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Abstract

Failed research can function as the underbelly of all qualitative research projects that come to fruition. These shadow projects offer invaluable insights to future research and researchers alike. In this article, I trace a failed life history of sex offenders project from its conceptualization to its abandonment, after conducting a series of searches on the online National Sex Offender Registry database. Through the use of preliminary field notes and an analysis of media representations, I examine the role of bracketing of the topic, as a by-product of the phenomenological tradition, and other methodological issues such as physical and emotional vulnerability as a lone researcher, preconceptions harbored about "challenging" populations, and how a research setting can contribute to failed research.

A methodological adage from John Van Maanen's classic *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Van Maanen, 1988) has stayed with me over the years. The passage reflects on how researchers rarely publicly disclose mistakes or "failures" that they have made during the research process (p. 79). It reminds me that not unlike those researchers with failed projects lurking in the shadows, I, too, have abandoned research left in the conceptualization stage or simply phased out after data gathering, with data sets left in obsolete software applications never to be analyzed. These shadow projects can offer invaluable insights to future research, but the way in which most disciplines operate occurs through the production of positive results. Another major obstacle that amounts to lost opportunities to learn from missteps in the field stems from an academic code of silence. Whether in academia or applied research, failed studies are rarely openly discussed among scholars. This article, therefore, examines the lone research process, the effects of an immersive media analysis, the exercise of bracketing, and how these factors may have contributed to the abandonment of a research project.

Interrogation of "failure research" has been limited; nevertheless, it can be invaluable to the medical profession (Kingori & Sariola, 2015; Montgomery, 2015) in gaining insight into different stages of the research process (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2012) including methodological challenges when facing vulnerable populations with mental illness (Briggs, 2010) and in developing safe research strategies (Nilan, 2002; Steiner, 2016) when dealing with "dangerous field settings" (Batsleer, 2012; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007, 2008; Sampson & Thomas, 2003). In this last case, for instance, without proper coping mechanisms, qualitative methodologists can be subject to many mental health stressors during the research process (Clark & Sousa, 2018; Kumar & Cavallaro, 2017) that may contribute to abandonment of a project.

Given the lack of a body of literature in failure research, I sought to chronicle how a project on life histories of sex offenders eventually failed after a search in the National Sex Offender Registry database indicated my close proximity to multiple

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felons. By reexamining personal ephemera, including preliminary field notes and a media analysis of representations of sex offenders, I interrogate the role a theoretical framework played in my preparation for this project and how these representations as proxies for human subjects contributed to unintentional presumptions about the topic. Concerning the former, a theoretical framework applied to my ongoing study about sex workers (Gregory, 2005) revealed ways theoretical scaffolding can inhibit understanding of remotely related research topics; regarding the latter, I question how immersion in a media analysis contributed to a heightened awareness of the population (Zhang & Chia, 2006). Revisiting these field notes will help to identify what divergent factors may have contributed to my sense of vulnerability as a lone researcher (Bresler, Wasser, Hertzog, & Lemons, 1996). Specifically, I will apply interpretive phenomenology to gain perspective when understanding "why" I wanted to study this subject (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013), and I will reflect on the role bracketing played, if any, in obfuscating preconceptions harbored toward a "challenging" population (Oakley, 2010).

Arriving in Wisconsin

Over the years, I have felt some gratification in my ability as a researcher to gain entry into communities in which I was not a member but with whom I was able to build rapport despite our differences (Gregory, 2005). The more emotionally and physically uncomfortable an experience, the more I encouraged myself to face the challenges of gaining knowledge about that topic or the population of interest. These bodily reactions to tensions in the field, sometimes in the form of physical discomfort, have become a personal barometer of information for me. And while these bodily reactions may not be exclusive to noncollaborative research, treating one's body as an instrument for measuring vulnerability seems to be heightened for me as a lone researcher in the field. In hindsight, I can identify the way feelings of insecurity and vulnerability mixed with great excitement could occur when entering some field settings. This emotional performance of the researcher presented itself while I interviewed transgender streetwalkers in a desolate streetwalking zone (Gregory, 2005), or in subsequent years, when I conducted an observation of an online chat room where United States militia sympathizers used an audio application as a bullhorn for evangelizing why Randy Weaver was an American folk hero (Gregory, 2007). After the course of 2½ years as a lone researcher in the field observing commercial venues and conducting interviews with sex workers in the Netherlands, I was ready to map out a new research trajectory, preferably focused on populations relegated to the social and sexual periphery in the Midwest, where I held a new academic position.

