

LABYRINTH MOMENTS: EVIDENCING REFLEXIVITY IN INTERSECTIONAL RESEARCH USING CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is, oftentimes, an emotional, relational, political and intellectual rollercoaster ride. This heightens the risk of methodological, ethical and relational fallout. Constructivist grounded theory enables researchers to confront the multiple ways in which deeply embedded aspects of identity, personal values, biases and emergent research relationships impact the research process. In this article, we demonstrate how a reflexive stance in constructivist grounded theory enhances bracketing and loosens the grip of both positionality and methodolatry. The discussion draws on the lived experiences of conducting and supervising autobiographically inclined doctoral research. The article underscores the need for a strong reflexive stance, not just during fieldwork, but right from the onset, at the conceptualisation stage. A reflexive stance, on the part of both students and supervisors stands to benefit the decolonisation project and can help guard against epistemic violence.

Keywords: Colouredness, constructivist grounded theory, positionality, reflexivity, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

The post-1994 legislation in South Africa categorises Africans, Chinese, Coloureds and Indians as Black, and provides for these groups, and for all women as previously disadvantaged. Gender transformation initiatives, as a result, ignore intragroup differences and have impacted different groups of women differently (Booyesen and Nkomo 2010; Dlamini 2013; Elu and Loubert 2013; Hunter and Hachimi 2012; Ncube 2018). As the 22nd Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) Annual Report shows, White women, followed by Indian women have benefited the most from gender transformation legislation (Department of Labour 2022). Both groups are currently overrepresented in corporate top and senior leadership positions, relative to their

representation in the economically active population (EAP). While African women fare relatively better, particularly in terms of public sector leadership, the underrepresentation of Coloured women cuts across sectors. And yet, despite this glaring underrepresentation, the lived experiences of Coloured women leaders continue to be footnoted in the South African gender transformation narrative. This is the gap that the current study seeks to address.

The doctoral study on which this article is based uses intersectionality as the key conceptual framework, and constructivist grounded theory as the methodological approach. Both constructivist grounded theory and intersectionality are emotionally, relationally and at times, politically charged (Belkin and White 2020; Wheeler, Shaw, and Howard 2020). They have the potential to confront the researchers and the researched with aspects of their lived experience that might have been hidden from their own view (Baird 2021; Charmaz 2020). This increases the risk of interpersonal and research integrity violations. While intersectionality renders vivid sites of privilege, power, and domination (Collins 1990; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1989), inbuilt rigor strategies in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014; Hall and Callery 2001; Nagel et al. 2015) and the use of multiple reflexivity tools, like the writing of poetry, memos and drawing, can help to ensure quality and research integrity (Butler-Kisber 2020; Charmaz 2008; Conlon et al. 2020; Etherington 2004; Finlay 2002; Kempton 2022; Olson 2016; Osei-Kofi 2013; Schindler and Schäfer 2021; Smith 2020; Woitek 2020).

The first author of this article, (TF) is a doctoral student, and the second author (PM) is the research supervisor. TF self-identifies as a Coloured woman leader and is currently conducting research on the lived experiences of Coloured women leaders in contemporary South African organisations. She started the research at a time when her Coloured identity was at the centre of a drawn-out debilitating negative experience at work. PM identifies as a Black African woman and is particularly sensitive to the epistemic violence that often comes about, when privileged outsiders speak on behalf of marginalised “others”. Having TF as the principal researcher in this study was deliberate. PM had previously discouraged a student who did not self-identify as Coloured, had footnoted Coloured women in her study, and was suddenly wanting to make Coloured women the focus of her very first article from the study. It just did not feel right.

The article is structured as follows: to locate the discussion in its empirical context, a brief explanation of the origins and meanings of the Coloured identity within the South African context is presented first. This is followed by an overview of constructivist grounded theory and intersectionality. Under the findings and discussion, examples of how memos and poetry were used as reflexivity tools throughout the research process are shared.

