Studying South African Black Gay Men's Experiences: A First-Time Researcher's Experience of Reflexivity in a Qualitative Feminist Study

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Abstract

Qualitative research on gay experiences in South African society is slowly gaining momentum. However, it is accompanied by serious ethical implications and positionality dilemmas that should be considered in carrying out such research. Black gay researchers' discussions of reflexivity in research that focuses on gay identities and realities in South Africa remain minimal. This paper focuses on a first-time gay male researcher's experience of being reflexive in a qualitative feminist study on the realities of Black gay men in mining workplaces. It highlights the importance of reflexivity and how it is enacted by a gay researcher who studies a gay population that they are in some way a part of, especially in South Africa, where sexuality is still a contentious topic. It is easy for a researcher to alter participants' narratives when they are a part of the population because they already have certain perceptions based on their personal experiences. This paper posits that the sexual and other intersecting identities and personal experiences of a researcher matter in research on vulnerable sexual minorities and should be a basis for critical reflections in qualitative feminist research.

Keywords

gay research, reflexivity, qualitative research methodology, research ethics, feminist epistemology

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Introduction

Imagine you are doing qualitative research for the first time, and it is on a sensitive topic on gay experiences in the heteronormative and male-dominated mining industry. You are passionate about LGBTIQ+ rights and advocate for the emancipation of sexual minorities in the South African society. The topic is important to you because you identify as gay and have experienced some discrimination based on your sexual identity. Therefore, you want to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of other gay men who are silenced by discrimination in their workplaces. However, you get rejections when you try to reach out to potential participants and while doing interviews with some participants, you come across troubling issues that go against your values, and your worldview as well as contradictions of what you expected to find in the research. You are confronted with the complexities of meeting the standards of ethical qualitative research and dealing with your subjectivities. To address your biases, you must identify them first, but how do you do that when they are deeply entrenched in a worldview you have acquired over long periods of time? How do you position and examine yourself in a study that you think you know so much about because you relate in some ways to the participants, and you have read extensively on the topic? How do you deal with unexpected rejection from potential participants?

These are some of the questions that I grapple with in this paper to explore the challenges and opportunities presented by my subjectivities in qualitative feminist research

with vulnerable sexual minority individuals. While qualitative research has been criticized for the lack of rigour due to the subjectivities of the researcher, reflexivity has established itself as a necessary and efficient tool for qualitative researchers in the social sciences to achieve rigour. However, reflexivity can be a complex process for a first-time researcher, more so when studying a population that you are in some way a part of, whether partially or fully. Patnik (2013) argued that prior experience or knowledge of the participants' background generates assumptions that may influence the researcher's perceptions of their realities. In being reflexive, I identified biases that I developed during my prior interaction with the participants and their context. Through critical reflexivity and examining myself in the research process, I was able to reduce the impact of my biases and minimize the influence of my values and perceptions on the participants' narratives and my research study's findings. While reflexivity assisted me with reducing negative impacts of my biases and perceptions, some of them contributed positively and enhanced the study.

Being a Black gay male researcher and conducting a study on other Black gay men who are in a different heteronormative context required research methods that would allow to produce reflexive knowledge. A feminist epistemology fitted well with my research goals to unearth the complexities of the marginalized positions that Black gay men occupy in heteronormative contexts. The exploratory nature of my research called for a qualitative research design to explore the lived realities and experiences of being male, Black, and gay in heteronormative and masculinized spaces. As I undertook my qualitative research, I grappled with issues of maintaining and increasing the rigor and trustworthiness of my research design and findings. In my quest to achieve trustworthiness, I was aware of my own position in the research study and in relation to the positions of the research participants. Engaging in reflexivity was important to rationalize the suitability of my research design to the aims and objectives of my study and to strengthen trustworthiness of my research findings. The fact that I shared the same racial, gender, and sexual identities with the participants in the study, made reflexivity complex, because I already had my own assumptions of the participants' realities based on my experiences and observations.

This paper is a commentary on the reflexive processes I engaged in throughout my qualitative feminist research study. Feminist LGBTIQ+ researcher's accounts of reflexivity in their research with sexual minorities are lacking in South African literature. Available accounts of researcher reflexivity in South African feminist research are often provided by female researchers who studied experiences of women and children (see Adeagbo, 2020; Sokoya, 2006; Womersley et al., 2011). This commentary contributes to literature on reflexivity in qualitative feminist research by providing a reflexive account which highlights the uses of reflexivity for sexual minority and feminist researchers who study LGBTIQ+ experiences. Reflexivity was particularly relevant in helping me bring to the fore marginalized voices of Black gay men without altering the original meanings of their stories. In utilizing reflexivity as a research tool, I had to first acknowledge my personal biography to understand my position in the research.

