# Autoethnography, Reflexivity, and Insider Researcher Dynamics: Reflections on Investigating Violence against Men in Intimate Relationships

**Emmanuel Rowlands**
*SARChI Welfare & Social Development*
*Centre for Social Development*
*University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa*
*Email: 201707708@student.uj.ac.za*

## Abstract

*Autoethnography is a qualitative research method for relating lived-through personal experiences to a range of existing social representations. It is regarded as self-representation in examining and critiquing dominant representations. While the researcher's subjectivities are restricted within the ethnographic qualitative framework, autoethnography emphasises this foundation as essential to data collection, interpretation, and analysis in the research process. In this paper, I discuss how my lived-through personal experience of abuse influenced how/why I conceptualised, investigated, and represented the lived experiences of several abused male victims of intimate partner violence in Johannesburg, which are typically ignored in gender-based violence literature. The paper comments on tactics used to negotiate ethical dilemmas as part of a conceptual examination of the benefits of reflexivity and insider positionality to reinforce the self-reflective autoenthgrapahy as a valuable qualitative method.*

**Keywords:** *Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Positionality, Investigating abused men.*

## Résumé

*L'autoethnographie est une méthode de recherche qualitative pour relier des expériences personnelles vécues à une gamme de représentations sociales existantes. Elle est considérée comme une représentation de soi dans l'examen et la critique des représentations dominantes. Alors que les subjectivités du chercheur sont limitées dans le cadre qualitatif ethnographique, l'autoethnographie met l'accent sur ce fondement comme essentiel à la collecte, à l'interprétation et à l'analyse des données dans le processus de recherche. Dans cet article, je discute de la manière dont mon expérience personnelle vécue de la violence a influencé comment / pourquoi j'ai conceptualisé, enquêté et représenté les expériences vécues de plusieurs hommes victimes de violence conjugale à Johannesburg, qui sont généralement ignorées dans la violence sexiste. Littérature. L'article commente les tactiques utilisées pour négocier les dilemmes éthiques dans*

*le cadre d'un examen conceptuel des avantages de la réflexivité et de la position d'initié pour renforcer l'autoenthographie autoréflexive en tant que méthode qualitative précieuse.*

**Mots clés** *: Autoethnographie, Réflexivité, Positionnalité, Enquête sur les hommes maltraités.*

## Introduction

Where there is a dearth of guidelines to help researchers engage reflexivity more robustly in pursuit of knowledge construction, on the one hand there is an overabundance of concern for reflexivity and positionality to establish ethical rigor in the qualitative-interpretive method (Koopman, Watling and LaDonna 2020; Pensoneau-Conway, Adams and Bolen, 2017; Berger 2013). On the other hand, criticism of research for sustaining dominance representation, sexist prejudices, and purportedly speaking to discourage achievements gained in the fights against men's oppression of women has generated resistance to engage with qualitative experiences of abuse men (Ratele et al. 2016; Seidler 2006). This is a significant concern, as writing as an insider or outsider is becoming a struggle for researchers working with participants who share similar representation with men (Medzani 2021). Yet there is still a need to redress essentialisms and differences in representation in gender-based violence research. This paper demonstrates how an autoethnographic approach can help achieve richer reflexivity, negotiate ethical concerns, and provide a voice and representation of men's experiences of abuse. This group has been routinely marginalised, silent, or ignored in gender-based violence literature (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015; Anderson 2006). The article draws on how the researcher's autoethnographic experiences and fieldwork experience contribute in many ways to telling the stories of some men's experiences of being violated by their female partners in Johannesburg.

Qualitative researchers have become more aware of their role in knowledge-generating dynamics (Robben and Sluka 2007), allowing them to be more reflexive and critical in managing their influence in fieldwork, particularly if they are insider researchers (Gray 2014; Creswell 2013; Yin 2009; Moss 2002). Reflexivity entails a continuous self-evaluation of the researcher's prejudices, representations, and personal backgrounds such as culture, gender, and race, as well as a critical examination of the researcher's positionality urging researchers to recognize their unique privileges in relation to the study context or participants and, through reflexivity, take responsibility for their subjective lenses during the research process (Mason-Bish 2019; Gabriel 2015; Berger 2013). According to Wiederhold (2015:606), the insider researcher is a "researcher at home" who has excellent control over the process since they are familiar with or have prior knowledge of their subjects and their environments. Thus, reflexivity "involves honesty and openness" and places the researcher in a position of relative objectivity (Gray 2014:606). The researcher's candour about himself adds to the method's

