

# Feeling 'like a minority...a pathology': interpreting race from research with African and Caribbean women on violence and abuse

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## Abstract

Qualitative researchers are often advised to use their emotional responses to data, and participants' experiences are understood through those of researchers', how this process unfolds is less clear. This paper is about role of feelings for the qualitative researcher at different stages of the process and offers strategies for working through, 'using' and 'feeling together with' participants, reflections on lived experiences. I interviewed nine African and Caribbean heritage British women about their experiences of violence and abuse where one described feeling 'like a minority...a pathology'. This paper describes my responses to experiences of racialised and gendered intrusion in interviews, later reflection and analytic work. The paper brings recognition to a stigmatised and hidden process within qualitative interviews and data interpretation. This serves to amplify the impact of injustice and adverse experiences for participants, and researchers, and to a wider audience, and to validate its existence and emotional burden as a legitimate and crucial stage of qualitative data analysis.

Keywords: race, feelings, emotions, transference/countertransference, violence, abuse, African, Caribbean, women, minoritised.

## Introduction

I am a researcher of African and Caribbean heritage who initiated a study to explore the absences in narratives of violence and abuse with women of similar heritage in the UK. Participants felt comfortable to discuss racialised ways in which they felt intrusion and abuse. These occurred in numerous examples one being where participants would rightly assume common knowledge about hair/hairstyles 'you know the way we do.' Postcolonial theories of gendered and racialised embodiment, racialisation (Ahmed, 2000; 2007; Alcoff, 2006; Fanon, 1952/2008) and the political resonance of feelings (O'Neill, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2013) provided the theoretical bases to unpack the complex layers of feelings described and conveyed during interviews. Further layers of interpretation were provided by autobiographical narratives from Black British women (Briscoe, 2009; Mason-John, 2005; Williams, 2011) and previous research carried out mostly with African American women (Garfield, 2005; Washington, 2001; Wilson, 1993; Tiyagi, 2001 with Canadian women).

The analysis of the data was also routed through my own discomfiting engagement with participants' descriptions of feeling racialised. These feelings I later identified as multiple shifts in my insider/outsider and 'in-between' identities (Merriam et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2015), a transfer and sharing of racialised feelings between myself and participants during interviews, that were carried into transcription and analytic work.

The paper builds on feminist, ethnographic, oral history and psychosocial research on sensitive topics such as living with violence and abuse, death and long term health conditions (Campbell et al., 2009; Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Holmes, 2014; Holland, 2007; Hollway, 2016; Hutcheson, 2014; Marks and Monnich Marks, 2003; Roper, 2003; Watts, 2008). Psychodynamic therapist and psychiatrist, Searles (2000) describes clients accessing therapy as everyday therapists, wanting to make sense of their lives and assisting the therapist to do so. Clients' human responses to the therapist also assist therapists in facing their own personal and professional challenges. Transference, where the client may respond to the therapist as person from their early childhood, offers the therapist a window into clients' lives that is mutually beneficial and co-constructive. In a similar vein research participants are everyday researchers and analysts of their lived experiences who can assist researchers who investigate in a more public manner, to understand phenomena and in doing so both co-construct and co-produce the findings.

### **Black women stereotyped as impossible victims of violence and abuse**

There are few research studies about Black British African and Caribbean heritage women and fewer still on the subject of violence and abuse. There is also some hesitance among people from minoritised groups to participate in social research (Henry-Waring, 2004; Phoenix, 1990; Serrant-Green, 2011) for fear of contributing to negative findings. In the UK, public attention to cases of child maltreatment occurs periodically (Radford et al., 2011). Some of the most high profile cases of child maltreatment and infanticide that have come to public attention have also been those involving African and Caribbean heritage children (Barn, 2007; Bernard and Gupta, 2008). This creates a complex political terrain for speaking, seeking support and legal sanctions. Inhibitors to speaking about violence and abuse experiences for Black women are being perceived as strong and impossible victims of rape (Hill Collins, 1990), fear of betraying family and community by exposing experiences that contribute to stereotypes of dysfunction among Black families (Tyagi, 2001; Wilson, 1993) and previous experiences of racism. Studies from the USA and UK have found that African-American women who internalise cultural stereotypes, that they are always up for sex, unrapeable and strong (Hill-Collins, 1990), delay seeking help for violence and abuse (Washington, 2001; Wilson, 1993; Wyatt, 1992). African American women can be accused of racial betrayal when they report African American male abusers, because of police racism towards African American men (Crenshaw, 1991). The women I interviewed also described responses to their hair/hairstyles and bodies as intrusive. From the outset of the project there was an overarching concern about not repeating pathology, yet honouring participants' experiences of violence and abuse.