Personal Biography

As a young gay man, who went through the struggles of seeking a place in a society in which sexuality is reduced to heterosexuality and sexual diversity is considered taboo in certain sections of society, I am concerned with how South African society treats individuals whose sexual identities fall outside the heterosexual norm. I grew up in a Black rural community where the exploration of my sexual identity was confined to very private spaces due to the heteronormative standards to which I was expected to adhere. I was cognisant of the

possibilities of rejection and discrimination, which in turn influenced the careful "privatization" of my personal life, especially aspects related to my sexual identity.

When I left the rural space, I grew up in to enter an urban space as a university student, I was exposed to a gay community that explicitly embraced sexual minority amidst society's rejection and intolerance of gay people. Issues of sexuality were openly discussed with lecturers and fellow students in class, a reality that I was being exposed to for the first time. I was exposed to LGBTIQ+ organizations on campus and met more gay people than ever before. I became knowledgeable of dating applications and websites where I could meet other gay men, whether it was for casual sexual encounters, friendships, or possible relationships and I had opportunities of experiencing public gay spaces, such as gay night clubs. This reality changed my perspective of my gay identity, which I had kept private, consequently resulting in me taking a chance and eventually making my sexual identity public.

The gay culture I was exposed to at that time helped me understand myself better and appreciate my gay identity as a valid part of my self-concept. Despite societal pressures and experiences of discrimination based on my sexual identity I learned to embrace my true self. However, I remained uncomfortable with heteronormativity in the South African society and its negative implications on gay identities. This discontent sparked my interest in gay experiences and my desire to see gay silence broken in spaces where heteronormativity prevails, and discrimination is used to punish gay people. This interest is what guided my research into the experiences of Black gay men in the South African mining industry, a space that embodies a heteropatriarchal occupational culture.

My Master's Research Study on Black Gay Male Mineworkers' Experiences

In my master's research, I provided an exposition of my experiences as a Black gay researcher who conducted qualitative research on Black gay mineworkers and had to deal with the questions of positionality, ethics, and reflexivity prior to conducting the research, during the process of research and in finalizing the research findings. Heteronormativity and widespread discrimination in South Africa continue to silence gay people in different contexts of the South African society (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Tebele & Odeku, 2014; Van Zyl, 2015), and I adopted a feminist epistemology to "un-silence" marginalized Black gay mineworkers who have been rendered invisible and considered non-existent in the mining industry.

The focus of my research study on the experiences of Black gay male mineworkers called for a research approach that would consider participants' unique experiences based on their different social context and identity markers that set them apart from gay men in other spaces. Following a feminist epistemology, my study provided Black gay mineworkers with an opportunity to safely tell their stories and challenge the false perception that they do not exist in the mining workplaces. A feminist epistemology seeks to produce knowledge by first understanding lived experiences of oppressed and marginalized groups and then analyzing the social relations that determine them (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2007). However, as qualitative researchers we need to recognize the authority that emanates from the experience of having studied a phenomenon, having reflected on it, and paid attention to the reflections of others. It is imperative that as feminist qualitative scholars we take responsibility for the authority of our experience in the production of knowledge with marginalized groups (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999). Reflexivity is a necessary tool for researchers who seek to produce feminist knowledge that is trustworthy.

Having experienced discrimination and witnessed the widespread hate crimes against gays in South Africa, I was not going into this research with the purpose of just writing a dissertation, but I wanted to break boundaries and enter a mining space that has for a long time silenced the voices of gay men. I was also coming into the research as a Black gay researcher

who has read extensively on gay experiences in workplaces and engaged with the South African history on gay bodies within the mining space. My experience, in conjunction with the knowledge I gained through an extensive study of the literature placed me in a position of authority and in the interest of responsible feminist knowledge production, I grappled with concerns on how my subjectivities would possibly impact my interpretations of the research participants' narratives.

The feminist epistemological standpoint guided the methodological choices that I made in my research study. My research aims were achieved through Black gay mineworkers sharing their feelings and thoughts about issues of discrimination in heteronormative spaces and how it affected the construction and management of their sexual identities. Being aware of my position and the authority that came with it, allowed me to interrogate my perceptions of the participants' social contexts and their personal choices when it came to constructing and disclosing their sexual identities.

I collected data through in-depth face-to-face interviews with Black gay men who are formally employed in the South African mining industry. Engaging in face-to-face interactions with the participants allowed me to grasp the deeper meanings of their narratives, however, this required me to develop a relationship of mutual trust with the participants. It was not easy to achieve this relationship of mutual trust, because they live mainly hidden gay lives and were concerned about possibilities of disclosure. Concerns with disclosure were a problem, especially in the initial stages of the research; potential participants refused to take part in the study, and I reflect on this in the subsequent sections.

In the interest of responsible research, I had to ensure that the participants were protected and not exposed to harm in any way. They were going to share very personal aspects of their sexual identities with me, and they could only do this if they trusted me with their lived realities. I came across challenges in gaining access, meetings with the participants and with the collected data which required me to reflect on my position in the research and the relationships that I developed with the participants. Reflexivity proved to be useful in my quest to develop knowledge that reflected the experiences of Black gay mineworkers as narrated by them.

