

2 Among the naturists

In this chapter I report on my participant observation in a nude swimming club in Dublin. I am going to describe not only what I *observed*, but also what I *felt*, in an unfamiliar setting that was replete with potential embarrassment.

The story of my research on naturism in Ireland began a few months before I attended my first meeting with the club in Dublin. As a young researcher, I felt an intellectual hunger, and the need to venture out into the field. Long before the research proposals and ethical approvals came through, it had become clear to me that in order to do the justice to the topic I had to leave the safety of the library and my desk behind me. It was almost a rite of passage. That is why, when it came to studying Irish naturists, the only way I considered appropriate for me to gain access to the group, collect valid data and try to see the world through their eyes, was to join them and become one of them for a year.

People often ask me about the ‘real’ reasons for deciding to study naturism. It is as if they are waiting for me to admit some ‘dirty’ little secret – such as exhibitionist tendencies. How did it actually feel to bare it all among strangers, they would ask, or ‘what sort of people’ would normally engage in this type of activity? And these were among the more intelligent questions. There were many others asking about participation in naturist orgies, accompanied by winks and nudges. Some people would refer to me as ‘the sex expert’ or dismiss the value of my degree and my research, because the subject of my study was regarded as trivial and odd. Considering that my day job at the time was as a barmaid in a busy, traditional old pub in Dublin’s city centre, I quickly grew rather reluctant to discuss the topic of my research with any of the customers. And it would not be an exaggeration if I were to say that I had similar experiences with students and staff of my own department. When I bumped into one of the senior lecturers at a party given by a mutual friend, he expressed his utter disbelief that anybody would choose to study ‘such a topic’. Judging by the fact that he had spent his entire academic career researching the problems of social class, it was more than implied that my topic was not ‘serious’ or important enough. Besides that, many people felt uncomfortable with me, especially when I was discussing my plans for or experiences in my fieldwork. It made some people turn red, giggle, make an awkward joke or just go very quiet. This has convinced and reassured me of the validity of my research as a contribution to the field of sociology of emotions

and the body, and of how much I could contribute to the understanding and knowledge of our own shame and embarrassment.

It is safe to say that there were many occasions when I felt quite defensive about my study, and refused to answer or shrugged off banal questions and comments coming my way. Despite how it might have seemed to them, in avoiding their questions I was not being standoffish, prudish or fuddy-duddy. I enjoy my share of the banter, dirty jokes and never-ending innuendo with which the English language so magnificently abounds. But there came a time, or rather a point of saturation, when I felt more wary as a woman about the kind of reactions my engagement with this study would trigger, especially when combined with the character of job I was doing for a living.

All this being said, I thought I was being paranoid, especially after I made a short appearance in a programme on nudity in Ireland which was broadcast on one of the national TV stations.⁵ I was approached once during my lunch in work, by one of the pub's customers who put his hand on my shoulder and said to me: 'I saw you on TV. I know what you're into ...', followed by a wink and a smile from beneath his bushy moustache. Ironically enough, I felt safer parading around naked during my naturist meetings at the local club.

2.1 *Gaining access to Club Nautica*

When I initially contacted the gatekeepers of the club, I sent a description of my study, in which I introduced myself. My intention was to create a sense of trust and rapport between us. After several exchanges of emails and phone calls between me and committees of the Irish Naturist Association (INA) and of Club Nautica (a Dublin-based naturist swim club), I felt that at least I was being asked all the right questions and being given the appropriate kind of attention for a researcher. Eventually a lunch was scheduled with the club's secretary and his wife. When I arrived in a busy café somewhere off O'Connell Street in Dublin's city centre, I quickly scanned the room to see if I could guess which group of people would fit the image of naturists I had in my mind. I sensed that I should be looking for middle-aged people who exuded a 'sense of mission' of some sort, because that was the impression I had gained so far from my telephone conversations with them. One table with three people having tea and scones caught my attention, but just to be on the safe side I rang the secretary's mobile phone. It happened that my intuition was correct, and I had managed to select the right table. After an exchange of pleasantries, introductions and the traditional

