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Illicit Sex and the Female Researcher: Reflections from the Field

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Abstract

This article presents some initial methodological reflections from an ongoing programme of empirical research examining the risk taking behaviours of men who have sex with men in public sex environments in an urban area of North East England. Drawing upon an early career female researcher's experience of undertaking sixteen in-depth interviews with male participants, this paper seeks to critically explore the challenges that female researchers face when conducting interviews with men on topics related to sexuality and sexual risk behaviours.

Keywords

female researcher, fieldwork, gender, interviews, men who have sex with men, sex

Introduction

The reiteration in section 71 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 of the statutory offence of intentionally engaging in sexual activity in a public lavatory, originally stated within the 1967 version of the Act, arguably highlighted a continued focus within criminal law to regulate public sexual practices with a specific focus on male homosexual sexual activity. Although written as a gender neutral offence, the statute was formulated and enacted on the basis of concerns about male homosexual sexual activity in public lavatories (colloquially known as 'cottaging') (Johnson 2007). It also created a significant distinction between the legality of sexual activity in a public convenience, and sexual activity in other public spaces which are not subject to a specific offence but are punishable under the common law. As argued by Croce (2014), the homosexual identity has undergone a political and socio-legal recasting (Weeks 1981), reflected culturally in the emergence of highly visible gay bars and villages in many Western urban city spaces, the increasing globalisation of Pride/Mardi Gras events, the 'pink pound' economic discourse and indeed global 'gay tourism' (Bell and Binnie 2004). However, other forms of

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sexuality and identity, such as men who have sex with men in public, as indicated within the 2003 Act, have fallen into the category of the socially, politically, and crucially, morally unacceptable (Ashford 2010).

The study of men who have sex with men is not necessarily a study of gay culture, but simply the study of behaviours and experiences of men who happen to engage in sex with other men (whether or not they are sexually active with women as well) (Tewksbury 1996). Although described by Altman (1999) as a particularly clumsy phrase reflecting inabilities to separate behaviour from identity, the term was initially coined in response to concerns that HIV/AIDS prevention strategies were being primarily aimed at the gay community and neglecting other groups who may be at risk. By referring to 'men who have sex with men' the intention was to move the focus away from particular identities and emphasise that prevention methods were aimed at high risk behaviours (for example, unprotected sex with multiple and/or anonymous partners). As the heteronormative assumption of sex occurring behind curtains, closed doors and within four walls remains central to legal frameworks (Atkins and Laing 2012), men who have sex with men in public sex environments face social and cultural marginalisation as they transgress these heteronormative ideals. As evidenced within the research of Hennelly (2010), sexual activity in public places is subjected to a hard moralistic stance within the UK media and indeed areas of public sex are regular targets of local authority efforts to 'design out' the practice. The public convenience as a site for cottaging has been of particular concern to urban 'gentrifiers'; as Houlbrook (2005) highlights, many were ultimately closed or demolished and those that were redesigned were given larger spaces, white tiling and deeper stalls in what were considered effective measures in preventing cottaging. As such, men seeking to engage in public sex with other men face a growing number of risks as they contend with the increased spatialised surveillance and regulation of their public sexual practices (Herdt 2009). Given that the terminology of men who have sex with men was first developed to recognise high risk sexual practices occurring outside of the gay community so that health providers might offer a more tailored service to reduce levels of risk, the

law's continued focus on the regulation of public sex, and in particular the act of cottaging, seems somewhat antithetical to this risk prevention agenda and serves to reinforce heteronormative notions of men who have sex with men as the risky sexual 'other'.

Risk and danger to the personal security of the researcher is an issue gaining greater recognition within the social sciences (Jamieson 2000); however, these notions are arguably amplified when researching groups categorised as 'risky' or 'other'. Drawing upon the data collected from sixteen in-depth qualitative interviews with men who self-identified as having used a public sex environment in an urban area of North East England, this paper presents some initial methodological reflections from the ongoing programme of empirical research as part of my PhD study. Informed by feminist methodology discourses (Gurney 1985; Arendell 1997; Grenz 2005) concerned with researcher/researched power relations and a reflexive approach to my own positionality as a female researcher conducting interviews with men, this paper aims to highlight some of the challenges that female scholars of male sexuality and sexual practices may face.

