



“Only if she is sexy”

An autoethnography of female researcher-male participants relations

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Abstract

Purpose – Ten years have elapsed since the author was a doctoral student and conducted a study on the life stories of abusive men, about which the author writes in the present autoethnography. The research was submitted and earned the author her PhD; the findings were written in a book published in 2003, and the author also had articles published abroad. And yet, not one word of what the author relates here was reported to her supervisor, nor did it appear in any of the publications dealing with that study. This paper seeks to address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – In this autoethnography the author describes some episodes that occurred while she was conducting this research and raises some questions regarding feminist research and the power relations between a female researcher and male participants – questions such as “Could it have been less abusive?”, “Why did I not write all this as part of my reflection on myself and my research process?”, “Why did it take me so long to be able to talk about it in a professional forum?”, “Does it happen to every researcher who studies men?”, “Can it happen again?” and “Does it lie somewhere in the seductive part of female interviewer-male participant relationships?”.

Findings – In light of the episodes described, the paper will discuss the dilemmas of being a woman and a feminist researcher, vulnerable to some male research participants.

Originality/value – The question of a woman researcher’s vulnerability is scarcely described in research methodology articles and books.

Keywords Batterers, Autoethnography, Feminist research, Power relations, Domestic violence, Feminism

Paper type Research paper

Ten years have elapsed since I was a doctoral student and conducted a study on the life stories of abusive men, about which I shall write in the present autoethnography. I was younger and far less experienced then, but certainly not a young girl. I was already a mother (at first only of my daughter, and my son was born while the interviews were being conducted). I had married, divorced, and found love again. I had been a literature teacher, a part-time psychotherapist at a mental health clinic, and I had already conducted a qualitative study on abusive men and battered women for my thesis. In short, I thought I was an experienced and professional woman.

The context – my PhD project

The research I am referring to in this paper is my PhD project. The research tried to describe and categorize the emotional world of batterers, it was conducted in the qualitative tradition of oral life history analysis and data collection lasted about a year.

The sample included 20 men who battered their wives, from the northern region of Israel. They were approached through social service agencies working with domestic violence, and through “snowballing” (a friend brings a friend). The age of the participants ranged from 25 – 57 years. All were of Jewish origin. None of the men had



been diagnosed and/or had been treated for mental illness, intellectual retardation or chronic substance abuse. The intensity and frequency of the self-reported violence varied from minor to severe, according to CTS2 definitions (Straus *et al.*, 1996), with no murder attempts reported. Social economic status, assessed using a short demographic questionnaire, revealed the sample to be middle-class, all born in Israel, save for two.

The purpose of the project was first explained to the participants. A signed informed consent form was obtained. The data were collected during two open, in-depth interviews that concentrated on the emotional life stories of the participants, as presented and interpreted by them. More specifically, each participant was asked to tell me his life story from the earliest recollection he has until the present with an emphasis on emotions and its influence on the main events in their life. No time limit was defined, but most of the first interviews lasted from three to five hours and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, but five men preferred to be interviewed at the social service office. Following the first interview, a primal theme analysis was conducted for each. The analysis was returned to the interviewee for feedback. The purpose of the second interview was to validate and authenticate the first interpretation of each man's story, and to interpret together with each the main themes in their stories. At this time, the participants were also asked to elaborate on points that seemed neglected in the first interview, or in need of clarification. The second interview lasted from one to three hours and was also tape-recorded and transcribed.

The whole project was supervised by a university professor who knew nothing of all these events described in this paper because – despite the very good relationship we had – I didn't tell him any of it.

The research was submitted and earned me my PhD, I wrote its findings in a book published in 2003, and also had articles published abroad (i.e. – Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008). And yet, not one word of what I shall relate here was reported to my supervisor, nor did it appear in any of the publications dealing with that study, and was recounted only to my partner and perhaps one or two close women friends. A year ago I presented the subject for the first time at a conference and I have repeatedly asked myself why it had taken me so many years to “open” the subject publicly in a professional forum of researchers.

It should be noted that this time too I thought a great deal about whether or not to tell the story, what and how much to tell, and which words are “permissible” in academic writing. Since language is the principal tool in my work, and as the harassments were mainly verbal, I decided not to censor, and I apologize in advance to those readers who might find some of the words offensive. This autoethnography deals with my relationship as a researcher with the male interviewees in my study.