5 The programme was *Angela Scanlon: Full Frontal*, RTÉ One, 16 October 2014.

Irish ‘where are you from?’⁶ and the ‘Jaysus, your English is very good’, we were joined by another couple of club members. It became clear to me then that the reason I was being so outnumbered during the meeting was that they were not only taking my research offer seriously, but also that they might have considered me a threat to the privacy of the club members. During the meeting, which eventually took the form of a more relaxed interview conducted by the naturists, I was asked about my reasons for researching this particular topic, ethical issues such as participants’ confidentiality and my credentials as a researcher. One of the main concerns for Paul (one of the members who arrived late with his wife Niamh) was that once the participants had signed the consent forms, they would no longer be anonymous, so he wanted to know who would see those signed copies. After I assured him that they were for my eyes only, he then asked me details about my data collection or, to be more precise, he asked, ‘So ... er ... would you be sitting somewhere in the corner with the clipboard and observe us like we’re some sort of wild tribe from the Amazon?’ He seemed a lot more at ease when I told him that I wanted to become a club member and attend all the meetings as an equal – naked like everyone else. I also told him that I would never be walking around during the club meetings looking like a ‘typical researcher’, so that people would act naturally around me even while knowing that I was there to do the research. That is also why I specifically stated to them that I would not be formally collecting any data until early the following year, and that for the time being I just wanted to get to know everyone at the club, and let them to get to know and trust me.

After all the questions had been answered and the consent forms shown, the deciding factor in gaining permission for the study seems to have been that I wanted to become a member of the INA and join Club Nautica in their activities, and pay my monthly fee like any other naturist member. That I believe was the moment when they actually saw how serious I was about my study and that I was not looking for a ‘quick fix’ of information from them. Towards the end of the meeting our conversation became much more relaxed and I could see how warm and welcoming they could be to newcomers like me. I was given the nuts and bolts of practising naturism in Ireland, including that, strictly speaking, it could be regarded as illegal under the laws governing public exposure. My ‘interviewers’ explained the rules of participation during naturist meetings, when I should try not to do anything that could be found offensive by other members. The general atmosphere at the table was friendly, but at the same time I could not help but notice the sense of firmness and defensiveness in the way they interacted with me. There was an air of openness, but they wanted to be taken seriously.

6 One of the more characteristic elements of Irish people is their asking, on a first meeting, where a person is from. It normally comes up very early in the conversation, similarly to the American ‘What do you do for a living?’

They would have had no problem in refusing me access to the club if they had felt it could cause any upset or disturbance to the members. I sensed that I could not afford to let my guard down and needed to choose my words carefully. While the women played the more soothing and caring role of giving reassurance to the beginner, the men asked more direct questions that would help them to be sure that I had no ulterior motive. Of course I was outnumbered by the group, so all in all the meeting felt rather intense. Was this the way all applicants were screened? I posed this question to one of the older members of the club during a swim a couple of months later. He said that they used to be much stricter about the screening process. First phone conversations took place between the members of the committee and anyone interested in trying out naturism. If the person passed the first stage, which consisted of making a good impression and showing understanding of what naturism was, then a face-to-face meeting would be arranged outside the club. If that went well, the potential member would then be invited to come for one of the swims and see whether the naturist experience was found agreeable. The first guest meeting with the swimming club at the designated venue would usually be free but, after that, financial arrangements would be made, which also involved filling out application forms for the so-called passport of the INF (International Naturist Federation), which would guarantee entry to any naturist site in Europe and some in other parts of the world.

A good deal had been implied, but probably not everything was spelled out to me. What interested me most here were the strict criteria people had to meet before they were accepted as members. In practice, only couples are welcome to join. My case was different because I am a woman, and, as they told me, there is always a shortage of women present at the club meetings, and they try to balance out the numbers.

