Chapter 32. Seeking the "Self" in Relation to "Others": Negotiating with Multiple Selves of an IPV Researcher

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I came to Florida State University to explore the sociological aspects of communication. As a non-immigrant, Indian woman-of-color, I took up the onus of designing a prevention program against intimate partner violence (IPV) in Florida.

My curiosity to understand how a relationship founded on love becomes abusive and controlling began upon witnessing certain controlling incidents as a child, drove me to share research space with women survivors of IPV. I recognize the privilege I hold in their eyes as someone not privy to what it means to be a survivor IPV. The power struggles between a researcher and participants made me scrutinize each decision to be ethically responsible.

I explore the role of interpersonal network ties (INTs) for two groups of women: survivors, and for those who are at-risk.[1] By comparing insights about their INTs, I emphasize on linkages between social support and women's willingness for disclosure about abuse, which has program implications in protecting women and organizing communities for social change.

During conceptualization, I believed that (1) my identity as a woman can resonate with participants to confide in me; (2) my field experience in India with closely related issues put me at a topical advantage; and (3) my unfamiliarity with nuances of an intimate relationship may act as a barrier to share vulnerabilities with women and bring "othering" to surface, inadvertently widening the researcher-participant communicative distance. I present two distinct anecdotes that disrupted my comfort with research whilst strengthening my positionality as an IPV researcher.

Ethical Language of Consent

Arshiya asked me to keep her identity anonymous over text. In my response, I summarized the confidentiality clause from informed consent. During our

1. INTs are operationally defined as known, trusted, and more readily available individuals to women than are formal sources of help, and those who are the reference group for these women when it comes to their willingness for disclosure about relationship difficulties or distress, including any type of abuse. By "survivors," I mean women who have navigated an abusive intimate/romantic relationship. "At-risk" indicates women who have ever been in an intimate/romantic relationship for at least three months, that is when the signs of abuse begin to appear.

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scheduled zoom call, we both saw each other's faces recognizing the similarity in our appearances and our English accents. We do not hail from the same country, but we had an unsaid shared understanding about talking in our native language (Hindi/Urdu). Her name was a major giveaway to presume her country of origin was Pakistan. Momentarily, I contemplated explaining the consent in Hindi, but it would have been inappropriate to deviate from the ethical protocol and initiate an interaction in Hindi so, I refrained myself.

Arshiya seemed apprehensive about her identity as we went over the consent. Understandably, she made the same request, but this time in Hindi, referring to my "familiarity with our cultures" and how tabooed partner abuse is. She established a connection between us with two short sentences. Reciprocating in "our" language, I assured her there is no one (except me/Principal Investigator) who has access to participant identifiers. Empathizing with her, I understood her hesitation and calmed her.

An epiphany dawned upon me. I was responsible for protecting this respondent's anonymity—as a researcher and a South Asian. I was compelled by the connection between our respective countries of origin, which facilitated the interaction that ensued. We still talked in English, but this brief conversation pivoted the course of the survey administration that followed. I felt myself being more patient in clarifying the purpose and intentions of questions in Hindi, when necessary—which blurred the researcher-participant dichotomy and probably closed the communicative distance. This incident is telling of the power that subjective perception about a researcher holds over this process, as my ascribed identity was more trustworthy than the IRB-approved research procedure detailed in the informed consent.

Clearly, motivation for each participant is a function of circumstances, apprehensions, and incentives—which brings me to the next incident.

Bureaucracy of Incentivization

I called Nina, notifying her of her research eligibility and requested a 90-minute time block for the interview. Misunderstanding my request, she began narrating her story enunciating "gun" and "drug use," but I did not interrupt her emotional expression. It was after 2-3 minutes that I emphasized that an in-person meeting might be a better way to talk, and she obliged.

As a graduate student, I was limited in ways in which I could provide incentives. Although I informed Nina about $25 Amazon gift card, she only accepted to participate for cash. She texted me she "can't really do much with $25 card" as she had "a lot going in life [so] it would just be best if [she] declined."

Inspired by Peshkin's subjective I's, I grappled with my different selves: bureaucratic expectation of adhering to pre-approved incentive payment method; researcher's hunger for diversity emerging from awareness of Nina's socio-economic status as an unemployed college-dropout-woman-of-color; and

civically-responsible citizen who did not want to aggravate drug (ab)use that subconsciously came from her short disclosure over phone. I considered Nina's effort to text when she could have easily "not showed up." She did not feel entitled to receive cash, she felt comfortable expressing her discomfort in the incentive type, indicating her interest to participate. Her preliminary trust obligated me to navigate this situation without giving up on her participation.

Recognizing my own blind spots, I first discarded the bureaucratic expectation which could widen power distance between researcher (as FSU representative) and participant, whilst silencing both our voices. With an hour until the scheduled interview, I called my major professor, who challenged my assumption about Nina's drug use, and that it is possible that Nina "simply does not shop on Amazon" helping me suppress my civically-responsible voice. While I saw Nina's narrative as critical for IPV scholarship, I did not let my researcher-self objectify her as a "means" for data collection. The knowledge that research logistics are not compatible for her circumstances warranted an attempt to find avenues to make that participation possible. I felt accountable for equitable incentivization to my participants, and I refused to enforce a singular type of incentive.

Taken together, my resonance with Arshiya's geographical origin and shared language (homophily), and intuition about Nina's seeming desire to participate (empathy) decreased communicative distance between "us." I learnt how mental contestations driven by normative expectations and internalizations awakened me. That said, humanizing participants and suppressing (to some extent) subliminal power hierarchies inherent to research made the whole process more rewarding.