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of researcher-participant relations (Arendell, 1997; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006; Karnielli-Miller *et al.*, 2009; Paterson *et al.*, 1999), and most of them – including those dealing with feminist research – assumed that the participants whose voice was suppressed were female, and that in power relations the researcher always has the advantage (Harding, 1987; Hill-Collins, 1990; Brayton, 1997). But what happens when the researcher is a woman and the participants are men? Is the reversal of power relations and the aspiration for equality and partnership between the female researcher and male participants still relevant? Is it still possible “to negate the hierarchical relationship between the female researcher and

male participants” as proposed by feminist researchers? (Harding, 1987; Brayton, 1997; Kemp and Squires, 1997).

The relationship between a female researcher and male participants in a qualitative research in general and in a feminist research in particular, is undefined, and there are no clear lines that describe a “proper” or optimal relationship (Wolf, 1996; Weston, 1988; Reinharz, 1992). The relationship changes in accordance with the female researcher’s personality, her worldview, her social and ethnic origins, her professional perspectives, her theoretical framework, the methodological choices she makes, and, of course, her objectives. The relationship is no less influenced by the female researcher’s perception of the place of the participants, her research partners, and, of course, their personality. The participant’s socioeconomic background, his worldview, his objectives, his motives for participating in the research, and his perception of the female researcher’s place *vis-à-vis* his own place in the relationship, all influence the relationship formed between the female researcher and the participants (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004; Karnielli-Miller *et al.*, 2009).

Most of the discussion on researcher-participant relationships in research on sensitive topics presupposes that female participants are vulnerable, and much has been written on the ways in which researchers must exercise caution in order to avoid causing them harm and exploiting them. The premise with reference to power relations is that the female researcher possesses greater social power than the female participants, and she must consider how not to exploit that power. In the present autoethnography I shall raise the issue of power relations between a female researcher and the subjects of her research when the latter are violent men. In the relevant literature I found only scant reference to the question of what happens to these power relations when the researcher is a woman, the topic is sensitive, and the participants are violent men (Willot, 1998). One such reference is Arendell (1997) who described her early research in the area of marital conflict, when she became aware of safety issues and potential dangers to the female researcher.

When the participants are a group or individuals whose behavior is deviant or problematic, this can pose difficulties for the female researcher, and even endanger her and the study. There are several reasons for this: first, studies with deviant populations are complex and interdisciplinary by their very nature, and consequently they are frequently perceived as “not purely scientific”, and there is a tendency to trivialize the subject (Troiden, 1987). Second, controversial subjects (such as intimate violence against women) are likely to cast suspicion on the female researcher interested in them because – as noted above – the choice of subject and methodology are the female researcher’s personal choice and they are influenced by her world (Reinharz, 1992; Wolf, 1996; Willot, 1998). Third, physical danger to the female researcher can stem from her very association with violent populations, or her presence in potentially violent situations (Arendell, 1997; Brewer, 1990; Paterson *et al.*, 1999). All of these situations can be included in the term – “research of a sensitive topic”.

What is research of a “sensitive topic”?

Different researchers have addressed the question, “What is research of a sensitive topic?” in the understanding that such research should address the issue of sensitivity as part of the methodological choices. The answer is seemingly clear and simple, but the various definitions emphasize so many different aspects (the study’s implications,

those involved in it, and so forth) that virtually any study can be included in them (Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Lee, 1993). A simple definition on which I seek to base my remarks is the one proposed by Lee (1993, p. 4): “[Sensitive research is] research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it”. He speaks about “threatening research” in three domains: the first, when the research constitutes an “intrusive threat”, since it deals with areas that are private, sacred or stressful. There can be no doubt that my research, which deals with the emotional world of abusive men, touches upon private and intimate as well as stressful areas. The second domain is when the research deals with topics related to social deviance, and might in some way stigmatize or incriminate the participants. This is certainly true with regard to my research, as 1991 saw the enactment of the Domestic Violence Prevention Law in Israel, consequently defining batterers as criminals. The third domain is when the issues are connected with politics – in the broadest sense of the term – i.e. when issues of power, control, and influence are involved in the research.

Every stage of a research can be potentially “sensitive”, from the formulation of the research question, setting up the research design, establishing contact with the participants, analyzing the data, and, of course, formulating the social implications of the findings (Brewer, 1990; Lee and Renzetti, 1993). Difficulties and sensitivities may arise at each stage of the research and in all manner of ways – methodological, ethical, technical, legal, and political. Research of sensitive topics can sometimes potentially affect the researcher’s personal life, and sometimes his or her personal safety (Brewer, 1990). On the face of it, in light of the difficulties described above (and many others I have not mentioned), it would have been easier to avoid research of sensitive topics. However, this type of research, like sensitive methodology, can be significant since it challenges the social order as well as the self-evident methodologies upon which we base our knowledge of the world.