## **Black women experience a continuum of oppression**

I interviewed nine British African and Caribbean heritage women with experience of violence and abuse. The term 'violence and abuse' encapsulates physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and financial abuse or any other forms of maltreatment from an intimate partner, a stranger or an acquaintance (UN, 1993) or that occurred in childhood from adults and/or someone who was at least five years older at the time (Butchart et al., 2006; Radford et al., 2011). Kelly (1988) conceptualised a sexual violence continuum as the extent and impact of experiences that can resonate long after incidence and may influence women's safety planning, for example where and when to walk in public to avoid a potential rape. Roy (2008), Wallace (1979) and Davis (2000) furthered that women's experiences of sexual violence include ethnic, racial, structural and cultural nuances. Women's allegiances with men on racial or economic grounds can be betrayed by expectations that they continue to fulfil traditional gender roles and in doing so may experience sexual violence from men that goes under the radar of political priorities (Roy, 2008; Wallace, 1979). The multiple forms of violence, abuse and intrusion experienced by the women interviewed, were understood and conceptualised as a 'continuum of oppression' (Author, 2014).

## **Method**

A two/three stage life history interview process along with personal photographs requested from the women, were used to elicit past memories. Photographs were also created by the women to reflect current concerns and experiences of private/public spaces. The women were also asked to edit and create diagrams depicting their relationship to their bodies and experiences of seeking and receiving help and support. The research was approved by the London Metropolitan University research ethics committee and interviews were carried out between 2011 and 2012. The recruitment process was a protracted one and explanations offered by those who participated were that they knew of many more women, who would not speak, creating what Serrant-Green (2011) describes as a 'screaming silence': A pertinent issue well-known among members of minoritised groups who fear that exposing the issue might negatively impact the group.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a combination of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Willig, 2012) were applied to the data. The research questions were: *How is race and ethnicity embodied for Black women and how is this related to seeking help for violence and abuse? What are Black women's embodied experiences of space and place when coping and seeking help for violence and abuse?* The photographs were also analysed thematically (Gleeson, 2011) for how they illustrated themes identified from the interview data, for their wider political implications and how they brought emotional proximity to the narratives (Author and others, 2013).

Feminist theorists have problematised knowledge creation: who can be knowers and what forms of knowledge are considered acceptable (Harding, 1993; hooks, 1981; Hill Collins, 1990; 1981; Ramanzoglu and Holland, 2002). More specifically researchers working on

violence against women and children have also highlighted how in the production of knowledge the researcher can become affected by the re-telling of traumatic events and this can veer uncomfortably close to their own biographical histories (Campbell et al., 2009; Stoler, 2002; Pearlman and Saktvitne, 1995).

### **Transference/ Countertransference in social science research**

Transference/countertransference have been used in various ways by researchers to describe feelings and responses to participants' narratives (Holmes, 2014). Transference has been described as a projection of unconscious motivations, worry from one person to another and countertransference, the experience of being the recipient of such a transfer. Being the recipient of a transference brings to forefront of thoughts previously unconscious worries, past events, reflections and in some cases, dreams. Both terms originate in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1910; Firenczi, 1955; Heimann 1950 cited in Holmes, 2014) where analysts have considered whether transference/counter-transference blocks or further encourages therapeutic closeness. In this paper transference/countertransference are described as enablers to the process (see also Searles, 2000).

In the social, behavioural and natural sciences researchers are autobiographically invested in the topics they pursue and any observations are routed through their interests (Devereux, 1967 cited in Giami, 2001) whereby findings explicate the researchers' interpretations of participants' experiences. This is routed through their own experiences (Willig, 2013), making researcher reflections on interview conversations a pivotal role in the process. Transference and countertransference are thus emotionally challenging for both participant and researcher, but offer both an opportunity to reflect on the meanings of the feelings (Hollway, 2016). Transference/countertransference may also be present in any conversation between two people including those occurring between researchers and participants (Hollway, 2016). Writers however, caution against directly mapping transference and countertransference occurring within a therapeutic relationship from a counselling session, to the research context (see Holmes, 2014).

