

Mentioning the unmentionable

– photo interviewing as a way through a methodological crisis¹ in sensitive research matters

AF PERNILLE FAXE

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the benefits of photo-interviewing in qualitative studies on sensitive research topics by reflecting about a methodological crisis in my study on male infertility. I will also reflect about my own researcher subjectivity and vulnerability and how it shaped the research process. I will show how photo interviewing became a way to navigate both my ethical considerations toward the interviewees and a way to overcome my own discomfort and thus created a gentler room to be in for both informant and researcher. An interview structured around images offers a dignified way in and out of sensitive topics and can be flexibly employed as an approach to potentially painful topics, whether informants are in ‘the eye of the storm’ or reflecting on a problem in the past.

KEYWORDS

*masculinity, infertility, photo-interviewing, ethics, sexuality/
maskulinitet, infertilitet, foto-interview, etik, seksualitet*

Pernille Faxe is a sociologist and part time lecturer at the Universities of Copenhagen, Aarhus and Roskilde. She teaches gender/masculinity studies and qualitative methods, and her primary research interests move across the intersections of medical STS, sexualities and gender.

My interview with Phillip is not going well. There is a vulnerable feel to the conversation. Despite his seeming willingness to answer my questions, I am reluctant to ask them. I am afraid he might begin to cry. He keeps touching his brow and eyes. He seems uncomfortable. He also keeps talking. He tells me how he recently realized how hard his situation was to live in. How he broke down in the kitchen in front of his family and rambled for 2 hours. How he has not told his closest friends how he feels about the situation, he has kept himself in a shell, and now he wants to try and open up the topic with them. He excuses himself to use the toilet. I wait – he returns – I try to round up the interview. I kept it very much on the surface and still feel I went too far. Or maybe I felt he did?

In my study of men's experiences of fertility treatment (Faxe 2012) the interview with Phillip was an unpleasant methodological crisis that led me to explore alternatives to the traditional interview format of researcher question – informant answer – follow up and probing.

That way of interviewing had revealed itself as problematic when the immediacy of Phillips unresolved problems became apparent. Interviewing 'in the eye of the storm' was difficult, potentially intrusive and uncomfortable to a degree that compromised my ability to ask questions and thus gain insight into the phenomenon I was attempting to understand.

Discussing this research process in light of theory on visual methodology is very much a retrospective exercise. At the time of gathering empirical material and doing the interviews, I did not work from theory, I was experimenting. I was seeking a way out of a problem and a way into engagement that was gentler for both researcher and informant. The following is thus a description, reflection and discussion of this

process drawing on my own experience and entering into conversation with theoretical contributions from other authors. It can be read as a methodological offering, a description of a strategy for overcoming crisis and a possible method for approaching sensitive research matter. It can also be read as an analysis of a research process in which my own experience is the empirical material. To a lesser extent it can be read as a peek into the phenomenon explored: men's experiences of fertility treatment, as the actual research matter and findings are not the primary focus in this limited space.

Photo interviewing in this project entailed a shift from a linear narrative into a more thematical 'in and out' narrativity which is also a guiding principle for the structure of this text. It will engage 'in and out' of themes and methodological theories, experiences and reflections rather than attempt a linear narrative of the research process.

In the following I will present the research topic of male infertility as a sensitive matter and describe how I initially approached it. Then I will return to 'the difficult interview', elaborate on the crisis it caused and present photo interviewing as a way out of it. Thereafter I will reflect on researcher subjectivity and how it played a part in shaping the methodology of the study. Finally, some concluding remarks on the benefits of photo-interviewing will follow.

INTO THE MATTER:

APPROACHING A MASCULINITY TABOO

The subject of men and infertility had not been well explored at the time I began my project, at least not from the men's point of view, neither in Denmark nor internationally. The underrepresentation of male perspectives and experiences of infertility was and still is somewhat notorious. There are a few studies that explicitly address men's experiences (Throsby & Gill 2004; Gannon

et al. 2004; Web & Daniluk 1999; Goldberg 2004; Mikkelsen 2006; Mikkelsen et al. 2013; Inhorn et al. 2009; Schantz et al. 2005; Pook & Krause 2005; Barnes 2014) some that include them (Schmidt 1996; Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 1999; Adrian 2006) and some in the journalistic or self-help genre (Mason 1993; Schover & Thomas 2000). It was widely regarded as a sensitive and taboo topic, something that would be difficult to recruit informants for. Initially I was not unsettled by this and did not expect any particular challenges in regard to finding men willing to be interviewed. I simply set out to advertise my intent and tried to recruit informants by flyers in fertility clinics and postings on relevant websites. As time passed with little response, I intensified my efforts and approached organizations, researchers and a filmmaker, Jan Bacher Dirchsen, who had just released the documentary *Man, Men, Semen* about men with low sperm counts (Dirchsen 2010). He kindly passed on my request for informants through his contacts and thus became my most helpful gatekeeper, as men then began to contact me.² This development influenced the research topic in an important way: most of my informants had low sperm counts, which was not initially a requirement. I had intended to interview men with experiences of fertility treatment for any number of reasons but due to this recruiting strategy the project's focus changed. At the time of writing my master's thesis I had interviewed seven men with low sperm count and one whose wife was the infertile partner. The focus was therefore narrowed down to male factor infertility.

