REFLECTING ON 'INSIDER’ / ‘OUTSIDER’ POSITIONALITY WHEN UNDERTAKING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PAKISTANI MEN: INSIGHTS FROM A FEMALE RESEARCHER

# Abstract

**Background** Conducting culturally sensitive research into male experiences can be challenging for female researchers. Despite this, very few reflective accounts of how researchers overcome these difficulties are available in literature.

**Aim** To illustrate a female researcher’s challenges in conducting research into the young men’s experiences of puberty in Pakistan and highlight strategies used to overcome these.

**Results** A key challenge was creating an environment in which participants felt able to share their experiences. This was overcome by the incorporation of the lived experience of the public involvement contributors in the development stage of the project, offering a choice of interview format to participants and other solutions driven by the ‘insider’ position of the researcher (being from a same culture). Interestingly the researcher’s ‘outsider’ role as a mature and pregnant woman appeared to create a ‘safe’ environment allowing the young men to openly share their personal experiences.

**Discussion and Conclusion** Female researchers can successfully conduct culturally sensitive research with young men in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan. The key is to be aware of potential cultural issues and to utilise any ‘insider’/ ‘outsider’ positionality to greatest effect.

**Implications for Practice** In addition to adapting procedures, such as gaining trust, building rapport, and assuring a non-judgemental and comfortable environment, the ‘outsider’ position of the female researcher should be given due consideration when undertaking culturally sensitive research with men.

# Key words:

Culturally sensitive research, female researcher, ‘insider’ / ‘outsider’ role, reflection, young men, Pakistan

# Introduction

Traditionally, sensitive research topics are defined as those eliciting powerful emotional responses such as sadness, embarrassment, fear, and anxiety and having the potential to bring physical, psychological, or emotional distress to both the participants and the researchers (Cowles 1988, Sieber and Stanley 1988). It has been argued that any topic of research can be sensitive, albeit some topics have potential to create more distress than others (Lee and Renzetti 1990, Corbin and Morse 2003). Some researchers argue that research focusing on certain phases of life such as pregnancy, puberty, birth, and death, can be particularly sensitive (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005, Powel et al 2018). In many societies with strict socio-cultural norms such as Pakistan, puberty and related sexual and reproductive health topics are considered taboo subjects and young people are not encouraged to discuss these (Ali et al 2004, Qidwai 1999, Afsar et al 2006, Mamdani and Hussain 2015).

This paper reflects on the experience of the primary researcher (NAS) who, as part of her doctorate studies, explored the puberty experiences of young men living in Pakistan (Shivji et al 2021). Here, the researcher explores the impact of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positionality in the planning, development and implementation of this study and provides tips for overcoming challenges associated with research in these areas for other researchers.

‘Insider’ positionality is when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members and share the same culture, language, and identity with the study participants (Birman, 2005). This ‘insider’ role allows researchers to be fully accepted by their participants (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, Irvine et al 2008). As a result, participants may be more open with researchers and share in-depth information required in the data collection phase. Conversely, when a researcher is positioned as having an ‘outsider’ perspective, this might be seen as useful in bringing less bias to the study, allowing researchers to analysis the data more objectively and openly, without bringing subjectivity to that information (Irvine et al 2008).

## *Ethical Consideration*

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution review board (IRB) of the University of Nottingham, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences research ethics committee in August 2014 (Ref no: OVSa14082014 SoHS PhD). Permission to access sites for recruitment of potential participants (a private University and local Scout Group) were granted between July and September 2014 from respective coordinators. Participation was voluntary, and all the participants provided informed consent.

# Deciding on Appropriate Data Collection Methods

The study was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, a country, where people predominantly follow a Muslim religion, and topics such as puberty are considered taboo and are a sensitive subject to talk about (Aahung Annual Report 2018, Ahmadi et al 2009, Alwan et al 2010). For this study, the researcher initially considered a variety of data collection methods that may be suitable to use for sensitive studies. For example, use of an online survey containing open-ended questions were considered, as a potential method for the collection of data of a sensitive nature (Flicker et al 2010, Lee 1993). However, due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was felt that an interview-based qualitative approach would generate more in-depth, contextual, rich, and informative data, and provide access to those subjective perceptions of the participants, which may be less accessible through an online survey (King and Horrocks 2012, Low 2013).

Consideration was also given to the use of Focus Group Discussions for data collection, as all participants would have experienced puberty and may have shared a specific set of issues associated with this life event (Silverman 2011). However, as this study was culturally sensitive, there were concerns that the young men may not be comfortable sharing their personal experiences in a group setting (Sim and Waterfield 2009). Focus groups were therefore, not considered as the best approach for this study.

