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## Sexuality Research During a National Lockdown: Reflexive Notes and Lessons from my Ph.D. Fieldwork

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges for qualitative researchers since many countries had to implement lockdown policies to control the spread of the virus. Within the South African context, research on sexual minority identities and experiences is automatically sensitive and risky given the extent of intolerance and high regard for heteronormative ideologies and beliefs that continually exclude sexual minorities from the “normal.” The sensitivity is intensified during a national lockdown since there is an excessive reliance on digital public spaces to recruit participants and conduct interviews. Based on the experience of Ph.D. fieldwork, this paper pays attention to a sexuality researcher’s experience of conducting research on gay men’s experiences in the South African military and police services during a national lockdown. Particular attention is given to the dilemmas posed by the government’s restriction on physical movement and reliance on digital spaces, particularly social media to identify gay men who work in the two organizations and form virtual relationships of mutual trust. Ultimately, this paper holds that reflexivity is critical to feminist research on vulnerable sexual minorities when the relationships between the researcher and the researched are established and maintained through digital platforms. While digital spaces offer opportunities to reach vulnerable populations, they present some challenges that may compromise the credibility of the study if not identified by the researcher.

### Keywords

positionality, reflexivity, COVID-19, national lockdown, sexuality research, social media, rapport, black gay men, South Africa

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### Acknowledgements

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# **Sexuality Research During a National Lockdown: Reflexive Notes and Lessons from my Ph.D. Fieldwork**

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The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges for qualitative researchers since many countries had to implement lockdown policies to control the spread of the virus. Within the South African context, research on sexual minority identities and experiences is automatically sensitive and risky given the extent of intolerance and high regard for heteronormative ideologies and beliefs that continually exclude sexual minorities from the “normal.” The sensitivity is intensified during a national lockdown since there is an excessive reliance on digital public spaces to recruit participants and conduct interviews. Based on the experience of Ph.D. fieldwork, this paper pays attention to a sexuality researcher’s experience of conducting research on gay men’s experiences in the South African military and police services during a national lockdown. Particular attention is given to the dilemmas posed by the government’s restriction on physical movement and reliance on digital spaces, particularly social media to identify gay men who work in the two organizations and form virtual relationships of mutual trust. Ultimately, this paper holds that reflexivity is critical to feminist research on vulnerable sexual minorities when the relationships between the researcher and the researched are established and maintained through digital platforms. While digital spaces offer opportunities to reach vulnerable populations, they present some challenges that may compromise the credibility of the study if not identified by the researcher.

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## **Introduction**

I was planning to submit my Ph.D. research proposal to my faculty’s higher degrees committee when my supervisors advised me that I could no longer use the traditional face-to-face interviews due to the national lockdown implemented by the South African government in 2020 to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus. As Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman (2020) argue, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing mandates across the world restricted traditional face-to-face research, demanding that qualitative researchers adjust the data collection tools and rely on technological avenues to conduct their fieldwork. As it became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic would continue for several months, researchers were under pressure to adjust their research designs and turn to digital spaces for their fieldwork (Cesário & Nisi, 2021). It was almost a year since South Africa had been on lockdown, and with the various lockdown stages that slowly paved the way for physical contact, I assumed I would be allowed to conduct face-to-face interviews for my study if I adhered to the government’s rules to maintain physical distance and wear a mask when interacting with people. The university was taking caution, and all students were only allowed to conduct their interviews telephonically or virtually through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Immediately, I was

concerned because of the sensitive nature of my research. I was conducting a study on the experiences of Black gay men who work in the heteronormative male-dominated South African military and police services. Additionally, the country was experiencing a stressful and uncertain period since the COVID-19 virus was spreading fast, and numbers of infections and deaths were increasing every day.

Access was already a dilemma considering the widespread discrimination against gay people in South Africa and the history of intolerance and exclusion of gay people in the South African military and police services (Brown, 2014; Francis, 2017; Mankayi, 2011; Reygan & Lynette, 2014; Sithole 2015; Tshisa & van der Walt, 2021; Van Zyl et al., 1999). Previous experience with researching a marginalized sexual minority taught me that approaching and getting participants to trust the researcher through social media platforms can be extremely difficult and result in many rejections. The restrictions on physical contact added to my dilemma as I realized that I now had to rely on digital devices and virtual platforms to develop rapport and build relationships with the participants. This meant that the participants had to share personal aspects of their lives over the telephone with a stranger they had never met and trust that their information would not be compromised. I was concerned about how I would develop rapport through digital spaces, get the participants interested in the study, and manage my relationships with them virtually.

