

What do Reflection and Emotion got to do with it? My Journey as a Novice Researcher

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ABSTRACT

In this manuscript I am attempting to provide insight into my journey as a novice researcher completing my Master's research that explored Working Women's Perceptions of Power, Gender-Based Violence and HIV-infection (Freeman, 2010). I considered reflexivity as it relates to the analysis of qualitative data by drawing and reflecting on my master's studies in the field of sociology. The study explored working women's perceptions of power, gender-based violence and HIV-infection risks within intimate relationships. This problem was addressed by conducting an exploratory study with five female employees in an airline business who participated in in-depth, face-to-face interviews. This manuscript covers a brief introduction to reflexivity in qualitative data analysis, provides a reflective account, Theoretical Perspective, Interpersonal and Institutional context of research, the Emotional Response to Methodology and concludes with some lessons learned and recommendations for other novice researchers.

Keywords: *Reflective Account, Reflexivity, and Qualitative Data Analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This manuscript is based on the research project undertaken for my master studies, which was an exploration of Working Women's Perceptions of Power, Gender-Based Violence and HIV-infection (Freeman, 2010). It was a qualitative study in which participants were identified using purposive sampling and data was collected using semi-structured, individual in-depth, face-to-face interviews, following a narrative approach. Interview data was analysed and interpreted by applying a generalised inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. This manuscript presents a brief overview of qualitative research in order to provide a backdrop for the research within which I am demonstrating the significance of reflexivity within this context.

1.1 Purpose of Reflexivity

In an important discussion about the implications of the values, histories and social locations of researchers who engage in the study of other people's lives, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) encourage qualitative researchers to develop a practical and visible process of reflectivity. The authors are of the opinion that in this process an understanding of the



self in relation to the research and an accounting for one's research choices are recommended. These authors note that the literature on reflectivity focuses on the implications of researchers' epistemological position on their analytic and interpretive approaches to conducting research and conveying findings.

Malacrida (2007, p.1329-1339) further explains that traditional epistemological concerns in qualitative research focus on the effects of researchers' values and emotions in choices of research topics, power relations with research participants and the influence of researchers standpoints on data collection and analysis. At the same time, the research process also affects the researchers' values, emotions and standpoints. In many ways qualitative research with vulnerable and marginalized people is akin to witnessing (Malacrida, 2007). Undertaking sensitive qualitative research is necessary if researchers want to enhance their understanding of the issues that affect people in today's society (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2006).

Dickson-Swift *et al* (2006) explain that qualitative research requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the topic they are studying and to undertake personal interaction with participants. My primary reason for engaging in such research was to provide an opportunity for emancipatory knowledge production in which participants' stories were told as a way of naming hurts and outlining injustices and as a way to move towards positive social change and this motivated me as a researcher. In this reflective account as a novice researcher, before inspiring upcoming researchers to be reflexive about how they examine research participant's accounts of their lives, it seems proper for me to reflect upon my own account and why I am concerned with reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. My curiosity in reflexivity generally, and as it relates to data analysis in particular, is more recent. It has developed largely in response to an increasing awareness of how limited my reflexive processes were at the time of my master research.

1.2 Reflective Account

This reflective account considers reflectivity as it relates to the analysis of qualitative data by drawing and reflecting on my own master studies. According to Lietz, Langer & Furman (2006, p.444), reflexivity is "one among other strategies that qualitative researchers must engage in order to describe research findings in a way that authentically represent the meanings as described by the participants". Lietz *et al* (2006, p.447) as cited in Horsburg (2003, p.308) argue that reflexivity is "an active acknowledgement by a researcher that his or her own actions and decisions will inevitably influence upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigations".

Reflexivity involves deconstructing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experiences and identity intersect with that of participants. Dowling (2006) encourages researchers to engage in continuous self-critique and self-appraisal and to look closely at how their experience shapes or influences the stages of the research process, and to emphasize not on 'looking good', but on self-revelation. A self-reflective question that

arose was: As a researcher, can I really be a good researcher without self-awareness and self-concept?

