Managing myself: investigator survival in sensitive research

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Abstract

Thirteen years of investigative research into sexual abuse in sport provides the basis for this paper, in which reflections are offered about the role and survival of the investigator in sensitive research. The ethical ground rules, research methods and working practices adopted during this research have all been influenced by processes well beyond conventional social science. The paper interrogates three meanings of 'managing myself' as a lesbian engaged in a gendered research process: first, managing myself, coping with the strains and stresses of the research; secondly, managing (by) myself as being alone in the research; and thirdly, managing my 'self/selves', deciding which of several possible selves or agendas - the personal, the scientific or the political – is being addressed at any given time. The paper ends by considering how to maintain focus in the face of internal doubts and external pressures.

Keywords: ethical, investigative research, gender, autobiography, reflexivity.

In this paper I examine different ways of managing the research role. In so doing, I offer some personal evaluations of the challenges faced during my previous investigative research on sexual abuse in sport (Brackenridge, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a). Thirteen years of work on this 'sensitive topic' (Lee, 1993) provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for the paper. During this time an intermittent research diary and a continuous archive of written correspondence and other material have been compiled. These texts now constitute a case study of the ways in which an individual researcher can both act upon and be manipulated by the broader social and political systems within sport. The primary purpose here is not to address the findings of the research but to reflect on the subjectivity of a lesbian engaged in a gendered research process. In particular, the intention is to use this research experience to explore strategies for personal survival as an investigator and to propose a framework for self-management that other researchers might also find helpful.

Reflexivity is becoming an increasingly important research skill (Fine, 1998; Richardson, 1990; Sparkes, 1995). Pearsall (1998: 1559) defines it thus "…(of a method or theory in the social sciences) taking account of itself or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated." Reflexivity helps the researcher both to locate herself within the power dynamics of the research relationships (such as researcher/researched or researcher/funder) and to adopt a healthy scepticism towards the 'truth' of her findings. In this paper, reflexivity and introspection are taken to be legitimate sources of knowledge and to offer useful means by which to examine how issues of marginalisation, gender and homophobia impinge on, and are dealt with by the researcher.

Part of the reflexive project of modern sociology is to acknowledge the influence of our gender and sexual identities within the research landscape and, in particular, to account for the ways in which personal agendas map onto and shape scientific ones. The stimulus for this paper, which is a reflexive account of a white, middle class, lesbian engaged in sensitive research about (largely) female oppression in a (largely) male dominated world, was twofold: first, was a personal legitimation crisis brought about by serial failure with grant applications and secondly, was an increasing sense of burnout from the many reverses which I have experienced along the way (Brackenridge, 1998b). Confronting all this has led me to articulate the

previously taken-for-granted rationales for my research and recognise more clearly the social, political and historical contingency of the work.

The main part of the paper is an interrogation of the idea of 'managing myself', using three different meanings of the term. The first meaning, managing myself, addresses how I have coped with the strains and stresses of the research. The second meaning, managing (by) myself, explores my sense of being alone in the research. Finally, managing my 'self' or selves, explores which of several possible selves or agendas - the personal, the scientific or the political – I am addressing at any given time. In the last section of the paper I review how I attempted to maintain focus as a researcher in the face of internal doubts and external pressures.

Situating myself and others

Before examining self-management in research, it is first important to situate myself and others within the research landscape. Part of this exercise is to recognise the reciprocal effects of the research process on me, the investigator, and on my participants who have experienced sexual abuse in sport. There is a long and respected tradition in social science (Becker, 1967), and in feminist social science in particular (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Hagan, 1986), of examining questions of allegiance and reciprocity. There is a danger that, in attempting to situate oneself within research writing, the individual writer somehow, falsely, stakes a claim over terrority that has been collectively trod for years by others. Worse, and in relation to this paper in particular, my reflections might be seen as merely self-pity. However, Okely (1992: 2) suggests that criticisms of reflexivity as narcissistic confuse self-adoration with self-awareness. There is also, of course, a danger of attempting to become 'more reflexive than thou' (Marks 1993: 149) leading to one becoming trapped inside a circular reflexivity. Nonetheless, I have found it helpful to adopt reflexiveness as a coping strategy. Marks (1993: 140) suggests:

> The attempt to encourage reflection and to instigate change in practices represent(s) the clash between (postmodern) concerns to construct systems of meaning as contingent, positioned and partial with (modern) liberatory concerns to challenge social inequalities.

