When Women Study Men: Gendered Implications for Qualitative Research

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Abstract
As a White cis female researcher, I am often asked about my capacity to conduct meaningful, credible, and safe research with men. Questions often center on my experiences in men’s spaces, ability to understand or represent men’s experiences, and safety protocols to mitigate against looming threats of male-perpetrated violence. I am curious about how my gender continues to be a point of contention in my role as a qualitative researcher. In this meta-analysis and commentary article, I explore my experiences in relation to other female researchers who study men and who have published articles reflecting on gender norms in research practice. With examples taken from the contexts of fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and presentation of findings, this article illustrates the nuanced and often invisible power and gender dynamics that inform how methodological decisions are made, what is found or synthesized from qualitative data, and how problematic social norms are reinforced. I argue that, within the context of research about men and masculinities, researchers must be responsible for reflecting on and confronting gender norms as a part of their intersectional experiences of privilege and oppression. Specifically, researchers can use reflexive practice and field journaling to better understand how gender norms and uneven power dynamics are introduced to, co-constructed within, and generated from qualitative studies. These reflections and concerted efforts to confront broader social injustices imbedded in research practices are necessary for researchers to produce sound data and promote reciprocal research benefits. Without such efforts, researchers may reinforce the same structures of power and stereotypical gender norms that they aim to disrupt in their scholarship.

Keywords
methods in qualitative inquiry, critical feminist theory, critical theory, feminist research, qualitative meta-analysis/synthesis, social justice

Introduction
My academic career started in my master’s degree when I studied men’s health and masculinities. Early on, I confronted questions about my capacity to conduct meaningful, credible, and safe qualitative research as a young cis White woman. Between conference presentations, peer review feedback, and interactions with friends and family, my ability to access men’s spaces, understand men’s experiences, and analyze data about men was and continues to be a topic of debate. Even now as I am finishing my PhD, I am routinely asked about my safety protocols for traveling alone or spending time with men as part of fieldwork and whether my feminine appearance puts me at risk. Once, I was asked by an anonymous peer reviewer to justify my role in a project about men by providing evidence of other female researchers who successfully study men without imposing their bias. These lines of inquiry presume that being a woman inherently challenges the credibility of my work with men and about masculinities. The understanding that certain identity markers can diminish research findings stems from the positivist assumption that some researchers can be neutral or objective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Kirsch, 1993; Pease, 2010; Spivak, 1988). Yet, scholars increasingly challenge this position by demonstrating how the language of neutrality or impartiality is often used to discredit the scholarship of

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researchers who are othered because of identity markers such as gender, race, and/or ability (Bourke, 2014; Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Pease, 2010; Spivak, 1988). Notions of subjectivity can therefore be used as an insidious form of discrimination, disproportionately inviting questions about the credibility and worth of some scholars’ work based on their identity (Bourke, 2014; Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Henry et al., 2017; Horn, 1997; Pease, 2010; Spivak, 1988). Cis, White, male scholars, by contrast, are often normalized as neutral experts and are rarely investigated along the same lines (Bourke, 2014; Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Pease, 2010; Spivak, 1988). This assumed neutrality is subtly reinforced through the masculinized writing conventions that are upheld by many academic disciplines and funding agencies (Kirsch, 1993). Scholarship is often assessed and assigned value on the basis of sounding authoritative or confident, demonstrating leadership and independence, and contributing unique and expert findings to the field. Many scholars feel pressured to adopt this masculinized voice to demonstrate trustworthiness in their research proposals and solicit competitive funding. In doing so, researchers may undermine worldviews or research values that embrace uncertainty, collaboration, humility, and curiosity instead.

With this in mind, I am curious about how my gender is or becomes a controversial element of qualitative research practice. I agree with those who challenge my work in that all researchers (myself included) must be reflexive of their positions within qualitative research projects and broader structures of power. In this article, I will explore the questions I grapple with in my own experiences as a researcher and in relevant literature about the dynamics between female researchers and male participants in qualitative studies. My goal is to disrupt rather than reinforce the problematic assumptions about gender upon which the questions/critiques I receive are predicated. In using a critical lens to explore my personal reflections and those of other scholars who have published on this topic, I aim to trust personal experience while maintaining a relative distrust of experience as it is understood, valued, and practiced within Western education systems (Jacobs, 2008).