I am a Social Worker by profession, familiar with counselling. I have experience in working with women on the issue of gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS for many years. I know and understand the different cultures that are Baster, Nama-Damara, Oshiwambo and Otjiherero. The knowledge, understanding and respect of different cultures play an important role in the research process. In this regard, reflexivity is an important part of qualitative enquiry because it is through this reflexivity that qualitative researchers can ponder the ways in which who they are may both assist and hinder the process of co-constructing meaning. Babbie and Mouton (2008, p.317) point out “that reactivity might occur in such studies, since research participants react to the characteristics of the researcher”. Given my professional status in the workplace as a Social Worker who was responsible for employee wellness, and having been a working colleague to the participants with whom the interviews were conducted, personal and emotionally overwhelming issues were of concern.

However, I did not allow my professional role to interfere with my role as a researcher. I ensured that I remained the investigator, not the helper or counsellor. I guarded against this problem by approaching the study with great caution. I remained cognisant and vigilant of this possibility and therefore ensured referral systems in place. In cases where a participant got emotional, I immediately stopped the interview in order to allow the participant to calm down. In such cases, I referred participants to relevant helping professionals, such as psychologists. I proceeded with interviews only with the permission of the participant, a practice recommended by Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong (2008).

Reflexivity considers the multiple identities and perspectives of the researchers in consideration of ways in which these factors could both support the process of data analysis while also acknowledging the potentials for reactivity and bias. In order to succeed in the data analysis and interpretation, it was important for me to know who I am, where I am coming from, my culture, belief system, strength and weakness. These insights formed a backdrop to data-gathering using a narrative approach in which a volunteer sample of women were asked to retell actual stories of power, gender-based violence and HIV-infection risks within their intimate relationships. In this regard, the proposed study sought to uncover women’s experiences of the “web of abuse and the personal and external resources from which they can draw to shift the balance of control within such relationships” (Kirkwood 1995, p.86).

In 2008, I launched the “I”-stories booklet that chronicled real life stories of Namibian women who spoke out against gender-based violence during the *Sixteen Days of Activism Campaign against Violence against Women*. The theme of the “I”-stories booklet was: *Healing through the Power of the Pen*. This was a series of first-hand accounts of women who have experienced gender-based violence, and included themes such as domestic violence, rape, child abuse, poverty, and HIV infection after a sexual assault. The aim was



to create a safe and supportive platform where women could gain emotional healing in the telling and writing of their personal accounts.

For the writers it was empowering to tell their stories, because it formed part of a transition from victim to survivor (Namibian Voices for Development, 2008). It was during the *Sixteen Days of Activism* campaign and after receiving copies of the “I”-stories booklet, that five women employed in an airline business in Namibia approached me and voiced their need to be given an opportunity to share their perceptions of gender power, gender-based violence and HIV-infection risks both in their intimate relationships and at the workplace. For the purpose of my research, I approached these five working women to form part of the study.

Reinharz (1992, as cited by Malacrida, 2007) claims that research that is rooted in the needs and concerns of individuals and is engaged in with full reflexivity concerning the emotions and values embedded in the research process has the potential to change research participants and researchers alike. Reinharz (1992, as quoted by Malacrida, 2007) argues that such research is transformative and has the potential to engender powerful and positive social change. Thus, emotions in research are unavoidable but also desirable, indeed necessary, to the goals of constructing emancipatory knowledge (Malacrida, 2007). When I decided to write about working women’s perceptions of power, gender-based violence and HIV-infection risks among female employees in an airline business, ethical issues were taken into account whereby I sought formal ethical clearance from the University of South Africa’s Ethical Clearance Committee. I submitted a research proposal for approval of human participation research as well as information- and informed consent letters that were given to the respondents before the interview could take place. The research proposal was submitted and presented to the university’s Ethics Committee for approval which was granted.

1.3 Importance of Reflective Journaling

In the beginning of the research project, I was very enthusiastic about my studies, however being early in the project I experienced my own health crisis and also lost some of my course work submitted to the University of South Africa. I had to deal with my feelings of loss and devastation. Throughout the process of undertaking the emotionally-laden research, and experiencing such challenges, I utilized a range of methods to try and reduce the impact that the research had on me in order to strengthen my ability as a researcher to be reflective.

