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A Man in Women's Studies Research: Privileged in More Than One Sense

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As part of a new Integrated Master of Psychological Sciences degree, specialising in Clinical and Health Psychology at the University of Liverpool, I was able to design the very first qualitative study I could call my own. Advertised as a study investigating "Femininity in Never Married Older Women" and recruiting from across the United Kingdom, I had twelve participants who self-identified as never married women. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were designed to be open to anyone who identified as a woman (thus including trans-women as well as cis-women, and women of all sexualities, thus not just heterosexual women – though participants were not asked to divulge either their sex or sexuality). All participants, however, had to have been born in-or-before 1966 (therefore being in their fiftieth year of age or more at the time of being interviewed), and must not have ever been legally married. Participants were however recruited if they had had children (six participants did have children), if they were cohabiting at the time of being interviewed (one participant was cohabiting with a long-term [male] partner), or if they deemed themselves to have lived *as a married couple*, despite never having legally married (approximately half of the participants deemed that they had at some point over their lifecourse).

Participants had a median age of fifty-eight years (with an age range of twenty-eight years between the eldest and youngest participants), and interviews lasted between just over twenty-five minutes and just under seventy minutes (two were by telephone, the rest were conducted face-to-face). After transcribing the semi-structured interviews verbatim, the study itself and the subsequent transcripts of the data collected has led to multiple analyses (see Silverio, Bennett, & Soulsby, 2017; Silverio & Soulsby, 2016; Silverio, Soulsby, & Bennett, 2017; 2018 – all of which are due as forthcoming papers).

Furthermore, regarding this particular (under-researched) group of participants, and the findings of these analyses, a number of commentaries on the matter were released (see Bell, 2017; James, 2017; Sore, 2017; Wood, 2017) after a series of invited talks given by the author (Silverio, 2017a; 2017b; see also Faulkner, 2017). The outcome of this attention to the research subsequently led to multiple reflections on researcher position and privilege by the author (see Silverio, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), however, the first and second empirical analyses – both of which used a Grounded Theory approach albeit on different aspects of the data – are the focus of this paper.

The Grounded Theory approach used was a hybridisation of Glaserian and Straussian Grounded Theory, based on the original methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, whereby transcripts were coded to develop initial categories, and super-categories which are then collapsed, merged, and re-worked leading to theme development, and a final theory. In line with Glaser (1992), I planned to have no *a priori* assumptions of the data or of the population, instead developing robust, layered, thematic concepts through iterative coding and constant comparison, which could then be framed within existing literature (as in Strauss, 1987). The first analysis focussed on gender identity resulting in the development of a theory looking at how this populations' gender identity differed from that of married women, whilst the second Grounded Theory was established to explain ageing social networks in this demographic.

The dilemma

The field dedicated to the Psychology of Women was, and remains, long-established with two firm branches of research and teachings. Eminent cross-disciplinary researchers and thinkers such as Judith Butler, Mary Crawford, and Rhoda Unger (see Butler, 1990; Crawford & Unger, 2004) dominate the first arm: 'Feminist Psychology' which I describe as: Exploring the relationship of women's gender identity to, and the interaction of women within, religio-politico-social settings, education & employment, and familial & other social hierarchies. And likewise, equally recognisable academics such as Nancy Chodorow, Karen Horney, and Eleanor Maccoby (see Chodorow, 1994; Horney, 1967; Maccoby, 1966) have published the cornerstones of 'Feminine Psychology' which I define as: Investigating the psychosocial and psychosexual challenges and issues which arise due to an adoption of a feminine gender identity in relation to the intimate & public self, and to society.

Through my initial analyses I began to call my own position as a (male) researcher into question, especially given that I had specifically chosen to align my work with the lesser recognised branch of Women's Psychology: 'Female Psychology', for which I proffer the definition: Examining the lived experience of women's life-courses, through narrative, in order to explore patterns and trends in mental health and social wellbeing, whilst noting adaptations to gender identity challenges over all life-transitions and across cultures. To my knowledge only two texts had ever specifically addressed and asserted themselves as works of 'Female Psychology' – Helene Deutsch's collection of psychoanalytic papers (reprinted as Deutsch, 1991) and an annotated bibliography by Eleanor Schuker and Nadine Levinson (2017). Both being from a psychoanalytic

perspective, there was not much published by way of guidance as to whether I was doing the data, and therefore my participants, justice or whether I was simply the straight, white, educated, male, researching 'Female Psychology'. In reflecting on my position I noticed what was influencing my analysis when I had in fact attempted to use an analytical approach and methodology (Grounded Theory), which prevented me from holding any preconceived ideas about my participants, or of my data.