Shortly upon arriving in Wisconsin, I learned from health educators at a health fair that the age of sexual consent in the state posed many problems for 17-, 18-, and 19-year-old gay men who would visit from neighboring states, like Illinois and Minnesota, where the age of consent was 17 and 16 years,

respectively (RAINN Consent Age, Illinois, 2017; RAINN Consent Age, Minnesota, 2017; RAINN Consent Age, Wisconsin, 2017). These young men would partake in what they presumed were consensual sexual relations, only later to find out their sexual partner was considered a minor or that the minor's family had pressed statutory rape charges against them. This trend led me to mull over what it meant to be 18 years old and in a sexual relationship where the sexual contact appeared consensual, but state law deemed it nonconsensual. For a young gay man who might experience desires outside the conformity of heterosexual norms and state jurisdiction of what constitutes a relationship (Murray, 2019), this scenario was not dissimilar to some of the legal and moralistic aspects facing people working in the sex industry. Hence, aspects of state regulation of sexuality seemed like a nexus between my research on sex workers and young gay men labeled as sex offenders.

Many of these gay men, who were barely adults themselves, were now incarcerated in Wisconsin prisons and branded for life as sex offenders. This realization made understanding nonnormative sexual relations involving underaged youth as a possible expression of political dissent and a challenge to socially constructed rules of sexual engagement.[1] How would the label of "sexual offender" further stigmatize an accused young gay adult? The person would not only be listed in a national directory but also be prohibited from living in certain places and working in some industries. Their family members could face potential harassment by association. For incarcerated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and heterosexual identifying young adult offenders, the issues are compounded by potential exposure in prison to a mix of repeat sex offenders, who could also be violent felons; furthermore, there is the long-term impact of stigma management for those whom the state has labeled "criminal" but who were minors at the time they committed a sexual offense with another peer (Stillman, *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2016). The complexity of the label of "offender" seemed like an unshakable weight to carry, long after the person had served their prison term (Stillman, *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2016). From this perspective, I considered the wide net that snared many types of people who, by all accounts, seemed to be within this population but varied in terms of types of offenses and degrees of sexual violence assigned to the label. All of this sparked my interest in pursuing a broader study of the population.

Life Histories Versus Assessment Scales

For the purpose of this article, I have conducted a brief search of relevant publications on sex offender studies and found out that my proposed life history project would have filled a gap in the research on this subject. In fact, the few relevant articles I identified have been published between 2008 and 2018, that is, after my project had been abandoned. I have included the following citations as an example of how the topic is framed across disciplines and what methodological instruments are used to understand the population. Crucially, examining the existing studies from this present standpoint only confirms to

me what was missing at the time of my initial inquiry and continues to expose a gap in the literature review. Indeed, most of these studies focus largely on historical or quantitative analysis of sex offenders' behavior. While a few recent papers have centered on sex offender treatment (Jones & Neal, 2018; Stinson, Becker, & McVay, 2015), therapeutic alliance (Watson, Daffern, & Thomas, 2015), and community-based sex offender integration (Keer, Tully, & Völlm, 2018), biometric assessment dominates the body of work (Davis & Archer, 2010; Janka, Gallasch-Nemitz, Biedermann, & Dahle, 2012) conducted on sex offenders. Most biometrics assessment range from arousal assessment (Reyes, Vollmer, & Hall, 2011), risk assessment scales to determine the rate of recidivism (Janka et al., 2012; Kim, Benekos, & Merlo, 2015; Lehmann et al., 2013; Simon, 2000) to "multiscale inventories" that enhance typologies to distinguish types of offenders (Davis & Archer, 2010). Although useful, these data gathered through self-surveillance and monitoring of sex offenders tend to reduce the human subject to a series of analytics.

