**“Revealing Too Much?” Reflecting on Emotions in Research with South Asian Women**

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**Introduction**

This chapter focuses on qualitative research and demonstrates the ways in which ‘emotional encounters’ with participants may be understood and managed. Although reflecting on feelings or emotions during the research process has not generally been encouraged, such an approach is gradually gaining academic currency. In seeking to acquire an understanding of the researcher’s perspective, reflexivity can be used as a tool to explore the dialectical relationship between the researcher and participants when faced with decisions about revealing information not required (or expected) in a research project. Literature that reflects the importance of understanding emotions within the research process is drawn on and as a starting point the chapter considers what an emotion is before going on to investigate if there is emotional management during the ‘emotional encounter’. The gendered aspect of emotion work forms an important part of the discussion and the remaining challenges to the work on emotions considered here concern how research can benefit from ‘emotional encounters’. It also considers how reflexivity can avoid pitfalls such as voyeurism or stories exclusively about pain, which is evident in some minority ethnic women’s autobiographical works, for example, Jaswinder Sanghera’s Shame; Daughters of Shame; and Shame Travels: A Family Lost, a Family Found. This is critiqued by Reynolds (2002a), who states that black women’s literature, in its pursuit of authenticity, has positioned them as victims. The intention of the research therefore is to put forward the narratives of South Asian women who occupy multiple structural positions in British society, who experience multiple discrimination at all levels, and who are marked by heterogeneity yet continue to be viewed in a stereotypical fashion (Brittain et al., 2005).

**The Research**

The data is drawn from two research projects in which a total of forty-two South Asian women were interviewed. The fi rst project involved interviewing thirteen female Bangladeshi Muslim university (humanities) students and graduates about their experiences of higher education. The second project was concerned with political agency and twenty-nine women (Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Sikh) working in projects for Asian women were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours, were carried out in private, recorded and the data transcribed. The participants gave written consent to be interviewed and were briefed on the aims and objectives of the project and issues of confidentiality and anonymity. As the researcher for both projects, the women interviewed were not required in any way to divulge personal or sensitive information. However, in order to contextualise the work done in the projects, i.e. dealing with their client group’s problems related to sexual abuse, forced marriage and domestic violence, I have included their narratives. A small number of women disclosed personal experiences; therefore this chapter conveys my response to unexpected sensitive information during the interview and my emotional response at a later stage during transcribing (Gilbert, 2001; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). The reflections on my own emotions felt during the research and through transcribing were from my research diary, enabling me to make observations and locate myself in the research process. I also wanted to avoid a reflexive account that could be interpreted as voyeuristic or exhibiting over-rapport (Skeggs, 2002; Walkerdine et al., 2002).

**Emotions in Research and Reflexivity**

The term ‘emotion’ is elusive and has been described by Oatley (2004: 13) as ‘a tug on the sleeve. Sometimes it can be a violent shove, or a painful kick. It demands to be noticed, it demands to be understood’. If we understand that emotions form a central role in our lives and what it means to be human, then this must be extended to research in all disciplines. In qualitative research emotions have been described in a variety of ways (Gilbert, 2001: 9) and researchers have often been asked simultaneously to remove emotions from the research process and to establish rapport (Kleinman and Copp, 1993). If emotions are highlighted there is the risk that the research will be judged critically as exhibiting over-rapport and its validity questioned (Walkerdine et al., 2002; Wilkins, 1993). One way of dealing with diffi cult emotions is for researchers to repress them (Kleinman and Copp, 1993) or to avoid doing similar research (Kleinman, 2002). Despite the emotional toll, researchers return to similar research many times resulting in high quality research on emotionally charged phenomena such as rape and bereavement (Gray, 2008; Wolf, 1996). Although this can be challenging, we can learn from the process and put in effective strategies (Savage, 2004). Furthermore, it shows how we are linked to social structures through the corporeal and personal history (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions in research have gradually become more acceptable and it has been recognised that the experiences of researchers as ‘emotional’ requires further development (Bloor et al., 2007; Campbell, 2002; Gilbert 2001; Holland, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Spalek, 2007). Participants sometimes use the research environment as a conduit to reveal (unexpected) emotions and in turn, the researcher has to be able to fi nd a ‘suitable’ response (DicksonSwift et al., 2006, 2008 and 2009; Woodby et al., 2011). This is complicated by efforts to achieve rapport that can sometimes lead to falsifying rapport or over-rapport through ‘self-disclosure’ (Liamputtong, 2007; Lumsden, 2009). In the quest to collect data, discomfort may be felt by researchers suggesting that ‘emotion work’ is involved during ‘emotionally engaged’ research (Campbell, 2002; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006 and 2009; Fritz and Kitzinger, 1998; Reynolds, 2002b). Although dealing with emotions means that researchers have to possess therapeutic skills, they must also be able to establish the use of emotion as epistemologically signifi cant (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Warr, 2004).