Male factor infertility is generally viewed as a large taboo and more sensitive subject than female factor infertility and also more problematic than men 'along for the ride' of their partner's fertility challenges (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2001; Throsby & Gill 2004; Gannon et al. 2004; Web & Daniluk 1999; Pook & Krause 2005). There are socio-cultural perceptions about men, their sperm

counts and masculinity that flourish in both popular and scientific metaphors which have also become topics of analysis in gender studies. The short version is that the man and the sperm are viewed as mirror images of one another. The sperm count reflects not just health and biological odds of fatherhood, but also the man's personality, intellectual character, physical abilities and virility. Connecting sperm counts with identity often adds up to the short cut of conflating sperm with manliness and thus it can be thought of as *sperm-masculinity* conceptions. This is of course a crude rendering of the folklore of sperm, it is described more deftly in many studies on fertility (e.g. Martin 1999; Moore 2007; Marx 2001; Daniel 2004; Inhorn et al. 2009; Krøløkke 2009; Barnes 2014) but it is at the heart of both everyday and social research assumptions regarding what is at stake for men suffering from male factor infertility. It is expected to affect the man's sense of self, undermine his masculinity and compromise his manly status. It is also assumed to be a taboo that men do not wish to discuss. Regardless of whether an individual man with low sperm count experiences it this way, these socio-cultural scripts are so prevalent (even when not explicit) that he must at least navigate within and among them. They become implicit points of reference to be identified with, compensated for, rejected, reproduced or reconstructed and transformed, and they frame the phenomenon of low sperm counts within a matrix of masculinity. As such, it also became part of my research project to explore individual experiences and descriptions of *sperm-masculinity* and how individual men negotiate this frame.

Apart from the sensitivity of sperm-masculinity, the issue of men and their health is also widely regarded as a topic to tread gently around. Infertility involves health issues, the body, gender, sexuality and emotional challenges. All these dimensions of men's personal experience are presumed to

be hard to gain access to. The assumptions run along the same lines as the sperm count taboo: men are not expected to want to discuss and reveal their personal soft spots, their emotions and their health problems. It is perceived to go against dominant male stereotypes and masculinity ideals to an extent that some social researchers advocate for the development of especially sensitive methodologies in regard to the study of men's lives (Seidler 2004, 2007) and specifically employ sensitive and empowering methods to studies into men's health (OliFFE & Borttorff 2007). My own experience with interviewing men is limited to the topic of infertility and in that context it was useful to employ creative, discreet and gentle interview methods, but I attribute this more to the sensitivity of the topic than directly to the informant's gender. Though male gender roles take part in situating certain topics as sensitive, it does not necessarily follow that men in general are more withdrawn or difficult to interview than women and I did not in fact find the informants particularly reserved.

OPENING UP WITH PHENOMENOLOGY AND SEDUCTION

"There are things you don't say. There are also things that I won't tell you" (John)

Exploring sensitive issues and potential taboos is challenging. There is a lot at stake for the informant and politeness and ethical considerations are called for. Studying a subject clouded in explicit and implicit stereotypical taboos present the risk of both overstepping the informant's boundaries and of limiting the subject and reproducing stereotypes through research; both in design, theory, methodology, and findings (Heinskou 2013). Introducing the sperm count taboo directly in interviews could be risky. Men could easily become uncomfortable or debate the topic from an intellec-

tual point of view and it might limit the conversation to how they navigated the matrix of masculinity. It would then easily follow that theories on this could be applied in the analysis but perhaps not much else.

An element of seduction is also relevant to consider. Fog (2004: 225) points to the potential danger of interviews seducing the informant to 'go too far'. Seduction can lead the informant on and leave him with an experience of having exposed himself to an embarrassing or painful degree. Seduction in this sense implies hidden agendas, false pretenses and deceit. To discuss the concept of seduction from another perspective I approach it as a gentle 'leading towards and entering into' the research topic. The researcher and the informant move slowly towards the central issues, touch on and explore them, then leave the encounter while mentally straightening their clothes and saying thank you and good bye. The sociologist plays the part of a considerate and polite Don Juan and the 'one night stand' is a fitting (if somewhat vulgar) metaphorical term for the event (Heinskou 2004). To avoid brutal transgression of the informants' comfort zones, I deliberately set out to gallantly seduce them. I chose a narrative approach in which I asked about the background and reason for the informant's engagement in fertility treatment. Narrative interviews often revolve around life stories (Horsdal 2002; Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000) but in this study I used a narrative approach of 'telling the story of treatment' as a strategy to open the conversation and extract descriptions rather than factual information. This framing encouraged a chronological narrative within which I focused on eliciting descriptions and used follow up questions to go deeper into subjects of specific interest. I had an interview guide, which I rarely consulted during the interviews but used to prepare and remind myself of primary focal points before the conversation. I rounded off with questions

about the informant's daily life and slipped gently into small talk before ending the interview. The plan was to gently 'seduce' and 'draw in' the informant, ease into conversation about potentially intimate and difficult topics and then reduce intensity by directing the interview towards more general and superficial matters.

