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Negotiating gender in men's research among men

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Publication Details

Flood, M. G. (2013). Negotiating gender in men's research among men. In B. Pini and B. Pease (Eds.), *Men, Masculinities and Methodologies* (pp. 64-76). United Kingdom: Palgrave.

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Abstract

What happens when men are the subjects of research? Gender and other forms of social difference are performed and negotiated in part through face-to-face interactions, including through such research methods as interviews and focus groups. When men or women conduct gender-conscious research with male research subjects, a host of issues are raised: practical, political, and epistemological. This chapter explores three dimensions of face-to-face research among men. It draws on the male author's qualitative research among young heterosexual men regarding their sexual and social relations with women, as well as others' gender-sensitive research among men in a variety of settings and populations. First, what do men say in interviews and focus groups, and how is this shaped by their interactions and relations with the researcher and with each other? Second, how do researchers and research participants negotiate men's power and privilege in face-to-face research with men? Third, how do researchers and research participants negotiate power relations among men themselves?

Keywords

negotiating, gender, men, research, among

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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Introduction

What happens when men are the subjects of research? Gender and other forms of social difference are performed and negotiated in part through face-to-face interactions, including through such research methods as interviews and focus groups. When men or women conduct gender-conscious research with male research subjects, a host of issues are raised: practical, political, and epistemological. This chapter explores three dimensions of face-to-face research among men. It draws on the male author's qualitative research among young heterosexual men regarding their sexual and social relations with women, as well as others' gender-sensitive research among men in a variety of settings and populations. First, what do men say in interviews and focus groups, and how is this shaped by their interactions and relations with the researcher and with each other? Second, how do researchers and research participants negotiate men's power and privilege in face-to-face research with men? Third, how do researchers and research participants negotiate power relations among men themselves?

Men and feminist research

There are at least five dimensions to the relationships between men and feminist scholarship: men as the political problem to which feminism responds, men as objects of feminist scholarship, men as students of feminist scholarship, men as agents of feminist scholarship, and men and women's institutional location in producing scholarship about men. While I have addressed some of these issues elsewhere (Flood 2011), here I focus particularly on the second and fourth of these: on the conduct of gender-related research among men, and particularly by men. Conducting empirical research on men and men's place in gender relations raises dilemmas which are methodological, political, and epistemological.

While there has now been substantial attention to the epistemological and political issues at stake in men's relationship to feminist knowledge or feminist theory, there has been less attention to the *practice* of gender-focused research among men. As is true of scholarship on gender in general, most of this has come from women. There are now a range of productive commentaries on negotiations of gender and sexuality in research on men conducted *by women*. For example, some studies have documented that for female researchers interviewing men, performing traditional femininity can increase the likelihood of receiving unwanted sexual advances (Lee 1997) and can reinforce stereotypical sexist discourses of women as empathetic listeners and facilitators of men's narratives, but can also reduce the potential threat experienced by male subjects (Horn 1997). While traditional accounts of methodology and research ethics have focused on risks to the researched, women's face-to-face research with men can involve risks for the researcher, in particular when the interview topic is sexualised, including the possibilities of flirting, unwanted sexual attention, the sense of going on a 'blind date,' and sexual violence (Lee, 1997; McKee & O'Brien, 1983:

158). (Male researchers too may be sexualised, as Walby (2010) documents, for example, in his research on male commercial sex workers.)

While there are numerous accounts by female researchers of the significance in research of their own gendered identities and relations, there are very few from men (Robertson 2006: 302-3). But for men doing research on men, there is a powerful rationale for critical reflection on their research practice. First, for men in general, as members of privileged social categories, critical reflection on our social locations is a necessary element in strategies of resistance and change (Harding, 1991: 269). Indeed, ‘critical autobiography’ – the analysis and deconstruction of men’s own social and historical formation as masculine subjects – is increasingly prominent in masculinities scholarship. Second, ‘putting oneself in the picture’ is an important methodological component of research. Feminist and qualitative texts recommend a reflexive approach, where reflexivity involves a willingness to locate oneself as an actor in the research process, recording the subjective experiences of, and the intellectual autobiography of, the researcher (Edwards, 1993: 185). Third, critical reflection on one’s role in knowledge production is a desirable element of progressive academic practice. All knowledge is socially located and its production is mediated by power relations (Morgan, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1990: 39).