Researching Sex

The complexities inherent in sex and sexuality research are well documented (Bancroft 1997; Poole et al. 2004; Hammond and Kingston 2014). Each person's sexuality and sexual experiences are unique and multifaceted and involve a diverse array of aspects and factors that contribute to, and help provide, unique sexual narratives (Plummer 1995). This in turn presents researchers with significant challenges rarely found within other areas of endeavour. The categorisation of sex and sexuality research as topically 'sensitive' (Lee and Renzetti 1993) and socially 'taboo' (Seal et al. 2000) can indeed have substantial methodological implications as researchers often rely heavily upon self-report research techniques which are dependent on volunteers or self-selected participants who are willing to disclose such intimate details to a stranger (Frith 2000). Nevertheless, the sexual behaviours and lifestyles of others is arguably now a well-established area of study within and across a plethora of academic disciplines, from social and hard sciences through to arts and humanities subjects. Topics

such as the commercial sex industry (Sanders 2005), male sex work (Whowell 2010), public sex (Humphreys 1970) and pornography (Attwood 2005) to name a few, have witnessed a surge of academic inquiry and have promoted an increasingly interdisciplinary approach. However, despite this continued development in research regarding the sexual landscape, researching sex remains problematic regardless of the topic under investigation (Hammond 2010), as researchers must carefully negotiate ethical approval, locate and engage with participants, and sensitively disseminate their findings. As suggested by Allen (2009), researching sex and sexuality may be deemed challenging because it asks questions about an experience which is socially constituted as private, embarrassing, and perhaps even dangerous. Inadequate sexual vocabulary may also hinder the research process as participants and potentially researchers themselves struggle between slang terms which double as obscenities, and polite terms which may be considered too technical for everyday use (Holland et al. 1998). Furthermore, as argued by Gailey and Prohaska (2011), some female researchers conducting interviews with men when the topic of inquiry is related to sex, can potentially face additional challenges that other female researchers may not encounter.

As highlighted by Lee (1997), although feminist scholars have often reflected upon women's experiences of researching other women, she was disappointed that feminist reflections on women interviewing men remained in short supply. Although there has now been an extensive contribution towards understanding the dynamics of female scholars researching male subjects, there has been relatively little written regarding the challenges faced by women researchers when the topic relates to sex or sexuality. Gailey and Prohaska (2011) contend that whilst there is evidence to indicate that women can successfully interview men about sensitive issues, sex and sexuality still seem out of bounds, challenging Stanley and Wise's (1993) assumption that whether interviewing women or men, the researcher is in an inevitable position of power because they theoretically control the content and process of the interview situation. Reviewing the relevant literature concerning cross-gendered interviews, it becomes evident that gendered performances and interactions predominate. Green et

al. (1993) warn of the potential for sexual hustling and indeed attack in such settings, whilst Horn (1997) details the way in which her professional integrity was challenged by way of senior police officers insisting that she refer to them as 'uncle' and being patronised by some interviewees who insisted on advising her on how she should have approached her interview and what questions she should have asked. Additionally, Pini (2005) notes the aggressive performances of masculinity that can be displayed by men when being interviewed by women and advises that appropriate gender roles must be carefully negotiated. In contrast, however, Sanders (2008) claimed that when conducting cross-gendered interviews with men who bought sex, she did not experience being sexualised or objectified in the ways that she was expecting. This, she argued, was due to clear ground rules and a statement issued to participants before the interview regarding appropriate topics for discussion, which established what she was interested in hearing about and what was 'off the agenda'. The social relationship that was insisted upon in this context therefore was based upon her identity as a researcher as opposed to her gender as a woman. Nevertheless, had the topic of inquiry not related to sex and sexuality, perhaps such a clear statement of ground rules and an indication of appropriate topics for discussion would not have been necessary. Furthermore, it could be argued that restricting participants to a pre-approved agenda potentially limits the scope for data collection, as participants are more selective over what they may or may not share with the researcher. Additionally, inherent within Sanders' statement is her *expectation* prior to beginning her research that she *would* be objectified and sexualised, thus leading her to take precautionary steps such as issuing the ground rules. Indeed, Gurney (1985) suggests that a female researcher should consider and prepare how she might decline a sexual advance without embarrassing a respondent before she enters the field. Undertones of the expectations displayed within Gurney's and Sanders' research are evident throughout the literature concerning cross-gendered interviewing, with advice to female researchers ranging from taking conscious decisions about makeup and clothes (McKee and O'Brien 1983), to asking a colleague to call midway through the interview to ensure safety (Sharp and Kremer 2006).