The strategy was also founded in a phenomenological approach. While acknowledging the social construction of gender (as well as the social-scientific construction of the specific phenomenon of interest) I was primarily interested in how the constructed reality 'fertility treatment' was experienced by the (equally constructed and gendered category) 'infertile man' inhabiting it. I was initially less interested in how this could be analyzed from the perspective of gender as a system or structure and not at all interested in comparing men's experiences to those of women. As such the immediate research focus was men's *subjective experiences* of and in fertility treatment and their descriptions were primary in both interviews and analysis, though the analysis did engage in discussions with a range of social constructionist gender theories as a secondary move.

It is a phenomenological ideal to move from 'surface' to 'essence' (or at least a broader grasp of the phenomenon in all its being) and unfold it in a rich and empathetic description (Geertz 1973; Bech 1999; Bech 2013). From a phenomenological point of view this is best attained by way of the subjective experience and as such individual sensory, emotional and embodied experiences are deemed valuable sources of knowledge (Rendtorff 2004: 284). Approaching subjective experiences in a manner open enough to access essential or exemplary elements requires a 'bracketing' exercise. The researcher's common sense and theoretical preconceptions and expectations of the phenomenon must be set aside by epochê; a meditative cleansing of the mind that ideally leads to being able to

'see the thing as it is' and at the same time, observe oneself seeing it (Husserl 1952; Moustakas 1994: 85 ff).

Well aware that epochê is an unlikely ideal to achieve in the purest form, I nevertheless made bracketing attempts and tried to open the field by use of alienation and strategic ignorance. This may at first seem quite a paradoxical approach to empathetic insight into subjective experiences, but 'not knowing' and 'not being' can be a vantage point of entry into 'knowledge of being someone else'. I regard 'not knowing' as a first move that can never be regained. It is possible to acquire knowledge, but nearly impossible to erase it, so the opportunity to approach a topical interview strategically ignorant is a valuable opening method (Andersen 2013). It also serves a way to attune oneself phenomenologically, take a step back and approach the phenomenon in a questioning manner rather than an analytical one (Thøgersen 2013).

I had set aside the prevalent view that fertility treatment was a phenomenon primarily relevant to study from a women's perspective. I knew little regarding the technicalities of treatment. I was a woman trying to gain insight into men's perceptions. Though this was more by virtue of necessity than strategy, it proved itself useful in interviews. My (easily identifiable) membership of the category 'woman' indicated and presupposed an ignorance of the subjective experience of being 'man' that positioned me as an 'uninformed outsider' and led to many rich descriptions by the 'expert insiders' that I talked to. They expected me to know little (and perhaps understand even less) about being a man in fertility treatment and were therefore engaged in informing and enlightening me on the subject in much detail. There was no expectation of common ground or shared experience and if I did not grasp their meaning no illusion of resonance was broken and it was not perceived as an implicit rejection if I said 'I don't understand – will you elaborate?'

I also bracketed my theoretically informed expectations by letting the informants lead the way in interviews and explored the perspectives and concepts that they brought up. Despite having research interests in such things as ‘sperm’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘sexuality’ and their interconnectedness I did not explicitly initiate conversation on these topics as I was also interested in *whether* they were of immediate concern and *how* they might be introduced if they were. There could be many other aspects of being a man in fertility treatment that had importance and if I introduced too many preconceived ideas, others could easily be silenced. Above all, it was important that my interest in the informant *as a person*, not just as an empirical example of the category ‘infertile man’, was apparent in my approach.³

IN CRISIS: INTERVIEWING IN ‘THE EYE OF THE STORM’

The first three interviews went well. My informants were easy to talk to. They offered rich descriptions, important perspectives, and were open about their personal experiences. They had all reached points of clarity, reflected on their experiences and two of them had children while one’s wife was pregnant. In short, the problem was mostly behind them.

Then I interviewed Phillip. He did not have low sperm counts, but was in treatment due to his wife’s infertility. Treatment was ongoing, his situation was unresolved, he was in the midst of discovering just how hard this was for him, the feelings he was experiencing were new to him and he had recently begun to let some of them out. He was apparently in a crisis and I was at a loss. It was difficult for me to determine which questions and topics were fair to introduce and which might be too sensitive for an informant in the midst of unresolved problems. I felt uncomfortable and incompetent.

The difference between interviewing in ‘the eye of the storm’ and retrospective conversations about a situation from the past can be regarded as a difference in the *quality* of intensity and clarity. There was intensity and clarity in equal measure in both kinds of interviews, but the *atmosphere* was different. Men with unresolved problems were primarily engaged in the immediacy of the present issues and apprehension about the future while the retrospective narratives were framed around a ‘then – but then...’ and ‘now looking back I can see...’ which could be seen as self-observation of another kind. Sometimes an extra layer of reflection and insight occurred *during* the interviews, as a direct result of simply talking about it, which would then be mentioned as well.⁴

It became apparent to me that research into sensitive topics needs consideration of the phase the informant is in at the time of the interview (Jacobsen et al. 2002). There is an extra dimension of uncertainty in the midst of a problem yet to be resolved, and less time and opportunity to make sense of, come to terms with, or rationalize the situation.⁵ As I did not know my informants’ position in treatment before interviewing them, I needed a flexible method.

