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Exploring the Dynamics of Situated Emotionality in Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Positioning standpoint logic as a methodological framework

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- **Dr Sheila Quaid**
- *Finding a place: negotiating lesbian parental identities* (see Quaid, 2009).

- **Dr Angela Wilcock**
- *An exploration of the knowledge women in Sunderland have of help-seeking in response to domestic violence* (see Wilcock, 2015)

Introduction

- This paper is a reflective piece about the growing recognition of emotionality in the work of social researchers. Feminist approaches to research and practice have for many years recognised the presence of emotion in the research process. In this paper we reflect on our use of feminist standpoint epistemology. This framework informed our research projects and our methods were designed in relation to this perspective. During our qualitative research interviews emotion was produced as stories of emotional and physical harm were explored. The emotion was felt by researched and researchers. We found little clarity in methodological literature about the appropriate use of emotion or how to behave professionally in the presence of emotion. Our feminist standpoint framework did not help in dealing with it. On reflection of these experiences we both embraced the emerging literature in social sciences on the role of emotion in research practice. We then reflected on our own experiences. This paper documents our current thinking on this issue. We contribute this reflective work to growing interests in emotions in research and professional practice. Our reflections leave us with an increased conviction that emotion is not only to be embraced as part of research practice but that emotion is embedded in the knowledge we produce. We argue for; acknowledgement of the presence of emotion in research; a duty of emotional care for both researched and researchers; and we are intellectually seeking further collegiate discussion on incorporation of emotion into our production of knowledge. We made the decision to write this paper in the first person and to alternate first person throughout the text.

Drawing on two different theses

- We seek to illustrate how the positioning of ourselves raised questions about emotionality in the fieldwork process. We were able to develop trust and openness with our respondents, which for some became highly emotive. This interactive, emotive style of interviewing produced knowledge, which emerged though positionality, inter-subjectivity and reflexivity. However, questions for further consideration also emerged around limitations regarding the emotion produced in our work.

Standpoint

- Standpoint embraces reflexivity in an attempt to challenge and recognise the power imbalance within the research process. One important element of reflexivity is for researchers to situate themselves both socially and emotionally, therefore, a researcher's personal biography must be considered prior to the analysis of the data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). This requires the researcher to critically reflect on their own standpoint, thus making them aware of their positionality and differences in the research process.

Methodological Philopsophy

- We position standpoint as a tool to use in feminist inquiry. We have both utilised this philosophy and incorporated the principles into our methodological design. We set out to gather knowledge surrounding the topics of our doctoral theses. Standpoint is a methodological philosophy which has at its heart the grounding of common experiences.

Feminist research

- is '*grounded in consciousness*' (Stanley and Wise, 1983:159) it acknowledges that the researcher cannot be separated from this process, nor any situation that may arise in the fieldwork. Reflexivity, being at the heart of the fieldwork process exposes the researcher to the sensitivity of the situational dynamics as they occur (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Reflection

- Given our professional and personal experiences, and our confidence in our research design, we both felt fully prepared for any dilemma that may arise in the field. We had not however, anticipated the impact of triggers influenced by positionality and reflexive thinking through the acknowledgment of inter-subjectivity on both ourselves as researchers and the researched

Situational Dynamics

- However, while standpoint encourages this positioning and recognises the situational dynamics that may occur during the research process, we are considering how to deal with the sensitivity and emotionalisation of the reflexive process. Reflexivity requires the researcher to situate themselves both physically and emotionally throughout the research process (Berger, 2015; Mauther and Doucet, 2003).

Emotion is present : What should we do with it?

- Emotion is evident in every aspect of sensitive/subjective research (Jagger, 1997; Holmes, 2010). Holmes (2010:139) points out that while '*there is much academic discussion surrounding reflexivity; attention to the 'emotionalisation of reflexivity' is largely missed from reflexive and standpoint theoretical explanations'*.
- Comprehending emotionalisation is vital to examining how contemporary subjects reflexively produce a sense of feeling, thinking and being in the world which relies on others (Holmes, 2010:140).

Looking After Respondents and Researchers

- Discussions regarding sensitive research highlight there is risk of the researcher suffering emotional pain, being overwhelmed or experiencing flashbacks to personal associations of abuse (see Kelly, 1988, Renzetti& Lee, 1993 and Stanko, 1997).

