

# A Reflexive Inquiry into Gender Research



# A Reflexive Inquiry into Gender Research:

*Towards a New Paradigm  
of Knowledge Production  
& Exploring New Frontiers  
of Gender Research in  
Southern Africa*

Edited by

Samantha van Schalkwyk  
and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

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## FOREWORD

### AKOSUA ADOMAKO AMPOFO

The book, *"A Reflexive Inquiry into Gender Research: Towards a New Paradigm of Knowledge Production"* is born out of research that was first presented at a symposium organised at the University of the Free State in October 2012 through its Trauma, Forgiveness & Reconciliation Studies programme. The symposium was titled, *"African Gender Perspectives: Dialogues between Scholars, activists, and community-based workers"* and was the first symposium of its kind at the University of the Free State—addressing questions of pain, trouble and trauma; policy and law; family relations; research and activism; as well as new methodologies in gender work.

This book project is about a whole lot more than trauma. It is about the lives of ordinary women and men. But is also about the lives of researchers, activists, and policy makers, and their relationships to the stories they encounter in their work, and the people who inhabit those stories. It is about us, me and you, who, like the *abusua* at the outdoorings of a baby, a new member of the lineage, are called upon to ensure that it becomes a person—someone who recognizes that her or his humanity is inextricably linked with others', who knows she is because others are: Ubuntu!

As long as there are humans living on the planet there will be disagreements and conflicts. There will be wars for spoils and enlargement of territories. There will be warriors and heroes, the vanquished and survivors. There will also be mediators and efforts at healing and peace building. The 11 September 2001 terror attacks in the United States, provided new impetus for western powers to construct the "other"—i.e. Muslim societies, African states —through the prism of terrorism. Formal state-building processes and political strategies have been dictated by the imperative of containing, countering and defeating terrorist groups. Sadly, much less attention has been paid to conflict resolution, peace building and healing. Perhaps this should not be too surprising given that war and the trade in arms is a billion-dollar industry.

The increasing militarization of our world is not unrelated to the gender troubles, as I refer to them, that we encounter and experience in our

communities and homes. As violence becomes more and more commonplace, gender-based violence has, more and more, become the arena in which contested power relations are fought. As the power relations that govern the cultural contexts that conflicts and violence inhabit are repositioned, we must ask new questions and devise new methods to enable us to understand and respond to what is happening in our world, our communities and the communities of our neighbours. The Akans say, “When your neighbour’s house is on fire fetch a bucket of water”—this is both good neighbourliness as well as a common-sense survival act. That is what *“A Reflexive Inquiry into Gender Research: Towards a New Paradigm of Knowledge Production”* does, and does admirably. The text brings together scholars from diverse disciplines; in addition to the editors some are well-known Southern African scholars and scholar-activists, such as Elaine Salo and Kopano Ratele; others are emerging voices that bring fresh perspectives to the table.

Having worked in the areas of social justice and transformation for close to 27 years as a “gender person” I believe I can legitimately claim to recognize scholarly expertise and commitment to social justice when I encounter it—and the editors and contributors to this volume fit the bill.

It is truly a privilege for me to make a few preliminary remarks about this impressive text. I began my formal career as an Africanist and a “gender person” when I joined the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, as a Junior Research Fellow in 1989. In his famous “African Genius” speech at the formal opening of the Institute on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1963, our first president Kwame Nkrumah exhorted us to study Africa and her Diaspora in “African-centred ways” and make specific contributions to the advancement of knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Africa. Over 50 years later knowledge production both within and outside the academy continues to be valorized largely according to where it is produced and by whom—global north authors and publication outlets remain at the top of the rankings as the power nexus is perpetuated, sadly also by scholars from the Global South, for reasons of tenure (institutional) pressure or identity (personal) crisis. This makes the study of the lives, conditions and experiences of peoples of the African world in *African-centred* ways as socially, culturally, economically and politically salient today as it ever was. This is a major reason why *A Reflexive Inquiry into Gender Research: Towards a New Paradigm of Knowledge Production* connects with my spirit—the book valorizes the knowledge of so-called “ordinary people”.

I consider myself a scholar-activist: exploring, explaining and addressing our “gender troubles” continues to engage me inside and



outside the classroom. Indeed, for me the classroom is itself an activist space where we disrupt and even dismantle the house that patriarchy built. At the heart of these “troubles” are the power dynamics that leave women, as a group, disadvantaged relative to men, and that feminists have described as patriarchy. Nowhere is patriarchy more explicit than in gender-based violence, whether in the home or during conditions of war; whether at the hands of an individual “perpetrator” or via state-constructed systemic violence.

Here is why this text is important for scholars of African Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and also Methodology courses: the book compels us to re-examine our dearly held, but often-times limited understandings of “gender trouble” and other forms of social disadvantage and exclusion. It also compels us to view gender troubles, and especially gender based violence, not as discrete incidents but occurrences that are born out of the intersections of class, race, and the status of the post-colony to name but a few. Further, the book provides ample opportunity for us to confront our own discomforts as we traverse that space where “researcher” and “researched”, where episteme and “lived experiences” meet, or even collide. By so doing we can allow ourselves to recognize, and acknowledge that none too infrequently we, the relatively economically and socially comfortable researchers, could actually be the socially disadvantaged. For a lifetime could not provide some of us so-called middle class researchers with the benefits of the experience of having lived in Khayelitsha. However, this is no simplistic reflexivity journey. It is not enough, as the editors themselves note, to merely recognize difference and provide descriptions of these. That would be narcissism and not activism. Rather, the authors move beyond locating themselves and their identities in the research space, and seek to “focus on the rich dynamics of the *context* and a reflexive engagement of what went wrong (or right) during their engagements” (this volume page xx, emphasis in original) in ways that seek to be transparent and ethical.