I was struck by the reserved and cautious character of their manner and organisation. As they said themselves, because Ireland is such a small country and 'somehow everyone knows everybody', they have to put a lot of emphasis on the confidentiality of their members. They have teachers and even once a priest amongst them, and so they had to recognise the fact that the general public in Ireland might have serious problems with accepting their choice of pastime, and that there was a risk of it and them being stigmatised.

Since most of the regular swimming club meetings were suspended for the summer, I was just in time for the start of the new club's season and the first meeting was due to take place in the Crooked Glen⁷ swimming pool the following day. The timing for me personally was unfortunate, since I was menstruating. I knew I could not, or at least I felt I could not, bring up the issue in front of the rest of our small assembly, and so when we were all leaving the café, I took one

7 The name of the location has been changed. It is an area not far from Dublin's city centre.

of the female committee members on one side and explained my problem to her. She smiled warmly, and in a mother-hen like way explained that at times like these it is perfectly all right to wear the bottom of a swimsuit. That is all very well, but the more I thought about it at home, the less reassured I felt. I had agreed to bare it all for the purpose of my research, but making my bodily functions somewhat public and obvious in front of a group of strangers was yet another emotional challenge. Unfortunately, not even tampons are completely invisible. Having nowhere to hide them due to the required dress code, I experienced a brief moment of self-pity and annoyance on behalf of the whole of womankind. Dealing with this problem of having a period is embarrassing for women, but, thinking about it, it is mainly the case due to the tremendous sense of embarrassment and repugnance evident through the rolling of the eyes, flinching or shuddering by men, thanks to whom menstrual blood has turned blue on our television screens. Then yet another nagging thought occurred to me that day: after spending a lot of time studying the literature on nudity and what makes the human body erotic, I could not help but think of the rationale of the striptease. If I were to show up ‘only’ topless to a naturist gathering, would it not seem provocative or teasing? It might also draw some additional attention to me, in which case ironically it would have been easier to handle the embarrassment of being stark naked than having them wonder why I only went ‘half-way’. I decided that it was pivotal for me to participate fully naked that day. I admit it is a surprisingly strange way to handle fear of my own embarrassment. Could it be that it is one of the biggest human tragedies in general that half the time we struggle to find a way to fit in with the rest of the society, and the other half to find the way to stand out by just the right amount? Maybe the naturists are yet another group in a society that is trying to play with that balance. Perhaps it is what connects all fringe groups.

Speaking from the perspective of the time that has passed since then, I can understand why the group acted so suspiciously towards me and my research. It has become known to me that the naturist community in Ireland has tended to attract attention from various media, and the general message of the club or the privacy of their members is not always at the top of these agencies’ priorities. Even now I am convinced that being a young female researcher with a certain sense of naïveté that I carried with me while doing my fieldwork helped me in the process of establishing the rapport with the club members. I was not perceived as dangerous or untrustworthy by the people who participated in my study.

During my year-long fieldwork I attended numerous swims with the Dublin-based Club Nautica, and also several naturist private house parties or sauna nights. I carried out my observations on rules and regulations, body language and on the ways events were organised. In this chapter I shall report some

detailed observations about two of the main events, and give more general notes on the rest of them.

2.2 *The first swim*

So how does one, researcher or not, prepare for a nudist experience? In my case the build-up before the event became quite stressful, since I needed to embrace two roles: that of a ‘good naturist’ who does not break any rules, and that of a researcher trying to blend in with the rest of the group, never to make anyone feel uncomfortable about my presence, and simply to keep my cool all the time. During my preparations before the first swim, I could not help but notice what Butler (1990) calls the ‘performativity’ of the body, which made me realise yet another role I needed to embrace – that of a woman. I felt that, especially in the case of women, there must be a certain way of presenting their bodies, such as treatment of all bodily hair or possibly keeping to a diet or exercise regime in order to look good naked. It almost struck me that one would probably be expected to make same preparations before the naturist meeting, as one would before a ‘sex date’. I thought it was all very well that it was a naturist gathering, with greater acceptance than usual of the flaws of the human body – including a whole array of shapes and sizes – but that women would still be expected to look a certain way, to take care of and treat their bodies in a certain way. In a situation where by default one is quite literally not able to hide anything, it is hard for a woman especially not to conform to conventional standards of bodily hair maintenance. So auxiliary hair – pubic hair to some extent or other, hair on the legs or even the hair around the face and the nipples that might occur during the hormonal changes that take place in a woman’s body over her lifetime – are expected to be tended to in our wider modern society, an assumption that then slowly trickles down to the naturist environments too.