Feminist research, which emerged from the radical circles of the 1960s, brought the tension existing between social order, academic research, and political perceptions out into the open. Although there is no single research methodology for feminist inquiry, all feminist inquiry is committed to investigating women’s place in society as well as issues of gender and power in that society. Consequently, “personal” topics (such as sexual preferences, domestic violence, and so forth) have become central to feminist research, and in any case placed feminist researchers in “the eye of the storm” of research of sensitive topics (Kennedy-Bergen, 1993; Dobash and Dobash, 1998).

What is feminist research?

Feminist research quite naturally dealt and continues to deal with “sensitive topics”. The feminist perception, which inscribed on its escutcheon the slogan “the personal is political”, cannot but investigate personal and intimate topics such as violence, rape, and exploitation, and – *Vive la Différence!* – love relations, parenting, and so forth (Reinharz, 1992; Kemp and Squires, 1997; Willot, 1998). Those recesses in personal life to which society is denied access, knowledge, and the ability to intervene, are precisely where the weak are exploited by the strong.

But what makes feminist research feminist? Brayton (1997) suggests that what makes feminist research uniquely feminine are “the motives, concerns, and knowledge” brought to the research process. It must be stated at the outset that there is usually no agreement on the definition of feminist concepts. It can, however, be stated that there is

agreement on the fact that fundamentally feminism recognizes that the social world is organized around sex and gender (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985).

Just as there are numerous arguments regarding the definition of feminism, thus too with regard to the definition of feminist research methodology. Whereas epistemology deals with theories of knowledge construction, what it is and what is its validity, according to Sandra Harding in her book, *Feminism and Methodology*, methodology deals with the question of how research is and should be conducted. And her answer, similar to those provided by other feminist researchers, is that reference to the fundamental importance of gender means describing women's everyday experiences, experiences that in traditional social research have been forgotten and neglected (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992). Harding also contends that investigating the feminine perspective, acknowledging the fact that the female researcher is part of the research, and a declaration to the effect that the female researcher's beliefs are what shape the research, are attributes that make a research feminist. In other words, a feminist research is one in which feminist perceptions and beliefs guide the female researcher's research decisions at each stage. Feminism seeks to study the dynamics of patriarchal relationships from the perspective of women. Feminism is also a commitment to social change deriving from the actions of women who reject the patriarchal order of society, and who aspire to a more egalitarian one. The leading role played by feminist research is therefore to expose the imbalance in power relations between women and men (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Brayton, 1997).

Cook and Fonow (1986) define five epistemological elements that characterize feminist research:

- (1) viewing women (and topics affecting their life) and gender as the focus of analysis;
- (2) the importance of raising awareness, i.e. feminist research plays a political role;
- (3) rejection of the subject-object dichotomy in research relationships;
- (4) emphasis on ethics in research; and
- (5) the intention of empowering women and effecting a change in the balance of power and gender inequality.

Thus, an autoethnography dealing with an examination of the power relations between a female researcher and male participants is a part of feminist research.

Two main subjects lie at the crossroads linking qualitative research in general, feminist research on sensitive topics in particular, and this autoethnography: the first is the female researcher-male participant relationships, and the second – researcher's reflexivity and I would like to expand on both.

When the research is threatening, the relationship between the female researcher and the male participants can become enshrouded in mistrust, concealment, and deceit. Although various researchers have developed different ways of dealing with these difficulties, in the main they are not discussed in scientific publications and researchers' discourse (Lee, 1993). I shall attempt to address these problems, and present them to my readers.

I should like to begin by relating three episodes connected with recruiting interviewees and holding interviews that were traumatic and threatening for me, and impaired the quality of the interviews.

It is important to note that the female researcher-male participant relationship varies in the changing stages of the research. There is a difference between the interviewee recruitment stage, which is one of “courting” and negotiating who will give and receive what (Bravo-Moreno, 2003; Karnielli-Miller *et al.*, 2009), and the data gathering stage, in which the female researcher is almost completely dependent on the male participants’ cooperation, whereby they will provide the richest and most in-depth knowledge at their disposal. Much has been written on the rapport-building process, and I shall not expand on it beyond stating that in different cases the relationship is built by creating a “false friendship” and employing various manipulative means (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006).