This article relates to literature on identity politics or politics of difference in qualitative research. Specific attention is paid to the relational roles of female researchers and male participants, which are currently undertheorized. By grounding this topic in my experiences, I offer strategies for understanding and challenging co-constructed gender and power dynamics in three common elements of qualitative design: selecting research spaces, conducting interviews, and presenting findings. Although I specifically write from my position to articulate research implications for female researchers who study men and/or masculinities, male researchers also benefit from thinking through the same complexities and dilemmas. Reflecting on the ways in which gender norms are introduced to, co-constructed within, and generated from qualitative studies is necessary for researchers to produce credible research and ensure reciprocal research benefits.

**Gendering Fieldwork and Research Spaces**

He met me outside and led me into the old warehouse. As I scanned the rows of workstations, equipped with old tools, saws, pieces of scrap wood, and rusting metal, the excited butterfly feeling I walked in with quickly turned to knots. There must have been 20 men inside—all of them older. As I walked through the warehouse, the men raised their heads one-by-one and looked. I could feel their eyes, and I became uneasy. As I looked towards the exit, I did the math: 20 men, isolated factory, endless equipment, and one of me. Being socialized not to trust men was not doing me any favours in this job. Armed with an audio recorder, an emergency contact number, and a carefully selected modest outfit, I began to tense. I ran through the plethora of disastrous scenarios in my head and wondered what I was getting myself into.

This passage is a modified excerpt from a field journal I kept in 2014 during my study of Men’s Sheds in Ireland (Lefkowich & Richardson, 2018). I had recently completed my master’s degree and was just shy of 25 years old. This study prompted questions from others about how I accessed men’s spaces and protected my well-being. As other scholars similarly identify, women’s fieldwork is primarily written about and understood through the lens of a looming threat of harm, and specifically, sexualized violence (Day, 2006; Huggins & Glebeck, 2009; Lee, 1997; Pain, 1997). Regardless of their own perceptions or expectations, women are unanimously assumed to be at greater risk of male-perpetrated violence in fieldwork than male researchers (Arendell, 1997; Bryan, 2007; Huggins & Glebeck, 2009; Lee, 1997; Pini, 2005). This looming threat of violence was apparent in my experience of meeting men in an old warehouse and in an unfamiliar town. As such, notions of safety and identity require further exploration to illustrate underlying power and gender dynamics when selecting research spaces or reflecting on “the field.”

The concept of “men’s spaces” is intriguing. Places may become associated with certain identities over time and with shifting sociopolitical, ecologic, and economic circumstances (Farough, 2006; Fine, 2013; Francis, 1997; Twitchell, 2006; van Hoven & Horschelmann, 2005). Some spaces may become synonymous with a particular gender identity as certain people come to feel belonging, ease, nostalgia, and entitlement (Farough, 2006; Fine, 2013; Francis, 1997; Twitchell, 2006; van Hoven & Horschelmann, 2005). Specific gendered behaviors may also become associated with or normalized as part of the unspoken culture in a place—reflecting who may be visible and welcome and the kinds of relationships or activities that can be expected (Fine, 2013; Lyman, 2013; Twitchell, 2006). Women who engage in the unspoken culture of a place may be seen as “one of the boys” and perpetuate a masculinizing of space regardless of their own gender (Fine, 2013). The identity of a space may also be reinforced by members who make others feel alienated, uncomfortable, or out of place (Bryant, 2007; Razack, 2002; Thien & Del Casino, 2012; van Hoven & Horschelmann, 2005). Comfort, discomfort, visibility, and movement between spaces help to illustrate positions of spatial
privilege (Bryant, 2007; Razack, 2002; Thien & Del Casino, 2012; van Hoven & Horschelmann, 2005). Those who identify with a space are often afforded feelings of safety and belonging, whereas those who do not may feel oppressed and unsafe. It is not an accident, then, that I became uncomfortable and began to question my safety in the “men’s space” that I studied.