APPROACHING PHOTO INTERVIEWING

Shaken by the conversation, I began looking for other ways to structure the interviews and approach topics. Including pictures was recommended to me by my thesis supervisor, Marie Bruvik Heinskou, who had used an advertisement for the Morning-after Pill to spur conversation in interviews on ‘safe sex’ (Heinskou 2004). The idea appealed to me for a number of reasons: I did not know what else to do; I enjoy trying new methods; and I had an Actor Network Theory inspired interest in fertility treatment artefacts (Olesen & Kroustrup 2007) and thought it could be useful to include images in the interviews.

Using images or photographs as stimuli material or as a structure for interviews, has (as I discovered somewhat after the fact) a foundation in visual sociology/anthropology and is often termed photo interviewing or photo elicitation (Prosser & Loxley 2008; Oliffe & Bottorff 2007; Pink 2011; Harper 2002; Rasmussen et al. 2013). Sometimes the researcher creates or finds images to use, at other times this part is informant driven, in which case the informant takes photographs or finds illustrations that show or represent aspects of the research topic or the informants' life and social world, this approach is sometimes called photo-voice, as it prioritizes the informant's 'voice' through photos (Oliffe & Bottorff 2007). A combination of researcher-informant produced material can also be used. The informant driven method is difficult in a retrospectively narrative interview. It obviously makes little sense to ask informants to compile a photo journal of the past or find photographs that they did not take. It is an option to request images that remind the informant of what he experienced and use those images in interviews, as Oliffe and Bottorff (2007) have done with good results.

Since informants in my study were in various stages of reproductive treatment, some in the beginning or midst of it; some long past it and merely looking back, it made sense for me as the researcher to find images and use them as common ground within and across interviews. From the first interviews I conducted, I had an empirical sense of what themes were of importance for men in fertility treatment. I also had my theoretically formulated research questions and the aforementioned interest in fertility treatment artefacts. Thus, which kinds of themes, situations, artefacts and concepts I needed visual illustrations of was founded in both dimensions, and therefore had both inductive and deductive aspects. I looked for images that would spur conversation on topics already introduced by previous in-

formants, but also images that could address research themes that were hard to mention. Pressed for time I decided to find images on the internet.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCHER DRIVEN PHOTO ELICITATION BY AID OF GOOGLE

Using internet resources as a way to gather material has rational advantages. It is fast, easy, and does not require special equipment. Entering 'sperm sample' in the google search field yields a variety of useful (and not so useful) images to choose amongst. Thus finding pictures of objects was relatively straightforward. I quickly found images of artefacts such as the above mentioned sperm sample, pregnancy and ovulation tests, fertility enhancing vitamin supplements, fertilized eggs under microscope and pregnant bellies. Gathering visual material for concepts, situations and emotions proved more complex. Entering 'love' into the google search field yielded a multitude of visual representations, but not a lot of variation. Googling concepts resulted largely in a visual reproduction of clichés and stereotypes rather than richness and diversity.⁶ One of my research interests had become the significance of male friendship. This proved difficult to illustrate by the aid of google, despite using a wide variety of search terms. The problem in this case was not so much a standardized reproduction of stereotypes, rather the seeming lack of images that resonated with my informants during interviews. It was simply hard to find pictures that illustrated this concept in a way that was generally recognized to represent it. The images I chose to use were received and interpreted in widely differing ways during interviews. A picture of three men arm in arm on the beach was read as 'gay' by one informant, who was confused and offended by it. The same image triggered talk about adoption by another, who read it as 'foreign' due to the men's dark hair and the exoticism of the beach. An

image of two guys in a canoe, smiling with beers in their hands – chosen on advice from an informant who recommended I use something with sport and alcohol to signify male friendship – spurred interest in the canoe, the possible location of the river, and talk about alcohol and diet in connection to improving sperm counts, but was not identified by many of my informants as ‘friendship’ and rarely inspired talk about that phenomenon in their own lives at all.



OUT OF CRISIS: PHOTO INTERVIEWING AS ‘IN AND OUT’ NARRATIVITY

In setting out again to interview, now armed with a bunch of pictures, I kept the phenomenological and narrative approach. I still consulted my interview guide ahead of the conversation (but gradually reduced it to a short list of topics) and I asked the same opening question: “Can you tell me about the background for your experiences with fertility treatment?” The narratives were allowed to run along the lines of the informants choosing and then I introduced the images at some appropriate point. I called it an experiment, a game, a method I wanted to explore. I made it clear that there were no rules and it could not be done wrong: “Just look at the pictures and choose some that mean something to you or that you want to talk about”. We would

then talk about, around and with the images, and I would round off the interview the same way as before: moving away from central issues towards more general conversation and slipping into small talk before saying goodbye.