Considering the sensitive nature of the present study, semi-structured individual interviews were chosen as the data collection strategy for this study, with options for participants to participate in a face-to-face interview or remotely (Elam and Fenton 2003). Conducting interviews would also allow the researcher to encourage/prompt participants to share their personal thoughts on sensitive topics, observe participants’ attentiveness to the questions being asked, and gather and react to non-verbal feedback (Murphy et al 1998).

Remote interviews such as those conducted over the phone or online may be well suited to research on potentially sensitive topics, where often the detachment from the physical presence of the interviewer can provide participants with a level of distance which allows them to feel more comfortable disclosing intimate and personal experiences (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, Deakin, and Wakefield 2014). Using remote video techniques enabled the researcher to retain the ability to observe the tone, gesture and facial expressions of the participants and helped build rapport between the researcher and participants, overcoming the problem of visual anonymity that may arise when remote interviews are conducted using audio techniques only (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). However, an option to join via audio only (i.e., camera off), was also given to participants. In these circumstances the researcher also kept her camera off. It should be noted that none of the participants chose this option. Providing an opportunity to young men to choose between remote (Skype based) or face-to-face interviews gave them a degree of autonomy/power, helping them to feel more comfortable and in control over their interactions with the researcher, which is an essential element of conducting successful research on sensitive topics (Van der Riet and Boettiger 2009).

## *Patient and Public Involvement Approach*

Recognising the cultural challenges of talking about puberty experiences, the present study incorporated the input of Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) contributors to support effective design and development of the research project. For this purpose, two group meetings were conducted with eight young men of similar ages (18-25) years and cultural backgrounds (South Asian origin) to the intended study participants. These young men were recruited via an advert displayed on the University’s student union notice board and contributors were provided with a shopping Gift Card as compensation for their time.

The PPI group provided feedback on study design and documentation (such as the topic guide), recruitment, and feasible strategies for a female researcher to conduct in-depth and high-quality interviews on a culturally sensitive topic. The group provided helpful feedback on how to approach young men to ask about specific pubertal changes including, voice changes and hair growth, when needed. Having these additional prompts helped the researcher to break any silences during the interview and focus the interview on specific changes/events that may have occurred within the lives of the participants. PPI input was also beneficial in gaining practical advice on the conduct of the study. For example, it was the PPI group’s suggestion, that the female researcherapproach students from a private university and scout groups to participate in the study and to offer them the choice of the remote or face-to-face interview options. The input of PPI group was, therefore, instrumental in deciding on culturally appropriate ways of conducting the research and in enhancing the data collection process.

# Issues, Challenges and Strategies

## *Power Imbalance, Cultural Understanding and Rapport Building*

Despite interviews being considered the most appropriate way to gather in-depth information regarding participants’ personal experiences, particularly in relation to sensitive topics, there is the potential for an imbalance of power between the researcher and the participants (Raheim et al 2016). In qualitative research interviews the researcher initiates the interviews, generates questions, probes, and interprets the meanings from interviews, possibly creating an asymmetry of power (Low 2013). This asymmetry however can be addressed by creating a two-way relationship between the researcher and participants, which allows information to be mutually exchanged between both parties and contributes to establishing rapport. This is particularly important in relation to sensitive topics, where social desirability tendencies might be higher (Bergen and Labonté 2020, Peters et al 2008, Low 2013, Liamputtong 2007, Karniele-Miller et al 2009).

In this study, the researcher used an icebreaker, initiating a social conversation about study, family, or general life at the beginning of the interview to put participants at ease and help establish trust and build rapport with the young men. A similar approach has been used by Bergen and Labonté (2020), where they established rapport with participants through using humour and self-disclosure techniques in order to put participants at ease. In addition, the researcher reiterated the consent at the beginning of each interview, ensuring that young men did not feel obliged to participate in the study because of the perceived institutional or researcher’s expectations.

In addition, the researcher’s ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ position, for example belonging to the same culture and speaking the same language (insider) (Irvine et al 2008) and being a married and pregnant woman at the time of data collection (outsider) (Bergen and Labonte 2019) also helped in overcoming these challenges of cultural understanding, and rapport building.

