

Ethical Issues in Researching Discourses of Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: Experiences from the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

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Abstract

Most feminist researchers have not adequately addressed specific ethical dilemmas that emerge when conducting research on sexual harassment in African Higher Education institutions. Since the study used some of the students' direct and indirect autobiographies which were told under stigma, disbelief, and pain, thus, the researcher had to consider ethics of research, since the stories helped uncover important aspects of social realities in the context institutional culture. In this paper I present ethical challenges which the researcher encountered while exploring discourses of sexual harassment, which if not dealt with professionally could affect quality of data. The ethical challenges discussed in this paper are based on access and consent with the research participants; participant's traumatic experiences; privacy and confidentiality of the study participants and data. The article is based on the authors' experiences on ethical issues drawn from a larger PhD study 2013 entitled: Exploring discourses of access and sexual harassment in Higher Education: A study of students' perceptions of the University of Nairobi's Institutional Culture, Kenya.

Key words: Feminist research; sexual harassment; ethical dilemmas; consent; access; traumatised experiences; privacy; confidentiality.

1.0 Introduction

Ethics in research dealing with sensitive issues such as sexual harassment usually places a researcher in a difficult position on how to deal with the multi-faceted issues and dilemmas. Ethical issues arise from the kind of problems social scientists investigate and the methods used to obtain valid and reliable data

(Nachmias and Nachmias, 2004). For instance, a study focusing on perceptions of men and women students' experiences of discourses of sexual harassment is, indeed sensitive. Being sensitive means that sexual harassment is surrounded by embarrassment, victimisation, silence, ignorance, secrecy, stigma, threats and discrimination (Lee, 1993; World Health Organisation, 2001; Jansen, Hilber and Johansen, 2006). Such a research topic is likely to intrude into private spheres or delve into deeply personal experiences (Lee, 1993), sometimes posing a substantial threat to those involved in the research, which according to Fontes (2004), can make the collection or/and dissemination of data problematic. Ethical issues are usually concerned with moral questions of what is wrong and right regarding a research process. Ethical guidelines outlined by the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; Neuman, 2000), did inform the present study.

As part of feminist research ethics, a number of reviewed studies on sexual harassment were concerned about issues of privacy and confidentiality, which guided the present. For instance, Imasogie (2002) used letters to refer to the faculty, while Ladebo (2003) withheld the names of the universities. Naidoo and Rajab (1999) maintained that answering of the Sexual Harassment Questionnaire was anonymous. Sexual harassment touches on students' privacy in ways that could be stressful and emotional. Thus, in line with what Kamau (2009) noted a sensitive study requires serious ethical considerations throughout the research process.

2.0 The Relevance of Ethical Issues in exploring discourses of Sexual Harassment

In this study, the researcher encountered ethical challenges or issues in different phases of the research process: data collection, analysis, report writing or dissemination of the findings. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), these phases are potential sources of ethical problems in feminist research. The specific ethical challenges the researcher had to deal, some of which have been outlined by Kirch (1999) include: the issue of privacy (confidentiality, anonymity and need to ensure adequate and informed consent); negotiating access to the respondents and dealing with participants traumatic experiences. Throughout the research process the researcher considered the values and beliefs of the participants while bearing in mind the sensitive nature of research topic. Therefore, the researcher needed to deal with these ethical issues without hurting any of the study participants, for purposes of generating meaningful and relevant data, that allows the respondents to develop and express their own realities. This was crucial because data was generated using aspects of private stories of men and women students' experiences while bringing these accounts into public domain (Edwards and Ribbens, 2000; Birch, Miller, Mauthner, and Jessop, 2002; Mauthner, Birch, Jessop and Miller, 2002). In the next section the author examines in details each of the three ethical challenges encountered during the research process.

2.1.1 Negotiating for Access and Consent with the Research Participants

Negotiating for access and getting informed consent to conduct research is a real ethical challenge to researchers. The main concern of informed consent has to deal with 'respect' (McCormick, 2013) of those involved in the research process (organisations and participants). McCormick (2013) advises researchers the importance of obtaining informed consent before embarking on any research. First, the researcher sought approval to collect data from the Ministry of Science, Education and Technology, and Registrar in the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's office (Administration and Finance) University of Nairobi. Similarly, Zindi (1994) had sought permission from the Ministry of Higher Education in

Zimbabwe, while Naidoo and Rajab's (1999) proposal was approved by the University administrative authorities, academic departments and students' bodies in the University of Natal, South Africa .

