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On the Outside Looking In: Difficulties in Obtaining the Opinions of Muslim Religious Leaders' Views on Domestic Violence Experienced by Married Muslim Women

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the difficulties I faced in getting access to respondents in a qualitative study on the opinions of Muslim religious leaders on domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women. This in turn highlighted the need for me to reflect carefully on my own assumptions about my insider status and take into account how prospective participants identify me as a researcher. For the study on which I am reflecting, I chose an interpretive research paradigm which falls under the umbrella of qualitative research. This research paradigm was necessary as it places emphasis on context and nuanced meanings and was intended to allow me to interrogate the way religious leaders dealt with domestic violence and the rationale behind their approaches. Using this approach allowed me to explore some of the structural constraints that came to the fore via anecdotal research. This paper presents the challenges I faced and how I looked to overcome them and includes a detailed discussion of why the qualitative research approach was the most appropriate for this study, how I selected the participants, and how I experienced the interview process. Importantly, it speaks to reflexivity. In May of 2017, I set out to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews within the Gauteng region using purposive and snowball sampling. Trying to access participants proved to be difficult and it became clear that a mistrust exists between the academy and some theological organizations. Insider/outsider phenomena, which were envisaged at the proposal stage, proved to be important.

Keywords

insider/outsider research, sampling, reflexivity

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On the Outside Looking In¹: Difficulties in Obtaining the Opinions of Muslim Religious Leaders' Views on Domestic Violence Experienced by Married Muslim Women

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In this paper I discuss the difficulties I faced in getting access to respondents in a qualitative study on the opinions of Muslim religious leaders on domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women. This in turn highlighted the need for me to reflect carefully on my own assumptions about my insider status and take into account how prospective participants identify me as a researcher. For the study on which I am reflecting, I chose an interpretive research paradigm which falls under the umbrella of qualitative research. This research paradigm was necessary as it places emphasis on context and nuanced meanings and was intended to allow me to interrogate the way religious leaders dealt with domestic violence and the rationale behind their approaches. Using this approach allowed me to explore some of the structural constraints that came to the fore via anecdotal research. This paper presents the challenges I faced and how I looked to overcome them and includes a detailed discussion of why the qualitative research approach was the most appropriate for this study, how I selected the participants, and how I experienced the interview process. Importantly, it speaks to reflexivity. In May of 2017, I set out to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews within the Gauteng region using purposive and snowball sampling. Trying to access participants proved to be difficult and it became clear that a mistrust exists between the academy and some theological organizations. Insider/outsider phenomena, which were envisaged at the proposal stage, proved to be important.

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Introduction

In this paper I reflect on the data collection process conducted for my doctorate. The journey was commenced to gain insight into Muslim religious leaders' views on domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women. This paper highlights the difficulties I faced in gaining participants for my doctoral study. At the start of this journey, I thought that being a Muslim male would make it easier for me to conduct an important study and give voice to a group of individuals who have come under severe scrutiny, yet whose voices have been largely missing in literature on domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women in the South African Muslim community. However, what I envisaged to be a process with some challenges that could be overcome in gaining participants turned out to be the most challenging experience I have faced as an academic to date. My experience with potential participants from one of the most prominent organisations in South Africa was not one that can be characterised as positive

¹ The title "On the Outside Looking In" was influenced by a lyric from a song called "Siberia" by the Backstreet Boys from their album "Never Gone" released in 2005.

to say the least. I encountered many obstacles in trying to gain access to this organisation to provide me with participants to take part in my research.

In this paper I outline the difficulties I faced in trying to access this organisation. Methodologically, it speaks to literature on the tensions that exist between being an insider and an outsider and demonstrates that one cannot idealistically adopt either an insider or an outsider position. Due to our complex identities which result from the many roles we assume, we can be both be insiders and outsiders at the same time. Yes, I am male and Muslim, but because I was an academic rather than a religious leader, I was viewed as an outsider who would not appreciate the intricacies experienced by Muslim religious leaders.

