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The Politics of Research Ethics in Social Work: Reflections From a First-time Researcher

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon the experiences of a novice researcher negotiating ethical concerns that arose while interviewing women survivors of intimate partner violence. I begin with a brief history of research ethics and feminist contributions to social science research. Drawing from my Honours project I reflect on interviewing friends, boundaries, managing distressing disclosures and the personal politics of research.

Keywords: research ethics, feminist research, interviewing friends, research politics, boundaries

1. Introduction

...research in the social sciences is first and foremost a moral activity (Hallowell, Lawton & Gregory, 2005, p. 142)

According to Shamoo and Dunigan (2000, p. 205) “ethics as a discipline deals with the broader value system of our society that encompasses the consensual agreement on what is right and wrong”. In Australia, social workers are bound by the Australian Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics which promotes respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity as core values (AASW, 2010). For social work researchers, abiding by this Code of Ethics means that research proposals should have merit and integrity, promote community participation, be respectful of participants’ privacy and honour Indigenous cultures.

Researchers must also ensure that research participants have informed consent and that their information is treated confidentially, while aiming to publish research that promotes social change (AASW, 2010, pp. 36-38).

2. A Brief History of Ethics in the Social Sciences

By configuring research ‘subjects’ in particular and limited ways, ethical review procedures are not only often problematic for social justice researchers but fail to consider ethical questions that are vitally important to them such as voice, representation and collaboration (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 4).

More thorough ethical review boards were established after some well documented medical experiments challenged the ethical boundaries of research. One of the most well-known unethical studies took place in Alabama, USA. Known as the *Tuskegee Study*, the purpose of the research was to observe the “natural course of untreated syphilis” (Brandt, 1978, p. 22). Beginning in 1932, nearly four hundred poor, rural, black men were recruited to the study without the knowledge of the true purpose of the research. Years after a cure for syphilis was found, they still did not receive treatment for the disease. Instead the men were subjected to numerous invasive tests and experiments that were initially proposed as a six month study, but went on for decades.

Findings from the *Tuskegee Study* were published in over a dozen peer reviewed journals, including the *Journal of Chronic Diseases* in 1955. The article, *Untreated syphilis in the male Negro* described in its methods section what would be considered unethical practices today. The men were recruited directly by a health worker and were promised the incentive of “free medicine (for diseases other than syphilis)” (Schuman, Olanksky, Rivers, Smith & Rambo, 1955, p. 545). The paper goes on to report that nine of the men did not ‘cooperate’ in the second step of the research but as “news of their illness or disability is readily available” they [the researchers] were still able to observe them (1955, p. 546). These ‘experiments’ continued until 1964 until Peter Buxton (a social worker) and his allies, brought the unethical research practice to an end. Meetings with the authorities who governed medical research had proved futile. It was only when they approached the media that sufficient pressure was applied to end the research (Rubin & Babbie, 2001; Blaskett, 1998; Brandt, 1978). Brandt (1978) asserts that white privilege and racism were instrumental in the development of the project and in allowing it to continue as long as it did. If proposed today, it is unlikely that the study would gain ethical clearance due to the with-holding of treatment for a deadly and communicable disease, direct coercion of participants by someone in a position of power over them and non-consensual observation of men who had chosen to withdraw from participating.

During the 20th century unethical medical research practices also took place in Australia. From the end of World War 2 until the early 1970s, research was being undertaken on babies and children living in institutions and orphanages in Victoria (Blaskett, 1998, p.20). Tests were done to trial possible vaccines to prevent communicable diseases like herpes simplex. By current standards issues such as informed consent were treated with little ethical consideration. Similar to the Tuskegee Study, it was a media attention after an investigation by journalists at the *Age* newspaper that drew the research to the public’s notice, albeit 20

years after the experiments had been discontinued (Hughes, 2004). Commenting on this in an editorial in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Larkins (1997) wrote that the doctors conducting the trials were well meaning due to “the huge burden of the infectious disease”, that “they made no attempt to cover up the procedure” and that “the details were published in the most widely read Australian medical journals” (Larkins, 1997, p. 60). However it is unlikely that these medical journals were either accessible or widely read by anyone other than the medical profession, therefore close scrutiny by outsiders was hardly possible. Unethical medical research like the examples discussed above has led to far closer examination of current ethical procedures in the research process.