STUDY BACKGROUND

The Population Registration Act, Act No. 30 of 1950, classified South Africans into four different racial categories: Bantu (i.e., Black African), Coloured (i.e., of mixed race), White and Other. Asian was later added as a distinct racial category for South Africans of Indian descent. The Coloured racial group consists of the descendants of various Khoisan groups (Veracini and Verbuyst 2020, 260). While being the second largest cultural group in South Africa, the Coloured population has, consistently, been somewhat “invisible” when seen against binary White–Black relations and the associated power differentials (Blaser 2008; Brown 2000; Carvalho-Malekane 2015).

The Coloured identity has been characterised as “fluid” and “ambiguous” (Petrus and Isaacs-Martin 2012, 87–88). It has, for political and other reasons, been experienced with ambivalence by many. For some, as confirmed by participants in the current study, the Coloured identity is a source of pride, and the richness of its diverse cultural heritage is celebrated. There are, however, some people, who reject this identity and for whom it is a source of shame, fear and frustration (Adhikari 2006, 467). Shining the spotlight on Colouredness, thus, carries the risk of alienating many, both within and without the Coloured population group. This makes a rigorous approach in the current study imperative.

Given the contentious nature of the Coloured identity within the South African context, and the continued marginalisation of Coloured people in the current transformation and decolonisation project, there is a need for a strong reflexive stance in research. Soliciting the insights of Coloured women leaders about their lived experiences affords them a space to tell their own stories, in the respectful manner they deserve. In this study, we deliberately centre Coloured women’s voices and epistemological perspectives (Battiste 2000) in the hope that this will contribute towards advancing a decolonising perspective (Trimble and Fisher 2005). In so doing, we seek to avoid the kind of blatant negative stereotyping that was evident in the 2019 “notorious Coloured Women” article (Carollisen and Bowers du Toit 2022, 9). We were, right from the beginning of the research project, mindful of the tendency for legacies of colonisation and coloniality to linger during post-colonial eras, and for some marginal voices to continue to be silenced (Bhatia and Priya 2021). We were very much awake to the fact that being members of marginalised groups does not render us immune to intra and inter group epistemic violations.

This article, thus, serves to trouble the continued silencing of the Coloured voice, including in the transformation and decolonisation project in South Africa. As some of the participants in the study pointed out, the racialisation, and thus politicisation of the Coloured identity, and attendant negative stereotypes, take away from the richness of the diverse cultural heritages that make up the “melting pot” that is the Coloured community.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In this section we briefly outline Constructivist grounded theory and Intersectionality as the methodology and key conceptual lens used in the study. As the following discussion shows, there is, indeed, a seamless fit between the two. One cannot conduct a meaningful intersectional study without being awakened to power differentials and potential sites of self-other violence, within and amongst ostensibly “similar” groups. Such an awareness, in turn, can sharpen one’s capacities for reflexivity, if one so chooses. This augers well for the transformation and decolonial research project.

Constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory requires that researchers be aware of underlying personal assumptions during the course of research projects (Charmaz 2014; 2016; Charmaz and Belgrave 2019; Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006). It follows an iterative process of constant comparison within and among data cases, theory, researcher field notes and memos (Charmaz 2008, 27–49; 2016, 127–193). The researcher must be highly engaged and listen attentively to the participants’ experiences with *openness*, throughout data collection (Mills et al. 2006). Central to this requisite methodological self-consciousness, are notions of strong reflexivity (Harding 1991, 28) and positionality (Clarke 2006, 20). These concepts underscore the fact that the lived experiences of the researcher cannot be removed from the context of the phenomena under study and from the pre-understandings of the research participants (Dörfler and Stierand 2020; Frechette et al. 2020; Shufutinsky 2020).

Positionality, on the other hand, refers to *what* researchers know and believe, and to the position that they take in relation to the social and political contexts of their studies, and how this influences every phase of the research process and outcomes (Rowe 2014, 628). For, as Charmaz (2008) points out, the research process is a social construction, and the researcher’s social context, position, viewpoints and privilege, or lack thereof, inevitably affect the research undertaken. Positionality, therefore, allows the researcher the mental and relational space to be conscious of their own social context and to engage with their own reactions, so that these reactions do not hinder the process of analysing and understanding the participants’ perspectives (Kennedy and Gardner 2021, 863).

