

“Researching Young Masculinities: Theorizing Processes of Identification in the Research Setting”

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Abstract. In this article, I examine my experiences in researching young boys’ identities in a school setting. In the first part of this paper, it is asserted that modernist conceptions of the subject may not be suited for understanding social psychological processes of gender identification. In the second part of this paper, I employ a feminist perspective and a poststructuralist perspective as vantage points to understand my experiences in relation to various actors in the school setting. I conclude by arguing that the broad principles of poststructuralism and feminism is useful for identity related research because it deploys a reflexivity that allows the researcher to examine the researcher/researched as localized processes of identity formation.

Keywords: masculinity, feminism, post structuralism, schools, HIV/AIDS, sexuality

1. Introduction

The process of exploring identity requires one to reflect on how one engages with the research process and the implications of this process in terms of how one theorises in relation to the identity making process. As Gill (1995) asserts, reflexivity “...is an essential part of the theoretical position that I am proposing, which requires analysts to make explicit the position from which they are theorizing, and to reflect critically upon their own role- not simply becoming the ‘certified deconstructors’ of other people’s discourse” [1:79]. In this regard, this paper provides a discussion of my experiences of researching boys’ identities in relation to heterosexual experiences and HIV/AIDS in a school setting. My experiences when working with boys is used as a vantage point to document some of my constructions of the numerous actors (learners, teachers, including myself, an Indian¹ educated male) during my field work which spanned a period of seven months in 2009 [2]. In this sense my attempt to document this process of change or what Merten’s (1998) refers to as ‘progressive subjectivity’ is achieved in the following manner [3]. In the first part of this paper, I discuss my initial troublings with theorising boy’s behaviour in terms of the modernist version of the subject (the self-contained and passive information processor). In the second part of this paper, I argue from a feminist perspective and a poststructuralist perspective for power as a polyvalent concept in the identity making process. In this regard, the feminist research process has been concerned itself with destabilizing dominant power relations inherent in the traditional approach of researcher/scientist as ‘expert’ and research participants as ‘passive’ and lacking agency.

2. A feminist research perspective

The notion of reflexivity is central to the imagination of qualitative researchers. Morawski (1990), a feminist theorist, asserts “reflexivity is the process and results of being both the subjects and objects in the human research” [4:616]. A central concern during this early inquiry phase was to begin to grapple with the complexity of how young people negotiate sexual relationships and sexual practice. This issue is an important area of research if we are to begin to understand why the HIV/AIDS epidemic is so rampant in our

¹ I use the term Indian and Black to refer to ‘race’ categories which originated in the Apartheid era. These terms are still used, in a paradoxical manner, in post-apartheid South Africa as a basis for social redress.

part of the world. The information-processing approach (also referred to as Mentalism), “a position which holds that there are mental processes ‘behind’ what people say and do” [5:5], is a dominant approach to theorizing in health psychology (e.g., Theory of Reasoned Action [6]; Health Belief Model [7]). Durrheim (1997) asserts that there are two important assumptions related to this scientific package of empiricism within disciplines such as psychology which we need to question [8]. Firstly, it is assumed that knowledge can represent reality (here, the real observable ‘objects’ in the world are not behaviours, but mental operations); and secondly, psychologists believe they employ objective measures, and that their facts, based on observation, can map out the true picture of human psychology. The conventional paradigm was blinded to the gendering processes occurring in these peer group sessions. Allowing myself to foreground my emotions as part of the research process enabled me to deflate the tidy and objective processes of research and open up an alternate line of inquiry. Assumptions, which I began to question, revolved around the male-centred rational decision-making model, unitary subjectivity and conscious mechanisms related to the understanding of human behaviour. Poststructuralist and feminist writings spurred my interest on this path. Hollway (1989) argues that during her period of gathering material, she was looking for work, which mounted a solid critique of orthodox psychological methods [9]. In this regard, feminist poststructuralist theorizing has made significant contributions to problematizing the traditional research process which neglects the issue of reflexivity [9].

“What is feminist research?” The writings that define feminist research are dense; span multiple disciplines which are highly philosophical and inherently political. These divergent approaches are similar in their focus on the experience of women’s lives and the oppression of women in patriarchal culture, yet they are different in how they conceptualize that marginalization. While there is sufficiently more material at present in the form of the social constructionist and discursive traditions (see [10] for an overview), Morawski (1990) claims such a critique needs to be targeted at the normative constituents of knowledge generation [4]. She asserts that feminist scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated that how and what we come to know depends on *who* we are.-an explicit rejection of the Enlightenment conception of the rational/passive and a-historical knower. At least two strategies emerge from the reformulation of the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. Firstly, an understanding of the reflective, relational, and temporal consciousness of the knower and of the knower’s relation to what is to be known, suggests that there is no single identity of knowers. “Knowledge seeking can be seen as an activity undertaken by historical and fractured identities to recover what is latent or hidden from our known reality” [4:177]. Secondly, the recognition of fractured identities and non-autonomous knowers destabilizes the master discourse of ‘truth seeking’ and instead offers the possibility of a multifocal lens that enables the recognition of tensions and contradictions in the knowledge generational process. While being mindful of the dangers identified in the feminists’ debates about essentialism and difference, I was interested in the progressive potential of deconstructing male/men as a category. This is politically more important for men who have claimed an objective rationality than it is for women, who have been traditionally been denied their subject status. In the following section I draw on broad theoretical strand of feminism and poststructuralism to generate some insights regarding my experiences when working with boys in two schools located in a working class community of Phoenix, Durban, South Africa. More specifically, I provide a glimpse of my initial insights regarding the *performance* of multiple identities in the research context