### **Researchers' responses from immersion with participants' narratives**

Researchers, especially those engaged in discussing with participants past traumatic experiences have found useful transference and countertransference to unpack conflicting feelings and attempts to suppress them where they feel blocked from within by an event occurring during interviews that lingers during and after the research process (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al 2009; Hutcheson, 2014; Gemignani, 2011; Proudfoot, 2015). Featured in reflexive accounts are feelings of guilt, shame, like a research or academic impostor (Marks and Monnich-Marks, 2003; Proudfoot, 2015) who has betrayed their participants through having periods of feeling distanced from the research and participants. During interviews where a participant describes harrowing past events the researcher performs active engagement, is attentive and responsive as an interviewer and attempts to conceal shock, fear and discomfort followed by emotionally going to pieces

(Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Gemignani, 2011; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Watts, 2008). Gemignani (2011) felt he had betrayed his participant, a Bosnian refugee who had survived living in the woods near a farm, by eating a raw chicken, for revealing his shock during the interview where this was recalled. The heroic image of survival troubled a previously held view of refugees as vulnerable after which Gemignani further reflected on his experience as an immigrant. Such experiences are reported by researchers as feeling they have 'polluted the data', this may also include feeling disembodied, disconnected from their lives as well as somatic symptoms described by participants feeling low in mood, unmotivated, experiencing headaches, insomnia and gastrointestinal problems (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015), emotional and physical exhaustion (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009). 'In this relational place, qualitative inquiry develops through intimacy, empathy, and self-reflection, embracing social and historical dimensions of its protagonists and welcoming the vulnerability of the researcher's subjectivities' (Gemignani, 2011: 707). Such unfolding requires containment and management from the researcher (Gemignani, 2011; Roper, 2003).

### **Uncomfortable feelings from interview discussions**

Discussions may also feel uncomfortable between researcher and participant when for example White researchers ask White participants unaccustomed to discussing their racial heritage, to define their racial category (O'Hara and Shue, 2014). Researchers may feel inferior when a generational, status or power imbalance exists on the side of research participants (Marks and Monnichs-Marks, 2003; Roper, 2003). For Roper (2003) the researcher takes from the interview, the mood and emotional residues from their past experiences into the interpretation of narratives. Being open and honest in the writing up of how the 'monstrous unconscious' influenced the data produced, makes the process more transparent and may also leave the researcher with a better understanding of self (Proudfoot, 2015).

In order to work through/with uncomfortable feelings, some form of supervision is recommended. In the least peer as well as academic supervision, with some advocating counselling and group or individual psychotherapy (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Mark and Monnich-Marks, 2003; Proudfoot, 2015). Holmes (2014) advises researchers to not assume that their feelings map directly unto those of the participants and having psychotherapy or peer supervision might not get the researcher any closer to how participants feel. Being a lone and/or a novice researcher may also mean experiencing isolating periods of discomfort (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Gemignani, 2011; Proudfoot, 2015).

I will now outline my responses and reflexive work that informed the interpretation of the data. I end with a discussion on how feelings initially experienced as intrusive can be worked through by researchers and suggest naming and making visible such feelings, destigmatises a crucial process in research especially on sensitive topics.

### **The interview process and preparing for the not yet known emotional response**

Interviewing on sensitive topics requires emotion management where researchers gauge how much to give and give and hold back (Campbell et al., 2009). I prepared for interviews by reading previous studies violence and abuse. This anticipation also required emotion management. I aimed for the interview situation to be a safe and non-judgemental space, I was wary of my verbal and non-verbal expressions. I engaged in what I interpreted then and now as an emotional performance (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Gemignani, 2011; Watts, 2008), in that I attempted to conceal my emotions because I thought they would distract from what women wanted to share. During the interviews there were points where I wanted to cry, but held back tears and rage responses when women described past experiences of abuse, violence, neglect, parental abandonment and poverty. I would swiftly check the woman's facial expressions to confirm she was not crying. I reasoned for me to cry would convey to the woman that I was not coping with her testimony, so I would wait until after the interview in the car to cry (see also Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Gemignani, 2011). I felt torn between my role as responsive and empathic interviewer, ethically aware about boundaries and awareness of my own levels of discomfort. Dickson Swift, et al. (2009) found qualitative health researchers feel conflicted as to whether or not to show their emotions during interviews when participants become upset, or reflect on past memories that the researcher finds upsetting. At points I wanted to give women hugs, but felt that would have been interpreted as intrusive given that women had had their bodily boundaries intruded in the past (see also Watts, 2008 who gave hugs to participants living with experiencing cancer). Therefore, during interviews, despite my training and experience in carrying out qualitative research, I felt unsure and conflicted about how to respond to participants' and my own emotions.

### **Responding to traumatic accounts**

Vicarious traumatising (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995) can occur when a person listens to a re-telling of a traumatic experience and responds as if he or she is experiencing the trauma first-hand. Researchers can feel traumatised after bearing witness to women's testimonies. It may not even be the violence or abuse, but something that personally resonates with the researcher (Stoler, 2002; Campbell et al., 2009). For example I experienced as tragic and enraging a woman's account of poverty, malnourishment and being denied the opportunity to attend a grammar school after winning a scholarship, because of my strong opinions about the transformative nature of education. A participant's account of going abroad for work to get emotional distance from an intimate relationship also resonated with my experience. This brought past decisions, long forgotten, to the foreground for reflection on for example, my own cowardice in not ending a past relationship sooner. Another participant spent many years in a relationship with an emotionally distant partner. This drew parallels with my life experience. When one participant discussed how she can be silenced in her attempts to talk about past abuse

experiences, I reflected on whether I had silenced accounts of violence/abuse owing to an inability to hear.