Fear, stemming from a lurking threat or heightened risk, is a political process intended to explicitly distinguish between those who are made to belong and those who are not (Day, 2006; Farough, 2006; Pain, 1997; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Women’s fear can be explained as a “spatial expression of patriarchy” (Pain, 1997, p. 231). Within a Western patriarchal system, women are seen to belong in the home (Day, 2006; Pain, 1997). Women’s movements into public spaces, including traveling alone at night or in poorly lit/unfamiliar areas, are therefore assumed to put women at greater risk of harm (Day, 2006; Pain, 1997). Some of these concerns are echoed in ethics protocols, well-meaning advice between colleagues, and published papers that caution women against meeting participants in private (e.g., the home or a hotel room), entering neighborhoods or areas known to have higher rates of “deviant activity” (e.g., drug use, crime), or taking on more vulnerable travel arrangements (e.g., traveling at night or to unfamiliar places; Cassell, 2005; Huggins & Glebeck, 2009; Lee, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, Haywood, & Bright, 2013; Paterson, Gregory, & Thorne, 1999). Before unpacking these concerns in more depth, I want to be clear. Researchers (regardless of their gender) should integrate their comfort, values, and professional boundaries into their methodological and prioritize self-care in their research design. Decision-making based on the safety of researchers, in addition to participants, is valid.

And also... deciding on research spaces based on safety may perpetuate subtle gender norms or power imbalances. The notion of “safe spaces” primarily refers to environments that keep people (and marginalized peoples specifically) free from violence (Fox, 2007; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Labeling research environments as safe can reinforce invisible power structures and gender norms (Farough, 2006; Fox, 2007; Razack, 2002; The Roestone Collective, 2014). For example, some men’s racial, ethnic, and/or sexual identities have been historically feminized and desexualized in efforts to safeguard the fragility and innocence of White women (Day, 2006). In Canada, historical and ongoing academic, journalistic, and media representations of Chinese men commonly reinforce a stereotype that they do not align with the same hypermasculine norms of dominance over White women and hypersexuality that put women at risk (Day, 2006). Thus, determining spaces associated with some men’s identities to be safe (for the researcher) may affirm colonial and racist stereotypes and perpetuate the legacy of using White women as a barometer to measure the potential danger posed by men of color (Day, 2006). Notions of safety may also essentialize women’s experiences—undermining the unique risks that women of color and Indigenous women experience independent or because of White women (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018). Some White researchers may intentionally avoid spaces that are racialized not only for fear of their safety but also to avoid confronting notions of White guilt or being viewed by residents as colonizers or racists (Farough, 2006). Rather than traveling to a community, researchers may instead choose to host interviews, focus groups, or observations in convenient academic settings. Yet, researchers must consider how their selection of a “safe” research environment impacts the subsequent data generated and the communities or populations affected.

Choosing a university space to conduct research may undermine participants’ own interpretations of safety, which can negatively impact the quality of data generated (Fine, 2013; Twitchell, 2006). Intentionally selecting spaces that are not associated with some participants’ identities can perpetuate the problematic ways in which racialized men and masculine identities are constructed in relation to notions of deviance or danger (Fine, 2013; Twitchell, 2006). The lack of attention paid to men’s gendered and racialized experiences of harm in academic research perpetuates the erasure of historical and ongoing research-based trauma that disproportionately affects men of color, Indigenous men, queer men, men with disabilities, and men with mental health issues or cognitive impairments (Gatrell, 2006; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). University settings may offer the guise of safety or neutrality while maintaining long-standing inequities (Henry et al., 2017). As a result, some participants and researchers are made to feel marginalized, unwelcome, and out of place relative to those who feel entitled to and belonging in university space. Although conference rooms, offices, or university lounges are commonly used for interviews and focus groups, I challenge researchers to question how we come to understand these settings as safer and what prevents us from meeting participants where they are comfortable.

