The Feminist Biographical Method in Psychological Research

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Abstract

The feminist biographical method is an in-depth interpretive methodology that is useful for research in the field of psychology. I believe that this qualitative method is an excellent tool for analyzing individual narratives of participants lives in relation to the larger cultural matrix of the society in which they live. Although an oral interview is often the primary strategy employed for data collection in this methodology, other sources of information such as personal journals, official documents, and cultural texts are also exciting additions to the research. The strengths of the feminist biographical method include the depth, context, and meaning found in the research; the inclusion of women's experiences and voices in academic research; and the ability to conduct a sociopolitical analysis of potentially marginalized people. In this article, I delve into the feminist biographical method by providing discussion and examples from research in the field, as well as from my own research. I provide the reader with a personal narrative on how-to conduct research using the feminist biographical method. In particular, I delineate the process of researching the lived experiences of women international students in difficult relationships. As a psychological researcher, I encourage others in the field of psychology to consider using the feminist biographical research to add context, depth, and richness to studies involving human participants.

Keywords

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The Feminist Biographical Method in Psychological Research

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The feminist biographical method is an in-depth interpretive methodology that is useful for research in the field of psychology. I believe that this qualitative method is an excellent tool for analyzing individual narratives of participants' lives in relation to the larger cultural matrix of the society in which they live. Although an oral interview is often the primary strategy employed for data collection in this methodology, other sources of information such as personal journals, official documents, and cultural texts are also exciting additions to the research. The strengths of the feminist biographical method include the depth, context, and meaning found in the research; the inclusion of women's experiences and voices in academic research; and the ability to conduct a sociopolitical analysis of potentially marginalized people. In this article, I delve into the feminist biographical method by providing discussion and examples from research in the field, as well as from my own research. I provide the reader with a personal narrative on "how-to" conduct research using the feminist biographical method. In particular, I delineate the process of researching the lived experiences of women international students in difficult relationships. As a psychological researcher, I encourage others in the field of psychology to consider using the feminist biographical research to add context, depth, and richness to studies involving human participants. Key words: Qualitative Research Methodologies, Feminist Research, Biographical Research, International Students, Women's Issues, Intimate Relationships, and Abusive Relationships

I want research that begins in a place of unknowing, with a leap of faith, a courageous willingness to embark on a journey. I want research that seeks out mysteries and acknowledges even the muddled, mad, mesmerizing miasma that rises up as a kind of breath and breathing, connected with the pulsing and compelling rhythms of the heart (Leggo, 1999).

Introduction

Deciding on an appropriate research methodology is not an easy task for burgeoning qualitative researchers. Today there are many choices including action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Taylor, 1994), critical theory (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997), discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1995), ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), feminist research (Fine, 1994; Usher, 1996; VanderPlaat, 1999), and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to name only a few. Besides the sheer number of qualitative methodologies

available, further complications arise when considering the practical and theoretical implications of each method. For instance, grounded theory stems from a positivist tradition that straddles both quantitative and qualitative realms. This kind of research will provide a very different context for conducting, analyzing, and interpreting data than interpretivist methods that built upon humanistic, hermeneutic understandings. Also important to consider is that in every academic discipline some research methods will be foregrounded as valuable, time-honored, and accepted while others are left in the background, considered inappropriate, or are simply unknown. These latter methods then, become unacceptable tools of investigation within any given department, university, or even an entire field. Since the feminist biographical method is rarely used in psychological inquiry, I would like to make a case that this method should be considered and utilized for this kind of research.

In order to situate myself, I will share my own process of finding a method that not only fits well with my research, but also with my philosophy as a therapist and educator. While studying and preparing extensively for my candidacy exams during my doctoral program in Applied Psychology, I took many courses in qualitative inquiry, read voraciously on the subject, and fretted with other students about how to make the final decision on choosing an appropriate methodology. Part of the confusion for all of us seemed to lay in the fact that many qualitative methods overlap, in part, by utilizing similar strategies, particularly the oral interview. Together we lamented our predicament in attempting to choose the "right" method and sometimes wondered if it wouldn't be more straightforward to use a quantitative design with set rules, procedures and expectations. However, as a therapist and educator I believe in and value the interconnectedness between people, development through relationship, and the value of individual narratives. Therefore, I knew that finding a personally meaningful and academically suitable method was paramount in my search of possible alternatives.

Quite by accident, I found a book chapter written by Erben (1996), from an edited textbook on educational research (Scott & Usher, 1996), that highlighted the feminist biographical method Excited by the description of the method, I used Erben's reference list as a starting place and branched out to find other works on the subject including, journal articles (Csef & Stengl, 1992; Finger, 1988; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995), a professional journal dedicated to auto/biographical research (*Vitae Scholasticae)* and various edited book chapters and books (Denzin, 1989; Iles, 1992; Mann, 1994; Smith, 1994; Tierney, 2000). The examples of the biographical method that I read about highlighted the flexibility of the method over and over again by its inclusion of multiple strategies for data collection such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and personal reflections. What especially intrigued me was the discovery that written texts were often used as a major part of the research endeavor. Sometimes texts from the participants themselves were collected and analyzed such as journals, poems, and stories. At other times, texts from cultural sources such as novels, historical accounts, religious texts and the media were utilized. Considering that my undergraduate degree was in English Literature, my previous career was that of an English teacher, and writing was one of my passions, I was thrilled to bring together the two areas of study that had driven and continues to drive so much of my life—literature and psychology.