It was immediately clear to me that ‘something happened’ when the images came into play. They created at first a little recess, a break in the flow of conversation in which the informant looked at the pictures, took them in and chose some to talk about. The pace slowed down, the atmosphere changed. Harper (2002) claims that images activate other parts of the brain than verbal interaction and draws on deeper streams of memory and consciousness. Thus images evoke a different kind of information and stimulate more emotional language. This was apparent in some of the interviews I did as well. My three-hour long conversation with John is an example: when the pictures were introduced, his narrative changed from primarily clinical descriptions and facts, into a more subjective and emotionally engaged story of being in treatment. This also led him to elaborate on subjects already mentioned and share more personal information.

Photo interviewing also seemed to have the effect of introducing a ‘third party’ (Törrönen 2002) in the conversation.⁷ The phenomenon was invited into the room in a visually sensory manner, the images pointed towards and reminded the informant of themes it could be useful to discuss and my influence as interviewer was somewhat diffused. The dialogue shifted into interaction between the informant and the phenomena by way of images and I became more a participant observer than an interviewer (Rubow 2003). They picked out or picked up or pointed to various pictures. Some arranged them in themes. Some put the ones away that we had already discussed in separate piles. They each approached the situation in more or less structured ways, which offered an intuitive peek into the workings

of their minds. Some picked out a few images and told me a story about treatment while laying out the photographs. It felt a little like reading tarot cards, the informant being the fortune teller, or like watching someone play solitaire. The images chosen and placed together helped narrate the stories of infertility.

OPENING AND CLOSING – OFFERING THE INFORMANT A DIGNIFIED WAY OUT

The photographs thus situated the interview in a way in which the mentioning of sensitive subjects was done visually. It is difficult not to respond on a subjective level to images of something that is of importance personally. The affective engagement evoked in this way helped my strategy of seduction and eased the conversation along the lines of themes I wished to know about. This could be regarded as a very manipulative and perhaps transgressive way to get information, but as it transpired, informants were very capable of employing their own strategies as well. They chose which images to talk about and what themes they introduced with them. They also used the pictures to change the subject, when they felt like it. Often in a very discreet way. They simply directed their attention (or feigned curiosity) towards another image in the pile and began a conversation about that. This was unexpected and brought my attention to an important methodological issue. It became apparent that giving informants a dignified way out has some merit in research on sensitive and taboo topics. Telling informants that they do not have to answer certain questions if they do not want to, is not always enough. To reject a question and say that a topic is off limits, can easily be as uncomfortable as going on talking about it (Mohr 2014: 96).⁸ It draws attention to the exact thing they might not want attention directed towards: the fact that it is a sensitive or painful topic they would rather not discuss. As such it can

create an awkward and perhaps humiliating situation.

Rejecting a topic raised by a photograph can be done in more subtle ways. In one interview I attempted to engage Mogens on the topic of the sperm-count taboo by pushing an ad for a vitamin supplement called ‘cum-enhancer’ towards him. It neatly connected sperm-count, virility and masculinity together by its sales pitch. Mogens rejected the image physically by pushing it away with raised eyebrows, pursed lips and no verbal comment was needed.⁹ Choosing, ignoring or rejecting an image is less intimidating than responding to words and pushing a photo towards someone thus seems less intrusive than asking an intimate question.

NAMING PICTURES

When informants talked about the pictures, they often did not ‘name’ them. They simply pointed to or picked up a photograph and referred to it as ‘that one’ or ‘this type of thing’. It seemed important, and practical, to extract some ‘labels’ and have the images ‘named’ for later reference. Expressions such as ‘this says a lot’ while waving an image may be meaningful during the actual conversation, but does not result in very useful quotes for a later analysis and makes it very hard to know which image is at stake when listening to the recording. I asked them to elaborate a little ‘for the tape’ and it turned out quite useful in another way. It indicated how the image was read and what kind of words and terms the informant used and preferred when talking about certain aspects of treatment and everyday life. An example is how the research topic of ‘sexuality’ was addressed and introduced as an intermingling of talking about ‘sexuality’ and ‘intimacy’ or ‘closeness’. Sometimes ‘intimacy’ was used as a euphuism for sexuality, but more often it was explored as a distinction on its own or as an important part in or result of

sexuality. It was often quite easy to talk about; in fact many introduced the subject almost immediately, both with and without the use of images, but in interviews where the topic was perhaps off limits or simply harder to approach, the pictures were a help. The subject of sexuality was already in the room, lying on the table in the form of photographs, ready to be chosen or ignored. If an informant wished to explore it he could, if not he could abstain. Some did not volunteer a conversation about sexuality and in those cases I also did not bring it up. In one interview the 'sex' pictures played a silent part. The informant kept moving them around, picking them up and pushing them aside. There was a somewhat detached but intense circling silence around the images and the topic went unaddressed by words. I suppose the option of asking him what he thought of those pictures was present, but I chose not to (Fog 2004). Sexuality and intimacy were also brought up in connection to many images that were not directly sexual: fertilized eggs, ovulation and pregnancy tests and the illustration of a couple lying in bed with their backs to each other. These were less direct ways of engaging with the theme than from a verbal question, which indicates the value of interview persons using images as elegant ways to navigate topics. It also shows how intermingled sexuality is with other aspects of treatment and daily life and how it contains a wide range of meaning.