The tensions described in this section bring about important questions about whose comfort or “safety” should be prioritized in research environments, when, and how. While I am not advocating for anyone to put themselves in harm’s way, it is important that researchers grapple with how they come to perceive risk and safety relative to their participants and research environments. As a cis White woman and settler, it is important that I problematize gender norms in relation to whiteness—and the notion of fragility—when considering my role and presence in different research spaces. In safeguarding my own comfort and the well-being of my participants, I have a responsibility to disrupt a legacy of symbolic and epistemological violence that occurs when White women fear men of color. Reflective journaling can be a useful way for researchers to explore their engagement with research spaces: How they gain access to, feel in, and move between research spaces; who is visible in or absent from certain settings, if there are gendered behavioral norms enacted in particular locations; and what these experiences signal about power and gender (among other intersections of identity). Researchers should continue journaling when they return from “the field” or if they choose to conduct research in universities to counter the assumption that academic spaces are more neutral or “safe” and therefore exempt from observation.
My earlier field journal excerpt illustrates how I internalized a looming threat of violence associated with unknown spaces and unfamiliar men. From journaling and consistent debriefs with my supervisor, I would later describe how my feelings of fear and caution were eclipsed by relief and embarrassment. Participants eagerly took me on tours of their space, helped me set up an interview room, included me in activities, and fused over getting me endless cups of tea and cookies. Throughout the project, I traveled to similar sites across Ireland (alone) and felt an increasing sense of confidence and adventure.

**Relational Gender Dynamics in Qualitative Interviews**

Researchers have a significant role in co-constructing data. From designing the scope of the study and deciding on interview questions to introducing key language and unspoken norms, researchers influence how participants express themselves and their gender (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005; Holmgren, 2011; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). Dynamics between researchers and participants cannot be assumed ahead of time or replicated—both parties navigate social norms, personal dynamics, and congruent or competing agendas together and within the study’s context (Holmgren, 2011; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). Although not an exhaustive account of how gender and power intersect in qualitative interviews, this section glimpses at some dilemmas that complicate how qualitative data can be generated and subsequently understood.

Gender performance can be an important interview strategy for researchers. Leaning into dominant feminine norms (e.g., nurturance, patience, compassion, passivity, heterosexuality) may grant some men permission to participate in traditionally feminized activities like talking or expressing emotions (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003; Williams & Heikes, 1993). As a researcher, being perceived as nonthreatening or even incompetent can also help participants to feel less guarded (Cassell, 2005; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997). Men who internalize homophic social norms and stigma surrounding male intimacies may be deterred from participating in an interview with another male interviewer (Jachyra, Atkinson, & Gibson, 2014; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Or, if they do participate, these men may perform or posture more stereotypically masculine behaviors such as competing for dominance, avoiding emotional reflections, and belittling women in personal anecdotes (Jachyra et al., 2014; Macan Ghaill et al., 2013; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Therefore, it may be advantageous for women to conduct interviews.

Yet, intentionally embodying certain feminine characteristics associated with nurturance, incompetence, or weakness can perpetuate the harmful stereotypes about women who discredit their expertise as researchers. Including women peripherally in studies to recruit and interview men (as research assistants or interviewers rather than co- or primary investigators) is also problematic. Tokenistic inclusion limits our understandings of how women contribute to or influence qualitative research from positions of power or decision-making rather than as bodies in a room or names on a recruitment poster that invite men to speak comfortably. This preserves social stigmas about male intimacies and validates or introduces a heteronormative lens to the study through which women’s interactions with participants are dominantly theorized.

The literature exploring power imbalances in interviewers primarily focuses on men’s objectifying, sexist, and flirtatious behaviors toward female researchers. Common reflections include participants commenting on female researchers’ appearances, sharing explicit details of sexual encounters, and asking about interviewers’ sexuality or sexual experiences (Arendell, 1997; Cameron, 1997; Coates, 2003; Gurney, 1985; Lee, 1997; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Pini, 2005; Sallee & Harris, 2011; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Yet, sexualized behaviors do not inherently grant participants control or power in an interview. Some men enact traits of hypersexuality and prowess to create a more familiar way of sharing personal narratives (Cameron, 1997; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). Rather than intentionally malicious, men’s flirting may signal their limited opportunities to engage in platonic and emotionally safe interactions with peers, especially considering that adult men have fewer close friendships (Cameron, 1997; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Martin, 2001). For men who lack confidants beyond their romantic partners, sharing personal reflections in a professional setting may be anxiety provoking (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). Likening the interview to a romantic context by flirting with the researcher may demonstrate men’s own vulnerability and need to share personal reflections in a more familiar way (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013).