During May of 2017, I conducted my first qualitative in-depth interview with my first participant. Getting to this point of my doctoral journey was not easy. Upon reflection, as a researcher, I realized the importance of using a qualitative methodology to answer the research question because many “dead ends” were encountered and possible “head on” collisions as well as “slippery patches” with participants were avoided. Sometimes possible participants refused to take part in the research and at other times potential confrontations were avoided. I discuss the importance of recognising how academia is sometimes at cross purposes with community organizations with which we are supposed to be working to create a better society. I begin by situating myself between insider and outsider. This speaks to the important point of reflexivity which Palaganas et al. (2017) describe as the process whereby our values and locations influence the research process. My dual position of being simultaneously insider and outsider was influencing the research process. Next, I outline the importance of using a qualitative research paradigm for my doctorate and highlight difficulties during sampling which produced many reflective insights on the insider/outsider phenomenon.

By reflecting on my experiences, I hope to show the complexities that are involved when discussing sensitive issues with the broader public. I believe that these discussions need to be had. However, in approaching these discussions, we need to be very careful in how we do so. As researchers, we cannot take our positionality for granted because positionality is complex and must be thought through thoroughly before we approach such discussions as domestic violence. If we do not do so, the research process can be derailed, or the process can be difficult to navigate. I hope my fellow researchers will reflect on their positionality before engaging with similar topics to mine. In doing so, their experience will hopefully be one that is smoother than mine.

Insider or Outsider? Locating My Position in the Research Process

There are different views regarding the role of the researcher. The work of Simmel (1950, cited in Saidin & Yacob, 2016) indicate that one position a researcher should take is that of an outsider so that he or she can be objective. Simmel (1950, cited in Saidin & Yacob, 2016) states that an individual can only be “natural” if they assume the role of an outsider. In contrast, the counterargument is that people who are outsiders would not be able to do justice to the findings because they would not be able to understand the culture in which they are working. (Saidin & Yacob, 2016). Insider researchers who are members of a particular culture will better understand those being studied. Insider researchers are individuals who share similar characteristics, such as ethnicity and gender, to those being researched (Saidin & Yacob, 2016). At the onset of my research, I thought of myself as an insider as I was a Muslim man looking to interview Muslim male religious leaders on their views of domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women.

Adler and Adler (quoted in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) identify three roles that a qualitative researcher can take. The first is as a peripheral member who “does not partake in the core activities of group’s members” (Adler & Adler, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Second,

there are active members, who are active in the group's central activities. Third, complete members are members of the group or become members during the course of research. Researchers who are complete members are more likely to be accepted by a target population, which seems to enhance the researcher's legitimacy. This can lead to developing a trusting and open relationship (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Saidin & Yacob, 2016). To a certain extent, I shared characteristics with the participants, as I am male and Muslim. At the time, I felt that sharing these characteristics made me a perfect candidate to find out religious leaders' views on domestic violence experienced by Muslim married women. This is what Merton (1972) refers to as "insider doctrine." Insider doctrine refers to a situation where ascribed status takes precedence. For example, only Black people can understand Black people. However, the situation is more complex.

Structurally, we all have status sets which make us both insiders and outsiders (Merton, 1972). Status sets is defined by Merton (1972) as "a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behaviour and perspectives" (p. 22). Merton (1972) believes that sharing the same characteristics does not necessarily make one an insider. People can have the same gender but share different views. For example, a White woman's understanding of being a woman might differ from a Black woman's (Merton, 1972). While there are advantages to sharing some characteristics with the participants, reflexivity entails constantly reviewing one's positionality and considering how this may affect the research and its findings (Palaganas et al., 2017). Whether one is different from or similar to others requires reference to another person. When we see ourselves as the same, we are also forced to see how we are different (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While I am an insider in some respects, I am an outsider in others. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) would say, I am "in between." I am an insider in the sense that I am male and Muslim and I am an outsider in the sense that I am not a religious leader.

Walking an Interpretivistic Path

I decided to use a qualitative research approach because one of the paradigms it focuses on is interpretivism. Unlike positivistic notions of social reality, which look at generalising results and observable behaviour, interpretivism places emphasis on social action (Neuman, 2000). This originates from the work of Weber, who emphasised the point of "*verstehen*," which means "emphatic understanding" (Glass 2005, p. 1). It is important for social researchers to understand the meaning behind the action. People's actions are related to the social contexts they find themselves in (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007; Glass, 2005; Henning et al., 2004; Neuman, 2000). Henning et al. (2004) make this point clear:

Interpretivist knowledge is dispersed and distributed. The researcher has to look at different places and at different things in order to understand a phenomenon. That is why interpretivist research is a communal process, informed by participating and scrutinized and/or endorsed by others. Phenomena and events are understood through mental processes of interpretation, which are influenced by and interact with social contexts. (p. 20)