My most staggering discovery among the existing research was the long history of European documentation, dating from the late 1930s to the 1960s, linking an array of "sexual deviant" behaviors to enforced institutionalization (van der Meer, 2008, 2014). Secondary sources range from criminal records to probation officer reports. Often medical records would include "voluntary" and involuntary castration and mandatory sterilization as a therapeutic punishment (Oosterhuis, 2014; van der Meer, 2008, 2014). Inherent in this practice from the 1930s is the assumption that sterilization eugenics would have a curative effect on a range of "sexual perversions" from those labeled as exhibitionists, chronic masturbators, nymphomaniacs, to men and women classified as "homosexuals" (van der Meer, 2008, 2014). Eugenics, therefore, functioned as the basis for a clinical approach that understood these traits or behaviors as hereditary and therefore could be passed down to offspring (pp. 50, 51). Whether to ensure the suppression of sexual desires or to guarantee infertility, these methods marked and controlled the bodies of those deemed as sexual deviants.

Of all the literature, only one article focuses explicitly on the ethical aspects of treating sex offenders (Grady & Strom-Gottfield, 2011). The authors identify a lack of effective evidence-based treatment, funding for research, and gaps in treatment effectiveness (p. 19). Most notably, the authors consider the vulnerability former sex offenders face with changing laws determining community notification and restrictions regarding residence. Overall, the article humanizes the population in ways that they are not in most publications, as it specifically speaks to an audience of clinicians who work directly with this population and points out the ongoing toll the label of sex offender takes on all parties involved in treatment.

What this brief literature review speaks to, even today, is an apparent gap in the research and a need to understand the lives of sex offenders. This meant that, as a qualitative methodologist, I would search for a holistic approach to understanding this diverse population. The method of life histories seemed underutilized but highly operational as a piecemeal approach to

reconstructing an in-depth narrative (Nelson, 2010). This narrative approach can come across as fragmented and largely based, though not exclusively, on the participant's point of view (Tierney, 2014). One of the benefits, however, is how the method situates the participant in a historical context through the use of unstructured interviews, newspaper articles, diaries, e-mails, text messages, photographs, ephemera, and the perspective of family and friends (Nelson, 2010). This 360° approach seemed holistic and utilized so many materials that could provide insight into the life of a sex offender. Hence, my interest in deploying this particular methodology was informed by my confidence in the way life histories could offer a glimpse into different stages of a person's life through storytelling.

Interpretive Phenomenology

For this article, it is beneficial to make a distinction between descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology, and their role in the research process. The former focuses entirely on the perspective of the participants; whereas the latter focuses both on the experiences of the researcher and on the participant to inform a study (Sorsa et al., 2015). Interpretive phenomenology, specifically, places a researcher's a priori theoretical framework and experiential or historical knowledge within the research process (Tuohy et al., 2013). This type of awareness, where the researcher feels truly present assimilating the complexity of social reality into his or her research process, can create different degrees of intentionality (Le Vasseur, 2003).

Various methods within the qualitative tradition are linked to the philosophy of phenomenology (Le Vasseur, 2003). In the writings of Husserl, and later that of his protégée, Heidegger, tensions mount within the area of phenomenology, consciousness, and the compartmentalization of preexisting experiences whenever a researcher engages in a new inquiry (Le Vasseur, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2010). While Husserl believed that a phenomenological deduction could occur, meaning that one could set aside prior opinion, Heidegger believed that phenomenological deduction could not occur within the realm of being, and therefore one could not distinguish the practice of intentionality from a priori knowledge and awareness (Le Vasseur, 2003). The notion of "setting aside" prior to understanding of any social reality in question is often referred to as *bracketing* and involves encapsulating one's preconceptions, theoretical commitments, and life experiences as they unfold within the phenomenological tradition (Le Vasseur, 2003). This phenomenological lens informs any interpretation of a sex offender's social reality and gives precedence to the lived experience in the production of knowledge (Gearing, 2004; Le Vasseur, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Putting Aside Preconceived Ideas

Bracketing (Saldaña, 2015, p. 4) can be particularly challenging when a researcher is heavily wedded to a particular theoretical framework or model that has shaped his or her

education or research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Le Vasseur, 2003; Sorsa, Kiikkal, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015; Tufford & Newman, 2010). At the time I began conceptualizing a life history project focused on sex offenders, I was immersed in the topic of commercial sex and desires and analyzed the topic using queer theory (Namaste, 1994) and treating most aspects of gender and sexuality as performative acts (Butler, 1989). Bracketing under these circumstances became an unrealistic task as I edited my dissertation to book form using a particular set of theoretical tenets (Gregory, 2005). This theoretical lens challenged dominant public perception of commercial sex and stigma management of sex workers; but it may not have been applicable to understanding the topic of sex offenders. Either way, the intellectualization of the topic temporarily removed me from the implications of the behavior and its infliction of pain on survivors.

