

Lessons from an ethnographic encounter with young women in a South African Township

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Abstract

This paper discusses lessons from the researcher's experiences of her ethnographic approach that employed a sociological study on the lived experiences of young women in Ngangelizwe Township, Mthatha to uncover the various ways in which the young women negotiated their lifestyles. The ethnographic research approach is underpinned by the desire to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants lived experiences. Such understanding is intended to go beyond the participant's explicit identifications of their realities, unearthing the hidden meanings shaping the production of their social action. However, gaining access into the lives of participants is not a straightforward process and should be recognised in its difference from gaining access into the area of study. Gaining access into the social lives of participants and engaging in ethnographic observations is a complex process in which the researcher participates in multiple overlapping roles that are shaped by unforeseen on-field occurrences. This paper sheds light on some of the field occurrences in how they informed the data collection process through which the objective of examining the realities of young women in Ngangelizwe Township was achieved.

Keywords: *Ethnography, Lived experiences, Realities.*

Résumé

Cet article discute des leçons tirées des expériences de la chercheuse de son approche ethnographique qui a utilisé une étude sociologique sur les expériences vécues des jeunes femmes dans le canton de Ngangelizwe, Mthatha pour découvrir les différentes manières dont les jeunes femmes ont négocié leur mode de vie. L'approche de la recherche ethnographique est sous-tendue par le désir d'acquérir une compréhension approfondie des expériences vécues par les participants. Une telle compréhension est destinée à aller au-delà des identifications explicites des participants à leurs réalités, en exhumant les significations cachées qui façonnent la production de leur action sociale. Cependant, accéder à la vie des participants n'est pas un processus simple et devrait être reconnu dans sa différence par rapport à l'accès au domaine d'étude. Accéder à la vie sociale des participants et s'engager dans des observations ethnographiques est un processus complexe dans lequel le chercheur participe à de multiples rôles qui se chevauchent et sont façonnés par des

événements imprévus sur le terrain. Ce document met en lumière certaines des occurrences de terrain dans la façon dont elles ont informé le processus de collecte de données à travers lequel l'objectif d'examiner les réalités des jeunes femmes dans le canton de Ngangelizwe a été atteint.

Mots clés: *Ethnographie, Expériences vécues, Réalités.*

Introduction

This paper provides a discussion of how the ethnographic research approach can be used in qualitative research to provide better understanding of the research participants. By sharing field-based experiences, the researcher unpacks some of the challenges faced when ethnographers seek to gain access into the field of study. The study explores the significance of successfully gaining access as well as acceptance in to the social worlds of research participants in an ethnographic study (England, 1994: 243; Fossey et al., 2002: 720 and Sandewolski, 2000: 334). The above objective is met by answering how the researcher gained access into Ngangelizwe Township, Mthatha as a field of study and uncovering how she forged relationships with potential participants. It unearths how she engaged in in-depth discussions that shed light on the ways in which young women in Ngangelizwe negotiate their lifestyle choices. The discussion begins with a brief focus on the area of study, giving the setting and the socio-demographic profile of the area of study.

Characterising the Field

The Eastern Cape is the third-highest populated province after Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Review and Outlook, 2017:41; OR Tambo District Municipality Socio Economic Review and Outlook, 2017: 13 StatsSA, 2016: 2). The majority of its population is located in the OR Tambo district comprising Mthatha, Mqanduli and surrounding rural areas. The King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) local municipality, which is in OR Tambo district is more densely populated in comparison to other municipalities in the Eastern Cape Province (OR Tambo District Municipality Socio Economic Review and Outlook, 2017: 72). Peri-urban areas such as Ngangelizwe Township experience extreme in-urban migration that results from the in migration of job-seekers. The population that is drawn into this township is predominantly young and reflects the overall population of the Province (where in EC roughly 34.8% of the overall population between the ages of 0–14 years). There are more females in all the age categories (similarly to the EC province in which women over the age of 30 comprising approximately 56.8% of the total provincial population) (OR Tambo District Municipality Socio Economic Review and Outlook, 2017: 72).

