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An account from the inside: Examining the emotional impact of qualitative research through the lens of “insider” research

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Abstract

The benefits and challenges of insider positionality have been much written about in relation to qualitative research. However, the specific emotional implications of insider research have been little explored. In this manuscript, I aim to bring the literature on insider positionality to the study of emotion in qualitative research through a reflection on my experiences as a “total insider” conducting interviews for a longitudinal qualitative study examining mental health during the transition to parenthood among sexual minority women. On the basis of this experience, I highlight emotion-related benefits and challenges of my insider positionality, as they pertain both to the quality of the research and to my personal experiences as a qualitative researcher. In particular, I examine the potential benefits of my insider positioning for establishing rapport and my capacity for empathy, and the personal emotional growth and learning that my insider positioning made possible for me. With respect to challenges, I examine how my emotional investment in the researcher-participant relationship influenced my role as a research instrument, and discuss the difficulties I encountered in managing appropriately bounded relationships and making decisions about self-disclosure. I close by highlighting promising avenues for further exploration of the emotional implications of insider research, from the perspectives of both researchers and participants.

Keywords

qualitative research; insider research; emotion work; interviewing; researcher reflexivity

Much has been written about the advantages and challenges of “insider” qualitative research; that is, contexts in which the researcher identifies as a member of the social group or culture that is being studied (Greene, 2014). In the positivist tradition, outsider status is considered the ideal, objective norm, while insider status is seen as fraught with potential bias, thereby threatening research quality (Merriam et al., 2001). In contrast, researchers operating within interpretive or critical paradigms see potential value in the knowledge that arises from lived experience (Chavez, 2008). Participatory and emancipatory paradigms take this further to prioritize lived experience, or “practical knowing”, over other forms of knowing, expressly

valuing the insider position as integral to conducting ethical and effective research (Heron & Reason, 1997).

Writers and theorists have called attention to the tendency to oversimplify the distinction between “insider” and “outsider”, for example, distinguishing between “total insiders” (those who share multiple identities or profound experiences) and “partial insiders” (those who share a single identity and/or have some detachment from the community under study) (Chavez, 2008). Tilley (1998) uses the term “someone familiar” to “avoid re-inscribing binary opposites” of insider and outsider status (p. 319). Merriam et al. (2001) further problematize the insider/outsider dichotomy, drawing attention to the roles of power and positionality in defining one’s place on an insider-outsider continuum within a given research context. One’s positioning as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ may not be static: as Song and Parker (1995) describe, a binary understanding of insider/outsider positioning can be seen to place “too much emphasis upon difference, rather than on partial and simultaneous commonality and difference between the researcher and the interviewee” (p. 249) that may shift over the course of the research relationship.

Insider status offers many advantages to qualitative research, and particularly research positioned within a participatory or emancipatory paradigm. These advantages include ease of access to the field or participants; expediency of building rapport; nuanced and responsible data collection, taking into consideration community norms and values; and richness in the interpretation of the data in light of deep knowledge of the social, political and historical context (see Chavez, 2008). At the same time, insider status can also bring challenges. Presumptions, on the part of researcher or participant, that there are shared understandings of important concepts may curtail their explicit discussion, or the nature of pre-existing relationships between researcher and participant may make discussion of key topics risky or uncomfortable (Chavez, 2008). Complex issues related to power may arise when the researcher holds multiple roles that are differentially situated in relation to participants: although the researcher may identify as an insider in relation to the identity or experience that is the focus of the research, power differentials associated with class privilege, for example, may significantly color the research relationship (Merriam et al., 2001). As noted by Tilley (1998), “the researcher’s familiarity with the context does not always guarantee that the research conducted will be any less hazardous to the participants than the research directed by someone stepping in from the outside for a brief encounter” (p. 327).

As noted by Greene (2014), despite the identification of these advantages and challenges, relatively little writing has described the actual “doing” of insider research, and what has been written focuses primarily on identifying strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of findings. One notable gap in this literature is attention to the emotional implications of insider positionality, both for the research and for the researcher. Although insight into participants’ emotional realities has been noted to potentially enhance the researcher’s capacity to collect and interpret rich data (Chaves, 2008), potential disadvantages for research quality associated with an insider researcher’s emotional investment in the topic or participants has received little attention (apart from more general critiques regarding insider positionality; see Merton, 1972). Further, few writers have explicitly discussed their own

emotional experience of conducting research as insiders; that is, little is known about the emotional implications of insider research for qualitative researchers themselves. This may be particularly relevant when the researcher's subjective experience of multiple identification ("total insider" status) complicates the reflexive task of "establishing and maintaining an appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance" (Greene, 2014, p. 9).