Preliminary Field Notes as Data

St. Pierre (1997, 2013) asks in her seminal works what constitutes as data. Data can take the form of "emotional data, dream data and sensual data"; and over time, data can be reinterpreted with a new critical lens (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 177). If text is data, in the hermeneutic sense, then notes taken at all stages of the research process could play a pivotal role when analyzing or reanalyzing a topic at different points in time and under different circumstances. The following unedited prefieldwork writings may not be linear chronologically, but they have the potential to emerge as long forgotten textual artifacts (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 177). We must keep in mind that the textual object is neither static nor immune to change in terms of how it is critically understood through our own analysis and feelings over the passage of time. This could explain why so many qualitative methodologists are hesitant to publicly archive their field notes for future reinterpretation. Public exposure could feel too embarrassing; and making field notes or interview transcriptions available for public viewing would only draw attention to our outdated modes of thinking, social awkwardness, or what we failed to capture or missed when analyzing a research subject. This is especially true for lone researchers such as myself. My own notes about sex offenders and representations of sexual predators in the media provide dimension into how I thought through the topic, what my intentions were as a researcher, and what theoretical considerations were flooding my lens, consciously or not, as I attempted to compartmentalize these ideas.

The following preliminary field notes were never intended to be public facing and yet hold meaning as data (Anderson, 2006). They are meant as artifacts to better chronicle the research process and to better understand why the project was later aborted. And, while they represent a stationary moment, I read them now with the lens of hindsight, possibly seeking new meaning and interpretation, not unlike any other textual evidence taken from the field. Hence, it is incumbent upon the reader to decide whether there is a

production of knowledge in this process or whether they bring value to the methodology.

> In the writing of this paper, I can't even name the computer file I'm writing on as "pedophilia," such is the fear of being "caught" or of being misunderstood if this computer were to be checked or if the screen is accidentally seen by someone in passing. (2003)

I hesitated to use a naming convention when I saved the file, because aspects of the topic were socially taboo, and I feared they could be misinterpreted or hacked. Similar to a confessional, this opening entry speaks to my conscious trepidations about the topic. These underpinnings suggest that I may have internalized cultural norms around sex offenders and pedophilia and feared stigmatization by association. It is not clear how this sense of apprehension and bias could have manifested in my rapport building with human subjects, had I completed that research. This tension most likely would have led to an asymmetrical relationship with informants.

Elicited Emotions and Mass Media

> Often, when we refer to a pedophile, we have in mind a disturbed person unable to control "his" contorted sexual desires. His sexuality, commonly understood as deviant, is pathologized and perceived to be only satisfied through (sexual action). There are parallels between a serial killer who cannot avoid murdering "his" victims and a pedophile that is often constructed as one who cannot avoid raping children. This representation is well formed in our imagination. Marked as an uncontrollable act, the perpetrator must therefore be eradicated. If we, however, think of pedophilia as just another form of sexuality all criminal stigmas attached to it cease to hold. Is a pedophile necessarily a sexual predator just because he has desires? Or is he threatening to society whether he "acts" on his desires or not. (2003)

Although no formal reference can be deduced from the above field notes, exposure to popular culture surely influenced my partial framing of those early writings. As the conceptualization period progressed, I continued to screen themed film and television programming and then wrote interpretive, critical notes about the narratives and characterization of sex offenders. My viewing ranged from *Happiness* (Solandz, 1998) and *L.I.E.* (Ryder, Cuesta, & Cuesta, 2001) to *Capturing the Friedmans* (Jarecki, 2003), *The Woodsman* (Fechter & Kassell, 2004), and the occasional *Law & Order SVU* (Wolf, 1999–2018) episode linking sexual predators to the act of serial killing. The latter three represent very distinct fictional and nonfictional perspectives of the pedophile's social position and their engagement with the criminal justice system. While *Capturing the Friedmans* stands out as a documentary based on a real case, there was value in screening some fictional characterizations, in particular *The Woodsman*, where the principle character struggled to change his life after incarceration and

without family support. However, screening procedural series like *Law and Order SVU* (Wolf, Molina, & Makris, 2005) only lent to participating in some kind of public moral panic. And although these media references were personally selected for the purpose of a media analysis, they represented powerful stories and played some residual role in eliciting voluntary and involuntary emotions from me as the viewer.