In this article, I introduce psychology researchers to the feminist biographical method, primarily because it is an overlooked, but much needed tool in our field. I

believe that we are losing a significant and important perspective in psychological research by not acknowledging and including this method in the range of possible choices. What is lost is the richness gained from listening to individual and cultural stories. For example, in one area of psychological research focusing on international students, we examined the many issues associated with these students in our colleges and universities (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). I argued that although the international student literature provides a comprehensive and global sense of common issues, the information is typically superficial, stereotypical, and devoid of the unique, personal, and contextual circumstances of real and living people. Fortunately, this is beginning to change with researchers attempting to give voice to individual experiences of international students through qualitative methods that invite personal perspectives (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Huxur, Mansfield, Nazor, Schuetze, & Segawa, 1996; Shougee, 1999). Although qualitative work is becoming more apparent in research on international student issues (Alexander & Shaw, 1991; Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Han, Jamieson, & Young, 2000; Tyler & Boxer, 1996), the types of methods used in this area still remain primarily based on instruments and structured interviews. Furthermore, cultural texts, whether written, passed down orally through the generations, or portrayed visually and orally through the media are virtually neglected, despite the tremendous influence of these elements on cultural groups and individual stories (Popadiuk, 2002). Therefore, I propose that including more studies based on interpretive analysis of both written and oral narratives would significantly add to the field of psychological research by giving us in-depth, contextualized, and experiential accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

The Utility of the Biographical Method for Studying Lives

I believe that the feminist biographical method is an excellent research methodology for addressing: (a) depth, context, and meaning in research; (b) women's experiences and voices; and (c) a sociopolitical analysis of marginalized people. First, the feminist biographical method provides depth, context, and meaning to the phenomenon under investigation. Although most people would agree that quantitative research is important and valuable, it is sometimes more difficult to see that it only provides a partial and limited perspective. For example, when researching abusive relationships I found that it was a much different experience to learn about the number of slaps, hits and punches exchanged between intimate partners, than to learn about a woman's actual experience of receiving physical and emotional blows from her husband or boyfriend. The statistical analysis of abusive tactics can indeed inform, but it can also be used to negate the gendered aspect of spousal abuse. In my research on women international students I found that the ability to contextualize a woman's experience allowed for a more meaningful and rounded analysis of the situation. It also forced me to acknowledge the value-laden nature of the inquiry, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the socially constructed aspects of reality, and the situational constraints of the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The feminist biographical method has something significant to say about being human in our world and it does so in a way that provides context, depth, and meaning. It is critical to include this method in the field of psychology, because the method's theoretical underpinnings suppose a different understanding of what constitutes truth,

knowledge, knowledge generation, and data analysis than that found in traditional psychological research. This method, then, asks different types of questions, approaches participants from a more holistic perspective, and seeks to compare individual experiences with larger sociopolitical and historical issues. Researchers using this method seek to acquire an inside understanding of the participant's definition of the situation by "grasping the subjective consciousness or intent of the actor from the inside" in order to understand his or her intentions, motives, desires, thoughts and so forth (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192). Schwandt goes on to say that qualitative researchers utilizing philosophical hermeneutics, such as with the biographical method, also look over the shoulders of the actors in order to figure out what the actors think they are up to. In sum, the feminist biographical method is a powerful research tool. It engages in research from a unique perspective that provides depth, meaning and context to the participants' lived experiences in light of the larger cultural matrix in which they live.

Second, the feminist biographical method is an important approach for addressing women's lives because women have typically been silenced in society. Pirani (1992) states that "silence is that powerful and restrictive protection, particularly enforced by our patriarchal society, that hides so many truths, so many 'herstories'" (p. 14). Denzin (1989) speaks to the importance of biographical work when he says that it "must always be interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak" (p. 82). The feminist biographical method allowed me to uncover stories from women who may not have otherwise talked about their relationships and pain in such a public way. The women international students from my research broke strong cultural barriers meant to silence them against speaking to a stranger, an outsider, a Caucasian, about the difficulties with their men, their relationships, their cultures. The feminist biographical method helped eradicate the barriers, allowing me to join with these women, because of my sisterhood as a woman who has also experienced the pain of a difficult past relationship. By researching women's experiences, I join other feminist researchers who aim to generate new kinds of knowledge and truths based on women's experiences by using a method that calls for connection, meaning-making, and relationship rather than distance, logic, and objectivity (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Researchers, who utilize the feminist biographical method, including myself, have the conviction that "women's experiences are valuable and need to be recorded" (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 1). Broch-Due (1992) provides an explanation for the increased interest in biographies of women over the last ten to fifteen years. She states that "there is a general feeling that important qualities of many people's lives (and emphatically of women's lives) have been excluded from representation in the main body of research" (p. 93). I agree that research on women and women's issues have typically been left on the margins of academia, although this too is slowly changing. The field of psychology needs to continue the goal of balancing the research agenda by including increased emphasis on women and their issues. This would include alternative methodologies that contextualize and provide depth and meaning to the research, like the feminist biographical method. This shift toward a feminist research agenda using feminist methodologies is critical if we want to continue to question, challenge and change the constructions of gender and power imbalances and forms of privilege and power including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, and ability levels (Dankoski, 2000). In

sum, the feminist biographical method is a powerful tool for connecting and empathizing with women, learning about the particular concerns important to women, and broadening the lived experiences to include cultural manifestations of gendered power and privilege.