Of course, most of the chapters are grounded in the Southern African context, particularly South Africa’s context of extreme violence that continues today. This is where questions of shame, trauma and healing, another important aspect of the book, come in. For healing cannot come unless we open our hearts to see the “oppressor” in his or her context of historical and institutionalized oppression. Hence, the book’s focus on three themes—the deconstruction (and reconstruction) of knowledge, attention to the methodologies of research and the power inherent in the relationships, and “processes that work towards liberation for social change.”

There will be no spoiler alerts—you must read the book. Indeed as is usual, the Introduction sets the stage quite nicely. Suffice it to say, in conclusion, that the writers come from a feminist framework and so, not surprisingly, the first section of the book contains essays that disrupt gendered categories and definitions in law and also in the academy. In the second part of the book the essays turn to praxis and feminist collaborations across the artificial binaries of academic and civil society spaces, while at the same time politicizing the encounters and possibilities. Part three turns to an extremely important subject that all too frequently receives short shrift—the context of power relations between researchers and “subjects” and the ethics of research encounters, especially in the sensitive areas of intimate relations.

This much-needed book seeks to destabilize the taken-for-grantedness of research and knowledge production, and succeeds in doing so. Beware: the willing reader will learn much, but prepare to carry your emotions with you; prepare to be confronted, turned upside down, scared, uncomfortable, but happily, also be prepared to experience numerous “aha!” moments that provide you with considerations on how to find yourself right-side up. This is not a do-research-this-way happily-ever-after story. But it *is* a hopeful collection of essays of how we can be better feminists, better scholars and activists, better citizens—better human beings.

## INTRODUCTION

SAMANTHA VAN SCHALKWYK  
AND PUMLA GOBODO-MADIKIZELA

*The mother, wrinkled and meek, shuffled into the other room the first time; the second time, when we tried to interview her, she pulled a blanket to her eyes and disappeared into a corner.*

Taken from the paper of Elena Moore (this volume), the research journal entry above speaks powerfully about certain tensions and the messy realities that we as feminist scholars often face during our engagements with participants. Moore is a researcher from Ireland who at the time was doing research in black South African townships. Her research was based on exploring the intergenerational transmission of motherhood among three generations of women. Moore speaks of one of her experiences going into the women's home to interview them. She describes a poor black woman who lives in a shack in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa. Over 20 years since democracy the legacy of apartheid lives on and the socio-spatial landscape still reflects the ethos of the Group Areas Act. Poor people predominantly reside in ghettos, or townships, to which they were moved as a result of apartheid policies. These areas are beset with a range of social problems, including severe poverty, unemployment, and high levels of violent crime that pose challenges to a life of integrity and self-worth.

The excerpt above aptly conveys a sense of the old woman's experienced vulnerability when researchers from a tertiary institution came into the intimate space of her home and began asking private and sensitive questions about her family life. Moore, the researcher, describes her own emotional memory of the event and the woman's lack of agency – the mother was “wrinkled” and “meek,” she did not walk but rather “shuffled”. The woman pulls a blanket to her eyes, as if to protect herself from the intensity of the emotional invasion.

Moore explains the context of unequal power relations that the old woman lived in and that her presence, as researcher, may have rendered the woman increasingly vulnerable to her abusive husband. This image speaks to the experiences of many researchers who have faced

participants' sense of anxiety or unease at being exposed to research processes that are very unfamiliar to them. Sometimes our research topics are considered sensitive issues to the participants (and their family and community) and often we cannot pre-empt these views before we arrive at the location of the research. Indeed, what is considered to be a sensitive topic is dependent on the relational circumstances and the conversational encounter between the researcher and the researched—that is the “*cultural* and *contextual* circumstances and the *personal* views held by the people involved” (Hydén 2008, 22). It is important that we, as researchers and activists, are in tune with our participants' views, otherwise we miss out on the essence of our interactions with those who take part in our research.

Often our very presence as researchers heightens participants' vulnerabilities, especially when we are working with people who have cultural beliefs that are very different to our own. In some circumstances we may be prying into areas of the participants' lives that are rendered taboo and “unspeakable” by their culture. We may inadvertently place participants in an uncomfortable or even dangerous position by asking them to respond about certain private aspects of their lives. Such attempts may be met with silence on the part of participants—similar to the blanket in the diary entry above—a symbolic shield with which the old woman tries to protect herself. Often as researchers and activists we do not express the difficult positions that we find ourselves in whilst we are working in the “field”. In this compilation we hope to unearth some of these silences in ways that can be useful for conceptualizing power and “self” in the process of an African-centered knowledge production.

## Setting the Context

The idea for such a book on a reflexive inquiry into gender research emerged from an international gender symposium held in 2012 at the University of the Free State (UFS) titled, “African gender perspectives: dialogues between scholars, activists, and community-based workers”. The symposium comprised a diverse array of people who work in the field of gender—scholars, activists, and scholar-activists. Present were also community-based workers who live in underprivileged communities in South Africa and who are faced head on with the harsh realities of gender inequality and the economic and social challenges of addressing gender issues in the Southern African context.

The community activists included Faeza Meyer, a backyard shack dweller who had been involved in land housing rights and who is the Chairperson of Tafelsig Residents Unite in Cape Town. Faeza was

working on a research project with feminist historian, Koni Benson, from the University of Cape Town. The researcher and community activist joined forces to document Faeza's experiences of living in a small informal settlement in Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plein. Mitchell's Plein was one of the townships built on the periphery of Cape Town for "colored" people of mixed race ancestry who were forcibly removed from the white areas during the apartheid era. The area is beset with a range of problems, which include high levels of crime, poverty, gangsterism, and other social ills. Due to overcrowding and a severe lack of housing a small community had occupied a piece of land in this area, and had been subjected to a range of violent land invasions as authorities attempted to remove citizens from the land.