Sexualized behaviors in interviews, however, may also reflect participants’ alignment with stereotypical masculine norms of control and dominance over women (Arendell, 1997; Cameron, 1997; Horn, 1997; Lee, 1997; Sallee & Harris, 2011). By commenting on researchers’ appearances, asking personal questions, requesting dates or other romantic encounters, sending unsolicited and explicit photographs or messages, and/or inappropriately touching the researcher, participants may explicitly attempt to demonstrate control over the interview and interviewer (Arendell, 1997; Lee, 1997; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Pini, 2005). Participants may also use crass, sexually explicit, or demeaning language to describe women in their narratives, which demonstrates their sense of dominance over women regardless of who conducts the interview (Coates, 2003; Horn, 1997; Sallee & Harris, 2011; Williams & Heikes, 1993). As I reflected in my own 2014 field journal excerpt:

> His eyes lingered on me, making sure to keep my attention. He then scanned the length of my body and returned to my eyes. As he did, he described his relationship with his wife—making her and I both small.

For many female researchers, interviewing men can be oppressive, humiliating, and emotionally taxing (Arendell, 1997; Huggins & Glebbeck, 2009; Lee, 1997). Interviewers
may struggle to listen to, demonstrate compassion for, or validate interview responses or behaviors that undermine women’s agency (Huggins & Glebeck, 2009; Lee, 1997). Humiliating and demeaning occurrences may be difficult for interviewers to articulate or confront because they are normalized as harmless, and women are expected to stuff them off (Martin, 2001). Some interviewers interpret sexualized or discriminatory behaviors as an explicit lack of respect and respond by interrupting and assertively ending unwanted behaviors to reestablish clear boundaries (Hoel, 2015; Lee, 1997; Sallee & Harris, 2011). These dynamics can make it seem as though participants are in positions of power relative to researchers. This interpretation aligns with patriarchal norms about men and women’s relative power rather than research norms about power differences between researchers and participants. However, some scholars suggest a different way of analyzing power in interviews and further complicate assumptions about who is in control, how data are generated, and which agendas or values become dominant in interviews.

Beyond paternalism and dominance, there are more nuanced ways that men grapple with or explore their gender in qualitative interviews. Difficult personal reflections can be shared more easily if participants distance themselves from their responses. Therefore, rich data are often embedded within contradictory, ambiguous, and noncommittal responses whereby men hold multiple perspectives or identities at once (Cameron, 1997; Coates, 2003; Gill, 2005; Kiesling, 1997; Lyman, 2013; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Speer, 2001). Jokes and sarcasm similarly allow men to both reject and reinstate normative social rules about masculinities (Lyman, 2013; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Speer, 2001). These playful responses allow men to temporarily challenge gender norms and end their criticism when they deliver the punch line (Lyman, 2013). Incoherence and contradiction can also demonstrate men’s resistance to both masculine and Western norms of self-expression like being rational, linear, and authoritative (Cameron, 1997; Speer, 2001). Men’s difficulty in articulating feelings about or interpretations of masculinity is important because there is no consensus in society about what it means to be a man (Wong & Rochlen, 2004).
strategies to make room for and amplify (rather than dismiss) multiple, contradictory, and nuanced expressions of gender. Drawing on worldviews and methodologies that embrace multiple meanings, humor, arts, nonlinear narrative constructions, and nonverbal data in research design may enrich what can be known about gender. Considering the complexity in which power and gender are negotiated or relationally co-constructed makes it impossible to conclude with any confidence that female, unlike male, researchers inherently impose bias in interviews with men. Therefore, regardless of their gender, interviewers must be reflexive of how, when, why, and for whose benefit they lean into, perform, or challenge gender norms in interviews.

Analyzing and Representing Gender

Given the complexities imbedded in fieldwork and interviews, it can be challenging for researchers to write about what actually occurred. Researchers often compromise the tone, context, and emotion of research narratives (both their own and their participants’) to align with conventions of academic writing. Female scholars, in particular, face an additional challenge of acknowledging their own gendered identities and experiences in their work without undermining their authority, rigor, and research validity. In this section, I explore some of the dilemmas that female researchers who study masculinities may face in representing themselves, their participants, and their fieldwork.