Engaging positionality

My analytical position. I had commenced this piece of research wanting to explore the relationship (if indeed, one existed) between later-life gender identity and marital status. My approach was to be data driven and to theorise on any relationships using the data itself, rather than from a preconceived, imposed, or forced analytical paradigm. To achieve this, I set out to use an inductive qualitative research approach (Howard-Payne, 2016) using a classical Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser, 1992; Holton, 2008). This research would be a novel foray into the lived experiences and emotional narratives of a population, which has been relatively neglected by the social sciences: The never married older woman. Through conducting the interviews and analysing the data I noted there did appear to be a psychological intersection of gender identity and marital status and aside from an interesting portion of the data being dedicated to later-life femininity, there was a separate analysis to be highlighted focussing on ageing social networks in this population. From one empirical study, I had two separate Grounded Theory analyses to conduct, and so I continued, re-reading the data, re-familiarising myself with the nuances of each interview, and constantly comparing each interview I read and analysed to the last. I was immersed in my data and I knew every interview in excruciating detail. Throughout the data collection process, the time taken to transcribe each interview, and through the lengthy analytical process, there was one comment, however, which brought some doubt to my mind as to whether I was indeed doing the 'right thing.' One of the interviewees towards the end of my data collection had responded to one of my questions with: "I find it a bit irking actually that there's somebody who sounds awfully like a young, white male is interviewing me about femininity!" It became a sticking point. I questioned my position as a male researcher in women's studies research. I questioned my position as a researcher full-stop. I started to evaluate my *actual* knowledge-base of 'Female Psychology', and then as I appraised my theoretical viewpoint, I could not help but dispute my methodological standpoint. If I had a theoretical background – even if acquired subconsciously – how could I be a true Grounded Theorist?

Re-reading the data, I became increasingly aware of *how* I was reading the data, and in what ways it *could* be read. I was reading the data I had collected under the notable influence of de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) suggestion that "women *become*" and of Bem's (1974) work on "Psychological Androgyny." I then contemplated the possibility that if two key readings through my degree training had made such a profound effect on my thinking, it was more than possible that the hegemonic, heteronormative, patriarchal lens of our society had been so ingrained over my lifetime, that when I came to analyse the data, it had simply remained unseen. It was therefore possible that these interpretations and lenses through which I was making assumptions of women's gender

identity and social networks may have gilded (or perhaps had even tarnished) my questioning and subsequent analyses.

I had to admit to myself that Simone de Beauvoir's work had made me think that women (or more generally, people) *become,* rather than being born into a society, performing and constructing their gender within given contexts and therefore not internalising their biological sex as an innate and congruent manifestation of gender. Ultimately, the Beauvoirian influence could have sub-consciously lensed my analysis, causing me to view my participants as products of society rather than individuals with agency. Additionally, adopting a belief system centred around gender which included a Psychological Androgyny (as in Bem, 1974) meant I was analysing my participants' data within the confines of a gender spectrum with masculinity and femininity at either side, and with dedicated space for an androgynous person adopting and constructing their identity using aspects of both flanking identities. In doing so I had once again sub-consciously assumed my participants had the same, or a similar view of gender identity as me, which included the separation of masculinity and femininity by androgyny (for which I could have been accused of looking) when they may have had in fact no opinion on gender identity at all.

I asked whether these influential readings had made my research less valid – because if I could interrogate my work in such a manner, I was sure that others who had been working in the field for longer, and those with a pedigree of influential research would be sure to pick holes in my assertions. My answer to whether my ideologies had compromised the validity of my research was: "No," but I felt my analytical position must be clarified within subsequent discussions or conclusions. By documenting my theoretical and philosophical standpoints, it would then allow me to set them aside whilst I analysed, and draw upon them after the analytical process was complete in order to frame my Grounded Theories within the current empirical and social settings.

Being a (feminist) grounded theorist. The awakening, which came whilst analysing my data for both the later-life femininity and gender identity, and the ageing social networks Grounded Theory analyses, meant I had to also address my methodological position. Classical Grounded Theory meant I was to have no *a priori* assumptions of my data, and as established above I could have been challenged on actually holding some quite distinct and prescribed notions of both my cohort of participants and their data, of which I felt I was merely custodian. I somehow had to reconcile a feminist *theoretical* character, and an atheoretical *methodological* approach. Immediately I began to ask myself questions of each interview. Whether participants had been guarded in the interviews because I was opposite sex and the opposite gender asking them about how they perceive and regard *their* gender. This led to thinking about whether it had been me who had been (mis)interpreting parts of my participants' dialogue.