The Present Study

In this manuscript, I aim to bring the literature on insider qualitative research to the study of emotion in qualitative research through an examination of my experiences as a bisexual-identified, (then) pregnant woman conducting interviews for a longitudinal qualitative study examining mental health during the transition to parenthood among "invisible sexual minority women" (that is, women currently partnered with men but who do not identify as heterosexual and/or have had recent sexual relationships with women). As one of the principal investigators, I conducted several of the interviews for this study, beginning during the late stages of my (and their) pregnancy, and continuing through my maternity leave (and their first year of parenting), often with my infant (and theirs) with us in the room during the interview. In this context, I experienced myself as an insider on multiple levels of emotional significance, including by virtue of stigmatized identity (bisexuality), heteronormative experience (male partner), and life stage (through pregnancy and early parenthood).

In this paper, I focus on my experiences interviewing one participant in particular, who I will call Nicole. Nicole and I shared not only the study inclusion criteria as described above, but also other commonalities that were very important to us, though not necessarily related to the topic of the research. Some of these, it should be noted, were privileged identities we share in common, including whiteness and higher education. Others were less obvious markers of identity or experience, some things so personal or emotionally laden that I will not name them here. However, one commonality that became extremely significant in terms of my emotional experience of conducting these interviews was our shared experience of the large age gap between our first child and the one we were expecting at the time of the first interview.

By drawing upon interview transcripts and field notes, as well as my informal recollections, I examine my experiences interviewing Nicole five times over the period of one year. In so doing, I aim to build upon the existing literature on 'insider' qualitative research by highlighting the emotional implications of doing this work. To do so, I will first examine what I see as the emotion-related benefits of my insider status, followed by the emotion-related challenges. I will discuss these benefits and challenges both as they pertain to their impact on the research study/data, and on myself as the individual researcher.

Reflexivity in Insider/Emancipatory Research

Much has been written about the role of reflexivity in qualitative research (Denzin & Norman, 1997; Pillow, 2003), including insider qualitative research (Berger, 2015). Pillow (2003) cautions against use of reflexivity as a methodological tool that is ultimately intended

to yield more valid research. She problematizes the notion that self-reflexivity “provides a cure for the problem of doing representation” (p. 181), including representation of those we understand ourselves to share important similarities with.

At the same time, Pillow (2003) and others (e.g., Gildersleeve, 2010; Berger, 2015) speak to the importance of reflexive practice in being “rigorously reflective about the workings of power” (Pillow, 2003, p. 188). Attention to power relations between researcher and those being researched is similarly central to notions of insider research as enacted through participatory or emancipatory approaches (Heron & Reason, 1997). As such, my conceptualization of reflexivity draws on the work of feminist and other critical scholars who foreground attention to power in research relationships (e.g., Fine, 1994) and practice reflexivity as a means to recognize and be held accountable for the implications of this power (Sharp & Weaver, 2015). Through this lens, my privileged positioning as an academic researcher, together with other privileges I embody (e.g., whiteness, cisgender privilege, class privilege) are foregrounded even as I reflect upon my insider positioning connected to an identity category associated with social oppression (bisexual woman).

Emotion-Related Benefits of “Insider” Positionality

Many potential benefits have been associated with insider status. For example, Chaves (2008) characterizes potential benefits she associates with the researcher’s positionality (including expediency in building rapport), access (including both expediency of access and access to in-group activities), and data collection/interpretation/representation (including knowledge of the historical and political context of the field). Here, I highlight the emotion-related benefits to the research I perceived as a result of my insider status, with a particular focus on implications for rapport. I go on to discuss what I perceived to be the personal benefits of my insider involvement in this research.

Benefits for the Research

My insider status fostered emotions (both in myself and in Nicole) that facilitated a rich interview experience, particularly through enabling a different kind of rapport than I have experienced in conducting less emotionally laden and/or “outsider” interviews. In the context of a longitudinal study where our relationship could build over a number of meetings, the continued sharing of our same-ness--particularly in regards to our emotional experiences--resulted in a deep comfort with and connection to one another, to the extent that in later interviews, transcripts show us sometimes speaking in unison or finishing each others’ sentences.