This requires social researchers to interpret the words of individuals by considering the social context of those individuals. Various sociological texts have elaborated on how Weber empirically employed "*verstehen*." He indicated that one needs to look at the social context and social relationships of individuals, which shape their understandings of social reality and actions (Bryman, 1988; Glass, 2005; Tucker, 1965). Under a positivistic paradigm, as a researcher, I might conclude the action or inaction of religious leaders to be oppressive to

women: why do they not just give a woman a divorce when she requests it? On the surface, this seems very patriarchal. However, when I consider the context which influences the social action of an individual, my understanding of the social situation changes. Sometimes, external forces in a social situation prevent an individual from acting how they want to act. It might not be that a religious leader does not want to issue a divorce but that the social context prevents him from doing so.

Weber distinguished between direct observational understanding and explanatory understanding. Direct observational understanding refers to observing someone's behaviour—for example, being happy. Explanatory understanding refers to the reason behind happiness (Bryman, 1988). A man who makes funny faces and crawls will be deemed insane, yet if he is doing it towards a child, he will be deemed a good father because the society he comes from prescribes such behaviour in order to be termed a good father (Tucker, 1965). One participant in my research, Abdur Razaq (pseudonym), indicated that he was once threatened with a gun by an abusive husband. Hence his action or inaction was influenced by the social context. When religious leaders say they are limited in terms of what they can do, they are alluding to the social context in which they find themselves. Islamic law is not legitimised in South Africa, yet some individuals marry according to Islamic rituals and do not register their marriages. Religious organizations are tasked with dissolving marriages that are not registered (Abrahams-Fayker, 2011). But, as another participant indicated, even if they issue a religious ruling, the husband does not have to accept it because Islamic Law is not recognized locally, thereby limiting their ability to intervene in domestic violence.

These findings were only possible through my use of an interpretive method such as in-depth interviewing. This is what I hoped to achieve with my research which was understanding where religious leaders were coming from. Reflectively speaking, I thought that because I was a Muslim male, religious leaders would open up to me about struggles they encountered. But securing the interviews, as the rest of the article will show, was no simple matter of matching my religion and gender to that of the intended participants.

Difficulties in Gaining Access: Being a Muslim Male is not Enough

Henning et al. (2004) are of the view that, in qualitative research, your participants need to wander with the researcher during this journey; hence, it is important to choose the right participants with whom to wander. In this study, they were not difficult to identify, as the research topic was Muslim religious leaders. Use was made of purposive and snowball sampling.

Purposive sampling was useful because the participants needed to be “unique cases that are especially informative” (Neuman, 2000, p. 198). In this case, the research question revolved around Muslim religious leaders. Additionally, access to the sample was not an easily gained (Babbie, 2001; Neuman, 2000). I contacted the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA) to gain access to religious leaders (*ulama*). This organization has specific affiliates which have united under one body to provide a unifying voice for Muslims in South Africa (Islamic Focus, n.d). The different organizations maintain mosques under their jurisdiction and deal with marital disputes (United Ulema Council of South Africa, n.d). Two affiliates in Gauteng were approached, as I wanted to interview religious leaders within these organisations who work with issues of domestic violence. However, gaining access to one of these organisations proved to be difficult.

On 27 March 2017, I phoned one of the two organisations to begin my fieldwork. I requested to speak to the same person to whom I had spoken when preparing my proposal; however, he did not remember me. From the outset, I noticed that he was not as accommodating and enthusiastic as he had been during our first conversation in 2015. I introduced myself and