Third, the feminist biographical method, like other feminist methodologies, emphasizes the sociopolitical and historical aspects of lived experience. As a feminist clinician and researcher, I was excited about the opportunity to utilize a critical theory lens to examine the individual stories and cultural texts collected for my research. With the feminist biographical method, issues of power, process, and social change, as well as issues of gender, culture, class, and heterosexual privilege could be central to the research inquiry and interpretation (Mahlstedt, 1999). In my own research, I was fascinated to examine the issues of gender, culture and socioeconomic status with women international students. In one of the interviews with a participant from China, I was surprised to hear the stark similarities between her upbringing and oppression as a woman and the stories of many North American women. Similar words and sentiments were shared: growing up with dolls and dresses; learning how to be "nice, good and quiet;" being chastised for engaging in "boy" activities; and experiencing the loss of self, freedom, and opportunities due to not being born male. The feminist biographical method allowed me as researcher to delve into the messy and often unacknowledged area of power, privilege and oppression through the women's stories and the readings of cultural stories, myths, studies, and the media.

Although a feminist critique is not unique to the biographical method, I feel that the critical theory lens is too often overlooked, or more likely ignored in psychological research. Psychology, unfortunately, has a long tradition of remaining apolitical and removed from the social issues that impact individual, family, and systems functioning (Jackson, 2000; Strickland, 2000). Social justice is a moral imperative that should drive psychologists to understand that the "behaviors they seek to study, modify, and eliminate are related to gaps resulting from poverty, inequality, and inequity" (Mays, 2000, p. 326). Jesse Jackson stated in his address to the American Psychological Association on August 20, 1999, "Learning to live in a diverse social order requires that we question the prevailing precepts of our society and not seek the comfort of isolation within our own small group" (p. 328). I strongly believe in the importance of our field to move toward a broader sociopolitical analysis of people's lives, and understanding of how cultural influences including power, privilege, and access to education, health care, employment, wealth, and political influence are direct determinants of both physical and psychological health. The feminist biographical method opens up time and space to promote and interpret marginalized stories. The importance of spending time, money and effort in researching marginalized people and stories is critical in the healthy development of diverse individuals, families, and nations. In Jackson's words, "You, as good psychologists, as teachers, bring your light to dark places. Help us find all the lost sheep, and leave no one behind" (p. 330).

Definitions and Salient Aspects of the Method

I would like to begin the discussion of the feminist biographical method by drawing upon the current descriptions provided in the literature. The biographical method is a culturally produced artifact and an interpretive document that can be defined by

method (e.g., interviews, focus groups), theoretical orientation (e.g., hermeneutics, phenomenology), or disciplinary strand (e.g., history, women's studies) (Tierney, 2000). Drawing from the social sciences, the approach has the possibility to explore individual narratives, to engage in psychological analysis and interpretation, and to utilize a feminist deconstruction of gender, culture, and power issues (Smith, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) further add to this description by stating that the biographical method is an interpretive research paradigm that encompasses narrative and interpretation, as well as lived experience and dialogue. When I first read these descriptions I imagined the powerful contribution that could be made to the field of psychology through the creation of literary, narrative accounts of individual lived experiences and cultural analyses.

In light of the many available qualitative methods for academic research in the field of psychology, I believe that there are two salient aspects of the feminist biographical method that makes it unique. First, there is an emphasis to include as few or as many different strategies for data collection and analysis as deemed appropriate and necessary to develop a comprehensive, multi-faceted investigation. For example, in her research with adolescent girls, Mann (1994) chose

(1) to record verbatim conversations that the girls had with each other and with the researcher,

(2) to utilize autobiographical accounts provided by individual participants, and

(3) to use an autobiographical account of her own marginalized childhood.

Other researchers support the need for biography to move beyond narration and storytelling to include interpretations and explanations stating that life experience cannot be separated from interpretation (Iles, 1992). In Mann's analysis of the data, she not only interpreted the various narratives from the perspective of an academic researcher and individual who had experienced the phenomenon, but she also included interpretations solicited from the girls' themselves about their own stories. By asking the participants for their interpretations, Mann is consistent with a feminist agenda that "challenges and questions power imbalances not based solely on gender, but also on sexuality, race, class, and therapist/client relationships" (Dankoski, 2000, p. 4). In this case, Mann chose to decrease the power imbalance by listening to and including her young, female participants' interpretations alongside her own, even when they were in direct conflict.