Reflexivity, on the other hand, is a *process* of self-awareness (Townsend and Cushion 2021, 252). Reflexive analyses are valuable for providing “hidden insight” into phenomena through either personal connections, lived experiences, or for reflecting on the social problems that researchers have to grapple with (Sparkes 2020, 299). Qualitative research often relies on

the reflexivity of the researcher and emphasises that experiences and data exist in multiple realities, including those of the researcher (Bryman 2016; Charmaz 2014; Shufutinsky 2020). The researcher's own experience and expertise become reference points in terms of asking relevant questions and can enhance the researcher's theoretical sensitivity (Singh and Estefan 2018, 5).

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, existing literature on reflexivity focusses mainly on the data collection and data analysis stages of research. It is somewhat mute on the need for reflexivity during the earlier stages of the research process, and at reporting. Whereas students using qualitative methodologies often include a section on positionality in their research proposals, introduction and research methodology chapters, they, for the most part, do not do much about bracketing until they begin fieldwork, if even that. This article demonstrates the need for a reflexive stance right from the beginning of a research project, including during the conceptualisation and writing up of the findings. Being alert to, and vigilant in guarding against inherent bias throughout the research process enhances the quality of research projects. It minimises the risk of studies collapsing further down the track, and/or articles being withdrawn post publication. This, ultimately, increases the likelihood of timely completion of quality graduate studies.

The article also seeks to highlight the need for a reflexive approach on the part of both the supervisor and the student. Oftentimes, in qualitative graduate research, it is only the positionality of the student that is acknowledged and must be "managed", using the various strategies of rigour. It is as if the research supervisor's identity, personal and political biases, as well as attendant power dynamics are not a part of the knowledge creation process. Nothing can be further from the truth. As will be shown later, we, as part of research contracting, acknowledged the precarious nature of Black and Coloured relationships in contemporary South Africa and the potential risk to offend. We made a conscious decision to give each other direct feedback whenever it felt as if attendant "racialised" and supervisor-supervisee power dynamics were threatening to pervert the research project. This way of thinking about reflexivity stands to inform collaborative approaches to graduate research and supervision, despite identity and systemic power differentials.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, the key conceptual framework of the current study, is a way of understanding social inequalities and emphasises the mutually constitutive nature of social identity categories (Veenstra 2013, 647). Principles of intersectionality include directionality, simultaneity and multiplicativity (Veenstra 2013, 647). From the principles of directionality, simultaneity and

multiplicativity arise new versions of double jeopardy and triple jeopardy, renamed “multiple jeopardy” by Deborah King (2016, 47).

According to King’s (2016) concept of multiple jeopardy, disadvantaged identities experienced in tandem result in inordinate (i.e., even more than additive) amounts of disadvantage. This matrix of domination seeks to account for the multiple ways in which women experience themselves as gendered, raced, classed, and sexualised (Veenstra 2011, 11). Veenstra (2011) explains that experiences of gender are racialised, sexualised and classed, while experiences of class are gendered, racialised and sexualised. For Spelman (1988), race, class, gender, and sexuality are not reducible to individual attributes that should be measured and assessed for their separate contribution in explaining social outcomes. The author (Spelman 1988) argues against the “pop beads metaphysics” and contends that a woman’s identity consists of the sum of parts that cannot be neatly separated from one another.

As a lens, intersectionality is unapologetically political and renders vivid intragroup and intergroup dynamics (Erby and White 2022; Hahn Tapper 2013; Valdez and Golash-Boza 2017). Rather than treating women as a homogenous group, intersectionality enables the interrogation of the ways in which different groups of women experience discrimination and oppression differently, and how some have relative privilege as a function of the other social identity positions that they hold (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020; Ramsay 2014; Severs, Celis and Erzeel 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This reflective article draws on the lived experiences of conducting and supervising autobiographically inclined doctoral research. The data that informs the discussion comes from fieldwork experiences and research supervision conversations. Throughout the research journey, TF kept a research journal, in which she used memos (Charmaz 2008; Conlon et al. 2020; Schindler and Schäfer 2021) and poetry (Butler-Kisber 2020; Kempton 2022; Schenstead 2012; Smith 2020; Woitek 2020) as reflexivity tools. These tools helped TF to unclutter the messiness of qualitative research and enabled her to document her feelings during and after particularly challenging fieldwork experiences (Pink 2015; Saldaña 2018; Sparkes and Smith 2011). In sharing her fieldwork experiences about how she navigated the entangled data collection and analysis processes, sometimes successfully, and at times not so successfully, we suggest that poetry, as reflexive tool, is indeed an innovative way to transform higher education research practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section we highlight critical events, which we term “labyrinth moments”, during the