Perhaps like others in working in the sociology of sport, I feel caught up in this clash. The sociology of sport, like any other branch of the parent discipline, is currently experiencing post-structuralist challenges to the conventions of its various traditional perspectives, whether functionalist, symbolic interactionist, critical or feminist (Sage, 1987; Dunning, 1998). However, I am sceptical about the shift of emphasis from structural analysis of 'inequality' to post-structural analysis of 'difference'. In my view, undue emphasis on post-structural relativism might well impede political challenges to the lived reality of male violence against women and children, violence which finds particular legitimation in sport (Sabo and Messner, 1990; Messner, 1992; Burton Nelson, 1994; Robinson, 1998).

Coming to terms with reflexivity, as part of autobiographical writing within the sociology of sport, is particularly difficult for those, like myself, with positivist origins who have taken a feminist turn. As Okely (1992: 3) says so succinctly, "Autobiography dismantles the positivist machine." Under the post-structuralist critique, for example, there has to be a view from somewhere (Richardson 1990: 27), there can be no context-free or "author-evacuated texts" (Geertz 1988 cited in Sparkes 1995: 160). Yet in my own publications, whether to broadly scientific audiences or to practitioner groups, I have typically adopted a combination of two context-free, authorial voices. One is the disembodied, pseudo-scientific, *positivistic authority* where I present 'data' 'theoretical models' and 'explanations' of the 'risk factors' and dynamics of sexual abuse in sport (Brackenridge, in press; Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997). The other is the voice of *experiential authority* in which I draw heavily on quotations from research participants to illustrate the social processes and personal consequences of abuse (Brackenridge, 1997b). In both types of writing, I am absent-as-person: my life experience as female, lesbian, white, middle class, political activist, advocate is missing. Yet all these elements of my self-presentation must influence my research participants and my 'results'. In trying to position myself within the power relations of the research, I recognise that I am more powerful than my research participants yet less powerful than the agencies whom I am trying to influence. I spend a great deal of time and effort lobbying for policy changes in sport and trying to help my research participants in their struggles to seek support, counselling or redress against their abusers. My interpretations of 'findings', my own sense of self and the lives of many of the people who have assisted me in this work have been irrevocably altered by the experience of doing this research. Influences are therefore reciprocal, even if not consciously so.

Othering in sexual abuse research

In the discourses of sexual abuse in sport, 'othering' is frequently encountered as a mechanism for: assuaging guilt ("it's not my fault it's *theirs*"); denying responsibility ("it's not my problem, it's *theirs*"); and claiming innocence ("we must keep *them* out of *our* sport"). As Kelly *et al.* (1995) point out, the language used to describe sexual abuse (they prefer the term 'sexual exploitation') exacerbates this tendency to other, since both 'sexual abuse' and 'paedophile' are emotionally charged terms that play upon false fears of stranger danger. There is a strong possibility that both abusers and their victims will be othered in research accounts unless they are also given a voice.

I have tried to "give voice to those whose narratives have been excluded from the public domain and civic discourse." (Richardson 1990: 28). However, my interpretations of my participants' accounts of their experiences can never come close to matching their actual experiences; the experiences which they have recounted to me have been lived, then relived, then told by them, then are re-told by me. Despite my efforts to observe ethically sensitive protocols, I quote selectively from *their* words, I frame *their* concerns and, through my writing, I lobby on *their* behalves. All this, then, reinforces *my* view of *their* (other) worlds. Very few of my earlier respondents accepted my invitation to comment on written work emanating from their interviews: most said that they wanted to exit the research scene and reclaim anonymity. My concerns about (mis)representing and othering them remain especially acute.

This concern about othering the survivors of sexual abuse in sport is compounded by the realisation that I am certainly distorting the experiences of those who agree to be interviewed and even, perhaps, making their lives more miserable than they are already. It is difficult *not* to become cast, or indeed to cast oneself, as a kind of modern-day moral crusader or what Becker (1963: 147-8) called a *moral entrepreneur* and, in the process, to lay claim to the emotional and political territory of my research participants. Fine reminds us that it is not good enough simply to write about those who have been othered. Instead, she argues that we should "…engage in the social struggles with those who have been exploited and subjugated…" (Fine 1998: 135). There is, then, a moral imperative that suggests that detachment should not lead to

indifference. Below, I discuss how I have engaged in such struggles and the methods of self-management that this engagement has required.