The second salient aspect of the feminist biographical method is the inclusion, analysis and interpretation of cultural texts. In my research on women international students' experiences of difficult relationship, I delved into the stories, fables, novels, traditions, religions, movies, television shows, media releases, government policies, sociological studies and the like to better understand the cultural, historical, philosophical, religious and familial contexts of the international students that I interviewed (Popadiuk, 2002). The addition of cultural texts provided a sociocultural perspective that added both breadth and depth to the analysis of the individual lives and narratives of the participants. The level of complexity and interplay between these two major components of the research, the individual interviews with participants and the diverse cultural texts from Hong Kong, China, Singapore, and Peru, proved to be

fascinating, providing an entirely new dimension to the research that I would not have previously imagined. I assert that without the textual inclusion, critical information and knowledge would have been lost or misinterpreted.

Research Plan

In order to make the discussion of the feminist biographical method concrete I will use my own research process to provide examples of how one might undertake this work. I will not include a full write-up of my research results, since the focus of this paper is to highlight the utility of the feminist biographical method, not discuss my research findings, which will be published in another paper. My research consisted of six phases that, although distinct in many respects, also overlapped or circled back at different times during the process. Following a general description of the process, I describe particular aspects of the research in more detail. These aspects relate directly to the utility of this type of research because I demystify the process by providing detailed information about what I have done and why I have done it. Being transparent about my work is in keeping with a feminist agenda in which researchers attempt to consciously acknowledge and minimize power differences by maintaining an openness and vulnerability about oneself. Discussing the aspects of my research further relates to the utility of this method by the fact that I am sharing enough information to provide depth, context and meaning to the process. I disclose my own history and sociopolitical stance as far as it is necessary to allow others to see where I situate myself in relation to the topic and the process. Overall, the utility of this method as it relates to the *content*, namely that it provides depth, meaning and context, space for women's voices and issues, and a sociopolitical analysis, parallels what happens in the *process* of this type of research. Thus, by describing my process in the research I invite others to explore with me what I have done and why I have made particular choices about the work, rather than obscuring my motives or the challenges that inevitably face all researchers.

For the first phase of the study I conducted preliminary research to identify a particular group of women and a problem to investigate. After much reflection I finally decided to look at women international student issues, based on my interest in and involvement with international students. For my master's degree I had examined the transition issues associated with adolescent international students attending public school in an urban school district from a critical incident research study perspective (Popadiuk, 1998). I had also previously worked as a Coordinator for a highly successful international peer program at a large west coast Canadian university. Having finally made my decision, I developed research objectives, goals and questions based on my theoretical orientation and research methodology. I found this first phase of the process difficult, in that, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices and areas of interest for both the content and the method.

In the second phase of research I immersed myself in the literature on:

(1) international students and cross-cultural psychology,

(2) marital and relationship theories and counseling interventions, and

(3) interpretive, qualitative methodologies.

I found that there was almost no information about international student relationships, especially with a focus on intimate relationships. I also discovered that there was a paucity of qualitative research, especially interpretive studies, in the field of international student research. Through an in-depth review process I analyzed, critiqued and wrote extensive literature reviews about each of the three areas of investigation mentioned above. It was at this point that I defended my papers and passed my candidacy exam.

In the third phase of my research, recruitment and contact, I developed a plan for recruiting participants, primarily through the creation of posters and email list-serves. As potential women participants were recruited, I talked with each one on the phone or in person in order to discuss the purposes and goals of the study, the level of desired commitment, and issues of confidentiality. Although women were encouraged to think about the research before agreeing to participate, the women who met with me set up the first interview time by the end of the initial meeting. I conducted in-depth research interviews with each of the five participants on two separate occasions and conducted follow-up contact as required. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, an onerous task considering the amount of data that I had collected. Once the first interviews were completed I began researching cultural texts based on prompts that had come from the participants. For instance, if a woman discussed specific Confucian sayings that she had learned as a child, I would study Confucian texts to learn more about the attitudes and directives related to women's roles. I especially enjoyed turning to texts to read more about the cultural aspects of women and intimate relationships. Out of the six phases of research, phase three took me the longest period of time to complete.

Phase four, interpretation, included multiple readings of the interview texts and a review of pertinent key concepts from the literature reviews. I began to make decisions about discrete quotations from the interviews, thereby, creating individual pieces of data to analyze. This literally meant that I would cut-out chunks of verbatim text from the pages of transcribed interviews, which would then be used for data analysis. I concurrently selected and finalized hundreds of related quotations from the various textual sources for inclusion. An example of a short textual quote that I selected was an ancient exhortation that remains current rhetoric in many Chinese cultures today, "A wife is one who bends to the will of another and so her rectitude lies in not following her own will" (Raphals, 2002, p. 291). The research participants' own views about their cultural upbringing and social milieu provided further evidence of how culture impacts and intersects with personal perspectives. The purpose of this phase was to become immersed in the data and literature, as well as to create distinct data pieces from individual participant quotations and textual selections.

