

Positionality statement on studying male victims of intimate partner abuse in Zimbabwe: A research note

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Abstract

Reflecting on one's positionality as a researcher is a critical element in qualitative studies. While there are various qualitative studies on the meaning of and the way positionality affects qualitative research practice, this research note examines the phenomenon as it applies to the author's doctoral study. Drawing from a collection of research memoirs, the research note presents the author's conceptualisation of personal positionality in the study, based on nationality, personal values, work experience, age and gender. The note details the author's multiple identity shifts throughout the study. Potential challenges and opportunities of knowing one's positionality together with the effects of positionality on the participants, the researcher as well as the research process are highlighted. It concludes that positionality among qualitative researchers is characterised by fluidity, instability and continued shifts as opposed to it being a constant form of researcher identity.

Keywords: Positionality, qualitative research, reflexivity, fluidity

Introduction

This research note is a reflexive presentation of the author's positionality in a study constituting a doctoral thesis titled: *Intimate partner abuse and male identity: Experiences and perspectives of abused men in Zimbabwe*. The data for the study were collected through key informant interviews with individuals working with male victims of intimate partner abuse (IPA), semi-structured in-depth interviews with the male victims and focus group discussions with adult community members.

Positionality is the identity of the researcher in relation to the study context and or to the participants (Rowe, 2014). It points to the way researchers' identity influence

and potentially distort their understanding of the studied social phenomena¹. The researcher's positionality is informed by aspects which include *inter alia* their personal knowledge, cultural values, power and preconceptions on the subject of research (Shih, 2019). It affects every phase of the research process. Researchers become aware of their positionality through the process of reflexivity which is an important aspect of any qualitative enquiry. Reflexivity is a means by which researchers critically appraise the effect of their presence on their participants and *vice versa*, thereby addressing issues of positionality (Mason-Bish, 2019).

Positionality issues

For Burawoy (2003), reflexivity entails a process of subjecting the whole research process to intense scrutiny through questioning the research practices, identities, and positions of the people involved. Qualitative researchers grapple with the empirical challenges that result from conducting studies among participants who ostensibly represent the familiar.

Male victims of IPA, key informants and community members who together comprised the study participants and I, hail from Zimbabwe. We all, as residence, experienced the effects of political and economic instability that characterised Zimbabwe for the past three decades. I received almost the same socialisation as all the participants, since these are somewhat similar across the country. This raises pertinent questions regarding whether the shared circumstances make us familiar. *What boundaries do I have to navigate in view of the shared nationality and language with the participants? Are there any taken-for-granted barriers in negotiating the boundaries? What are the implications of my gender, age, work and research experience and personal values on*

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/positionality/> Accessed 20 November 2019

the research process and the study findings? I endeavour to answer these questions as I delineate on my contact with the study participants as well as the ‘positions’ (Bourke, 2014, p.3) and identities I embodied.

Defining oneself as an insider and ‘knower’

Wiederhold (2015, p.606) regards researchers who conduct their studies in familiar environments or those having background knowledge on their participants as “insiders” or “researchers at home”. My identity as a Zimbabwean, my work experience and gender socialization as well as the formal education and training I received in Zimbabwe provided me with access to knowledge and information which may be inaccessible to someone who does not share these characteristics. Thus, based on these attributes, I was an insider-researcher.

Work history, previous studies and preconceived views on Intimate partner abuse (IPA)

Despite having no personal history of abuse, I have had contact with male and female victims and perpetrators of IPA during my employment in Zimbabwe’s Justice Department. In 2014 I conducted a study on the prevalence of abuse against men. Such research and work experience locate me in an acknowledgment of preconceptions I might have brought to the doctoral study.

Researchers’ familiarity with the studied in social research is associated with the assumed insider view of participants’ lives (Chavez, 2008). In my doctoral study I exploited already established networks with some key informants and abused men. A notable instance is one where counsellors from one family counselling organisation invited me to attend their sessions and I was introduced to their counselees as a student associated with their organisation. I perceive such a gesture as a confirmation that I

belonged with the organisation. The counselees in this instance, who later became my interview participants, maintained closeness and openness through comfortably sharing their views. They must have considered me as one of them.