Domestic violence is a sensitive and emotive issue

- Angela was not prepared for the impact on herself during both the reflexive process and transcription. The impact and depth of emotional engagement experienced by respondents in this research had to be dealt with in order to ensure minimum harm. Angela felt their pain and anguish but was also aware, as a researcher, it was not her place to show her level of distress to the respondents. Neither was she prepared for the continued impact of emotionalisation after the fieldwork. Consequently, Angela also had to deal with the after-effects of the emotion, which were felt by her following the fieldwork and through transcription and analysis.

Angela reflects

- My feelings of guilt and anger were influenced not only of the harm the women had suffered at the hands of men they loved, but also by the realisation that the situated emotion the respondents felt had been initiated by the focus of my research
- As Reinharz (1992) amongst others explain, this work process becomes an integral part of the topic studied. In other words for us, the emotion became part of our valuable data through the emotion-laden material we collated (see Blakely, 2007). We both found the fieldwork an emotional experience and through inter-subjective practice our feelings were attuned to that of our respondents, inevitably this had an influence on the research itself (Blakely, 2007).

Through reflexive thinking Pauline (respondent) began questioning her relationship.

- *It's funny though because although we have a joint account, and I actually earn more than me husband now, I have to tell him what I have spent. This is because he keeps the accounts, but that is a form of control isn't it? I haven't thought of it because I am a spend thrift you see and he is not, but that is just part of it. I have never thought of that being that way. It is quite interesting that I have never thought about that before.*
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- During the interview process there was a realisation for some that their relationships were not as loving, caring and as honest as they thought. Those interviews evoked emotional reactions as the respondents ontological assumptions were challenged

Angela reflected

- I was as at this point feeling her pain. When listening to respondents reflecting and reliving abusive experiences it is very difficult not to be affected. *There is no line that separates us, the researchers, from them, the survivors (Blakely, 2007:61)*. I became aware of my own vulnerabilities as a woman and that it could have been me telling that story instead of listening to it (see Blakely, 2007: Campbell, 2001; Rager, 2005).

Connecting to Experience

- Angela had not been prepared for the emotion she experienced upon reflection of the fieldwork process. For example: reflexive thoughts about what the respondents had gone through during their interview, and reliving their experiences during transcription brought to the fore the ‘emotionalisation’ of the reflexive process (see Hertz, 1997; Holmes, 2010). As Angela reflected she became concerned as to how she would do justice to the privileged narrative the respondents had shared.

Research with Lesbian Couples

- In Sheila's interactive interviews emotion was produced as certain negotiations were brought to the fore.

- Emotions were heightened around **ethnic composition of family , who was to be seen as 'mother ……..**an emotive issue which caused some uncomfortable realisations and **Homophobia and negativity from families of origin.**

Tensions Revealed

- Although Laura (Co parent) and Rose (biological mother) had negotiated many roles and responsibilities in their family project they had not fully resolved parental identities and the lack of ‘permission’ for Laura to refer to herself as Joshua’s mum or his parent, caused her anxiety but also frustration. Laura started to explain situations where she felt her position was ambiguous:

Laura Co parent said;

- *A situation that I am aware of is when he gets invited to a party, and you have to phone to say whether or not he can go. I'll leave that to you, deliberately, and I consciously think, I'm not phoning because what do I say?*
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- *Her partner Rose said that she had not been aware of Laura's dilemma, and asked her "what would you like to say?" Laura replied:*
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- *I would like to be able to say 'hi I'm one of Joshua's mums. That is not appropriate though, because it's not the agreement we've got, so I avoid it.*

Sheila

- Rose (biological mother) reasserted her own identity when she said "*yes I understand but I am his mother*". At this point the interview broke down and we negotiated a break. We reconvened after a cup of tea but the issue surrounding Laura's parental identity and lack of motherhood status remained unresolved in the remainder of the interview.

Guilt for the Researcher

- Sheila checked out if it was ok to continue and they were in agreement. Laura however asked Sheila if any leaflets with information for relationship counselling were in the research pack. Sheila left the interview with a maelstrom of thoughts and reflections on what should have been done and with deep consideration of her responsibilities to them now that this emotion had been unleashed in the interview. She drove away with deep unease at what had just occurred. There was a mix of felling that what had just happened was inappropriate and at the same time intensely sociologically interesting.