credibility and makes his work more appealing to readers (Creswell 2009). However, Song and Parker (1995) note that most researchers struggle with understanding their positionality as insiders or outsiders in relation to their experiences and complexities with the phenomenon under examination. Thus, Koopman, Watling and LaDonna (2020) point out that the many sorts of commitment to openness and pathways to richer reflexivity that the insider researcher must maintain are not explicit. They argue that self-reflective autoethnographic practice is an innovation for achieving broader reflexivity because it puts the researcher's lived-through experiences front and centre as an integral component of the knowledge-making process.

Autoethnography methods provide opportunities to tell stories about personal lived experiences and to capture the experiences of others in the process of knowledge building. The terms "auto" and "ethno" allude to the subjective *self* and *cultural* milieu representing personal experiences in a social context (Reed-Danahay 2006). The lynchpin ontological viewpoint of autoethnography aims to justify how the researcher's lived experiences interact with the meanings and realities of wider social life in the knowledge-making process (Ellis 2004). From the constructionists' standpoint, autoethnographic knowledge building is coproduced in a unique, frequently flitting, power-laden, and intensely context-dependent connection between the researcher and interview participants (Gray 2014; Ellingson and Ellis 2008). Thus the critical realist position of autoethnography acknowledges that social knowledge and truth can be linked to the researcher's lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, and observations as a means of comprehending the issue and social situation under investigation, rather than being limited to objectivie scientific procedures (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015; Babbie and Mouton 2011; Ellingson and Ellis 2008). Scholars are debating whether evacuation or analytical features of autoethnography procedures are appropriate. The former is a narrative portrayal of the researcher's subjectivities to spotlight the experiences of society's hidden others (Bochner and Ellis 2016). In the research process, the latter explore theoretical understandings of social phenomena through meticulous, analytical reflexivity beyond the researcher's self (Anderson 2006). Despite the method's ethical shortcomings, self-reflection in autoethnographic practice has been demonstrated to benefit the researcher by increasing self-awareness on representation and positionality and providing a new and viable methodology for engaging reflexivity in the qualitative research process (Chatham-Carpenter 2010; Koopman, Watling and LaDonna 2020).

This paper shows how embracing autoethnography helped the researcher to generate new knowledge with men who had been the victims of intimate partner abuse. It emphasises the researcher's subjectivities related to reflexivity, positionality, and representation ethics. The remainder of this paper demonstrates how the researcher's autobiographical account stimulates the conceptualisation of his research and reflects the researcher's self-reflexive practice in negotiating ethical concerns in exploring men's experiences of intimate partner violence. It also highlights some of the abused men's experiences.

## Conceiving the project: The mirror effect

I have been interested in gender-based violence for quite a long time, particularly violence against women. This has positioned me as a defender of women's rights who wants to see justice in any case of abuse against women. However, the cultural and masculine understanding that men are protectors of women and can bear whatever a woman throws at them left me experiencing many years of abuse from my partner. These experiences of abuse essentially informed the choice of the topic "Intimate partner violence and shifting masculinities".

## Internal dialogue of the researcher

> *Am I still a man? I have lost touch with my inner self. Is this my fault? Can I come out of this cage? But real men do persist. What will people say? Do I have options? Maybe this is my destiny* (The researcher)

My personal experience with emotional Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) hurt my psychosocial well-being and masculine identity. I've also seen and heard firsthand accounts of other men being assaulted by their female partners. Nonetheless, the prevailing depiction of women as victims of IPV, as proved statistically worldwide (WHO 2013), continues to obscure the experiences of some men who have also been victims of such violence. Thus, I chose this focus to make a case for men whose plight has been constantly ignored by society and its systems. From a self-reflective autoethnography standpoint, my specific concern was to undertake an in-depth inquiry into understanding men's gendered psychosocial identities in the context of IPV victimisation. This endeavour highlighted the malleable and precarious nature of masculinities interfacing with the concept of power and control discourses among heterosexual communities. I did this to give a voice and representation to a group of men whose lived experiences of abuse are frequently ignored (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015). As the researcher, and in consideration of my perception of gendered representations in the country of my birth, my lived experiences of IPV motivated me to seek further to comprehend the nuances involved in trans-African men's realisation of their masculine identities, especially in contexts of changing gender relations and their susceptibility to IPV within the Johannesburg space in South Africa.