In the subsequent sections, I engage with my position in the study, considering reflexive moments that transpired during the research and highlighting points of conflict that emanated from my subjectivities as a researcher. I start by engaging with some literature on reflexivity and its uses for feminist researchers, indicating how the literature guided my study. Reflexivity assisted me with constantly tracking my role in the research and identifying these points of conflict. I wrote down my values, views, and perceptions on the phenomenon under study; engaged with interview notes and observations and analyzed my interactions with each participant after every interview to trace biases and critically engage with them to reduce their impact on the structured analysis of the data. The process of identifying biases and self-criticizing was not an easy one and I will illustrate how reflexivity unfolded and framed my approach to the implementation of research ethics in this study. The discussion on ethics is followed by a reflection on the relationships with the participants and how I navigated the insider/outsider roles. I end the paper with a narration of the interviews, looking at the issues discussed with the participants and my feelings and reactions to their stories. Importantly, and as per the principles of feminist knowledge production, I employed reflexivity to avoid telling my own story based on my incorrect analysis of the gay mineworkers' narratives and as a result, contributing further to their marginalization.

Reflexivity in Feminist Research with Vulnerable Groups

At the start of my research process, I was aware of the importance of positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research. However, this was based on theoretical knowledge that I gained through my studies, and it was going to be the first time in which I was expected to be reflexive. I learned that providing a biased perspective or analyses of the participants' narratives may lead to a false representation of their stories and moves the direction of the study from the participants to the researcher. My concern with managing my own biases and presenting participants' narratives in a way that does not take away their original meanings informed the analysis of my experiences and motivations for carrying out the study.

Reflexivity has been established in qualitative research as one of the ways in which researchers can ensure rigor and quality in their research (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019; The & Lek, 2018). It entails the process of understanding the self and the role that the researcher plays in the process of creating knowledge. Furthermore, the researcher must monitor themselves and the influence of their biases, beliefs, values, and personal experiences on the research (Ali, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). Thus, a feminist epistemology, is focused on the production of reflexive knowledge, taking into consideration the insider/outsider relationship, highlighting power dynamics, and keeping power differentials between the researcher and the participants to a minimum (DeShong, 2013). Van Stapele (2014) argued that the researcher's position in the research process, influences how they interpret the narratives of their participants. This calls for them to continuously locate themselves in the research process to avoid producing knowledge that is biased and invalid. Their insider or outsider position, and whether they have similar experiences as the participants is vital in identifying and considering similarities and differences between the researcher and the researched. Identifying a position helps the researcher to become aware of their unconscious bias and avoid disregarding information that goes against their values or what they expected to find (Buetow, 2019). Dodgson (2019) explains that it is important for the researcher to understand their position in relation to the participants. How the researcher identifies themselves will determine whether they fulfil an insider or outsider role, allowing them to be cautious of power differentials that may exist between the participants and themselves.

My position in my study, called for an awareness of the role that I was playing in the study and in my interactions with the gay mineworkers since it was easy to shift from my position as a researcher to a personal role that would influence participants' narratives. One advantage that I observed from reflecting on my position in my study was understanding that I was not coming into the research field as a clean slate, but I was coming in it with a particular worldview that I generated from my life experiences. I learned that qualitative research, recognizes that researchers are part of the social world they study, and as such, my position in the research process has an influence on how I interpreted the participants' narratives. Therefore, it was important that I engage in the processes of self-introspection where I acknowledged and scrutinized the role of my subjectivities in the research process. As per Van Stapele (2014), the recognition and clear descriptions of the contextual intersecting relationships between the researcher and the researched, increases the credibility of the study's findings and provides deeper understandings of the work and this was particularly important in my feminist research, since I was in certain ways a part of the population I was studying. Understanding my position, reflecting on it and self-critiquing allowed me to grasp the deeper meanings that participants attach to their experiences and understand how intersections of multiple identities and spaces shape the different realities of gay men in various settings.

Considering Ethics and Being Reflexive in Research on Gay Experiences

I met with the participants at agreed upon places outside their workplaces, where they felt safe to pen up about their personal lives. The participants felt comfortable and free to share their experiences, outside their workplaces which they perceived as unsafe for them to disclose their sexual identities. It was, therefore, important to protect the participants from harm, while developing relationships of mutual trust with them by being transparent and providing them with all the information related to the aims and objectives of the study. Maintaining high levels of confidentiality in the research, was not only an ethical duty, but it was also a mechanism that allowed me to gain the participants' trust. It was impossible to separate ethics from reflexivity, because the whole process of researching a sensitive topic of gay identities in heteronormative mining workplaces called for sensitivity towards the human rights of the participants, which required that I not only protect the participants from external harm, but to also avoid marginalizing them further by not being critical of my role and the power differentials in the research.