Lessons from entering the Field

The researcher was born and raised in Ngangelizwe. The field of study presented as a familiar social space – she is an insider. However, caution was exercised regarding this position; specifically, the researcher's long separation from the social space coupled with the social, economic and cultural transformations that have occurred within the social space. This presented the field of study as a potentially unfamiliar setting in which the researcher was both an insider and an outsider. The outsider experience was shaped by spatial mobility which resulted in many familiar people migrating from this space, while many unfamiliar people occupied the area. The first field experience was then aimed at reintroducing the researcher to Ngangelizwe Township.

Declined invites into the study

Upon receiving ethical clearance, the researcher went to the field where she spent the first few days visiting family members who are scattered in Ngangelizwe Township and Norwood suburb in Mthatha. These visits were opportunities to observe potential research participants in the area. During the second week, the researcher identified five young women, two of whom were friends who came to the researcher's family home to deliver a message. The researcher took the opportunity to introduce herself, told them about the study and asked them if they would be interested in becoming participants. They politely declined.

Three other young women were identified as they stood at the street corner on a Saturday afternoon chatting. The researcher introduced herself, her study and requested the women to participate, but they declined. The researcher turned to family members asking them if they knew any young women whom she could request to participate in the study. Two young women were identified. The women agreed. This seemed like a breakthrough. However, when the researcher approached one of the women to seek consent to interview her, the woman stated that she was shy and was uncomfortable talking about her life. The second young woman who had agreed to take part in the study kept postponing her meeting with the researcher.

The first experience of not being able to connect with potential participants and forge relationships through which ethnographic encounters could be done indicated the challenge of entering the field of study. It also made it clear that being present and living in the area of study does not mean having access to the field of study because it is the social space in which realities of participants are negotiated. Although, having gained access to Ngangelizwe Township, the researcher had not gained entry into her field of study (Bucerius, 2013: 691; Dunlap and Johnson, 1998: 129).

Hence, the researcher planned a new way to gain entry into the social lives of potential participants.

Scouting for participants through a semi-insider

The researcher contacted a sociology honours student at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) main campus in Mthatha whom the researcher knew. The student was selected based on her age, familiarity with sociological research principles, social science research methods and familiarity with Mthatha, even though she did not live in Ngangelizwe Township. The researcher hoped that the assistance could acquaint her with young women in Ngangelizwe since she was in the same age group and that through her, the researcher would gain access to the young women's lives.

This research assistant visited Ngangelizwe between 1:00p.m. and 3:00 p.m. depending on her study schedule and that she commuted by taxi. She would be dropped off in different streets, walk and identify young women whom she would approach introducing herself and stating the reason why she was there, asking if they would be willing to partake in the study and adhering to the ethical standards of qualitative research (Genzuk, 2003: 8 and McNamara, 2009: 173).

The assistant's involvement was cut short. On a Saturday afternoon, as she walked down the streets in Ngangelizwe, she was robbed by two young men who pointed knives at her while demanding her cell phone. She gave it to them and they quickly disappeared. The researcher discontinued the assistant's involvement for fear of exposing her to further vulnerabilities. The contacts gained during the research assistant's trips were lost as they were stored in the stolen cell phone. This experience was a lesson that the researcher was a learner in a potentially complex field of study in which she was susceptible to physical risks (through vulnerability to crime) in addition to social barriers (difficulty of gaining entry into young women's social worlds).

The researcher had to rethink her positionality and take the place of a learner in Ngangelizwe Township. The unfamiliar position enabled the researcher to be cautious and to be open to guidance (Chughtai and Myers, 2016: 1 and Jones and Smith, 2017: 99). While the researcher planned her third field encounter, a death in her family occurred. This unforeseen event influenced her third encounter in the field.