Gender equality discourses, for example, appear to have changed the power balance between men and women in intimate places (Barkhuizen 2015; Robins 2008). However, according to statistics given by the South African Police Services and Stats SA in 2018 and 2019, there were 2.01 million crimes recorded in South Africa in 2018, with an average of 58 murders each day. A woman is slain every three hours, and a woman is sexually

assaulted every 36 seconds. Estimation shows that acquaintances and intimate partners were responsible for 72 percent of all assault instances reported (Stats SA 2019; SAPS Crime Annual Stats 2019). As a result, these large-scale IPV events and gender relations dynamics provided a conducive environment for conducting this study, revealing African men's experiences of IPV in Johannesburg and the broader South African space.

## Methods

Due to the delicate nature of the subject and the cultural stigma associated with male IPV victims (Randle and Graham 2011; Wassenaar 2006), I obtained permission to perform this study from two separate research ethics committees (Braun and Clarke 2013). The first was provided by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities, while the second was from the Johannesburg Health District's District Research Committee. These clearances also permitted me to visit the RHF Hillbrow H.E.L.P. centre where the fieldwork took place. This clinic provides 24-hour health care services to sexual assault survivors and domestic violence victims and provides medical evidence to the South African criminal justice system during court hearings of cases from patients bringing accusations against accused abusers. I went into the research sites with a pre-planned convenience sampling recruiting technique to recruit abused men who visited, so I volunteered as a worker without pay, offering guidance and referral services to victims and survivors of abuse who visited the facility while also observing and gathering information in relation to answering the research question.

While doing the study, I had to think about ethics in three separate ways:

1. ethical considerations when researching groups with comparable ostensible representations, and the need to be aware of current representations. I was concerned about giving a heterodox position since the prevalent image of intimate partner violence has been male authority and control over women, which is a social threat.
2. ethical consideration when researching traumatised participants. I struggled with the problem of re-enforcing their traumatised condition, given that most of these men were interviewed when they visited the facility after bouts of abuse.
3. ethical considerations as an insider of the area being researched. Being a volunteer worker in the centre, my relationship with the interviewees raises questions about power relationships. As a result, engaging the participants and ensuring their rights and self-determination were a bit of a challenge for me.

I interviewed 25 African men from countries such as South Africa in Southern Africa, the DRC Congo in East Africa, and Nigeria in West Africa, and five key informant interviewees (nurses and police officers) over the course of five months. The interviewed men where in a relationship ranged from eight months to ten years. Four of the men interviewed were in a marital relationship, 14 were in a cohabiting relationship and seven were in a dating relationship.

These men, who live in the Johannesburg Metropolitan area, were aged 23 to 58. Despite the fact that they were "lower-class" men, their socioeconomic situation was relatively solid in comparison to their female partners, the majority of whom relied on these men for their economic sustenance. The men were involved in various sorts of profitable economic activities, with the majority being self-employed and a minority working as workers in various organisations. A large percentage of these men went on to earn a higher education qualification, while others finished high school. The majority of these men's partners were unemployed and lacked formal schooling. Seventeen of these men's partners were from South Africa, and six were from Zimbabwe. With respect to the key informants, these had extensive experience in their fields and were personally responsible for handling and resolving domestic violence-related matters at the RHF and police stations. One of the medical doctors in the study had been practicing clinical forensic medicine for 31 years, and the police captain had been a member of the SAPS for 20 years; at the time of the current study, she was the social crime coordinator at the police station, dealing with issues of abuse, including IPV.

