

*Vela Bambhentsele*¹: Intimacies and Complexities in Researching Within Black Lesbian Groups in Johannesburg

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Introduction

Gay and lesbian people have been on the social, legal and political agenda for some time. Post-apartheid South Africa has boldly included gay and lesbian rights in the transition to democracy. Most recently, same-sex marriages have been legalised even though widely challenged. While there is much talk about gay and lesbian rights, for many lesbian women these rights are merely paper rights as women struggle to cope and live with the challenges of a society with rampant inequalities. Furthermore, gay and lesbian people continue to face resistance from a society entrenched with patriarchy and notions of homosexuality as “unAfrican”.

Since the 1930s, sex and sexuality in South Africa, although to varying degrees and largely focusing on men’s experiences, have been widely speculated on and have been an important register of social hierarchy and change (Delius and Glaser, 2002). Under apartheid, public and political scrutiny of sex and sexuality was intensified through legislature, policing and censorship, as argued by Posel (2004). Also in the last two decades, sexuality has gained momentum in the public sphere due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic which has forced public discussions on sex and sexuality. The 1996 Constitution and the Bill of Rights have also placed sexual practices, identity, and freedom of expression as protected rights accessible to all citizens. Despite some of these advances, critical work on lesbians or women’s same-sex relationships has been minimal in the scholarship in South Africa.

Much work that is written about black lesbians often positions us as victims of violence, hate crimes or relates our existence to that of gay men. My interest was to tap into a terrain that is rarely focused on, the terrain that has contributed to our invisibility and silence as black lesbian women, disregarding our lives and our experiences. Furthermore, in much of the

scholarship, there is a tendency for female same-sex relationships to get desexualized (see Potgieter, 1997). This happens when attention is not paid to the desire and erotic sexual relationships between women and the focus is on lesbian feminism, which sometimes emphasizes political positions and non-sexual relations between women, or when women's same-sex sexualities are viewed with a heterosexual gaze.

I embarked on a study to investigate the lives of black lesbian women in Gauteng. Throughout the study, I had to negotiate my own position as my identities and sexuality continue to be influenced by the people who inform my research. I am interested in what it means to be engaged in doing research in areas that have been considered taboo, unresearched or working with those who have been represented in ways that limit their agency.

The term *lesbian* is used with caution. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996:192) argue that “the term lesbian freezes human sexuality into two dichotomous fixed practices – heterosexual and lesbian. These do not reflect historical reality”. Use of such a term implies that some identities are fixed throughout their lives, which is not the case. One preferred reference is to “women in same-sex relationships” but this has implications for who gets recruited. I was looking for women who had been or were in relationships with other women. I did not use terms such as lesbian, bisexual, *stabane*, and others (although these did come up during interviews).

Researching from the Inside

First I drew from Kirin Narayan's work in problematising the notion of “insider”. Narayan notes that some scholars have questioned the authenticity of an “insider”. “Insiders” or what she terms “native” researchers and anthropologists are those who are believed to write about “their own culture from a position of intimate affinity” (1993:671). She argues against the insider/outside dichotomy as factors such as “race, class, education, sexual orientation, gender or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status”. Narayan further argues for the “enactment of hybridity” in our texts, advocating for “writing that depicts authors as minimally bicultural” in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life.

Prior to starting the research I was aware of some of the challenges I would face. While my identity as a lesbian was an asset in terms of gaining access, I had to be cautious of the implications this might have on my

academic career as my study could be dismissed on the basis of writing “for my own group” and my work “tainted by personal concerns”. In many of my meetings with colleagues and supervisors, I was asked about how I would maintain distance from the participants. At the same time, my ability to go deeper into the lives of the participants, to be trusted and obtain sensitive information which revealed new and exciting worlds to my colleagues, proved to be an asset.