After the club’s secretary and his wife picked me up in their car outside my home one late September evening, we headed to the swimming pool in Crooked Glen located in Dublin city. We were among the first to arrive, so we waited in the car for other members to turn up. I looked around the grim surroundings of the neighbourhood and the swimming pool building itself, and could not help but think how unfortunate their choice of this venue must be if they were trying to impress and attract more members. It could give the whole event a rather clandestine character, if one did not know better. While I was busy filling out the forms for my official membership, I noticed more and more cars pulling into in the car park outside the pool. Donal and Linda (the names by which the secretary and his wife will be referred from now on) recognised most of the members’ cars, but interestingly enough most of them continued to stay in the car. It was

not until moments later, when I saw a group of loud schoolchildren pouring out from inside the building and hurrying into their coach, that I understood why nobody was going inside before. When eventually we went inside, we were greeted by the female lifeguard who came in specifically for Club Nautica swim nights and waited for the other fellow naturists to come in. Some weeks later there was one occasion when a male lifeguard was present instead of our usual one, and I must admit that that unnerved me slightly. Even though by then I was feeling more comfortable coming to these naked swims, I was struck by my own reaction to the new lifeguard. It felt different because, unlike other men who attended the swim, he was not a naturist and he seemed more of a threat to me. I am aware it had nothing to do with him. He was just doing his job and most likely was rather embarrassed himself with the 'naked soup'. It was entirely my own projection of fears and a realisation that if he were not one of 'us' he might not have developed the same indifference, or even innocence, towards all the naked bodies around him, especially naked female bodies. Of course, he was also dressed in his uniform, which automatically created an imbalance that was quite hard to ignore for a beginner like me. Moments like these seem to be harder to ignore for women than men. Even though it was absolutely impossible for any physical harm to come to any of us, I still felt this invisible air of some kind of symbolic threat of 'violence', the innate fear of being in a very vulnerable position. I suppose it could be compared to the feeling that materialises within every woman when approached by a man in the street at night, with nobody else around, even if the man just happens to be there at the same time and means no harm at all. It is almost a primal fear that women cannot really control, and it appears even in situations of even the minutest possible danger or threat.

When it was time to head back to the changing room, I had to pass the lifeguard on my way. I managed to internalise my shame and make it look completely nonchalant, even though on the inside I was holding my breath and imagining his eyes following my naked body (most likely it was not the case at all); I felt the physical sensation of the skin on my back creeping with embarrassment. I could not tell if any of my other female companions felt the same way about it. In retrospect I wish I had asked.

At my first swim, after the introductions had been made, I noticed that some fellow swimmers stayed more reserved towards me after they found out who I was and my purpose in joining the club. Some of them over time approached me and asked me questions about it and became more reassured and open to my presence, others opted for keeping a safe distance from me till the very end. Since Club Nautica strives to create a safe and family friendly environment for practising naturism, only couples or women were accepted and allowed to join. I was informed that this was so that women would be more secure in attending and would not feel threatened when outnumbered by male members. Most of the

time the numbers were kept at a fifty-fifty ratio, and children were present during most swims I attended. That night seventeen club members attended the swim and the number included three small boys.