One of the ways in which our shared emotional experiences facilitated rapport was through my capacity to provide Nicole with deep validation of her experiences; that is, through expressions of empathy. Much has been written about empathy in the research encounter. Mallozzi (2009) contrasts three different theoretical approaches to empathy: a postpositivist perspective, in which expressions of empathy are avoided so as not to interfere with the desired neutrality of the interview space; a feminist perspective, in which empathy is understood to be necessary to facilitate an environment for safe sharing; and a poststructuralist perspective, in which researchers are cautioned to avoid using empathy in

ways that might erase important differences between researcher and participant. In light of this study's focus on a marginalized population (sexual minority women), together with my own research orientation within a transformative-emancipatory paradigm (Mertens, 2003), my interviewing approach was most closely aligned with the feminist tradition. That is, I did not hesitate to offer what Mallozzi (2009) has termed "empathic moves", with the expectation that this would serve to increase Nicole's comfort, and in turn, sharing of rich data.

My expressions of empathy seemed to be particularly effective in contexts where the challenging emotions Nicole was expressing were widely considered not socially acceptable for a new mother (for example, in our discussion about her desire to make time for needed self-care, "It takes work to say, okay, I'm going to take care of myself.") In these contexts, I was able to move beyond simply reiterating Nicole's experience towards reframing it, adding new dimensions to it that reflected a knowing of her emotional experience that validated it as real, acceptable and important, even when in contrast to social norms (for example, in my response, "Especially when you have a little person relying on you for all their food"). The effectiveness of this validation is reflected in her enthusiastic responses to my comments (in this case, "Yes, exactly, oh my god it's so hard.")

One particularly striking example of the emotional impact of our commonalities on my capacity for empathy happened during our second interview. I was breastfeeding my baby while Nicole shared her experience of having to rush her own newborn baby to hospital with potentially serious medical complications. Despite the fact that the baby was now healthy and in her own mother's arms, this experience elicited a depth of emotion that I would consider beyond what has been termed 'feeling their stories' (Gair, 2012, title), in that I could feel the weight of Nicole's experience not only metaphorically, but literally, with respect to the infant in my own arms. My depth of feeling was explicit (reflected in the transcription as me making a "shocked noise" and commenting to Nicole that I was holding back tears). As Gair (2012) describes in her discussion of empathy in qualitative interviewing, I believe that this deep feeling fostered an enriched research relationship, which in turn allowed for the collection of enriched interview data in this and subsequent interviews. That is, I believe that my "empathic moves" towards Nicole helped to create an environment where she felt comfortable sharing experiences and emotions that she might not otherwise have contributed to the research. Indeed, consistent with reports from other insider qualitative research (e.g., Farnsworth, 1997), Nicole explicitly noted the value of my 'insider' status in respect to my capacity for empathy, saying, for example, "It's so nice that you can relate to me exactly."

Apart from the impact of empathy, rapport also seemed to be facilitated in the postpartum interviews by the babies' presence in the room with us, and the associated emotional tone and level of intimacy. Throughout the transcripts there are notes of babies crying, comments spoken to babies embedded within our conversation with one another, diaper changes and other baby care. The babies' emotions are immediate, demanding our response, even in the midst of intense emotional sharing--and so perhaps invited even freer sharing of Nicole's own emotions. Further, having babies at the same stage made our shared role as new mother very present in the room with us, particularly as it enabled us to assist one another in baby

care at certain moments in the interview (e.g., soothing the other's baby when one of us was temporarily called away).

The presence of babies also meant a level of intimacy with one another not typical of a research interview, in that we were attending to very base human functions (breastfeeding, diaper changing) even as we spoke. The last part of our final interview, for example, took place as I prepared Nicole's baby's lunch in her kitchen—the transcript is peppered with my questions about which bowl to use, how warm she wanted the food, and so on. In reading the transcript again, there is a feeling of intimacy and deep connection between us, as we together care for her child's needs while at the same time serving the purpose of the research.

Benefits to the Researcher

Little writing has explicitly discussed how researchers may personally benefit from their participation in qualitative and/or insider research, beyond material benefits associated with academic metrics. In this research, I experienced important emotional benefits, both in terms of the feelings of comfort and reassurance I derived from hearing Nicole's reflections on similar experiences, and in terms of the personal growth and learning that occurred for me as a result of these reflections.