Refl exivity has been associated with feminist research and has been used to make sense of emotional encounters (Adkins, 2003; Macbeth, 2001). Reflexivity allows us to link the research encounter with the real-world situation; to question accepted norms and values; to provide insights to ‘emotionally sensed knowledge’ (Adkins, 2003; Hubbard et al., 2001; Macbeth, 2001). However, what lies at the heart of qualitative research is a quest to tell a story and the researcher is implicated even if reflexivity is employed. Stories can involve us at a deep emotional level, the complexity of which is described as a ‘dance between them which produces the stories told within the research’ (Walkerdine, et al., 2002: 179–180). The ‘dance’ indeed is one that involves rapport, expectations and the sharing of identities such as ‘race’, gender, class, age and sexuality and has been documented by many researchers (Bhopal, 2001 and 2010; Gunaratnam, 2003; Phoenix, 1994; Reay, 1996 and 1998). It also involves ‘dancing’ around sensitive issues and deciding whether to conceal or reveal information by the researcher and participant. Stories are arrived at through human interaction, which can be viewed as having its own internal dynamics rather than being static (Walkerdine et al., 2002: 188). The emotional content of research during the research process and afterwards is of interest, therefore, for some researchers reflexivity facilitates an understanding of the dialectical relationship/interaction between the researcher and participants and the accompanying emotions (Holmes, 2010: 149; Theodosius, 2006).

The contradictions that are inherent in our lives, our structural location and positions of power in research are important to acknowledge, and through this we avoid the risk of presenting reflexive accounts by researchers as simply voyeuristic, fetishistic or those that render the researcher powerless (Ahmed, 2004; Skeggs, 2002). Instead we can present the accounts as having a kind of ‘emotional connectedness’, which should feature in ‘well-executed research’ (Coffey, 1999: 158–159). Reflecting on emotions in both research projects with South Asian women indicates that emotions are moving, that we are moved by them, and that they connect us to our history, to each other as collectivities, to our bodies and external structures (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed (2004) shows how reflexivity, pain and anger against oppression can be potentially transformative.

**Moving on from ‘The Confessional’**

Skeggs (2002) points out that the aim of the researcher is not to exploit research participants but to learn from them, i.e. avoid the ‘reproduction of passive pathologies’ through negative and stereotypical portrayal of South Asian women in the media. However, Skeggs’ work shows reflexivity to be a bourgeois preoccupation that represents voyeurism through seductive confessional stories. She shows how it is used to confirm power relations, yet she also views it as an important component of research (ibid.). To overcome this contradiction, it is important to state that by highlighting emotional responses (through reflexivity) to research does not necessarily involve appropriation of a woman’s story (Ahmed, 2004) or to show her pain (hooks, 1990; Reynolds, 2002a). Instead, what it does is to point to the position of the ‘subaltern’ and to reflect on researching areas of critical concern such as sexual abuse and violence; therefore Skeggs (2002) points to a reflexive practice that is ethically informed. Although research involves an element of risk, we do not just simply stop doing research; instead, we must ‘consider practical ways of ameliorating these [risks]’ (Sampson et al., 2008: 923; Savage, 2004).

What follows in the next section is an account of my research experiences with South Asian women who revealed sensitive and personal information without prompting, appropriation or distortion. It is significant to note also that the two research projects focussed on political agency and experiences of higher education, not sexual abuse of girls, forced marriage, disownment and violence against women.

**Reflecting on Experiences of Emotions in Research**

The narratives of the women interviewed construct a version of the social world in which I am implicated, and they are products of the interaction between the researcher and the researched. A researcher therefore contributes to this construction. Far from the narratives presenting a ‘truth’, they provide data that allow an insight into the experiences of South Asian women. There were some women who during the course of the interview disclosed intimate information and the following is my account of the ‘emotional entanglement’ that resulted from the interaction. Through a refl exive approach I was able to process the unexpected information, and decide how I wrote about it to provide a deeper analysis of the interviews.