3. Insights into the Identity Formation

3.1. Being Attentive to Hierarchical Relationships

Feminist perspectives, as Oakley (1988) and others have suggested, have been key in creating non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and participants [11]. In keeping with feminist tradition, I have accorded high status to the knowledge, understanding and feelings of the participants by privileging their ‘voices’ throughout the study. ‘Voice’ privileges experience over theory as a basis of our understanding, and rather than being sanctioned by others, its validity comes from the speaker. My conversations with learners were largely opportunistic. During my initial visits to the two schools where I was granted permission to interview learners, I introduced myself to classrooms of young learners and sat outside the classroom with boys, observed and listened to what they said. I roamed around the school playgrounds during breaks, noting how they congregated and what they were getting up to. For more focused

conversations, I found a vacant classroom close to the playground at each of the schools. This was convenient because it allowed me invite those boys who were eager to talk more about their heterosexual experiences for further conversation. Bhana (2003) asserts that “gender power relations inscribe the routines of everyday... schooling contexts and issues of masculinity and femininity arise from these relations [12:56]. My relations with young adults were inscribed with power. A range of discursively constructed subject positions police public spaces, such as the principal’s office, the classroom and the playground. My ability to relate to boys was governed within such spaces by the complexity of adult-child power relations. For example, like in Bhana’s (2003) study, in the playground, many young learners would approach me with complains regarding the behaviour of other children [12]. I was also questioned about who I thought were the ‘good’ boys and ‘bad’ boys on the playground. I felt constrained within the subject position of an ‘adult’ which, ironically, made me feel powerless most of the time.

3.2. School Boys Subject Positions

During this series of interviews with boys, I noted that they appeared to be very knowledgeable on the issue of HIV/AIDS. Learners were very eager to tell us how one can contract HIV and what one should do to protect oneself from getting the disease. Not surprisingly, such findings were already being evidenced in scientific literature, that is, youth, particularly male youth in South Africa, were described as being very knowledgeable on HIV/AIDS [13]. Boys in these discussions deliberately positioned themselves as knowledgeable on sexual matters, HIV/AIDS and ability to judge risky sexual partners. They spoke confidently about the risks of unprotected sex, blood contact as being an important transmission mechanism, and their strategies for negotiating safe (hetero)sexual encounters. In the extract below, a group of three boys, Rakesh, Adrian and Siphon talk about the risks of unprotected sex.

Rakesh: Hey! Everyone knows about AIDS.

Adrian: We are more aware of everything around us now

Rakesh: And you get it by sleeping around and not wearing a condom.

Adrian: Ja! We know, it’s ABC – abstain, be faithful, and use condoms.

In my group discussion with boys, we also talked about the possibility of them contracting HIV. For instance, in the extract below, two boys, Alan and Eric, in a group discussion of four boys, talk about the possibility of contracting HIV. The deliberate positioning of the “player” as ‘risky other’ (or ‘immoral other’) is centrally related to the underestimation of the ‘self’ as being vulnerable to contracting HIV. Typically, personal risk of contracting HIV is often underestimated.

Eric: And I will not be scared. I will not be uncomfortable because it is hardly possible for me to get AIDS, I mostly use condoms.

Interviewer: So, who do you think is likely to get AIDS?

Alan: Mostly the ‘players’, those that sleep around, with the prostitutes. (Other two respondents nod in agreement).

A key consideration during this phase of my inquiry was to ensure subject centredness and gendered sensitivity by positioning young boys at the heart of the research process. This entailed providing the interviewees with ample ‘space’ to talk as experts, as they constructed themselves and addressed specific issues concerning themselves and their relationships with others. For reasons such as these, I intended to view gender as performance and relational (e.g., [14], [15], [16]). This is not to say that boys create themselves in any way they wish. Rather, there are popular and culturally specific ways of positioning boys and men, which, for example, emphasise their toughness and propensity for ‘action’, whether it is harmless, responsible or disruptive. In the respect, Davies and Banks (1995) asserts that a purely qualitative approach enables researchers to engage – inter-subjectively and – dialogically – with their participants, in ways that would generate insights that are central to their construction of the subject’s worldview [17].