Cultural and ethnicity issues

Kendall (2011) regards culture as inseparable from ethnicity and as an essential marker of one's identity. It refers to material and non-material phenomena shared within a group of people and passed from generation to generation (Kendall, 2011). Such phenomena include values, language, customs (gestures and practices), artefacts and symbols *inter alia*. These shared phenomena of group life as Kendall (2011) notes, are important for individual survival and most importantly effective communication *inter alia*.

The population of Zimbabwe can broadly be divided into Shona (70%), Ndebele (20%) speaking ethnic groups and other demographically smaller groups (10%) (World Population Report, 2018). All the participants identified themselves as Shona speaking. This is an aspect I shared with them although I also speak Ndebele and English languages. Banks (1998) notes that language between participants and researchers entail cultural insidership on the part of the researcher. I, thus, became a cultural insider amongst the participants who would regard me as a legitimate member of their Shona community. Being an insider in this regard facilitated the interviews and especially the ease of articulation of views on both sides. A notable incident is one in which a participant used an idiom, "*musha mukadzi*" which means 'a home can only be, if there is a wife, without which it is not a home.' The use of the unexplained idiom can be perceived as an expression by the participant that they expected me (the researcher) to know the meaning since I could speak the language. It is an indication of their recognition and acceptance (Manohar et. al., 2019) of me as one among them as Shona speaking people. Some participants would joke about political activities that were obtaining in Zimbabwe at the

time (the period leading to the 2018 national elections). To them it was a given fact that I knew the political goings-on because of my nationality, hence, I was one of their own. This shows inclusivity on the part of the part of the participants and to that extent, I navigated the boundaries of exclusivity to become an insider. I was an insider based on cultural connections and that gave me access to the deep meanings of relations between men and women in Shona communities.

Gender and age issues

The role of gender in social research has been intensely debated within the feminist scholarship with a general conclusion that it is essential (Manohar et. al., 2019) and depending on the situation, it may positively or negatively impact qualitative data gathering. The primary feminist argument is that researchers of a different gender from that of the participants (cross-gender studies) may not be as effective as those of the same gender (Manohar et. al., 2019). In that regard, a gender-insider researcher is understood to be closer to participants through some shared life experiences peculiar to a gender. Gender as an aspect of identity is, therefore, key to researcher positionality issues.

This study was carried out among men, (although some women were interviewed as key informants and FG discussants) by a man. My gender as a researcher made some participants feel comfortable to share their experiences with the thought that as a man, I would understand them and be less critical or judgemental of them. It is also with no doubt that some participants found it easy to express themselves due to the perceived narrow social distance between us. One participant would address me as, “*mukoma*,” a Shona word that refers to one’s brother. By using gendered words shared among men, the participant expressed ease of communication and a degree of closeness which may not be achievable with a person of another gender.

On the other hand, conducting social research among men as a man may pose challenges. This is especially so if the research focuses on such issues as masculinity which, as Kimmel (2008) notes, are usually policed by other men. Some men may feel uncomfortable having another man interviewing them for the fear of being judged according to the socio-cultural standards of masculinity. This, however, was not the case in this study. My gender positionality, in fact, enhanced the study as more men were open and comfortable sharing their experiences with another man.

Apart from gender, the age of researcher in relation to that of the participants has profound implications on social research and these may be positive or negative. Manohar et. al. (2019) note that participants' trust and respect, which all determine the quality or depth of information they share, are closely tied to the age of the researcher. My age positively impacted my field interactions with the young participants who freely expressed their views without hesitation. However, I was perceived with suspicion among the elderly participants based on my age. Thus, contributing to their outsider perception of me.

The outsider in an unknown terrain

The shared nationality, gender, language and other cultural practices with the participants would make me an apparent insider. Nonetheless, I would ask myself: Whether I share IPA experiences of the male victims, or; Whether I know all the markers of masculinity in the Zimbabwean context? Since these questions could not be answered in the affirmative, I regarded myself as an outsider to that extent. My age and professional training formed the bases on which outsidership, and the researcher-participants power dynamics manifested. These aspects form the subject of the following discussion.

Ganga & Scott (2006) aver that cross-generation studies – where the researcher and participants belong to different generations – are characterised by suspicion due to

perceived differences in life experiences. For Manohar et. al. (2019), research participants are likely to share a great deal of their lived experiences with people they perceive to be their peers. Evidence from this study confirm such assertions. The elderly men (of above 50 years old who constituted FGDs) exhibited reluctance to respond to some of the questions. Rather they considered it their opportunity to emphasise on my age and how I should conduct myself as a young man. For instance, when probed regarding the markers of masculinity in Zimbabwe, one elderly man responded as follows;

...ah listen, there are some issues that you cannot understand at your age. Only those that have come of age can have these issues explained to them by their elders.