The fifth phase began with the categorization of participant and textual quotes through a thematic analysis. I found this phase to be particularly enjoyable and rewarding because I finally began to organize the material in a creative and meaningful manner. To start, I created two major sections, one for the personal, lived experiences of the participants and another for the textual and participant views of the cultures under review. I then sorted the discrete data pieces from each of these two sections into categories, themes and subthemes. The following outline provides an example of a category, the major themes, and the subthemes:

1) Relational Interaction Patterns *(Category)*

   a) Issues of Trust: Boundary Violations *(Theme)*
       i)   Triangulated relationships *(Subtheme)*
       ii) Relationship insecurity *(Subtheme)*

   b) Impediments to Mutuality
       iii) Insensitivity to needs
       iv) Emotional unresponsiveness

   c) Links to Abuse: Disempowering Acts
       v)   Power and control
       vi) Verbal degradation
       vii) Physical violence

Finally, in the sixth and final phase of the research I reviewed the collected data and wrote two chapters on this information. In one chapter, I provided a comprehensive narrative representing the thematic analysis of the lived experiences of the participants in their difficult intimate relationships. In a separate chapter, I created a narrative that included an interweaving of the women's cultural perspectives on women and relational issues with the various representative cultural texts. I then completed the work by analyzing overriding themes and making general recommendations based on the research findings.

Detailing the Process

Now that I have presented my introduction to the feminist biographical method, its utility for psychological research, the common definitions and salient aspects, and my research plan, I would like to provide further details about the process. For the remainder of this paper I have focused on important areas and issues that highlight the reflective process necessary to ethical interpretive, feminist research. In particular, the areas that I have chosen to discuss include selecting participants, the interview process, role as interviewer, use of documents, interpretation, researcher notes, evaluating the trustworthiness of the research, and ethical dilemmas.

Selecting Participants

Overall, eleven women initiated contact about the research, but for varying reasons only five participants followed through with the interviews. The age range of participants was from 20-35 and their time in Canada ranged from four months to eight years. The following table provides an overview of the demographic information.The final results showed that only one participant could be clearly seen as someone engaged in an abusive relationship while another participant was clearly in an egalitarian and mutual relationship. The remaining three participants could be seen as attempting to negotiate power imbalances within their relationships.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

	Grace*	**Lily***	**Iris***	**Vivian***	**Maria***
Nationality	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Incan
Country of Origin	Singapore	People's Republic of China	People's Republic of China	Hong Kong	Peru
Education Level	Masters	Ph.D.	Masters	Undergrad	Masters

*Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identity

Throughout the process of this research I reflected upon my assumptions and biases in order to be more fully aware of myself and how my assumptions might be implicated in the work. One of the initial reasons for this research was my interest in examining women's experiences in emotionally abusive relationships from international perspectives. This bias led me to want to advertise for participants in a particular manner by naming behaviors often associated with abusive relationships. However, through a self-reflexive process and discussions with others I decided that maintaining this bias would likely limit my understanding of how international students' conceptualize difficult relationships. Therefore, it became imperative that I monitor myself during interviews by carefully asking open-ended questions in a way that did not lead participants to report on what I had initially wanted to hear. For example, instead of asking if the participant's boyfriend called her names or put her down, I simply asked her to describe a particular interaction or situation that she would consider difficult. In this way, I allowed the women to express their own ideas about what constituted problems in a difficult relationship. Thus, I opened up the possibility of examining variations of relationships based on a fuller range of possibilities, including egalitarian, traditional and abusive models.

The Interview Process

The following overriding questions guided this study:

1. What is the lived experience of women international students living with difficult intimate relationships?
2. How do these women understand the meaning of their experiences as related to their own cultural frames and family backgrounds?

Two interviews were conducted with each participant, each corresponding to one of the overriding questions. In the first interview I focused on the difficult experiences

regarding the individual's relationship, while in the second interview I asked about the participant's perceptions of women's issues from her own cultural vantage point. Despite the particular focus for each interview, there was cross-over between the topics—cultural stories were often shared to contextualize the difficult experiences and personal experiences were related when discussing the larger context of women's issues.

The semi-structured interview process was guided by a series of specific research questions. The following list provides the questions that I used as a foundation for the first interview:

First Interview Guiding Questions
International Students' Intimate Relationships

- Tell me the story of your relationship.

- What parts of your relationship were satisfying? Can you think of some examples? What did you find the easiest in your relationship?

- What parts of your intimate relationship were difficult? Can you think of some examples? What did you most struggle with in your relationship?

- Sometimes women notice changes in themselves or their partners, and sometimes they do not notice any changes. What was it like for you?

- Were you able to deal with the difficult parts of your relationship? What helped? What was not helpful?

- Did you get any support from other people? If yes, from who? If no, why not?

- Are there any differences between how your relationship would be seen in your home country compared to how it may be seen here in Canada?

- Do you have any other comments about you, your boyfriend, or your relationship?

 As the interviews unfolded, questions were changed or added accordingly. The written interview questions served primarily to inform the direction and purpose of the interview, since I utilized my counseling skills to conduct each interview in an individualized manner.

The interviews were audio taped and detailed notes were taken. The interviews ranged in duration from a minimum of 2 ½ to a maximum of 4 ½ hours. During the interviews I used open-ended questions to ask the women about their relationships and their lives. Each participant began her story with how she met her boyfriend, what she appreciated and enjoyed about him, and the development of the relationship. Often without prompting, the women then described how the relationship began to be experienced as difficult and often included examples of the struggles that ensued. I asked questions and made empathic comments to support the participants and to encourage

them to continue to deepen the stories. For example, I asked for particular details of a situation or how they made sense of a problem. Throughout the process the participants were encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings and actions associated with their stories. At the beginning of the second interview, I checked to see if the participant wanted to add or change anything from her previous interview. Several women added new stories, while others felt that what they had originally said was complete. One woman, although satisfied with the information given during the first interview, softened it by sharing a few more positive stories about her partner.