To make sense of the relationship between emotion and mass media, I turned to Döveling, von Scheve, and Konijn (2010) to better understand how mass media transmit fictional and nonfictional "knowledge and information" to potentially "arouse and shape emotions—locally as well as globally" (p. 2). Here, emotion as a "domain of analysis" becomes the "outcome," or part of an instructive socialization to normative emotional responses (p. 8), not dissimilar from other "socially and culturally framed processes" (p. 4). In effect, these media representations of sex offenders, whether intended as entertainment or as a cautionary tale, must be understood as affective messaging, and therefore products of cultural processes that keep public opinion cycling through a whole course of emotions from fear and anxiety to sadness and anger. Thus, this type of emotional regulation makes it imperative to understand how messaging shapes a long-term affective response from viewers, and consequently that of public opinion.

Research suggests some television and cinematic content provides a "depiction of social reality" that elicits a negative effect on viewers, whereby eroding trust in the person or group represented (Zhang & Chia, 2006, p. 283). This phenomenon, called cultivation theory, may be more common during "passive consumption" of certain types of mediated content on noninteractive platforms when viewers feel a sense of social anomie than when users have a participatory media outlet available to them (Zhang & Chia, 2006, p. 283). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that because I personally curated the visual content and had a preconception of the material from which to "regulate" my emotions (Konijn & ten Holt, 2010, p. 40) for the purpose of writing my analysis that a parallel emotional state did not play out. The hyperconcentration of similar storytelling, with ambient sensory elements and arch, may have had more influence on my preconceived ideas about this sensitive topic and the challenges of compartmentalizing those emotions than anticipated.

> If the academic agenda for the past 20 years has been to deconstruct heterosexuality and expose how relations are socially constructed, how do the sexual desires that the pedophile represents fit into this scheme? Is pedophilia meant to be understood outside of this paradigm, or are his/hers desires a product of 21st century civilization? If we are truly committed to move away from an essentialistic construct of sexuality, this issue must be considered thoroughly. (2003)

While this supposition may have informed my theoretical framework on working conditions of sex workers, the circulation of the "normalization of this behavior" actually emerged from my screening the documentary, *Capturing the Friedmans*

(Jarecki, 2003). Screening the film lead to the question whether 20 years from now these relations—between adult and minor—would be normalized. This paradigm shift around a continuum of sexual expression challenged the boundaries of what could be considered socially constructed. Any premise to deconstruct the naturalization of a sexual order inevitably hits a wall with pedophilia. Years later a similar dialogue emerged in an episode of *Law & Order SVU* regarding "harmless feelings" (Wolf & Betancourt, 2009). This type of story line leads viewers to feel revulsion toward the normalization of socially reprehensible behavior. Thus, the potentially shifting social norms embedded in these messages resemble theories that circulated around my interpretation of transgender sex work in the Netherlands. Yet when read directly from my field notes, they appear out of context and do not give any indication that I had been influenced by a documentary, research on sex work, or an idea that had made it's way to a syndicated crime show.

Bracketing

As I review the curation of these notes 15 years later, notes written to explore the boundaries of my framing of the topic and the temperature of my discomfort level, there exists a degree of researcher detachment, hidden behind theoretical scaffolding that indoctrinated me as a scholar into an emotionally taxing topic. Is this mechanism of "putting aside" more than just an attempt to be nonjudgmental? In some cases, detachment affords researchers a way to function in a field setting that would otherwise be untenable; consequently, these disclosures could also be treated as "prereflective" experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013).