Another very useful strategy was to round up the interview by asking if there were any missing images. One informant immediately told me I should have found a picture of two guys hugging, as that is one thing he felt he really needed during the treatment process. *"And it has to be a hug from a male friend, this is not something a woman can understand"*. His comment circled back to the limitations I encountered in addressing male friendship visually. The image he asked for could easily have offended someone else.

IN AND OUT OF TIME – ACKNOWLEDGING RESEARCHER VULNERABILITY

In much the same way as retrospective and 'eye of the storm' interviews offered different perspectives, my own engagement and understanding of the conversations had different qualities as I worked with it over time. Being *in* the conversation, *listening* to it and *transcribing* it (or indeed *reading transcripts*) were not the same experience and gave rise to different reflections and insights, both regarding the 'findings' in the empirical material and regarding what the process of creating it was like for me – the researcher. Considering interviews as participatory observation (Rubow 2003) the option of participating and observing 'in and out' of time, in medias res and retrospectively, also offered other levels and layers of reflection (Gammeltoft 2003, Rubow 2003), especially regarding my own subjectivity and vulnerability.

Listening to the interview with Phillip a few years later I'm confused. I remember the interview being hard but it is difficult to hear. There are pauses and hesitations, but there are often pauses in interviews. He struggles for words, but people do that sometimes. It is mostly significant that I do not ask follow up questions to intimate topics. I remember holding back, letting him bring up as much as he could bear. The shell he talks about having protected himself with is likely what held me back. He strikes me as a sensitive and fragile person that I cannot bring myself to nudge. Only because I remember the interview, took notes and took notice, in fact because I was there, am I able to discern the little indications of awkwardness and sensitivity that exist on the recording. I remember how he touched his eyes; how I thought he might cry. My memory reconstructs the atmosphere that fails to translate onto an audio file. Someone else might not notice and my interpretation of the interaction would not easily be reproduced or validated by another researcher's

ear. It strikes me as ironic that the difficulties in the interview, that brought on a methodological crisis and pointed me towards a new strategy, are this subtle in a translated representation. Without the material and sensory context they appear insignificant and weak.

I overlooked some of my own discomfort for a long time. It was implicit but unexplored. I viewed it as unimportant, other than as an indication that I needed a new strategy. I was preoccupied with balancing ethical considerations towards the informant on the one hand and getting the material I needed on the other. From another more raw and honest perspective there was an element of denial. I was trying to become a good researcher, a professional, an academic (Groes-Green 2012). Dwelling on my own feelings seemed to me a weak and unprofessional approach. The paradox of neglecting the significance of my own vulnerability, while using my sensitivities as a research tool is one I explored later.

In the research process I was concerned with my own experiences only insofar as it contributed to the interview strategy or had significance for grasping the phenomenon explored. My reactions told me something about the phenomenon from a societal perspective, as I am myself a product of the same social context. In this line of argument a researcher's subjectivity can be legitimized and validated as a professional tool. This is as it should be. The other side of this argument, though, is that through fear of incompetence and embarrassment it might easily follow that I both lacked empathy for myself and failed to see how my own vulnerability shaped the research process.

In fact, I looked for other interview methods largely because of my own discomfort, not because I did not get the necessary material or because my informants were unwilling to talk.¹⁰ I certainly sensed their pain but acted on my own difficulties in asking questions and engaging in the con-

versation. Yet framing this solely in terms of research ethics and methodology left me with a blind angle for some of my own motivations: I also needed a 'way out'. The researcher's discomfort is as valid as concerns for the informant when changing strategy as that also affects the interview dynamic. Being comfortable simply creates better conversations. It reduces interviewer 'noise', elicits richer descriptions and perhaps more pertinent 'findings'. I found interviewing with images liberating, exciting and dynamic (Harper 2002). I looked forward to the interviews and to bringing out the pictures. I was genuinely curious how they would be received and handled, which images the informant would choose, which would be ignored and what topics would emerge. It allowed me more freedom in engaging because it offered more ways in and out; for the informant and for me. Together we navigated a pile of pictures, alternating personal stories, third person narratives, scientific descriptions and intimate revelations. Photos were pushed across the table as a way to initiate a topic and feigning curiosity could be used as a strategy for changing it. This created a dynamic setting that helped me to discard some of the responsibility and fear of intrusion and transgression that I had carried with me.

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE BENEFITS OF PHOTO-INTERVIEWING

Photo-interviewing helped overcome the sensitivities in this study on male infertility, where concerns for potentially distraught informants and my own discomfort were issues that had to be navigated. The method spoke well with the phenomenological approach and increased the quality of the empirical material in some, if not all, interviews because images have a quality of evoking subjective experience, calling for descriptions, allowing for poetic and metaphorical language and thus facilitating access to the tone, tune, and atmosphere of lived