As one example, hearing from Nicole about her infant's very challenging sleep pattern in our second and third interviews was immensely validating for me as I also struggled through extreme sleep deprivation. But just as for Nicole, her validation of my experiences was particularly meaningful in relation to emotions and experiences that were less socially acceptable to express. For example, in the first interview, Nicole noted: "I don't feel terrible *all* the time." In light of my own very difficult experience of pregnancy, I remember feeling relief and appreciation that Nicole would express so bluntly the taboo experience of not enjoying her pregnancy.

Perhaps most important to me were the strategies I learned to benefit my own parenting through hearing how Nicole had managed issues that I was also encountering. For example, in our first interview, Nicole described feeling a greater responsibility to educate her child about heterosexism than she believed other sexual minority parents should have as a result of her experience of heterosexual privilege (in having a male partner). Her comments provided me with a new way of thinking about how and why I talk to my own child(ren) about heterosexism. Similarly, in later interviews, Nicole shared with me strategies she was using to manage the challenges of life with a baby and an older child, such as managing family dinners, that I implemented in my own life. These significant personal benefits—in terms of both direct emotional support and more indirect support through personal learning--were a strong motivator for me to continue the interviewing work even during my maternity leave (rather than have another interviewer take over while I was off, as had been initially planned).

Emotion-Related Challenges of Insider Positionality

As noted above, others have described some of the potential disadvantages or challenges of insider qualitative research (Chavez, 2008; Merriam et al., 2001). Many of these were relevant to this study. Here, I focus on those challenges that I experienced as being complicated by my emotional investment in the project, and in my relationship with Nicole.

Challenges for the Research

In reviewing the interview transcripts, I am aware that I made choices, not always consciously, about which areas to probe or focus on in the interviews that were not necessarily in service of the research project. That is, I feel that in some cases, I took the interview in particular directions either out of my own interest in certain of her experiences (particularly experiences that I shared), or out of my personal concern for Nicole as a like other. The choices we make in our interviewing reflect, of course, the reality of the researcher-as-instrument in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), but here I am specifically drawing attention to the way anticipated emotional benefits of particular lines of questioning—either for myself or that I anticipated for Nicole—directed my choices about how to focus the interviews. That is, my emotional investment in my relationship with Nicole made me a “*differently calibrated*” instrument (Pezalla, Pettigrew & Miller-Day, 2012, p. 182). In some cases, my choices yielded rich and important data, but I am aware that in other cases, there were missed opportunities to follow up potentially important statements or ideas, or alternatively, time spent exploring in depth issues or topics that were not particularly pertinent to the research questions. For example, in one interview, several pages of a transcript are devoted to discussion of Nicole’s relationship with a sibling, including multiple places where I probed and encouraged her to explore further. Although support from family of origin is relevant to the scope of our research, the details of the relationship that I probed here went well beyond what was needed for our work. Reading it in retrospect, I think I continued to explore this line of questioning because of emotional investment not only on the part of Nicole, for whom this sibling relationship was very significant, but also because of the personal reflection it was spurring in me in relation to my relationship with my own family of origin.

Another challenge for the research was that, at times, I found myself making interventions in the course of an interview that could not be said to be for the benefit of the data, but rather were intended (albeit not always consciously, or at least not in a premeditated way) to be for the emotional benefit of Nicole. There was a tension between how I might approach some of Nicole’s disclosures from the perspective of a “neutral” researcher (in terms of intellectual curiosity and a desire to fully bring out her experience) and from the perspective of someone otherwise invested in our relationship (in terms of wanting to reach out and make connections). There were times when I sincerely wished to provide her with emotional support, particularly in moments where I felt our same-ness could enable me to do so very effectively. This extended beyond empathy—a deep understanding of how Nicole was feeling—to actions on my part that were intended to address or support her difficult emotions.