Although this response may be interpreted in many ways, to me it meant that the participant considered me a novice who still needed to grow under the guidance of experienced and knowledgeable elders. In their eyes, I was an outsider based on their perception of my age. Thus, the information they shared with me had to reflect this social gap.

The same was the case with some key informants, who treated me with high levels of professionalism while also exhibiting remarkable knowledge of their areas of operation. Their constant use of the English language and peculiar work vocabulary made me feel *othered*. In other instances, during interviews with abused men, some would maintain a very formal relationship epitomized by addressing me as “Mr” or “Sir”. This was despite my emphasis on informality. My interpretation of their reservedness centres on the subject of the study, namely IPA, which is highly sensitive and private. Hence their reluctance to let someone penetrate such personal sphere unrestrained. One may also interpret the use of formal language as their bestowment of power upon me as a researcher. Which in its own way indicate a gulf in our relationship. In yet another notable instance of power dynamics, a key informant (a church pastor) took me through a lesson

regarding research hypothesis and argument. The behaviour felt like an act of asserting her power over me since she occupied a respectable position in her church and holds a PhD.

It is trite in Zimbabwe especially towards general national elections that people discuss political issues and developments on taxis, buses, and other public or private spaces. However, some participants were conspicuously silent on the subject. One can only suspect that such silence meant that the researcher-participant relationship was not close enough relationship for them to entrust me with their political opinions. It is difficult to imagine that they were uninterested in the subject considering that Zimbabwe's ever-evolving politics affect bread and butter issues and determine the way one organises their daily lives. My inference in this instance is that I remained an outsider to them.

Complexities of the insider-outsider dichotomy

According to Song & Parker (1995) conceptualising positionality using the insider-outside dichotomy does not give the full picture of the complexities that are associated with the phenomenon. The categories are narrow and inadequate to capture the multiplicity of researchers' experiences (Chavez, 2008). In most cases qualitative researchers find that their identity, relative to the study participants can neither be described as insider nor outsider.

As above noted, my positionality varied depending on my gender, age, work and personal history. Sometimes it also varied based on the participant-group and my or the participants' power over the research process. In instances where, a participant had control of an interview, then my positionality would largely be that of a subservient outsider. From such research experiences, it can be averred that my positionality was problematic. My identity in this study unsettles the divide between outsidersness and

insiderness. A phenomenon Abu-Lughod (2000) termed ‘halfie’. I kept shifting positions from one who belong to the *other* depending on different positionality dimensions. While my ethnicity, gender, work history and previous research experience positioned me together with the studied, my age and personal life experiences pointed to the fact that I did not belong with them. I locate myself right at the fulcrum of outsider-insider pendulum throughout the whole study as I grappled with interpreting the meanings derived by men from their experience of abuse perpetrated by women. This transcendence of the insider-outsider borders shows that exclusive outsidersness or insiderness in social research is utopian.

Collins (1991) dismisses the notion of concrete and constant positionality among qualitative researchers. She describes qualitative researchers whose positionalities are continuously shifting as the outsiders-within (Collins, 1991). Wiederhold (2015), however, cautions against totally dismissing the insider-outsider dichotomy in conceptualizing positionality. She postulates that the dichotomy assists in explaining qualitative researchers’ situation in view of their research subject, site and participants (Wiederhold, 2015). The reflexive approach to the complexities of positionality, thus, enables qualitative researchers to be conscious of the reality that they are a profound tool for data collection as they are also producers of intertextual knowledge through their interactions with the participants.

Conclusion

The examples presented in this paper recognize the importance of positionality considerations in qualitative research. This is so not only because positionality has a determining effect on the way the research is conducted but also due to its influence on the research outcomes and the interpretations thereof. Therefore, qualitative researchers need to be alive to positionality issues that may interfere with study processes and

outcomes. It is through such consciousness that one is able to critically appraise possible researcher-participant power imbalances. Without which qualitative studies may either become uncritical interpretations of research participants' claims or overly represented voices of the researchers while those of participants are undermined

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