Interviewing vulnerable groups did not only require reflexivity on my part as a researcher, but also required rigorous ethical considerations. Bless et al. (2013) argued that it is important to consider research ethics in social research to ensure researchers do not exercise their power in ways that undermine the participants' human rights. My research topic required that participants disclose personal information about private aspects of their lives, and it was necessary for me as a researcher to reflect on this aspect of the research. The topic of sexuality in the South African mining industry is a sensitive one and the extent of discrimination in South Africa, as evidenced in literature (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Msibi, 2012; Naidoo & Karels, 2012; Ngidi et al., 2020), required that I follow clear ethical guidelines. In carrying out the research, and meeting with the participants, I constantly reminded myself that I am dealing with a sensitive issue which some people might not be comfortable discussing due to fear of exposure and possible harm. I had to conduct the study and the interviews sensitively and ensure that the participants felt safe throughout the interviews. Conducting research on a vulnerable group did not only call for a mere adherence to ethical guidelines but also demanded a particular level of responsibility and care since carelessness or negligence would marginalize the participants.

I observed participants' concerns with confidentiality and anonymity, especially in our interactions. In an interview conducted in a restaurant, I noticed that the participant was not completely comfortable and when I asked why he was uncomfortable he told me that my voice was a bit loud. He requested that I lower my voice so that people do not hear what we were talking about. I complied and lowered my voice. Speaking up was not out of the intention to expose his gay identity as I naturally speak up, but I did not take caution of the context we were in. Although the participant insisted that we meet at a restaurant, I noticed a restaurant was not the right place to conduct an interview of this nature. It was not a safe space for the purposes of confidentiality since someone who knows him could have heard us if I did not lower my voice and that could have led to his hidden gay identity being known. Fortunately, this incident occurred in the early stages of the research since this was my first interview with that participant. In subsequent interviews I asked the participants that we do not meet in public spaces, and they interestingly did not have a problem with welcoming me into their private residences. I realized that the participants allowed me in their residences because I was referred to them and had explained my research and the importance of their contribution prior to us meeting. However, there were serious challenges I came across in the process of negotiating access to the participants.

Negotiating Access to Black Gay Men in Heteronormative Spaces

Berger (2015) argued that the position of the researcher may affect access to the "field" since some participants may be more comfortable or willing to share their stories with a researcher whom they perceive to be sympathetic to the situation they are in. In planning my research, I was aware that my personal identity would have a potential influence on access because participants were likely to consider my sexual identity and other biographical factors in their decisions to participate in the study or not. As a Black gay man, I knew many other gay men, and I identified my first participant through one of my gay friends. I did not think that my sexual identity would hinder access to the participants. In fact, I thought that it would make access much easier. I used my personal contacts and social media to identify participants. While it was difficult to find participants who were willing to participate in both avenues, social media proved to be the most difficult.

I have many gay friends and followers on my social media accounts, and I started to identify participants by looking at their social media profiles, pictures, and biographical information. Through this method, I was able to identify four gay men whose social media profiles suggested that they work in the mining industry. I assumed that they were gay based on the mutual social media contacts and their social media posts. I would also get referrals from personal contacts who would refer me to certain social media profiles. I started sending out messages to the potential participants via social media. I first greeted them and upon their response to my greetings, I would send them a summary of the information sheet that I would give to all the participants. The information sheet explained that I am a master's student conducting research on the experiences of Black gay male mineworkers. Th would be followed by a request for them to participate in the study and information relating to confidentiality, which guaranteed them that interviews will be treated with the strictest confidentiality and that their personal information would not be exposed. However, all the four men refused to participate at first instance.

All five participants who took part in the study were referred either by my personal contacts or by a participant who I already interviewed. I understood that not everyone would be keen or comfortable with the topic under study. Considering that my study focused on a topic that was taboo in the mining space, I did expect some rejections. However, I was interested in understanding why all the participants that I directly approached, refused to take part in the study while participants who were referred agreed. I started analyzing my approach to the social media participants. I read the text messages I sent on social media several times trying to analyze them and determine what triggered participants' immediate refusal to participate. Personally, I would not be offended if someone approached me on my social media and asked me to participate in a study that has to do with aspects of my sexual identity. I thought about my social status, as an open Black gay middle-class researcher who stays in mostly urban spaces where sexuality was not entirely a taboo topic. I asked myself, how I would feel if a stranger approached me and asked me to disclose aspects of myself that I am not usually comfortable engaging. I recalled past experiences where I was not comfortable being called gay because of the stigma associated with the identity.