Role as Interviewer

My role in the interview was twofold—to listen supportively to participant's stories while also actively exploring their lived experiences. The relationship between me and the participants was warm and understanding, much like a "friendly stranger" (Lyons & Chipperfield, 2000, p. 37). A number of women commented on how comfortable they felt throughout the process, including during the initial meeting. The participants felt safe enough with me to share personal information that was often difficult and emotionally charged for them. Most of the participants wept during various parts of their interviews and they appeared to freely share their feelings, thoughts and interpretations of the situations they described.

During difficult times in the interview I used my counseling skills to support participants when needed. The boundaries were clearly communicated to participants regarding the purpose of the meetings: The encounters were research interviews, not clinical sessions. After her first interview, one participant asked for my professional opinion about her situation and wondered if I could give her some suggestions or advice. Similar to counseling sessions in which a client asks directly for feedback after telling his or her story, I agreed and proceeded to briefly reflect back what I heard and how I made sense of her situation. I also suggested a referral to university counseling services to her. Although she declined this recommendation, she did agree to read a book on verbally abusive relationships which I had suggested as a possible option. We spent the first thirty minutes of the next interview debriefing the book and some of her feelings about her boyfriend. Since she was trying to deal with the end of what I would describe as a "textbook case" abusive relationship, I felt an ethical and moral obligation to provide her with some professional feedback and resources in response to her request for help.

As much as possible, I established a non-hierarchical relationship with the women by dressing casually, meeting them in a neutral location, speaking with them as peers, and encouraging them to ask me questions. At the same time, however, I know that I maintained my legitimate power as a researcher and interviewer, which afforded me the opportunity to interview the research participants and give them confidence in my skills, background and intentions. In some of my experiences with feminist clinicians and researchers there has been the notion that power is "bad and wrong" and that we should do away with all power differences. I disagree with this point of view, seeing that power is something that exists whether we like it or not and that it can be legitimate or illegitimate, respectful or abusive. I believe it is how one uses or abuses his or her personal and systemic power and privilege that, at least in part, determines the quality of the interaction. It is through acknowledging and maintaining awareness about one's own

power in its overt and subtle forms that becomes a critical component in *not* abusing one's position.

Use of Documents

Two types of texts were collected for the purpose of analysis. First, some participants provided written documentation that augmented their personal stories. For example, one woman provided me with written email ICQ messages between herself and her boyfriend in Hong Kong. ICQ stands for "I seek you." It is a computer program that allows people to "talk" over the internet through instant messaging. Four other participants updated me on their relationship via email one to two months after the final interview (some from overseas). The email updates were important and useful in ascertaining what developed in the women's lives and relationships subsequent to our interview contacts. Another participant, who returned to China for an extended visit, wrote eight typed pages detailing her answers to interview questions because she had not been available for a second interview. I found this a particularly valuable piece of writing because she wrote very candidly about her situation and answered follow-up questions that had been too emotionally difficult for her to answer during the first interview. Being able to write rather than talk about these painful stories seemed to provide the participant with more privacy. Another participant was hoping to contribute an essay that she wrote about women and culture from a Chinese viewpoint, but was unable to locate the document when she went home. The written documentation collected from the participants was utilized in the thematic analysis and interpretation.

The second type of text collected were books and writings from literature and philosophy; mass media including film, magazine articles, and advertising; large sociological studies; and feminist cultural analyses on the individual countries of origin. The third overriding research question guided this part of the data collection and analysis, "How do the individual lived experiences fit into the philosophy, literature, traditions, popular culture, etc. of the individual's particular society and ethnic background?" I read the texts with the purpose of collecting data representing women, women's issues, and information about intimate relationships in the participants' cultures. From this collection, I narrowed the field further by focusing on particular selections that represented current and traditional thoughts about women's roles. This data was then thematically organized and arranged utilizing a similar process to the interview transcripts. The textual data was integrated with the women's perspectives of their culture rather than separately organized and analyzed. This provided the advantage of directly juxtaposing the written texts alongside the participants' words, augmenting their perceptions about women and culture.

Interpretation

The process of analysis involved many steps. Following the interviews with each participant, I proceeded to transcribe the audiotapes verbatim and then read the transcripts through from beginning to end. During this process a list of possible thematic categories emerged from the data. This simply means that participants described similar patterns of stories that could be grouped together to form a single category. As this was

an initial list, I opted to create detailed sub-categories that could be later merged together to create larger themes. A second reading of the data allowed me to fully immerse myself in the process. Following this, further refinements were made in theme determination.