Whilst reflecting on an ‘insider’ position facilitated the researcher in understanding the cultural issues related to the sensitivity of the subject (Irvine et al 2008, Shai 2020) and the language used to describe participants’ experiences (Chidarikire et al 2018); the ‘outsider’ role portrayed the researcher’s maturity and understanding of the topic (Shai 2020). The similar ‘insider’ approach had been used by Chidarikire et al. where the primary researcher was bilingual and a native speaker of Urdu, which allowed the researcher to understand the hidden meaning and nuances of local idioms/ terms beyond the words that participants used to explain their experiences (Chidarikire et al 2018). This cultural understanding was a strength in this study, as it facilitated access to the “cultural community” (Birman 2005).

In contrast, the researcher’s ‘outsider’ position was demonstrated through mature attitude, understanding, and respect towards the young men. In this study, researcher’s ‘outsider’ position was related to her being a more mature female; thus, being of a different gender, researcher’s perceptions of participants’ experiences were not influenced by any personal experiences. Hence, the researcher demonstrated active listening and non-confrontational behaviour (non-judgemental gestures), which allowed her to establish rapport with young men and made them feel comfortable to talk to her. Both these roles therefore, facilitated in understanding the story of these young men, gaining participants’ trust, and building rapport (Bergen and Labonte 2019, Chidarikire et al 2018, Shai 2020), as a result of which, the participants appeared comfortable to share their personal and private experiences with the researcher.

## *Respecting Sensitive Information*

When conducting research of a sensitive nature it is important to provide enough time within interviews for the participants to respond to the questions in detail (Bergen and Labonte 2019, Elmir et al 2011). In addition, asking open-ended, clear, and mindful questions (keeping the cultural sensitivity in mind) are considered appropriate for a qualitative and sensitive study, as they help elicit reflective responses from participants whilst being respectful of the sensitivity of the topic (Dempsey et al 2016, Patton 2002, Dickson swift et al 2007).

In this study, not only were participants asked open ended questions, but also were given sufficient time to answer the question and reflect. These questions often elicited strong emotional responses, for which the researcher ensured to maintain sensitivity and provided warmth to participants. Warmth and sensitivity were demonstrated by maintaining silence, respecting participants’ emotions (Dempsey et al 2016), showing willingness to continue with the interview when the participants were ready, and offering participants breaks if required during the emotional moment within the interviews. For example, a silence for a couple of minutes was observed by one of the participants, who shared his traumatic experience of being sexually abused during puberty. Allowing silence and pause during the interview supported this participant to manage the emotional impact of the discussion and provided a comfortable space for him to express his personal experience. The success of this strategy has been previously demonstrated when conducting qualitative research in different cultures (Kawabata and Gastaldo 2015) as well as, on sensitive topics (Dempsey et al 2016).

Additionally, the researcher offered either a break or to discontinue the interview to any participant who became distressed during the interview. Participants were also signposted to appropriate support services. Despite the eliciting of these strong emotions during the study, young men disclosed feeling privileged to contribute through sharing their previously untold experiences.

The researcher’s role as an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ may have had a direct impact on how she was perceived by the participants in respecting sensitive information, and how the knowledge was co-constructed between them (Irvine et al 2008, Watts 2006). In the current study, regardless of the format of the interviews (i.e., face to face or remote) the ‘insider’ position enabled a sensitive and accurate understanding of the puberty experiences as expressed by participants; however, the ‘outsider’ position of the researcher, specifically as a ‘married woman and visibly pregnant’ might have made her look mature and more receptive than a young woman of a similar age (Reich 2003). Hence the researcher’s ‘outsider’ position appeared to be less of a threat to the young men’s masculinity. As these young men might not have disclosed certain personal experiences to a young female researcher or a male researcher, in order to protect their self-image and maintain their traditional masculine identity (Bergen and Labonte 2019, Ahmadi et al 2009, McKenzie et al 2018, Reich 2003). This shift in power balance, allowed participants to establish rapport and be more open with the researcher, enabling them to share their experiences and express their true feelings during the interview (Bergen and Labonte 2019, Dickson-Swift et al 2007).

# Conclusion

This paper describes a range of strategies that can be used to support female researchers undertaking sensitive research with male participants. These strategies can be used to build trust and confidence between the researcher and the participants and include rapport building techniques, addressing power imbalance by asking sensitive and open-ended questions, and allowing participants to share their personal and intimate experiences in a positive and supportive environment.

In addition, being reflexive throughout the research processes is important as it allows the researcher to identify their ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions/roles and how these roles may influence the research process. Exploring the impact of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positionality in the planning, development and implementation of this study provided useful techniques to overcome the challenges associated with conducting sensitive research. Such reflection could be applied in similar settings to benefit future researchers.

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