Whilst Lee (1997) argues that such strategies can actually assist the female researcher in feeling empowered and as such more able and confident to take control of the interview situation, strategies that emphasise a female researcher's own responsibility to carefully choose her clothing and makeup so as not to appear sexually desirable or available are problematic at best and appear to reinforce ideas concerning victim blaming and the oppression of women. Whilst it would be somewhat naïve to suggest that researchers, regardless of gender, need not consider or implement strategies to ensure safety, given that often participants are unknown to the researcher prior to their initial meeting, disproportionate emphasis is given to the risk posed to female researchers, serving to reinforce gendered notions of female vulnerability and masculine dominance.

As there still remains limited scholarly focus upon cross-gendered interviews when the topic relates to sex and sexuality, methodological considerations for female researchers adopt a new dimension. Reflecting upon my own positionality, I find that as I position myself and am positioned in various contexts, a nod in the direction of gender, ethnicity and race have now become essential components within social positioning as well as sexuality and indeed education. Nonetheless, it must also be noted that every time I assert who I am using these traditional labels and classifications, I am also clearly asserting who I am not. Positionalities possess rank, have value and are constructed hierarchically, particularly those that are visible and discernible. It is through the emphasis of difference that places or positions in social order are constructed, and privileges or indignities are legitimised, depending on whether one is on the margin of society (e.g., people of colour, women, poor) or at the core (e.g., white, male, middle and upper class) (Harley et al. 2002). Different assertions or self-presentations can also be chosen at different times; for instance, my gender as a woman may have more significance than my ethnicity as white British when conducting cross-gendered interviews; or in fact, as a sex and sexuality researcher, it may be my sexuality or heterosexual status that becomes more significant. However, these labels are not exactly like different coloured cloaks that we can don and then discard; they are more like different layers which can be worn in a different order in response to various power

relations (Anthias 1998). Subsequently, the limited number of reflections of other female scholars entering the field to study the illicit sexual practices of men, renders preparation difficult. Feeling a profound sense of despondency, I had been confronted with a wealth of literature focusing upon my choice of clothing, warnings regarding sexual hustling or attack and the requirement for me to look and act professionally, but little in the way of advice for how to prepare and respond if problems arose. Furthermore, with such warnings in place, my decision to proceed with the project whilst being aware of such literature which characterised my research endeavours as fundamentally risky given the 'othered' status of my participants and the sensitive nature of the topic, left me feeling a sense of deviancy and stigma that I had not expected. Subsequently, I found myself drawn back to the research of Gailey and Prohaska (2011) and asking myself the question: *is sex and sexuality research with men out of bounds to me as a woman?*