In focusing on issues at stake in men doing research on men, I will illustrate my discussion with reference particularly to my own PhD and postdoctoral research. But I will also draw on other examples of gender-sensitive research on men in a variety of settings, milieux and contexts. I should note that I am concerned only with research which is *self-consciously* on men — that is, which is ‘gender-conscious’ or ‘gender-sensitive’. I focus on feminist or profeminist men’s research, although an increasing minority of scholarship self-consciously on men is antithetical to feminism. I am not concerned with research which happens to be on male subjects or on both men and women but which is not concerned with questions of gender, although one may wish to criticise the neglect of gender in such projects.

My own research has focused on the organisation of heterosexual men’s social and sexual lives and relations and the meanings given to these, what I have described at times as the critical analysis of the sexual cultures of heterosexual men. In my PhD, I examined young heterosexual men’s participation in safe and unsafe heterosexual sex. I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seventeen men aged between 18 and 26 to explore men’s sexual practices and the meanings and socio-sexual relations through which these were organised. In later, postdoctoral research, I extended this into a wider analysis of young heterosexual men’s socio-sexual relations, drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 90 men aged 16 to 24. I have also conducted research on other practices and domains related to men, gender, and sexuality, particularly men’s violence against women and its prevention, fathering, and pornography. Across these, my work draws on both materialist and cultural emphases in social theory, contributes to a critical sociological scholarship concerned with questions of power, injustice, and change, and involves engagement in activism and political advocacy.

The following discussion highlights three aspects of the social organisation of men’s lives which have implications for research on men, and particularly male/male research: (1) male disclosure and homosocial interaction, (2) male privilege and sexism, and (3) power relations between men. I focus first on male-male interaction, and the typical forms of speaking, behaving and relating which are both a resource for and a constraint on research on and by men.

(1) Male disclosure and homosocial interaction

When I began my PhD, I was concerned that such gender-related qualitative research on men ostensibly faces the problem that men are unwilling or unable to speak personally and men's dominant ways of speaking are third-person, rationalistic, and factual (Davies, 1992: 54; Jackson, 1990: 271-73). This view was supported by several interview-based studies (Brannen, 1988: 556; McKee & O'Brien, 1983: 151-2).

The sex of the interviewer also appeared to be significant here. According to some early research, especially when the content of the interview is sexual or personal, the following patterns are common, as Scully summarises: male interviewers get fewer responses than female interviewers, especially with male subjects; male interviewers elicit more information-seeking responses, while female interviewers elicit greater self-disclosure and emotional expressivity (Scully, 1990: 12). More recent research has continued to suggest that there are subject areas where men are more comfortable speaking to women (Broom *et al.* 2009: 54). These results fit with general patterns of emotional disclosure among men: men are said to be more likely to confide in women, especially those with whom they are sexually involved, while emotional intimacy among men is proscribed. Thus female interviewers may have an advantage over male interviewers, and may be less subject to the frequently punitive, disinterested and jokey character of male/male talk (McKee & O'Brien, 1983: 153).

These portrayals in the literature seemed to place me at a disadvantage as a male interviewer interviewing men, and when I started my PhD research I feared that in the interviews with young heterosexual men I would face stony silences and discomfort. While I had plenty of experience of intimate and revealing personal conversations about emotional and sexual matters with close male friends, I feared that this would not be possible in interviews with total strangers. I felt nonetheless that there were significant political and theoretical reasons why male researchers should conduct research on men, and the disadvantages of doing so simply came with the territory.

My experience of qualitative research with men has not borne out this depiction of male non-disclosure. In the PhD research, for example, all but one of the 17 research participants offered high levels of personal disclosure; none showed obvious signs of discomfort such as not answering questions or resisting conversation, and all said that they had not found anything difficult about participating. There were many moments of humour and reflection. The one man who disclosed little was Dave, a man recruited from the Westside Youth Centre. (Names and other details have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality.) The interview with Dave was the most difficult to conduct, in that he often gave monosyllabic answers to my questions, he paused repeatedly, and he offered sparse and halting narratives of self, experience and meaning. Dave continued such patterns in a second interview twelve months later, while reassuring me on both occasions that he was comfortable with the interview process. However, Dave's example is unlikely to be evidence for masculine inexpressiveness, given the factors which perhaps limit his ability and willingness to give detailed accounts of his life: reported "learning difficulties", sexual assault victimisation, and intrusive experience as the long-term "client" of youth services and the welfare sector.