La Vasseur (2003), quoting Salsberry (1989), suggests that all modes of cognitive process are within a conceptual framework, and therefore it is impossible for any researcher to escape the lens through which he or she interprets social reality. Even in qualitative methods, the researcher functions as "the instrument of analysis through all phases of a qualitative project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80). This suggests that some type of bracketing should occur at the earliest stages of the research process (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Glaser, 1978) rather than limiting it to the analysis stage (Paley, 2018). An emotional detachment, whether expressed as disciplinary jargon or taken from a theoretical model, sets boundaries for the researcher, hence making it easier for him or her to focus on a research hypothesis or research question rather than to their underlying relationship to the topic (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Of course, I am not without my own strategies for demonstrating control over a research topic. Sometimes I use academic language as sweeping stand-ins for complex relations whether it's about "power," "desire," "consent," or "sexual violence." This is a weighted issue and plagues language across many disciplines (St. Pierre, 1997). To this end, though, I am left to confront what is a subjective interpretation of a "normal" desire and when it becomes a form of exploitation, which is not unlike the questions I had been asking about commercial sex.

Representations of Sex Offenders in the Media

As discussed above, popular culture plays a significant role in shaping public perception and collective understanding of who might be a sexual threat to vulnerable populations. Bracketing this influence is challenging, if not impossible, as messaging saturation contributes to a din of media noise around us. In my quest to understand sex offenders, I began writing about media representations as a proxy for the human beings I planned to recruit for my study. Rarely did I find in popular outlets a humanization of people who had been accused of or who had served prison time for pedophilia. This is largely because of a perception that sexual offenders can never be "cured," and as a result, their characterization tends to be one-dimensional or married to a kind of public panic that renders them as monsters in our culture. Hence, I found myself wrestling with these representations as surrogates for a population that I might investigate in the near future; nonetheless, I, too, was a consumer of these narratives.

The documentary, *Capturing the Friedmans* (Jarecki, 2003), probably had the greatest influence on my perception of the topic. The documentary chronicles a tragedy captured in real time through home movies depicting the unraveling of a family unit. This story begins after child pornography is intercepted by federal law enforcement and then delivered to the household in a sting operation that eventually spirals into a full-blown child molestation case involving children in the community where the culprit lived. I happened to screen the documentary while in the Netherlands where the audience, made up of many middle-aged Dutch men, appeared to express a palpable collective sympathy for the film's subjects, a father and son, who later pleaded guilty to multiple accounts of child molestation. This may not have been the reaction of audiences in the United States; but from abroad, the suburban hysteria and coercive interviewing techniques of law enforcement used on child victims were something both tragically American and an indication of a growing moral panic (Manzella, 2011).

Through digital storytelling, consumers of popular culture are fed narrative tropes about the way sexual predators operate and reproduce with each new generation of victims. Embedded within this portrayal is a systemic pattern of violence that is passed from perpetrator to victim. Within this narrative, the passing of the "disease" infects the next generation, therefore, revealing how new pedophiles are made. Sometimes murder, incest, and pedophilia meld into a single story (Wolf & Betancourt, 2009; Wolf, Molina, & Makris, 2005); wherein lies a meta-storyline that maps how pedophiles are created outside of social conditioning. "Origin stories" function as a way to suggest how child sexual victims become adult perpetrators. These types of origin stories also inform how the public understands the life history of a sex offender on prime-time television. As a result, these representations, whether they are humanizing or not, leave an impression that the sexual, psychological damage of intergenerational abuse is somehow unavoidable if one becomes "infected" (Wolf, Molina, & Makris, 2005). Whether this is fiction for the sake of producing a drama or rooted in empirical research, this perception shapes public opinion, sentencing recommendations, self-perception, and contributes to widespread social stigmatization.

The National Sex Offender Registry

Around the time the National Registry of Sex Offenders database migrated online, I learned at a dinner that the host had checked the registry to determine whether any of his neighbors were listed. Use of the database seemed justified given this person had small children who played in the neighborhood. How novel, I thought, to use the directory to check my neighborhood for hits. The registry was, after all, publicly accessible. Furthermore, if others were using it to ensure their safety or that of their children, I could rationalize searching for profiles in my neighborhood.