Words from a workshop on vicarious traumatising would resound in my head especially during interviews; 'the woman is here, she is living, she is surviving, she has survived, she has a story to tell, she has chosen you to bear witness, it is a gift, take it and be mindful of how you receive it' (see also Gemignani, 2011; Proudfoot, 2015). In hindsight, I should have cried and offered the participants hugs when they cried. However, after a few interviews, women hugged me and that relieved us both from the heavy feelings of talking about past experiences of violence and abuse. I also wanted to advise women to proceed with criminal prosecutions, based on my own sense of injustice and rage for what had happened to them. I resisted and contained these urges and instead informed women of the many criminal justice options during debriefs. During interviews I had a distinct sense of wanting to hear women's accounts without muddying the data with my own experiences that felt like distracting noise for later reflection.

### **Clearing space post-interviews to begin to process the emotions**

Post interviews, I would clear a space to process my emotions. I practised self-care. I would take the long route back home, and have alone time for a few hours and eat whatever was sweet and comforting. I felt distanced from my family and would be often silent, and felt sexually estranged from my partner especially as this was research about sexual violence and child sexual abuse. Leaving time between interviews and taking time out from reading transcripts to process the emotional impact of the research were advised in supervision. Mourning or bereavement may be similar to the emotions felt about experiences of violence and abuse; mourning a lost childhood or innocence (Haaken, 1998). Writing the reflective section of my methodology took over a year to be articulated. Researchers (and participants), carry the research situation with them: in this study the expressions on women's faces, the weather at the time of each interview, the clothes worn both by myself and participants and traces of conversations from the interviews would echo long after the data production process. This has been documented (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Coles and Mudaly, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Stoler, 2002). When women shared past experiences of violence and abuse the atmosphere was tense, women struggled to maintain eye-contact and appeared visibly relieved and more relaxed at the end of these interviews. Subsequent interviews were lighter in mood especially when women discussed their agency; how they had rebuilt their lives in the aftermath and their plans, dreams and hopes for the future.

### **Feeling inferior together**

Applying feminist, postcolonial and in this paper transference/countertransference theories enabled me to intimately and empathically understand and interpret how participants lived with multiple and intersecting experiences of violence and abuse. From the outset of the

project and in light of cultural stereotypes about Black women, I felt uncomfortable on each occasion when I introduced the topic of race (see also O'Hara and Shue, 2014).

During my analysis the question 'what does feeling like a minority/like a pathology feel like?' plagued my thoughts. Do I feel like a minority or have I felt this way in the past and had I buried or minimised this feeling? Women also recollected becoming aware of their racialised selves as different and multiply-associated with negative stereotypes in public spaces. I wondered whether I had long since forgotten public spaces I now avoid so as not to feel minoritised? I had had this perception of myself as quite free in public spaces, but analysing and thinking through the data, compelled me to reflect on the places I hadn't frequented. I am reminded of an article I had read about the relative absence of African and Caribbean people in Michelin-starred restaurants in the UK. I remember when I read this article my aside was 'Well maybe it's because they don't feel welcomed or comfortable eating there.' I also thought of places in the UK that I have wanted to visit and maybe live, but thought against it as I did not want to engage in discussions about difference and my "culture" or have to face overt racism. I felt found out by the data. I was being racially exposed and in response I felt intellectually obvious, well of course my work is about feelings of inferiority as a member of a minoritised group. I now had to conceal what felt like a previously well-hidden persona surging its way through by body surface and on my written drafts uncontrolled and my response was why now? Not right now. I was in danger of exposure for feeling inferior.

On reflection I could have been experiencing a stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995) where when individuals who belong to racialised, minoritised or marginalised groups are shown phrases that reproduce cultural stereotypes about them or people from their social group, their performance on aptitude tests are negatively affected. I went from fearing pathologising people from minoritised groups in the very early stages of the research, to feeling too inferior to present the findings. It appeared the more aware I became of myself as racialised, in a manner that I have not previously been aware of experiencing, the more difficult it became for me to speak. I had to escape from feeling racially inferior, ashamed and racially over exposed. I have theorised that Black women may experience racialised and gendered shame as a result of past experiences that appear to either support or contradict cultural stereotypes about their strength, resilience and sexiness that may construe them as impossible rape victims (see also Author 2014). Such constructions can be seen to limit the space for Black women identify as victims and erode the possibilities for safe spaces for discussions about past experiences sexual violence/abuse. My feelings of inferiority then, related to previous experiences, brought into reflection after listening to participants' accounts of feeling minoritised/pathologised. In his analysis of the play *Ricardo Bracho's The Sweetest Hangover (and other STDs)*, Munoz (2006) articulated lesbian, queer, transgendered and Latino/a performances within the 'shared vibes' (p.76) of the nightclub space as experiences of 'feeling brown' in resistance to dominant discourses of gay white superior/gay brown inferior masculinities. The research situation enabled participants and I



to feel together previous experiences of racialised intrusion and inferiority that also enabled new interpretations through my post-interview experiences of such feelings.