Secondly, in accessing the study participants, the researcher had first to make contact with the potential participants before explaining to them the study objectives and then seek their consent to be interviewed. Informed consent involves respect for autonomy, protection of vulnerable persons (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005), and the participant's freedom to participate. Therefore, the respondents were kindly requested to avail themselves for the interview. Verbal consent was preferred to written. This is because verbal consent creates personal attachment between the researcher and the participant. Miller and Bell (2002) makes it clear that access to research participants on a sensitive topic should be based on trust, since use of formal consent could challenge the relationships between the researcher and interviewee.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, voluntary participation became the guiding principle, particularly in the sampling of fourth year students and student leaders. McCormick (2013) argues that informed consent becomes meaningful when the respondents voluntarily agree to share their understanding of the issue under investigation. Thus, volunteering sampling is the idea of requesting respondents to willingly agree to participate in the research process (Ahuja, 2003). The researcher together with eight volunteer students, (four men and four women) posted advertisements on strategic notice boards where the students frequent most in each of the six colleges/two campuses of the University of Nairobi, that is, in the Halls of Residence, especially those occupied by the fourth year students, libraries, students' cafeteria (MESS) and the Hall Officer's notice boards.

The specific procedures followed in using the advertisement included placing it on the notice boards, giving the students time (mostly two to three days) to put down their particulars (name, gender and cell phone contact), computing the results from the advertisement in a sampling frame and use of lottery method. In this case, the sampling frame was prepared by listing down the students who had written their names, contact and gender on the advertisement. This was done by noting down the numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, etc) against each respondents' name obtained from the advertisements. The names and numbers were then written down on small pieces of paper. These papers were placed in two containers, each representing men and women students. After mixing up the papers in each of the two containers, the research assistant were asked to pick out one paper at a time (use of simple random or lottery method) until the desired number of respondents was obtained. Use of simple random sampling or lottery method selection process guaranteed and ensured each member of the population an equal and independent opportunity of being selected (May, 1997; Cohen, *et al*, 2000; Ahuja, 2003) to participate in the study.

In the process of interviewing the students, despite the researchers use of negotiation skills, two women students were reluctant to participate in the interviews, even after having met and talked with them before the interview. All the men students who were approached for the study voluntarily agreed to participate. Birch and Miller (2002) notes the need to operate within a feminist 'ethics of responsibility'. Since feminist research highlights on respect and trust, there was need to respect the two women students' decision, but continued persuading them to participate in the interview. Rubin and Rubin (2005) emphasis the need to avoid putting pressure on a respondent to participate in any research process against his/her wish. In addition, Miller and Bell (2002) notes the reluctance of women students to participate in the interview sessions, especially if contact comes from men, unlike in the

present study where they were approached by a woman lecturer/researcher. The idea that men may prohibit women from participating in such kind of sensitive research as postulated by Ellsberg and Heise (2005) could probably be a possible explanation for the women students' need to withdraw from the research. This is because many violent partners tend to control the actions of their partners such that even the act of speaking without their partners' permission could lead to more violence (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005). Although the present study did not explore this dimension, it may be an ethical dilemma relating to women in power (faculty) and women students.

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research while being assured of confidentiality of the information collected. For instance, they were told that the information collected was to be used for 'academic purposes' only, and that codes instead of their names would be used in the report. The participants were further reminded that the data they had shared with the researcher would be used in making important recommendations to help other men and women facing similar challenges. Giving details regarding the aims and nature of the research makes it easy for a researcher to get participants with fewer difficulties (Cohen *et al*, 2000; Mauthner, 2000; Ellsberg and Heise, 2005). This also made the participants know what and why the research is being done, a way of gaining and maintaining confidence and trust. The purpose of the study was emphasised in all the 30 interviews and four focused group discussions, although sometimes the researcher took a slightly different approach since each case was unique in terms of (gender, campus, degree programme, personal attributes), with an aim of achieving the same goal. In the process, '*good relationships*' with the participants (Birch and Miller, 2002: 91) was established. This was achieved through the use of 'chat-talks' or informal talk.