In my experience with my Master's research, I learned to question my subjectivities in the research process and identify biases that may impact how I interpret and engage with the participants' narratives. In my Ph.D. research, I encountered some struggles with the power differential between the participants and myself and continually had to employ reflexivity to question some of the decisions I made in conducting the research. I decided to approach the research with caution since I was planning to recruit participants through social media, which may be considered an unsafe space. Additionally, I decided to devise strategies that would allow me to develop rapport on social media platforms and create relationships of mutual trust to allow for successful telephonic interviews. The study was approved after I demonstrated in my research proposal that appropriate measures would be taken to protect the participants and ensure ethical practices irrespective of recruitment and interviews taking place on technological platforms. In this paper, I document my experience of recruiting participants and collecting qualitative data through digital platforms, developing rapport through social media, managing virtual relationships with the participants, and engaging with my subjectivities and positionality throughout the research. Through experience and extensive reading of literature, I went into the research aware of the intricacies of using digital platforms to recruit participants and conduct interviews; however, I could not anticipate some of the impacts that using digital platforms would have on my relationships with the participants and the broader study. I employed reflexivity as a research tool to reflect on my values, beliefs, and personal biases and engage on their positive and negative impacts on my research. Conducting research on a vulnerable sexual minority during a national lockdown due to a pandemic can be stressful, and it is through reflexivity that I was able to manage and control the impact of some of the dilemmas I encountered in the research as I was mindful of who I am to the research and the participants.

My positionality was important, especially considering my deeply held desire to disrupt heteronormativity in the South African military and police services and to *visibilize* sexual minority identities in male-dominated heteronormative workplaces. Thus, in this paper, I seek to provide a reflexive account of my experience as a sexuality researcher and unearth some of the complexities that come with conducting Ph.D. research through digital platforms on a sensitive topic of sexuality in heteronormative male-dominated workplaces during a national lockdown in South Africa. Limited South African literature has focused on sexuality researchers' experiences of conducting research on sexual minority individuals during a

national lockdown due to a pandemic. This paper contributes by further considering the challenges and dilemmas that a sexuality Ph.D. student can encounter in conducting fieldwork during a national lockdown in digital spaces.

### **Producing Feminist Knowledge: My Ph.D. Study on Black Gay Soldiers and Police Officers' Experiences**

My Ph.D. research was focused on Black gay men's experiences of constructing and negotiating their identities in traditionally male-dominated workplaces. The study sought to unpack how heteronormativity in the South African military and police services informed the construction and negotiation of Black gay male identities. Despite South Africa's legal transformation that recognizes the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and other LGBTIQ+ people, the prevalent heteronormativity continues to foster intolerance and exclude sexual minorities in various social spaces (Brown, 2014; Francis, 2017; Langa, 2020; Maake et al., 2023; Matebeni, 2018; Tebelo & Odeku, 2014; Tshisa & van der Walt, 2021). Due to the sensitivity of the topic under study, I had to be mindful of my positionality and interrogate my subjectivities throughout the research process. I was not only coming into the field as a researcher but as a Black gay man passionate about dismantling heteronormative forces in workplaces and contributing to the creation of inclusive and conducive working environments for sexual minorities. I had chosen the South African police and military services because the two organizations have been rendered heterosexual, with no challenge to the heteronormative male occupational culture.

Considering the aim of my Ph.D. study to unearth the complex realities of constructing and negotiating Black gay identities in workplaces that are known to exclude gay men, I employed the feminist standpoint epistemology to bring to the forefront the voices of gay men in the South African military and police services. A feminist standpoint epistemology affords an epistemic privilege to the standpoint of women and other marginalized groups. This epistemology acknowledges that women and other marginalized groups are positioned in different contexts, and subsequently, their experiences of oppression are constructed differently. While feminist research is famous for *visibilizing* women and advocating for their emancipation, Harding (1991) argues that women should not be the only producers of feminist knowledge and holds that men who occupy oppressed positions also need to understand themselves and contribute to an understanding of their experiences from a feminist viewpoint. Consequently, Black gay men are in oppressed positions in various spaces because knowledge and dominant understandings of sexual identities and masculinity are based on heterosexual men's experiences, continually silencing men who do not conform to heteronormative gender expectations. It was my understanding that Black gay men are better at understanding heteronormative social relations than heterosexual colleagues who are privileged since they possess a socially and culturally acceptable sexual identity and masculinity. This reality justified a need for a feminist standpoint epistemological approach to the experiences of Black gay male workers in traditionally male-dominated workplaces to challenge heteronormative barriers that silence gay men within these spaces. Thus, this epistemological approach was imperative to allow Black gay men's stories to be told from their standpoint.

