

The Gender Dilemma: Barriers For Female Researchers

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In Male Dominated Environments

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Lets Talk About Sex.....

Recent years have witnessed a surge in feminist debate regarding the challenges of being a female researcher situated within male dominated environments (see Gurney 1991, Sampson and Thomas 2003, Palmer 2010 and Reeves 2010). Indeed, contemporary feminist theory places particular emphasis on the female to male interview process with the recognition of the complex and multi-faceted power dynamics that influence the social interaction of the interview situation.

However, despite the growth in feminist scholars reflecting upon the challenges of the female to male interview process in general, few have specifically focused upon the unique challenges faced by women researchers when the topic of interview is sex or sexuality (for exception see Green et al. 1993 and Gailey and Prohaska 2011). Such an omission, Gailey and Prohaska (2011) argue indicates that whilst women researchers interview men about sensitive issues, sex and sexuality still appear out of bounds.

Furthermore, Gailey and Prohaska (2011) note that the lack of literature regarding dialogue about sex within these settings presents a substantial problem for women preparing to conduct in depth interviews with men. As interviews can be shaped significantly by the reflexivity of the researcher as well as the researched (Riach 2009), the absence of previous studies can be deemed as somewhat problematic.

Reviewing the literature that exists where women have conducted research in male dominated environments, even where the topic of enquiry has not related to sex or sexuality, it becomes evident that gendered interactions predominate. Whilst Lee (1997) warns of the potential for sexual attack in such settings, 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'. Additionally, Pini (2005) talks of the aggressive performances of masculinity that can be displayed by men when being interviewed by women and how appropriate gender roles must be carefully negotiated.

Subsequently, the assumption made by Stanley and Wise (1993) that regardless of whom a researcher is interviewing there is an inevitable power relationship in favour of the researcher is strongly challenged when the interviewer is female and the interviewee is male.

However, gender is only one aspect of the researcher, there are many others which may help or hinder the research process such as age, sexuality, ethnicity, social background to name but a few.

Interview

Women

Sex

Nonetheless, Horn (1997) argues that when conducting research within male dominated environments, gender assumes a greater significance than it might do in other environments which is complicated even further when sex and sexuality are considered (Walby 2010).

Developing a shared understanding and establishing the necessary trust and rapport in a transitory research relationship is assumed to be more difficult due to the sensitive topic of sex. And having the right or ability to interpret accounts of sexual lives and identities is seen as somehow more problematic when there are gender differences between the researcher and the researched (Bellamy et al. 2011).

However, the assumption that an insider knowledge gained via a shared gender can indeed grant an epistemic privilege has been problematized and some feminist authors have highlighted the dangers of assuming that gender or sexual orientation are homogeneous categories and that matching participants with the researcher will result in the production of more authentic research accounts.

With this in mind, it could therefore be argued, that whilst undeniably barriers created by gender differences appear within the female to male interview process, the concept of gender cannot be considered in isolation in terms of data collection and indeed in terms of defining the delicate line between insider/outsider relationships. As noted by Sherif (2001) identity is in a constant state of flux so as well as the researcher being able to present herself in different ways during the interview process, so too can the participant.

References

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Gender

Men

The Project

Prompted by Rubin (1985) in which it was argued that there is a purported natural relationship of trust between gay men and heterosexual women, Bellamy et al (2011) developed a study in which a gay male researcher conducted interviews with women regarding their understandings of sex and sexuality. They concluded that the gay male – straight female connection provides a context that buffers the power imbalance experienced when a heterosexual male researcher interviews women about sex and that this is based primarily on the shared experience of marginalisation.

Although this study focused upon the male in the role of researcher, it did attempt to highlight the way in which gender barriers could potentially be broken where there exists a shared social location, in this instance the marginalisation of women in the form of sexism and indeed the gay male in the form of homophobia.

As a female researcher proposing to conduct in depth interviews with men who have sex with men in public sex environments, Bellamy et al's shared marginalisation theory strikes particular interest. Whilst the claim is made that a shared marginalisation can in fact aid the interview process in terms of breaking down the traditional gender barriers evident when the male identifies as heterosexual and the topic relates to sex or sexuality, this has only been concluded on the basis of the male taking the role of researcher. During the course of my research I aim to explore whether when the roles are reversed and the female takes the role of researcher, that the same or similar claims can be made.

Additionally, the male researcher within Bellamy et al's (2011) study was clearly identified as being gay. The focus of my research will be upon men who have sex with men, defined by their lack of identification with any particular sexual identity. Although they arguably experience marginalisation due to their lack of conformity to homonormative ideals, there has been no research specifically focusing upon the gender dynamics of a woman conducting research in this setting and so therefore assumptions cannot be made as to the outcome.

Whilst the gender barriers for women conducting research within male dominated environments, particularly where the topic concerns sex, have arguably prevented the rapid growth seen in other areas of feminist enquiry, my research aims to contribute towards the advancement in debate regarding feminist methodologies and in particular the female to male interview.