The casual chat was meant to create natural, relaxed and informal atmosphere at the beginning of each of the interview sessions (Parr, 2000; Ulin, Robinson, Tolley and McNeil, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The purpose of the chat was aimed at giving the researcher an opportunity to comment on events or situations that are familiar and important to the respondents at the time of the interview. Thus, casual chat did help create and search for a common ground, in order to build good relationship with the respondents, a way of developing rapport (Bogdan and Bilken, 1998; Ulin *et al*, 2002), and relaxing the interviewer and interviewee (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The nature of the chat varied from one student to another and it generally took about three to five minutes. The chats were usually based on the family affairs/matters of the students, university issues such as accommodation, academic programmes and the researcher's studies. Sharing such experiences helped develop a close bond that led the researcher and interviewee to a relaxed and fruitful conversation. This further helped to generate rich information by establishing credibility and earning respondents' trust (Ulin *et al*, 2002; Gillman, 2003).

In creating a friendly relationship, the researcher and the interviewee come to understand each other well, trust and have confidence in each other which then increases one's likelihood of getting rich data required by a qualitative researcher (Birch and Miller, 2002; Dunscombe and Jessop, 2002). The friendly relationship between the researcher and participant encouraged them to speak freely and to make their contributions without any fear. Emphasising on the importance of establishing human relationship as a key element to researching a sensitive topic, Ann Oakley (1981:58) in Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong (2008) states that '*personal involvement is—a condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives*'. Thus, through the researcher's personal involvement in the research

process it became possible to be able to generate meaningful data through the use of in depth interviews and focused group discussions.

During the interview introductions, the researcher sought permission from the study participants to use the digital recorder. Scholars, Bogdan and Bilken (1998), Patton (2002), Rubin and Rubin (2005) noted that the idea of obtaining permission before recording is key to successful interviewing process. Use of a recorder was significant in ensuring that accurate and complete 'verbatim' data (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) was collected from the interactive nature of the individual interviews. In addition to increasing the accuracy of data collected, use of a recorder permitted the interviewer to be more attentive or close to the interviewee because any successful interview requires great concentration. To ensure confidentiality of the participant's recorded 'voices', they were promised that it was only the researcher who would have access to the recorded voice, while avoiding recording or writing down their names. Similarly, Kamau (2009), for example, assured the respondents of making anonymous any details that could be used to identify them.

2.1.2 Dealing with Research Participants' Traumatic Experiences

Any social research that involves sensitive issues and emotional topics could probably create potential risk or harm (Kirsh, 1999; McCormick, 2013) to both the researcher and the participant. McCormick (2013) notes the need to guard against potential harm particularly to the participants. Ellsberg and Heise (2005) theorise that, conducting interviews on violence-related incidences could make the victims to relieve painful and frightening events. In dealing with the ethical issue before carrying out the interviews, the respondents were alerted of the freedom to withdraw from participation and decline to answer certain questions or discuss a particular topic in case they felt threatened or uncomfortable. The participants' need to withdraw from the research at any time was partly informed by Kirsh (1999).

During two of the interview sessions, one woman student was reluctant to respond to some of the questions expressing some fear, while another one stammered, and at times remained silent causing the researcher to stop the interview for about ten minutes. The two women students in the current study seemed to have gone through traumatic sexual experiences on campus. Similarly, Urquiza, Wyatt and Goodlin-Jones (1997) in Fonte (2004) reported of traumatised victims of violence showing emotional responses such as tearfulness, headaches, anger and depressed mood. Being overwhelmed by memories of sexual harassment through recalling of terrifying, humiliating or very painful experiences has further been reported by Shrandar and Sagot (2000), Shumba and Matina (2002). The dilemma of whether to continue with the interview or to stop characterised some of the in depth interviews, not forgetting the wishes of a man or woman not to talk of their deeply hidden and private experiences need to be respected.

Although the researcher had no professional knowledge on how to deal with traumatised responses, there was need to be creative in order to make the researcher and the participant 'safe'. The researcher, therefore, applied the limited knowledge of counselling by carefully speaking in a respective manner to the woman student after which she was given the option of either continuing or stopping the interview. The way one approaches counselling role is important because as Coles and Mudaly (2009) cautions it may have a significant influence on the research interview and data collected, either by limiting or enhancing interaction. In this study, counselling enhanced the interaction because the traumatised student agreed to continue with the interview sessions, while being reassured of the confidentiality of all

the responses. Ellsberg and Heise (2005) report respondents choosing to continue with the interview after emotional debriefing. However, going by Rubin and Rubin's (2005) suggestions, the researcher always remained patient with hesitations and silences, thus, giving the respondents' time to reconstruct and reflect on their thoughts.