This in turn forced me to take some time out from the analytical process to thoroughly interrogate my work, and my processes up to and including the analytical process thus far. This was followed by taking some time away from the data all together. I had drilled so deeply down into my data, it had become difficult to see where my

participants' data began and where my interpretations ended. It was the most excruciating part of the analytical process. To step away from data you think may well be challenged and give yourself time to reflect on your own positionality as a researcher rather than the results of your participants' data is incomprehensibly difficult, but I would suggest a vitally important, and necessary step. I began to view myself (or perhaps more specifically, my *analytical*-self and my mind) as a vessel for my participants' data. Engulfing twelve transcripts and allowing them to merge into one dataset did not necessarily mean that they had been *gilded* or *tainted* by any other information which was also contained within said vessel.

I had set about analysing my data using a hybridised, but heavily Classical Grounded Theory approach (as in Glaser, 1992), which once a theory had been developed, could be framed within the wider existing empirical literature and social context (as in Strauss, 1987). I had an ontological position of critical realism whereby I dealt with the reality of my participants' experiences and what could be understood about said reality, using solely the information from the data collected to answer those questions by developing a Grounded Theory (in my case – two Grounded Theories, one on gender identity and later-life femininity; the other on ageing social networks). I opposed adopting an ontological approach of social constructivism or pragmatic relativism which would have meant I, as a researcher would have been responsible for co-constructing my participants' data with them through the interview process to formulate a Grounded Theory of a 'truth' created between the researcher and the participant at that point in time and history (see Howard-Payne, 2016).

Furthermore, when exploring my own epistemological approach to this piece of research I was comfortable in that I had adopted a realist epistemological stance (Howard-Payne, 2016), based on objectivist principles (or postpositivist emergence as proposed by Levers, 2013), where in fact, I as a researcher, attempted to approach the participants and their data with no preconceived notions of what the characteristics of the participants are and nor of what the properties of the data may well be. Rather a process of constant comparison of each interview in the dataset allowed me to navigate and negotiate erratic aspects of the interviews, and sort and organise the data into robust, layered, and meaningful thematic concepts, which were then used to theorise about the sample population. This allowed me as a researcher to be *guided by* and *work within* the data objectively being open to new concepts, which emerged through the analytical process, rather than the data being forced into a particular thematic paradigm. In sum, each part of each interview (and the selected quotations) became a constituent part of the now emergent property – which is the theory developed, rather than each constituent part (the data) being made to fit a pre-existing and imposed theoretical, or empirical ideology, or social context (Levers, 2013).

Accepting my position as a researcher

Hearing participants' voices, whilst silencing my own. I had aimed to use my position as a researcher to offer a platform on which participants could voice their experiences and this is an approach to research which I fervently defend. Allowing for a data collection method whereby: 'We, the researchers are naïve to the lived experiences of

them, the participants, who are the experts'; permits us to learn from our participants about their identity, psyche, and socio-emotional experiences with regard to our line of enquiry. In this respect, our participants become the oracle from which we draw our knowledge – thus staying true to an objectivist methodological approach.

I had indeed agonised over the conclusions drawn from both analyses, and worried that there was the possibility for potentially every one of the claims I made to have been lensed by my own position as a researcher – a researcher who through living and learning had been inadvertently – and also *advertently* – influenced by the Psychology, Feminism, & Philosophy which had been so crucial to my development as an early career academic up to and including the time of collecting this data and subsequently analysing it in the ways I have. I ensured I re-read the data, each time attempting to consciously exclude any further evidence of my own perceptions and assumptions occasionally enacting some minor re-analysis to ensure each Grounded Theory had been data-driven, and *not* researcher-led. In doing so I also spoke with supervisors and mentors who had more experience with qualitative research and also discussed approaches and findings with fellow students and colleagues who at the time were using a variety of qualitative analyses. In doing this I was able to critically discuss my approaches, my conclusions, and my subsequent theories developed and defend them out-loud rather than simply battling with them in an ongoing commentary limited to the confines of my own head.

It is my sincere belief that this process enabled me to grow as a novice researcher. I realised how silencing one's own voice is quite probably the most difficult part of the analytical process for any qualitative researcher – and I especially found this problematic at first. Furthermore, attempting to unpick my interpretive voice from my participants' voices whilst reading and re-reading the transcripts during analysis felt for a while like a "muffled clamour" (Carter, 2017) as qualitative research so often is. However, the process has enabled me to confidently assert that I learnt how to control my own voice (if not somewhat rather slowly), setting it to one side for periods of study design, data collection, and analysis; whilst allowing it to 'speak' when framing my data-driven analysis within the wider theoretical context, thereafter lensing my arguments derived from a theory developed directly from a dataset, against the existing literature and social contexts.