The patterns of male non-disclosure described in the early literature are likely to be the product of more than the interviewees' sex, reflecting more complex interview dynamics and the operation not of "masculinity" *per se* but of particular masculinities structured by other social relations and of masculinities in interaction, namely between interviewer and

interviewee. For example, the willingness of particular men to talk about emotional and sexual matters in an interview may be constituted by their age, class or ethnicity. My young informants' relative comfort with disclosure may reflect generational differences among men, and it may also be shaped by their largely middle-class, tertiary-educated and Anglo backgrounds. It may also reflect the particular character of the interaction between myself and the interviewees — the ways in which we were able to slide into familiar, masculine modes of relating which facilitate personal disclosure, through our respective subject positions (including our similar ages) and conversational negotiations.

These possibilities raise a more substantial issue, to do with the premise on which concerns about men's 'greater' or 'lesser' disclosure are based. Talk of 'lesser' or 'greater' disclosure can imply a realist epistemology, which is also evident in the notion of "matching" interviewer and interviewee. Matching research participants in terms of their positions in class, racial and gender relations is often advocated in methodological cookbooks as a way of minimising power inequalities and increasing empathy and rapport. However, if one assumes that accounts given in interviews are negotiated constructions rather than repositories of a unitary truth and that knowledges are situated, it becomes more important to analyse accounts within the context of the interview itself (Phoenix, 1994: 66).

In my research with young heterosexual men, one of the most striking patterns has been the presence of homosocial story-telling. Heterosexual men talk about sex in different ways in different social contexts and different conversational interactions, and this is part of general variations in their presentation of self (Hillier, Harrison & Bowditch, 1999: 73; Wight, 1996: 2). My and others' research has documented that young heterosexual men often talk about sex and intimacy in differing ways in mixed-sex groups, compared to all-male groups, compared to one on one with a female friend, compared to one on one with a male friend. For example, some of my interviewees described the exchange of stories of sexual exploits and commentary on the attractiveness and desirability or otherwise of women passing by, typically using blunt and sometimes humorous colloquial language, and this form of talk was most common in all-male groups. With their female partners on the other hand, men may engage in talk which is more respectful, romantic and sensual, but also sexually explicit talk such as 'talking dirty' during sex. In different interactions and contexts, there is variation in the explicitness of men's sexual talk, their use of romance- and intimacy-focused discourses, the extent of their emotional expressiveness, the degree to which their accounts are accepting of and respectful towards women or hostile and sexist, and so on. While I focus here on the issue of male disclosure, in the following section I address the ethics and politics of hearing men's sexist and hostile stories.

Among heterosexual men, cultures of sexual storytelling develop particularly in deeply homosocial and masculine contexts, such as male prisons, all-male workplaces, and military institutions (Flood 2008). In my PhD interviews, two of the men from a military university offered highly rehearsed sexual stories which they have also told in the homosocial culture of sexual story-telling on the military campus. These were detailed sexual stories about sexual episodes, whether involving one's good fortune, sex with prized or "shocking" women, or one's depravity and ill fortune. In the interviews, while the young men involved in this story-telling culture described their participation in such styles of talk, they also offered these stories directly. In fact, the two young military men told virtually identical stories in separate interviews about particular sexual episodes in which they had both been involved.

In such instances, male participants' accounts in interviews are likely to be shaped by the sex

of the interviewer, with men feeling more able to offer to a *male* interviewer the stories which they also offer to male audiences elsewhere. In my research, I have no way of comparing the interviewees' responses to those given to a female interviewer. However, other studies suggest that there are systematic contrasts in men's presentations of gender to male and female researchers. In qualitative research at a US university, Sallee and Harris (2011) found, for example, that men interviewed by a male researcher were more likely than those interviewed by a female researcher to support and to demonstrate sexually objectifying behaviours. They described their focus on women's physical and sexual attributes and gave detailed accounts of their involvements in sexually objectifying interactions, using graphic descriptions of female bodies and body parts. On the other hand, men interviewed by the female researcher used more clinical and academic language, gave greater acknowledgement of how men's talk about sex can objectify women and contribute to gender inequality, and emphasised their own discomfort with or resistance to their peers' sexist and objectifying talk.