2.1.3 Privacy of the Study Participants and Data

Any research dealing with sexual harassment, such as the present study, requires the researcher to protect, control and safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of the participants (Nachmias and Nachmias, 2004; Fonte, 2004), and the information (Fonte, 2004) shared with the researcher. Privacy is a fundamental human right recognised in Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. Privacy underpins human dignity and other values such as freedom of association and speech. The right to confidentiality and privacy give participants the freedom to decide for themselves when and where, in what circumstances and to what extent their personal attitudes, opinions, habits, beliefs, behaviour, doubts and fears are to be communicated or withheld from the others (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 1981 in Cohen *et al*, 2000; Nachmias and Nachmias, 2004). Thus, violation of privacy remains a concern (United Nations, 1948), particularly in this present study.

Throughout the interviewing process, the researcher was aware that the nature of research on sexual harassment, could make the respondents feel embarrassed and uncomfortable; hence affect their level of participation. Thus, the researcher made sure that both men and women students/leaders were comfortable and willing to participate. Further, there was need to keep on reminding the participants of the confidentiality of their identities. By making the respondents feel comfortable throughout the interview sessions they were in a better position of disclosing private data to the researcher. Since men and women students' experiences mainly occur in their personal lives and voices, this could be seen as 'private' (Edwards and Ribbens, 2000; Kamau, 2009), or culture of private domain (Kamau, 2004).

Fonte (2004) noted the importance of maintaining confidentiality and privacy of research participants by ensuring that their names or identities are not known. The researcher achieved this by separating the respondents' identities from the information they gave making sure it was not identifiable with any particular participant. The researcher used numbers I, II, III, IV, V and VI to represent the six colleges; name tags during the Focused Group Discussions, for instance labelled 1, 2, 3, 4 etc., to represent different student leaders. Use of name tags is a reminder that a system is in place to protect the anonymity of participants (student leaders) and the moderator (researcher) (Ulin, *et al*, 2000). Students leaders were encouraged to refer to each other by the numbers on the tags, for example, '*...I agree with number 4 that...*' etc, during the discussions which helped protect their identity.

Changing certain identifying details in the discussion of the research findings helped to maintain confidentiality and privacy of the participants so that no one would be able to identify the person with the information provided. Throughout data presentation the researcher used coding systems. For instance, with the interview transcripts C23F or C10M was used to represent case/interview 23 woman or 10 man respectively; and FGD4 was used to represent Focused Group Discussion 4. Use of letters, numbers or pseudonyms is meant to protect privacy of the participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This approach has also been used by other feminist researchers such as: Zindi (1994), Imasogie (2002),

Shumba and Matina (2002) and Labedo (2003). Some feminist researchers argue against use of numbers or letters, noting that it is alienating since it breaks the link between people and data (Kamau, 2009). In this study, the researcher made an ethical decision to use numbers and letters but with caution by remaining closely in touch with the 'voices' heard during the interviews, a key aspect of feminist research. By avoiding use of the participants' identities, it assured the respondents that any private and sensitive information they shared with the researcher remained confidential.

Apart from assuring participants of confidentiality, privacy also meant meeting the interviewees in places where they felt their safety was not compromised. This at times presented a challenge since all the students were in session at the time data was collected, sometimes making it difficult to obtain a quiet private space, for conducting the interviews. Before proposing any venue the researcher first asked the participants to give their options. In most cases, women students gave the researcher the option of using their rooms in the Halls of Residence, unlike the men students who did not seem to have an idea of where we could meet. Earlier during the pilot study, the researcher learnt that conducting interviews in public offices posed disturbances such as telephone calls and people coming in and out. The researchers' position as a lecturer in the University of Nairobi was an added advantage of being able to easily negotiate with men and women students/leaders for a quiet space to carry out the interviews and focused group discussions

3.0 Conclusion

It is clear that feminist researchers encounter a number of ethical challenges while conducting research. This article presents some of the key areas where challenging ethical decisions are required in researching a sensitive topic that deals with people's private lives, with the aim of collecting reliable and verbatim data. The research experiences and the ethical guidelines thought before the study placed the researcher in a position of being able to deal with the ethical dilemmas throughout the research process. In dealing with ethical dilemmas especially those related to negotiation of access and consent, participants' traumatic experiences and maintaining privacy of study participants and data, the researcher was able to conceptualise what Kamau (2009:229) refers to as 'speaking the unspoken', or Mama's (2006) ideas of women's unspoken and complex university experiences, by bringing them into the public domain, for academic and professional audiences (Edwards and Ribbens, 2000).

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