### **Empathic engagement and a naïve desire for analytic distance**

My feelings of racial inferiority extended to my professional and academic identities because my practice had not enabled what I thought at the time analytic distance. I was being drawn too much in by the data. In hindsight I can argue, well isn't that the desired outcome? Well yes, but I did not feel at the time I had a handle on my emotional responses to the data. It is hard to think now, writing about this how this could be the case, however the months spent wanting to flee my research evidences something was going on. Ahmed's (2012) imagery of a brick wall used to describe racism captures some of what I felt. The blockage was hard and painful, but not apparent to anyone else around me, or so I thought at the time and difficult to speak about. I turned up to work, began, but could not fulfil the tasks toward completing where the extracts became the hard structures. Relatedly, I felt a lot of guilt for this response. It was the incorrect one as it was moving me away from women's narratives.

I felt ashamed on multiple levels: as a researcher/professional who had carried out interviews on sensitive topics before, yet could not maintain analytic distance and boundaries between reflection on my own experiences and those of the women I interviewed and how this made me feel. This occurred after the interviews, during transcription, analysis/write-up and after drafts when I became intensely fearful about what the analysis revealed about me personally and professionally (see Marks and Monnich-Marks, 2003; Proudfoot, 2015). Analytic distance appeared then to be what would lessen the intensity of the feelings. The emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) left me feeling blocked, stuck and unable to shake off how I felt and also outlined in the earlier discussion on transference/countertransference (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Gemignani, 2011; Hutcheson, 2014; Proudfoot, 2015). After all who wants to feel like a minority? Paradoxically, I wanted to escape the difficulties of processing the emotional resonances from data that could only be interpreted through being deeply immersed. Advice to qualitative researchers from textbooks is to get closer, engage with participants' accounts through researchers' lived experiences. To be affected is the goal that enables research to illuminate how social injustice feels. What occurs during these empathic engagements for the researcher and how to negotiate discomfort, grief, sadness, and stuckness, are less well articulated.

### **Delays in production: emotional labour during transcription and interpretation**

There were moments where I felt silenced for choosing the topic and experiencing the emotions that were a part of the process. I would be often blind-sided by thinking of the transcription and analytic work as 'work' that is without emotional burden, everyday administrative tasks, where I would arrive at particular points in the data and would be overcome by tears. This was a different kind of work to my work prior to this. This left me

feeling like an imposter researcher, who had lost the boundary between my work and myself (see also Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009; Marks and Monnich-Marks, 2003; Watts, 2008). While transcribing the parts of the interviews where the women discussed the worst of what happened to them and to this day, I devised a way to read and format the extracts by skimming over the content for relevance without close inspection. It took me months to closely read and reflect on the impact and implications of the content. This emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) continued during transcription, interpretation and write-up (Kelly, 1988). I coped through listening to affirming music. The words of the song by Emelie Sande's (2012) *Read all about it Part III*, cycled my playlist and assisted me in persevering during this stage. I even worked out a way to listen to music while writing up, because this afforded some distance from the content. This felt like a very shadowy and extended period of the research where I turned up to my desk on a daily basis, headphones on, the world shut out and worked on until I began to produce written drafts. The extracts sat formatted, with minimal linkage to the relevant literature from me where I would be prompted to revisit them in supervision. This did not occur out of sheer laziness, procrastination or through carelessness on my part. I was emotionally unable to give the extracts the close reading required for the narrative flow of the write-up. Making visible the life narratives and meaning-making activities of the participants, was just not unfolding at the speed I had expected.