indicated the nature of my research. While directing me to someone who lives in my locality, he was clearly apprehensive. He indicated to me his disappointment with previous researchers who had been to their organisation for assistance. He stated that the organisation allowed social scientists to interview them on the issue of domestic violence, but when they present their results, a true reflection of their views is not provided. Qualitative research data, in the eyes of De La Cuesta Benjumea (2014), is obtained and constructed rather than collected. The researcher does not have access to the data immediately. Rather the researcher needs to develop a relationship with the participant and this relationship will produce the data. The person who is asked to be researched is asked personal, intimate details. Therefore, they need to have “faith” or trust in the person who is gathering the information (De La Cuesta Benjumea, 2014). It was obvious that this person did not have trust in me. I indicated to him that I had no agenda, and if he wanted to, he could see my interview schedule. I told him that dialogue was important between academia and civic organisations. He told me that while we could have a discussion on the issue, the practicalities they face are not understood. I told him this was the purpose of my research. Mullings (1999), who focuses on economic geographers trying to access elite business organizations to gain interviews, indicates that it is difficult to interview elites because they have an “exclusive source of information” (p. 339) on how they function. Similarly, De La Cuesta Benjumea (2014) indicated that religious centres are often difficult places in which to gain access to participants. De La Cuesta Benjumea (2014) cited a case in which a religious institution did not want to give a student pursuing a master’s degree access to pregnant adolescents who were living in the institution. This happened despite the organization themselves being the supervisors of the research. Elite individuals display resistance when asked about their personal lives or their organizations (De La Cuesta Benjumea, 2014). I experienced this form of resistance from the onset when interacting with this organization. However, this does not mean that I had no power in the relationship. Perhaps it was the power that I had which resulted in the organization feeling afraid to take part in this study. I have power in that I am the one who disseminates information via research about the organization (Rabe, 2003).

Importantly, my own profile was a problem. Liu (2018) indicated that when he conducted research amongst elite members of universities in China on institutional governance, he studied in the same region as they and worked in higher education in the same region for five years, which helped him gain access to participants. While I studied in the same region as my participants, I did not work as a religious leader. Being an academic was a “put off” for them, because, according to them, I did not understand the practicalities with which they dealt. This brings back the tension that exists between insider and outsider research. As already indicated, I am an insider due to certain characteristics I possess such as being male and being Muslim. I am an outsider in the sense that I am not a religious leader. What they did not realise is that I wanted to understand the practicalities they encountered, which I communicated to them. This interview required me to be reflective on the sensitivity of my research. The intricacies of being an outsider and an insider were colliding head on.

Greene (2014) indicated that one’s “positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the other” (p. 2). One’s positionality can change. Importantly, my experience revealed the point made by Kusow (2003):

The insider/outsider distinction lacks acknowledgement that insiders and outsiders, like all social roles and statuses, are frequently situational, depending on the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context. In other words, according to Merton, we cannot permanently locate individuals according to a single social status. Rather, they occupy a set of social statuses

such that one individual can occupy an insider status in one moment and an outsider [status] in another. (p. 592)

Chavez (2008) posits that people are either “total insiders” or “partial insiders.” A “total insider” is someone who shares multiple identities and experiences with their participants. A “partial insider” is someone with a sole or a few identities within a community; however, they are detached from that community. After my experience with the individual with whom I spoke on the phone, I was made to feel more like a partial insider even though I am male and Muslim. After speaking to this individual, I felt like an individual outside the circle of trust. While I envisaged problems when I presented my proposal to the Higher Degrees Committee, I had not envisaged the extent. I knew I had to be reflective, but I had not yet realized the immense importance of this process. My professional and religious identities were in a state of conflict with each other. Beoku Bettis’ idea (1994, as cited in Chavez, 2008), is relevant here: “I came to realize that while the insider standpoint was a valid approach to the research process, it was more fragile and complex than it is often portrayed as being” (p. 480).

I thought that my status as a Muslim male would gain me access to participants. However, my occupation as an academic also meant that I was an outsider, or as Chavez (2008) would say, a partial insider, who cannot interview religious leaders. I empathised with this individual; however, this individual clearly saw me as an outsider in saying that I did not understand the practicalities of the situations with which they deal. He might have been worried that I would misrepresent them (Rabe 2003).

While qualitative research allows researchers access to important information, such as how an “event” or access to information will influence one’s actions, the data are often susceptible to misinterpretation (Mullings 1999). Rabe (2003) indicated that she empathizes with communities who refused outsiders the chance to “speak on their behalf” (p. 153) because there is a significant chance that they will be misrepresented.

As pointed out, the individual to whom I spoke had a valid point because he indicated that the organisation was misrepresented by previous researchers who accessed the organisation. Previous research depicts the organisation negatively in how they deal with the issue of domestic violence. Perhaps this individual had reasons to be distrustful. This brings us back to the case of Abdur Razaq (pseudonym), who was threatened by an abusive husband. Subsequent findings from my doctoral fieldwork indicated that religious leaders are faced with difficult situations. For example, wives are economically dependent on their husbands; sometimes religious leaders advise women to lay a charge against their husbands but they refuse. Importantly, they are restrained by the fact that they have no legal power, and hence are limited in what they can do.