Managing myself

Managing my data, emergent theories, the various stakeholders in the research and, especially, the lives and preoccupations of my research participants, has proved difficult. On reflection, however, I realise that managing myself within the research has been far *more* difficult. Issues of research competence have confronted me throughout. I have been criticised by different research colleagues as being unqualified for undertaking work in this field both because I am lesbian (and therefore must surely be biassed against males) and because I am not a clinical psychologist (and therefore surely lack the professional skills to study the issue)! I made a rule for myself to advise undergraduates *not* to undertake empirical work on this topic with survivors, judging that the potential negative consequences for the survivors of bad research practice were simply too great. Yet I have often supervised student projects on homophobia, racism and sports violence so why did I impose this exclusion? The ethical ground rules, research methods and working practices adopted during this research have all been influenced by processes well beyond conventional social science. As I discuss below, the 'plural self' (Rowan & Cooper, 1998) has been a major feature of my research work. There was no easy way to disentangle the competing demands made by the research or, indeed, to find established codes of practice that answered all my own questions about how to proceed.

<u>MANAGING</u> myself :

Researching sexual abuse in sport has exacted a toll on me as an individual. This is not an uncommon experience for ethnographers and investigative researchers (Sugden, 1995; Lee, 1995) but I have not found it easy to deal with. This is ghetto research in the sense that it occurs in the sport setting, which is often defined as non-serious and therefore not worth the scrutiny of researchers from its parent discipline; it is feminist in a male-dominated field of study; it is new with almost no context-specific literature; and it is about a sensitive, embarrassing topic. Learning to cope with the ups and downs of the research process is simply part of the job for all of us (Lee 1995: 12-13) but, for me, the messy conjunction of personal conviction and political resistance in this work has proved, at times, almost intolerable.

Some of the particular stressors experienced during this research are: personal insults and attempted blackmail from an international coach; a threat of legal action from a national sport organisation; attempted recruitment into causes by my participants; hate mail and crank 'phone calls following a television appearance; media harassment and misrepresentation by journalists wanting access to my data on individuals; isolation and ridicule by individuals and agencies about whom I have incriminating 'evidence'; rejection of grant submissions on the grounds that sport research has nothing new to say about sexual abuse; and, withdrawal of access by a major sport organisation to an elite athlete sample for fear of what might be uncovered. The consequences of these stressors are no doubt also experienced by other social scientists. They include: anxiety; insomnia; political frustration and ineffectiveness; funding shortages; lack of primary data; publishing delays or rejection (with papers being judged as either too personal or too positivistic); and personal legitimation crises.

This work has also presented enormous methodological and personal challenges which I have found necessary to tackle without much assistance from conventional research literature. For example, disclosure of 'the famous', such as Olympic coaches, was an unanticipated outcome of the interviews but has burdened me with what Fetterman (1984) calls "guilty knowledge" (Brackenridge, 1997a). I have coped with this by following Sugden's advice "Never tell" (Sugden, 1995: 243) and deciding that, in *extremis*, I would rather face contempt of court charges than reveal my data sources.

As with many critical social researchers, I have felt the need to establish my own support systems in order to maintain some sanity and to protect myself at times of particular stress. My feelings have ranged, at different times, through mild annoyance, to anger and helplessness, to virtual paranoia and despair. I know that other researchers have experienced similar feelings.

Some obvious stress management options available to me have been to stop the research, to change topic or simply to learn to cope. Neither stopping nor changing topic are realistic options for me since the process of engagement has bound me inextricably to the political and personal struggles of my research participants. Some of them call on me regularly, asking for advice, technical information, referral locations,

reporting procedures and networks. A small number have elected to act as informal reviewers of my work, providing critical comments and ideas but, for the most part, participants want to be left to get on with their lives. Learning to cope has been a long process. Particularly in the earlier, inductive stages of the research, I found most of the scholarly codes of ethics that I consulted were inadequate sources of support and guidance. I therefore established a protocol that has helped to steer me through many of the ethically problematic situations that have arisen during the work. Following the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994) I set down my 'research rules', a step-by-step list of procedures which has acted as my route map through the difficult terrain of contacting, meeting, interviewing and attempting to support athletes who have been sexually abused by their coaches. For me, writing out my research rules was an important coping mechanism. It meant that I could not only break down the work of each contact into manageable chunks but also check that each person involved had been offered the same care (or omissions) within the same ethical boundaries. These rules were set out under the following headings: contacting participants; putting at ease/gaining credibility; gaining trust/giving control; listening; checking emerging findings; follow up. They also included a set of similar rules for data handling, analysis and storage. When I first prepared this protocol I did not appreciate how helpful it would prove to be.