Plugging in my zip code produced many hits. I discovered within a few blocks from where I lived, there were upward to 15 known offenders living in the same building. I concluded this cluster represented former felons on probation living in a transitional home after completing their prison sentences. Those two blocks struck me as in close proximity to my apartment. Upon a deeper dive into the "data points" across a map of my place of residence, I noticed a profile of a familiar face with a known address. As I stared at the familiar countenance, it occurred to me that the person lived in my apartment building. Weeks later, I reflexively acknowledged a man whom I passed on the sidewalk. His reaction seemed unresponsive, if not a bit hostile. Only later did I recall his image listed in the registry. Suddenly, I was engulfed by my research topic without a barrier between my personal life and my scholarly aspirations. In the 20 years that I have conducted research, there has always been a physical distance between those two locales. The very idea of conducting research close to my home where I felt a sense of safety and autonomy raised challenges and exposed underlying unease toward this topic. As a result, anxiety began to take hold of me as I went about my daily life. I became fearful of washing my laundry in the facility available in the basement. And as time went on, I no longer felt safe in my apartment or walking alone down some nearby streets. Teaching in the evening and arriving home quite late meant that I had to be extra vigilant about my safety. Only later did a friend suggest that my neighbor, in particular, wasn't interested in me because of my advanced age. This realization did not bring me any comfort.

It was at this moment as a lone researcher, I could neither immerse myself in this topic nor conduct any challenging research in close proximity to my residence. The line between my research setting and where I felt safest had blurred. This close proximity to my home coupled by the task of being a lone researcher triggered concern that in the end caused this project to shut down. What was at play could be described as a

phenomenological, existential theme of "lived space," implying that both my physical surroundings and its virtual representation in a cluster map of sex offenders' profiles irreversibly affected my judgment and decision-making (Ahern, 1999; Mackey, 2005; Tuohy et al., 2013; van Manen & Adams, 2010).

The Lone Researcher

Much has been written about self-reflexivity in the social sciences and its role in challenging a researcher's authority at different stages of the research process (Bresler et al., 1996). This process is particularly magnified when a lone researcher conducts the research discussed in this article. Interrogation of the "recursive nature of fieldwork" and the way it unfolds, even the texts that are generated, suggest how the researcher is situated within the findings (p. 14). Thus, playing all the research roles at each stage of the process could make the interpretive lens less detached for the lone researcher (p. 20). How the lone researcher remains in dialogue with himself or herself, and whatever personal shortcomings he or she may face, every part of the research process brings forth a type of exposure rarely divulged in large qualitative team projects. Therefore, comparing the similarities and dissimilarities of research teams versus lone research in the field builds understanding of the mechanics of lone research (Bresler et al., 1996). For a lone researcher, negotiating fieldwork, writing field notes, or preparing coding and analysis, reflect degrees of subjectivity that are magnified by a singular perspective (p. 14). Furthermore, while research teams bring multiple building blocks of expertise and knowledge (p. 19), and at times tensions to a study, lone research projects funnel into a singular repertoire of skills and challenges for the principle investigator. The notion of leadership becomes the engine that propels a complex project forward with a singular force; however, there is no hiding behind the "we" of a collective analysis or delegation of responsibilities as a singular researcher. The lone researcher must engage with every aspect of the research process; and, failure to do so successfully can put a project at risk of abandonment.

Hence, the lone researcher has a heavy weight on them when approaching challenging topics. The process of negotiation—terms of access, rapport, participation—made with informants is completely determined by a singular personality who might feel an inability to push back on informants who have expectations of their participation or might reveal illegal activities.

Lone Research, Reflexivity, and Research Design

Bresler et al. (1996) describe the need for the "monitoring of subjectivity" as it will have an impact on research coding, analysis, and interpretation of data. It's fair to say, however, that the notion of interpreting reality will impact a study at all stages of the research process and may be magnified by the experiences of the lone researcher (Dowling, 2007; Tuohy

et al., 2013). Research teams, in contrast, have to come to some consensus at all written stages of the process and, most likely will write with a team reading in mind. Contrastingly, the lone researcher's field notes or interview transcripts are only as insightful as the researcher. Thus, the aforementioned field notes analyzed for this article are an example of how subjectivity emerged early in the research process, exposing positionality as a lone researcher, the direction of inquiry, choices of methodological tools, and ultimately what would have been the findings (Bresler et al. quoting Peshkin, p. 25). In hindsight, maybe my interpretive process collapsed because of the lack of heterogeneity that can only emerge from team research projects.