As a partial insider, I did not have such knowledge at my disposal and maybe these were the reasons which the individual referred to as practicalities which are not understood. Whether such information was revealed to previous researchers and ignored, is difficult to tell. I realised that as social scientists, we have biases and subscribe to certain ideologies. However, our judgement should not be clouded by our emotional investment in ideologies which influence our thinking so that we jeopardise future social research of our colleagues and ourselves if we do not do justice to our findings and our participants. At the same time, I told myself that I could not fall into an internal sympathetic “trap” which would jeopardise my integrity as a social researcher.

What transpired brings up issues of social justice. In discussing the concept of social justice, Tyler (2000) indicates “that for justice to be effective, it must be able to gain acceptance of rules and decisions that depart from individual or group self-interest” (p. 118). Bearing this view in mind, academics need to produce objective results even if it goes against their own

positions and research organisations need to be open to views about their organisations even if they do not agree with those views.

Trying to Build Rapport with Muslim Religious Leaders

The first conversation with the individual from the organization who was hesitant to provide assistance required deep reflection on my part. Even though I told him I would show him my questionnaire and that he could ask his colleagues about me, I realised that building rapport needed more work. I spoke to my supervisor, who told me that I should rather meet face-to-face with organisations that might assist me to find participants. I should also inform them that we could show them my transcripts. In a follow-up meeting, I told my supervisor that I would try to set up a meeting with the individual I had spoken to. Mullings (1999) indicated that it is difficult to get hold of elite individuals because of their time constraints. Sometimes researchers only have a chance for a brief interview. Getting hold of this individual was rather difficult, as he was not always in his office when I called, but I finally managed to get hold of him. I requested a face-to-face meeting while also trying to build rapport by being as transparent as I could. Harvey (2010) advised, "When communicating with elite members concerning a research project, in the vast majority of cases, researchers are advised to be as open as possible with their research goals and attempt to instil trust and a common understanding about what they hope to achieve" (p. 201). This time he was more accommodating: he wrote down my cell phone number and promised to get back to me. However, he did not get back to me; I tried getting hold of him again to no avail.

The individual had recommended a religious leader in the area in which I lived at the time. Even though he recommended this person, I knew that rapport was not at the level it should be for the study to reach its potential.

Using Other Contacts to Access Participants Via Snowball Sampling

The individual recommended was known by a mutual acquaintance. I contacted the mutual acquaintance to organise access to this individual. My intention of using snowball sampling in order to get access to participants was thus justified (Babbie, 2001). Atkinson and Flint (2001) and Babbie (2001) advised the use of snowball sampling to access difficult participants, and this proved correct. Henning et al. (2004) stated that purposive sampling needs to be adjusted in order to accommodate snowball sampling.

In this research, it was very important to make this adjustment. Religious leaders were proving to be a population to whom access was difficult to gain. The mutual acquaintance put me in touch with this individual, who was very accommodating and polite. However, he requested to see my interview schedule because he told me this was not his area of speciality. My supervisor told me to go ahead and send the interview schedule, which I did via email. Unfortunately, the response was negative, the reason being that the individual felt he was not qualified to provide me with answers to my questions. He directed me back to the organization that had put me into contact with him. In our previous conversation, he gave me the number of another colleague who lived in the same vicinity as I. In agreement with my supervisor, we felt that, since I lived in the vicinity at the time, it would be a good place to start. I managed to get through to this individual. The individual was friendly and hospitable; however, he told me he needed to get permission from his superiors. He took my number and told me he would call me back. Similar to the first individual I contacted, I did not get a call from him, and frustration crept in. I spoke to a religious leader who was not affiliated with any organisation to see if he was willing to take part. However, he felt that he was not in the right state of mind. Nevertheless, he gave me a list of people I could contact.

One of the individuals on the list was an acquaintance of a relative. This individual worked with the first organization I tried contacting. Given my difficulties with the organisation, I felt it would be better to use a snowball pathway in order to gain access even though it meant it would take time to get hold of this individual. De La Cuesta Benjumea (2014) indicated that “gaining entry into the field is, in truth, a process in which personal relationships play a fundamental role” (p. 483). Personal relationships played an important role in gaining access to participants to whom access would have otherwise been difficult to gain. It was through knowing a third party who knew both myself and the possible participant that I was able to access the individual in question. Previous research has taught me that one must have contingency plans when trying to access participants. I emailed my relative the details of my thesis. He promised to try to get me access to this individual.