Thrownness into the field of study

The premature death of the researcher's cousin threw¹ the researcher back into the field before she could plan how to approach the third encounter. This experience proved

1 The concept of thrownness was coined by Heidegger (1927) in his suggestion that human beings are thrown in world in which they are faced with many 'not at home feelings' such as anxiety. However, as they engage with daily activities and gain understandings of the world in which they live, they may choose to throw themselves out of their thrown condition, thus gaining an 'at-home feeling'. In this study, this concept is used to indicate how the researcher entered unfamiliar social activities and social spaces in the field through which the researcher met and acquainted with potential research participants.

that researcher's lived experiences interconnect with their subjective experiences in ways that may influence the direction of one's research approach. The funeral became significant for the study because the event centred on a young woman who embodied all the features of the potential research participants (Chughtai and Myers, 2016: 2). These features were class, race, gender, age, location and culture. The researcher had to deliver a speech at the funeral. This moment introduced her to the young women at the funeral as one of the societal members who belonged in the area, even though many of the young women were not familiar with her. This introduction directed a spotlight onto the researcher in ways that made her face familiar to the young women who attended the funeral. The researcher took this as an opportunity familiarize herself with young women at the funeral and this became the first milestone in her attempt to enter the field. Drawing from Henry (2012: 535) that funerals provide opportunities in which researchers engage empathically with those in the field thus drawing on shared feelings to convey meaning, forge, as well as sustain relations.

The researcher opened her eyes to other potential opportunities in which she could throw herself into the social experiences of young women (Fine and Hallett, 2013: 190). One of the opportunities that the researcher used was during this funeral. There she asked a group of young women if she could travel with them in their car as they were travelling from the graveyard to the deceased home for refreshment. On the journey, after being silent for a while, one of the young women (early twenties) said 'Uxolo sisi wam, besicela ukudlala iingoma sisele, sonwabe njengoba besisenza nomhlobo wethu. Simamele ingoma zakhe' (Excuse me, my sister, may we please kindly play our choice of music and indulge in alcoholic beverages like we would normally do with our late friend and listen to her favourite songs). The researcher agreed and laughed; she watched and listened to them converse about their friend. The researcher interpreted the young women's request, not as the young women asking permission per se. Instead, they were making her aware that they were about to unmask themselves so that they could at that moment be who they are in the absence of unknowers (strangers or people who do not know them too well or may not have seen them in a certain way e.g., singing and dancing). The moment was significant in how it opened 'the curtain' into the real social behaviour of the women within their social world, thus throwing the researcher into the field as an observer. This granted her an opportunity to learn how to communicate with young women in ways that may make them agree to partake in the study. It gave the researcher entrance to observe, orient herself, and test her behaviour as well as position herself in ways that did not cause discomfort among the social agents.

The young women were chatting in the car, singing along and sharing plans for the evening to host a party after the funeral (also casually known as after-tears) in celebration of their friend's life. This information provided yet another opportunity to ask to go with the young women to the party, which would be hosted in a nightclub (loosely referred to as club). To the researcher, requesting to go to the nightclub was a first experience. This

experience was important as it introduced her to the young women's social world. As the researcher asked permission to go with the young women to the club, they laughed and asked if the researcher was serious but agreed. This was important in drawing the researcher closer to them. These scenarios became significant in how the researcher found herself partially accepted into the social space of the young women in ways the researcher was unable to in her initial approaches.

These field encounters reflect the importance of alertness in ethnographic research. It is constant alertness to potential opportunities that allowed the researcher to identify moments to throw herself into field meaningful encounters. The thrownness experience however has to be done in a very cautious way so that the researcher is aware of when to maintain an absence of the present. This is important to ensure that the researcher's presence does not become a burden that pushes potential participants away. When invited into unfamiliar research experiences, an ethnographic researcher needs to be mindful of their movements, expression as well as reactions to events so that these are not misinterpreted in offensive ways, pushing away participants (England, 1994; Hathaway, 1995 and Neumann, 2014). Having gained entry in to the field of study, the next step was to seek permission to observe and record conversations with participants.

Gaining consent for in-depth conversations and first-hand observations

The next step is for the researcher to validate that the identified participants meet the sample criteria, request their informed consent and begin data collection. It is important for the participants to know that their relationship with the researcher is underlined by a purpose to learn from them, record the information obtained and publish it. This ensures that participants make an informed decision as they open up their truths to the researcher. This was the process followed by the researcher as she identified approximately twenty young women who fitted her sample, which was age approximately 21 to 29 years and present- and long-term residences of Ngangelizwe Township.