### **Vacillating between intersubjective proximity and distance**

I felt as if I like Dana, the protagonist in Butler's (1979) *Kindred*, was being dragged back through the antebellum southern states of America where I then had to reflect on the impacts of slavery and colonialism and their contemporary legacies. Walkerdine et al. (2013) have explored how recollections of difficult childhood experiences can be viscerally experienced as an almost supernatural force or emotive and powerful moment during the research situation to the extent that it feels as if 'history walks in the door'. My personal and collective history walked into the research process in a visceral and stigmatising manner. Would I have felt so drawn in had my racialised embodiment been South Asian or White English? Regardless of ethnicity, the qualitative and feminist research methods would require emotional closeness to women's narratives (Coles and Mudaly, 2010). However, I concluded then more racial/ethnic differentiation between myself and the participants (see Egharevba, 2001) might have enabled me more analytic and emotional distance as a temporary, albeit naive strategy to manage my feelings through stages of the analysis. It felt too close, too intimate. I reasoned then that if I was less of an insider, I would have better processed my emotions through this stage of the process. I know now that this was an erroneous conclusion.

### **Interpreting through insider/outsider and in-between identities**

Maxwell et al. (2015) articulate an 'in-between' space that opens up or closes down communication between researchers and participants dependent on aspects that are shared such as gender or race, and those that are not; socioeconomic status. The

insider/outsider dichotomy smooths over the more complex and intersectional 'in-between' identities that are navigated in interviews and interpretative work; some enable more data and some close off avenues for deeper conversations (Maxwell et al. 2015). During the interviews my insider identity enabled in-depth discussions about violence and abuse, race and how women had felt silenced.

My insider identities were: a woman of African and Caribbean heritage, working/middle class, educated, the first in my family in the UK to go to university, victim/survivor of violence and abuse and a member of a minoritised and racialised group, having an evolving aesthetic acceptance of my body, my dislike of being racially or socially categorised. My outsider identities were: as a researcher, I also related less well to some of the racialised experiences: I had not before thought of myself as less-than because I was a member of a minoritised group, yet for months after carrying out interviews, I felt inferior. I also felt guilty for the experiences that were less familiar. My in-between identities were: I have 'felt judged' in social spaces, but have attributed little importance to such feelings. However, during that period, I began to question my skills, to teach/lecture, to present my work, to parent... I questioned my ability to present women's accounts, as I was now convinced that my interpretations would be deemed as inauthentic, less credible, ironically the very terms often used to discredit Black female rape victims (Kennedy, 1992). Therefore, I experienced shifts in my insider/outsider/ in-between identities (Merriam et al., 2001; Maxwell et al., 2015).

I was assisted by peer support and my supervisors, yet I felt overwhelmingly alone, not helped by choosing to hide, hibernate and do analytic work in a basement office in the University (see also Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Gemignani, 2011; Proudfoot, 2015). I felt a failure for feeling this way, as if somehow prior to my interviews with women, I had existed in an inauthentic realm where race was absent or less present. How had I missed all of this when I had previously thought of myself as so engaged and sensitised to race? I did not want to write about feelings of racial inferiority as this appeared to serve White superiority/Black inferiority discourses (see also Razack, 2007) that were antithetical to the project. I was aware that I was reacting to something racialised and unpleasant, however, the willingness to submit to it took time to decipher, name, interpret and describe.

Despite the above, feelings of racial inferiority were reported by participants and resonated in my reflections and responses to the data. Additionally, the narratives were not simplistically dichotomous, women discussed the spatial relatedness of feeling racialised and how race/racial difference had been used as a method to silence accounts of violence and abuse: 'Black people don't do those things [child abuse]'; 'We're not western, because they will not understand ... and people will judge you, so shut up and it will go away...they will not believe you'. While it felt at the time as if my insider identity was drawing me too close to narratives, where I responded with wanting to flee, I would eventually learn that it was my proximity to the narratives that influenced how I felt. These feelings were revealing

something about women's lived experiences that I was phenomenologically interpreting through reflection on the content of the interviews and my past experiences.

I eventually felt compelled to sit with the discomfiting feelings (Walkerdine et al., 2013; Watts, 2008). The more I turned away, the more the issues appeared to beckon me to linger with postcolonial theories of embodiment (Ahmed, 2007; Alcoff, 2006; Fanon, 2008/1952). Feeling excluded 'not belonging' at home, at school, in the UK or Africa and the Caribbean were themes from first person narratives of child sexual abuse written by African and Caribbean heritage women (Briscoe, 2009; Mason-John, 2005; Williams, 2011) and in my interpretation and analysis. I remembered a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol of the Sankofa bird, body facing forward head facing backwards which translates to: *go back and get it*. To go back and inspect the past for how it can inform both the present and the future. I had to go back and get something from the interviews, from my past, from postcolonial histories and theories to help make sense of minor, stigmatised feelings felt in 20th and 21st century narratives about violence and abuse to explore what some forms of violence share with others. These were the ways in which participants and my own experiences collided in discussions and later analytic work. These discomfiting feelings resulted in identifying gender, race/racial differentiation and their relatedness to experiences violence and abuse, and shifted the focus of the analysis.