One of the most striking things that a first-timer like me comes across is that, since it is a naturist swim, both men and women can use the same changing room. Some members chose to take off their clothes in slightly more private corners of the room, where boxed off open-ended changing spaces were available, and others chose to do it openly at the centre of the changing room. Some might think that the moment a group of strangers take off their clothes, chaos will ensue. Chaos, that is, in terms of their behaviour (or rather misbehaviour), manners forgotten, a Sodom and Gomorrah of sexual misconduct. This is the only way some people could imagine such a moment. But when you actually do bare everything in front of other people, all you can hear is a ringing noise in your ears, interwoven with the sound of your pounding heart. Your body does not forget how to move, it does not lose control over its impulses. So there it was, the moment I stood completely naked in the room in front of all these people whom I did not know at all. If you were to imagine this, you would consider it the thing of a worst nightmare.⁸ Yet they were all strangers to me, they were all naked too, and they paid no attention to my nakedness. It was odd to think that the last time I had stood naked in front of another person was in an erotic setting; now I know that what created the erotic setting was so much more than just our naked bodies. People at the club did not seem to care about nakedness and there was comfort in that – a sense of naked solidarity. Some might think that if you were to be so vulnerable, it would be better to be surrounded by people you knew and trusted. I think it is quite the opposite. These people did not know any other ‘version’ of me. I did not have to work with them every day, bump into them in my local supermarket or pub. To me, it made it all feel both safe and unreal. There was shame, embarrassment and some awkwardness too; but, despite the initial shock to the system, I knew that it was only one aspect of my life, which did not define me. I could walk away from it and leave it behind me. I had reckoned that if one were ever in this situation, somehow one would ‘innately’ know what to do (and what not to do); and, more importantly, one would know what one would not like other people to do while one was in this vulnerable situation. On the other hand, it did not now feel as if anything unexpected could ruin the whole atmosphere. It felt solid to me. I also felt that if somebody made a false move or made someone feel uncomfortable, it would not be by chance, but quite intentional. The framework is such that, for it to work, ulterior motives can have no place.

8 As Myers (1989) asserts, the bad dream of being seen naked in public is one of the commonest dreams within Western societies; it was even confirmed by some of the naturists in my study.

Since the room was quite cold, I rushed into the safety of the swimming pool, which unfortunately was quite cold too. I must admit that doing that also gave me the advantage of being in the water by the time the rest arrived, so that I could observe the body language and the ease of walking around naked almost flaunted by most male members. Being in the water for some reason gave me a false sense of feeling less exposed. Some women seemed more comfortable than others, but it was really hard to say whether it was due to the embarrassment or the sheer cold temperatures of the venue itself. As I was sitting in this cool pool of water, I discreetly watched all the naked bodies jumping in or slowly coming into the water. I had never experienced seeing so many naked bodies in front of me, all at once anyway. I was curious about them, but I did not find them at all sexually arousing. Maybe it was because the context of the situation was not appealing to me erotically, lacking the 'right' kind of intimacy, or maybe it was simply due to the fact that I did not find any of the men physically attractive at all. This was true when a few months later a young couple from Eastern Europe joined the club, and the man was a young and good-looking bodybuilder. He had an admirably well-sculpted body, and even though it was pleasant to notice it standing out from the pool of bodies 'filled with the air of bygone decades', it still did not feel erotic to me. Was it my inner restraint or was it the carefully orchestrated atmosphere of the event that stripped this happening of any unwanted desire? It felt like seeing something behind glass, something that we were always curious to see, but now that it is here in front of our eyes, we take a moment to consider it and acknowledge it – but once it is satisfied the curiosity is fleeting.

Since I cannot swim, I stayed with the group of other non-swimming women in the shallow end of the pool, but we were frequently joined by other members who would stop for a quick chat. I noticed that most of us maintained constant eye contact with the person we were talking to, and there were no obvious signs of anyone overstepping that rule. I myself was tempted not to keep my eyes on other people's faces, but to keep looking to check whether they were looking at my naked body. It was all new to me so I felt the need to check in case they were in any way ambivalent about their indifference towards all those naked bodies surrounding them.

I noticed that most of the female members had trimmed their pubic hair. Some had none, others showed clear signs of bikini-line treatment. It is hard to tell from observation alone whether this was a factor in the 'performative body' notion connected with nudist practice, or was more to do with the general standards of beauty prevalent for women these days.