doctoral research journey, whereby TF deployed multiple reflexivity tools to negotiate the twists and turns of her autobiographically inclined study. Each critical incident was a “head and heart moment” (Ellis, 2020; Skilling et al. 2022), and forced her to grapple with the tensions and contradictions of her role as a Coloured woman leader conducting research on Coloured women leaders’ lived experiences.

Labyrinth moment 1: Who and where am I in this research topic?

Oftentimes, in doctoral research, students embark on their research journey with a general idea of the broad topic area that they want to explore. It then becomes incumbent on the supervisor to create a safe reflective space in which the students can narrow the topic down to a specific, meaningful, doable research project. To this end, and as part of contracting, PM invited TF to reflect on, and to share her lived experiences of women in leadership, both as a woman leader herself, and as a follower and observer of women leaders. The objectives behind this exercise included finding a topic with a strong enough “hook” to last the long mile of part-time doctoral research, with its many emotional, relational, and intellectual twists and turns. The conversation was also intended to be a positioning and bracketing exercise, so as to help TF begin to identify both her conscious and unconscious psychological and political investments in the research topic.

As indicated earlier, TF was, at the time of embarking on the research journey, entangled in a racialised negative dynamic at work, whereby her Coloured identity was figural. To process the emotional “stuff” that the topic surfaced for her, and as part of the due qualitative research process, she kept a research journal, in which she captured her raw thoughts and emotions. The following stanza draws from her journal entries and shows how TF used poetry as a reflexive tool during the conceptual stage of her study.

“The mandate

*It plays over and over in my head
As I toss and turn in my bed
‘I have a mandate to get rid of Coloureds and Indians’
This raised a few suspicions
Holding such a superior position
She said it with an assured mission*

*Call me a coward, call me a weakling
But at that moment I couldn’t believe what she was revealing
Even when we tried to question this racist statement
She made it blatant that she had no time for engagement
To the highest authorities she would go
To find this John or Sue Doe*

Then the victimisation started
The bullying persisted and lasted
The harassment
The embarrassment
The rejection
The humiliation
The isolation
No training or development opportunities
Made me feel like the minority within the minorities
Being threatened with downgrading my job
Felt like justice for this elitist mob
All of this was linked to my racial orientation
Which amounted to open discrimination
'I don't trust you people' ... 'There are fraudsters in our midst'
'I will not start this meeting until the fraudsters leave' were some of the remarks
And, with poise, the fraudsters' names she barks
'You and co', leave!
Stripped naked in front of colleagues
Out of the meeting we reluctantly dragged our rejected bodies ...
Our humanity raped
The proud legacy of our elders erased
What an assassination on our dream of Blackness!
Such a slap in the face of our democracy!
Because she was dead set on fulfilling this mandate
She was the keeper of who entered the racial gate!"

(TF June 2019)

Many more emotionally charged memos and stanzas were written regarding TF's lived experiences of racialised discrimination, at the hands of a Black woman leader. With the raw emotionality of her experiences sufficiently contained through these reflexivity tools, her intellectual capacities were gradually freed up and she started to engage meaningfully with the literature review process. She was then able to craft the current working title of her doctoral study and to narrow down its focus. The claim here is not that the strong and difficult feelings surfaced by the study disappeared, never to reappear. On the contrary, in fact. Naming and reflecting on the experience did, however, help ensure that the emotions did not create too much "noise" for TF, thereby distorting participant data.