Due to its nature of advocacy and liberation, the standpoint of feminist epistemology compels the researchers to be mindful of the authority and experience that they possess in the production of feminist knowledge (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999). My position as a Black gay sexuality researcher experienced in research about sexual minority individuals placed me at an advantage since the authority to analyze and develop meanings from the participants' narratives lay with me. As such, I had to be mindful of this authority to ensure that I would not report a biased account of the participants' realities since that could marginalize them further.

Hence, reflexivity was necessary to ensure that I engaged with my position in the research, considered my values and biases, and interrogated my subjective understanding and interpretations of the participants' narratives. I grapple with these issues in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Ultimately, the study sample consisted of 24 self-identifying Black gay males who have undergone training in the South African military and police services and are currently employed by the organizations. However, the paper focuses on 19 interviews that were conducted in the first phase of data collection during the national lockdown. The additional five interviews were conducted after the national lockdown was lifted. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants telephonically, and none were conducted physically. The participants shared their experiences of identifying as Black gay males in heteronormative workplaces and navigating the heterosexual male occupational culture that has, for many years, privileged heterosexual men while marginalizing gay men. Conflicts arose between my understanding and the participants' understanding of specific issues, which called for an evaluation of my positionality versus the aims of the research. I relied on my Master's experience in dealing with sexual minorities to reduce the impact of some of the dilemmas I had encountered previously. While there were dilemmas that I was encountering for the first time, some of the lessons from my Master's research impacted this study positively, as I avoided issues that could have hindered the success of the research.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity in Qualitative Feminist Research**

Feminist research is about emancipating the marginalized, and it is the responsibility of a feminist qualitative researcher to ensure that they are not at the center of the research and end up dominating the participants' voices. Feminist researchers are part of the social world they are studying, and they come into the research with their inherited biases, beliefs, and personal experiences that, if not acknowledged and guarded, may impinge on the participants' narratives (Maake, 2021; Van Stapele, 2014). Hence in this paper, I aim to share my experience of reflexivity, paying particular attention to how it assisted in interrogating my position and building rapport with the participants throughout my fieldwork. As a research tool, reflexivity helps the researcher understand their position in the study, interrogate their relationships with the participants and the research study, and reduce the power differentials between the researcher and the researched (DeShong, 2013; Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity is a conscious process of unmasking hidden conflicts informed by preconceived assumptions, ideas, and beliefs to emancipate the thinking and action of the researcher, participants, reality, and context (Hibbert, 2013). As such, being reflexive entails the researcher's conscious awareness of differences in the participants' perceptions, assumptions, and ideas from their assumptions and beliefs, with the intention of developing a well-rounded view or interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Kalu, 2019.). Reflexivity informs the researcher's positionality since it calls for an explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment by the researcher on their perceptions and positions, paying particular attention to how this might, may, or have directly or indirectly informed the design, execution, and interpretation of the research findings (May & Perry, 2017).

Van Stapele (2014) argues that a researcher's recognition and precise analysis of the contextual intersecting relationships between themselves and the participants increases the credibility of the study's findings and produces in-depth understandings of the work. Similarly, Kalu (2019) argues that the core aspect of reflexivity is that it ensures that the researcher clearly captures the participants' experiences and creates knowledge that is trustworthy, reflects, and is in accordance with the ideas and rights of the participants who were interviewed. Hence, the need to employ reflexivity to present participants' narratives from their perspective and ensure

rigor and quality in the research (Ali, 2015; Dogson, 2019). Maake (2021) argues that reflexivity is a valuable tool in research that focuses on the experiences of marginalized sexual minorities in heteronormative contexts, particularly when the researcher is connected to the participants, either through experience or similar identity markers.