No intense gawking at anybody was taking place, yet I could not help feeling discomfort, and chose to get out of the water before most of the male swimmers did so. It is one thing to swim naked or even share a changing room, but I

must admit it felt odd to shower in front of other people. We had only three open-fronted shower cubicles available to share among the 15 people on average, all coming out of the swimming pool at the same time after the hour for the naturist swim was up. I was startled the first time when I was taking a shower and turned around and saw other members waiting for their turn. I felt rather disconcerted by it, and it led me to think later when I returned home, that my intuitions were not inaccurate at all. The sight of a woman, or a man for that matter, lathering and gently touching their naked body and running their hands up and down it is a long-established sexual trigger and fetish in our culture. It is always intimate and has become something erotically pleasurable for a spectator. It is a staple of blue movies. There is a very fine line between what is considered necessary bodily hygiene and an erotically charged sensual activity. Showering proved to be one of those moments that made me stop in my tracks and made me think.

2.3 St Valentine's Day Party (18 February 2012)

The party was on Saturday night at 8.00 p.m. in the private home of one of the club's committee members, who stepped in after the couple who had initially volunteered to throw it cancelled two days before it was due to happen. I refer to it here as a 'Valentine's Day party', but in fairness only because it happened to take place around that time of the year. No naked cupids were involved in the event.

I was picked up from a city centre location by two couples who volunteered to give me a lift on their way to the party. When we arrived, Mary Jane (the hostess) was at the door, fully dressed since she was on opening doors and preparing food duty. Once we walked in to the house we were greeted in the dining room by the already naked host Stephen. One could tell right away that the house itself had been prepared for the naturist party, because the temperature was quite high in all the rooms, so that it might have felt uncomfortable sitting in one's clothes. The curtains on all the windows were carefully drawn.

Because this was my first 'proper' naturist party I decided to follow the others in the order and timing of behaviour and manners. It looked as if the group of us who had just arrived were not rushing to take our clothes off. It was a rather cold evening outside, and so they decided to warm up a bit first. We were, after all, the first to arrive. It also made a sense for Mary Jane to keep her clothes on since she was preparing chicken curry and wanted to avoid burns.

Within the next hour or so, more people began to arrive at the party, most of them couples. In total there were around twenty people at the party that night. It looked as if the smokers were lingering over taking their clothes off since they needed to go out every now and then. One of them, though, was clever enough to

have brought his bathrobe, in order to slip into something warm quickly if he needed to go outside again for a quick smoke.

Certain rules were in place that night, apart from the usual one about members and their guests behaving in a manner that would not cause any offence to other members or their guests. All members had to bring their own towels to the party so that they could sit wherever they liked, provided it was on their own towel. It is considered rude and inconsiderate to sit on a towel that belongs to someone else, and even more so if someone sits on a chair or a sofa without putting a towel over it first. I was watching throughout the evening, and the whole 'towel rule' worked quite smoothly in practice. It was not the German holidaymakers' style, however; nobody was reserving their seat with their towel so that no one else could sit there. A person did not have to walk around with their towel if they wanted to leave it on their seat. It could be left wherever he or she was sitting last, and if someone wanted to take that seat, they could remove the towel and put their own down in its place. This shows that a certain level of repugnance towards some aspects of the naked human body still exists among naturists. The 'towel rule' may be considered a common-sense rule that nobody questions. Whether it is a naturist holiday resort or someone's private house, it seems to be crucial to keep up hygienic practices on all accounts. This appears to be a good example of the distancing towards natural bodily functions that happened during the European civilising process. In a way it reminds me of the rule with menstruation, because we all know it happens, but when a woman in a naturist setting is wearing a sarong or a bikini bottom we would not like to discuss why. People sitting with their naked backsides on their towels seems to be a similar case; both involve parts of our bodies responsible for some unavoidable and necessary physiological functions. Both were pushed behind the scenes of social life long ago, symbolically separated from the front of the stage.