As one example, in an early postpartum interview, Nicole spoke of feeling guilty about needing help to manage the demands of caring for her children even though she was on a paid maternity leave. Rather than enabling her to freely express these feelings, or perhaps probe their origins as a more emotionally neutral interviewer might have done, I responded, “It’s a pretty big job—like, I think if this were paid employment, there would be a ‘Manager of the Parenting’ . . . It would never be just one person responsible for everything.” Nicole appreciated this reframing, saying, “That’s helpful, I haven’t really thought about that, it’s helpful to think of it that way, thanks.” Competing with the potential benefit to Nicole is the reality that by initiating this exchange, I not only potentially weakened the data set (by not encouraging Nicole to further describe or explore her feelings) but I also entered into the ethically murky territory where research and therapeutic intervention sometimes overlap in qualitative research (see Grace et al., in press). As Rossetto (2014) has noted, while there may be therapeutic value for participants associated with their experiences of qualitative research, “the researcher’s role is listener, learner, or observer, not counsellor or therapist” (p. 486)

Challenges for the Researcher

While my insider positionality did pose some challenges for the research, bringing the lens of emotion work in qualitative research to my reflections directs me to focus more particularly on the emotional challenges for me as an individual researcher.

For the duration of this project, I felt muddled by the emotional work of negotiating relationships both emotionally significant and yet appropriately bounded. Some writers have examined the topic of researcher-participant friendships, for example, exploring the complications of insider research involving previously established friends as participants (Taylor, 2011), and examining the personal and ethical challenges of the “researcher-friend” role in ethnographic research (Berbary, 2014). In the context of this study, I experienced the potential for new friendship—one very desirable to both of us as a result of our multiple and relatively unusual shared identities and experiences—but (I felt) made impossible by the ethical demands upon me as a researcher in a longitudinal study (i.e., wherein I would have a continued research relationship with this person over the next several months). This tension is especially apparent in the email correspondence Nicole and I had over the duration of her study participation. Although the initial purpose of this correspondence was in scheduling subsequent interviews, it came to become an extension of our interview relationship, in which we shared updates about our pregnancies/babies, and even photos. Between the first and second interviews, my conflicted feelings about the nature of our relationship were such that I addressed them directly in one of my messages to Nicole:

I feel the same way, about how great it is to be in touch with someone going through such a similar experience...Because of that, I have to tell you I’m struggling a bit with figuring out what kind of relationship with you is ok considering I’m the principal investigator of a study you’re participating in, do you know what I mean? Just ethically in terms of making sure that you don’t feel coerced to continue to participate, don’t share information with the study you wouldn’t otherwise necessarily choose to share etc. because of a relationship between us. Anyway I just wanted to let you know that it’s on my mind, that I’m

juggling these roles, so that if you feel any distance on my part, you will know that's where it's coming from, and definitely not from a lack of interest or connection.

I initiated this discussion partly as an attempt at what Lather (1986) has termed “dialogic encounter” (p. 268) as a component of reflexive practice; to engage Nicole directly in discussion of the power differentials in our relationship and ideally come to some mutual agreement about how they should best be managed. On the surface, this correspondence, including Nicole’s understanding and supportive reply, helped to resolve, or at least make visible, the tensions between our relationship as researcher/participant and as potential friends. Yet throughout the year of our research relationship, I often wished that a different type of relationship was possible, and I believe Nicole felt the same way (e.g., from a later email Nicole sent me: “I wish we were friends. I’d love to hear more about how you are and how you are doing in your transition to mothering two. And I wish we could just hang out with our babies!”)

My motivation for engaging Nicole in my process of determining the boundaries of our relationship was also rooted in what Rallis and Rossman (2010) have termed *caring reflexivity*. Grounded in notions of reflexivity as an important component of ethical research practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), caring reflexivity is a relational process that calls us to consider “what is ethical practice in this instance with these people?” (Rallis & Rossman, 2010, p. 496). In our second interview, Nicole described feeling lonely and isolated as a result of not knowing other new mothers who also had a much older child. In response to these comments, I struggled with feeling that a different kind of relationship with me might help to ease her feelings of loneliness, and so pondered whether it was ethical *not* to offer her a different kind of engagement—or at least, to not speak about my conflicted feelings in relation to this. As I described in my field notes:

I find my research relationship with this participant a bit challenging due to a real sense of connection related to having so much in common – particularly the large age difference between our kids. This was especially a challenge in this interview because she was describing her feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of people in her life who really understand what she’s going through. It was a challenge not to want to reach out!...I have previously been transparent with this participant about the tensions I feel with respect to maintaining an appropriate research relationship considering our commonalities, and I feel like I will reiterate this again in a follow up email, in order to acknowledge that I am hearing her expressions of loneliness.