### **Submission to feeling and interpretation**

I teetered around the edges of the extracts, formatted the thesis until eventually, at home, music turned off and thinking now only of what the extracts had to convey about women's experiences of violence and abuse, I turned to and submitted to whatever would emotionally unfold for me. My turn to postcolonial, feminist and critical social psychological theories about feelings and emotions assisted in interpreting the extracts and through processing my own feelings from immersion in narratives of women's lives. Writing up the thesis took a year longer than I had planned and it was another year before I could begin to rework parts of the thesis into papers. I found it almost impossible to write about the complex entanglement and mess of processing of my own and the participants' accounts of their feelings from past experiences and those displayed during interviews. To understand is to become deeply entangled (see also Demir, 2015; Holland, 2007). The 'aha moment' came when I made the connection, these shameful feelings may have been what the women were attempting to convey.

My feelings now accessible and available to me to describe and critique were beneath conscious awareness and hard to interpret (Burkitt, 2015; Cromby, 2007). I reflected that unpleasant and collective histories might be reappraised with every telling of past experiences of violence and abuse where the fear of personal, familial and racial judgement silence women even in spaces that are 'safe' to speak. I later re-interpreted that shadowy period with uncomfortable, shaming, blocked and stuck feelings as transference/countertransference (Benoot and Bilsen, 2015; Coles and Mudaly, 2009;

Giambi, 2001; Gemignani, 2011; Hollway, 2016; Proudfoot, 2015, Searles, 2000) important in interpreting the theme of experiencing racism/racialisation within this research process.

### **Violence work in the research process**

Researchers might believe that if they were not who they are, or a different type of researcher, stages of the process might feel different. In my case the subject matter and my racial, gendered and cultural proximity influenced the emotional resonances and insights. Difficult emotions associated with oppressive experiences of violence and abuse, involve 'violence work' (Kelly, 2009). The 'violence work' for me was reflecting on racialised, colonial violence as well as the sexual violence/abuse. The proximity of my experiences to those of the women interviewed, and being sensitised to race meant that the many forms of abuse and violence were made visible during the analysis.

What Proudfoot (2015) describes as 'the monstrous unconscious' captures the weight and shame of feeling the feelings that researchers might at first think they should not be feeling, that are integral to seeing, reading and interpreting participants' experiences. I analysed my wanting to distance myself from presenting findings from my research, mirrored the women's attempts to distance from negative stereotypes of Black women and Black people while asserting pleasure in the self, their bodies, aspects of their lives and the right to voice their narratives of violence and abuse; an embodied paradox.

Being biographically close to the data risks uncomfortable feelings, however temporary these may be. It would be ill-advised for researchers to be overly cautious about feeling discomforted. However, if researchers experience a need to break away from thinking and writing about data and it appears a return is far from sight, make a note to self to re-read. I pined for the seemingly safe distance of quantitative analysis to cope with difficult emotional responses (see Holland, 2007). This desire to flee my data for the protective shelter of number-processing, was a passing stage. The courage to return, attend and unpack the disturbing feelings and that the analysis would take longer than first anticipated, offers researchers some reassurance. This violence work takes time. Writing or chanting 'this is violence work!' can be a useful reminder here.

Narratives of sexual violence, child sexual abuse, were interwoven with narratives of migration, racialised and racist experiences, ethnic inclusions and exclusions, fitting/not fitting in with societal and familial notions of gender/culture (see also Author, 2014). In hindsight, uncomfortable feelings were necessary for me to feel through in order to interpret the themes I had identified in the data. Early drafts of the findings were all about such feelings. I tried to capture the icky, messy, uncomfortable nature of these feelings with the word 'nugatory' a nothing self, worse than negated, a self that I and indeed the women I interviewed would rather put and leave behind.

### **Feeling together: peer supervision to amplify injustice**

I connected my repeated failure to accurately convey the women's narratives in written format to their descriptions of experiencing multiple forms of abuse and intrusion, located within their racial and gendered categorisation as Black women, descendants of immigrants and victim-survivors of violence and abuse. My engagement with the women's narratives indicated understanding the sociocultural context to their lives (Kalathil et al., 2011; Long and Ullman, 2013; Thiara et al., 2015; Wyatt, 1992) was a key route to interpreting the meanings they gave to experiences of violence and abuse.

Contexts where violence and abuse occurred for minoritised African and Caribbean women require consideration in service provision and support because this is where women may be faced again with feelings of minor and pathology. These are the contexts where women continue to live with the consequences and recollections of past experiences. Carrying out this research has enabled me to reflect more on the (in)visibility of a range of life contexts. Women's life contexts may include shaming experiences of their hair, hairstyles, bodies, race, racialisation, feeling 'like a minority' and require further exploration. Such feelings may positively contribute to counselling and support and may only be expressed to researchers of similar racial and cultural backgrounds (see also Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). This places a racialised, emotional burden on the minoritised researcher and space should be offered to support this process.

