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CONFESSIONAL TALES: INTERVIEWING GAY MEN: A HETEROSEXUAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This commentary is a confessional tale of my experiences as a heterosexual male interviewing gay men on issues of masculinity and body image. As a researcher on masculinity and body image over the past 12 years interviewing a range of males across ages, demographics and various sub-cultures, gay men appeared to me as being an important group of men to study given they have been under-researched where body image is concerned. Indeed, their voices have not been heard in many qualitative research projects to date. Therefore my aim was to listen to the voices of gay men, both younger and older, and allow them to share their life historical experiences around masculinity and the body. Some of the men I interviewed found it intriguing that I was a heterosexual male attempting to find out about gay men’s experiences. I did not consider this to be an issue at the time, nor do I consider it be an issue now. The following is an account of my experiences as a heterosexual male interviewing gay men.

Introduction

This is a different paper to any that I have written in the past. The majority of my articles have been based on research findings containing rich descriptive qualitative data. However, this paper aims to highlight some of the issues that I have faced as a heterosexual male researching gay men and body image. While it is not an autoethnographical piece, it is a narrative of the self. More specifically it is a confessional tale. Sparks (2002, p. 57) claims that confessional tales foreground the voice and concerns of the researcher thereby allowing us to be taken behind the scenes of the “cleaned up methodological discussions so often provided in realist tales”. Fieldwork confessional tales are also different to the realist tale in that realist tales are author absent and have created clear delineated lines between the tight research methods and the data (Van Maanen, 1988). Realist tales do not take into account the researcher’s personal perspective. Smyth and Shacklock (1998, p. 1, cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 58) emphasise the importance of confessional tales and the voice of the researcher when they claim;

The reflexive narratives of researcher’s encounters with the intersections between the researcher’s values and the research processes reintroduces the researcher as person into the account. Issues like: ethics, gender, race, validity, reciprocity, sexuality, voice, empowerment, authorship, and readership can be brought into the open and allowed to breathe as important research matters.

Finally as Sparkes (2002, p. 59) claims, confessional tales provide a personal voice and take the place of the disembodied voice of realist tales. The confessional tale allows the author to announce, “Here I am. This happened to me, and this is how I felt, reacted, and coped. Walk in my shoes for a while”. The following are some of the confessions of a heterosexual male undertaking research with gay men on body image and masculinity.

I Confess

I currently have a beginning Ph.D student all but 4 months into his research process. Recently he asked me whether he should disclose his sexuality to his prospective gay male participants given that he is researching gay men’s bodies within the
sporting arena. A lengthy discussion followed as to the merits of disclosure or non-disclosure. We came to an understanding that full disclosure should be carried out based on a body of literature identifying the importance of this aspect of research (Sparkes, 2002). Interestingly, I too provided full disclosure to my gay male research participants throughout the research process, but only when asked about my sexuality. However, I admit that I did not consciously conceptualise the issue prior to beginning the research. In fact it was at the end of my first focus group that a young male asked me whether I was gay or not. Admittedly, and a little naively, I was a little taken aback. Indeed, I was not expecting to be asked this question as I was after all, researching men, masculinities and body image. The difference here was that I was researching such phenomena among a marginalised group, which in turn wanted to ascertain my legitimacy as a researcher of gay men. It seems, anecdotally, that the majority of males researching gay men are in fact gay themselves. Therefore I have become accustomed to others assuming my sexuality as being gay. It was therefore a similar set of reasoning that underpinned these men’s concept of me.

The interesting aspect for me regarding the question of being heterosexual or gay is that in subsequent research I have attempted to take a similar approach to disclosure. The difference now is that I am almost always expecting to be questioned, whereas in the beginning I did not contemplate the possibility, nor did I consider this to be an issue at any level. Some might argue that one does need to be gay in order to immerse oneself in the culture and truly understand the meaning of what it is the men are saying. My argument is that of the 220 or more participants I have interviewed over the years they have included eating disordered men, ageing retired men and bodybuilders to mention a few. I have not been immersed in similar life experiences to these men and yet I have had the capacity to understand and interpret their lives according to what they have shared with me through the interview process. This is the same with gay men. I acknowledge that I am not a gay man and yet I have attempted to understand the men’s experiences surrounding body image and masculinity which are the consistent areas of focus across all my research. By listening to gay men I hear a new set of voices around the constant research focus of body image and masculinity.