All the identified participants spoke isiXhosa and English interchangeably with some using local terminology/slang. The researcher who is fluent in isiXhosa and English engaged with the participants in both languages while relying on the participants' explanation for the local terminology that they sometimes used. The conversations were held in both English and isiXhosa and then translated and later transcribed by the researcher into English. The participants were primarily identified based on observations made during the social activities; observations that suggested that these young women carried rich information that could be valuable for the study.

Once the identifying characteristics were validated and consent to participate in the study was given, the same procedure was followed to identify eighteen more participants

with some declining to take part and others willingly signing the consent. Six young women declined to take part in the study. One research participant invited her friend to take part in the study to which she consented. All fifteen young women were long-term residents of Ngangelizwe Township but resided in different sections of the township. Gaining consent from the fifteen young women meant they were allowing the researcher to be part of their daily routines, chatting to them, going to social functions with them, asking them detailed questions about their lives and about their socio-economic environment (Creswell, 2013; Etikan et al., 2016; Gentles et al., 2015; Neuman, 2014 and Polkinghorne, 2005).

The researcher chose not to have a planned approach to the first in-depth discussions and observations, rather letting the discussions unfold based on the encounters with the participants who had granted consent. This means that no formal interviews were scheduled with the participants (however, the researcher had an interview schedule that she reflected on after engaging with participants, in order to make sure that the conversations with participants were guided by the research aim and objectives). This was done in order to avoid creating a formal arrangement that could potentially make the participants uncomfortable being themselves during the conversations. This was also done to freely allow the conversations to occur as led by the participants. It is within this view that the following observation experiences occurred, as discussed below, and were used as an introduction to in-depth conversations about the lifestyle choices and lived experiences of participants in Ngangelizwe Township.

Observing Busi²

The first evening of the observation occurred when the researcher visited Busi (participant) at her home. When the researcher arrived at Busi's house, she noted a red car parked not too far from Busi's home. Inside the house, Busi's grandmother was cooking dinner and Busi's children were playing. The researcher greeted and asked how Busi's grandmother was keeping, introduced herself and engaged in a conversation about the ailments of growing old. During the conversation, Busi appeared from the bedroom to check who was talking to her grandmother. Greetings, laughter and the exchanging of pleasantries ensued. It was at this point that the researcher excused herself from the kitchen, moving to the lounge with Busi. Busi's friend, a young woman like herself, was in the lounge. They were both dressed in mini-skirts, pumps (shoes) and high-waist jackets wearing weaves and were putting on make-up. The researcher saw that they were dressed similarly and getting ready for some occasion and made a joke, saying that it is afternoon and the ladies should be preparing to sleep; it is not morning. Both Busi and her friend laughed at the researcher's joke.

2 Pseudonyms are used for all the participants

Busi introduced her friend and the researcher to each other, saying that her friend was a student at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). Busi then mentioned that they were getting ready to go somewhere. The researcher asked if she could take them to where they were going and not have to worry about catching a taxi. After some thought, they agreed. Busi said that the person they were going with was panicking anyway since they were taking long to get ready. The researcher then asked about the red car that was parked not far from Busi's home. This turned out to be the person with whom Busi and her friend were going to travel with. Busi then made a quick call to the person in the red car to alert the person that they would meet later. When Busi and her friend were ready, they picked up their black Channel shoulder bags. The researcher left with them, leaving behind Busi's grandmother and the children. As they entered the researcher's car, the researcher noticed that the red car had left.

On the way to town (Mthatha CBD) where Busi and her friend were going, the researcher maintained the absence of the present, allowing Busi and her friend to chat among themselves and discuss their upcoming evening. It was easy for the researcher to maintain an absence of the present as both women were seating at the backseat while the researcher was sitting alone in the front seat driving. Thus, drawing from Hoepfl (1997: 52) and Reeves et al. (2013: 1368) who maintain that observation is a common form of data collection in field research in which the researcher maintains a passive presence, being as discreet as possible and not interacting with participants.