Method

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen male participants who all self-identified as having used a public sex environment with other men in an urban area of North East England. The term 'public sex environment' (PSE) categorises various locales that function as meeting places for men who want to engage in sex with men. These may include public parks, beaches, motorway rest-stops, cemeteries (colloquially referred to as 'cruising grounds' in the UK and US and 'beats' in Australia), and public toilets ('cottages' in the UK and 'tearooms' in the US). Sexual intercourse usually takes place in situ, although sometimes men use the PSE simply to source sex partners, going elsewhere (e.g. home) to have sex (Frankis and Flowers 2005). Participants were primarily recruited via an informal gatekeeper, a male personal acquaintance who had agreed not only to participate in an interview regarding his public sexual practices with other men, but also to promote engagement in the project amongst other men within his networks. Additional informal gatekeepers were identified at later stages within the research project. Self-identified members of the LGBT community, these informal gatekeepers approached me following informal discussions with them

regarding my research, with ways in which they felt they could help promote my study, whether this was via their social media pages, referring people they knew, or by more actively assisting with the recruitment of participants within community settings. From the initial referrals from the informal gatekeepers, snowball sampling was then utilised in order to gain access to more participants as well as promotion of the research on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

The Reflexive Researcher

In the interests of remaining true to my reflexive approach, it was considered appropriate for the purposes of recording my research experiences in a systematic way, to create a research journal. This research journal served a number of functions: whilst practical entries enabled me to explore methodological issues such as aspects of my research design which worked well or needed to be developed further, entries also supplemented my data collection in terms of providing contextual information about the interview setting or by recording non-verbal communications. For example, one such entry noted:

> *As the participant offered further information about the homeless man that he regularly encountered within the Cruising site, his emotion was evident. Although he tried to disguise this by repeatedly clearing his throat and avoiding eye contact with me, I could see that his eyes were stung with tears. I chose to remain silent which felt unnatural as I wanted to offer some words of comfort, but his attempts to hide his emotion indicated to me that this would have been unwelcome.*

The utilisation of a research journal also, as evidenced above, allowed me to reflect upon my own emotions during and after the interview and as such enabled me to gain a greater understanding regarding how these have interacted with and impacted upon the research process (Nadin and Cassell 2006). A further example can be seen within the journal entry that was written following an interview with a man who identified as heterosexual and told me that he was in a relationship with a woman who did not know that he engaged in sex with other men:

> *I find it very hard to sit and passively listen to people talk about being unfaithful to their partners. My own personal experiences with infidelity came racing into my mind as a participant talked about the various lies he felt he had to tell his girlfriend to explain his absences. My heart broke for that girl as once upon time, I was the girl being lied to. Granted, by a different guy and within different circumstances, but the lies remain the same.*

In this instance, the research journal served as an alert to the risk of emotional harm that I as a researcher faced. As stated by Maslach (1982), frequent face to face encounters with people, especially interactions that are particularly emotionally tense, are associated with high levels of emotional exhaustion, which is in fact not always related to the data that is being collected but may be related to the researcher's own reaction to the data by way of vicarious traumatisation, in which the researcher is exposed in a secondary fashion to the trauma experienced by others (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). The disproportionate focus within the literature upon the risk of physical harm female researchers may face when entering the field, had rendered me somewhat unprepared for the potential emotional harm that my research may cause me. The fact that fieldwork can involve emotional experiences on the part of the respondent is now fairly well understood; however, although emotional issues are often mentioned in fieldwork accounts, usually in relation to good ethical practice, the literature on research methodology aimed at sociologists and other social scientists working at the 'coal face' tends not to include emotional distress among the dangers which researchers may have to face (Hubbard et al. 2001). I had not considered prior to conducting the interviews that what I may hear could have an emotional impact on me; I had distanced myself both from my participants and the topic itself. In this context, my reflections in my research journal prompted me to recognise the importance of my own emotions within the research process and provided me with an outlet for my thoughts and feelings outside of the interview setting.

In conjunction with interview transcripts and field notes, my use of a research journal also enabled me to continuously reflect upon the research process and identify how my gender was both

constructed and performed. This subsequently allowed me to examine if and how my gender had impacted upon the research that I was able to undertake. For example, I recorded several instances in which my informal gatekeepers reported to me that I had lost potential participants on the basis that they specifically requested a male interviewer as a condition of their participation. Whilst I found this frustrating, I respected the participants' right not to engage with the project and acknowledged Williams and Heikes' (1993) suggestion that same-sex interviews are often preferred due to the assumed notion that trust and rapport is more easily achieved within these contexts. It is also recognised, however, that my gender may have indeed impacted upon my study in ways that, due to being unaware of it, I was unable to record.