Today, in-house university-based ethics committees (or boards) are commonplace. In Australia, research undertaken within the social and behavioural sciences is required to comply with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). The role of an ethics committee is to consider the ethical validity of proposed projects involving human subjects, with particular attention paid to the merit and integrity of a project, plus a focus on justice, beneficence and respect for participants. Sometimes the committees play a range of conflicting roles. A basic task is to vet projects for potential poor treatment of those involved in the research. While protecting the interests of research participants, they also seek to protect universities from allegations of unethical conduct, which can have serious financial, legal and reputational consequences if pursued and proven (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007, p. 29)

More recently, questions are asked about choice of research methodology, involvement of participants (rather than subjects) and dissemination of findings to include those from whom the research data was gained (Truman, 2003). Compared to even ten years ago, the level of detail required of applicants has increased, with attention given to perceptions of risks and proposed contingencies

(Truman, 2003). Blaskett (1998) suggests that the profession of social work with its core value of social justice for all members of the community has a lot to offer the ethics review process.

Even though ethics committees' endorsement of approved projects can lend credibility to both researchers and their findings, some researchers still see ethical review processes as a nuisance or irritation (Blaskett, 1998, p. 21). Others see ethics applications as a form of censorship, a "bureaucratic exercise in form-filling" (Hallowell et al, 2005, p. 144) or a hurdle to beginning the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263). Once a project has gained ethical clearance, there is currently no guarantee of whether the research undertaken, analysed and reported adhered to the ethical processes promised (Pich, Carne, Arnaiz, Gomez, Trilla & Rodes, 2003; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2006).

Annual reports are sometimes required but even they can be carefully constructed to sidestep having to explain any deviations or complications from proposed processes. From a feminist or anti-oppressive practice perspective (Dominelli, 2002) however, I knew that such a dismissive stance was simply unethical and as a first time researcher, learning how to negotiate the ethics procedure proved to be a valuable learning experience which helped define the parameters of my project.

3. Feminist Contributions to Ethical, Social Science Research

Traditionally, research has also been an expression of power where the researchers are viewed as being in a position of authority or power over research participants. More recently there have been significant challenges to the notion of researching down towards a more egalitarian framework based in researching with rather than on communities. This has been especially reflected by feminist researchers and the paradigm of feminist research (Smith & Pitts, 2007, pp. 9-10)

Second wave feminist researchers brought to the attention of academia the gendered bias

occurring in research and how that bias was obscuring true data representation (Gilligan, 1982; Cotterill, 1992). The principals of feminist research are to produce relationships between the researcher and the researched that are "non-hierarchical and non-manipulative" (Cotterill, 1992, p. 253). Known as participatory research (Reinharz, 1983), this can be achieved by making interviews an "interactive experience"—where the researcher builds rapport or friendships and shares her own knowledge and common experiences with the participant (Cotterill, 1992, p. 594).

Over the last few decades feminist contributions to university ethics processes has been mixed. Many feminist researchers have had a positive influence on the ethical considerations of research in the social sciences. Issues of power relations and empowerment of participants are now routinely considered, while feminist research methods have influenced ethics review board's policies (Gottlieb & Bombyk, 1987), even if this is not made explicit. Yet this influence has not necessarily extended to ethics committees respect for the many non-positivist research methods many feminists prefer. Ethics committee members may even show antagonism "towards research informed by feminist or other critical theory approaches to social enquiry" (Blaskett, 1998, p. 21), making ethics applications potentially more complicated for social work researchers operating from an anti-oppressive practice perspective.

Like some forms of frontline social work, some forms of social work research projects are shaped by anti-oppressive practice perspectives, where empowering participants in the research process is emphasised (Dominelli, 2002; Blaskett, 1998, p. 20). Feminist scholars operating from an anti-oppressive practice perspective have questioned the power imbalances often operating between researchers and the researched (Reinharz, 1992), urging researchers to think through the many ethical issues likely to beset them, including but not limited to 'researching down' or with people with lower social status, who might feel compelled to participate or make particular

utterances, unless care is taken to ensure consent is properly informed (see Brown & Strega, 2005). From an anti-oppressive perspective, the values of social justice, self-determination and empathy are not just important to frontline social work but also in research design, resourcing and implementation. Studies involving equals or peers are included in the broad repertoire of possibilities (for more on interviewing peers, see Tang, 2002).