The short trip was useful in giving the researcher ideas to begin in-depth conversations with Busi as a form of a catching up on the conversations that occurred during the observation. Busi and her friend's conversation was cut short as they arrived at the hotel and bar. Busi asked the researcher to take photos of them with her cell phone and send them to her before the researcher drove off. Once the researcher had sent the photos to Busi, she and her friend went into the bar waving goodbye. A man was standing outside the hotel and bar casually watching as the pictures were being taken. He approached the researcher as Busi and her friend were leaving. He asked the researcher about the school she attended and if the researcher was coming inside for drinks. Before the researcher could answer, Busi returned, hugged the researcher and whispered, bye, thus signalling that the researcher was not permitted to enter Busi's social world beyond the experiences shared. The man did not wait for a response as he went into the hotel and bar. This marked the end of the evening for the researcher.

One of the lessons that the researcher learned from the above scenario was that the participants are constantly present and observant during their interactions as indicated by how Busi noticed the man talking to the researcher and reacted to his attempts by coming to interrupt his conversations with the researcher. The manner in which Busi approached and dismissed the researcher revealed that she was not ready to open this social reality to the researcher while also redirecting the attention of the man. The observation was important in reminding the researcher to approach the young women

as active agents who carefully participate in the negotiation of their realities even though the products of their efforts may not always yield their desired outcomes.

Observing Akhona

A second observation experience that opened the way to in-depth conversations was with Akhona. The researcher sent a message to Akhona on a Saturday to find out if she was at home and available for a social time. Akhona shared that she had plans to go to an event in her neighbourhood during the day. She invited the researcher to accompany her since it was not far from the researcher's family home. The researcher accepted the invitation. The researcher walked to Akhona's home, and upon entering, greeted the older sister and the two young children. Akhona was dressed in tightfitting Guess jeans, a denim jacket and Nike sneakers. Akhona was wearing her weave and make-up. She was occasionally brushing her weave while talking to the children who were asking to go with her.

The researcher greeted and introduced herself to Akhona's sister while playing with the children. This gave Akhona time to check where she had placed her Apple cell phone while thinking of a way to leave without the children noticing so they do not cry. The researcher took out some money (coins) from her pocket and gave it to the children to buy themselves some snacks during the day. Suddenly their attention shifted from Akhona to the money. They thanked the researcher, calling the researcher, aunty. Akhona indicated that she was ready to leave as she took her Aldo handbag, kissed the children and said goodbye to her sister. The researcher followed Akhona's lead, and they left.

Akhona and the researcher were chatting while occasionally exchanging greetings with neighbours. Some of them asked Akhona for R2 to buy a cigarette (commonly known as a loose/feg/entjie). Others would ask Akhona for a beer, which costs roughly R20.00 stating how thirsty they were. Akhona often responded with laughter, sometimes signalling that she would see them later. During these encounters, Akhona would turn to the researcher and give a description of the people who were greeting them, what they did for a living and how their lives had changed over time.

As Akhona and the researcher walked towards the house where the social event was, a man standing next to a black BMW car, seemingly attending the same function, called on Akhona. The researcher continued walking slowly towards the gate, and Akhona ran to catch up with the researcher upon which Akhona immediately pointed at the man she was talking to with her head and stated the following: 'Yambona ke lo, uyatsitsa qha uthanda amacherry ingxaki yakhe. Kudala endifuna qha soze ndimvume. Ndingaba yintoni zizlay queen zase lokishini ngomntu wazo' (you see this one, he gives out money to his woman, but he likes women too much, that's his problem. He has been asking

us to date for a while now, but I will never date him. What would I be, with township slays queens fighting me for their man)? A statement to which they both laughed as they went into the house. A statement that the researcher took note of as the researcher planned to get more details on during her conversations with Akhona.