As a feminist qualitative researcher, I acknowledged that my positionality would impact the research processes, the data analysis, and the relationships with the participants. Holmes (2020) argues that positionality is essential to qualitative research as it acknowledges and recognizes that researchers do not exist in isolation, but are a part of the social world they are researching and that this world has already been interpreted and given meaning by existing social actors. Positionality entails that the social-historical-political location of the researcher informs their orientations and that they are not separate from the processes that they research and seek to comprehend (Malterud, 2001.) Thus, it is imperative for new researchers to acknowledge that their positionality is unique to them and that it can have an impact on all aspects and stages of the research process (Holmes, 2020). Additionally, Foote and Bartell (2011) posit that the positionality that the researcher brings to their work and personal experiences that shaped the positionality may have an unavoidable influence on what they bring to their research encounters, their choice of research processes, and how they interpret the outcomes. I shared similar identities (sex, gender, sexual, and racial identities) and experiences with the participants, but I understood that there were differences that distinguish them from me, such as their occupations, geographical locations, level of education, and social backgrounds. I have never worked in a male-dominated context, and our social backgrounds differed, and this informed the different degrees to which we experienced oppression and privilege based on our various intersecting identities.

My knowledge of gay men's experiences in the South African military and police services was generated through a critical reading of literature, and I could not claim to understand the lived realities of working in this space as a gay person post-1994. I hold a Master's degree, and I was coming into the research with the knowledge I gained over the years on sexual identities and heteronormative spaces. While I have experienced some discrimination based on my sexual identity, I acknowledged the privilege that comes with being a sexuality researcher and being employed in an academic space where I am afforded the agency to speak openly about sexual identity issues and actively challenge heteronormative beliefs. The participants worked in male-dominated organizations, where heteronormative ideals and values take center stage, and they did not have the privileges I had in my workplace.

In the subsequent sections, I consider my positionality as a self-identifying Black gay male researcher and sexuality student in a study on a sensitive topic that affected me personally and professionally. I engage with some of the strategies I employed to identify and approach participants on social media platforms and illuminate how power differentials were managed in this process. Furthermore, I grapple with challenges I encountered in establishing and managing online relationships of mutual trust and highlight how my positionality impacted my decision under challenging situations. It was in the best interest of my study that I identify and engage with my subjectivities during data collection, and I also bring to discussion how my subjective understandings of the participants' experiences led me to question the participants' stories and almost further my narrative.

### **Reflexive Note One:**

#### **Establishing Rapport During Participant Recruitment on Social Media**

Darko et al. (2022) defines social media as “a group of internet-based communication services through which users create and participate in web-based exchange, contribute user-created content such as videos, or join web-based communities to share information and ideas”

(p. 2). As such, social media is a crucial platform for researchers to recruit and connect with potential participants by advertising their research and collaborating with social media communities (King et al., 2014). Various research studies have demonstrated that social media can help identify and recruit participants who are difficult to reach (Gelinas et al., 2017; Seltzer et al., 2014; Sikkens et al., 2017); however, there is limited knowledge on using social media platforms to identify and recruit gay participants who work in heteronormative South African male-dominated workplaces. In my Master's research on gay men's experiences in the South African mining industry, I learned the importance of the researcher's approach when recruiting potential participants on social media platforms (see Maake, 2021). Therefore, I was immediately aware that I had to think critically about the approach I would take in my Ph.D. research to develop trust between myself and the participants and avoid rejections. Rejections were inevitable considering the study's sensitivity; however, I was aware that some rejections might be avoided if I adopted a sensitive approach that convinced the participants that they were safe and would not be exposed to any harm. I was aware that my position as a researcher afforded me a certain amount of power, and I consciously engaged in processes of reducing power differentials between the participants and myself by developing relationships of mutual trust and making the participants aware that their contribution to the study was valuable and beneficial.