At this point, I realized that I had taken for granted the gender normative societal pressures that I was forced to conform to. I also conformed to the societal pressures in my past, when I kept my gay identity hidden and pretended to be heterosexual. My transition from an ordinary rural "closeted" gay boy to an open gay man, changed my approach to sexuality, which informed my assumption that these gay men would be interested in taking part in my study. I became aware that I was approaching participants from my position as an open gay man, without placing myself in their shoes. I took for granted the effects that my open gay researcher role would play in social media interactions. Initially, the people I approached

directly on socially media, were nice to me and responded with enthusiasm when I started the conversations, until I started explaining the primary purpose of getting in contact with them. I realized that my quick and formal transition from just a social media friend or follower to a researcher conducting a study on gay men and needed them to participate in the study changed how they viewed me.

My approach suggested that I already knew their sexual identities and other personal information, without asking them. My approach made them cautious of my intentions and raised concerns of exposure. Something that also raised concerns of exposure was my open sexual identity. Since I approached the participants on social media, they were immediately aware that I am an openly gay man based on what I share on my social media. Gay men who are not entirely open about their sexual identities would not want to associate with gay men who are living open gay lives, and this was the case with the gay participants I interviewed (see Maake, 2020). From this, I was able to grasp the role that my open sexual identity and visible gay lifestyle played in inhibiting access to participants. With that said and because social media participants responded to me positively in the beginning of our conversations, I noticed that the problem was not entirely my visible gay identity, but that I am not only explicitly gay, but I was merely a stranger conducting a study on their sexual identities which they hardly spoke about. The question I asked myself was, how did I expect people who do not know me personally to share with me aspects of their lives that they do not share with people that they know and interact with daily? This question led me to interrogating my understanding of the sensitivity of the topic I was investigating, making me realize that while I thought I understood the complexities of gaining access through social media, to a certain degree I took it for granted and did not give it enough thought.

While it also took some convincing with participants who I accessed through referrals, they felt a bit safer since they were close with the people who referred them to me, and they were informed about me before I could speak to them. Upon interacting with them, I was able to share with them the role that they will be playing in the study, and the important contribution that they will be making to the study. I did not do this with the social media participants and our interactions were cut short by their refusal from the onset. As part of my reflexivity, I randomly asked participants referred to me if they would have accepted an invite to participate in the study if I approached them directly on social media. I shared with them a text that I sent to one of the social media participants which read:

> Okay. So, the reason I wanted to talk you, I am currently doing a study on men who work in mines. Focusing on their experiences of working in a mine with men and workplace discrimination. Now I noticed that you work in a mine, and I realised we have a lot of friends in common so I thought I should just ask if you wouldn't like to be interviewed. It will just be one interview and it will be very confidential and private. And I will use pseudonyms to protect your identity. Would you like to participate?

Apart from one participant whose sexual identity was disclosed to his family members, there was consensus amongst the participants that they would not have accepted the invite. They argued that the text was in certain ways "outing" the other person, and came across as intrusive, since it implied that I had been doing an investigation. After these responses, I read the text multiple times and although I was trying to provide a reason for choosing the participant, statements such as, "I have noticed that you work in a mine, and I realised we have a lot of friends in common" exposed the participant, leading to them rejecting my invite. When I thought about the implications of this statement, it was evident that my reasoning was based on assumptions about the details I gathered from the participant's Facebook profile. My

perception of the participant could have been wrong, and I should have instead taken some time to build some rapport, instead of suggesting to the participant that he is gay, without him saying it.

From my examination of the text and its implications, I learned that approach is very important when conducting research on marginalized groups and the researcher needs to first analyse their position before approaching people on social media, which is not a safe space for someone to be completely guaranteed that their personal information will not be compromised. It is important to tread with caution when approaching people on social media and to think of a more sensitive approach that will not unsettle or make the person uncomfortable, particularly so when conducting research on a sensitive topic. The need for sensitivity emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in the beginning of the research process, to ensure that as a researcher, you do not come across as a threat or having ulterior motives to potential participants.

In the initial stages of my Ph.D. research, which I am currently working on, I had to revisit my master's research experience and reflections, especially with gaining access to social media participants and tried to devise different and more sensitive strategies that would secure access. Instead of going directly into potential participants' social media inboxes, I often share broad information about my Ph.D. study, particularly my research questions on my social media and ask for people's opinions and views. Based on the responses and engagements I identify people who fit the sample that I am looking for and start a conversation in the inbox by reflecting on their response to my statements. I slowly build rapport in the social media inboxes by engaging broadly on the research information that I have shared publicly and their views before we arrange for an interview. Another strategy I use is going through participants' social media platforms and looking at information that they share on their social media. I would comment on some social media posts that allude to their sexuality, and from there, they would realize my interest in their views. The most important aspect is to avoid rushing into the formalities of the research, and to demonstrate interest in the participants' lives and their general views about issues of sexuality and slowly build rapport. The disadvantage of these strategies is that it may take some time for people to warm up to you. However, interacting with the participants for longer periods presents opportunities for an even deeper grasp and understandings of their realities.