Managing (BY) MYSELF:

One of the major causes of the stress in this research has been the lack of collaborators with whom to share ideas, successes and failures. Until very recently, I have had to manage almost entirely by myself because this is a new subject of enquiry in sport, engaging very few sport researchers. Also, researchers from the parent disciplines (sociology or psychology) have either not responded to my approaches for help or have defined sport as insufficiently serious to merit special academic attention. For reasons of confidentiality and the sanctity of my personal relationships I decided long ago that my own significant others should not be burdened with my research concerns. Finding others with whom to share my research concerns has taken many years.

As described above, research participants in this work have represented a considerable drain on my personal resources: they have often turned to me – but to whom could I turn? Even though I have not been using ethnography in the anthropological sense (Clifford, 1988), I have experienced similar feelings of

aloneness in the field (Clarke, 1975 cited by Punch, 1998). Adopting the research rules referred to earlier helped me, I believe, to maintain the necessary and genuine empathy with my research participants whilst at the same time establishing sufficient psychological distance to allow me to function as a researcher. This boundary issue has been addressed by other feminist researchers (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981) who have celebrated the subjectivity of feminist research *with*, rather than *on*, women. Nevertheless, I found it helpful to try to acknowledge *overtly* my subjective commitment to the participants both as women and as athletes since my life's work has been advocacy of gender equity through sport.

Fine (1998: 152) suggests that "Those of us who do this work need to invent communities of friendly critical informants who can help us think through whose voices and analyses to front, and whose to foreground." I have adopted other self-protection methods such as: keeping an intermittent research diary; seeking counselling (discussed below) and establishing a network of allies. Research is a shared experience and without the willing co-operation and continuous support and feedback from athletes, their families and friends and a particular journalist it would not have been possible to sustain the necessary effort to keep the work going.

Managing my <u>SELF/SELVES</u>:

A second protocol, adopted mainly for my own survival and sanity, arose from two days of intensive discussion with an informed adviser/friend. During a period of particularly intensive pressure to divulge sources, names and data to the media, I felt the need to share my excitement, concerns and frustrations about this research. I could not do this in my usual personal circles, for obvious ethical reasons. I also felt that I needed to confide in someone beyond my immediate circle of close professional colleagues. I approached someone who had known me for many years and who had extensive facilitation skills. She agreed to work with me, in the role of counsellor, on an as-needs basis. Our first meeting began with several tortuous hours, attempting to map the emotional and methodological spaces of the research. At her suggestion I tried to separate my approach to the work into three different missions - the personal, the political and the scientific - each with its own written aims and objectives. This led me to recognise that I was driven by overlapping personal, political and scientific motivations and that it was not always easy to see which I was privileging at any given time.

Personal self: Gill Valentine (1998) has described eloquently but terrifyingly how a systematic (and ongoing) campaign of anonymous, homophobic hate mail has undermined her previously "unhyphenated, asexual academic identity with a sexual signifier" (Valentine, 1998: 307). Reading her account of the exclusionary discourses she has experienced in her own subject (geography) has made me re-examine my own positionality within sport and leisure studies and within my relations with my research participants. For example, whereas my status as 'out' lesbian is well-known within my professional community, I have never mentioned it in interviews, meetings or correspondence with my research participants. Why? It is certainly not an issue of concern to me in other contexts. But, in making a conscious decision to lay out my credentials as a former athlete, coach and researcher and *not* to mention my status as feminist, lesbian or activist, I have steered a particular path through the space that lies between interviewer and interviewee. I do not know whether the responses I have elicited would have been any different had my sexuality been 'declared'. I have exercised self-censure on my sexual identity (is this self-homophobia?) for fear that interviewees might, as many others do, conflate '(homo)sexual identity' with 'sexual perversion' and, as a result, choose to retreat from the interview. My judgement, then, was that disclosure of my lesbian identity might have affected the willingness of the participants to engage with the research. In retrospect I realise that I denied them an opportunity to make such a judgement for themselves.

Political self: At the same time as struggling to address these discourses within the worlds of research and policy, I have been making ever-widening connections with the world of practice and advocacy, through delivering presentations, training, seminars and workshops on sexual abuse and athlete protection. My office has become a *de facto* clearing house: I receive, on average, three or four approaches each day for advice, referral, or information simply because there is no official conduit for such enquiries. Yet another level of engagement in this research has been, of course, with athletes themselves and, occasionally, with their parents or close friends. I have given literally dozens of newspaper and radio interviews, written many short articles for magazines or newsletters, and appeared in several major television documentary programmes. All this has been done because of my determination to bring the issue of sexual abuse in sport to wider public attention in the hope of stimulating policy development and implementation from the major sport agencies in Britain and beyond.