When I approached participants on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), I was aware that social media is not a safe space, and from previous experience, I learned that an approach that is not thought through might result in rejections. I was particularly invested in developing strategies that would allow me to develop rapport which based on previous experience, I knew was going to be a challenge. As Larivière, Crough, and Eastwood (2022) posit, curating rapport in digital spaces may be a dilemma since the common verbal elements of rapport building including eye contact, posture mirroring, physical proximity, or touch such as shaking hands are impossible to replicate in digital settings. In my attempts to build rapport, I first engaged with participants publicly on their social media timelines based on what they posted or shared so that they were not alarmed when I suddenly sent them private inbox messages. The interactions on the Facebook and Twitter timelines were not mainly about the study but were based on responses to anything that the participants or I shared. To stimulate engagement with the study, I started sharing information about my research, and people, even those who were not potential participants, would engage with me on my research and share the posts to their timelines. It was easier to recruit participants who contacted me, expressing interest in participating in the study. When it came to participants I had to approach directly, it was more challenging since I had to navigate the space with care and ensure that they did not view me as an intruder. Some participants did not engage with my social media posts, but I could gather that they may fit the selection criteria.

Eventually, when I reached out to the participants via their social media inbox, I started the conversations with small talk, particularly relating to something they shared on their social media timeline, which could be a picture or just a text about their day. I commented on pictures that the potential participants shared on their timelines and offered my thoughts on some of the issues that they raised. For example, one participant shared a picture in which he was wearing a colourful t-shirt that I liked, and my first comment was "I like your t-shirt, where did you buy it?" In another instance, a participant shared a post in which he raised concerns about gay activists who receive government funding to assist the LGBTIQ+ community but use the funds for their own benefit. I asked the participant to share more information about the issue and we continued to engage on the topic. I would keep the conversations going until I noticed that the participant was getting comfortable engaging with me. I would then indirectly bring up information related to my research and ask them what they thought of it, and they would share their thoughts. The problem with engaging on issues other than my research and prolonging



the conversations was that some people assumed that I was sexually attracted to them because I was expressing interest in them. They would try to flirt with me, and when I mentioned my research, some immediately lost interest in the chats and rejected my requests. Interestingly, most of the people I approached were willing to participate in the research. An advantage of engaging with participants over time on issues related to my research was that it allowed me to identify their sexual identities, as some of them would use phrases such as “as a gay man” or “being gay in the police” when sharing their thoughts. I then sent them a text requesting that they participate in my study. The text read:

I could not help but notice you work for the \*SAPS/SANDF. I am doing research for my Ph.D. on Black gay men who work in the SAPS/SANDF. I’m just interested in hearing about their experiences of training and working for the organization. I think my study would benefit a lot from your insights. Would you be willing to have a chat with me about that? Our conversations will be confidential and anonymous. I’d honestly appreciate it if we could have a chat.

I refrained from using the word, “interview,” because I was aware that the term might appear formal to some people. I learned this from previous experience with my Master’s research in which I sent formal texts using words such as “interview” and “participate” and failed to recruit participants through social media. Words such as “chat” and “conversations” were less formal, more appealing, and relevant, particularly in a social media space, resulting in most participants agreeing to participate. This exercise did not only secure participants for my research, but it was useful to develop rapport and reduce the power differentials because the participants did not view me as a researcher but as a fellow gay person interested in their stories. The participants used mostly colloquial language when they communicated with me, shared jokes and personal experiences that were outside the scope of my research. In some instances, they would respond with assumptions that I know what they are going through as a fellow gay man, and this came out often when they spoke about childhood experiences and navigating discrimination in various heteronormative spaces. These actions convinced me that they saw me as an insider rather than an outsider, since the emphasis was not placed on my researcher position but my position as a Black gay man. Reducing power differentials further enabled me to develop virtual relationships of mutual trust between the participants and myself and to emphasise the significant contribution that they were making to the research, fostering a heightened awareness of the value of their participation.

Language matters when recruiting and building rapport with potential participants for a sensitive study in digital spaces during a national lockdown, and the researcher must interact in a language that will not unsettle the participants. As novice researchers, we are often consumed in academic jargon and may use this when communicating with potential participants. Using this formal academic language on digital spaces might put participants off since these are public and informal social spaces that offer limited anonymity. Academic jargon is irrelevant in digital platforms and may hinder access and building rapport without the researcher realizing it. As such, the researcher must be mindful of how they express their research on digital platforms. I failed to recruit social media participants in my Master’s research partly due to the failure to build rapport with potential participants, and this changed in my Ph.D. research, where I incited willingness from the participants to engage with my research by communicating in a language relevant to these spaces. This rapport building and recruitment strategy was particularly relevant considering that the country was on national

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\* SAPS is an acronym for South African Police Services and SANDF for South African National Defense Force.

lockdown, and digital spaces were the only place where I could recruit participants, with no other options since we were not permitted to use traditional face-to-face platforms.