The accounts given by men in interviews and focus groups are inherently partial, committed and incomplete (Frankenberg, 1993: 41). Interview data is never "raw" and always both situated and textual (Silverman, 1993: 200). People's accounts of their lives are contextual, interactional and dynamic – they change in different settings and to different audiences and over time. At the same time, people also come to tell stories about themselves which are repeated and even ritualised: "I've always been the kind of man who...", "I fell in love with her when..." They do so in part because they have been constituted as particular kinds of subjects, through discourse and their lived experience of the social order.

Given patterns of homosocial talk, one strategy in men's research with men is actively to use patterns of male-male talk to advantage, adopting them to encourage disclosure. If male interviewers are more likely to be subject to jokey male talk, as McKee and O'Brien (1983) argue, this talk is an empirical resource in interviewing rather than simply a hindrance. In my interviews, forms of male homosocial talk such as the telling of sexual stories and jokey banter have been an important source for insights into men's understandings of sexual relations, and I give space to them and 'play along' with them when they occurred. In other words, I draw on my own familiarity with and embeddedness in masculinity and borrow from the norms of culturally approved male-to-male relationships (McKegany and Bloor 1991: 199-200). However, in recent interviews I did not explicitly *invite* a stereotypically masculine banter throughout the interviews, and this was less likely anyway given the participants (strangers rather than friends), the location (my office rather than a pub or other social space), and the interaction (a strange kind of conversation in which one participant mainly asks questions).

There are instances in male-male research where *both* the researcher and the researched enact idealised constructions of masculinity and masculine sexuality (Broom *et al.* 2009: 58). Both male and female researchers may 'bond over gender', using shared discussion of their experience of stereotypically gendered pursuits to create reciprocity and trust with participants. Sharing commonalities based on gender is a resource for qualitative interviewing. At the same time, it also risks over-intensifying the data's documentation of dominant constructions of gender and suppressing those aspects of participants' experience which do not fit them (Broom *et al.* 60-62).

There are other aspects of homosocial interaction which are less useful for research and which I have avoided in my face-to-face research. I am thinking of men's hostile and punitive reactions to other men who venture beyond codes of masculinity, reactions which

involve challenging the speaker's masculinity or heterosexuality. At times therefore, I hope that the use of less stereotypically masculine interactional and conversational styles, as well as general interviewing techniques, will lessen men's unwillingness to speak of their emotional and sexual lives. I distinguish here, therefore, between being positioned as 'male' *per se* by the interviewees and the particular gendered performances I adopted.

(2) Male privilege and sexism

The relationship between masculinity and the subordination of women raises vital issues for men's research on men. Should feminist research with men be 'empowering'? What are some characteristic political dangers of men's gender-related research with men?

Feminist methodological ideals in the 1970s and early 1980s included the norm of sympathetic, egalitarian and empowering research by women on women. Visions of interviewing women represented it as therapeutic, in a liberal revision of the practice of consciousness-raising (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). More recently, such visions have been radically questioned, with acknowledgment of the diversities and power relations between women themselves and more complex understandings of research processes. Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) criticise the notion of "empowerment" as glib and simplistic, citing the lack of common perspectives and experiences among women and the fact of domination/subordination relations between women. They urge that we investigate, rather than assume, the meaning and impact of research on its participants.

Feminist norms for the 'sympathetic' interviewing of women are inappropriate in interviewing men, or women, who are privileged or engaged in oppressive practices. Feminist calls for empathetic and non-hierarchical modes of research can run counter to the accompanying call for emancipatory research, especially in researching men (Davidson & Layder, 1994: 217) or anti-feminist women (Andrews, 2002). Indeed, women's interviews with men can involve risks for the interviewer (Lee, 1997; McKee & O'Brien, 1983: 158). There are times when one may want to 'interview without sympathy', such as when researching convicted rapists or the male clients of sex workers (Scully, 1990; Davidson & Layder, 1994: 216-17).