I also felt very challenged by the ironies of my own emotional invisibility whilst researching the emotional experiences of invisible groups. That is, I felt perplexed by how to perform my role in the research relationship, particularly as it pertained to self-disclosure, in ways that had not concerned me in my previous experiences of conducting what Chaves (2008) would call partial insider research.

Much has been written about researcher self-disclosure, particularly in the context of individual interviewing. Some writers, particularly in the feminist tradition, have advocated that self-disclosure can serve to build rapport and help to attenuate the power differential

between interviewer and respondent (e.g., Oakley, 1981). In some forms of insider research, such as community-based participatory action approaches, “peer researchers” are very purposefully involved in data collection, in part to increase participant trust in research on stigmatized topics (Salway, Chowbery, Such, & Ferguson, 2015). However, the complexities of interviewer self-disclosure have also been acknowledged: self-disclosure can sometimes reduce participants’ feelings of entitlement to speak on a subject, or unintentionally draw attention to points of difference between participant and researcher, and in so doing, have negative implications for the quality of data (Abell, Locke, Condor, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006).

My conundrums regarding self-disclosure were not so much about how research quality might be affected, but rather about what the emotional implications might be for Nicole should I choose to disclose certain emotions or experiences, or alternatively, purposefully withhold them. Considering Nicole’s acknowledgment of feelings such as loneliness and isolation—specifically in relation to not knowing other new mothers with shared experiences--disclosing my own emotional experiences of the transition to parenthood felt both important and self-indulgent. Throughout the interview transcripts, there are examples where Nicole shares experiences that I relate to very directly (e.g., with regard to pregnancy complications), yet I am notably silent. Reflecting on the interview transcripts after passage of time, I found that within each of the interviews there appeared to be something of a trajectory, from initial purposeful withholding of my experiences, to some brief but deliberate sharing, through to the very end part of interviews where in some cases it is almost as though our roles have switched—Nicole asks me questions, I answer, and she probes further. Indeed, the later parts of most of our interviews are much more conversational in tone than the earlier parts, almost as though I felt my ‘job’ as interviewer was done, and I could shift instead into my shared role as mother, or the wished for role as friend.

My challenges related to self-disclosure were also felt by Nicole, who expressed explicitly in our email correspondence her feeling that the interviews were one-sided, “too focused on me”. I tried various strategies to address her perceptions of this; for example, in my field notes for our final interview (the only one to which I did not bring my baby), I note:

As before, I was very aware of my many commonalities with this participant and mindful of not taking up interview time sharing common experiences. In order to do this without making the interview feel so one-sided, I deliberately shared an update about [Baby] and some pictures before turning on the recorder.

By the final interviews, Nicole was comfortable enough with me and our relationship to explicitly ask me to share my own experiences, particularly as they related to her own experiences that she had been sharing. When I did make self-disclosures in the context of the interview, however, there were times that Nicole responded not with further description of her related experiences, but rather in ways that were meant to support, reassure, or encourage me. That is, by sharing my own emotional experiences, at times I was putting my research participant in the position having to do emotional work.

My concern here relates to considerations of power in the researcher-participant relationship, and in this case, the emotional implications of this power imbalance for the participant in insider qualitative research. Issues of power in the research relationship have been written about extensively in relation to insider research (Merriam et al., 2001), feminist research (Stacey, 1988), and participatory action research (e.g., Fine, 1994; Greene, 2013). Although hypothetically insider status contributes to a levelling of power differentials as a result of shared identity (often one associated with marginalization), an intersectional lens calls us to consider the multiplicity of identifications and experiences we as researchers bring to this relationship—including those associated with academic institutional power (Maxwell, Abrams, Zungu, & Mosavel, 2016). We must attend to the power inherent in our role as the producers of knowledge; as those tasked to interpret and in so doing, re-tell the stories and experiences of our participants (Stacey, 1988; Tilley, 1998; Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). Some feminist scholars have argued that interviewer self-disclosure may be one way to mitigate this inherent power imbalance (Oakley, 1981). While in some ways I experienced this to be true, I also concur with Abell and colleagues (2006) that interviewer self-disclosure may also serve to reproduce or even amplify the existing power imbalance; in this case, through placing emotional burden on the research participant.