I had been watching the general dynamics of the group at the party, and at some point I noticed that most of people were behaving in a manner not too different from a dressed-up party. The body language seemed to be quite relaxed and people gathered around standing in small groups. But it is important to note that most of the guests kept eye contact during conversations, and it was rare to catch someone's eyes wondering into the area of someone's body below head level. A person was more likely to be noticed looking at the intimate parts of another's body with a blank sort of stare – the kind of stare when one does not necessarily see what one is looking at – rather than staring in a more impertinent manner. All the same, I noticed people looking at me when I was passing by.

Body distance was maintained at all times unless it was with a spouse. It was more noticeable when it turned out that it was a member's birthday and a cake with a candle was presented. I did not see anyone, apart from his girlfriend, hugging or kissing the 'birthday boy'. Photos were taken, though most of the

people moved away from the background or beyond the camera's range, and some women were actually hiding behind their husbands.

Once again, I noticed that most women had shaved or waxed their legs and pubic hair, apart from those who seemed to prefer to keep things more natural. As for the men, I noticed that some had shaved their crotch too, or showed signs of the hair having been treated at some point (hair growing back on various parts of the body). I shall revisit the issue of bodily hair more closely in the next chapter, reporting on my interviews with participants, who were asked directly about their attitudes towards bodily hair.

In general, the appropriate body distance was observed, apart from in the cases of spouses – and of Derek, the one and only single man at the party. Unfortunately, he sat next to me, and he seemed to ignore the fact that our bodies were touching (a 'cheek to cheek' situation'). On a couple of occasions he apologised for sitting too close to me, yet within seconds the same situation arose again. I also noticed him looking at intimate parts of my body while we were all sitting around and listening to the songs sung by other club members.

When towards the end of the night I went upstairs to the designated changing room, Derek came in to say goodnight to me while I was in the process of dressing. It seemed more awkward for me as a non-nudist than for him. I convinced myself at the time that it would be better not to upset the atmosphere, and I let it go, but an unpleasant feeling of having been violated came over me the moment I reached home. I decided to try to tackle the matter subtly with the secretary's wife, and she and her husband had apparently noticed my discomfort on the night of the party while I was sitting on the couch next to Derek. The moment I mentioned his name, Donal (the secretary) appeared and exclaimed 'I knew something was going on there!' They immediately apologised and reassured me that Derek would not be invited to any parties in the future; indeed technically he should not have been at the party that night. He had been a club member with his wife and children in the past, but was so no longer. The hostess happened to bump into him that day in the local supermarket and felt the need to invite him to the party. The following week after the party I received an email from Derek, forwarded to me via the club's secretary, in which he expressed his remorse if

I had felt uncomfortable that night. He blamed the woman on the other end of the couch who, he said, kept pushing him towards me. I suppose what really happened there that night lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Another thing that I noticed during the party was that women never sat with their legs open, even though many of them were sitting around the fireplace on the floor. On the other hand, men present at the party, despite their nudity, showed no signs of inhibitions about sitting with their legs apart. They were more likely than women to give the occasional scratch to the crotch area. We

could argue that the same gendered body language applies among dressed or 'textile' people in everyday life, but what needs to be noted here is that throughout my fieldwork, it was evident that men tended to feel more comfortable in displaying their naked bodies than did women.

Throughout the evening people expressed interest in the fact that I was researching Irish naturism, and, apart from the usual questions about my reasons for choosing this particular topic, a couple of people asked me whether I had joined the club on my own or with a spouse or whether I had been a naturist before I decided to study the subject. Towards the end of the evening, while I was waiting for the people giving me a lift home to get ready, the hostess of the party expressed her awe at my bravery in deciding to join the club on my own just to gather materials for my research. I realised yet again how important it is for these women to participate in naturist activities only if their spouses or other women are around. It is also important to say that most of these women had been naturists for at least 15 years. The party came to an end at around 2 a.m.