Insider-Outsider: Reflecting on Relationships with the Participants

When I entered the research field, some of the participants indicated that they would not have agreed to participate in the study if I was not gay. The similarities that I shared with the participants such as the racial, gender and, sexual identity positioned me as an insider and reduced the formal researcher and participant relationship since the homophobic bullying, I could identify situations where participants were skeptical in sharing some information about their experiences of bullying, and I knew that there was more information there which I could probe for. Some of the participants' experiences resonated with my own and it was in these instances where I could tell that there was more information that the participants could share with me. When they narrated their experiences of growing up in rural heteronormative communities, I saw myself in their stories as they recalled some of their painful childhood memories. One of the participants became very emotional as he told me about multiple occasions where other boys at school bullied him and called him names for portraying qualities that are socially defined as feminine. While listening to his narration, I found myself looking back at my own childhood experiences of being bullied for "behaving" like a girl. Several times I was reprimanded by people in the community and at school when I demonstrated socially defined "feminine" qualities such as playing with dolls instead of soccer with the other boys. This affected my confidence.

The compassion I felt for the participants enhanced further interests into the details of their stories, however, I was tempted to demonstrate some understanding of their feelings by sharing my personal experiences with them. I struggled with restraining myself and in my mind, I was thinking about how I can comfort the participants by sharing the similarities between our experiences without influencing their responses. While I felt emotionally attached and wanted to share with the participants that they are not alone in their historical and current struggles, I asked myself if the temporary intervention that I was going to do was worth risking the quality of the study and the long-term impacts that the study would contribute to the emancipation of gay people in the South African society. Although, I was coming from a place of care and comfort, an attempt to share my personal biography with the participants might have directed the attention of the interviews from the participants to myself, defeating the purpose of my research. I realized that my emotions enhanced the interviews, since I was able to identify opportunities to probe for further information with compassion, but at the same time could have taken my study on a different path if I went on and shared them my own stories.

While the similarities I shared with the participants positioned me as an insider, I constantly had to move between positions of an insider and an outsider because my relationships with the participants were informed by multiple identity markers that shaped our realities and experiences differently. Although I shared the same racial and sexual identities as the participants, including similar backgrounds and similar experiences, which qualified my insider position, there were obvious differences that positioned me as an outsider. My level of education, researcher status, employment history and social background were different from theirs. I was not familiar with the mining space because I have never been in a mine, not to mention that I have never worked in a mine. The only knowledge I had of mines in South Africa was knowledge I gained through reading literature. These differences were sufficient to position me as an outsider since I was entering their space as a researcher seeking information from them.

Although the interviews reflected usual conversations between friends, I had to be cognizant of my behaviour, reactions, and guard against what I say to the participants, so that I do not influence their responses. This was a difficult task because it was easier to get carried away and absorbed into the participants' emotions, than to restrain myself and withdraw from sharing my feelings with the participants. In some instances, where participant told me about their experiences of suffering in silence, and being unable to challenge discrimination out of fear, I felt distraught and wanted to share with participants' how I dealt with discrimination in my previous corporate workplace. However, I was conscious of professional standards of research that had to be upheld for the research findings to be credible. It was necessary to have friendly conversations with participants rather than structured formal interviews since that allowed the participants to share their stories with ease. However, it was also appropriate to uphold the highest standards of professionalism.

The Conversations: Interacting with Black Gay Men

In conducting the interviews, analyzing them, and writing my findings, I acknowledged my privileged position as an academic researcher. My understanding of gay identities in heteronormative spaces, including workplaces was informed by my study of the literature on this topic. This led to the realization that my understandings of gay realities and discrimination based on sexual identity may differ from those of the participants. It was useful prior to the interviews to reflect on my knowledge and the possibility that participants may provide information that is in contradiction with what I know. For example, one of the participants experienced name-calling at work, in front of colleagues and intrusive questions about his

sexual identity. Colleagues would use terms like *stabane*[1] when referring to him in meetings at work. He also explained that most of the time, he felt that his colleagues were treating him like a woman, because of his behavioural characteristics that are normatively associated with femininity. His heterosexual colleagues did not believe that gay men are "real men;" therefore, they could not perform manual labour that "real" heterosexual men could perform. The exclusion of gay men from notions of a "real man" highlights the patriarchal nature of their workplaces. The participant was not trusted with heavy objects and heterosexual male colleagues would always offer to assist him with carrying them, suggesting that he was incapable of carrying out such duties by himself. They would even sometimes assist him with completing his tasks, stating that he would not finish in time working by himself, and would delay the work process. For the participant, these were merely jokes that he did not really take to heart. The name-calling became normative to him, and he internalized it as part of the culture in his mining workplace.