The working title of TF's study was not an easy one to settle on. The reflective conversations that led to its formulation were also challenging to deal with. This is partly, because, in South Africa today, for both personal and political reasons, the Coloured identity continues to be a source of contestation and ambivalent feelings, (Adhikari 2009; Arendse 2022; Baderoon 2011; Farrah 2007; Johnson 2017; Marco 2012; Nilsson 2016; Palmer 2016; Strauss 2009). Having the Coloured "thing" out there, also made it less awkward for PM to

challenge TF whenever she appeared to be projecting, and inserting herself, unhelpfully, in emergent data and insights. For there is, in contemporary South Africa, a lingering, but often suppressed, African–Coloured dynamic, whose roots can be traced back to the time of apartheid.

Labyrinth moment 2: Owing my Colouredness

TF was born and raised in Gauteng, South Africa, where she still currently resides. The anxiety that she experienced, when she first started conducting interviews in Gauteng, primarily derived from her lack of interviewing experience. By the time that she went to undertake fieldwork in Cape Town, having already conducted 12 individual interviews in Gauteng, she had long conquered her skill-based confidence issues. Her fear of rejection by women leaders, who were ostensibly similar to herself, speaks to the intragroup dynamic that occurs in intersectional discourse (Erby and White 2022; Hahn Tapper 2013; Valdez and Golash-Boza 2017). Just as one would err to assume that all women have similar gendered experiences, it would be just as problematic to think that all Coloured women have the same experiences.

TF's main source of anxiety in Cape Town, which caught even her by surprise, was concern about how she would be experienced by the Western Cape participants. She, like them, is a Coloured woman, after all. In the following stanza, TF uses the “mirror” metaphor to reflect on her positionality and to name and bracket her biases, fears, and preconceptions of the Western Cape participants. She shows how her own life experiences, which were both similar to, and different from, those of the participants in the study, became a potential source of research integrity violation. Using poetry, she was able to negotiate attendant binds, through a self-reflexive process, in and through the mirror.

“Woman in the mirror
Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is the fairest of them all?
Those from GP or the Mother City?
Misconceptions increased my anxiety!
They are brighter and better, I was taught
Therefore, their approval I sought ...
While reflections of class and colourism my vision distort
Through my head and heart, I first must sort!
Mirror, mirror on the wall
I'm Coloured, but feeling kind of small
My subjectivity
Shoots off my emotionality!
Each story relived
Each moment revived
Their plight disclosed

*Through narratives exposed
Zooming in on each lived experience
Their voices hail victorious
At last, my own reflection minimises
As their Colouredness crystalises”*

(TF May 2021)

Labyrinth moment 3: Becoming seduced out of the researcher role

Overwhelmed by fear of rejection, and out of a desire to be accepted, TF found herself seduced out of the researcher role, during what was meant to be a focus group discussion. In a moment of fusion, requisite role boundaries collapsed, and TF became just “one of the girls”. Not only did she “forget” to run the focus group discussion guide by PM, as had been previously agreed and as is conventionally done in standard research supervision, the only data that she collected from the focus group was on just one research objective, on “the multiple meanings of the Coloured identity”. That and group photographs that she took with her “sisters”. Nevertheless, the data obtained is still valuable, and possibly comprises that which needed to emerge at the time, and in that particular context. The question of the Coloured identity is, after-all, pivotal in TF’s study.

The venue for the focus group was the Cape of Good Hope Castle, where the exhibits of the Cape Muslim and Slave Heritage Museum were on display. The space was rich with symbolism and memory of Coloured history and culture. This most likely, contributed significantly to the way in which the focus group developed. Fortunately, rich data on all the objectives was gathered from the one-on-one interviews already conducted. The following excerpt, taken from a memo, explains how the transgression of role boundaries occurred:

“As I enter the labyrinth ... I see me in them and them in me. It felt like I stepped into a mirrored gallery!”

TF used the following stanza to depict how she fell out of the researcher role, as she overidentified with the research participants.

“Being seduced
*Everywhere I look
I see reflections
Such real seductions ...
I’m hooked and it feels rather good!
Oh, flip, I forgot
My roles I’ve swopped!”*

(TF November 2021)

The importance of using the above stanza as a reflexive tool derives from the fact that its

playfulness helped TF begin to see the experience not as a reason to feel shameful, or as something to try to conceal. Instead, she was able to appreciate it as a reflexive moment, worth sharing with other researchers. After berating herself over the “incident”, she was able to reframe the experience, not as a failure, but as a reminder of the importance of negotiating and managing slippery role boundaries during fieldwork. Such heightened awareness of role boundaries was helpful later on during the data analysis phase, even as she often became stuck, and “dwelled”, on “stuff”.