### **Reflexive Note Two: Sexuality as a Disruption to Virtual Participant Recruitment**

Kasper and Landolt (2014) argue that sexuality in fieldwork may unsettle the relationships between the researchers and participants, calling for a renegotiation of positions throughout the research process. The dynamics of positionalities in the research encounter can introduce uncertainty, especially in how participants perceive the researcher's role. In a sexualized research context, the researcher may find reluctance or discomfort in occupying the position presented to them (Diprose et al., 2013). Being a single Black gay man and in a similar age group as the participants, I was aware that sexual attraction might develop between myself and the participants. The difference was that, on the one hand, as a researcher, I was fully knowledgeable of the ethical standards that I had to uphold in my research, and I knew sexual relations between myself and the participants were strictly prohibited. On the other hand, the participants were unaware of these ethical standards and sometimes crossed the line, leaving the onus on me to manage the professionalism in our relationships. While employing a rhetorical approach to participant recruitment was beneficial to building rapport and securing participation, it came with some challenges since to some participants I was a fellow gay men interested in having "chats" with them, and that signalled an interest in them. Although I did not meet with the participants physically, they had access to my social media profiles, where I share pictures of myself, and they were aware of my sexual identity based on the information shared on my social media. Having taken an informal approach to interactions with participants came with some challenges in my relationships with them since the lines became blurry at some points, requiring some intervention. Since the participants hardly viewed me as a researcher, there were some discrepancies in our understandings of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. I came across participants who thought it was acceptable to flirt with me and ask personal questions such as my relationship status and sexual preferences. These questions and sexual advances posed a dilemma because I desperately needed the participants for my study, but I was cognisant of the ethical standards of research.

Throughout my growth in the academic space, I committed to professional work ethics and did not intend to pursue or encourage sexual interactions with the participants. I was aware that having sexual engagements with the participants would affect the credibility and reliability of the study since participation would not be considered voluntary but encouraged or bought. As a responsible researcher, it was important that I uphold the integrity of the study and the ethical principles of respect, trust, and honesty. However, I was concerned that I might lose the participants if I did not entertain their advances or questions that I considered intrusive. Although I anticipated some of these reactions from the participants, I was not prepared to deal with them, and I had to take a step back and think about how I would approach this problem. While I could easily entertain the participants and flirt with them so that they would participate in the research, I was not comfortable with the idea because it would be misleading and could lead to potentially unnecessary conflicts between myself and them. Apart from my role as a researcher, I personally do not believe in deceiving people for my benefit because I do not appreciate being deceived. As such, I had to be honest and find a solution that would benefit my research without misleading the participants. I decided to not flirt back and answer personal questions I was only comfortable with, such as my relationship status. I knew that my reaction could put off some participants and lead to them withholding participation, but this was a risk I was willing to take since I could not compromise my commitment to ethical research and personal beliefs about honesty, and consequently, the credibility of my research. Interestingly, most participants who were flirting would realize that I was not reciprocating, and they would

stop without me having to ask them. That brought relief because I could maintain good relationships with the participants and secure the credibility and trustworthiness of my study.

Unfortunately, one participant persisted with the flirting, and I had to confront the matter. He appeared to be more interested in me personally, than in my research, and I was uncomfortable with that situation. The participant would comment on my looks and use terms such as “sexy,” “handsome,” and “baby” when referring to me. Additionally, he consistently insisted that we should meet in person for the interview and not do it telephonically, and even after explaining that we could not do that due to the government’s restrictions on physical contact, he persisted. I was unsettled by this persistence and the flirting. However, I had never encountered such an issue, and I needed someone with experience to advise me on an approach I could take. While I was frustrated by the participant’s persisting sexual advances, I did not want to respond in an aggressive tone as I believed that would be unprofessional. I spoke to my Ph.D. supervisor, who guided me on approaching the matter professionally. As a cis heterosexual woman, my supervisor conducted extensive research on sexuality and interacted with heterosexual men in her research. From my previous interactions with her, I learned that she came across similar instances. As such, I believed she could give me the best advice on how to proceed with the issue. After consultation with my supervisor, I returned to the participant and expressed my concerns about how they communicated with me. I explained to the participant that his flirting made me uncomfortable, and because of that, I could not continue interacting with him further. The participant completely denied everything, arguing that I was making an issue out of nothing. I did not wish to continue with the discussion as I was already emotionally affected and discontinued communication with him.