The first occurrence is connected with the study’s interviewee recruitment stage, and the title of this article is a direct quotation from it. The participant recruitment process in this study was as follows: in order to reach abusive men I approached all the domestic violence treatment and prevention centers, ranging from the center of Israel to the north of the country, and asked their therapists to put me in touch with men who would be prepared to be interviewed and tell their life story. One therapist proposed that he had presented my study to the group of abusive men he was working with at the time. I thanked him very much, I had expectations of recruiting several interviewees with his help, and that is indeed what happened. I recruited a number of interviewees from that group who made a considerable contribution to my study. The first of them, however, who was extremely gentle and reticent in the course of the interview, told me that there had been a heated discussion in the group on whether they should be interviewed for my study or not. The tenor of the discussion was along the lines of “I’m prepared to be interviewed only if she’s got big boobs...”, or “Only if she’s worth a f**k...”

Although the interviewee contended that this was not his own motivation for agreeing to be interviewed, from the moment the abovementioned discussion was laid on my doorstep I could not help wondering about the interviewees who had agreed to cooperate: What are they thinking? What made them agree to be interviewed? Do they have any concrete expectations? I doubt these questions, and the tension surrounding the subject, contributed to my being a good interviewer. At each first session with a man from that group I felt that I was first of all being “scrutinized” as a sex object and hoping that I “passed muster”, as a woman and also for them to agree to cooperate. All these feelings did not help me to claim my place as a young female researcher at the start of her career, but since I was not sure “who was to blame” (perhaps I should have called everything off as soon as I heard? Was I an ambitious opportunist prepared to take anything in order to advance her research? And anyway, I was using them, so why shouldn’t they use me? And also – I freely admit it – that feminist pride of “I’ll show ‘em...”), I took the responsibility for it upon myself.

Kvale (1996, p. 125) writes that “The research interviewer uses him- or herself as a research instrument, drawing upon an implicit bodily and emotional mode of knowing that allows privileged access to the subject’s lived world”. Participants’ life stories are not only a way of telling their story, but also a way of rebuilding their identity and explaining their behavior. Presentation and construction of this identity is accomplished in a study while building a relationship with the researcher. The situation wherein the researcher (me) is a young, educated professional placed me, at least partially, in a threatening position of power in the perception of some of the

interviewees. After all, as someone who is familiar with the emotional and conceptual characteristics of numerous abusive men I knew that a woman constituting a threat “must be put in her place” or “educated” (Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Yassour-Borochowitz, 2003).

The second instance involves the interview itself. One of my first interviewees, a successful businessman from the north of Israel, agreed to be interviewed (with the mediation of the social worker dealing with his case), when his wife was spending a second period in a battered women’s shelter to which she had fled (according to her social worker) after he had threatened to kill her with a knife. We arranged to meet and hold the interview at the domestic violence treatment and prevention center in the area where he lived. I arrived first, set up the tape recorder and my papers as befitting a young, efficient and energetic researcher (in my own eyes), and then he arrived and entered the room. Before he even sat down his opening sentence was: “Hello, I’m Yossi (a fictitious name). You can call my story ‘A man who loves women’. I’ve fucked all my wife’s friends”.

And I thought I was an experienced woman?! A professional who can deal with any situation in an interview?! Well, after such a coarse opening, even before I had asked my first question, I found it hard to begin the interview, not to mention direct it. In fact it was he who “conducted the interview”. Throughout it I was treated to lascivious winks accompanied by very evocative remarks (“Bottom line, you all like a man who knows how to stick it you, right?” and so forth), slow licking of the lips, and crude sexual comments like “You look like a woman who doesn’t need explanations . . .” (this was not said out of respect for my being a young researcher. . .). I was confused, forgot some of the questions, and I was unfocused. The recorder recorded his story, almost a monologue, a one-man show. At the end of the interview I asked him when we could hold the second interview, which I conducted with all the interviewees as part of the participatory methodology both to complete subjects and mainly to obtain feedback from the interviewee on the preliminary thematic analysis of his story. His reply was, “Whenever you want and you’re ready, go to one of the hotels in the area, take a room and charge it to me, call me, and I’ll come over right away”. He smiled and left.

I did not smile. I felt humiliated and confused, I was angry with myself because I felt I had wasted time, for it was clear to me that I would not hold the validation interview with him. In other words, that repellent experience would not contribute to my study. I remember that when my partner came to drive me home I got into the car and told him that I had apparently just met the most disgusting man on earth. I said just that and no more. I did not tell my supervisor and did not consult with any man or woman from the profession. I think I felt shame for managing the situation so unprofessionally. I was also afraid that someone might suggest that I abandon my research, and I was “in love” with my research subject.