Other community members included members of a youth group "Nabz Unite" who live in an impoverished township called Namibia Square, which lies in the Free State, South Africa, on the outskirts of Bloemfontein. The rise of democracy in South Africa has not afforded the residents with any improvements in their quality of life and the community is characterized by severe poverty, joblessness, and other social ills such as crime and violence against women. The youths live in a current state of hopelessness with the burdening pressures of adulthood running in stark tension to their sense of hopelessness and the lack of social opportunities.

Present at the event were also members from a group for abused women, called Sisters for Sisters, which is based in Cape Town, South Africa. These groups shared their experiences of working with researchers/activists on different occasions. The Sisters for Sisters group focused on their experience of taking part in a doctoral research project (run by Samantha), and the "Nabz Unite" group discussed their experiences of taking part in a series of workshops in their community that were run by colleagues at UFS. These stories added much value to our dialogues as we, the researchers and activists, were able to gain a different perspective about research processes and we could begin to interrogate our "hidden" assumptions about researcher-researched relational dynamics. The conversations contributed to an alternative, often silenced, view about what it means to be an economically and socially disadvantaged social being who participates in social research. For this we are truly grateful to the community members who spoke their minds in a space that was unfamiliar and perhaps a bit daunting to many of them.

Most of the chapters in the book are based on research that has been done in the South African context. There is one chapter that explores students' perceptions of sexuality in a university setting in Zimbabwe and another chapter which is based on research that was done with cancer

caregivers in Kenya. It is important to note that some of the researchers live, or have lived, abroad and have conducted much of their fieldwork in South Africa. They thus come from contexts that are very different to those of their research participants. Jennifer Fish and Savannah Russo are researchers based in the United States who were studying the experiences of poor black grandmothers in a South African township, Khayelitsha. Elena Moore comes from Ireland and she entered into a very unfamiliar terrain in her work on motherhood in three generations of Xhosa women living in townships on the outskirts of the Western Cape, South Africa.

Other authors came from the same context as their participants and shared the same ethnic identity and culture as their participants. However, various other identities that the researchers had access to meant that their worlds were still vastly different from the people who took part in their research. Jennifer Githaiga identified with the participants of her study because she shared the experience of caring for a family member who was dying of cancer and she was from the same country as her Kenyan participants. However, she writes about how her identity as an educated doctoral researcher created a visceral distance from her research participants.

Elaine Salo shared the identity of “colored” person who had grown up in the same area as her participants and who spoke the same language, however her status as a middle class woman with a motor car meant that the community treated her as significantly different “other”. Fay Hodza, a Zimbabwean heterosexual male, conducted fieldwork with Zimbabwean heterosexual students about homosexuality. Fay does not consider homosexuality as a negative identity (as many of his participants do), and it is from this position of difference that he was able to critically interrogate the students’ narratives. Thus, these positions of difference were of critical significance, shaping the experience of both researcher and participant and influencing the type of data and the analysis that was produced.

Following the symposium all of the contributors attended a weekend workshop in the peaceful setting of Monkey Valley in Cape Town. This was a rich space within which we could openly and honestly share the intricacies of our experiences in the field and the complexities of our personal involvements with our topics and our relations with participants. This was a chance for us to regroup and synthesize our thoughts and to provide feedback to each other that fine-tuned the chapters and our imaginings of the book as a whole. It was also a space through which we could provide support to authors who were grappling with ways to translate their practical experience of gender work into a narratable form through the written word. Particular challenges that were voiced were the

challenges of documenting activist work in the field of sexual violence and the challenges of activists and academics coming together and working in ways that can mutually contribute to the fight against gender-based violence in the South African context. We wanted to use these conversations in ways that will move “African-based” gender work forward.

In research on gender and gender-based violence we see the same issues arising again and again—that is, the work is often disconnected from the research participants or it rehashes what has been done before. Research that does not take the micro factors of context into account (context as in participants’ micro context *and* the geo-social research context) does not have the potential to promote change in the ways in which we theorize gender issues in the African context. We realized that many of the researchers/activists at the gender symposium were doing things differently and that a lot of the work was connecting to *real* social issues.

The stories across our various divides (community-based workers, activists, scholars) were charged as we grappled with issues to do with sexual violence, sexuality, masculinity, activists/scholar/participant experiences and subjectivities, survivor identities, and processes of change. The multiplicity of our voices all contributed rich contextual detail in ways that offer the potential for new theoretic insights in gender work. We addressed core questions of how scholars who work in the African context can do gender research differently and how we can find another language to communicate what goes on when we engage in such work. We also engaged in dialogue about scholarship as it is connected to real community issues in ways that can inspire social change. We wanted to create a book that would document these innovative dialogues and capture a sense of the spirit of “moving beyond” the boundaries of traditional feminist research in Africa. Of course, such a project had to be firmly rooted in our (Southern) African context.

The current socio-political landscape of South Africa is one characterized by extreme rates of violence. The history of apartheid has instilled a culture of violence in the country (Goldblatt and Meintjies 1997; Misago, Landau, and Monson 2009), and it is a space where traumatic memories are desperately struggling to be heard, often in horrific ways. Shame is an integral part of people’s social reality within this complex space. Such shame is often not acknowledged or expressed, however, shame is deeply written onto the bodies and psyches of many South African men and women. Very often when shame cannot be acknowledged and expressed by men this shame translates into insatiable

rage, which is frequently played out onto the bodies of women. South Africa is a place in which some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world are documented (Moffett 2006), where women are more likely to be raped than educated (Naidu-Hoffmeester and Kamal 2013), where people are brutally attacked and often killed because their sexuality does not fit the norms of hegemonic heterosexuality, and where any sort of difference is deemed license to dehumanize, oppress, and hurt—as seen by the increasing emotional and physical “xenophobic violence” against black African foreigners who are living in South Africa (Harris 2002; Strauss 2011).