experience. Interviewing with images did not only enhance my findings on the subject of male infertility, it also increased my awareness of both researcher vulnerability and the importance of giving informants a dignified way to change the subject.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the editors and anonymous peer reviewers for kind and helpful comments and Rikke Louise Knudsen and Maria Mortensen for good suggestions and peer support.
2. Jan Bacher Dirchsen had been in contact with many men of which only three participated in the film. In the process he had developed a level of trust with his contacts that ‘rubbed off’ on me. He could vouch for my approach and intentions after conversations we had on our mutual interest in men and infertility.
3. This is also important in recruiting informants. An example is John, who told me he had not wanted to be in the film *Man, Men, Semen* (Dirchsen 2010) due to the explicit focus on sperm and masculinity. He found that too limiting and somewhat offensive. He had only volunteered to be interviewed by me because the project was more openly directed at ‘men in fertility treatment’.
4. An example is my very first interview in this study. When I thanked the informant for his time, he in turn thanked me. He told me it had been good to talk about the treatment process and during our conversation he had realized it might have helped him to have ‘a good friend to talk to at the time’.
5. Obviously clarity is an ambivalent and slippery concept. Informants were sometimes temporarily resolved to change course, try donor insemination, start adoption procedures, have no more or accept a life completely without children, but as an informant told me: ‘When are you really resolved? I feel resolved right now but I don’t know how I will feel in years to come’.
6. ‘Freedom’ as an example returns primarily a variety of images of people running (or jumping) into the sunset with their arms up in the air, thus ‘freedom’ is largely interpreted and communicated visually as someone ‘getting away’ in a scenic and natural setting – at least on google.
7. Törrönen (2002) discusses the use of stimuli material as a third party and offering the options of index, microcosmos and provocation. The way I

used them corresponds most accurately to indexing.

8. Sebastian Mohr (2014: 96) discusses this from a perspective of negotiating ethnographic intrusion. Intending to *open* a negotiation by reminding informants that they did not have to answer questions that made them uncomfortable, he found that this instead *prevented* it. No one objected despite obvious awkwardness and even shame. Discomfort is not necessarily an ethical problem in itself and talking about something awkward may not always need to be avoided, but it exemplifies that it is not an effective method in giving the informant a dignified way out.
9. In other parts of the interview Mogens was very direct and forthcoming about his feelings of ‘castration’ in regard to his low sperm count as well as the indignities he experienced when producing semen samples. The rejection may have been a question of timing, but the ad may well have represented a stereotype he was offended by and did not wish to relate to.
10. The ‘difficult interview’ as an example was uncomfortable, but rich. He was under pressure and yet he shared with me many aspects of fertility treatment that are hard for men, even when they are not the infertile part. The material was not part of the thesis, as it focused on men with low sperm counts, and as such the conversation played a silent but important part in the research process. The encounter led me to conduct seven more interviews after finishing the thesis.

REFERENCES

- Adrian, Stine (2006): *Nye skabelsesberetninger om æg, sæd og embryoner: Et etnografisk studie af skabelser på sædbanker og fertilitetsklinikker*. Linköping Studies in Arts and Science No. 370, Institutionen för Tema – Tema Genus, Linköpings Universitet.
- Andersen, Bjørn Schiermer (2013): Til tingene selv: Om hermeneutisk fænomenologi, in: Bjørn Schiermer Andersen (ed.): *Fænomenologi – teori og metoder*. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.
- Barnes, Liberty Walther (2014): *Conceiving Masculinity – Male Infertility, Medicine, and Identity*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Bech, Henning (1999): *Fritids verden: Studier i modernitet, mandighed og homoseksualitet*. Forlaget Sociologi, København.
- Bech, Henning (2013): Livsverdensmetode, in: Bjørn Schiermer Andersen (ed.): *Fænomenologi*