How female researchers write about themselves or engage in reflexive practice in their research is riddled with dilemmas. By naming their identity, positionalities, and subjectivities, researchers keep their own voices and experiences at the center of their research (Pease, 2010). Centering on personal experiences in knowledge production can be a brave and important strategy for scholars whose identities and worldviews are often alienated in academia (Henry et al., 2017; Pease, 2010). As scholars elevate more diverse voices, they counter the troubling history of marginalization in academia and enrich research cultures for future generations of scholars.

In discussing their identity as a part of their scholarship, women may also contribute unintended harm to their peers. Women may unintentionally pigeonhole the roles, voices, and experiences of other female scholars, giving way to certain gendered assumptions about the fields of study in which women can research or cultivate expertise (Pease, 2010). For example, as women increasingly interrogate gender and positionality in their research, this topic becomes normalized as one primarily concerning women. It is almost assumed that female scholars would or should be interested in gender, whereas male scholars do not face this same expectation.

The growing support of intersectional approaches to gender and research also creates new power imbalances that can cause harm. In writing about their positionality, scholars may use some facets of their identity to veil or minimize experiences of privilege (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018; Henrey et al., 2017). For example, female scholars who experience some forms of oppression as women may also benefit from unearned privileges related to race, sexual orientation, ability, and education. Yet, many researchers believe that confronting their own position of privilege within inequitable structures of power is somehow optional (DiAngelo, 2018; Pease, 2010; Watt, 2007). Failing to acknowledge how they benefit from social inequities may signal scholars’ fear of giving up the power they believe is earned or deserved (DiAngelo, 2018; Watt, 2007). Beyond ignoring their positions, some researchers may become defensive or dismissive of how they currently benefit from inequities or how they stand to benefit from research that reinforce such injustices (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018; hooks, 1994; Pease, 2010; Watt, 2007). Reflexive writing, therefore, may also be used by researchers to sidestep, defend, deflect, and veil their own privilege in research and broadly in society. Self-indulgent, guilt-ridden, or savior-like writing may be used to stuff off privilege by soliciting sympathy from readers (Accapadi, 2007). This trend undercuts the writings of scholars who use their identities as a platform to interrogate and weaken problematic power structures in research. To meaningfully grapple with identity and power in reflexive writing, scholars must be able to sit with and be accountable for their privilege and the discomfort that accompanies naming unearned advantages.

In addition to positionality, writing about field experiences creates further turmoil for researchers. Not all field experiences are gratifying, safe, or easy to navigate, but writing about them is not straightforward. Describing unpleasant experiences can generate awareness that benefits other researchers working through similar issues (Arendell, 1997; Day, 2006; Lee, 1997; Pini, 2005). At the same time, illustrating the ways in which women fear or are harmed by male participants also preserves damaging stereotypes and perpetrator/victim binaries (Day, 2006; Holmgren, 2011). Despite the complexity of this dilemma, dynamics between female researchers and male participants are dominantly written about through the lens of safety and risk (Arendell, 1997; Gatrell, 2006; Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009; Lee, 1997). Using physical safety as the only lens to access and validate women’s reflections as researchers fetishizes women’s experiences of violence and discounts other noteworthy narratives like authority, bravery, or confidence (Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009). This may lead fellow scholars and readers to dismiss women’s experiences of courage and self-reliance as foolish, perilous, or unimportant (Paterson, Gregory, & Thorne, 1999). Yet, positive, mundane, or delightful descriptions, like Holmgren’s (2011) accounts, may normalize the role of women as interviewers as perfectly ordinary rather than strange. Weaving self-care into the methods section may help researchers to validate their own diverse needs in fieldwork without contributing to the fetishization of risks. Presently, there are very few reflections in the literature about how women cope with and endure difficult situations in fieldwork. Further research on this topic may unearth important understandings about how female researchers build resilience and cultivate strategies for self-preservation. Drawing attention to female researchers’ resilience could benefit future
generations of scholars by encouraging, rather than deterring, women from taking on ambitious research projects and participating in fieldwork.