As individuals who conduct gender research in this context, we need to be sensitive of these embodied emotions and the very real affects that they have on people in the aftermath of social and political trauma. It is crucial that researchers who work with people of this bruised and torn apart nation are attentive to the power dynamics inherent in research and that they strive to not reproduce patterns of power and oppression through their research work. The questions that we ask throughout this volume are in line with ways of doing exactly this.

Our questions are fuelled by the underlying assumptions of the “subjective elasticity” of identities (see Hoel 2013, 33). What this means is that we acknowledge the multiple identity positions of participants and researchers and we focus on the messiness of embodied lived realities that are constantly produced and in progress, shaped by the particular context within which research/activism takes place. The types of questions that we are asking are thus based around our views that the African social-spatial landscape significantly shapes the identities and processes that emerge throughout our research endeavors and, in this way, the context molds the process of knowledge production and the type of knowledge that we produce.

### **Our Epistemological Positions: Subjective Elasticity, Contextual “Selves,” and Destabilizing Hegemonic Power Relations**

The word “feminism” has come to represent a vast array of politically conscious ways of thinking that attempt to uncover unequal societal power imbalances and try to change dominant structures of power. In this compilation our understanding of what constitutes the core of feminist work has been enhanced by De Lauretis (1987, 113) who says that feminism is, “A critical reading of culture, a political interpretation of the social text and of the social subject, and a re-writing of our culture’s



master narratives”. Feminist research in the field of gender is thus centrally concerned with issues of deconstruction, power, and liberation for social change. It is on these three themes—deconstruction, power in research relationships, and processes that work towards liberation for social change—that our book focuses.

Our research efforts are broadly based within a qualitative epistemology—all of the contributions adopt a holistic approach to research and the study of people’s subjective realities and experience in context. With the “interpretive turn” in social science came an increased skepticism of the “objectivity” of research and issues of power relations in research came into question (Pillow 2003). In her pioneering paper Oakley (2003) critiqued traditional methods of research as being based on (and as reproducing) hegemonic gender relations. She argued that it is standard practice for interviewers to perform masculine traits of objectivity, authority, and emotional detachment, while participants are to act according to traditional feminine traits such as compliance and submission to authority. However, those who work in the field of gender should know that we, as researchers and activists, are not neutral knowledge seekers and our work cannot be conceptualized through the mere metaphor of “extracting” something (information/ “truth”) from participants.

Researchers/activists are subjects, human beings that most often inhabit a more powerful position in relation to the research participants and others that they work with. As Riley, Schouten, and Cahill (2003, 10) state, such an understanding of the power dynamics of research processes is crucial for interrogating the politics and practices of social research as it, “puts relationships, subjectivity and ethics as salient concepts within the research process”.

We believe that destabilizing traditional research scripts is an essential component of producing new frontiers of knowledge in the field of gender and to do this we have to be able to acknowledge the different kinds of identities that we “inhabit” when we practice research/activism. Most importantly, we have to make transparent certain identities that make us uncomfortable along the way. In much of this compilation the authors interrogate these “messy” and challenging identities; we do this by situating our work in line with feminist and poststructuralist theories.

The work of this contribution falls within a critical feminist approach to research that has been born from postmodern and postcolonial feminist theories. These approaches have in common an acknowledgement that the person is political (thus dissolving the boundaries erected between self and society), a view that patriarchy is an organizing principle in society, and the idea that knowledges (not the singular knowledge) are multiple,

shifting and situated (Callaghan and Clark 2006). Poststructuralist theories transcend traditional notions of the “self” and focus on the social embeddedness of identities—hence the focus is on a relational notion of personhood as a social construction which can be understood through mutual engagement and dialogue (Fisher 2004 as cited by Etherington 2007). Through our gender work we therefore acknowledge that meanings are multiple and that they are never finished.

According to such approaches the immediate social context within which the participants and the researcher are located at the moment of research/data gathering is of critical significance. Research happens within particular spatial-temporal contexts which shape how we conceptualize gender categories as well as the kinds of relationships that we, as researchers, develop with the researched. What we have learnt from these approaches is that power is in flux and we (as researchers and participants) constantly fluctuate between different positions during the process of research/activism. Our work is based on the view that we should not assume that a narrative adequately reveals the meaning of an action beyond the relationship with the researcher through which the narrative is produced. Melucci (1995) says that if attention is not paid to the conditions of production of a text, and to the reception and interpretation of it by the researcher, then one is practicing a new kind of objectivism under the guise of “subjective sources”. The researcher and the participants are reflexively interdependent and interconnected and these connections need to be made explicit during the analysis (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). In our book we use this knowledge to make sense of our challenging and often contradictory experiences as researchers within strange and rather unanticipated landscapes. Such a move encompasses possibilities of moving towards a place of better integrity and also of producing new, exciting kinds of knowledge. A central aspect of this re-imaging of fieldwork relationships is the idea of “pushing the boundaries” of reflexive engagement (Bondi 2009), or what we term “complicating reflexivity”.

## **Complicating Reflexivity**

Reflexivity has been defined as a research practice through which investigators turn their gaze onto their own subjectivity as it “exists” within the research context and as it impacts on researcher–researched interactions (Parker 2005). The concept has been defined as processes whereby researchers reflect on their research relationships and, in doing so, interrogate unequal social relations that stem from various social

positions (Bondi 2009). In order to “do” reflexivity, it is important that researchers recognize their differences of gender, class, race (and other positions) that separate them from the people that they study (Kobayashi 2003), *and* that they interrogate how (and why) these positions matter. Such reflective processes are meant to capture the rich fabric of social life that is overlooked by more traditional methods (Kobayashi 2003). According to Bondi (2009, 328), on a theoretical level reflexivity acknowledges that, “all knowledge bears the impress of the social relations entailed in its production, including the complex power relations between researchers and participants”. However, researchers’ practical engagement with reflexivity often does not match up to the standards/criteria of the theory. Often reflexivity is treated as an afterthought noting points of difference with the participants through brief and uncritical descriptions of certain social categories.