Finally, even while the experience of conducting these interviews had a positive emotional impact on me personally as I have described above, there were also times when our extensive shared similarities made the experience of hearing Nicole's stories emotionally triggering. As one example, during our first interview, Nicole described an earlier pregnancy loss, and her older child's reaction to the loss. At the time of this interview, my older daughter was the same age as her child had been at the time of her pregnancy loss. I remember holding back tears as I interviewed her, and being distracted by my own worries about how it would impact my daughter if I were to lose the pregnancy, or if something were to happen to the baby—a scenario that turned out to be the focus of terrible dreams I would have in the last weeks of my pregnancy. There were several sections of the transcripts of our interviews that still made me cry as I reviewed them in preparation for writing this piece, even now after substantial time has passed. Because the most triggering aspects of Nicole's stories for me related to a shared similarity that was not the focus of the research (the relatively large age difference between our children), I did not have anyone on the research team to debrief with who I felt would necessarily understand why these particular stories were so difficult to hear. Ironically, Nicole was the person in my life at that time who would have been best able to understand and support my emotional experiences as a researcher.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn upon my emotional experiences as an insider qualitative researcher in an attempt to illustrate how topics of concern in the literature on insider research (e.g., self-disclosure) may have important emotion-related implications for both the research and the researcher. Similarly, I have attempted to illustrate how literature on emotion in qualitative research (e.g., in regards to empathy) may be further complicated by insider status. In both cases, my experiences align with those of other insider researchers who have described both benefits and challenges associated with this positioning (Chaves, 2008; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2008). The specific context of my

experience, however, suggests some unique intersections of emotion work and insider research that warrant further exploration.

First, this work raises questions about how and why particular domains of insider status become more emotionally salient than others. Little writing has explored how different ‘types’ of insider positionality may differentially affect the research or researcher. Song and Parker (1995) note that shared experience of discrimination (in their work, racism) may be a particularly powerful site of commonality in a research relationship. In writing about research with sexual minority people, La Sala (2003) similarly notes that insider research may be preferred by participants because “they perceive that the researcher shares their desire to rectify social misconceptions of their group” (p. 18). One might therefore anticipate that shared experience of discrimination on the basis of bisexual identity, a phenomenon well documented in the research literature (e.g., Flanders, Dobinson, & Logie, 2015), might have been a very significant point of connection in the relationship examined here. However, the shared experiences that elicited the most profound emotions—both in me and in Nicole—were aspects of experience related to mothering, as opposed to experiences explicitly associated with sexual identity.

Few studies have discussed motherhood (or parenthood) as a potentially important experience from the perspective of insider research. One notable exception is the work of Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), in which they explore their respective insider and outsider roles in relation to qualitative research with specific parent groups. Contrasting her experiences as an insider researcher on adoptive parenting to her colleague’s outsider research work on bereaved parents, Corbin Dwyer (in Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) notes that “because of my strong emotional response, I felt that I would not be able to engage in talking to these parents about their experiences of losing a child” (p. 56). She goes on to describe the “emotional aspect of parenting” in that it “is pervasive, affecting (almost) every decision I make” (p. 57).

Perhaps it is this pervasiveness of emotion work in parenting that gives it the potential to serve as a profound site of emotional connection in insider qualitative research. Affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Clough & Halley, 2007) may be a useful lens through which to consider this possibility. The ‘affective turn’ emphasizes the significance of affective responses and emotional engagements in understanding human experience (Clough & Halley, 2007; Wetherell, 2015). As Cromby (2012) has noted, affect is of fundamental concern to qualitative research in psychology, yet simultaneously made invisible by the discipline’s (typical) reliance on the use of text and language for meaning-making. Since affect is “fundamentally before experience, part of its preconditions and motive force...it cannot appear directly in the kinds of self-report data frequently analysed in qualitative work” (Cromby, 2012, p. 93). Affective components of my experiences as an insider qualitative researcher are hinted at in my embodied experiences of responding to Nicole’s sharing about her baby’s health emergency and her prior pregnancy loss; in each case where I have recounted a visceral response to Nicole’s experience, our shared role as mother has been deeply implicated. Perhaps, then, the affective components of this shared role are particularly relevant to understanding its implications for insider qualitative research.