Many guidelines appear in textbooks and manuals regarding the manner in which a qualitative interview should be conducted. There is, however, a paucity of direction and reference to the question of what to do with interviewees’ problematic behavior. (An exception is Paterson *et al.*, 1999, Protocol for Researcher Safety). Interviewees’ behavior can be extremely problematic and can include flattery, flirting, and so forth (Collins *et al.*, 2005). Hutchinson and Wilson (1992) described a number of problematic behaviors such as sexual innuendo, hostility, jokes, silences, and outbursts. Although the majority of qualitative researchers concur that problematic behaviors constitute a

threat to the quality and reliability of the study, even in the canonical textbooks on qualitative research (e.g. Kvale, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Shkedi, 2003) the issue is not mentioned at all. The concept of “boundaries” in the context of researcher-participant relationships, or in its more prevalent and problematic form – “blurring of boundaries”, is usually found in clinical literature (psychology, medicine, nursing, and so forth). In this literature it usually relates to a type of restriction or distancing between people. The subject of boundaries is discussed extensively in therapy literature, but relatively little in the literature dealing with researcher-participant relations (Gilbert, 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006).

My third example is connected to two episodes in which I felt under real physical threat. In the first one I arranged to interview a young man from a town in northern Israel. When I asked where he would like the interview to be held, he replied that to save me getting lost in the town’s alleyways he would meet me at the bus station and drive me to his home. We arranged to meet in the morning. He and his brother came to collect me in a pickup truck. Both men were younger than me, between 20 and 30 years of age. In the pickup, as it twisted and turned through the alleyways, I could already feel my anxiety stirring, both as a result of his reckless driving and the fact that I had no idea where I was or where I was being taken. I was alone with two strange men, one of whom had been charged with severe violence against his wife. We finally reached an isolated, neglected house that stood in a big yard. My heart told me not to go inside, but the researcher in my brain said that research is a scientific matter, and a researcher is a rational person, not a frightened female. . . and I was ashamed too: after all, this was what we had arranged on the phone – he would come and take me to his home and we would hold the interview there. I was there in my capacity as a researcher gathering data. And besides, so far both of them had been cordial, and on the face of it I had no reason “to make waves”. I was the one who had requested the interview, for whom the young man had cordially made time, and had come specially to collect me from the bus station.

We went into the house, which was a kind of a “bachelor pad”. We sat down in the living room, I set up the tape recorder and wanted to start the interview (start, finish, and flee. . .). The brother lay down in the adjoining room (which opened onto the living room) in a “listening” position, and my interviewee started talking. Fortunately, the tape recorder was on because I didn’t hear a word and do not remember a thing from the interview. I was scared. No one knew I was there or with whom I was meeting (“participant confidentiality and privacy”). Throughout the interview I was inwardly trembling with fear, I left questions out, cut the interviewee off short when he tried to speak at length or expand, and all I wanted was to get out of there. I was an awful interviewer, the interview came out meager and deficient, and I think I was not particularly pleasant either.

Kennedy-Bergen (1993) writes about the fear and danger she experienced when going to interview women who had been raped by their partners, in their homes. She describes how she sat and was afraid that the raging husband (or ex-husband) would come into the house and be violent toward her and his wife (or ex-wife). On the other hand, she describes the home as the location preferred by the majority of women for holding the interview – it offers privacy, it is familiar to them, it enables them to dictate and be a partner in the interview and its pace (by deciding where they sit, when they have a coffee break, and so forth). According to her, holding the interviews in the

interviewees' home was at their request, even though fear made it hard for her to conduct the interview. In my case, the researcher in me agreed, as accepted in feminist participatory research, to the interviewee's suggestion of the location and conditions for conducting the interview. The woman in me felt threatened by a behavior that – according to the yardstick by which most of us were raised – was dangerous: going with unknown men to their isolated house.