***Emotional Responses to ‘Revealing Too Much?’ Sexual Abuse, Forced Marriage and Violence***

If researchers have experienced emotional responses in projects that deal with sensitive issues, it is possible that they will repress writing about them. This is mainly in connection with the validity of the research being questioned due to over-rapport (Walkerdine et al.; Wilkins, 1993). Another response by researchers is to avoid carrying out similar research projects in the future (Kleinman, 2002). However, we cannot always be assured that this will not occur in research that is deemed by ourselves to be ‘safe’ (Hubbard et al., 2001). Thus when participants unexpectedly divulge information that is intimate and personal and not related directly to the research, the researcher has to process the information and decide how to manage difficult emotions (Lumsden, 2009). This can occur during the research and afterwards when listening to the narratives (Gilbert, 2001). In the project that researched the political agency of women working in projects, one of the participants told me about her work with women who self-harm:

We work with women who have self-harmed in the past and there was a time when I was seeing a lot of cases like that [with] women overdosing, women cutting themselves, women hitting themselves as a way of having some control back in their lives.

(Ravi, Refuge Worker)

The narrative above does not suggest that emotions are expressed; instead it contextualises the research undertaken with the political agency of South Asian women who have been instrumental in setting up projects to aid those who are vulnerable. As the research progressed, ‘self-harm’ emerged as a recurrent theme. The women who worked in South Asian women’s projects had noticed the extent of self-harm amongst young women and understood it as a psychological and physical response to oppression. For some women, self-harm is the only response to oppressive practices and is an attempt to gain control over their lives. The extent of sexual abuse and self-harm violence in the South Asian community, and how women who even at the point of death are silenced, is confirmed by the following participants:

Recently the cases that have come through have been young women experiencing multiple rape and sexual abuse.

(Indra, Asian Women’s Project)

All the women that I’ve seen in the past couple of months, that have issues around mental health, they’ve all self-harmed . . . whether it’s been here or back home . . . it is sad and it is disturbing. But for me I think the most disturbing part about it is when they’re policed when they go to the doctors or to the hospital, to tend to their wounds or to have their stomach pumped. They have family members threatening them there in the cubicle, ‘If you tell them why you did this we’ll make sure you’re deported’ or ‘We’ll kill you and your family back home’ or ‘We’ll make sure that Social Services remove your children from you’ [pause]. It [suicide] is also self-harming, they do it as a way of escaping, it’s a last resort but it is still categorised under ‘an escape’.

(Sofia, Asian Women’s Project)

Given the risks outlined in the statements above, it is important to recognise that the concepts of honour and shame are prevalent in South Asian communities and articles have appeared in social sciences, psychology and psychiatry journals that comment on mental health issues such as depression, self-harm and suicide amongst South Asian women (Anand and Cochrane, 2005; Bhugra and Hicks, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2004). The concept of shame is evident in sexual abuse cases when girls are often threatened so as not to expose the perpetrator because of the shame and loss of honour for the family. This was the case in an interview I conducted with a young woman, Laila, who I spoke to in the context of the research that focused on higher education experiences. During the interview, it transpired that she had thought about committing suicide and told me that she was self-harming as a result of sexual abuse by a distant relative. The sexual abuse occurred when Laila was a child and she went on to tell me about the shame she felt about the situation. In addition to this, she had recently been sexually assaulted by a man on her way home. Although Laila had told her family about this and they were supportive, she was still self-harming. The self-harm inflicted on her body was different from the popular understanding that includes cutting the skin or hitting oneself, but through (un)conscious attempts, i.e. not caring for her health through refusing to wear a coat or suitable footwear in the winter that had resulted in her contracting pneumonia (Turp, 2002).

At first glance it may appear to some observers that wearing unsuitable clothing in the winter is a regular occurrence amongst young women going out for the evening. However, when I interviewed this young woman (in the afternoon), I saw that she was not dressed appropriately for winter (no coat and bare feet in sandals). Her situation brought home for me a disturbing fact that concerns South Asian young women, similar to that expressed by the refuge worker above, i.e. the high numbers who self-harm and commit suicide. Laila conveyed to me an extremely distressing situation, which was that she hoped to end her life due to the violation inflicted on her body. There have been many studies carried out on the suicide phenomenon, for example, by women’s organisations such as the Newham Asian Women’s Project and Southall Black Sisters, who state how oppressive practices such as sexual abuse, forced marriage and restrictions through surveillance lead women to ‘escape’ or to control a situation through self-harm and suicide (Burman et al., 2001; Fenton and Sadiq-Sangster, 1996).