Sheila
Homophobia and negativity from our families

- My life as a researcher was in part bound up with the emotional responses to the research.
- This required a reflexive process of emotionally charged interviews. As Reinharz (1992) amongst others explain, this work process becomes an integral part of the topic studied.

On announcing '*we are having a baby!!!*

some respondent's families responded with disgust, anger, negativity and hostility the idea. Some respondents' spoke of the emotional hurt they felt.

- *I came out at 20 and just thought, I'll never have children…when I told my mum that Corrine and I were planning to have a child she said to me that was the worst thing I could ever do as a lesbian, to have a child* (Lesley - biological mother).

Sheila reflects

- The responses mirrored my own experience of telling my much loved father of my pregnancy and he had responded by saying *'I have nothing to say to you*' and put the phone down. The mirrored experiences of the respondents and produced emotional responses I identified with, and relived these experiences and experienced emotionally engaged research.
- Whilst I was aware that conventions that suggested a researcher should be to be to some extent 'detached' from the story, emotionally I was '*feeling the research instead of just thinking it*' (Blakely,2007:2)

Ethnicity

- For Jan (biological mother) who is of Jewish heritage and Kate (co-parent) who is white British not Jewish emotions became heightened when discussing the choice of sperm donor. Jan's (biological mother) Jewish identity became important for her in a particular way when she thought about becoming a mother. Initially she had said to her partner that she wanted a Jewish donor. Jan (biological mother) explained:

Jan

- *It was important for me and that he had Mediterranean features…it felt like a compromise for me because Darren (actual donor) is Arian – blonde, blue eyes. It was hard and it raised a lot of cultural stuff. I went and talked to rabbis about it and what it means in terms of the religion….but I let it go in the end. It's not easy and it is still an issue for me that he is not circumcised…if Kate ever changed her mind then I would get him circumcised.*

- In this part of the interview Kate (co-parent) explained her thinking on the matter as follows;
- *“as far as I’m concerned he’s (baby son) Jewish I suppose, I am very anti religion, it’s not that I don’t want him to be Jewish I don’t want him to be religious*”.

- This negotiation involved a significant compromise on the part of Jan in relation to her cultural and religious background. Suddenly on this issue the atmosphere became tense and the couple found it hard to look at each other. Emotions were heightened and Sheila found herself in '*the role of interpreter' the one that weaves pieces of silence together' (*Nencel, L , 2013:79)

Sheila

I attempted to bring the dialogue forward and explore what had just been said it was too painful and Jan (Biological Mother) requested that we move on to the next area of questions. In this moment I was outwardly asking questions nevertheless inwardly questioning myself and dealing with my own emotional response to the apparent chasm of understanding between the respondents. Such difficulties were also found in the work of Wilcock (2015).

Some Thoughts

- Standpoint promotes positionality but on reflection of we found troubling moments when dealing with emotions produced in the process. Our work and methodologies produced for us both rich narratives and complex data and at the same time produced dilemmas surrounding ethics of care to both the respondents and to ourselves. We suggest that in working on sensitive topics the researcher and the respondents should be in a supportive and responsive process where emotional responses to circumstances and dialogue can be supported emotionally as well as academically.

Ongoing Thoughts and open for Discussion

- Questions also emerged about how to hold the reflexive emotion as a source of knowledge in the academic discourse. It was imperative to Angela to give ‘voice’ to the respondents who trusted and passed on their most personal, violent experiences .
- Sheila was aware that her own life narrative connected with respondents life narratives. How do we hold this emotional connection in production of knowledge?????

Emotionally charged research produces emotionally embedded knowledge

- We suggest it is imperative to give voice to emotionally produced knowledge, but how? Both our work evoked these questions; how do we represent emotionality in findings? How do we support/protect the researcher and the researched? We further suggest that in working on sensitive topics the researcher should be in a supportive and responsive process as this would allow for emotional responses to circumstances and dialogue to be supported emotionally as well as shared academically. Moving forward we will embrace any future situational emotion as we both now recognise the valuable contribution of emotionally charged knowledge within academic writing.