A similar approach was used in engaging with the other research participants thus drawing from Mulhall (2008: 308) who maintains that observation is valuable in that it captures the social setting in which people function. It is through observation that it is possible to ascertain whether what people say they do and what they do in reality correspond. This theorist is suggesting that observation is significant in how it can be used by the researcher to corroborate information by observing how people act matches with the narratives that they share. However, this should be done while recognising that what people do and what they say are both valid in their own right and may simply represent different perspectives on the data. None of the techniques, observation and conversations, is better than the other, but they work together to provide in-depth information on socially produced realities Mulhall (2008: 308) and Neuman (2014: 454).

The ethnographic observations in this study were in the form of participant and non-participant observations. Some of the gazes were silent while others were interrupted by questions from the researcher who punctuated the observations with the young women's voices and perspectives. The researcher engaged in social activities with the participants, such as accompanying the young women when they went to local nightclubs. In other instances, the researcher would go to the local clubs without the participants to observe social activities within these clubs. The aim was to observe how they engaged in social activities and to understand how their notions of fun were framed. These observations gave base for discussions that provided deeper understandings about the realities within Ngangelizwe Township. It is with the above understanding of the complementary role of observations and in-depth conversations that the following discussions consider ways in which the researcher engaged in in-depth conversations with the participants.

Engaging in in-depth conversation with participants

The researcher often used weekends to meet with the participants who were students and those who were employed. During the week, the researcher often engaged in in-depth conversations with the unemployed participants, thus also having the opportunity to observe what they usually do during this time. Contact during the week with the employed participants and/or students was often limited to visiting them for observation in the evenings when they had returned from work and/or university. The visits were done to maintain the researcher and participant relationship, finding out if there was any way in which the researcher could be of assistance to them. For example, if the

participants needed transport to town because the researcher noticed that sometimes taxis were hard to find. Taxis were more available in the morning and the afternoon. Contact with the participants also occurred through telephone conversations which meant that even without seeing the participants, the researcher kept communication with them. It was within this consistent communication process that the researcher called Snazo arranging that they meet if Snazo was not busy during the day. A request to which Snazo responded:

Researcher: Hi Snazo, you good? Was just calling to check up on you and see if you are free to meet sometime today.

Snazo: Hi. Thanks for calling. So kind of you. Just cleaning, doing the whole house chore thing. Dragging my feet cause, ndidiniwe [I am tired]. But we can definitely meet after lunch. I should be done by then.

Researcher: Okay, then, must I come over to your place? It would be nice if we can get a nice spot where there's not much interruptions, if you know what I mean?

Snazo: Let me come to you instead. I think that's better besides sometimes my gran's church people come here unannounced, and I have to make tea and all that so it might be difficult to chat. Hope that's okay with you?

Researcher: Sounds great. We may just have to watch the time though so you aren't away from home for long in case your gran needs your help.

Snazo: Plus you know how they are. She'd be acting like I went to a man and end up giving me a lecture for days [laughing]. Cool then, let's chat when we meet. Thanks again for the call.

After approximately three hours following the telephonic conversation, Snazo arrived at the researcher's family home wearing skinny jeans, Levis T-shirt and pumps with cornrows (hairstyle). The researcher and Snazo picked up communication from their morning call thus:

Researcher: Yewethu [Hey you, in an endearing manner]. I hope you told gran you are coming here, so she doesn't spend the morning worried about your whereabouts. Semhle ntombi! [looking good, girl!]

Snazo: [laughing] As if I had a choice. She'd scream the minute she sees me opening the door and ask, 'iyaphi loondlela nathi silandele?' [where's that road going so we too can follow?].

Researcher: I sometimes miss those sarcastic remarks though. Grandmothers can be such an energy. But I see many things haven't really changed in Ngangelizwe since the time I lived here.

