

SPECIAL FEATURE

Researching Sensitive Topics: Stories, Struggles
and Strategies

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Feminist researchers typically spend a great deal of time and energy anticipating the potential effects our research methods and protocols will have on participants. We usually spend less time anticipating the personal reactions experienced by ourselves, our colleagues, students or research assistants throughout the process of collecting, analyzing and presenting the data. In this special section, researchers studying sexuality (Israel, Zurbriggen), childhood sexual abuse (Stoler), heterosexual feminist identity (Freedman and Lips) and body-image interventions (Pitman) present personal narratives describing the experience of conducting research that aroused strong reactions in participants, colleagues or the researchers themselves.

There are many commonalities among these narratives. All of the authors discuss emotions that arose throughout the course of the research process (from design to dissemination of results). Most also provide specific and practical strategies for managing some of the difficulties that may arise when researching sensitive topics (for example, the importance of support networks, of self-care and of a thoughtful reflexivity throughout the research process). In addition, they discuss the following themes.

Researcher Identity

Discussions of identity are central to all of the narratives. Pitman focuses on two traditional categories of identity (sexual orientation and ethnicity), as do

Freedman and Lips (sexual orientation and feminist identity). For Stoler, the discovery of a (previously unknown) identity as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse had deep and broad effects on the research process. Zurbriggen discusses the difficulties that can arise for a researcher when her own preferred identity presentation (professional, researcher) is quite different from the identity that is foremost in the minds of some participants (sexualized, and perhaps sexually available, woman). Finally, Israel notes the negative emotional and practical consequences of having one's professional identity subsumed by one particularly 'titillating' research project.

Similarities between Researcher's and Participant's Identity or Experiences

Several contributions discuss similarities between the identity and experiences of the participants and those of the researchers. Pitman found it easier to develop intervention programs for a group of which she was a member (GLBT-identified individuals) rather than for one of which she was not (women of color). Perhaps because of a shared identity (feminist and heterosexual), Freedman and Lips experienced many of the same emotions on hearing colleagues' criticisms of their participants as one would expect the participants themselves to feel. Stoler discusses the issue of vicarious traumatization – traumatic responses occurring in the researcher that are similar to (albeit usually milder than) the traumatic responses experienced by the research participants. Similarly, Israel analyzes the ways in which her experiences of stigmatization (for researching strippers) were similar to (and also different from) the kinds of stigmatization experienced by the strippers themselves.

Social Relationships

Most of the contributions describe the socially situated nature of psychological research. The authors discuss both the reactions of other people to the research, and the ways in which the existing social relationships of the researcher were affected by her research. For both Israel and Zurbriggen, the nature of their research (sexuality) apparently caused others to be titillated (for Israel, colleagues and others to whom the research was presented; for Zurbriggen, the research participants themselves). Stoler (who studied childhood sexual abuse) sometimes found it difficult to remember that male friends and family members are not like the male perpetrators she studies, and had to learn to appreciate that most of her friends could not tolerate discussions of trauma to the same extent that she could. Freedman and Lips describe in detail audience reactions to their research, focusing especially on the ways that these reactions served to divide women from each other (audience members from research participants and audience members from researchers).

Professional Liabilities

Several of the contributors note that researchers who study sensitive topics sometimes find it more difficult to meet their professional goals. Both Zurbruggen and Stoler note that avoidance and procrastination are more likely to occur when researchers face the prospect of analyzing or processing data that are likely to arouse painful emotions. These responses are in many ways adaptive, in that they protect the researcher from emotional pain. However, avoidance and procrastination are also likely to make timely completion of professional goals more difficult. Pitman describes another potential roadblock to meeting professional deadlines – commitment to a feminist-collaborative research methodology.

Expect the Unexpected

Finally, each of the research experiences reported here resulted in something unexpected. Israel was surprised at the level of stigmatization that occurred, and Zurbruggen did not expect to be sexualized by her research participants. Stoler's recovery of memories of childhood sexual abuse was not anticipated, nor were the harsh criticisms of participants reported by Freedman and Lips. Similarly, Pitman did not expect that it would be so difficult to implement a feminist collaborative research methodology. The experiences of these researchers suggest that while we can (and should) do more to imagine, discuss and implement strategies for managing the negative effects of research on sensitive topics, it's unlikely that we'll be able to anticipate everything. It would be wise to remember that the unexpected will probably happen.

Conclusion

There are many complexities that arise when researching sensitive topics. As feminist researchers we can embrace that complexity, while still attempting to negotiate strategies for minimizing negative outcomes for ourselves, participants, research assistants and others involved in the research process. These authors contribute to a feminist conversation on these important questions, one that we hope will be of interest to all feminist psychologists, but particularly those who are themselves researching sensitive and emotionally arousing topics.

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