Malacrida (2007, p. 1329-1339) states “traditional reflective journaling is very important in ensuring the emotional safety of researchers”. In this regard, my first approach was to undertake reflective journaling which was commonly recommended by research supervisors and academics. It was important for me to locate myself within the research process, and to acknowledge, and be aware of the role I played within the research context, including the impacts the research had on me. Rowling (1999) explains that

reflexivity can be a difficult, but important aspect of sensitive research, because it is seen as a vital process if researchers are to explore emotional reactions and make honest sense of participant's experiences, whilst also endorsing current knowledge and elucidating new ideas. My personal and ethical relationship to the research undoubtedly contributed and articulated confusions and tensions. I felt how these manifested themselves in some of the marked coursework.

For me my personal crisis led to a renewed intimacy with my research topic and an ethic of responsibility to the stories of others that empowered me to move closer to the materials, where I said to myself: *"You are going to make a success of your master studies"*. The most effective way for me to undertake the research process successfully was through keeping a research journal. I maintained a research journal from the very beginning of my research process in which I outlined my thought processes, my feelings and why I made certain decisions. The journal keeping approach allowed me opportunities to record my initial thoughts when my father was diagnosed with lung cancer during the final stage of compiling my dissertation, I thought: *"Why now God?"*, feelings such as: *"Lord I am overwhelmed, but please help me to stay focus, ...were some of the reactions and decisions, which resulted in me becoming more determined to make a success of my studies.*

Research journaling enabled me to look back at my thoughts, feelings and experiences and to analyse the factors behind those decision-making processes as well as to see how my thought process changed throughout the course of the research project. Darra (2008) and Goodrum and Keys (2007) support the journal keeping approach and argue that personal journals or diaries can be valuable and relatively a simple way for researchers to work through and acknowledge their thoughts, feelings and the roles they play within the research context and it is also helpful in managing distress, sadness and release emotions (Goodrum & Keys, 2007). As a young social science researcher doing qualitative research, I looked at related aspects of reflexivity. Among the aspects of reflexivity, I discussed theoretical perspective, including ontology and epistemology aspects, interpersonal and institutional context of research and emotional response in methodology i.e. collecting, analysis and interpreting of data.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theory of Gender and Power was used as a theoretical point of departure and to find sensitising concepts to steer the data collection. The theory of gender and power, as conceptualised by Connell (1987) and then reworked by Wingood and DiClemente (1998) posits that three major structures typify gendered relationships, namely: 1) The sexual division of labour; 2) The sexual division of power, and 3) The structure of cathexis (Wingood & DiClemente 1998). The three structures serve to explain the cultural bound gender roles assumed by men and women (DiClemente & Wingood, 2000).

The above structures are said to exist at two different levels, that is, the societal and institutional level. The highest level in which the structures are embedded is the societal level. Furthermore, the three structures are rooted in society through abstract, historical and socio-political forces that consistently segregate power and ascribe social norms based on gender-determined roles. The structures remain intact even though the society is changing (DiClemente & Wingwood, 2000). The three structures are also evident at social institutions that include: schools, worksites or industries, families, relationships, religious institutions, the medical system, the media etc. In the social institutions the three structures are maintain, for example, through unequal pay for comparable work where women doing the same work as men but are paid less than men: the imbalances of control within relationships and at places of work.

According to Mauthner & Doucet (2003, p.422) “human beings are viewed as interdependent and as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations”. This ontological view of things emphasizes the issue of social relation which also shape people the way they make decisions. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) state that they have just recently appreciated and interrogate the epistemological and ontological assumptions of subjects and subjectivities that informed both their research and the data analysis method they used. Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.424) argue that research “which relies on the interpretation of subject’s accounts can only make sense with a high degree of reflexivity and awareness about epistemology, theoretical and ontological conceptions of subjects and subjectivities that bear on their research practices and analytical processes”.

2.1 Interpersonal and Institutional Context of Research

On the interpersonal context of research, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) state that the choices researchers make concerns ontological and epistemological positioning, methodological and theoretical perspective, and the adoption of particular research methods are bound up not only with our personal or academic biographies, nor are they motivated exclusively by intellectual concerns. According to Neuman (2007, p. 120) “qualitative researchers are more interested in authenticity, than validity. Authenticity means giving a fair, honest and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it every day”. I found it imperative to understand the experiences of the participants from their point of view. Primary data was collected mainly through in-depth face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was used and the interviews were tape-recorded.