- *teori og metoder*. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.
- Cho, Jeasik & Trent, Allen (2006): Validity in qualitative research revisited, in: *Qualitative Research*/6 (3).
- Daniel, Cynthia R. (2006): *Exposing Men – The science and politics of male reproduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Dirchsen, Jan Bacher (2010): *Man, Men, Semen*. Plus Pictures APS, Copenhagen.
- Fog, Jette (2004): *Med Samtalen som Udgangspunkt. Det kvalitative forskningsinterview*. Akademisk Forlag, København.
- Gammeltof, Tine (2003): Intimiteten – Forholdet til den anden, in: Kirsten Hastrup (ed.) *Ind i verden – En grundbog i antropologisk metode*. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.
- Gannon, K.; Glover, L. & Abel, P. (2004): Masculinity, infertility, stigma and media reports, in: *Social Science & Medicine*/59 (6).
- Geertz, Clifford (1973): *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Fontana Press, London.
- Goldberg, Helene (2009): *The man in the sperm, a study of male infertility in Israel*, MA thesis, Institut for Antropologi, Københavns Universitet.
- Goldberg, Helene (2009): The sex in the sperm: Male Infertility and Its Challenges to masculinity in an Israeli-Jewish Context, in: Marcia Inhorn; Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen; Helene Goldberg & Maruska la Cour Mosegaard (eds.): *Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity and Reproduction*. Berghahn Books, Oxford.
- Groes-Green, Christian (2012): Ambivalent Participation: Sex, Power, and the Anthropologist in Mozambique, in: *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness*/31 (3).
- Harper, Douglas (2002): Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation, in: *Visual Studies*/17 (1).
- Heinskou, Marie Bruvik (2004): *Mellem Risiko og Chance – Senmoderne værdiorienteringer i det seksuelle møde*. Speciale, Sociologisk Institut, Københavns Universitet.
- Heinskou, Marie Bruvik (2007): Seksualitet mellem risiko og chance – Svingninger i senmoderne værdiorienteringer, i: *Dansk Sociologi* 2007/1.
- Heinskou, Marie Bruvik (2013): Forførelse og fordom, i: Bjørn Schiermer Andersen (ed.): *Fænomenologi – teori og metoder*. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.
- Inhorn, Marcia; Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Tine; Goldberg, Helene & la Cour Mosegaard, Maruska (eds.) (2009): *Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity and Reproduction*. Berghahn Books, Oxford.
- Irvine, Janice M. (2003): The Sociologist as Voyager: Social Theory and Sexuality Research, 1910-1978, in: *Qualitative Sociology*/26 (4).
- Jacobsen, Michael Hviid; Jørgensen, Anja & Svendsen-Tune, Stine (2002): Sensitiv Sociologi: Undersøgelser af udsatte og udstødte mennesker, i: Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Søren Kristiansen & Annick Prieur (eds.): *Liv, fortælling, tekst*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag, Aalborg.
- Kroløkke, Charlotte (2009): Click a Donor: Viking masculinity on the line, in: *Journal of Consumer Culture*/9 (1).
- Martin, Emily (1999)[1991]: The Egg and the Sperm, in: Janet Price & Margrit Shildrick (eds.): *Feminist Theory and the Body*. Edinburg University Press, Edinburg.
- Marx, Vivien (2001): *The Semen Book*. Free Association Books, London.
- Mason, Mary-Claire (1993): *Male Infertility – men talking*. Routledge, London.
- Mikkelsen, Alice Toft (2006): *At være mand med nedsat sæd kvalitet i forbindelse med intracytoplasmatisk spermie injektion (ICSI)-behandling*. Afdeling for Sygeplejevidenskab, Aarhus Universitet.
- Mikkelsen, Alice Toft; Madsen, Svend Aage & Humaidan, Peter (2013): Psychological aspects of male fertility treatment, in: *Journal of Advanced Nursing*/69 (9).
- Moore, Linda Jean (2007): *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man's Most Precious Fluid*. New York University Press, New York.
- Olesen, Finn & Kroustrup, Jonas (2007): ANT – Beskrivelsen af heterogene aktør-netværk, i: Peter Lauritsen, Casper Bruun Jensen & Finn Olesen (eds.): *Introduktion til STS – Science, technology, society*. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.
- Olliffe, John L. & Bottorff, Joan L. (2007): Further Than the Eye Can See? Photo Elicitation and Research With Men, in: *Qualitative Health Research*/17 (6).
- Pook, Martin & Krause, Walter (2005): The impact of treatment experiences on the course of infertility distress in male patients, in: *Human Reproduction*/20 (3).
- Prosser, Jon & Loxley, Andrew (2008): *Introducing Visual Methods*, unpublished discussion paper. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.
- Rasmussen, Kim (ed.) (2013): *Visuelle tilgange og metoder i tværfaglige pædagogiske studier – En antologi baseret på erfaringer og indblik fra forskning, udviklingsarbejde og undervisning*. Roskilde Universitetsforlag, Roskilde.
- Rubow, Cecilie (2003): Interviewet som deltagelseobservation, i: Kirsten Hastrup (ed.) *Ind i ver-*

den – En grundbog i antropologisk metode. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.

· Schmidt, Lone (1996): *Psykosociale konsekvenser af infertilitet og behandling.* Ph.d.-afhandling. Foreningen af Danske Lægestuderendes Forlag, København.

· Schover, Leslie R. & Thomas Jr, Anthony J. (2000): *Overcoming Male Infertility.* John Wiley & Sons Inc., New York.

· Seidler, Victor (2004): Des/orienterede maskuliniteter. Kroppar, Känslor och rädsla, in: *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 2004/1.

· Seidler, Victor (2007): Masculinities, Bodies and Emotional Life, in: *Men and Masculinities*/10 (9).

· Throsby, Karen & Rosalyn Gill (2004): “It’s Different for Men”: Masculinity and IVF, in: *Men and Masculinities*/6 (4).

· Thøgersen, Ulla (2013): Om at indstille sig fænomenologisk, i: Bjørn Schiermer Andersen (ed.):

Fænomenologi – teori og metoder. Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.

· Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Tine (1999): *Tilblivelseshistorier: Barnløshed, slægtskab og forplantningsteknologi i Danmark.* Ph.d.-række nr. 12, Institut for Antropologi, København.

· Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Tine (2009): “It’s a bit unmanly in a way”: Men and Infertility in Denmark, in: Marcia Inhorn; Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Helene Goldberg & Maruska la Cour Mosegaard (eds.): *Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity and Reproduction.* Berghahn Books, Oxford.

· Törrönen, Jukka (2002): Semiotic theory on qualitative interviewing using stimulus texts, in: *Qualitative Research*/2 (3).

· Webb, Russel E. & Daniluk, Judith C. (1999): Infertile Men’s Experience of being Unable to Produce a Child, in: *Men and Masculinities*/2 (6).