Having said all of that I was not without my research, (and in particular) interview foibles, when it came to interviewing gay men. Following my initial focus group interview with a group of young gay men, which enabled me to develop a sense of understanding of the broad issues confronting gay men with respect to their bodies, I then set up a series of 14 in depth individual interviews. This was designed to eek out rich descriptive meanings associated with gay men’s bodies. I prepared my guided questionnaire based on my focus group discussion and the literature. I had already honed my interviewing skills over 12 years interviewing in excess of 200 males previously. I was ready to go. Or so I thought. My first interview was a young male who had recently turned 18. I had University of South Australia ethics clearance to interview males 18 years and above. We met a café, which was a common place to meet and be interviewed. While there were certainly some initial “breaking the water” questions we quickly engaged in discussion around bodies and body image. This young man had several non-visible disabilities, including erectile dysfunction, which he discussed with me very early in the interview. It was at this point that I needed to rein in the interview. However, I continued seeking more information because, after all, the participant was willing to provide more. This was a young enthusiastic gay man who had recently come out and was clearly proud of the manner in which he had reached this point in his life. I needed to remind myself of this and focus on the aspect of body image and masculinity rather than allow the participant to freely discuss
tangential gay male experiences despite the phenomenological nature of the research.

Towards the end of the interview it was clear that this young man had disclosed too much information. It was as if he looked at me and thought, “who are you?” and “why am I telling you all this personal stuff about myself?” No longer were his eyes focussed on me. Rather they darted around the café as a nervous defence mechanism. The young man’s responses to questions went from elaborate discourse to one and two word responses. Clearly I had lost this participant through my lack of intuition. I have never used this man’s data despite ethics approval allowing me to do so. This is the first time that I have even acknowledged interviewing him, as hard as it is. This was my first of 14 individual interviews. I walked away from that café feeling empty. It was late on a Friday afternoon and I remember contemplating the interview and the participant’s responses vividly all weekend and for days after that. It certainly impacted the way I approached the subsequent interviews thereafter. There were of course issues that went through my head on a constant basis such as why did the interview turn in such a fashion? Was my heterosexuality a barrier to conducting a valid interview? Do I have rigorous yet nurturing interviewing skills? What are the implications for my interview participants? These were some of the questions I was left to ponder over the ensuing weeks and, indeed, the rest of my career. However, maybe this should not have been about me. How was my research participant feeling? We have never made contact since.

Certainly, as I approached the remaining interviews I took on an entirely different perspective. In each of the interviews I stayed within the boundaries of the research parameters of body image and masculinities, no matter how rich, descriptive and ‘colourful’ the language and discourse might have been. For example, in a line of enquiry based on penis size and masculinity, several participants began to tell me about the size of their own penis. This was not the nature of the enquiry and I diverted the conversation accordingly. Similarly, the line of enquiry about numbers of sexual partners and masculinity led some participants to discuss the amount of men they had slept with. Again, while the data was both rich and informative it did not add to my research objectives and may have jeopardised the research by making the participant feel embarrassed as a result.

The capacity to stay within these self-defined research parameters provided me with an awareness of my research reflexivity and ability to change according to my limitations. This is an important aspect of research, particularly when developing one’s interviewing skills to both attain the necessary information but also make the participant feel valued. Some of the research participants interviewed towards the end of the project identified to me that the interview was a somewhat ‘cathartic’ experience. While this may have been an over-embellishment the men did suggest that the process was more of a sharing experience and they felt their information was providing assistance to others. Interestingly, the same feelings of nervousness and self-doubt crept back as I embarked on the next phase of my body image and masculinity research.

The next ‘logical’ progression of this research having interviewed young gay men on issues relating to body image and masculinity was to undertake similar research with older gay men. This research has been published in GLIP review previously (Vol 2, No 2). However, as a formal piece of research written up in a conventional manner I did not express the confessional fears and concerns I held prior to this research. Due to the nature of the recruitment process the men involved in this project were recruited through a ‘positive living centre’ and therefore were HIV positive. Given this was not a project on HIV I was concerned that my line of questioning would not adequately reflect the nature of my research. Further, I was also concerned that my interviewing skills would
not draw out the necessary information from the participants. This despite having a wealth of interviewing experience and the knowledge I had gained from interviewing the young gay men.

The interviews gathered some of the richest most descriptive data that I have collected in all of my time as a researcher of men's bodies and masculinities. It was clear within the interviews that both the researcher and participant understood the significance of this research and therefore disclosure was not a concern. Given the research participants were also in the late 40s and 50s and had very little concerns with expressing their feelings and emotions around themselves and their bodies it was probable that the data was going to be full of richness. From my perspective it was still important not to cross a boundary into personal emotional space. I had to keep reminding myself that I was researching bodies and masculinity, not HIV. It was clear that the men felt an integral part of the research process and that they helped direct the interview.

**Conclusion**

What I have attempted to identify in this paper is the ability to undertake research despite not being immersed in the particular culture. As I alluded to earlier I have had many people enquire as to my sexuality and then interested to learn that I am not gay. Simply, being heterosexual does not mean that the research is any less important to me. As a researcher I am passionate about seeking knowledge in new areas in which research gaps exist around my chosen area of research interest. That is men, body image and masculinities. I would argue that it is the skills and reflexivity of the researcher that are the most important aspect of undertaking qualitative research with any cohort, irrespective of sexuality, age, gender, race or ethnicity. This is my confessional tale.

**Author Note**

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