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“You Know What I’m Saying”: Emic and Etic Considerations in Research Involving Sexual Minorities

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Keywords: sexual minorities, emic, etic, insider, outsider

Abstract: This paper focuses on the implications of being an “insider” (emic perspective) versus being an “outsider” (etic perspective) when conducting research involving sexual minorities.

Introduction

It is incumbent on researchers to consider the possible consequences of their work; and issues of ethics and responsibility are key topics in discussions of qualitative research (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Such concerns may be heightened when studying stigmatized populations whose devalued societal position places them at increased risk for experiencing violence, discrimination, and exploitation in a variety of contexts—as well as the negative effects of such experiences. As a result, there may be greater potential for research to result in exploitation and harm to such participants than in studies of less vulnerable and less marginalized populations (Martin & Meezan, 2003). Gerrard (1995), a White researcher unprepared for the reaction of some women of color to participation in her study, provides one such example when referring to *research abuse* as researchers “parachuting into peoples lives, interfering, raising painful old feelings, and then vanishing, leaving the participants to deal with unresolved feelings alone and isolated” (p. 62). This situation also highlights that understanding a phenomenon from the participant’s frame of reference (a key feature of qualitative research) may be more problematic if a researcher and participants are members of different races, genders, or other positionalities. Such concerns have engendered interest in the influence of researcher attributes on the research process including race (Bowman, 2007; Twine & Warren, 2000); and gender (Burian, Yanico, & Martinez, 1998). One consideration in any such research for which there has been little consideration or even conjecture is the sexual orientation of the researcher, “an issue deserving more investigation” (Hash & Cramer, 2003, p. 60).

The concepts of *emics* and *etics* are instructive in exploring this issue. An emic perspective, or *insider* standpoint, represents the viewpoint of the members of a culture or group being studied or observed; while an etic viewpoint reflects more the perspective or values of the researcher, that is, an *outsider* stance (Pike, 1990). Researchers studying their own groups start with certain advantages. Some participants may be more open to engaging in research and be more honest in their reporting with an inside researcher (Hash & Cramer, 2003). Insider investigators also bring special knowledge to their research, which can facilitate data collection and analysis. They can use their emic understanding arising from group membership to communicate the expressions, sentiments, and goals of the group; to establish rapport; to formulate salient questions; and to capture, and understand the importance of, emic perspectives of the participants (LaSala, 2003). In this view, researchers who are sexual minorities and who engage in research with other sexual minorities are more likely to have personal familiarity with issues that affect their respondents’ lives-- for instance, all sexual minorities have to deal with marginalization, stigma, and the issue of disclosure (deciding whether, when, and how to *come*

out, i.e., to acknowledge sexual minority status to oneself and/or others). LaSala (2003) uses non-monogamy of some coupled male partners as an instructive example. As a gay male, he has an emic understanding of this phenomenon and thus might be interested in researching under what conditions such relationships thrive. A heterosexual unfamiliar with the idea of non-monogamous (yet committed) relationships might lack an emic perspective and—deeming the relationship to be dysfunctional—choose to investigate a perceived lack of intimacy. LaSala concludes “in this way, divergent insider and outsider perspectives could result in strikingly different studies of the same phenomenon, and lead to markedly different conclusions being drawn from similar data” (p. 18). This notion is echoed by McClennen (2003), a “nonaffiliated” (that is, heterosexual) researcher investigating domestic violence in sexual minority communities, who argues an inability to overcome the challenges of being an outsider “tends to result in oversimplification and overgeneralization of findings, creating a disservice to the oppressed community” (p. 32).

Despite these apparent advantages, being an insider may also present concerns. Insiders may mistakenly assume that research participants share common lived experiences or understandings of gay terms or meanings. Such assumptions may lead to an inside researcher to gloss over or fail to explore unique perceptions of individual respondents. Inside researchers also require a heightened awareness regarding potential social desirability effects due to participants’ concerns that the researcher will judge them negatively, given that “oppressed minority respondents may want to participate in research done by an inside investigator because they perceive that the researcher shares their desire to rectify societal misperceptions of their group” (LaSala, 2003, p. 18). Furthermore, being an insider does not grant *carte blanche* access; as “trust must be gained even by [sexual minority] researchers studying populations to which they belong” (Meezan & Martin, 2003, p. 11). In acknowledging the great diversity in sexual minority communities and the interplay of other social locations and factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, educational level, dis/ability, etc.), Wheeler (2003) reminds us that “even when researchers are members of the target group, based on demographics or other characteristics, the process of conducting the research places them in somewhat of an ‘other’ category” (p. 67). The purpose of this study, then, was to explore participants’ perceptions of the influence of the researcher’s sexual orientation on the interview process.

Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

This research was a subset of a larger qualitative narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of 13 midlife gay men between the ages of 40 and 60 which was framed largely from a social constructivist perspective focused on social, cultural, and historical contexts as determinants in growth and learning. Due to the marginalized and devalued societal position accorded to sexual minorities, these populations are at increased risk for experiencing violence, discrimination, and exploitation in a variety of contexts—as well as the negative effects of such experiences. Since research involving sexual minorities generally occurs in such contexts, there may be greater potential for exploitation and harm to the participants or the communities of which they are members than in studies of less vulnerable and marginalized populations (Meezan & Martin, 2003). Furthermore, research in this area may “touch upon painful life events [which] may generate considerable emotion and even distress” (Radford, 1998, p.191). In fact, such emotional responses may occur in both researchers and participants (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002). Thus, those engaged in research with sexual minorities must be particularly attuned to the possible consequences of their research both during and after the research process. Accordingly,

this research was also informed by critical feminist perspectives which acknowledge and underscore the importance of heightened self-awareness and reflexivity to qualitative research, and to my role as researcher in particular. Given a desire to critically appraise my role in the research process, and to interrogate research relationships—combined with an understanding of the world as comprised of multiple local and specifically constructed realities produced by people acting on their interpretations and experiences—I opted to share my status as a gay man with the participants. Typically I did so while arranging or at the beginning of the first interview. Upon conclusion of that interview, I asked each man if he felt his experience of the interview process was influenced by my sexual orientation; and whether he might have chosen not to address any interview topics, or reacted to or answered anything differently had I not been a gay male. This topic was briefly revisited during second interviews and as an aspect of routine member checking. Furthermore, in an attempt to ascertain if participants’ perceptions in this regard have changed over time, informal follow-up discussions with several of the research participants were undertaken approximately 18 months following the end of the initial data collection.

Findings and Discussion

These men enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their lives in ways often prohibited in other social forums. Many commented that the interview process helped them to “see things in a new light” and that it was “fun.” They appreciated an opportunity to discuss their lives in ways often prohibited in other social forums. Many commented that they enjoyed the interview process and that it helped them to see things in a new light; in George’s case, it provided the opportunity “of looking at myself differently.” Several commented that this type of research was something long overdue, and they were very pleased to be part of it. Mitch saw it as his chance “to help make a difference.” Mike found the process to be fun and added “we all need to sometimes rediscover who we are, and this was a good self-discovery.” These and numerous similar comments validate the use of narrative inquiry as an important and productive methodology for research with gay men, and presumably for other sexual minorities.

Upon being asked if my sexual orientation was an influencing factor on the interview process, that is, would he have participated in the interview, would the content or manner of his responses been any different, or did he feel he would have experienced the interview differently had I not been a gay male. Initial reactions were almost universal that it was not relevant—“I would have answered exactly the same” or “that didn’t make any difference whatsoever.”

However, after brief reflection, most of the participants recanted and said that they probably answered more freely and “without filtering” given my sexual orientation. Mike explained:

I don’t think it would have been as easy...I think your being gay made it very easy for me to be a little flippant and fun with my answers; and maybe even a little off-color; whereas, if you were flippant and fun in the same way with a straight guy, for instance, he doesn’t have that same knowledge base, that same experience base. It might be confusing to him—or he might think I was coming on to him (laughing)

One participant said “in retrospect, I did answer differently because I knew you would know what I was saying.” Another stated that had I not first informed him that I was gay, he “would have asked for credentials to make sure it wasn’t a set up for a gay bashing.” Others offered that they felt comfortable talking about topics and using terms they might not have used had I been a woman or a straight man. Joe said “If you weren’t [gay], I’d been afraid, probably, to say some stuff—like anything sexual-related.” One man stated that he wouldn’t have had any concern if I

had been female, but added “but if someone told me he were straight, the interview probably wouldn’t have gone so well because in the back of my mind, I’d be wondering why he’d be doing this kind of research.” Some men weren’t sure that they would have consented to even participating in the study. To Duncan, it would depend on how he was approached about participating—he would have to feel comfortable. This notion of feeling comfortable or at ease was echoed by several of the men including Don who stated: “I think I would have done it anyway but if it had been 15 or 20 years ago, I wouldn’t have been as forthright...I don’t think you being gay would make as much difference as just who you are...I was comfortable with you right off the bat.”