3.3. Foregrounding the Researchers’ Subjectivity

Feminist scholars have argued that feelings, like beliefs and values, also shape research and are a natural part of inquiry. The process of feminist research links emotion to the act of knowledge production ([18]; [19]). The experiences of the researcher are part of the reflexive process. As such, the reflexivity proposed is clearly recognizable as a *feminist* reflexivity that should be ‘acknowledged, revealed and labelled’ and that

the researcher is ‘*accountable* for his or her interpretations’ [20]. Foregrounding my subjectivity in this study allows me to reflect on my status as a middle-class Indian male doing research with young boys in a working-class community in Durban. Initially, I did not think too hard about what I was bringing with me to the research process. However, the specific strength of qualitative research, with its focus on located meanings, is that it facilitates the “development of substantive areas of concern and research questions in the ongoing design development of the research” [16:174]. I frequently recorded, in my research diary, my impressions of the school setting, my interactions with learners and my conversations with educators. In this way, I made my subjectivity central to the research process. I could not avoid how I felt, and I have no doubt that what I felt influenced the interpretation of the data. St Pierre (1997) calls this ‘emotional data’ [18]. The community of Phoenix, in which these two schools are situated, are different in their structural/social conditions in comparison with my usual social and living surroundings. It was in these contact zones that I was constituted and reconstituted, through particular subject positions in my interactions with learners and educators. ‘Race’ and class, as constructed under apartheid and deployed as a political, economic, and social system has informed and continues to inform many of my experiences as a South African [2]. It defines, to a large extent, where I live and where my research participants reside. While I conducted my research I lived in a middle class traditional White suburb close to the university within a reasonable commuting distance from the schools, where my research was conducted. Apartheid has perpetuated a social distance between people and, as a researcher, I was going into a vibrant working class community which was a familiar (historically Indian) yet an unfamiliar ‘new’ cultural zone for me. What I saw and experienced and later made sense of was the everyday power positioning in social contexts. In these schools dominated by tense and sometimes hostile relations between learners and educators, deciding which side to be on was a constant struggle. Given the sensitive climate of sexualized and moral panic, social research on the sexualities of young boys can be read through various positionings of researchers, school management, staff and boys.

3.4. Educators as Moral Authorities or Benevolent Carers

There are usually a number of agendas at play in the research arena. In my discussion with an educator confidant, it became clear to me, that while educators at one school was very positive towards outsiders doing “AIDS work”, they was also very keen to profile themselves in a positive light to the community. They would be seen as “doing something about sex/AIDS”. The pressure from educators to intervene was also a concern during the research process. Learners were frequently stigmatized views as being ‘deviant, immoral, or loose’. Again, this was not surprising, since I am sure that when most investigators enter the research setting, they are frequently cultured into the dominant discourses of power around the issue at stake. However, asymmetrical power relations between educators and learners had implications for my role as a researcher. I was concerned not to be identified with any particular authority figure, like the school principal, for reasons relating to gaining trust and ensuring confidentiality among my potential participants. Therefore, for instance, on one occasion when I was asked to address the school assembly, I declined, because I did not want to be positioned as an educator to learners. I also stayed away from legitimized educator ‘spaces’ like the staff room, an area that was off-limits to learners. My approach was to try and maintain an unassuming and ‘invisible’ presence in relation to many of the educators, while spending most of my time with learners in unstructured spaces. I was often faced with polite pressure from educators to label boys as ‘bad’, ‘deviant’ or ‘good’ that were in need of help. While educators positioned themselves as moral guardians or benevolent carers, learners were variously positioning educators as ‘helpless’ and in need of education, or ‘deviant’ and needing to be policed or alienated bodies, whom they found difficult to connect with.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have documented some of my experiences in researching identity. It must be said that including the ‘voices’ of my participants can never be complete. The ‘voices’ of the boys are certainly filtered through me since it is my interpretation of their accounts that is presented in this research. The editorial power of the researcher remains. Discourses selected by the researcher may appear to be powerful, truthful and authentic. This is a performance. The discourse will always remain a partial discourse, which often leaves the researcher in the shadows, as an *absent-presence*. I speak for ‘others’ through this text. I acknowledge that my interpretations and representations of boys’ conversations are not ‘innocent’. Further, I recognized during multiple moments in the field that my conversations with learners changed both the

participants and the researcher. The research questions and method of inquiry evolved over time, with 'mutual shaping and interaction' between the participants and myself taking place. Further, my analysis of the material produced and the construction of actors in this setting has been primarily the activity of the researcher, even though I did attempt to provide sections of my analysis for reflection and comment by the boys who participated in the research exercise. The broad principles of poststructuralism and feminism is useful for identity related research because it deploys a reflexivity that allows the researcher to examine the researcher/researched as a localized, dialogical production. In this respect, understanding *research as praxis* is of key concern.

5. References

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