Another instance in which I felt threatened was with the last interviewee in my research. I was already nearing the end of the data gathering, the smell of wrapping up was in the air, but it would have been a pity to pass up this interviewee since apart from being a batterer he was an attorney, an MA, respected in his community, and the type of interviewee it is not easy to get to. We arranged that I interview him in his office in the early evening, after work. I went into the office and immediately realized that since his divorce he was also living there. I felt somewhat ill at ease, but not yet fearful. Meanwhile, it was getting dark outside. I set up the tape recorder and suggested that we start the interview. He switched off the office lights “so I can get in the mood”. I asked the guiding question (“Tell me your life story, and please begin with your earliest memory”), and he began pacing around the office and around me, the lights outside gradually dimmed, and his silence began to be unpleasant. I was afraid. He had difficulty beginning his story. I started talking about one thing or another so as not to be sitting in silence with him in a darkened room. Once he got into the interview, he switched on the lights and I calmed down. He started talking and was very aggressive in an argumentative lawyerly style, dismissed my questions rudely, refused to sign the study participation consent form until he had changed a few words, and mocked my profession and professionalism. Trust and empathy on the part of the researcher were not in evidence there. . .

As a feminist researcher I was torn – both emotionally and ethically – between my personal beliefs which guided me to stand up for my professional dignity, or to run away for my personal-female safety, or yet again to accept this degrading attitude and preserve the common social order in order to create rapport and receive the participants' cooperation.

Willet (1998) writes about the significance of being a feminist researcher who studies men:

There is a tension between being a researcher and being a feminist. As a feminist I want to see a change in the patriarchal relations between men and women. I would like this change to extend to my relationships with the research participants, but found it difficult to challenge directly. As a researcher I was careful to nurture relationships, to avoid stepping over invisible lines in which these relationships might be jeopardized, and to “enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers” (Willet, 1998, p. 183).

Could it have been different? Why did I not write all this as part of my reflection on myself and my research process? Why did it take me so long to be able to talk about it in a professional forum? Does it happen to every researcher who studies men? Can it happen again? Does it lie somewhere in the seductive part of female interviewer-male participant relationships? Or perhaps a research in which there is a personal and intimate encounter between a female researcher and a male participant is, by its very nature, a sensitive and dangerous business? What are the power relations between a

female researcher and male participants in general, and in feminist research engaged in a sensitive topic in particular?

Reflexivity

Employing reflexivity is one of the research tools whereby the female researcher's subjectivity can be turned from an obstacle into an opportunity. Reflexivity may be defined as intentional self-awareness, i.e. the female researcher's continuous self-evaluation of her personal reactions, the interpersonal dynamics between her and the participants, and also with regard to the entire research process (Finlay, 2002). Callaway (in Finlay, 2002) expanded this definition when addressing gender politics, saying that the female researcher's reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness. Reflexivity does not only relate to the documentation of research processes and the female researcher's awareness, but also to general awareness of what is happening in general, and investigating the dynamics of female researcher-male participant relationships in particular (Finlay, 2002).

To reinforce the credibility and reliability of a qualitative research, researchers must assess how their interpersonal relationships with the participants influenced data gathering and analysis, and reflexivity is one of the tools that can be used to achieve this. Writing in the first person conveys the female researcher's subjective experience, and her commitment to the political change (i.e. power relations) that can result from reflexivity (Kemp and Squires, 1997).

However, reflexivity is a difficult, personal-subjective process, which is ambivalent by its very nature. For these reasons, numerous researchers try to avoid it (Finlay, 2002). This is apparently what I did when I ignored the humiliating attitude toward me as described above. Although I had a research journal for reflexive comments, thoughts, and so forth, and I was already a therapy professional (social worker), which helped me to identify and cope with the difficult content that emerged in the interviews and with the interviewees' occasional outbursts of weeping and rage, I was not wise enough to enlist all these tools to my self-help. Like the interviewees, I, too, was possibly in thrall to the professional, rational image of "the researcher", and thus did not take stock of what was happening to me.

Researcher-participant relationships

For many years qualitative research has been perceived as a joint researcher-participant product (Gergen and Gergen, 2000), which in essence presents a critical paradigm that attempts to rebuild the balance between researcher and participants (O'Connor and O'Neill, 2004). In fact, in qualitative research both parties feel highly involved (Karnielli-Miller *et al.*, 2009). To this end, a certain closeness and intimacy must be created so that the experiences the male participant shares with the female researcher are authentic, and produce "the story" which is in fact the source of the knowledge. For such an atmosphere to be created, the female researcher and the male participant must build a relationship that is neither formal nor hierarchical, and which, to a great degree, is unstructured and whose boundaries are unclear, since it is built and created in the course of the research interviews (and sometimes even in the recruitment stage) (Wolf, 1996; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006; Karnielli-Miller *et al.*, 2009).