In accepting my position as a researcher, I no longer see my reading and training as weaknesses to my analytical process or the outcomes of my analytical endeavours, but rather resources from which I can draw to provide strength to my prevailing assertions and data-driven arguments. I am more accepting of the researcher role having its own interpretive voice and how important that in fact is, when new research is completed. In allowing one's own interpretive voice to come forward at the appropriate time, you can bolster your strength as a researcher to be heard in order to add new perspectives and approaches to the research fields with which we engage and read. Immersing myself in the data will always be one of the most important factors associated with the analytical process, especially for projects where I elect to use a Grounded Theory approach and methodology from my growing qualitative methodology arsenal. In doing so I have also come to appreciate what a great privilege it is to do so, and how

respectful one must be of the participants' data to ensure it is *their voices*, and not our own, which directs any analysis.

Privileged in more than one sense. The current paper has been written to explain how I have and continue to engage with positionality as a male academic Psychologist, researching and teaching in the fields of Women's Health, Female Psychology, and Gender Studies. As researchers we can often be greedy for 'good' data, 'lots' of data, and 'varied' data, but actually each individual piece of data is just as valuable as the next and should not be discredited because it might seem at first to be ill-fitting with the rest of the theory or argument which appears to have emerged through the analytical process. Grounded Theory is in essence built on principles that require a researcher to sensitively and repeatedly navigate difficult data and negotiate its space within the rest of the dataset (Levers, 2013). Particularly in qualitative research, each interview acts as a proxy for the voice of the person who may have never divulged this information before – and therefore we have a duty as researchers to be respectful of the content of each interview and value the narratives of all our participants.

The weight of responsibility of privilege had sat very heavily on my shoulders whilst collecting and analysing this data because each interview had become a monograph of each participants' lived experiences, and each participant had entrusted me to be the guardian of those scripts. I believe it is only too easy to forget that the data, which you may have worked very hard to collect, may have been equally as hard for the participant to recount and share. Being a man who engages in this genre of qualitative research may act to only amplify my researcher privilege given that we inhabit a patriarchal society. It is also therefore understandable that women may not want to speak to male researchers or would prefer female-led research and data collection, as may be the case *vice versa*.

I feel hugely privileged to be able to conduct research, especially of a qualitative nature, because it enables me to interpret a variety of peoples' experiences over their lifecourse and interweave different peoples' stories together in a narrative patchwork of psychosocial and emotive experiences. Moreover, I say privilege is only ever amplified once more when I think of the time and emotional energy the women in this study gave when they came forward to be interviewed for my degree project. And when there were times, are still times, and I am sure in the future where there will be times where I question my position as a psychological researcher and as a male researcher of qualitative women's studies, I shall be forever grateful for the following statement from another of my participants (the eldest participant) in this study:

> I think it's good that you were doing it as an opposite sex person because you're free of a lot of the emotional bias. If I were interviewing another woman about this I'd start thinking you know 'doesn't she realise, can't she see the way these things work out?' If it's an opposite sex person you assume there's things they don't understand about the way they feel and think. I think somebody, a woman at some stage ought to do this for older men.

What this participant may never realise is that in one single quotation, she managed to validate my work and the reasoning behind my work, whilst simultaneously banishing any concerns I had had about my positionality as a researcher in this study.

Concluding comment

Having spent much time designing this study, collecting and analysing the data, and writing subsequent papers, commentaries, and conference presentations to disseminate the messages of this research and my approach to research I now feel confident in my elaborations of how exactly I positioned myself and my interpretive voice amongst my participants' voices. I learnt it was by far the most difficult aspect of research to silence my own voice, but that I could and now can assuredly set it aside and utilise it as an analytical lens when required to introduce my findings and developed theories into the existing empirical and social contexts. In doing so I believe my analytic voice has become stronger in my defence of my methodological, analytical, and interpretive approaches. It was and shall continue to be important for me to be entrenched in the qualitative data I collect, and it would have been wrong of me not to give space to my own interpretations, which have the potential to later be both contested or supported. Overall, I have accepted my certain *privileges*, and as a researcher, those are only too often amplified, but I was also incredibly *privileged* to be so openly accepted by my participants and by the audiences to whom I have presented and who have read these works. Engaging positionality is not an easy endeavour, but one of the most valuable from which I believe any researcher can benefit.

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