A few weeks later, the participant contacted me, acknowledged their unacceptable behavior, and sincerely apologized for it. He asked that we continue with the interview as he would like to tell his story. As a feminist researcher, I understand the importance of giving a voice to those who are silenced, and I could not let my emotions deny the participant the opportunity to tell his story. Due to the sincerity of the apology, I accepted and decided to conduct the interview with the participant. However, I had to first process my perceptions of the participant’s personality based on our previous interactions to avoid imposing biased projections on his narratives. I realized that the participant acted on his sexual attraction towards me without considering its implications on myself, the research, and our relationship. I believed it would be unfair to judge his entire personality based on that incident and deny his participation in my research. His apology indicated that he thought critically about what had transpired and realized its implications; hence he decided to take responsibility for the incident and apologized without any reservations. The interview lasted for almost two hours, with the participant sharing his interesting experiences and making a valuable contribution to the research. This was an experience that made me aware that relationships between the researcher and the researched are not always going to be smooth, and the researcher has the liberty to communicate with the participants when they are uncomfortable, as much as participants are encouraged to let the researcher know when they feel uncomfortable at any point in the research. I learned that there is nothing wrong with developing informal relationships that do not emphasize the status of the researcher, in-fact it can be beneficial to the study, but at the same time, it is imperative to be alert and notice when boundaries are being crossed because it can compromise the relationship and affect the credibility of the research if not guarded against.

### **Reflexive Note Three: Building Relationships of Mutual Trust and Confronting my Subjectivities During In-Depth Telephonic Interviews**

Conducting interviews telephonically comes with inevitable challenges, including establishing rapport and the loss of contextual data (Drabble et al., 2016). Having established some rapport on social media, I had already thought about how to maintain the rapport throughout the data collection process. The fact that the interviews covered very personal aspects of the participants' lives and that they were recorded could unsettle them. I, therefore, had to be mindful of how I handled the interviews and communicated with the participants over the phone. My concern with maintaining rapport guided my approach to the interviews and the strategies I employed to navigate the digital spaces in which the interviews were conducted.

In preparing for the interviews, I was careful not to structure them in a manner that intimidated or unsettled the participants, particularly since they were telephonic. I kept the interviews informal so that they reflected everyday conversations and did not emphasize my role as a researcher. While I used an interview guide that steered the direction of the interviews, I allowed participants the flexibility to share their stories as they saw fit. The flexibility of the interviews opened space for exploring some of the issues I had never thought about. For example, in one interview, while discussing a participant's relationships with heterosexual men during training, the participant mentioned his struggles with the showers, arguing that they were uncomfortable heteronormative spaces. From this mention of the showers, I probed for more information, and it became an interesting space for me to explore and became part of my questions when I engaged with other participants. This is an example of the shared power in my relationships with the participants, where I allowed space for participants to determine the direction of the interviews. The reduced power differentials ensured that the research, first and foremost, represented the realities of the participants, even issues that I did not think about interrogating initially.

During the interviews, I identified a critical incident where my subjectivities almost informed my wrong judgment of a participant's narrative, and reflexivity was efficient in helping me to identify my incorrect interpretation of what the participant was expressing. After conducting two interviews with police officers who spoke of the discrimination against gay employees in the South African police, I interviewed a soldier who was employed in the military's navy division, and he informed me that he had never experienced discrimination in his workplace. I found this unbelievable. I probed and asked the participant to explain further, and he maintained his stance that it had never happened to him and that he had never witnessed it being done to another employee. After completing the interview, I was in disbelief and thought of arranging another interview with him to find something that would highlight some form of discrimination. Following this interview, I interviewed two more soldiers and another police officer. The two soldiers described their experiences in the military as horrible, an experience they never wish to encounter again. The police officer reiterated that the police embodied heteronormative ideologies and the incidences of discrimination they cited. Interestingly, I found their responses acceptable and did not question their validity.