As women researchers we enter every new research field from within our own "stories". Thus, too, the participants in our studies enter the research from within their

life and stories. Data gathering, the researcher's fieldwork, consists of negotiating the relationship, the aims, and the way (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). All this is true tenfold in feminist research, for underlying feminist research is the desire to remove the imbalance in the social power relations between men and women in general, and between a female researcher and male participants in particular (Reinharz, 1992).

From the above it is clear that feminist research upholds the principle of a process of feedback and participant participation in analysis of the initial interpretation of the findings as a central component of the methodology (Bravo-Moreno, 2003; Brayton, 1997). But is this kind of participation possible? What type of negotiation was conducted between the female researcher and the male participants on their different place in the social world? To what degree does the inequality between them emerge overtly and covertly? What were my motives for conducting this research? The question, "Why does a feminist researcher choose to study violent men and give them (yet again) a voice?" is one that I have been asked many times both by colleagues and by some of the men who participated in the research. The question of my motives was in the background of our relationship, with the suspicion of "are you exploiting my personal story?" always hanging in the air. Similar to a blind date the initial encounter between the female researcher and the male participants plays an important role in forming the relationship. And here the question arises – how each side presents him/herself? (Bravo-Moreno, 2003).

I ask myself, "How did I present myself to the interviewees in my research?" Similar to various researchers (e.g. Bravo-Moreno, 2003) I employed different self-presentation strategies. I was obviously a young woman, a university researcher, a professional woman. However, I presented additional details whenever necessary: when I interviewed a male kibbutz member, I mentioned that I was born in a kibbutz, which I did not do with men from development towns. When I interviewed men who were fathers, I sometimes mentioned (when asked) that I had a little daughter.

How did the participants see me? The most dominant element of my identity was without doubt the fact that I was a woman who was younger than some of them, and the same age as others. Other elements of my identity (professional, familial, and even ethnic) were unknown to them, and I was usually not asked about them, and it seemed that they were of no particular interest to the participants. When, as noted above, they constituted a means of bringing us closer, I used them. However, the fact that I was a woman caused many of them to tacitly assume (and mention) that "You probably won't understand me" or "You probably identify with my wife, so you won't understand me". Thus, a priori, the sex-based differences between me and the participants made it difficult to create trust and closeness, and raised a barrier between us.

With regard to my academic-professional status: since research interviews are a unique human situation, they are also influenced by the meaning the participants' accord to the profession (and sometimes the imagined profession) of the female researcher (Collins *et al.*, 2005). When I established contact with the participants, I presented myself as someone writing a doctoral dissertation in social work. The majority of the participants had already had encounters and relationships with female (and male) social workers. Others had some kind of image of this profession, and of the powers and abilities of a female social worker regarding domestic issues. The

“professional power” I possessed, ostensibly at least, was also present in the initial relationship between the female researcher and the participants.

The majority of the interviewees were not really interested in whether it was a doctoral dissertation, an MA thesis, or merely a social worker’s interviews, and they even displayed confusion about this issue and my being “a researcher from the university” and not “a social worker” or “some student”. Others, who had an academic education, did ask and meticulously clarified the issue. In both cases I felt that the fact that I was an educated professional woman constituted a kind of threat to the balance of power. Yosef, for example, expressed this as follows: “I always wanted to study psychology at university, but family pressures never allowed me to do it. You look like someone who’s studied a lot. After studying psychology you can probably tell me all kinds of stuff I do not know about myself”. And another interviewee, Avner, who was in the initial phase of his own doctorate, said: “At this rate it looks like you’ll be a professor before I get my doctorate”.

The female researcher’s behavior always influences the participants’ responses, i.e. the findings. Therefore, to a great extent this study is a product of the female researcher, the participants, and the relationship between them (Finlay, 2002). At the time the interview takes place it is the female researcher who determines the interview’s “work plan”: she initiates it, she chooses the topics and the participants, she builds the interview guide in accordance with her needs, and she decides when the interview (and with it the relationship) ends (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005). But the participants, too, have the power to influence the research. This power is manifested in the degree of their cooperation in general, in the level and depth of the knowledge they are prepared to share with the female researcher, and in the atmosphere they create in the course of the interviews. All of the above is even truer in a research of life stories such as the one I am describing here, for in a study such as this the specific-personal knowledge about the participant’s life is solely in his hands, and the choice of what and how much to reveal depends almost exclusively on his goodwill, and the atmosphere of trust and closeness between him and the female researcher.