While research with men does not have to be 'empowering', must the researcher adopt a neutral façade? Scully adopted this approach when interviewing rapists, disguising how she felt about the interviewees and their stories. This involved a difficult trade-off between the unintentional communication of her agreement or approval, and the potential destruction of the rapport and trust which were necessary for the interviews to proceed (Scully, 1990: 18-19). I adopted a similar approach in my research. I concealed my own critical analysis and rejection of patriarchal masculine and heterosexual practices, in effect condoning these when they were reported or enacted. My ethical discomfort at doing so was only mitigated by a pragmatic concern with interview rapport and trust and an awareness of the progressive political uses to which this research can be put.

Given the pervasiveness of gender inequality, scholars doing research among men must judge the extent to which they will collude with sexism and subordination. For pro-feminist men as for feminist women, especially in masculine settings or among mainstream men, fieldwork or interviewing typically involves listening to talk and being in the presence of practices which one finds offensive and disturbing. Moreover, given the often homosocial dynamics of gender inequality (Flood 2008), male researchers may be particularly likely to collude in sexism. In my PhD research, I found the interviews with two of the men from the

military university in particular to be draining and troubling, as they told elaborate and to them hilarious stories about their blunt mistreatment of women. I had already decided that I could not react in the way I would normally to such stories. I took the general stance of adopting a similar demeanor to the informants', trying for example to laugh along if they laughed. This is still different to how a friend of the story-teller might react, slapping his thigh with laughter and telling a sexist story of his own, and some men undoubtedly were aware of my difference from them. Nevertheless, my neutral interviewing practice meant that I condoned performances or endorsements of sexism when they were offered.

For pro-feminist male researchers to conduct such research is to adopt the status of the 'outsider within'. We put on an impression-management face to pass, conceal our true intentions, and suppress our emotional and political reactions to what is said or done. I agree with Schacht that this is emotionally taxing work, and it can feel like a betrayal of one's values and a potential betrayal of the research subject (Schacht, 1997). Such research involves positioning oneself in a contradictory social location which includes inherent tensions, but also involves a critical and useful vantage point. Schacht describes his pragmatic adoption of a kind of emotional detachment in order to establish relations and to survive his feelings of self-estrangement, which is familiar to me as well. Pro-feminist men's ability to conduct research in masculine settings is facilitated by our own training in dominant codes of masculine performance.

In line with another norm in much of the literature on feminism and methodology, I believe that one's research should 'make a difference' — it should increase the possibilities for progressive social change. But is the research situation itself to be the site in which change is made? Authors such as Kelly *et al.* say "yes", arguing for the use of "challenging methods" which question oppressive attitudes and behaviours (Kelly *et al.* 1994: 36-39). I agree with Glucksmann that research has important limitations as a locus of political activity (Glucksmann, 1994: 151). Furthermore, "challenging methods" may have undermined the rapport which is a precondition for interviewees' disclosure. However, even just asking men to reflect on their own involvements in oppressive practices, such as rape, can prompt personal change (Sikweyiya *et al.* 2007: 56).

(3) Power relations between men

The social organisation of men's lives in most contemporary societies includes power relations between men themselves. One aspect of such power relations which deserves particular mention in relation to male-male research is homophobia. Male-male research involves the negotiation of tensions and fears to do with homophobia and heterosexism (McKegany & Bloor, 1991: 204). During the interviews I have conducted with young heterosexual men, I have been conscious of 'performing' masculinities, through language, dress, body language and demeanor. While I am heterosexual, I have sometimes been perceived as gay, because of earrings in both ears, a somewhat feminised body language, my wearing of anti-homophobic and AIDS-related t-shirts, and of course my political and intellectual positions. While most of these were not visible or known to the research participants, I wondered if they would assume I was gay as well, and if this might make them uncomfortable or influence their comments on AIDS or gay men or other topics. In order to minimise the men's potential homophobic discomfort, in the interviews I have 'outed' myself as heterosexual through casual comments on current or previous female sexual partners. This involves a kind of collusion with heterosexism.