I personally transcribed the tape-recorded interviews. In the further enhancement of the data, the research participants were invited to chronicle their stories about abuse and female vulnerability to HIV- infections in personal journals. This was to allow the participants the opportunity to add to their stories in a cumulative way and in their own time so that their narration was not restricted to the interview setting and process only. During and after the interviews, I recorded the field notes about the reactions and

observations of both the participants and the interviewer in a research journal. Befitting a qualitative study, a small number of interviewees were recruited and interviewed until saturation of the key themes was reached.

Themes that emerged from the qualitative interview data were transformed into analysis. The credibility of the data-generation process was enhanced and protected through immersion in the narration of the research participants. Neuman (2007, p. 249) explains that “field researchers depend on what members tell them. This makes the credibility of members and their statements part of reliability...field researchers takes subjectivity and context into account as they evaluate credibility”. The open-endedness of narrative research is the strength of the method, and there is no primary method for assessment of validity and reliability (Overcash, 2003). Narrative methods lend themselves to a holistic view of human experience. Overcash (2003, p.182) states that “as with all research, one final test of validity exists, namely the ability of the researcher to determine whether there is something abnormal or generally wrong with the data”. Consistency has been achieved in the interviews by using the interview schedule, the use of a secure setting in which the interviews were conducted and the use of the participants’ own writing. Rolfe (2006, p.305) emphasises the trustworthiness of qualitative work, which encompasses:

- credibility, which is comparable with internal validity;
- dependability, which is the same as reliability;
- transferability, which is similar to external validity; and
- conformability

The narrations generated presented a credible overview of lived experiences of GBV. The transferability of the data was evaluated in terms of the meaningfulness of the findings. Rolfe (2006, p.309) declares: Quality judgements entail a subjective ‘reading’ of the research text, and the responsibility for appraising research lies with the reader rather than with the writer of the report; with the consumer of the research rather than with the researchers themselves. This does not preclude the researchers from appraising the quality of their own work, but rather suggests that the readings of the researchers carry no more authority than those of the consumers of that research.

On the institutional context of research, I valued the support, guidance and encouragement from my supervisor as another resource that was beneficial throughout the research process. According to Ives and Rowley (2005) and Murphy, Bain and Conrad (2007) a good working relationship with supervisors during the research process is vital for a research student’s academic progress.

During my master studies I experienced my supervisor’s support not only as a guide and assisting me, but as someone who offered a degree of support not only on the academic achievement or progress of me as a researcher, but she also focussed on the whole person through being sympathetic and supportive of academic and non-academic aspects of my life, especially during the times when I had a major operation at the beginning of my studies and when I lost my dad and my brother-in-law towards the end of my studies when I had to finalize my dissertation for exam submission. I drew increasingly on my



academic supervisor and mentor's work and school of thought and thus deeply shaped my methodological, theoretical, epistemological and ontological contours of my thinking and dissertation.

My intellectual development reflected the availability, support and commitment of my academic mentor and intimately connected to the interpersonal, political and institutional contexts of my research. This kind of support from my research supervisor was important throughout the research journey for me to feel that I was supported and that I was able to approach my supervisor at any stage throughout the study to gain support. I benefitted a lot from the healthy working relationship with my supervisor, but it was also important for me to see a private counsellor especially during the periods that I lost my father and brother-in-law. The counselling sessions with the private counsellor were another method for me to deal with my personal losses as well as with the emotional burden of sensitive research as it granted me the opportunity to debrief, to hear and recognize why I felt the way and it also allowed me the opportunity to receive support and advice (Goodrum, *et al*, 2007). The counselling sessions with the private counsellor helped restore a sense of psychological and emotional wellbeing (Howarth, 1998).

3. EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO METHODOLOGY

In research, the emotional response from the researcher in collecting, analysing and interpreting data can also shape the research process. Hearing, typing, reading and coding the stories of the participants were an exhaustive exercise for me. It was important for me to protect myself from stress and burnout by spacing the interviews with the participants in order to allow myself some time to process each individual interview before attempting to move to the next one.