Sex and Stigma

Choosing to study sex and sexuality often elicits curiosity and judgement leading others to make assumptions about one's sexual proclivities. Whilst a researcher may prepare for how they might respond to explicit assumptions prior to entering the field, an awareness that the judgements of others may be more implicit than explicit can potentially influence a researcher's own predisposition to expect and assume that judgements are in fact being made regardless of whether they are imparted. Indeed, sex is culturally 'sticky', its complicated cultural meanings are attached to sexuality scholars both by others and the researchers themselves, rendering them vulnerable to those who would discredit their motivations and research. As argued by Attwood (2010), speaking of sex may be seen as crude, particularly for women whose engagement with the topic serves to challenge and transgress societal gender ideals regarding the 'traditional woman' being polite and refined (Coates 2016). Researching sex can encourage suspicion and as such could even be dangerous for one's professional reputation as a topic is pursued that is viewed as illegitimate, a joke, or unworthy of study (Hammond and Kingston 2014). Drawing on Goffman's (1968) theory regarding spoiled identities and stigma, scholars conducting research into sex and sexuality have often reflected upon the ways in which they have experienced a similar stigmatisation to those they study, leading to issues such as

difficulty in gaining ethical approval due to the perceived dangerousness of research participants, as well as assumptions being made regarding the researcher's own personal life which may cause embarrassment. Indeed, in commencing my own research for this project I have experienced stigma to varying degrees, from members of my own family who ask me on a regular basis why I can't just study a 'normal non-sexual' topic, to comments I received from strangers on social media asking why, as I am a woman, I am studying men and not women. Following such a comment on social media I noted in my research journal my frustration that for some, my gender not only defined who I could study, but also who I *should* study:

> *I have been informed via someone on social media that I have never met that my research topic is very strange and that they could not understand why I was studying men. As I am a woman, they tell me, lesbians would be a much better subject choice. Apart from the clear lack of logic to the comment, I feel angered that this person feels that my research interests must be restricted to my own gender or can otherwise be categorised as strange.*

Inherent within this comment, particularly the word 'strange', is the notion of the 'other'. 'Othering' is how people are defined as being different from the norm (Kitchin 1998) and serves to reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination (Fine 1994). Within this context, my choice as a female researcher to study the sexual behaviours of men as opposed to women is treated with suspicion. I am advised as to what I *should* be studying, informed that my interests ought not to venture beyond my own gender, and thus subjected to similar forms of marginalisation and stigma as experienced by my study participants.

Experiences of stigma were also evident within the interview process; my motivations were frequently questioned by participants and in some cases as is detailed below were accompanied by assumptions surrounding my gender and profession:

> *Participant*: So what got you into studying this then? Bit of a funny thing for a lass to do isn't it?

Researcher: It's something that has interested me for a long time, part of my study for my degree covered public sex so it stemmed from there.

Participant: I did wonder like because it is a bit of a funny thing for a lass to want to do. You are different to what I expected though.

Researcher: What did you expect?

Participant: I don't know, maybe someone a bit more 'social-worky' or something like that.

For this participant, his lack of understanding as to why I would wish to study male public sexual practices led to his assignment of an assumed traditional gender role for me, in this case that of social worker, historically a female profession (Williams 1992). Whilst I had initially interpreted this label in line with notions of the 'traditional woman' who is defined by Horn (1997) as harmless, caring and unthreatening, I also had to acknowledge the more negative undertones of this comment, as social workers can be regarded as nosy, intrusive and engaged in the surveillance and disciplining of deviant people. Whilst the participant indicated that I did not necessarily fit the social worker label that he had assigned to me prior to our interview, his statement that I had not met his expectations, was arguably designed to communicate masculinity (Presser 2005) and to highlight my deviation from this traditional feminine role.