As such, critiques of reflexivity have abounded. In particular a reflexive practice whereby the researcher focuses on their own social locations and experience have been accused as being self-absorbed in nature and as being the antithesis of activism (Kobayashi 2003). Some scholars argue that researchers’ focus on their “self” excludes other, more pertinent issues (Bondi 2009) and that such reflections serve to distance them from their subjects, through constructing a sense of a detached other, and by virtue of the researchers’ power to name and situate themselves in relation to the researched (Kobayashi 2003). A central argument is that reflexivity can end up distracting attention from much more important political goals and social change agendas (Bondi 2009).

Kobayashi (2003) argues that reflexivity is not the best tool that we have at our disposal for taking us further towards social change. However, what she refers to here is a self-reflexive reflexivity that is researcher centered and a mere reflection of one’s difference in relation to the people of study. Reflexivity can (and as we show, should), however be much more than a mere self-reflexive exercise. When we let go of the assumption that reflexivity should be done by announcing the social categories to which we, the researchers and activists, belong then we can begin to explore more complex and uncomfortable approaches to the process of identity transformation in context (Pillow 2003). It is this territory that our chapters in this volume explore.

For example, and a dominant theme throughout the chapters that make up this compilation, as researchers we very often transverse socio-cultural landscapes. That is, we negotiate social (and physical) landscapes that are very different from our own contexts—we are placed both physically and psychologically in unknown territory. It can be very intimidating for us, as

researchers, to enter into and experience the participants' topographical texture, however this is crucial information and foregrounding such tensions can help improve our analyses significantly (Pillow 2003). In order to push the boundaries of reflexivity we need to be willing to enunciate this unfamiliar/threatening territory. Some have stated that communicating dilemmas in fieldwork helps us work towards a more ethical research stance (see, for example, Etherington 2007). Once researchers can move away from a self-absorbed focus on their own identities and focus on the rich dynamics of the *context* and a reflexive engagement of what went wrong (or right) during their engagements with the participants then reflexivity can be a productive tool in the generation of new knowledge.

Denzin's (1997) five different typologies of reflexivity in qualitative research can serve as a useful guide for conceptualizing how we can push the boundaries of reflexivity. He outlines the categories of methodological reflexivity, intertextual reflexivity, standpoint reflexivity, queer reflexivity, and feminist reflexivity. The initial starting point of reflexivity, the base work per se, is to recognize the differences between the researcher and the researched. However, the crucial aspect of this process is then taking up a moral stance in working to eliminate, or reduce, such unequal power dynamics. This is the core of what Denzin (1997) refers to as "feminist reflexivity". As Kobayashi (2003, 348) argues:

reflexivity has no meaning if not connected to a larger agenda—which for most of us is avowedly both political and personal—meant to change the world. How we choose to change the world is a very personal matter; but the results are not.

Reflexivity is thus a varied and multiple concept that encompasses and feeds into both theory and practice (Bondi 2009). Reflexive engagement should entail a practice of on-going conversation about experience that should inform our definitions, concepts of the self, our relational conduct, as well as our political practice.

Poststructuralist lines of thinking have politicized the practices of representation; we, as social researchers and activists, now face particularly challenging questions with regards to reflexivity: Can we truly represent another? Whose story is it—the researcher or the researched? How can we engage in ethical (and productive) representation, and then who is the representation serving in terms of ethics and usefulness? (See, for example, Pillow 2003.) Reflexivity in this sense is a process whereby we make visible the ways in which we do the work of representation; it is through such an examination that we can foreground issues about the

politics of representation (Pillow 2003). However, we would argue that as gender activists and researchers who have a passion for working towards social change, our reflective practices need to be based on something more—a true connection between human beings.

Quoting the popular work of John Bradshaw, “Creating love: the next great stage of growth” (1992), hooks (2002) says that global societies’ acceptance of patriarchal domination as a founding narrative has resulted in a preoccupation of narratives of power rather than narratives of love. In this sense we have lost what it means to love in both our personal and professional worldly endeavors. For hooks (2002) this means the absence of care, respect, and responsibility. This is starkly apparent in much qualitative work in which research participants are given token acknowledgements and the research agenda is unequivocally designed to serve only the institution/researcher. So, we ask the question, “How can we re-gain an ‘ethics of responsibility’ and an ‘ethics of care’ in social research?”

In this book we offer insights into the processes and practices of novel and exciting forms of reflexivity that *can* be embraced to move us beyond reflection and moral discussions and further towards a social change agenda. Pillow’s (2003, 188) concept of “interrupting reflexivity” stands as a useful tool to illustrate what we are offering in this book. Pillow (2003) says that this kind of reflexivity renders knowing as uncomfortable and as unattainable. Knowing is unattainable because our ways of knowing the other (and the self) are blurred by the white noise of economic and political institutions. The chapters in this book provide rich context-driven insights that help to counter the privileging of a “reflexivity” that prioritizes the researcher’s identity. We engage in explicit discussion about the economic, political, and institutional contexts within which our research processes are situated, and the ways in which these contexts shape our interactions with others during research/activism.

We reflect on the power dynamics inherent in the research process in different but related ways. Broadly, in our book we conceptualize power in research as, firstly, power to define, and secondly, power to practice certain ways of being—both of which can lead to the achievement of certain political goals. Our contributors in this book practice feminist reflexivity in their gender work in the sense that they destabilize power structures according to three different conceptual levels of what power is and what it does (and can do) in research. The first is power as definition. The second is power as social action. The last is power as reflective awareness and communication.