As will be described later in this paper, the women I interviewed for my research could be considered as equals, peers and friends. This simplified some aspects of my research, for example in recruiting participants (especially as they were not being paid), being of similar age, class background and having ‘shared experiences’. It also meant that our interviews were open and relaxed, rather than being guarded, as interactions with strangers can sometimes be. Yet other issues complicated my research, such as those discussed in Dickson-Swift et al’s (2006) study of qualitative researchers of sensitive topics—such as intimate partner violence—where they found a range of ethical conflicts between building rapport with participants and the disclosure of distressing accounts which can create ongoing physical and mental health problems for researchers. Cotterill (1992) also raises some possible ethical problems that could occur in relation to ‘interviewing friends’, such as that women may not identify with each other based on gender alone and the moral and ethical matter of possible or perceived exploitation (p. 595).

4. My Research Project

...most researchers will first encounter fieldwork while engaged on a dissertation that is mostly a solo enterprise with relatively unstructured observation, deep involvement in the setting and a strong identification with the researched. This can mean that the researcher is unavoidably vulnerable and that there is a considerably larger element of risk and uncertainty than with more formal methods (Punch, 1994, p. 84).

Below are my personal reflections about conducting a research project for my Honours thesis in Social Work. I interviewed five women over forty years of age who had experienced intimate partner violence in their early years. The aim of the project was to discover how the women fared years after their relationship had ended, to recognise their strengths and to better understand the coping methods they had used post separation. There were many ethical issues that I encountered throughout my research project, but for the purpose of this paper I have chosen to discuss the issues that follow on the basis of them being more common to feminist research projects. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

4.1 Interviewing ‘Jane’

Over lunch one day at university early in my Honours year, a woman who I had occasionally studied with asked about my Honours research project. When I explained, she said that she fit the criteria and that she had some friends who may be willing to be interviewed as well. We exchanged contact details and after the final ethics approval came through, I sent her the relevant information and consent forms. We arranged a day where I would travel to her home in the country to conduct the interviews. I spent a full day there, interviewing her (she later became known as ‘Marie’) and two of her friends (‘Jane’ and ‘Sandra’).

In recognition of Marie offering to open her home to me for the day, I arranged that I would make a pot of soup for lunch while Marie offered to provide coffee and biscuits. The sharing of food can often “lighten the atmosphere” and be a distraction to the enormity of the topic at hand (Irizarry, 2011, pp. 165-168). On this day it really helped me ‘break the ice’. As we ate, I talked about my research and we shared some of our experiences of intimate partner violence. The mood was up; we were a group of working class women of a similar age who were survivors rather than victims. Despite our difficult histories we all recounted funny stories from our younger days.

Proving that Adelaide is indeed a small place, it turned out that Jane and I had worked in the same industry for many years and at different times we had both worked for the same employer.

After lunch, Jane and I began our interview. I explained to Jane about how I would respect her anonymity. Her reply was “I am happy to tell you anything—I have nothing to hide, anyway we are friends now”. Jane went on to tell me a confronting and tragic account of years of physical and emotional abuse suffered at the hands of her intimate partner from the age of fifteen. As a result of the violence, their four year old daughter died after being hit by a car while running to protect Jane from her father’s abuse (see Jarldorn, 2011; Fraser & Jarldorn, forthcoming). I found it difficult to hide my emotion at this disclosure and even more so when she went on to reveal that she went back to him after their daughter’s funeral and even years after they broke up for the last time she kept in contact with him via social media.

As I drove home that afternoon, I could not get Jane’s story out of my head. A heavy smoker for over forty years, Jane has a distinctive voice that I can still hear as easily as I can picture her sitting across from me at Marie’s kitchen table. That night I was reminded that conducting research can be lonely work (Punch, 1994). While I spent that night with my family, ethical considerations of confidentiality meant that I could not talk about Jane and could only say I had a rough day. I needed time to process the revelations I heard from the three interviews I did that day. That night, for the first time ever, I took a sleeping tablet and felt relieved as my recollections of the day began to leave my mind and I drifted into a dreamless sleep. Unfortunately, sleeping tablets don’t stop the thoughts from coming back—Jane’s story troubled me for a long time later.