- Snazo: A lot has changed to be honest, but a lot has remained the same. Remember Bra Jones? [pseudonym] He's still here drinking from morning until late. He is the life of the township that one. People come and go, die and are buried, but he's still hanging on. Sbu [pseudonym] and his crew are still here in and out of jail, but many boys have moved in from Ngeleleni [rural area near Mthatha], and they are the ones doing most crime here, so it's like that now.
- Researcher: I heard Mzo [pseudonym] died. What happened to his dealings [drugs]? That man was really scary.
- Snazo: Yep, wafa lowo yhu [that one died], he would stand there as if he is scanning every woman who walks up and down the streets, but I guess he was just making sure his boys were not using his stuff [drugs] instead of selling it. The family is still carrying on with the dealings though. There are also some boys working here, but I am not sure whether they are working alone or working for his family, but the business is still on. A lot of people died here, but some moved so there are many new faces.
- Researcher: And how have you and your family been keeping up? How has life been?
- Snazo: Life's hectic, you know, but good. Gran has been good. Busy with her church engagements. She is hardly ever home during the day because they visit people, funerals, weddings and all that, so church really keeps her busy. Then school for me. You know how frustrating school can be. Assignments, tests, classes and all that.
- Researcher: Hayi sundibroswer tshi [give me details, girl].
- Snazo: Yhu! Where do I start? With me, it's everything ndikxelele [I tell you]. The course content at school is challenging, assignments and exams. Ukufunda akululanga tshi [studying is not easy]. Then there's life, relationships. Ngumgowo ke nalowo [that's another challenge]. Sometimes you think all is well kanti u guy akekholapho [only to find the boyfriend is not thinking the same way]. So, nje ugowishe ke ngalondlela [then you go through the relationship frustrations]. Ngapha yimali, yesana mandithi! [on the one hand its finance, girl!]. Nje [just].
- Researcher: You seem to be going through the most, mntase [family/sis/sister are endearing words that are used interchangeably among women who share friendship ties]. Let's get some snacks so we can hear about u [the] guy. Then we can talk about your studies and family and life in general [both researcher and Snazo laughed as they went to fetch some snacks from the kitchen].

This conversation between the researcher and the participant Snazo reflects how the researcher approached in-depth conversations by starting conversations using mutually shared experiences. The researcher did this as it helped to establish a common ground between the researcher and the research participants. It created a friendly atmosphere within which sensitive information could more easily be explored (Neuman, 2014: 462 and Gill et al. 2008: 291).

The ethnographic approach to the study meant that the researcher had time to have follow up conversation with the young women (Naidoo, 2015). This advantage of ethnography is important because the researcher did not have to rush conversations with research participants thus allowing moments of laughter, jokes and the unforeseen interruptions such as young women being called by parent or siblings to go and attend to their duties in their households. These disturbances were subsequently meaningful in how they reflected some of the young women's realities that were not captured during discussions, therefore giving more detail to the context in which the young women negotiated their realities.

The researcher was also able to have conversations with groups of young women in Ngangelizwe Township. Some of the group discussions were unplanned, but the researcher used the opportunity in which the researcher found one of the participants sitting with friends and joined. After joining, the researcher would listen to the discussions while identifying a way to introduce a subject to be discussed. Other discussions were planned based on current events that the researcher relied on to get the participant's views as indicated in the following scenarios. One is from a session that occurred on a Saturday outside Nomhle's (pseudonym) home where Nomhle was sitting with two young women on a bench chatting and laughing. The other is from a group session that the researcher organised with the intentions of hearing from participants about the prevalence of gender-based violence in young women's relationships Ngangelizwe Township, Mthatha.

Group conversations with participants and friends

Interacting with Nomhle and her two friends

- Researcher: Hi, ladies. You good? I was just taking a walk, and I thought let me come see how you are doing Nomhle since I haven't seen you lately.
- Nomhle: Hay wethu ntombi [Hey girl] I'm good. Sihleli nje akhonto [We are just chilling, nothing much].
- Researcher: Is it fine if I join you? Nam akhonto [There is nothing] that I'm rushing to do endlini [at home].
- Nomhle: Not at all. This is Sethu [pseudonym], and this is Pinky [pseudonym]. We stay together in this neighbourhood.