When considering how women understand, interpret, and represent men’s experiences as participants, I agree with my critics that researchers might struggle to do an adequate job. But, not necessarily because of their gender. While many scholars have investigated and critiqued the essentialization of women and femininities, the same level of concern is absent from masculinities research (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Pease, 2010). For example, much of the current theorizing about masculinities aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) discrete classifications of hegemonic, complicit, and subordinate masculinities and the specific Westernized traits of stoicism, strength, sexual prowess, heterosexuality, dominance, invulnerability, and control of emotions. As discussed previously, men’s gendered expressions can be nuanced, fragmented, conflicting, incoherent, and fluid as men confront, challenge, align with, or reimagine masculinities (Affleck, Glass, & Macdonald, 2012; Gill, 2005; Hoel, 2015; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Pease, 2010; Speer, 2001; Wong & Rochlen, 2004). To promote clarity, researchers may conflate multifaceted reflections from interviews into preexisting categories that are recognizable and align with existing scholarship and methodological conventions for reporting on sex and gender (Hoel, 2015; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013; Pease, 2010; Speer, 2001; Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). Yet, relying on mainstream gender norms to synthesize and analyze data may diminish the complexity of participants’ experiences, limit the significance of findings, and stifle progress in the field of masculinities research (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013).

Researchers face additional challenges in representing participants’ agendas and values—raising the question, whose voice(s) should be heard? Participating in a study might be an important way for men to share their knowledge and to feel validated (Farough, 2006; Gottzen, 2013; Martin, 2001). Men who are negatively labeled in society (e.g., as perpetrators or racists) or who benefit from unearned social privileges may use their participation in research to solicit empathy, create a redemption or competing victim narrative, and/or justify their views (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005; Farough, 2006; Gottzen, 2013; Martin, 2001). While these reflections may produce compelling data, privileging discriminatory voices within research may support problematic structures of power in society, such as White supremacy (Farough, 2006; Gottzen, 2013).

In acknowledging this ethical dilemma, some researchers distance themselves from participants’ problematic perspectives in their findings or discussion (Arendell, 1997; Farough, 2006; Gottzen, 2013). This distance is also challenging. Researchers and participants collaboratively generate data and meaning in fieldwork and qualitative interviews (Holmgren, 2011). The social positions, agendas, and/or perspectives of researchers and participants may align, giving way to shared research priorities/benefits, or become asymmetrical, creating imbalances (Holmgren, 2011). Writing about these asymmetries can help researchers promote accountability for findings that could be harmful. At the same time, distancing oneself from unsavory findings could allow researchers to avoid taking responsibility for coproducing prejudices in qualitative data or potentially reinforcing their own positions of privilege (Pease, 2010). Researchers must be able to work through the implications of their findings, by grappling with and writing about the question, who benefits? (Pease, 2010; Pini, 2005).

In addressing the intricacy of writing qualitatively and reflexively, I wish to reframe the concern that women uniquely struggle with understanding, analyzing, and representing men’s experiences in their theorizing about masculinities. Researchers, regardless of their gender, face dilemmas in how to represent their own experiences, portray participants’ accounts, position their findings relative to existing scholarship, and engage in conversations about privilege and research outcomes. Yet, the process of making these decisions is rarely reflected upon in the literature. Engaging in iterative self-reflection and providing evidence of such reflections in qualitative research enhances methodological rigor, helps other researchers in their work, and disrupts the underlying power imbalances that lead some scholars to feel exempt from reflexivity.

**Conclusion**

This article is far from an exhaustive account of the dynamics between and implications of female researchers engaged in qualitative research with male participants. There are immeasurable intersections of identity and power in qualitative research and far too few scholars writing about them. Within the context of masculinities research, it is important for researchers to understand how preexisting gender norms may insidiously inform where, how, and with whom studies are conducted, as well as what is found, how findings are presented, and for whom the research is beneficial or harmful. By (unintentionally) reproducing dominant understandings of gender and broader structures of power, researchers can undermine their own work and the work of others in their field. Confronting this problem is complex as reflexive practice and accounts of positionality are not taken up evenly in academia—creating additional risks for researchers who bravely question and problematize their own identities. Remaining self-critical and skeptical of well-worn research methods and convenient conclusions are important strategies for researchers to contribute more imaginative and progressive findings to masculinities studies and disrupt underlying inequities.

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