At the same time, one would anticipate that sharing the very common experience of “parent” would not be sufficient to merit positioning oneself as an insider researcher in most contexts. Indeed, Corbin Dwyer positions herself as an insider researcher specifically in relation to research on white parents of children adopted from Asia (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In my work described here, the experience of mothering Nicole and I shared was very influenced by other identities and experiences, including our identities as bisexual and as feminist, and we connected strongly around our shared experiences of motherhood that transgressed social norms. I am also mindful that Nicole and I shared privileged identities and experiences that likely served to mitigate experiences of sexual orientation discrimination for both of us. Reflecting on my relationships with other participants in the study, in each case I shared the ‘insider status’ ascribed by the study inclusion criteria, but as a result of differences in other important identities and experiences (e.g., age, cultural background, number of children), I was less of a ‘total insider’ (Chaves, 2008). In these interviews I experienced benefits of my insider positionality (e.g., in facilitating rapport and providing context for appropriate probing) in ways that felt less complicated by the emotion-related challenges I have described in this paper. More research to explore when and how an identity as ‘mother’ (or ‘parent’) may contribute to insider positionality in qualitative research is warranted, as is work that more generally considers how the construct of ‘insider positionality’ may require differentiation on the basis of different emotional implications of shared identity/experience.

Second, this analysis draws attention to the need to more carefully examine the emotion-related benefits and challenges of insider research *for the individual researcher*. Few scholars have explicitly discussed how their involvement in insider qualitative research has affected them as a person; where this has been written about, it is typically mentioned in passing in the context of a larger discussion about implications for research quality. For example, in Song and Parker’s (1995) paper on self-disclosure in insider research, Parker describes personal challenges associated with managing his participants’ assumptions about his biracial identity, and also alludes to personal benefits when he notes, “A number of the part-Chinese people I interviewed summarised their sense of identity in terms exactly corresponding to the sort of vocabulary for which I had been struggling” (p. 246).

Similarly, Corbin Dwyer notes that her insider research on adoptive parenting not only generates important knowledge on the topic, but “also will assist me personally and help my children as it could help me become a better parent” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 56), and Farnsworth (1997) notes that her research on bereavement “helped me continue to explore, to reflect upon my own bereavement and to respect further my own experiences” (p. 412). However, with the exception of writing on insider trauma research, where there has been more discussion about emotional implications for the researcher and the need for consideration of self-care (see Thompson, 1995), I could identify few more fulsome discussions of the emotion-related personal benefits and challenges of insider research. Attention has been called to the need to attend to the “ethics of reciprocity” in relation to community-based participatory action research (Greene, 2013); achieving this requires a more complete understanding of what the benefits to researchers might be, beyond the traditional academic metrics.

Finally, in my analysis, I have alluded to potential emotion-related benefits and challenges to participants in insider qualitative research. Specifically, I perceived that Nicole experienced emotional benefit from my capacity to deeply empathize with her experiences, while at the same time, I worried that she was at times called upon to do emotional work in response to my own self-disclosures. My concerns about the inherent contradictions of an emotionally intimate relationship operating within the power structures of a research relationship echo the writings of many critical scholars who have drawn attention to the emotional (and other) risks for participants associated with feminist and/or insider research (e.g., Stacey, 1988; Tilley, 1998). As Stacey (1988) describes, “[t]he greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship, the greater is the danger” (p. 24). Critical writing on participatory research has similarly questioned some of the expected benefits and identified challenges for “peers” associated with their involvement as insider researchers on the basis of inherently unequal power relations (Voronka, in press). As Sharp & Weaver (2015) note, “what we perceive as benefits/harm might greatly differ from those of others, including members of sampled populations” (p. 312). However, despite this ample theoretical and methodological critique, I could identify no writing that examines the emotion-related benefits and harms of insider qualitative research from the participant perspective. (How) do participants experience the risks and benefits of insider research relationships? Are these risks and benefits experienced differently depending on the nature of the commonalities between researcher and participant? Attempts to answer these questions will no doubt be challenged by the same power relationships that make them important to ask; however, even partial understandings of participants’ emotional experiences of insider qualitative research could help to direct researchers through some of the challenges I have described in this paper.

Qualitative research, and insider qualitative research in particular, calls for the researcher to reflect on how one’s own identities, experiences and interpretations position us in relation to what or whom we are studying. More explicit consideration of our emotional selves in this reflexive process may serve to enrich our research data, our research relationships, and ourselves as individuals privileged to engage in research on topics that are emotionally important to us.

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