Each interview with participants and informants was tape-recorded and lasted around 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes, with enough responses to answer the research topic. Participants and informants were allowed to ask questions and express any concerns at the end of each interview session. The interviews were transcribed and thematised personally, naming themes as evocative and informative and presenting them logically, with each team building on previously mentioned themes (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Braun and Clarke 2006). I kept going back to my observation protocols and juxtaposing aspects with key informants' interviews with research participants, going through the meaning of each theme that arose and the extracts that followed with great care (Yin 2009). Participants' verbatim quotes were incorporated into the document to offer them a voice in the final product to capture the cadence of their modes and feelings and ensure credibility and transparency. By connecting themes that captured the overall stories of the data and juxtaposing these findings against relevant existing literature on IPV and masculinity, my goal was to tell a parallel narrative that represented how individual men explain the impact of IPV on their masculine identities.

As a volunteer worker at the facility, I participate in every activity at the site, from being present at the RHF staff meetings to partaking in the centre's community awareness campaigns, attending conferences with staff members, and pieces of training. I reported for service at the facility by 9 am and left at 3 pm. My role as a worker at the

facility facilitated my positioning as a researcher to gain insider views and subjective data (Creswell 2013). I became a participant-observer fully integrated into the activities of the site. To ensure credibility and rigor for the study's trustworthiness, I safely kept detailed records on the research process, including the field notes and audio records, which can easily be recalled. The audit trail of the data analysis process is also available; hence this further demonstrates the consistency, authenticity, and transparency of the entire research process (Creswell 2013; Babbie and Mouton 2011). I made dedicated efforts to ensure that an accurate account of the men's narratives of their lived IPV experiences, and how they impacted their masculinities, was presented without bias.

## Autoethnography and reflexivity strategy

In terms of representations and my apprehension about taking a heterodox stance on gender-based violence discourses, I struggled to strike a balance between delivering a balanced story and telling a story that could be used against women as evidence of their positionalities as perpetrators. To address this, I accept the autobiographical account of my lived experience and that anecdotal reports of men being beaten by women are true. I was fully committed to offering an empirical representation of abused men, appreciating the theoretical dynamics of what leads to these men's abused experiences, and foregrounding the roles both intimate partners play in heightening tension and conflicts in their relationships, having been explicit about my intention to contribute a nuanced dimension to the literature.

In the most common sociological definition, IPV is a structural and systemic interpersonal form of domestic violence in which one partner employs damaging patterns of behaviour and aggressive tactics to force and dominate the other partner (WHO 2013; Lawson 2012; Heise 2011; Dienye and Gbeneol 2009). However, from a feminist representation, the commonly acknowledged direction recognises IPV as a gendered phenomenon founded in patriarchal expressions of dominance and continuous oppression of women by males inside intimate relationships (Anderson 2005). This is considered a spillover of patriarchal values and attitudes into the home, reinforcing women's subordination and causing social inequality. Thus power imbalance between intimate partners, with males assuming social advantage and enacting masculinities, is intimately tied to IPV outcomes (Mathew 2010; Dobash and Dobash 1979). This is adequately reflected in the vast majority of research suggesting that women make up the large majority of IPV victims, especially in more severe and lengthy forms, and men make up the vast majority of perpetrators (WHO 2013; Dragiewicz 2008), yet additional scholarly contributions highlight important nuances in the literature (Buiten and Naidoo 2020; Adebayo 2014).

Even though research into male abuse is likely still in its early phases, there appears to be a scarcity of literature in the South and plenty of documentation and knowledge sources in the North that investigate male vulnerability and vulnerabilities to IPV (Entilli and Cipolletta 2016; Costa et al. 2015; Adebayo 2014; George 1994; Costa et al. 2015; George 1994). It became necessary to explore how men operationalised themselves as risk and vulnerability elements in intimate relationships to document and treat men's susceptibility to IPV, particularly heterosexual men's reality in the South. My autobiography, on which the research is based, grew in importance.

Although I only endured emotional abuse and have been through professional therapy since 2007, my experience has left an indelible mark on me. While it is ethically appropriate not to share my experiences with abuse in detail, it illustrates how different people experience abuse in different ways. What appears to some to be innocuous can lead to suicidal thoughts. My well-being suffered as a result, and my productivity also was affected. I was mentally jumbled. A man who once felt he could take the world by storm now appears minor and confined in his own eyes. My experience hampered my thinking ability, and my masculine orientation became immutable. It was impossible to flee. However, it was vital to maintain emotional stoicism and demonstrate to others that you are still the man they believed, felt, and always confirmed you were. The game's object was to stand up for others while dying on the inside. As a result, resiliency becomes a viable option. The coping approach was perseverance. The male element that remained to be upheld was endurance. Unless you modify your environment, shame is emasculating for life. Even so, you have the impression that everyone knows. You can't tell your family since they're looking for success tales.