I was troubled by the participant's view of fellow heterosexual colleagues' behaviors towards him because I believed they entailed discrimination and I struggled with understanding how he was able to overlook this discrimination and just refer to it as jokes. It wondered how the discrimination was normal to the participant and I judged him for not doing anything about this. Due to my historical experiences and the many years that it took me to embrace myself as a gay person, I would call out discrimination based on my sexual identity any day. It frustrated me that the behaviours of his colleagues had become normative to him, and I thought of correcting him and making him aware that he does not have to take issues of discrimination lightly. The fact that I did not say anything about this matter, troubled me even after the interview. In my struggles with understanding the participant's response to discrimination, I thought about our different social statuses that placed me in a privileged position and him in an oppressed one. I occupied mainly fewer heteronormative spaces, and my knowledge and exposure to debates around discrimination based on sexual identity have empowered me in multiple ways.

I realized that my judgement of the participant's narrative was informed by my own experiences and my knowledge of discrimination based on sexual identity. It also related to my role as a researcher to unearth issues that participants take for granted or do not question. This highlights the inherent power imbalance that emanated from my training as a researcher and a more critical understanding of my experiences in certain spaces where heterosexual and gay people co-exist. While I felt that the participant was being ignorant of the discrimination, in being reflexive, I came to an understanding that he was coming from a different context, and I had to understand where he was coming from instead of imposing my own beliefs and values on him and making conclusions based on my beliefs and understandings. There could be valid reasons why he has internalized the idea that these behaviours are jokes, including it being a coping mechanism or his way of dealing with homophobia in his workplace.

Another issue that I had to grapple with about the participants' narratives of working in heteronormative spaces was the extensive measures that some of them took to keep their gay identities a secret. I found myself troubled when participants described to me how they manage their sexual identities. The participants were forced by the heteropatriarchal nature of their workplaces to "pass" as heterosexual. They struggled with having to "pass" and keeping silent about their sexual identities, however, they considered passing as necessary to navigate heteronormative spaces. What struck me most about these narratives, was that some of them even formed romantic relationships with females and engaged in sexual intercourse with them, just to maintain a heterosexual front. For example, one of the participants explained that he

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[1] *Stabane* is a derogatory Zulu word meaning "a gay person." It is usually used in a negative way to attack or degrade gay men and women in some South African townships and rural areas.

would get involved in what he called "default" relationships with female colleagues unwillingly. He would also engage in sexual intercourse with them, just so that colleagues could be convinced that he is indeed a heterosexual. He said that some of his female colleagues would flirt with him, and he would go with the flow to silence them and avoid the curiosity that might emanate from him not responding to their flirty gestures with affection.

Dealing with this topic and coming across statements that contradict my values, I was forced to face my own perceptions of disapproval and further challenged to be critical of how I present the participants' narratives. I was deeply concerned about the participant's "passing"[2] strategies that I believed contributed to the dominant heteronormativity that continues to silence gay men in the South African society. During the interview with the participant who engaged in sexual intercourse with girls as a front, I recall asking myself, what was he thinking? Why is he taking it to such an extent? I struggled with understanding his reasoning for this behavior as I felt that the measures were not necessary. I felt betrayed as a gay man and wanted to blame these men for protecting heteronormativity, but then I asked myself what purpose this would serve to my study. Feeling so strongly about some of the participants' narratives kept me grounded as I had to revisit multiple times, the reasons why I was conducting this research. The back and forth between the purpose of the study and my analysis of the participants' narratives reminded me of the power differentials between myself and the participants. The negotiation power of our sexual identities in the different spaces that we occupied was not the same. I had better opportunities to negotiate a place in the broader heteronormative structures of society, because of my level of education and sexuality researcher status. These aspects of my identity came with some authority that the participants did not have access to.

Reflecting on my feelings of disapproval was also an epistemological exercise. I had to prioritize the co-production of knowledge and present realities of the participants and what such realities mean to them without altering their stories. I had to remind myself that the participant is in a context in which I have never found myself. He understood the extent of homophobia in the mining context much better than I did because I do not have first-hand experience of working in a mine.

I acknowledged that the participants' circumstances were not the same as mine since I previously had the privilege of working in a corporate context where I was able to be myself and I could challenge discrimination by asserting my constitutional rights of freedom of expression and association. From my undergraduate years, I have occupied mainly urban middle-class spaces, and developed a certain worldview that is different from that of the research participants. The academic space also provided me with an avenue to speak openly about issues relating to sexuality, be vocal about my feelings and stand against discrimination based on one's sexual identity. I have never been exposed to a highly masculine and patriarchal working environment. As a result, I cannot claim to know how it feels like to work in the research participants' environment every day. Being reflexive allowed me space to consider participants' positions when I analyzed their stories. It was in the best interest of the study that I take the perspectives of the participants on the issue and reduce the influence of my bias which could have compromised the credibility of the findings. Clearly these differences placed me in a privileged position, and it was this privilege that I interrogated. Much of it was not particularly earned but was gained due to the social status and spaces that I occupied.