Much has been written by anthropologists (and to some extent sociologists) about researching within lesbian communities and on the dynamics that such research brings to the researcher and the informants. The main concern of many anthropologists is the distance between fieldworker/researcher and informant. Such distance, as Evelyn Blackwood (1995: 55) argues, is accompanied by a sense of loneliness and alienation that fieldworkers experience, and is perpetuated by the notion that the researcher is the knower and the informants the known. Similarly, Jill Dubisch (1995) explores relationships in the field between informants and herself as researcher. Such relationships can affect and challenge one’s thinking about oneself, one’s identities, accounts of one’s own sexuality and ideas about how one relates to others. Relationships in the field bring into play hierarchies of knowledge and power which are not necessarily discussed in the field. This becomes difficult as the researcher tries to maintain her or his true identity beyond being just a researcher.

I felt the hierarchies of knowledge and power strongly during the course of my “fieldwork”. Participants asked me questions about issues pertaining to lesbian lives, about same-sex marriage, sexual styles, gender identity or how to get a new lover. The assumption was that I was clearly the more informed one, or had wider contacts and networks. In addition, while I shared a number of similarities with many of the participants, I also had to be aware of the ambiguities of ethnicity, gender identity and power in the “field”. While issues of language and translation, (which Tina Sideris (1986) foregrounds as usually problematic) were usually easily negotiated as the cultural gap between myself and the participant was minimal, with one participant there was a communication breakdown as I could not fully follow her street lingo and her fluent use of *tsotsi taal*. In another interview, I had to engage with my own identity as the participant attempted to figure out who I was in her own understanding of “lesbian” and she worked towards a self-construction in relation to me:

A: What are you exactly? [pause] I don't know what you are. I can't say you're butch or femme.

Int: ...What is it...?

A: It's clothing; it's hair...Um – [hesitating], Okay, you're butch!

Int: Butch because of?

A: Because of the way you dress, I suppose. I don't know, I don't know – it's the way you dress, I think. It's hard to just put a label on something and then you have to justify it somehow. What if that label is not even right? So, ja – I don't know what you are.

(interview with *Ayanda*)

The importance of being a lesbian and known was that I could easily find informants who moved in social circles that overlapped with mine. However, I had to manage the tension between being a friend and a researcher at the same time. Also, being an “insider”, as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996) experienced, meant that the researcher knew some of the subtleties of lesbian “culture”. Whether these then became foregrounded, and explored, in the interview could be tricky. On the one hand, exploring shared “cultural meanings” could be illuminating; on the other, the knowledge that I was asking questions about “cultural meanings” for research purposes raised questions about what I was prepared to share with an “outside” audience.

Furthermore, studying populations close to one's identity can give one access to people and open possibilities for intimate relationships of different kinds (Esther Newtown, 1996: 220). While I did not explore any romantic liaisons with participants, it became difficult to evade “suitors”, with whom I needed to stay in contact as they were interviewees. I had to be cautious about possible sexual attraction to participants and about the sexual suggestions directed at me during an interview or during ethnography. My “insider” status also created an emotional dynamic. Esther Newton argues that there could be emotional blocks to hearing interviewees' experiences, blocks that are caused by our shared social oppression as lesbians, and which could limit one's clear thoughts about a particular topic (1996:184). Issues around sexual violence, hate crimes as well as violence within lesbian relationships became difficult to engage with as I struggled to remove myself from the participant's experience in order to truly listen to her.

The position of power I held as researcher on the inside became much clearer as “fieldwork” progressed. This position suggested the notion of “*Vela Bambhentsele*”. I became known as the person who asked intimate details

of people's lives and recorded people's stories, which also meant that people volunteered to be participants. I continued to listen to many life histories even though I knew that I would not include them in the study. I had a number of requests from participants to set up appointments to interview them. When I made follow-ups with one potential participant who requested to be interviewed, I found out that she was under the impression that we were going on a date. I was surprised by her suggestions to meet at a fancy restaurant in Sandton, on a Friday night. I decided not to pursue the interview, not only because my budget could not cater for the restaurants of her choice, but also because I was very uncomfortable as I had been told that she had a lover who was jealous and knew how to put up a good fight.

Throughout the research I had to remind myself of the complex implications of the intimate nature of my interviews and of the relationships that were formed between myself and the participants. For all the participants, it was the first time they had talked openly and fully about their lives and shared intimate details of their full life history and sexual life. Close friends also became a problem as they could not understand why I chose not to interview them for the research and I had to negotiate different ways of engaging with friends about the research.