Masculinity and Dominance

Displays of masculinity were encountered in a variety of forms throughout the research process. Indeed my very first encounter occurred during the project approval stages of the study in which I appeared before a panel of two male senior academics who were in the position of allowing or refusing my study permission to proceed. As I explained that I was aware of the literature surrounding the challenges female researchers conducting research with male participants face, and that this potentially may be exacerbated by my subject choice, I was asked directly by a panel member why I had not considered asking a male researcher to gather my data for me. Whilst I acknowledge that this question was designed to promote my critical thinking around my identity as a researcher and how this may impact upon the data that I was able to collect, I felt it also denied my autonomy and again

positioned me firmly within the traditional female role of presumed incompetency (Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012).

Further displays of masculinity were to be experienced within the interview setting itself, during which my gender role was constructed for me by participants and I was assigned an identity based upon this concept of the traditional female. An example of this was evidenced within one particularly interview which was reflected in my research journal:

> *As I got my tape recorder out of my bag, the participant began to question me about it, where had I bought it? How much did I pay? How much memory did it have? Had I used any of the special features? When I explained that it had been a Christmas present and that I only used the basic recording function for the purposes of my interviews, the participant picked up the recorder and began talking me through what the various buttons did. I had not asked for this tutorial but it was given anyway. I had not said that I didn't know what functions my recorder was capable of, he assumed that I didn't and took it upon himself to educate me.*

In this instance in the interests of building trust and rapport with the participant, I had actively chosen not to challenge his assumption that I was unaware of the various functions of my recorder and passively allowed him to talk me through its capabilities. As such the participant was empowered to feel as if he was contributing towards my knowledge and subsequently was centralised within the research process. However, I was aware that by doing so I was also reinforcing conceptions of the female role as empathetic listener, but felt that as the interview progressed onto more sensitive topics, this may prove beneficial. A passive position was not always appropriate however, as certain performances of masculinity required me to respond by means of re-establishing the boundaries of the interview relationship, for example:

> P: I'm not gay, I don't want you writing that. I mean this is just something that I do, it doesn't make me gay. I mean I'll prove to you right here right now that I'm not gay.
>
> R: That really won't be necessary.
>
> P: No but I could and I would if it meant you wouldn't write about me as a gay.

R: At the beginning of the interview I asked you to self-identify and you told me that you saw yourself as a heterosexual man. I don't need any form of proof about that.

P: No but if proof was required I'm more than capable

R: Well let's move along as I'm not researching your capabilities

Although this particular exchange remained relatively light hearted in that we both continued to smile and I felt no immediate threat from this participant, I did however, notice that my body language began to change. The aggressive undertones within his comment 'no but I could and I would' unsettled me in ways that I hoped he had not noticed. I instantly checked for my exit; I had no plans to imminently use it but my brain told me that I wanted to know where it was. I straightened myself up in my chair, as if to display that I was still in charge and to symbolically challenge any dominance that he felt he had over me. I did not directly tell him that I had found his comments inappropriate, but re-established the boundaries of the interview by clearly asserting what I was not studying.

As noted by Pini (2005), the men that she interviewed for her study of male leaders of an Australian agricultural organisation often performed masculinity by positioning themselves as busy, powerful and important men whose time was valuable. Such interactions were also evident within the interviews that I conducted during which participants frequently checked and in some cases answered their mobile phones. I was left with the very clear impression that these men felt they had other and perhaps better things to do with their time, despite the fact that they themselves had volunteered to participate in the study and had indeed indicated a time and date that would be most convenient for them. My time however, was not viewed as valuable. Appointments to meet with me were made and then cancelled at the last minute, sometimes as I was already sitting waiting at the arranged interview venue. For the two men who answered their phone calls during the interview, I was expected to sit and wait while they finished their personal conversations; they did not excuse themselves from the room to take the call, nor did they arrange to contact the caller at another time. I was left feeling powerless, my personal feelings conflicted with my position as a researcher. I felt I could not vocalise

that I thought such actions were rude, as I did not want to alienate the participants. However, by not doing so I was also arguably reinforcing that their behaviour was OK and personally this felt damaging.