Next, printed versions of the interviews were created, each color-coded according to participant, and then quotations were physically cut from the transcripts for placement into the newly created categories. This physical "cut and paste" method facilitated another review of the emergent themes to verify the fit of each quotation to category. At times, a quotation seemed to simultaneously address two different themes, creating a dilemma. In these cases I re-read the quotation one more time in the context of the fully transcribed interview to decide on the primary theme based on the meaning and intent of the speaker. I also solicited the opinion of a masters level clinical therapist to provide a second perspective on these cases.

The process of sorting and developing emerging themes was easier than initially anticipated, in part, because I had conducted a qualitative research study that drew on a thematic analysis for my master's thesis. Since I knew that this was an early part of the sorting process, I quickly went through the first interviews, putting aside a small number of segments that did not seem to fit into any of the categories or which appeared to fit into multiple categories. I dealt with these quotations later after the primary themes had been developed. In some cases the quotations belonged to the second level of analysis concerning women's issues and culture, while the categories in this first level of analysis were all related to the women and their intimate relationships.

After developing categories for the relationship experiences, I moved on to organize the material about the women's perceptions of culture, gender, and class issues. My original inclination was to continue placing the second interview material into categories developed thus far from the first interviews. After struggling for some time, I realized that to do so would only be to force categories, which would not be in the best interest of the data and the research. I therefore initiated a new sorting procedure with the information primarily gathered during the second interviews. No longer being locked into predetermined categories, the sorting came more freely and the categories began to emerge. I considered this to be a second level of analysis, which examined the woman's perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs about issues such as gender role expectations, women's issues, and cultural influences. This approach provided an opportunity to examine sociological issues that impacted the women's lives rather than remain narrowly focused on the individual.

Interpreting the collected data was an on-going, circular activity that involved identifying themes and patterns through the process and theory of hermeneutics. It is through hermeneutics that the analysis of interpreting and understanding human experience comes alive. It is a way of opening up the richness, relationships, ancestries, and interdependency of human life in all its messiness, in the context of life, in all its ambiguities (Jardine, 1998). Hermeneutics focuses on understanding and interpreting human actions and expressions, and uses the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle to compare part to whole and whole to part (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). This circle simply means that individual stories are understood and interpreted in relation to the larger context of being a human in this world, and likewise, being human in our world compels us to pay attention to individual stories. Thus, my process in interpreting the data ranged from individualized, personal accounts to shared, cultural trends and traditions.

Researcher Notes

For this study, I developed two sets of researcher notes (a) field notes taken during the interview phase and (b) a reflective journal written during the analysis phase. In the first set of notes I compiled basic demographic information about each of the participants, detailed interview notes, and specific follow-up questions for the second interview. In addition to factual notes, I also wrote observational notes about myself, the participant, and the environment immediately after each interview. Reflective journal writing captured my observations, biases, descriptions of the participants and myself, the environment, non-verbal cues, and my internal responses to each participant. This kind of reflection enabled me to be aware of myself and the process. Through this writing I noticed, for instance, that I was asking too many questions with the first participant. Once I become aware of the problem I was able to slow down and be more present in subsequent interviews.

The second kind of writing was used during the analysis phase of the research. I began journal writing as a way of recording my actions and decision making process in relation to data interpretation. The writing became a way to work through and organize the material and ideas or sort out problems that seemed to impede my progress. For example, I sometimes felt overloaded with the volume of data that I needed to analyze. This had the effect of making me "freeze" in the process. In other words, I felt stuck and was not sure which way to proceed. Writing in my research journal allowed me to relax, and think through the research process in a free-flowing, non-judgmental manner. This inevitably would help me become "un-stuck," and more often than not, the process heightened my creativity, giving me a boost of energy and clarity.

Evaluating the Trustworthiness of the Research

Recent academic debates regarding the soundness of interpretive research reject the strict mirroring of constructivist, qualitative criteria against positivist, quantitative standards. Instead, McLeod (1994) discusses a more appropriate set of criteria for evaluating qualitative research. First, he outlines that a clear and comprehensive description of the procedural aspects of the research must be addressed. In my own research, I provided information regarding participant selection, descriptions of the interview process, and how the data was analyzed in order for the reader to determine the plausibility of the data.

Second, McLeod (1994) states that the study should be contextualized historically, socially, and culturally because qualitative research is, "more concerned with developing knowledge that is relevant and useful at particular times and places" (p. 98). My research is both contextualized by the multiple sources and perspectives that it draws upon, and it is relevant and useful in its application. For example, the findings can be utilized by counselors, doctors, and administrators at colleges and universities to improve services to women international students. Third, researchers should consider competing explanations and interpretations of the data, rather than simply collecting information that supports previously held biases and prejudices. In my analyses, a feminist lens was utilized, which brings into focus issues of gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and

power, but various interpretations, including those of the participants, were both considered and used.

Fourthly, qualitative work should show that reflexivity was maintained. During my research I spent considerable time reflecting upon my work, utilizing written journal and field notes throughout the process and talking at length to colleagues and supervisors. For instance, after an interview with a participant I reflected upon and wrote about transference and countertransference reactions between myself and the participants. This was particularly helpful when I had a strong reaction to a particular aspect of the information. Additionally, McLeod (1994) states that the credibility of the researcher, "is the person of the researcher, and his or her ability to form relationships with informants that encourage the disclosure and expression of relevant data" (p. 99). My ability to create a strong rapport with participants in a very short span of time was evident, based on the feedback received from the women themselves. The participants verbalized their comfort in talking to me even in the initial meeting and they all were willing to share very personal information about themselves, their relationships, and their families.