Qualitative researchers continue to raise key issues that come with engaging with challenging research settings; however, more rigorous dialogue is needed; and perhaps this should start with the graduate student dissertation project when advisors are negotiating protocols with their students (Sampson & Thompson, 2003). How, rhetorically speaking, do our lived experiences spark our interest in a research topic or population? Sometimes the reasoning is clear and evident as a social justice issue or health disparity. Layered upon any initial interest, researcher membership into a studied community must be evaluated. Sometimes membership can facilitate legitimacy in the field; other times it does not. Such questions hold a tremendous amount of weight for lone researchers as they move all the pieces of research design forward. And although qualitative methodologists, particularly lone researchers, must confront their identity in the field (Oakley, 2016; Wax, 1979) and how respondents understand them and the purpose of their research, only within the realm of qualitative methods do we broach such an issue.

The identity of the researcher also intersects with spatial relations set up in a field setting (Gregory, 2005, 2007; Sampson & Thompson, 2003). Such spatial relations are particularly meaningful when conducting ethnographies where there is a degree of vulnerability for the researcher. Choice of research settings plays a significant role in how a researcher feels positioned in a space and how she engages with research participants. Had I conceptualized a research setting far from my home base, as I did with my research on transgender sex workers, or had partnered with other researchers, I may have felt less threatened and more confident conducting this type of research. Overall, my academic authority and privilege in the "free world" felt somewhat flattened by my vulnerability as a lone researcher, the close proximity of former sex offenders to my home and my personal history.

Lastly, large studies have the luxury of conducting pilot studies to determine whether aspects of a research design works or whether segments of the research process need to be amended. Lone researchers sometimes don't have such a generous timeline. Because lone researchers are the front person who recruits, screens, and conducts all of the interviews, identity politics get played out in ways that can inhibit the process. Thus, the burden of personality and positionality can influence the success or failure of a qualitative project. And,

while the essence of qualitative research requires rapport building between researcher and participant, transparency and self-reflexivity are integral for a researcher to truly delve into the experiences of others. This includes the lives of sex offenders.

Conclusion

In the absence of available qualitative research across the social sciences on the topic of sex offenders to inform the scope of the original project, a number of ancillary elements informed the preliminary stages of this research study. This included a theoretical framework utilized during past research, an analysis of popular media representations focused on sex offenders, and my engagement with a national database as a lone researcher. Each of these factors shaped my conceptualization of this research project. As such, the function of interpretive phenomenology, and less specifically bracketing as a method, may have provided an added lens through which to understand this topic, as my scope of exposure to the community was limited. Given the complexity surrounding this topic and sheer amount of information circulating about it in the public sphere, qualitative methodologists aim to benefit from exploring the influence of media representations—whether fictional, nonfictional, or in the form of digital databases—when evaluating their preconceptions of a topic. The concept of "cultivation theory," in particular, may shed some light on the role of media analyses as it suggests viewer exposure to some television and cinematic representations of social reality, and here I would include virtual and online social spaces as well, can have a negative impression on viewers, thus shaping the way they interpret reality (Zhang & Chia, 2006). In hindsight, these influences were amplified for me as a lone researcher and were ultimately instrumental in the abandonment of this project.

Lastly, interpretive phenomenology can play a beneficial role in most qualitative research inquiry, especially in the case of the lone researcher. Part of the interpretive phenomenological process invokes recognition of one's preconceived values, perceptions and theoretical frameworks, and greater incorporation of those factors at all stages of the research process (Saldaña, 2015). Through early integration of the phenomenological experience of the researcher, unforeseen obstacles as described above, can be better addressed in preparation for unexpected power dynamics and preconceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While asymmetrical power dynamics and biases can never be totally dismantled, as they are by-products of institutional representation, they should be interrogated beforehand. Not exclusive to the lone researcher, this kind of reflexive interrogation of the researcher's role is a crucial element in the research process for most lone researchers. It also reflects the central limitation of what can and cannot be bracketed around our lives for the purpose of research inquiry. Thus, bracketing one's lived experiences—whether theoretical, experiential, or mediated through popular culture—cannot be quartered off for the purpose of studying a population, particularly one that carries the weight of criminalization and stigma (Le Vasseur, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Note

1. In some states, Romeo and Juliet laws protect couples whose age disparity is within 48 months.

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