The section below outlines our (the editors) analyses of the ways in which the contributors of this volume have worked towards “pushing the boundaries” of reflexivity. We analyze these contributions through the lens of “interrupting reflexivity;” drawing on the feminist themes of deconstruction, power in research relationships, and a social change agenda we weave a picture of the ways in which the contributors collectively work towards “ethical reflexivity” in African gender research.

## **Towards an Ethical based Reflexivity**

As we work to add to the global body of knowledge, it is important to keep in mind the effects of our contributions, however it is equally important that we keep in mind the effects and repercussions of the processes that we engage in to create this knowledge. In fact exceeding “normal” institutional expectations of research ethics is part of the core work that researcher/activists should be doing in Africa and with certain vulnerable participants (Swartz 2011). As Salo (this volume, 171) states:

the questions for African feminists have always required that we interrogated the praxis of knowledge production and of methodology that go beyond the usual normative acknowledgements of ethics, consent and commitment that underwrite standard social science research.

We need to examine our interviews, focus groups and other processes of knowledge production as more than mere data-gathering “tools” and we need to move beyond a “token ethics” which is written up according to prescribed institutional “rules”. All of this entails that we pay closer attention to the relational nature of research encounters (Boonzaier 2014) and the intuitions, motivations, and emotions that emerge within these sites. In this way we will be able to move towards a deeper understanding of our processes of doing research. Such “interruptions” of traditional conceptualizations of reflexivity is, for us, a move closer to “ethical reflexivity”.

Qualitative research, and especially work in the field of gender, requires a high level of personal commitment—both in terms of researchers’ taking up personal responsibility to uphold ethical practices during the research process and the emotional dynamics that occur through these human interactions. The latter is a dimension that is not so readily discussed during researchers’ reflections of their work; however this is an ever-present aspect of gender research. It speaks to what we give of ourselves as researchers in these encounters not because of what you might gain in return but because these are ethical human interactions, it

speaks to the fact that we, as gender researchers, temporarily inhabit unfamiliar and challenging environments that impact our sense of self and emotions as well as others' emotional and ontological territory (Hoel 2013). The link between reflexivity and ethical research is established by researcher transparency (Etherington 2007). When the reader is given important detail about our choices, interactions, and emotions then they can observe the ways in which these subtle and unpredictable situations arise—what Guillemin and Gillam (2004, 262) call “ethically important moments,” and, importantly, how we negotiate these situations. In such moments the decisions made by the researcher has important ethical consequences (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). We would add that such an agenda can be enhanced by additionally making transparent one's political and social change agendas and theoretical choices, and the ways in which these choices have shaped our representation of the people who take part in our research.

Power relations between the researcher and the researched are never egalitarian but rather are fuelled by imbalances which are shaped by race, class, academic authority, and level of control over the research process and the research output (Hoel 2013). These issues are magnified when working with vulnerable or traumatized communities (Swartz 2011). Researchers are often silent about important issues of power in research relationships. Such silence regularly happens by choice or by the restrictions of institutional norms about doing research and practicing the “researcher” role. Researchers often engage in what Finlay (2002) calls “selective silence”—that is they ignore issues during the research that were difficult for them to manage. This often entails a kind of suppression of verbal or other information that the researcher may find difficult to narrate. When we produce neat final written products in the form of books, academic papers, or theses we do not readily acknowledge that the process of getting to the finished product was not neat or uncomplicated in any way.

Researchers need to be explicit about their research processes and about their (political) motivations, choices and experiences that emerged along the way. In this way we can begin working towards a level of accountability with regards to our gender research. The innovative potential of our book lies in the ways in which the contributors grapple head on with such issues. We move beyond the suppression and silence about research experience/method that is so characteristic of contemporary qualitative work in the field of gender. Throughout the book, we keep bringing attention back to the importance of the social context with

regards to the interpretations and ideas that we have about the people that we study.

## **Practicing “Ethical Reflexivity” through the Deconstruction of Research Participants’ Social Positions**

As researchers we often practice a more powerful position in relation to our participants through the kinds of research questions that we ask. Some questions “close off” or inhibit any opportunity for social change in the lives of our participants. Scholars in different fields have criticized certain research questions. For example, the question in the field of violence against women, “Why do abused women stay?” was put under much scrutiny as it placed focus on the psychological deficits of abused women and did not acknowledge the social and economic factors that inform women’s choices to stay with an abusive partner. It was argued that more appropriate questions that acknowledge abused women’s social agency would be, “*How* do abused women stay?” Such a question moves away from psychologically pathologizing abused women and leaves room for the exploration of some level of agency. This example highlights the power of research questions in terms of their linguistic capacity to situate the researched as certain kinds of subjects.

Another potent use (or abuse) of power can be the definitions that we utilize in our research and then reinforce in our written work. In the first section of our book, “Multiple ‘selves’ in context: disrupting gendered categories and definitions,” the authors interrogate certain social categories and binaries of masculinity/femininity, personhood, the body and the sexual self. It is through such investigations that hegemonic definitions and “feminine/masculine” categories can be challenged and destabilized, and that socially constructed, oppressive ways of being can be transcended. The work in this section “speaks” to the first theme of feminism outlined above—that is the deconstruction of language to disrupt hegemonic gendered power. The contributors highlight their important decisions surrounding language and how they represent their research subjects/topic. Such sensitivity to language and representation is an ethical strategy in itself (see Swartz 2011).

In the opening chapter, “Rape and the limits of the law: revisiting the criticism against the South African Sexual Violence Legislation,” Azille Coetzee revisits the important question of whether the fight against sexual violence in South Africa should be pursued through avenues of legal reform. She does this through the lens of Carol Smart’s skepticism of the law as an appropriate medium through which to effect transformation.



Coetzee takes us through a philosophical interrogation of legal definitions that is well situated within the specific South African context. She argues that feminists who pursue change through legal means should look beyond legal definitions and the language of rape and should be ready to delve into transforming the power and logic of the law and challenge the laws power to define. Overall Coetzee concludes that there are significant limits of pursuing change through law reform and feminists should not be looking at the South African criminal law system as a solution to the problem of rape but rather they should pursue the fight through other mediums—such as active pursuits of redefining concepts of masculinity, femininity, personhood, and the body.