Around four weeks into the writing up process of my thesis, I realised that I had been avoiding writing a chapter in the women’s stories about how they felt intimate partner violence had affected their children. All five women I spoke to had raised this issue, even though it was not a topic I

had planned to cover when designing my research project. But I knew that for my project to be ethical and valid, I had to include what the participants deemed important (Massat & Lundy, 1997). I was having great difficulty coming to terms with Jane’s story and this was causing my ‘writers block’. I felt cross with her, not for returning to her partner all those times they had broken up previously, but for remaining in a relationship with this man after the death of her daughter which she unmistakably described as his fault.

I tossed this experience around in my mind every day from that first interview with Jane, leaving working on the chapter till last, always finding ways to tweak the other chapters rather than write the chapter on how children can be affected when their mother experiences abuse and violence from a father figure. Eventually, I began to come to terms with Jane’s experience and felt disappointed in myself. I now understand that I had placed some of the blame on Jane for her daughter’s death—I realised that was blaming the victim of abuse rather than the perpetrator. This revelation came after reading research critiques about the policy construct of ‘failure to protect’ that helped me to see what should have been so clear from the start (see Magen, 1999; Strega, 2012). This led me write up the ‘children’s chapter’ and to also provide some practical considerations for social workers in my conclusion.

4.2 Interviewing ‘Barbara’

Two weeks after interviewing Jane, I conducted my final interview for the project with a woman I had known for around five years. We met at our children’s school and saw each other fleetingly at the school gate, at children’s birthday parties and other school events. ‘Barbara’ asked about my research when we went on a school excursion together and offered to participate. In contrast to Jane, Barbara did not recount horrifically physically violent experiences but instead spoke at length about control and emotional abuse. Over the last ten years, Barbara had accessed feminist based counselling—the only participant that had—and as

a result she had a nuanced understanding of gender inequality, power, coercion and control, so was able to articulate her insights with some powerful stories. As I wrote up my findings I found I was giving a lot of space to Barbara, believing some of her quotes to be feminist inspired ‘gems’.

Whether it was Barbara or any other woman, it can be a nerve racking experience portraying individuals in an official document, such as a thesis. When Barbara asked if I had finished writing my thesis I printed her out a copy and carried it around for a couple of days before finally giving it to her. I was worried about what she would think about how I had represented her. I had used many quotes from Barbara throughout my thesis and I believe I represented her—and the four other women—fairly and accurately. However I still feared that she may disagree with my analysis of her experiences. When I did see her some weeks later I was still feeling nervous about what her reaction may have been. To my delight, she thanked me for how I represented her in my thesis. She said no one had ever listened to her like I had and validated her stories the way I did. She said she appreciated how it was written in a way that was easy to read and that she had put it away for the future, hoping her children would read it one day. Finally she told me that she felt the experience had given her closure from the events of the past. I am pleased that she got so much out of participating in this project and felt energised about the prospect of undertaking further research.

It was tempting to put my completed thesis up on the shelf in my study and to move on to other projects. However, Dickson-Swift et al (2006) reminds qualitative researchers that it is important to confront issues such as the blurring of boundaries, the concept of friendships in research and to consider the effect that distressing disclosures can have upon researchers. I have decided to reflect upon these issues that have the potential to impact heavily upon researchers, especially as one of the ethical responsibilities of social work research is to “observe the conventions of ethical scholarly enquiry” (AASW, 2010, p. 36), one of

those conventions being that social workers will “accurately and fully disseminate research findings” (AASW, 2010, p. 37). Having been involved in producing articles for publication in the past, I know that this can be an emotional roller coaster ride for the writer/researcher, but I also understand that pursuing publication is a way of recognising the gift of knowledge and trust these five women gave me. Ultimately, the knowledge they have gifted me is more about me as a researcher than it was about them, a gift for which I am eternally grateful. Writing this paper is part of my ongoing reflections and dissemination of findings.

5. Ethical Considerations and Reflections on Interviewing ‘Friends’

...relationships between researchers and participants rest at the heart of feminist ethical concerns in research (Gringeri, Wahab & Anderson-Nathe, 2010, p. 393).