In addition to using colleagues, I managed to also contact friends and family friends who were qualified religious leaders. Two individuals assisted me with this process. Although they did not deal with issues of domestic violence, they provided me with some useful information. One of them asked me to contact the *Imams* (religious leaders) from locations further from Johannesburg, their reason being that cases dealt with in Johannesburg are referred to the first organization I contacted. He also asked me to contact other institutions outside of this organisation, such as in Newclare and Eldorado Park, areas surrounding Johannesburg, where one would find *Imams* (religious leaders) taking a hands-on approach. For reasons of confidentiality, I did not tell this person that I had already tried to contact some of these people. The second person promised to put me in touch with someone from a reputable organisation who dealt with these cases. He also advised me to go via the first organization I contacted.

It is interesting to note that both individuals advised me to contact this organisation. Again, I realised the importance of getting access to the one important individual from this organisation as I felt this would allow the sample to snowball and increase the pace of my fieldwork. The mutual acquaintance managed to get me access to the organisation using his contact, who emailed me via his personal assistant.

This individual’s personal assistant, who was male, contacted me asking about the length of the interview, my due date, and which days I would be available. I responded indicating that I would require two hours, which could be spread over two sessions. I was more or less flexible in terms of my availability, and I indicated that I would like to conduct the interview in May of 2017. I did not receive a follow-up email. I decided to contact the individual’s personal assistant who told me the *Imam* was busy, as it was Ramadan, and my deadline of May was narrow. Harvey (2010) has suggested that, as personal assistants have access to potential participant’s diaries, it is important not to view them as barriers but as opportunities. I told him we could be flexible on the deadline. He promised to get back to me. Emails and telephone conversations were exchanged over a period of time before I managed to get an interview with the individual. Mullings’ (1999) point about the difficulty of gaining an interview with elites was proving to be correct. In this case, upon meeting this individual, he told me that he does not deal directly with cases. He told me he would speak to the individual I first contacted.

Back to Square One

When I contacted this first individual, again he was very apprehensive. He was very worried about how the organisation would be represented in my research. I tried to reassure him again that the purpose of my research was simply to find out the truth. He told me that even if my intentions were noble, it is still possible my research would do harm to the reputation of the organisation. Again, this brings us the issue of social justice. To achieve social justice, one needs to look at the best interest of society as opposed to one’s self interest (Tyler, 2000).

Importantly Tyler (2000) indicates social justice allows us to communicate with one another “without conflict and societal breakdown” (p. 117). This is what I wanted to achieve; I wanted to do research with organisations in the hope that we could work together to give women the rights they deserve. He told me he would discuss my research with the other members in a board meeting. At that point, however, my hopes of gaining a participant from this organisation were hanging by the thinnest of threads. The individual never came back to me. Kusow’s (2003) view that snowball sampling does not guarantee you results proved to be the case with this organization, despite the time spent. Atkinson and Flint (2001) warn that snowball sampling is a time-consuming process, and that was the case with this study. Even though I used personal contacts to gain access to this organization, the results were negative. This was a particularly saddening set of events. Religious leaders whom I interviewed while trying to get hold of this organisation subsequently indicated to me that this organisation made positive strides in dealing with issues of domestic violence. Ebrahim Moosa’s (2010) point about disunity in the Muslim community in South Africa could not be discarded.

Using Giddens’ “structuration theory” to develop a critical self-awareness, Kondrat (1999) argues that agents and structures are interlinked. However, the experience of each individual is not the same. It is important to consider issues such as class, power, and one’s position in relation to different social structures (Kondrat, 1999). As a Muslim male doing research on a topic that needed to be investigated, I felt like I was “shot down” because, as an academic, I was perhaps perceived as being part of the “secular” world, and hence considered a modernist, which in turn meant I was doomed (Moosa, 2010). Even though I tried to appease the organisation by constantly reassuring them, they were not willing to engage with me. Hence, my interaction with them left me feeling as though my achieved identity (being an academic) in our relationship was more that of an outsider than an insider; one who somehow would challenge their authority. Kondrat (1999) points out that, while individuals all live in the world, their conceptions and experiences of that world are not the same. How I perceive myself as an academic, and how organizations view academics from their experience, is different.