Fifth, Mcleod (1994) states that "the extent to which the descriptive account feels real and authentic is therefore an important criterion in all qualitative research" (p. 99). My research has achieved a rich, comprehensive, and holistic description of the topic under investigation. Sixth, triangulation of interview data is another important criteria. For my research, this was primarily done through the use of cultural texts from and about the ethnicities and countries of the participants. Collecting literary, philosophical, mass media, sociological, and feminist writings from and about the cultures under consideration, allowed participants' experiences to be embedded in the larger cultural discourses. I also returned to the participants to clarify particular issues that arose during the interviews. Finally, research needs to have the ability to be replicated by other researchers to show that the findings are "not an idiosyncratic result arising from one unique case, but has relevance and applicability to other cases" (p. 101). I have provided specific and complete details about the research process used, to the extent that this research could be replicated by others in the field.

Ethical Dilemmas

A number of ethical dilemmas emerged as part of conducting this research. One example that arose during the recruitment of participants concerned the amount of detail about the research to be revealed to the participants. Initially, my desire was to recruit women who were in emotionally abusive relationships, since this had been a primary focus of my studies. Deciding on how to advertise for research subjects in such relationships raised a quandary. I wanted to represent my study as honestly as possible, but there was also the realization that many women in emotionally abusive relationships do not identify themselves as such. Complicating matters was that women of different cultural backgrounds may have had a completely different conceptualization of what constitutes abuse.

My response to this dilemma evolved over two stages. Initially, I decided to use four or five prompts from the emotional abuse literature to provide women with a general focus of the possible kinds of behaviors they might experience in such relationships. These posters did not seem to be helpful in soliciting participants for the study. When the

information needed to be condensed for the email list-serve advertisement, there was an immediate response. This response may have been due to the direct invitation by a perceived credible source (e.g., the International Student Centre), and to the shortened and simplified format of the advertisement. This prompted me to make a decision to create another set of posters modeled on the list-serve ad, containing less information overall and without suggesting defining features of abusive relationships. Instead, the advertisements opened up the possibility for women who identified themselves as having experienced a "difficult" relationship in whatever way they defined it. I realized that while this would probably take me away from emotionally abusive relationships, it would also allow me to see what international women students identify as a difficult relationship. Indeed, the final participants had been recruited by the newer posters and they had responded positively toward them.

A second fundamental dilemma arose during the analysis of the data. Even before I had completed the interviews, I struggled with whether I should modify the women's words and sentences to be more grammatically correct or not, since English was not their first language. Many researchers, especially feminist writers, admonish researchers not to change women's voices to fit the academic text (Tierney, 2000). After reading through the literature on representing voices (Birch, 1998; Long, 1999; Edwards & Ribbens, 1998), I felt secure in my decision to make modifications so that the woman's words were clear and understandable. I agreed with the perspective stating that most people speak and write quite differently. It did not seem fair, therefore, that I would have the chance to spend hours and hours writing, polishing, and editing my text, while the participants provided me uncensored, rambling, casual speech that I would juxtapose against my own "professional" discourse. I particularly noticed my own embarrassment when transcribing some of my questions or comments from the interview tapes, and my immediate desire to "fix" up the sentences. The interviews were casual, informal, and loosely structured, whereas the text was academic, formal, and structured. I feel strongly that to use the exact wording of the participants clearly puts them at a disadvantage and makes them appear uneducated or inarticulate. These women, however, can be presumed to be both highly intelligent, overall, and highly fluent and articulate in their first languages.

Conclusion

My study contributes important theoretical knowledge to the growing body of international student literature. It provides an in-depth understanding of the context and complexity of women's lives, as related to their intimate relationships during their Canadian sojourn. This information fills a gap in the literature from a number of perspectives, including the complex lives of women international students, relational difficulties of these students, and sociocultural perspectives. The depth and breadth of this information provides a new type of theoretical knowledge to the body of literature that moves away from aggregate data and stereotypical presentations of student issues. Utilizing the feminist biographical methodology additionally imparts a feminist analysis and discussion of gender, culture, social class, and power to the established theoretical concepts associated with the international student literature.

Like any research methodology, the feminist biographical method has both strengths and limitations, and it can only provide a partial perspective. It is important however, to know what issues constitute tension and what areas are likely problematic, rather than allowing unexamined assumptions to predominate. In understanding these things, researchers have an opportunity to address the real life complexities of conducting research with human participants. Being able to identify and discuss these issues forces each researcher to face possible ethical dilemmas and personal blind spots, as well as acknowledge the rich possibilities provided by the feminist biographical method. This method can also be chosen because of a close fit with a researcher's personal values that respond strongly to relationships and connections, context and meanings, depth and richness, and literary traditions and language. Although this method has a strong tradition in history, literature, women's studies, anthropology, and sociology, it still remains underutilized as an interpretive research method in psychology. I hope that through this discussion I have illuminated an exciting and viable alternative for those qualitative researchers in the field of psychology.

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