The quick response, sound-bite approach of most journalists rests very uneasily against the requirements of painstaking research. I have had to adopt my own personal guidelines to avoid being pushed too hard into 'naming and shaming'. I do not divulge names or other identifying features of athletes or their coaches; I do not even name their sports yet, since the evidence base about differences between sports is so poor. At the same time, I weigh the benefits of media coverage (reaching a wider audience, encouraging athletes to come forward and talk, perhaps giving athletes or their parents the confidence to seek help from someone else) against the disadvantages of ill-informed, exaggerated coverage. In all my political activity, self-surveillance-as-lesbian is ongoing. Will my work be discredited as the rantings of a man-hater? Will I be rejected by informants who judge me to be hi-jacking their misery to pursue my own feminist goals? How should I dress to meet interviewees? How do I answer questions about female sexual abusers in sport? How do I prevent the constant confusion of (homo)sexuality and sexual predation? Herein lies food for further thought and research.

Scientific self: When in doubt about which 'self' is at work I remember the advice of my counsellor/friend "Keep going back to your desk". In other words, unless the scientific work is good, the political and personal missions can never be realised. But this exhortation implies a) that there is only one science and b) that the scientific self is somehow privileged over the other selves. Feminist, more especially post-structural/feminist, critiques of traditional science have destabilised conceptions of 'good science' (Barrett & Phillips, 1992). Under these kinds of descriptions the concept of truth is problematised. Although theory development is my scientific ambition, the kind of work I do meets very few of the criteria for conventional/malestream social science (Spender, 1981; Brackenridge, 1996) yet it also fails to engage substantially with the politics of difference. I have chosen, in the main, to adopt the relative safety of social-psychological language and methods because I judge that this is "where sport is" (Brackenridge, 1998b) and this kind of science is most likely to effect leverage and bring about change in practice. However, in making such a choice, I risk satisfying neither structuralists nor post-structuralists!

The articulation of these different selves with their different missions has proved enormously helpful in unscrambling problems with the research. Feminists have long claimed that the "personal is political" and

consequently have striven to avoid depoliticising debates about individual and organisational power. Despite this, I justify my conceptual separation of selves as both a device to help clarify my motives and as a framework to help guide my research strategy.

Conclusions - Maintaining focus

During the course of my intellectual journey I have come to face several crises, some of representation (of others) and others of legitimation (of self-as-researcher). My greatest challenge in learning to manage myself has been how to maintain focus in the face of internal doubts and external pressures. The exhortation to keep going back to my desk, that is to do good science, is a very important voice in my head when I am being pulled one way by the power of the media and another by the selfishness of personal ambition. It also helps me to focus on what I call my 'long game' by which I mean the investment in the painstaking accumulation of evidence and the tortuous process of theory development. In this respect, at least, my research ambitions – to predict and then to control – are shared with those of many other traditional social scientists. Yet I am constantly faced by questions about what might distort my data or make the work 'bad science'. For example: only volunteers come forward; they reproduce (possibly false) memories; they have vested interests; theirs is only one side of the story; I cannot verify what I am told; I rarely meet athletes who have dropped out of sport because of the abuse; those who 'survive', stay in sport and choose to speak out may be atypical or unusually strong. I have also realised very late in the research that my silence on matters of sexuality must have influenced the research process and that it certainly has influenced the (hostile) reception of my work in certain quarters of both the practical and academic domains of sport.

In this paper I have used my personal experience of researching sexual abuse in sport to explore strategies for personal survival as an investigator. Acknowledgement of the interrelationship of researcher and researched, a part of the reflexive project in sociology, is a step towards positioning myself as researcher. In the process, I have 'discovered' evidence of missing dimensions in the research, notably those concerning my own sexuality and the sexual politics of investigative social science. My own sexuality was constructed and realised largely through my personal and professional involvement in sports. It guides my epistemological decisions – what I regard as problematic and why, how I decide to investigate particular

issues, how and where I choose to present my work and how I value myself as a researcher and as a person. It took me (too) many years to realise this and to begin to see that, not only is scientific knowledge socially constructed but it is also highly personal: what I know, then, shapes who I am just as who I am shapes what I know.

The framework of self-management - coping with stress, coping with being alone, and privileging the personal, political or scientific self – is, of course, an artificial one. As someone once said, reality just *is* messy: my 'selves', of course, are in constant dialogue, seeking consensus through conflict. For me the personal *is* still political. Nonetheless, there have been moments when this framework has helped me to practise mental hygiene and to survive as an investigator simply by offering a set of optional routes towards the same destination.

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