In investigating safe and unsafe sex, sexual and reproductive health, violence against

women, and pornography, I have found myself conducting research which is widely identified as ‘sensitive’. Research on sex and sexualities in particular is commonly regarded as “sensitive” research (Brannen, 1988; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Sensitive research can be threatening to informants in three ways: intruding into private, stressful or sacred areas; revealing information which is stigmatising or incriminating; or impinging on political interests (Lee, 1993: 4). Research on sexual behaviour does all three. Sex research, like all sensitive research, also involves potential threats to the researcher. Researchers on human sexuality are often stigmatised, and their interest may be assumed to be the product of psychological disturbance, sexual ineptitude or lack of sexual prowess (ibid: 9-10). Researchers may suffer “stigma contagion”, in which they come to share the stigma attached to those being studied (ibid: 9). In my own research, I have been advised by a relative to “be careful not to catch AIDS”. Others have assumed that I must be gay given the widespread conflation of AIDS and homosexuality, or even paradoxically because I am researching heterosexual men. (Many of the men doing AIDS-related research *are* gay or bisexual, and thus AIDS-related prejudice and homophobia are not the only factors operating here.)

There are four further dimensions of face-to-face research among men which deserve greater exploration than has been given here. First, both the researcher and the researched may ‘do’ gender in *diverse* ways in the research context. For example, Robertson (2006: 311-12) notes the ways in which he and his male research participants performed and co-constructed both complicit and hegemonic masculinities at different times in their interactions. In the context of queer sexualities, Walby (2010) describes forms of male-male interaction in research encounters which are not scripted by hegemonic masculinity.

Second, the salience of gender and gender identities (and of other forms of social difference) among research participants is shaped by the research’s *content*. As one might expect, there is evidence that gender becomes particularly salient in studies focused on gender (Sallee and Harris 2011: 412). Male participants may engage in more pronounced ‘gender identity work’ in research projects focused on gender, and especially so when constructions of hegemonic masculinity are challenged (Pini 2005: 212). With topics such as sexual performance which are tied closely to hegemonic constructions of masculinity and masculine sexuality, men may be more likely to describe or perform hegemonic masculinities themselves (Broom *et al.* 2009: 57). Hence, as Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001: 91) note, understanding the workings of gender in research involves moving beyond ‘Who is asking whom?’ to ‘Who is asking whom about what?’.

Research’s gendered dynamics also are influenced by its *context*, and this is the third dimension of research among men which deserves attention. We must address the wider contexts – the gender regimes and relations – which structure men’s participation and performance as research subjects. As Pini (2005: 204) emphasises, we must go further and ask, ‘Who is asking whom about what and where?’. The research context includes both the immediate interview environment and the wider institutional and cultural context (Broom *et al.* 2009).

Fourth, gendered dynamics intersect with those associated with *other* forms of social difference including age, sexuality, class, and personal biography. While this chapter focuses on the workings of gender in men’s social research with men, other axes of social difference also are in operation in the research context. A full account of gender’s mediation of the production and analysis of qualitative data must include these (Broom *et al.* 2009).

Conclusion

Scholarship on gender now gives growing attention to how gender is performed, achieved, or 'done'. The three dimensions of men's face-to-face research among men discussed here are only part of a wide variety of ways in which gender may be performed and negotiated in research interactions. Such encounters are opportunities to signify, shift, and resist masculinities (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001).

For men or women doing gender-based research, a number of practical implications suggest themselves. Whether conducting same-sex or cross-sex research, researchers should be attentive to the gendered positions and expectations of both researched and researcher and reflexive about their own gender performance in the research process (Sallee and Harris 2011: 426-27). Focused efforts at reflexivity may be embedded in the research process from the beginning, or constructed retrospectively through examination of research fieldnotes and the recoding, for example, of transcribed interviews (Broom *et al.* 2009: 54; Robertson 2006: 306). As Robertson (2006: 309) emphasises, critical reflexivity involves examination of both personal, subjective experience (with all its potential ambivalences, contradictions, and fluidities) *and* structured, inequitable power relations.

Greater attention to the gendered processes at play in men's research with men is of both political and methodological value. Politically, such attention highlights men's often privileged social locations and the power dynamics and inequalities which are the context for knowledge production. Methodologically, such attention increases understanding of how our data are produced and how to make sense of them. The gendered dynamics of men's face-to-face research with men are not necessarily obstacles to data, but also themselves rich sources of data regarding men and gender.

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