I had anticipated encountering ethical problems with regards to consent, confidentiality and anonymity. These were raised during the ethical clearance process for my research. In the "field", however, these were played out differently. While consent forms were distributed to participants weeks before the actual interview, I found that because participants knew me, they explained that they did not need to sign a consent form. They felt that there was already a level of trust in place and because I was part of their circles, I would do justice to how I used their information and represented them.

This was a serious concern for me as I had to engage with participants not only as a researcher, but as an activist as well. In these situations I had to be very direct about what consent meant; how our stories and lives have been recorded by others and how our images have been presented. Such representation has at many times occurred without our full knowledge and consent and we are sometimes not aware of what happens to these stories and images and how we are represented. During this research I continue to encounter people who want to "bare it all" (inside or outside my own circles), thus giving me unrestricted access to their lives and to the "field". This did not always feel comfortable.

Maintaining close ties with participants also meant that they were aware that I could “verify” their stories and get to know more details of their lives, beyond the frame of the research. This illustrates an unclear boundary of being in the “field” and out of the “field”. In my experience, my life is the “field” and I continue my struggles to get out of the “field”. For some researchers who have researched lesbian or same-sex relationships as insiders, the “field” was less difficult to negotiate as the researcher’s study would come to an end or they would literally leave the area where they did research or end a relationship they had with an informant². For me, this was not the case.

The Activist Inside

The next thoughts are an attempt to engage with the notion of researcher/activist binary. Much of my research has existed across what are termed binaries: insider/outsider; participant/participant observer; researcher/friend and researcher/activist. These binaries are complex, layered and interlinked. Thus they are not just binaries, but linkages. Here, I want to explore some thoughts on the linkage: researcher/activist. I became conscious of this linkage when an academic colleague suggested I halt my involvement in an organisation as it would interfere with the research. For a number of other reasons, I took heed of the advice and left the organisation (although I became part of another one). However, I struggled with this and it was difficult to explain to academic colleagues that activism was not limited to involvement in an organisation.

Even when I ceased to work within an organization as an “activist”, limited to participating in events, marches, protests and supporting friends, I would still be seen as one. This linkage presents various complexities. Similar to Kennedy and Davis (1996) who wrote an ethnohistory of a lesbian community of which they were part, I have to engage with issues of hierarchy, reflexivity and dialogue. I have to constantly consider who I am writing for and for what, as well as reflect on the implications of what I write. As an “insider” and activist who has close ties with the subject of the research, I will be able to represent the voices and perspectives of the informants. However, I also feel it a priority to give the research back to the participants who have informed the research (so far I have done this by returning the transcripts as well as audio recordings of the interviews to the participants) as well as to various lesbian groups.

However, as Kennedy and Davis show, this is not easy as the researcher/s constantly have to negotiate the responsibility they have to the lesbian

communities represented in their research. There is a battle with power in matters of interpretation, which are at the core of the research hierarchy. Ellen Lewin and William Leap (1996:7) raise concerns about how an insider researcher/activist puts oneself in the ethnographic picture. They argue for the need to be more explicit about one's motives, expectations and personal history; and discuss how this affects the way "truth" is told, especially concerning questions of loyalty to "their people" (p19).

Overall, I have found that the work of doing research within one's group offers various opportunities, but at the same time, can be very complex and challenging. While the researcher may find such research an opportunity to learn about herself/himself, the dynamics in the "field" may raise many unexpected complexities requiring serious negotiations of power and position. So far, I continue to engage with the complexities. However, there are days when the tension of the binaries threatens integrity, patience and the belief that knowledge creation can transform the injustices in our lives.

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Endnotes

1. This is a Xhosa phrase with a literal meaning “appear /approach and they will open their legs for you.” It is also a clan name for Dalibhunga, Madiba, Yem-yem, Sophitsho, Ngqolomsila (the people who were born when the sun appeared).
2. For example see works by Gloria Wekker (2006), Kennedy and Davis (1996)m, Esther Newton (1996), Evelyn Blackwood (1995).