In chapter 2, “Beyond heteronormativity: doing gender and sexuality in university contexts,” Fay Hodza presents his reflections on gender and sexuality issues among students at a university in Zimbabwe. These are topics that are widely suppressed in a context in which homosexuality is largely rendered pathological, and sometimes even demonic. Hodza outlines his precarious position as a researcher who is studying such taboo, “thorny” topics. He speaks about the stigmatization and incredulity that he received from other scholars who labeled him “insane” and “un-African” because he was doing such gender work in the Zimbabwean context. This was a pertinent issue for him as a Zimbabwean, heterosexual, married male with a political agenda to promote equality. Hodza’s paper speaks to social-political issues of otherness, themes that point to the issues of what is problematic for the democracy of Zimbabwe. Hodza interrogates socially shamed positions to do with homosexuality and also interrogates the positions which his colleagues from Zimbabwe infer of him, as researcher. Here he is doing the work of deconstruction. Hodza’s work is important because it is only through talk about non-normative, “silenced” ways of being that new kinds of discourses and realities can be born.

In the third chapter of Part I, “Woman abuse in South Africa: reflecting on the complexity of women’s decisions to leave abusive men,” van Schalkwyk and colleagues explore the experiences of a relatively understudied group of women—abused women who are residing in shelters in South Africa. They coherently weave a picture of these women’s experiences of leaving abusive men and the complex decision-making processes that characterize their journeys—shedding insight on what the context of poverty, deprivation, and joblessness means for abused women. Following authors such as Davies and Harré (1990) and Davies et al. (2006), the authors adopt a feminist poststructuralist analytic approach of identities as precarious, contradictory and ever-changing and as constructed through language at certain contextual moments. It is through

an acknowledgement of their ideological approach to selfhood that the authors open up new kinds of questions about the complexity of abused women's experience. In this way they explore women's social agency as it develops within the specific context of the shelter sphere in South Africa. By asking such "identity questions" the authors problematize dominant cultural narratives of abuse, powerlessness, and victimhood.

These chapters show that when we begin to acknowledge the multiplicity of identities that are ever in flux, we can begin to deconstruct what it means to be a violated (and) sexual being. Importantly, in these ways we can begin to challenge and (re)construct different meanings about gender and power and what it means to be a victim of sexual assault, an "abused woman," and a human being who prefers to have sex with others of the same gender. These definitions have significant implications as they provide room to conceptualize space for the recognition of the power of the category of human being that we are researching, and thus provide the mobility to move towards social change. These chapters highlight the importance of researchers' reflexivity about how they categorize the people that they research. The chapters that follow in Part II of the book deal with reflections of power and the possibilities of social action through research/activism.

### **Practicing "Ethical Reflexivity" through Bridging Research—Activist Binaries**

In the second section of our compilation, "Feminist praxis: collaborations and bridging research-activist binaries," the authors reflect on their own research and activist processes. The stories depict real work in constructing collaborations between the "powerful" and the "powerless," between the "researcher" and the "researched," between the scholar and the activist. These chapters are in line with what Finlay (2002) calls "mutual collaboration"—a type of reflexivity through which researchers engage in various strategies to enlist participants as co-researchers and through which they embrace multiple voices, shared realities, and contradictions. However, such collaborative pursuits have often been used as an intellectual means of validating data (Finlay 2002) while less has been focused on mutuality as an intentional ethics of reciprocation in research that can contribute to flatten power gradients between participant/researcher and community worker/activist (Swartz 2011).

The chapters in the current compilation bring political motivation into the picture. They illustrate how we can practice mutual collaborative

reflexivity with a social change agenda, with the aim of changing the lives of our participating “partners”. Most importantly the authors highlight that when one has a social change agenda, one should never truly be able to categorize oneself as *either* researcher *or* activist/“teacher” or student”. Such collaborative work should value the combined insights of different persons, places, and contexts (Benson and Meyer, this volume). The work in this section provides insight into how we, as researchers and activists, can work towards liberation and a change in current social conditions—change not as abstract thought or ideas but as something that happens in the “here and now” of research. Through collaboration across divides, the authors co-produce knowledge in diverse formats that are relevant for the lives of activists/community-based workers “on the ground”. They show that through such collaborations both researchers and activists can engage with their co-produced insights and, by doing so, they can push the boundaries of traditional academic knowledge in ways that are productive for all.

In chapter 4, “Documenting trauma, hope and human security: scholar activist work with Grandmothers against Poverty and Aids,” Fish and Russo use a human security lens to explore the experiences of black grandmothers living in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha within the broader context of the HIV/AIDS crisis, poverty, and deprivation. They engage in a reflexive analysis of knowledge production through feminist-activist methods. Importantly, Fish and Russo critically engage with their position as privileged, white North American scholars researching the experiences of poor women in a black township in South Africa, and outline a number of components of scholar-activist research that they believe are transferable to scholar-activist work in other sites.

In chapter 5, “‘Writing my history is keeping me alive’: politics and practices of collaborative history writing,” Benson and Meyer reflect on the process, the politics, and the practices of collaborative work between a feminist historian and a community activist who formally occupied “illegal” squatter land in a small community on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa. Through their collaborative efforts and a collection of sources they weave together a story of people’s experience of a land occupation in ways that challenge traditional notions of methodology and authorship. Through rich descriptions of what they call a feminist collaborative methodology, they make visible the power positions that emerged throughout this process. Their collaboration makes explicit the intersection between research and political struggle. Importantly, Benson and Meyer say that this process of evolving methodology saw changes in the kinds of questions that they asked—from more theoretical debates such

as, “who can and should write history?” to more activist questions like, “what can history be used for and how can it produce solidarity?”