During a peer review of the overall research preliminary data analysis, a colleague asked why I hadn’t delved deeper into a particular comment by a participant who, in describing a particular aspect of his relationship with his partner, stated “you know what I’m saying.” I replied that I had indeed known what the participant was saying and “knew what he meant”—in that moment, I saw the potential drawback of over relying on my emic perspective. My colleague’s question was meant to insure that, based on my shared social status with the participant, I hadn’t mistakenly assumed that we necessarily shared the same understanding of a given experience or phenomenon, as such assumptions could result in a loss of objectivity on my part and a failure to explore each respondent’s unique perceptions. A subsequent member check confirmed that my understanding matched that of the participant, but that could easily not have been the case.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, follow-up discussions with several of the participants yielded a similar range of perceptions as to whether the sexual orientation of a researcher would influence the interview process. As he did previously, Steed still feels it wouldn’t make a difference for him whether the interviewer were “straight or gay or male or female,” although he imagines that “for some guys, they might be hesitant to say some things especially if it were a straight woman.” Similarly, George says “I’m pretty straight-forward. What you see is what you get in lots of ways. I really think I would answer in the same way.” Ray, on the other hand, does feel it would make a difference if the interviewer were a straight man and even more so if a straight woman:

I just feel that even though you have straight guys that are very, very comfortable with gay people, there are certain things they don’t understand. They can’t—they can’t possibly understand because they are not gay; and I would think that would just create a reservation for me so I would not be surprised if I would hold back a little bit.

When asked what if the interviewer were a lesbian, Ray had to reflect a bit before responding:

Well, to be honest, it would have to depend on the particular lesbian and how well I knew her to know how comfortable I would be. There would be some lesbians that I would be uncomfortable with talking about talking about my situation, but there are probably some out there that I would be as comfortable talking about it; but I think it would definitely depend more on knowing a lesbian more; whereas with you...I was far more comfortable because you were gay man...maybe it's just me, but there are just certain commonalities or comforts I have based on the person being gay, as opposed to not being gay. Maybe it's more a matter that I give gay men the benefit of the doubt (laughing).

Ray’s response underscores an important point—even with broad social locations (e.g., sexual minorities) there can still exist social distance that needs to be mediated such that as another gay male, my insider status was immediately conferred; whereas a lesbian researcher would need to negotiate that status.

Andy “would like to think it wouldn’t make a difference as to the researcher’s gender or sexual orientation.” He would want to be as honest as possible to support the aims of the research—but he quickly added, that my disclosing my being gay right at the start “allowed me to, I won’t say be more free, but to be a bit more comfortable talking about it.” In speaking of “the camaraderie, the brotherhood” that he felt based on my being gay, Mike affirmed my insider advantage. Along with that advantage comes a responsibility to both the participants and to the research process—I cannot assume that I do indeed “know what he is saying.” I must consciously assure that I am not privileging either an emic or an etic perspective; indeed “each is weak in and of itself, and if one is favored over another, the research can seem shortsighted or biased” (LaSala, 2003, p. 16).

Conclusion

Fuller inclusion of emic perspectives offers an opportunity for meaningful research regarding and involving sexual minorities (and other marginalized groups) which could be instrumental in building upon or modifying “existing theories that have traditionally ignored or excluded the realities and perspectives of these groups” (LaSala, 2003, 9. 27); or even to create new theory potentially offering insights into and a more comprehensive understanding of how these individuals live, love, and make meaning of their lives. At the same time, one must remain on guard for the disadvantages of relying too heavily on an emic perspective. No matter how many attributes or positionalities one might share with research participants, the role of researcher invites its own category of other for as Narayan (1993) notes: “all researchers are simultaneously insiders and outsiders to varying degrees” (p. 27). Indeed, the point isn’t that one must or should share a social location with one’s research participants. More importantly, recognizing the potential influences of both emic and etic perspectives and striving to integrate them—as opposed to operating from either exclusively--would seem to be a prudent approach when engaging with research on sexual minorities or other marginalized groups.

Establishing and sustaining relationships with others—including those with whom we share insider status as well as those whom we might consider as outsiders based on social location or positionality—may help provide clarity and insight in attempts to cross borders or to navigate insider-outsider tensions involved in such research. Collaborative efforts involving researchers across borders of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other positionalities could generate new conceptualizations and understandings as to how individuals live, love, and make meaning in their lives. Resulting opportunities to “talk to one another [and] collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (hooks, 1994, p. 129) would deepen understanding of various standpoints, while opening points of intersection and convergence for those across various social locations who wish to challenge oppressive systems and structures which privilege some groups at the expense of others.

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