The spacing of the interviews allowed me time to keep up with transcription of the interviews while the data was still fresh in my mind. I transcribed after every interview and needed to undergo debriefing sessions. As a protection mechanism in prevention of stress and burnout, I took some time off doing photography. I ensured my own emotional safety (and by extension that of my research participants) by arranging appropriate debriefing sessions in consultation with my mentor. I was the insider in the qualitative research, telling the story to the outsiders without imposing my own conceptual frameworks with the hope that the findings of my research may assist decision-makers to understand better the situation of working women's perceptions and experiences of power, GBV and HIV-infection risks.

As a first time data collector in academic research, I was surrounded by a feeling of anxiousness not knowing what the reactions of the participants would be. I was astounded by the amounts of data that I generated. As Malacrida states (2007, p.1336) "although much of the literature focus on the goals of transcription technique, little attention is paid to the difficulties of the emotional labour involved in transcribing". Like

in the case of Mauthner and Doucet (2003), I found available research methods, texts described as abstract, mechanical and disembodied technical procedures difficult to apply to my research. Furthermore, the methods that appealed to me seemed difficult to use without the guidance and support of an experienced academic supervisor. As Malacrida (2007) noted, it is clear that working with emotionally disturbing materials was difficult for the junior researchers involved in the research project. The master research dealt with a very sensitive issue that is why it was important to collect data in a non-judgemental and supportive environment to avoid biases. The findings were interpreted according to its real meanings without assumptions. Furthermore, complete confidentiality was maintained for data management.

4. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUNG RESEARCHERS

Part of my commitment in undertaking emotionally-laden and sensitive research in my role as a full-time employed mother was the realization that with the benefits of research come possible burdens and challenges which I needed to plan for and be willing to take on board. I learnt that as a student researcher one is expected to be an independent researcher and critical thinker. It meant that I had to do research beyond the prescribed and recommended materials to enhance my understanding of the subject matter.

Furthermore, critical analysis also meant that I had to compare and contrast different views with my own and had to use examples to illustrate my own understanding to argue my own opinion about the subject matter. What I experienced, was not something new, but something that other researchers before and many to come after me would experience. For the purposes of my master dissertation, theory played a key role in strengthening the practice of research. I had to demonstrate that I was able to identify appropriate research questions, select appropriate data-gathering methods, provided informative descriptions of the topic, analysed and interpreted the results; and made appropriate recommendations.

Reflective journaling, a healthy working relationship with the research supervisor, spacing interviews and transcribing of interviews and taking good self-care, are some of the corner stones in the academic progress and the psychological and emotional well-being of a researcher during the research process. It was of critical importance for me to stay in contact with my appointed supervisor through e-mails, telephone calls or personal meetings. Keeping notes during research supervision meetings and typing these up after a meeting, keeping a file for my own records and e-mailing my supervisor a copy, were some of the important things to do. Part of personal development into a professional researcher is planning ones work so that the researcher has the time and resources to meet deadlines. As a novice researcher, one is not expected to get everything right the first time.



5. CONCLUSION

As an early career researcher, one needs strategies to alleviate anxiety before, during and after the study.

This was done through appropriate debriefing sessions in consultation with my supervisor and mentor. Reflexive approaches ensure emotional safety of researchers and foster opportunities for emancipatory consciousness among research team members (Malacrida, 2007). The same researcher, Malacrida (2007), states that ethical considerations to a research is very important for engaging in reflexivity, she argues for an ethics of emotional care and support for research team members. Engaging in reflexivity does not only ensure ethical approaches to interpreting the lives of others, but also the emotional safety of the researcher. Reflexive approach to the research process has the potential to construct emancipatory knowledge for research consumers and create a positive change in the consciousness of researchers themselves. Computerised data analysis programmes for qualitative research are unreflective therefore human mind is needed to supplement and complement reflexivity account, that will give a clear picture for describing what is said by participants, the voice of the people. It is the hope that this reflective account on my journey as a novice researcher could provide some insight and alert other early career researchers on the importance of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis.

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