The Embarrassed Researcher

As stated by Irvine (2014), passions drive our research in ways that may have little to do with our personal lives and as such researchers are frequently submerged into lifeworlds that are perhaps unfamiliar to their own. Traditionally, researchers who studied sex in public places not only remained distanced from the erotic activities they were studying but also described their findings in equally distanced terms (Leap 1999). Advancements in qualitative empirical research have arguably bridged the gap between researcher and researched, placing greater significance on a researcher's ability to interact with and represent the views of those they study. Informed by the body of literature that had placed great emphasis on my ability to look and act professionally, I laboured under the illusion that for me to show embarrassment as I conducted my research was in some way a failing on my behalf. I did, however, experience embarrassment to varying degrees, and discovered how difficult the involuntary physical reaction of a reddening face is to hide. In my day to day life, I am rarely confronted with the language that I was suddenly faced with within the interview setting. For someone who until quite recently was still placing small asterisks in the middle of words categorised as swearing when writing them down, I found this sudden exposure to a whole new world of highly sexualised language quite overwhelming. My embarrassment was evident despite my desperation to convey a professional image, as if in some way I defined a professional as someone with the ability to control the blood flow to their face. It was not until I reached somewhere around the middle point of my interviews that I began to embrace my embarrassment as a means of endearing myself to participants. I was displaying the fact that despite my researcher role I was also human, imperfect, and possessed my own vulnerabilities and insecurities which in turn enabled participation and dialogue in ways that I had not anticipated. Indeed as one participant commented:

P: You're alright really, you. Sometimes when you go and speak with people, like especially them that work in the clinics and stuff, you just get a load of attitude.

R: Well thanks, I appreciate that. What do you mean by attitude?

P: Well they've all got ticky-box forms and if you don't fit into one of their ticky-boxes, they write you off straight away cos they don't know how to deal with you. At least you can have a laugh and you're not stuck up like them.

I found that as I became less concerned with suppressing my feelings of embarrassment I was able to relax more within the interview setting, and as I relaxed, I felt more empowered to build trust and rapport with my male participants in later interviews than I had done in my initial interviews. I was, however, aware that by conceding my embarrassment in order to facilitate dialogue, I was also conforming to socially constructed ideals of gender performance (Butler 1990) in which women are portrayed as innocent or in need of male protection (Carpenter 2006). Nevertheless, I considered this a necessary concession, to yield some of the power I held as an interviewer in order to encourage the participation of the male interviewees.

Whilst I had anticipated that as a female researcher of male illicit sexual practices I faced significant risks, as detailed within the literature regarding my personal safety, I had not prepared for the emotional risks that I faced prior to, during, and after entering the field. The concession of my embarrassment, the stigma and marginalisation as a researcher that I faced, alongside performances of masculinity and dominance, all served to put me at substantial risk of emotional harm. Conducting in-depth qualitative interviews regarding topics viewed as sensitive is a deeply embodied experience for the researcher as well as for the participants, yet whilst academic inquiry has paid significant attention to the notion of emotional risk to the participant, the researcher's emotions are largely left neglected, contributing towards an increased risk to researcher wellbeing.

Conclusion

This paper has offered some initial reflections from an ongoing programme of empirical research focusing upon the risk taking behaviours of men who have sex with men in public sex environments

in an urban area of North East England. It has highlighted that despite the rise in feminist literature focusing upon the experiences of women interviewing men, the reflections of female researchers conducting topically sensitive interviews with men remain in short supply. Where these accounts do exist, there is arguably a disproportionate emphasis on the risk to the physical safety of a female researcher and a notable neglect of the risk of emotional harm that women may face. The deficient focus upon emotional harm as a risk factor for female researchers entering the field is somewhat concerning. It is therefore hoped that by reflecting upon my own experiences of conducting research with men categorised as topically sensitive, other female researchers will share their own reflections from the field. It is only from the stories of others that future researchers may be better equipped to face the risks, both physical and emotional, of entering the research setting.

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