The hosts' children had been put to bed and sent their rooms as the party was beginning. I was told that it was an adult party and that children were not allowed to participate. They had seen naked adults during the fortnightly swims organised by the club, so it was probably more about them being in the way of 'adult fun' than any problem with their naked participation. I was by far the youngest of all guests at the party, with the modal age-group being the late forties, fifties and sixties.

Technically, the so-called Valentine's Day party was the second naturist party I attended. The first had taken place before Christmas, and it was also Club Nautica's and the INA's Annual General Meeting. The number of people who attended was quite low. I had a chance to meet the INA's president with his wife. The oddest thing that happened there was that despite the party being advertised as a naturist party, we all remained fully dressed throughout. It was my first naturist party at the time and I remained puzzled by it, and by the fact that nobody had raised the issue during the evening. It was on our way home that Paul and Niamh mentioned it. They explained to me that it was probably due to the fact that it was a cold evening out that day, and also that it was really up to the hosts of the party to initiate the act of 'disrobing'. This in some way adds to the conditional character of naturist gatherings, with certain levels of uncertainty and even insecurity in the manner in which the meetings are held and organised.

The problems of shame and embarrassment, and the need for confidentiality, can perhaps be observed more clearly today in Ireland than in many other countries. The reason is that, until well within living memory, the Roman Catholic Church held what Inglis (1998) has called a 'moral monopoly' in the Republic of Ireland, and used its hegemonic power position to impose an unusually rigid and conservative code of behaviour and feeling. Many of the members of

Club Nautica with whom I talked would, in their younger days, have had to surmount unusually strong obstacles, both from social disapproval and from their own inner feelings. Even today, that is associated with the Club being more nearly a 'secret society' than would be necessary in some other countries. For the effects of the inculcation of a strict Catholic habitus do not disappear overnight, even though the secular power of the Catholic Church in Ireland has in many respects declined dramatically in the last two decades or so. This is an instance of what Elias called 'the drag effect of habitus' (2010 [1987]: 288–90).

2.4 Conclusion

Is my personal account valuable for my research on nakedness and embarrassment? Is it not one of the most basic rules of 'science' as we know it to try and keep the researcher objective and detached? Did I break this rule in my research? I would like to argue that especially over the course of time I have learned the value of my own emotions about my fieldwork, having first underestimated and rejected them. I tried to set aside or silence my own feelings, which ranged from apprehension, fear, shame and distrust to enjoyment and gratitude towards the people who admitted me to their naked world. My attempt to exercise the utmost care for the comfort of the participants in my study might have pushed my own emotions into a secondary and unimportant place.

Ever since deciding to study naturism and beginning to try to access to the naturists' environment, I had attempted to prepare myself for it mentally. I accepted and tolerated their right to choose how they lived their lives with suppressed judgement and an open mind. Logically and rationally I had accepted my choice of becoming one of them too; yet on an emotional level it made me uncomfortable and at times even threatened by it. That is why I often felt disoriented and uneasy before and after the meetings with the club, but rarely felt this when actually surrounded by all these people. In Freud's terms, it was my 'superego' slowly coming to terms with the slight distortion of the world as I once knew it. The atmosphere of enduring benevolence among the club members was constantly intertwined with my own feelings of ambivalence. This ambivalence did not entirely desert me until the very end of my fieldwork. I suppose it is the way we gradually 'learn' how to enjoy our naked bodies and naturism, after we slowly and willingly step over certain thresholds of the feelings of shame, embarrassment, discomfort or even guilt, which nevertheless tend to linger at the back of our minds to some extent. I can only provide a thorough analysis and insight of my own experiences in more detail, because the data collected during the interviews do not always reflect it to the same extent. Most participants admit to these feelings more or less directly, but I sense that most of them, sometimes

after decades of practising naturism, have lost their memories of these awkward and uncomfortable experiences. Perhaps it is necessary and a part of the process to forget them, and then once having done so, one comes to enjoy naturism, maybe no longer as such a thrilling experience but instead as a peaceful recreation when one finally feels more free. Only 'more free' – because I doubt whether anyone can fully let go of all self-restraints and inhibitions.

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