Looking back at my upbringing in a rural community, I did not have this privilege of being vocal and practicing agency when it comes to issues of sexuality. It was this reflexivity on my past and present realities of oppression and privilege that informed my analysis of the participants perspectives in the co-production of knowledge. The processes of reflection that I

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[2] "Passing" for a gay person means that they deliberately conceal their discredited homosexual identity and adopt a normative heterosexual identity to avoid discrimination or punishment for being gay.

engaged in throughout my study and the fruitful results that emanated from these reflections, demonstrate that reflexivity is a useful tool in LGBTIQ+ studies, especially studies that seek to emancipate LGBTIQ+ people from the heteronormative oppressions that they are subjected to in various context of society. As a first-time researcher, who also identifies as a gay man, I needed to constantly engage in a critical reflection of myself throughout the entire research process. While my passion and drive to break the silence among gay men come from a good place, I had to be conscious and critical of my values and beliefs since they could easily move the attention from the research participants and their narratives to reflect what I believe encompasses the realities of the participants.

I learned from this experience that the influence of personal experiences and values in feminist research with sexual minorities should not be taken for granted, because they can easily take away the purpose of feminist research, which is to emancipate the marginalized. A feminist qualitative researcher should go beyond just acknowledging their experiences and biases but consider the role of those subjectivities in the study and engage with contradictions and feelings of discontent instead of blocking them out completely. As qualitative feminist researchers, our research is often guided by intentions to bring about change in marginalized people's lives and we cannot shut down our subjectivities because they are by default a part of our research and are bound to inform our perceptions of the participants whether we see them or not. By devising strategies to engage with our subjectivities instead of overlooking them, we create opportunities for ourselves to not only report on the participants' narratives accurately but to achieve the goals of feminist research and avoid contributing further to the marginalization of the population under study. If we overlook our subjective positions in research on a population that we are in some ways a apart of, we will be failing the same people that we are trying to emancipate, including ourselves.

Conclusion

The identity intersections that shaped my research experience as a Black gay man conducting research on Black gay men in a different context were highlighted in this research, emphasizing the notions that researchers are active members of the social world that they are studying and cannot remove themselves entirely from the research that they are conducting. Reflecting on the similarities and differences that I shared with the participants helped me to realize biases which I had to engage with and ensure that they do not impinge on the participants' narratives.

An insensitive approach to research with marginalized gay people may unsettle the participants and result in rejections. The problem might not be that the participants do not see a need to speak out, but they want to speak out in a safe space. This means that the approach that the researcher takes should assure the participants that they are indeed safe. It is necessary to completely understand the sensitivity of the topic under study and critically think about a sensitive approach. Alternative sexual identities are still under attack in various spaces of the South African society, however, while seeking to emancipate gay people from the silence that heteronormative structures of society force them into, it is vital to be aware of the contextual differences and status positions that inform how gay people negotiate their identities.

In qualitative research, it is necessary to appreciate the presence of multiple and sometimes contradictory realities, especially when the researcher shares similar experiences with the participants. While I shared same identities and similar experiences with the participants, the level at which we were able to negotiate our sexual identities in the spaces that we occupied was influenced by our statuses, and I was in a better position than them to speak out and challenge the discrimination. Being aware of my privileged position allowed me to understand the different perspectives that we shared.

Conducting research with vulnerable groups, requires a critical adherence to ethics, however, this is not sufficient to develop relationships of mutual trust. It is imperative that the researcher reflects on the implication of the research on them and the participants and enter the participants' world with full awareness of biases that may compromise the ethicality of the study. This is particularly important when the researcher is part of the population and feels that they know a lot about the population because they might seek to validate what they know and ignore information that goes against what they thought they would find.

What is worth noting in qualitative feminist research is that experience is not only rooted in context but also in social statuses that position us differently in various spaces of society. Indeed, reflexivity is an ongoing learning process that is necessary for a qualitative researcher who values the importance of rigor and trustworthiness in their study. However, it is important to note that it is not only about ensuring trustworthiness and rigor, but about the researcher understanding that the research is also a personal journey where they will learn and possibly change certain things about themselves while at the same time trying to understand participants' realities and how they make sense of their world. We can only contribute positively to the emancipation of the marginalized populations that we study if we engage in active critical self-reflexivity and pose uncomfortable questions to ourselves. The aim should be to tell the participants' stories, whether they are in line with our beliefs and values or contradict them and not to drive our personal messages about the participants to the world.

Following my experiences of reflexivity in my master's research and going forward with my Ph.D. research, I have learned and committed myself to producing feminist research that does not view participants as helpless people who need a researcher to save them, but as active role-players in the co-production of knowledge that will potentially change their lives for the better. Reflexivity taught me that I am a part of my participants' world, and they are a part of mine and as such, in my endeavours to understand their experiences and realities, I get to understand mine. Therefore, practising reflexivity did not only empower my research participants, but also empowered me as a researcher. I have come to know and understand that as a feminist researcher, I have a responsibility to the participants to respect their agency and tell their stories from their perspective, without attaching meanings that emanate from my subjectivities which I take for granted and fail to interrogate.

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