Labyrinth moment 4: Stuck in voluminous data and entangled in emotional “stuff” ... and so, I dwell

Having conducted a total of 25 semi-structured interviews, with an average duration of one-and-a-half hours, the data coding and analysis process was found to be challenging, keeping TF awake until the early hours of the morning, for months on end. In addition, triangulation data from the focus group and from 15 personal narratives (consisting of letters written by participants to their younger selves) had to be analysed. Not only did TF transcribe all the interviews herself, so as to immerse herself in the data (Bokhove and Downey 2018; Bryman 2016; Da Silva 2021; McMullin 2021; Mishler 2003), she was also committed to following the GT data coding and analysis guidelines to the letter.

“There are no short cuts in grounded theory, Prof” she would say, as if to convince herself. “Your name will be on this thing, Prof ... I don’t want to disappoint you” she would say, as if to assure PM that she was not wasting time. “Charmaz herself says one cannot hide from constructivist grounded theory”, she would proudly tell her group supervision peers, as they listened to her data analysis story in awe. In the following stanza TF reflects on how she became stuck during the data collection and analysis.

“And so, I dwell

I dwell on the dreadfulness of losing my key role (being a researcher)

I dwell

It is almost as if this dwelling has a rhythm!

I dwell

I dwell on being afraid of the unknown (how to be a researcher)

I dwell

I dwell ... almost floating in imaginative clouds of this enticing maze

I dwell

But if I am to have a quality qualitative study, then I must stop this dwelling ...

I dwell, nonetheless!”

(TF, November 2021)

While TF’s thoroughness yielded quality data and was consistent with CGT rigour, PM often worried that she was possibly becoming “stuck” in the data, instead of using it to ground

emergent theorisation. PM's concern, that the means to an end might have become an end in and of itself, developed as she began to worry about TF's completion of the thesis. Such concerns arose, despite her repeatedly telling both TF and her group supervision peers neither to take shortcuts with, nor to rush their fieldwork. As things turned out, however, TF's rigorous approach paid off, and she won two international research awards, for papers based on her research methodology at the World Conference on Research Integrity in 2022.

Labyrinth moment 5: Humbled, even as my confidence grows

The doctoral research experience is humbling, for supervisee and supervisor alike. Not only do both parties get confronted with and should allow themselves to be challenged by their individual areas of inadequacy intellectually, but relationally as well. Hence, many researchers can come to experience doctoral research as infantilising (Connor, Copland, and Owen 2018; Schulz 2021). This is because meaningful doctoral research demands epistemological humility (Gregg and Mahadevan 2014; Kidd 2016), which entails a willingness to be stripped bare of one's sense of what one knows or thinks s/he knows.

The need to adopt a receptive stance in research requires that one function from a position of negative capability (French, Gaggiotti, and Simpson 2014). And so it was for TF, as she frequently found herself oscillating between a position of "I so get this I am really enjoying this", particularly during data collection, and "what in hell did I get myself into? ... what was I thinking doing constructionist grounded theory?" during data coding and analysis.

TF captured her moments of self-doubt in the following poem.

"Humbled
I am humbled
As I stumbled ...
To the ground I fall
Feeling kind of small ...
While wandering in this labyrinth of mine ...
I realise that I am living my thesis
Over, and over, in time
In a corner I sheepishly slouch
Trying to hide from this qualitative approach
I must admit constructivist grounded theory
Left me more than a little bit weary ...
For now, I just want to sit here with me
So, please, just let me be ..."

(TF November 2020)

CONCLUSION

In this article, we presented data to show how various reflexivity tools, including memos and

poetry, can enhance rigour and quality at all stages of the research process. We demonstrated how, when it may be difficult to stay in the researcher role, and when thinking seems to be impossible, a reflexive stance and reflexive tools, such as poetry can help guard against integrity violations.

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