Giving voice and naming sexual violence may also include naming other forms of violence and abuse that have occurred to the victim/survivor. Acknowledging the collective history and racialised legacy of sexual violence may also illuminate challenges for speaking about violence and abuse in present day lived experiences. My overwhelming and disconsolate feelings of powerlessness became crucial steps to understanding how collective and individual histories of multiple forms of violence and abuse were lived, felt and managed by the nine women.

For O'Neill (2001) a 'politics of feeling' can occur when participants' narratives emotionally resonate with the researcher's to the extent that they incite action and activism. Douglas (2006) writes that activism can be the endpoint to feelings of rage and injustice about past experiences of violence and abuse and finding a space where this can be nurtured, where 'emotional literacy' can flourish can be politically transformative. Such end points are by no means easy to achieve without burden, even with the awareness that in order to interpret the findings, the researcher must necessarily submit to the unfolding process. Coles and Mudaly (2010) offer coping strategies for researchers investigating child abuse such as spacing periods of immersion and that did help. However it is the immersion itself that is both problematic and illuminating.

For researchers investigating violence and abuse a necessary submission to periods of feeling like crap is required to enable the realities of living with the consequences to become more visible and relatable. Even more disturbing would be to engage with women's

narratives and be desensitised, not want to turn away and run. The discomfort then is a reminder of the work yet to be undertaken. Peer supervision should continue through all stages of the research process. During transcription/interpretation when immersed in multiple accounts of adversity and injustice, collective sharing of the feelings evoked by this process could be beneficial where researchers are given the space to feel inferior/sad/uncomfortable and disturbed together. I experienced similar fears of exposure during the process of asking peers to review this paper. The conversations shared of similar periods of feeling among a diverse group researching a range of topics, acted as an enabler that collectively and individually validated the existence of such a process. A similar validation to the one described by participants who reflected on how it felt to be responded to with compassion and kindness as opposed to denials or silence after sharing accounts of violence and abuse.

### **Sharing and giving recognition to inferiority feelings within the research process**

When we pose research questions especially on sensitive topics, through our conversations in interviews and afterwards during transcription and analytic work we feel through a process. We are assisted by participants' expertise in managing and making liveable experiences that may not make any sense, are unjust, yet still felt and our feelings from deep immersion in this work enables a re-telling of these accounts to a new audience.

My description is no way a complaint about the burdens of qualitative research, but an explication that may assist fellow researchers in recognising and naming aspects of the process of data production (Ramanzoglu and Holland, 2002) and interpretation. Each researcher may feel through responses to participants' narratives in a manner that is individual and unique to their own life narrative (Campbell et al., 2009). I would have liked to have been more prepared for this process.

For researchers an awareness that feeling through an unsettling process may get to the gem of the narratives, is also important. Of equal importance is to submit to the process with the knowledge of an unknown risk of being stunned, diminished and moved by profound feelings without knowing exactly how, when or where they might occur. The process of 'catching feelings' to borrow from the Floetry (2006) song *Feelings*, drew me as the researcher both distally and proximally to how racialisation might intersect with experiences of violence and abuse in the lives of the nine women I interviewed whereby women felt silenced. I present this in the hope that it encourages support and conversation around troubling and deeply personal issues that may surface through research or when supporting victim/survivors and the arbitrary way in which such periods or responses may present.

Once we catch the feelings, the burdens and discomfort may be easier to disperse and as Douglas (2006), O'Neill (2001) and Walkerdine et al. (2013) observe, we are moved to act, and consider more carefully in our everyday and professional encounters, those with whom we feel more or less affinity, those we deem more or less like us and how such distal and

proximal connections influence and implicate how forms of violence and abuse are experienced and managed in the aftermath.

Research on feelings and emotions arising from discussions with participants about difficult or traumatic life experiences suggest as strategies, working in 'teams', distractions, connecting with others not related to the research. Strategies to manage uncomfortable consequences may develop over time, with some distance from the event/recollection or more acceptance of its proximity. However, an acceptance that difficult or traumatic experiences are just that and cannot be undone is also required. Living with and through disturbing and uncomfortable feelings in the manner that victim/survivors and people who live with life-limiting conditions are required to do, can inform what we as researchers are attempting to make more visible, give recognition to or amplify. Experiences of feelings during the research process may require a more accurate and descriptive term encapsulating reflexivity, transference/countertransference, violence work, vicarious traumatisation that include bodily responses. Naming and giving recognition to this process, may also externalise some of the discomforting feelings for researchers.

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