In their chapter, “Ought antiracists males be (pro)feminist too? Engaging black men in work against gender and sexual-based violence,” Botha and Ratele (chapter 6) describe their collaboration as two African heterosexual men who are passionate about working towards a gender equal society—Ratele as a scholar and Botha as an activist in the field. Botha is an activist who works as a media and government relations person for a non-governmental organization and Ratele is a professor who is engaged in research at a South African university. They have worked together for many years on masculinities and other gender and sexually related topics. They ascribe their sensitivity to the fact that each focuses on different processes and outcomes of activism/research—Botha mostly engages with people in the public eye and Ratele engages in more long-term reflection and research. The contributors say that their collaboration supplements and enriches each other’s work. They use the plural “we” to describe their connected journey towards a manhood that embraces self-definitions that are different from those imposed by patriarchal masculinity.

Ultimately the chapters in Part II highlight the emergent and transformative nature of collaborations—in providing new kinds of perspectives and knowledge, in eroding dominant narratives of personhood and practice, and in challenging researchers and activists to “push new ground” and to think of themselves and their roles differently. As the authors show, a large part of this work is deconstructing certain assumptions of hierarchy and knowing. In particular these collaborations across divides and across epistemological ways of knowing the world resulted in important shifts in perspectives. The authors moved from engaging in theoretical and language-based questions towards engaging in questions that focused more closely around issues of their connections with each other and the rich potentials of solidarity.

## **Practicing “Ethical Reflexivity” through Intersubjective Reflection**

Reflexivity has become an important topic for qualitative researchers in general, and more specifically for those who engage feminist approaches to research. Two foundational influences underpinning reflexivity are intersubjectivity and relational psychoanalysis, concepts that emphasize the interpersonal dimension of the process that unfolds in relational psychoanalytic practice. This perspective suggests that rather

than a neutral therapist making interpretations of the client's statements and behaviors, the therapist and client influence one another at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

The intersubjective epistemological model has broadened our understanding of the qualitative research process, and intersubjectivity is now seen to be at the core of knowledge production in the relationships between researcher and participants. Thus, making sense of the data is no longer seen as a role exclusively for the researcher, but rather a process of "co-production" of knowledge (Colombo 2003), which unfolds because of the reciprocal mutual influence inherent in these relationships between researcher and participant. Researchers then have to be aware of the interplay between their emotions and those of participants, how their own stories and biographies intersect with those of the participants, and how their positions of power and privilege may have affected the kind of knowledge that is produced.

In "Feminist reflexivity: ethics and researcher-researched power relations"—the third and final section in our book, the contributing authors grapple with these issues of power in research relationships, and of the intersection between their personal stories and the stories and circumstances of the participants in their research. Through critical reflection, they use their own fieldwork experiences to examine the deep emotions that they felt when they conducted the research. To demonstrate transparency and accountability, they confront the issues of researchers' power in relation to the people that they study. A central part of the work in this section is a critical interrogation of our assumptions of shared identities and the ways in which intersectional identities are always linked up with broader inequalities, which are fuelled by social and institutional forces. One cannot unequivocally claim a sense of shared identity with our participants, and to do so would be naive and to ignore the situated "truth" of our research encounters. The authors in this section give transparent accounts of power dynamics that occur throughout their research processes and their chapters constitute a move away from traditional discourses of methodology. A central theme throughout is that we, as researchers and activists, should look deeper than standardized ethical issues of consent, anonymity, and a shallow acknowledgement of our discomfort due to our position of power in relation to research participants.

Elena Moore (chapter 7) reflects on the challenges she encountered as a researcher from Ireland applying her research skills within urban townships in the South African context, and the "heart-break" of witnessing the intense male control that dominates the homes of the women who were participants in her study. Moore, from whose diary entry

the quote at the beginning of this introduction is drawn, also speaks candidly about her own disconnectedness from the woman hiding herself under a blanket: “I did not know how I could communicate with this participant whilst she was hidden under these blankets” (this volume page 158). These are the kinds of experiences that challenged everything she knew about research—ethics, confidentiality, and communication. At the same time, however, Moore argues that through her close engagements with the participants, and by confronting and engaging with the dis-ease in the research process, she gained unique insight into the women’s lived realities and their everyday existence. From engaging in such a way as qualitative researchers we learn more about how different people experience themselves as embodied beings in their social context and throughout the research process, this knowledge obviously enriches our understanding of their lived experiences and enhances our analysis of their stories in invaluable ways. Moore eloquently traces her thoughts and perspective through providing snippets of her field notes and neatly presents us with insight about the origins of her data. As such Moore’s chapter constitutes an outstanding reflexive exercise that is both comprehensive and holistic.

In chapter 8, “Autobiography and the research context: reflection on unbecoming the ‘native’ anthropologist,” Elaine Salo makes a call for feminist researchers to pay deeper attention to what “we” consider to be shared feminist epistemologies, dominant feminist perspectives on modernization, and normative discourses of ethics and methodology. She traces her experiences in the lively Rio Street of Manenberg, an impoverished colored community on the outskirts of Cape Town. Through rich descriptions of her interactions with the women of Manenberg, Salo poses critical reflections about shared temporalities and gender and raced identities. Salo uses the term “native anthropologist” because she was studying a familiar place, the colored township of Manenberg, South Africa, and she was looking at the experiences of colored women with whom she shared gendered and racial classification under the old apartheid system.

An important issue when considering one’s own power in relation to the people that we study is our own choice as researchers what to disclose to research participants. From a traditional research ethics perspective this translates to informed consent about the research process and other important information about the project (Escobedo et al. 2007). However, issues of disclosure become more complex when we are working with a social agenda in mind, when we connect with participants as human beings and not as the all-powerful researcher. In chapter 9, “Interrogating our