Importantly, when considering the insider/outsider debate, one cannot ignore how being an insider can be a complex issue. In dealing with an immigrant community of Somalians, Kusow (2003) spoke about how fellow immigrant Somalians expected him, an ethnographic researcher, to paint the Somalian community in a positive light when conducting research on the Somalian community. While I am not an ethnographer, there seemed to be fear that I would paint the organization in a manner they did not want. This comes back to the point about power: as an academic, I have power even though I was viewed as an outsider. People who are researched by outsiders are afraid about how they may be misrepresented by those who have the power to represent them. As a social researcher, I have that power to do so via my articles and my thesis (Rabe, 2003). The organisation clearly felt that they were misrepresented by previous researchers who conducted research on them. Based on these experiences, perhaps they had a legitimate right to be afraid to take part in my doctoral research.

Bearing this in mind, however, while reflecting on this issue, organisations such as the one I approached must be cognizant that if they are to progress and increase their efficiency, it is advisable to them to be open to ideas of accountability. One way they could improve accountability is through processes such as evaluation where they could realise which areas of their work, if need be, need improving (Bless et al., 2013; Bruhn & Rebach 2007). Another way they could improve accountability is through the process of “Downward Accountability” (Wallace & Pollock, 2008, p. 34) which involves working together with constituents to meet the organisations’ goals. Constituents could include “clients, consumers or participants” (Wallace & Pollock, 2008, p. 34). In its broadest sense, “constituents” entails community and civil society (Wallace & Pollock, 2008, p. 34). After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his best friend and close confidant, Abu Bakr, was his successor. In his

inaugural speech, Abu Bakr asked his subordinates to tell him where he was going wrong (Ebrahim, 2012). He stated, “O people, I have been appointed over you, though I am not the best among you. If I do well, then help me; and if I act wrongly, then correct me. Truthfulness is synonymous with fulfilling the trust, and lying is equivalent to treachery” (para. 3).

Conclusion

This paper highlights the tension I encountered by being simultaneously an insider and an outsider while trying to gain participants, using a qualitative research methodology in trying to answer the research question. Using the insider/outsider perspective allowed reflexivity to constantly be kept in mind. This process required me to critically reflect on my own position as an assumed insider and how it differed from how the target population perceived me. I am an insider in the sense that I am Muslim and male, hence I have similar characteristics to those of Muslim religious leaders. I thought being Muslim and male made me more of an insider, and that this would make it easier to reach participants. However, owing to lack of trust between some religious organisations and the academy, I realised I was more of an outsider. I am an outsider because I am an academic. I find myself in an environment where knowledge production is referred to as secular knowledge by some religious leaders. I often feel that the term “secular knowledge” is used by some in the Muslim community to disregard knowledge production produced within the academy. This is rather disheartening as the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated that “the ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr” (Morse, 2015, p. 1). As a Muslim who navigates the academy as well as Muslim society, my ethical position is that I, as a knowledge producer, look to produce knowledge which is truthful to the best of my ability.

From the research I conducted with the participants who agreed to take part in the research, I think some of them, like me are trying to use their knowledge to create a better society by dealing with a sensitive issue such as domestic violence. All of them agreed that domestic violence is a serious issue in the Muslim community. Given the limited resources at their disposal, from what I noticed, some of them are trying their best to deal with a sensitive issue. However antagonistic judgements have been passed on them without looking at the position from which they are coming. As one participant pointed out, they are painted negatively despite spending an onerous amount of time trying to solve a marital dispute.

The question comes to mind is that when we as academics label them negatively, are we not engaging in the same process as the organisation did with myself? Just the way I was treated as an outsider, it seems like we as academics are also treating them as outsiders when we use negative jargon to describe how religious leaders deal with the issue of domestic violence in South Africa. As a result, this unfortunate divide exists between civic organisations and the academy. It is important for us as academics to put ourselves in the positions of religious leaders to understand their views.

Some of my findings show that some of them are taking positive stances such as agreeing with Muslim personal law, yet literature shows that they are painted negatively within their own circles when they do so (Suleman, 2019). They find themselves being placed in outsider positions by different constituencies. Perhaps when they find themselves in these positions, some of them cannot trust an individual like myself who represents one of these constituencies (the academy).

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