- Researcher: Molweni bethuna nam ndihlala apha [Hi ladies, I am one of your neighbours].
- Nomhle: Sethu, Pinky, this is Sne. I'm sure you have seen her around.
- Sethu: Not really but kuhlukwazi [it's nice to meet you].
- Pinky: I think I saw you at espaza [spaza shop]. Not sure if it was you. You were with two kids.
- Researcher: It might have been me and my cousins. It's really hot today. Any plans for the weekend ladies?
- Nomhle: Yhu, singaplana ntoni sana umntu engenamali kangaka? [What plans can we make when we are so broke?]
- Researcher: Hay wethu [No girl]. Nomhle, speak for yourself [everyone laughing].
- Nomhle: Ndinyanisiile njena yayazi nawe, umntu akasebenzi [It's true, you know] moss! [that it is!] unemployment.
- Researcher: So how bad is unemployment here in the township ladies? Makhe sincokoleni [Let's chat]. Nomhle mntase [family] please may we send a child to get us drinks from the spaza safa lilanga? [We are dying of heat]. Which drink do guys prefer? [Taking out money for fizzy drinks].

Planning a group session with Sasa

- Researcher: Hi girl, you good? [telephoning Sasa].
- Sasa: Hey sis, good thanks. Wena? [You?].
- Researcher: I'm good thanks. Ye sana [girl], have you been following the news lately? The killings of young women?
- Sasa: I have, hey, and it's really so scary and makes me so angry.
- Researcher: I was just watching the news and reading online, and I realised it's such a growing trend. I thought let me call you and see if we can discuss how things are since some of these women are varsity students. Imagine how young they are, Karabo Mokoena, Akhona, Njokana and the others.
- Sasa: Ey sis [Hi sister], don't even list them. It's bad. I did an interview on campus some time ago, where I was asking men why are we being punished for being women? Is it a sin that we are female?
- Researcher: I would really love to listen to the interview. Do you think it's a big thing in young women's relationships here elokshini? [in the township?].
- Sasa: Yho, ndikxelele [gosh, let me tell you] it's a problem elokshini [in the township] and on campus. Girls aren't free. Kubi, mntase

- [it is bad family].
- Researcher: Eish [colloquial expression of surprise/disapproval] now that you putting it that way, maybe we should just sit and chat about it. Is it possible for us to meet with others and discuss just sharing our experiences or what we have seen?
- Sasa: Yes sis, no problem. That'd be nice. Maybe we can even give each other tips of what to do, you know.
- Researcher: Let's invite two or more girls please and sit and chat about these experiences. Thanks for availing yourself. I hope your studies are going well and the family is good too.

Some young women were unwilling to share information at the beginning of the discussions, mostly using third-person examples to illustrate cases. However, they slowly engaged more as the discussions progressed. They tended to use the third person more when referring to activities that they felt would not be received favourably among the community as these could potentially produce judgemental attitudes.

Conclusions

The above discussion aimed at sharing lessons learned through an ethnographic study among young women in Ngangelizwe Township. The researcher's experiences unearthed the ethnographic research experience whose success depended on constant negotiations to enter the social lives of participants. Some of the negotiations were explicit as the researcher requested access to become part of the participant's experiences. Other forms of negotiation were symbolic through gestures such as visiting the participants to find out they needed transportation. All these gestures were aimed at building and maintaining trust and friendship that would create a conducive environment for ethnographic observations and conversations between the researcher and participants.

The researcher's field experience showed that although theory may provide researchers with information that guides the ethnographic experience, being in the field opens the researcher to the unexpected encounters. Some of these encounters occur as researchers struggle to connect with potential participants or when unforeseen events such as crime in the case of the research assistant. These encounters, ethnographic researchers can use as lessons to improve their field experience. This means that a researcher needs to be prepared for a challenging unforeseen experience and (re)adapt their research approach accordingly.

The above discussion indicates the importance of flexibility as ethnographic researchers constantly shift between an expert and a learner. In the young women's social worlds such as clubs, the researcher had to take the position of a learner and let the young women lead

their conversations and engagements. However, this role was not fixed as the researcher would also play the role of a transporter, a sister when some of the young women wanted to talk to someone other than their friends. Ethnographers need to be constantly aware of the roles that they play and where those roles fit in their research. This awareness is important in maintaining trust as some of the young women would share experiences that were not intended for the study but to offload their pains and frustrations. It was very important for the researcher to recognise the shifting roles in order not to respond in ways that would compromise trust between the researcher and participants.

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