The two interviews described above were both made possible because of friendships. Barbara was already a friend due in part to our children’s shared place of learning. Jane however, felt that our past shared experiences made us friends. While Jane had stated that she was happy to have her identity made public, my promises to our ethics committee meant that could not happen and as a result I could not meet that request. My pre-existing relationship with Marie had made possible the interviews with the other women. Without Marie vouching for my character as an equal rather than a university researcher, they were not likely to have occurred. Our shared lunch provided a friendly ‘warm up’ to break down barriers and provide a comfortable interview space that would follow. Our ‘friendships’ helped strengthen my research by allowing for a deeper account of private lives that may not occur in interviews with unknown women (see Cotterill, 1992 and Harris, 2002). We had a “social and collective identity” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, pp.169-177) that cemented our trust in each other, allowing rich and thick accounts of personal

histories that are rarely shared with strangers.

I think I was able to bridge the power imbalances that are possible in the researcher/researched relationship, mostly by interviewing women who I considered equals. McRobbie (1982) argues that as a feminist researcher I should acknowledge my own history to maintain a balance of power. In disclosing my experiences or my “use of self” I was able to build rapport with the women, but later had to subject myself to “critical scrutiny” of my own politics and ethics (Zubrzycki, 2002, p. 352). Nevertheless, I was at times challenged by the way the women had handled their experiences and the choices they made. On closer reflection, I would guess that parts of my story would challenge them too. I learned from this process that not everyone’s experience will be the same as mine and the decisions others make will probably be different than mine (for more see Fraser & Jarldorn, forthcoming).

6. Personal and Feminist Politics in Research

The ‘cookbooks’ of research methods largely ignore the political context of research, although some make asides about its ‘ethical dilemmas’ (Oakley, 1981, p. 55).

According to historical, scientific research values of objectivity and neutrality (Longino, 1990), I should not allow my own political values influence my scientific research. Yet without my political values, I would not have approached the research design, literature review, interviews and data analysis in the ways that I did. Under this cloud, figuring out the extent to which my values and beliefs could influence the ideas and processes I used was not easy. Early into the research process I realised I was being led by my heightened emotions. My personal and feminist politics had taken over in the quest to understand more about why men can perpetrate violence against the women who love them and why the women persevered with their relationships as long as they did. Before I undertook the interviews I had become so

immersed in the literature, trying to answer my own questions that I was becoming re-traumatised. I was not sleeping well and was probably not the best parent or partner throughout this research project. By the time I went out into the field, I was not treating this as an emotionless experience as textbooks instruct us to do (Oakley, 1981) but felt angry with perpetrators all over again. Upon further reflection, I believe that a lot of this anger came from the realisation at just how much research has been undertaken on the dynamics of intimate partner violence, yet it felt that within Australian society, little has changed.

I agree with Rubin and Babbie (2001) who suggest that no research in the social sciences is ever conducted without the researcher having pre-conceived opinions, personal morals and history. This is especially true, given that academics recommend novice researchers choose a topic that will ‘sustain their interest’ (Fraser, 2009, p. 88). While there are many similarities between the research interview and a therapeutic interview, I found the biggest difference was the time I spent reflecting on the content of the interview and its process, particularly as I used a narrative analysis as my research method. The time spent listening, transcribing, reading and reviewing the interviews embedded the women’s stories (and my reactions) into the forefront of my daily thoughts well past the submission date of my thesis. Dickson-Swift et al (2006) suggest that given the complex issues in qualitative research like those I experienced, further attention from researchers, their supervisors and ethics committees needs to be paid developing protocols to better manage the effects of the blurring of boundaries (p. 867).

7. Conclusion

No research is carried out in a vacuum (McRobbie, 1982, p. 48)

Along with Morley (2009), I have come away from this feminist, social work research wondering what good I have done for the women I worked with on this project. Will it produce any

structural or institutional change for women? I understand that up to this point, I am the only person who has directly benefitted from this research; I got some great data for my Honours thesis and along the way have begun to train my mind, eye and soul in researching women's lives (Hill, 2007). I cannot really tell if I have "done no harm" (Fraser, 2009) in interviewing the five women and can only endeavour to continually reflect upon this experience and use it to maintain working towards social justice role in social work, whether it be on the frontline or in the loneliness of research.

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