Various writers have also commented on the responses of mental health services and social services to South Asian women’s depression and suicide (Anand and Cochrane, 2005; Barn, 2008; Burman and Chantler, 2003; Burman et al., 2002; Raleigh, 2009). It raises questions about the role of multiculturalism which ‘allows’ oppressive and abusive practices to continue behind the façade of decency, morality and sexual purity of the South Asian community. Therefore the importance of the women only projects and spaces cannot be emphasised enough. Indeed some of the women I interviewed who were now engaged in work through projects had experience of sexual abuse themselves. One of the women in the research project focusing on South Asian women’s political agency revealed her personal history of sexual abuse when she was a child:

When I was a child I was abused, sexually abused by two, three, four, fi ve, six, seven men and with one of the men it was over a long period of time, maybe a year or something. I would have been about six when I worked it out. I had grown up in a family of four brothers, four sisters and I know for a fact that my older sister was abused and my older brother, who is older by a year and a half, was abused as well. . . . So one day mum found out about the abuse and what she then did, which is part of this stereotype but it’s also true! Basically to blame me as a child, obviously I was that type of child, which was why those men [pause] I suppose I never really confided [anything] to her [mother].

(Amira, Asian Women’s Project)

Although I was shocked by Amira’s revelations of sexual abuse during the interview, I was able to maintain a level of decorum. I respected her right to tell her story; after all, her account of sexual abuse helped her to fight the double standards operating within the South Asian community. Directly after the interview I was impressed by this woman’s courage to be open about her experience but I was also stunned into silence. When I returned to the interview and listened, my response was anger at the perpetrators, incredulity at the mother’s response and sympathy for the abused women. In relation to this example it is important to note that the two research projects that I was involved in investigated political agency and higher education experiences, and were not connected to sexual abuse or self-harm. As a result of revelations such as those above, I was confronted with how to write about women’s agency because their intimate experiences represented a form of ‘internalised oppression’ and passivity.

On reflection, this was my experience of powerlessness, i.e. how could I present the positive, empowered South Asian woman with agency? In research it is therefore important to understand the relationship between the mind, body and emotions (Stanley and Wise, 1993). On further reflection it became clear that sexual abuse of young girls in the Asian community was an issue and the role of women’s projects was crucial in terms of support. However, I had subconsciously transferred the powerlessness I was experiencing on to the participants who were actively challenging oppression. This led me to reflect on the experiences of another participant who was asked a question about her relationship with her immediate family. After telling me about her sons and daughters, she conveyed the following heartfelt narrative, expressed with deep emotion and regret, about her forced marriage to a much older man and the violence she experienced as a young woman:

I was actually forced into a marriage in Pakistan when I was sixteen to a first cousin who was fifteen years my senior. At the time of that marriage I was taken overseas as many young women are, on the pretence of a holiday. It was only when I arrived over there that I was told that my marriage had been arranged to my f rst cousin. The marriage itself had been set up by my brother-in-law and my mum was only made aware a week before. . . . Even though I didn’t want to go through with it [I did] because I was fearful for my own safety basically. I ran away for the second time. I was then set up in the sense that my brother-in-law had contacted somebody, a friend that I was in contact with, after I ran away and had brought me to the city centre (not knowing that my brother-in-law was going to be there) and when I saw my brother-in-law I fled but he then followed me and assaulted me physically in the city centre and I was admitted to hospital.

(Benazir, Women’s Network)

This participant had married the man chosen for her because this was the only route available to her to escape from Pakistan. On her return to Britain (without her husband) she ran away from home and thereafter gradually resumed contact with her family. The relationship with her family was fraught with diff culties as she was pressured to arrange for her husband to join her. This became intolerable, resulting in her running away for the second time. She told me of the pain and public humiliation she suffered at the hands of her brother-in-law because she had broken ‘the rules’ of acceptable behaviour, bringing dishonour and shame to her family. This participant had paid dearly for her freedom because she was ostracised from her family. Benazir told me that her involvement in the women’s network and adoption of children had filled a space emotionally. In connection with the political agency of women, this time on reflection, I was able to present this woman as empowered because she had organised a network that promoted women’s rights.

The projects set up by women such as Benazir provide support for women fleeing violence and protection from their families, yet the relationship with the family is an ambivalent (and emotional) one which most people can relate to (Brah, 1996: 76).