It was after my fifth interview when I interviewed one more soldier that I had to interrogate my thoughts on the previous soldier's narrative. In the interview with the sixth participant, he also informed me that he is openly gay at work, and although he experienced some discrimination, it was dealt with by the authorities. He explained that in an instance where an instructor discriminated against him, the case reached higher authorities, and the instructor was disciplined. When I reflected on my reaction to the first military participant's response, I realized I was not satisfied because the participant was not telling me what I thought I would find. Drapeau (2002) argues that qualitative researchers must understand and own their

subjectivities because we may find nothing more than what we are specifically looking for, sometimes without even knowing it. Before my interviews, I engaged with literature on the South African military, which proved that gay people were ill-treated in the organization, and I was convinced that all participants would tell me about negative experiences only. It dawned on me that my disbelief in what the participant was telling me was informed by my subjective perspective that all gay men in the military experienced discrimination based on their sexual identity. I then realized that a second interview was unnecessary since I would only be going into it with the intention of confirming my preconceived ideas about gay men in the military. In my subsequent interviews, I became aware that while there might be similarities in the participants' experiences, there are also differences that are informed by their different contexts, geographical locations, ranks, and how they enact their masculinity, and this became a point of analysis for my study. There was strength in different perspectives on the same organizations, which furthered the intersectional lens that the research adopted.

### **Conclusion**

In line with Lobe et al. (2020) conducting research on a sensitive topic like sexuality and accessing participants during a national lockdown through digital spaces demanded substantial efforts in building rapport and formulating strategies that would capture the participants' interest in my Ph.D. study. Recruiting participants in digital spaces posed challenges during my Master's research, and my apprehension heightened upon learning that for my Ph.D., I could not actively seek participants or engage with them in person. The resultant ban on physical interaction following the national lockdown meant I had to rely significantly on digital spaces to identify participants and conduct interviews for my Ph.D. research. Doing fieldwork during this period required extensive care since the research was not only being conducted on a sensitive topic but was also taking place during a stressful and uncertain time when people were particularly concerned about the COVID-19 epidemic that was threatening lives.

It was, therefore, imperative to respect the participants' time and be sensitive to their willingness to contribute to a study on their experiences of sexual identity construction and negotiation in traditionally male-dominated workplaces during a national lockdown era that was implemented as a result of a life-threatening pandemic. Establishing a strong rapport was crucial during the entire fieldwork period since I needed to reassure participants that, even though our interactions were digital and lacked face-to-face encounters, they could have confidence in my commitment to safeguarding their information and identities. Hence, building rapport could not be hastened or overlooked; it demanded a sustained and thoughtful approach, which made it a continuous reflexive process.

As a feminist sexuality researcher, it is crucial to be aware of the purpose of conducting research, which is often to liberate sexual minority identities from the confines of heteronormativity. This should drive the approach you take in conducting your fieldwork on digital spaces to ensure that the participants' experiences take centre stage and that you do not allow your personal beliefs and experiences to hinder you from telling the participants' stories. When researching sexual minority experiences during a national lockdown, we should be cautious in how we approach digital spaces and remain aware that these spaces are public and unsafe. As such, conducting fieldwork in these spaces requires strict attention to rapport building and adherence to ethical standards. Since we are unable to see the participants in physical settings during a national lockdown, meaning we lose most of the contextual data, including nonverbal cues and reactions to the questions we ask, we should pay particular attention to our subjectivities because if we lose focus on the assumptions that emanate from our subjective positions, they may lead us to ignore even the verbal data that contradicts what

we know or expect to find. Ignoring this data does not only take away the participants' agency since we end up telling our own stories of them and silencing their voices, but it also undermines the efforts and time they invested in contributing to the study. Through reflexivity, I was able to identify the preconceived assumptions that led me to question the participant's positive experiences in a heteronormative organization. The outcome of my reflexive process indicates the power of critical reflexivity in feminist qualitative research on the experiences of gay people conducted during uncertain times presented by the national lockdown. Misinterpreting the participants' experiences in this kind of research silences them and marginalizes them further instead of liberating them from heteronormative ideologies that suppress them, defeating the entire purpose of feminist epistemologies. Therefore, maintaining a critical awareness of the implications of a national lockdown on sexuality research conducted through digital spaces is essential for reflexivity. This awareness plays a pivotal role in guiding the researcher's approach to potential participants and the establishment of virtual relationships built on mutual trust.

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