Implications

The interview, which is termed by some as “the soul of qualitative research” (Downs, cited in Hutchinson and Wilson, 1992, p. 119), is human behavior that has served as a means of acquiring knowledge, of understanding and learning about the world of the other since antiquity (and the Bible is full of such examples). There is much talk among contemporary researchers about “the art of the interview”, and to enrich and enhance this art one must learn and research not only the technical aspects of researcher-participant relations, but also the question of participants’ problematic behaviors in general, and those that occur between a female researcher and male participants in particular.

What are some of the lessons that can be drawn from my experience? – First of all I think it highlights the problematic status of women-researchers when conducting a feminist research about men. In that – the act of conducting research is not different than many other acts of women trying to participate in the social life from an equal standpoint. A feminist research is a political act. As such – it might endanger its actors.

On a more practical level I learned that a feminist research on a sensitive topic requires what Paterson *et al.* (1999) call “a protocol for research safety”. Every researcher, and women researchers in particular, should learn to assess and identify threats, and to create, in advance, preventive strategies to deal with them. Senior researchers should be aware of the dangers (scarce as they might seem) and discuss them with their students before entering fieldwork. By doing so they will not only help their students to be more alert to these threats, but also enable the students – should the need arise – to discuss them openly.

A personal summary

Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) contend that the way in which data is gathered influences the macro-ethics of the knowledge produced by the data, and the way in which they are obtained and influence culture and society. As a woman who believes that the choice of the way must be congruent with the desired outcome, I totally agree with this. However, one of the difficulties facing female researchers seeking to conduct a feminist research is the attempt to reduce the gap between the realistic limitations of conducting any research, and the ideals of feminist research.

For me, feminism is both theory and practice. It is a primary cognitional framework in light of which I examine my life and that of those around me. The aim of my feminism, as I understand the concept, is to illuminate the dark recesses in which women are humiliated, oppressed, and excluded in order to put a stop to that oppression, humiliation, and exclusion. Hence, my position as a feminist researcher demands that I be part of this process of exposure and understanding. It also demands that I assume responsibility in the attempt to change the status quo: as a researcher and a woman I must use not only the experiences of male and female participants, but also my own experience and life practices as a point of departure from which I can observe and describe the world; to be my own “guinea pig” when I examine my experience of being a woman, a feminist, and a researcher trying to influence the world by constructing knowledge.

Some of my colleagues recently pointed out the analogy between the interviewees’ attitude toward me and their attitude toward their abused partners. Others noted the similarity and analogy between what I have described above and sexual harassment in the workplace. Although the source of these analogies is clear to me, I did not want to emphasize them in this autoethnography out of respect for the essential difference between the repeated physical and verbal violence suffered by my participants’ partners, and the occasional verbal difficulty I experienced. My intention in the present article is to highlight the personal, unique experience of a female researcher studying intimate violence against women, but in no way to compare it with the terrible suffering of the victims of this phenomenon.

The recognition that the female researcher is an integral part of the research process is also significant in researcher-participant power relations. As part of this, feminist research seeks to expose the place in the social world whence the female researcher comes, and not only that of the participants. When the difference exists and is apparent in the initial outward appearance of sexual identity, namely a female researcher and male participants, a barrier is immediately raised even before we have taken into account additional identity issues (such as ethnic origin, educational differences, and so forth). I have tried to uphold this principle in the present article, by revealing my

experiences in writing for the first time, while intentionally employing language differentiating between the sexes with regard to myself (“the female researcher”), and also with regard to the interviewees (“the male participants”). Could the results have been different if I were a male researcher? – I am sure they would have been, in the same manner that many researches about women conducted by male-researchers could have been. The unique encounter between researcher-participants, and especially in a qualitative research, allows me to presume so.

However, a feminist research must not only investigate issues connected with women and gender, but actively gives expression to the voice of women in social life. In the academic world in which many women study, write, research, and work, the voice of the researcher as a woman is not sufficiently heard, not in regard to her relationships with her male colleagues, and even less with regard to her relationships with her male research participants. In this autoethnography I have attempted to make one of these voices heard. Ethics in feminist research talks about how people can empower themselves. This idea is well expressed in the words of Christians (2005, p. 156) – “Dialogue is the key element in an emancipator strategy that liberates rather than imprisons us in manipulation or antagonistic relationships”.

Epilogue

You must know who is the object and who is the subject of a sentence in order to know if you are the object or subject of history (Nélida Piñon, cited in Kramarae and Treichler, 1985).

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