The ‘ties that bind’ are strong and disownment of women who have broken the rules of society is a feature in Asian communities. Disownment was expressed by another woman I interviewed:

By the time that I left I already knew that I wasn’t accepted in the family. . . . They [siblings] were the ones who kept the honour of the family so the pressure was from them to protect my parents from shame. So they played a major part. Families can hide individuals and they can decide not to talk about the individual, they will say that you do not exist and I think I was one of those people. I was just wiped off the face of the earth and my story is very important because it is actually saying that I exist. I am here. The book is not written for my family but to say I am here. I am truly here and I have tried to make something of my life. That is very important for many people who are different. (Simran, Writer and Campaigner)

‘Patriarchal discourses’ are concerned with the issues of honour and shame, and position women as ‘carriers of tradition and culture’ who can stain the family’s name (Brah, 1996; Gillespie, 1995: 80; Wilson, 2006). Simran (her pen name) had published a book, Children of Hope, with the aim of highlighting ‘disownment’. She expressed her sadness at losing her family and stated that her aim was to reunite women and men with their disowning families. Once again my refl ections on this interview involved sadness, sympathy, anger and then hope, which Simran’s book was attempting to achieve. Therefore, I was able to work through my emotions through reading her book, to contextualise her ‘missing’ family with her own family. She had managed to carve out a space for herself and was in the process of setting up an organisation to help disowned women and men. It is useful to reiterate that studies have shown how culture and religion are used to subordinate women of all ages who ‘learn’ to accommodate the needs of the family and not express their own feelings (Bennett and Detzner, 1997; Raval, 2009; Wilson, 2006). Indeed, understandings of culture are frequently used to justify subjugation of South Asian women and emotionally punish those who break the rules through disownment.

However, the question for me was, why did these women choose to reveal intimate facts about their past? Their revelations could be interpreted as a result of rapport or even over-rapport (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). My reactions consisted of shock, sympathy and anger at the hypocrisy of the South Asian community in their attitudes towards girls and women. Hubbard et al. (2001) argue that researchers are affected by data collected in interviews and retrospectively in the interviews with the women above, the shock must have registered on my face and been conveyed by my silence immediately after the revelation. After the interview and during transcribing I also felt revulsion and despair, which turned into anger (Hubbard et al., 2001). Although anger is sometimes regarded as negative, it is also an important emotion or form of energy that can propel us into action, i.e. it can push us forward because it is not passive or fatalistic. If we turn to the feminist and anti-racist movements, we can see how ‘the passion of anger is crucial to what gives us “the energy” to react against deep social and psychic investments in racism as well as sexism’ (Ahmed, 2004: 175; Lorde, 1984). Despite the nature of the revelations, I consider such encounters to be useful particularly in highlighting the extent of sexual abuse and violence (physical and emotional). Although it is an indictment of the South Asian community, it also provides evidence for those women involved in grassroots activism to facilitate social change.

Another aspect to consider is ‘emotional support’ for participants in research who reveal their hidden experiences, for example, Laila’s revelations of sexual abuse (Hubbard et al. 2001: 121). Although I was not prepared for the revelations, Laila was also in need of assistance, particularly with her recent experience. Fortunately my brief training as a tutor-counsellor equipped me to offer some immediate therapeutic intervention and I was also able to guide her to appropriate organisations that offered counselling. Although researchers have suggested that at the emotional level some people may benefit from participation in research, there are difficulties associated with the task of managing such situations. The danger of providing therapeutic support or counselling implies that researchers have the ability to help and to manage highly sensitive information; thus retrospectively, training is recommended in preparation for such an emotional encounter (Rager, 2005; Sampson et al., 2008). Hubbard et al. (2001) argue that such experiences can impact on the data collected in future research by avoidance of these issues by researchers.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the emotional experience, although negative, has not resulted in an avoidance of the specific issues faced by South Asian women and on the whole I could appreciate the positive nature of their work. It has been argued that the role of emotions is important in qualitative research. Although the study of emotions is not straightforward, we can see how experience and emotions are firmly linked to knowledge production. If we can recognise that emotions happen through the interactions between people, then it is possible to recognise that this is vital to the understanding of people’s lives. The focus was on research carried out with South Asian women and has brought attention to the management of emotions in situations when intimate information is revealed and to ‘emotion work’ carried out in such an encounter. For this to be revealed reflexively it is important to show how the researcher is implicated in research. Reflecting on research therefore allows us to consider emotional encounters and to use them in the analysis of data. Although reflexivity has its advantages, we must also accept that there is some difficulty in addressing emotions in research because of the many theories of emotions. Therefore, there is value in using ‘emotional reflexivity’ to explain research encounters not as a ‘truth’ but as a partial encounter because ‘the reproduction of the social is always incomplete’ (Holmes, 2010: 149). Thus researchers can provide a way of giving voice to those who are silenced, oppressed and presented in stereotypical ways and for acknowledging that emotions have epistemological value in research.

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