Being aware of my personal experience and representations, I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one in-depth interviews with the participants, leaving them considerable time to build their own descriptions of their experiences. Hence men like Mandla emphasised the different forms and severity of violence he suffered in the hands of his partner:

> Firstly, she bites me here, secondly, she stabbed me with a knife at home, my landlord called ambulance they brought me here. Last two weeks she beat me with a bottle [...], yesterday she beat me again with a bottle, and bit me here, even here is the mark of last week's bite. It's like four time's serious inquiry but abusing me emotionally is many, many times even today.

Another participant, Misa, who suffered superficial burns when his partner scalded him with boiling water, described how emotional abuse may quickly escalate into more serious physical abuse:

> Yes, she does use her mouth to abuse me, and it's too much. She doesn't want me to go anywhere, even if I miss her calls if I try to calling back, she will start shouting at me, she is trying to control me. Even now am supposed to go play soccer she said don't go and we start to fight.

Several men's comments reflect a habit of financial abuse leading to physical and emotional hostility. For example, Thokozani stated:

> Financial abuse is there, if I say there is no money for this and that she slaps me and calls me "kwerekwere" (foreigner).

These comments were crucial in understanding the men's lived experiences with IPV. Other guided unstructured open-ended questions followed, allowing participants to contextualise their abuse experiences into physical, emotional, economic, and sexual IPV.

Furthermore I probed the sources of tensions, how tensions appeared in their relationships, and whether they were directly abused by their female partners. This probing helped to uncover the direct, indirect, and contributing elements and sources of conflict in the relationships of these African men. These elements included coming home late at night and cover-up tactics, jealousy responses, explosive anger responses, lack of conflict management, excessive alcohol consumption, low socio-economic status of the female partners, lovelessness, superiority complex and control, gender equality mores, ignorance of the relevant laws and the attitudes of police. For instance, Thabiso's case describes how some of the men's partners use violence to avoid answering questions about their whereabouts:

> Yesterday we were together, and we drank, and today when I got home, I found that she was not there, and I left my things and went out, and later I went back home, and I found that she was still not home, and then when she got back late, I asked her where were you, that's where it all started, that why am I asking her that.

Although these factors earlier mentioned overlap or intersect, they emerged as the most important feature of being subjected to violent abuse from the perspective of the African men. Overall, semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews are

particularly effective in exploratory research to obtain extensive explanations from research participants (Bless et al. 2013).

Autoethnography helped me structure my research and informed how I progressed through the stages from a reflexivity perspective. Given the political and epistemological ethical considerations that must be adhered to in the qualitative process to assure impartiality, I recognised that I must act professionally and objectively throughout the research process (Creswell 2009; Yin 2009). I was aware of my reasons for conducting research and the meanings I placed on the process (Gabriel 2015; Berger 2013). Reflexivity became a critical ethical and strategic need to shield the participants' images of themselves as victims of abuse from my own experience because these might incidences might have occurred in different contexts. This is in the sense that there is no single "reality"; instead, the reality is contextual and layered and can be accessed through study participants' positions and inputs (Braun and Clarke 2013). I also recognised that I needed to tell a balanced story, acknowledging that more males are perpetrators of IPV (WHO 2013), but I also needed to elucidate what is real for these men, as well as the inner meanings these heterosexual men attach to their lived realities of IPV on their perceived masculinities. Thus, my autobiographical tale provided a chance to illustrate the relevance of reflexivity in relaying the participants' stories. It warranted a more in-depth examination of my behaviours, emotions, prejudices, and foreknowledge as I interacted with the participant's accounts (Koopman, Watling and LaDonna 2020; Pensoneau-Conway, Adams and Bolen 2017).

## Traumatised selves and ethical strategies

The research on traumatised participants was another ethical concern. I recognised that turning off my previous trauma experiences and truly immersing myself in being a traumatised men researcher would be extremely difficult. While my own experience depicts characteristics that may make it challenging to be open to diverse points of view, it is not surprising that the same features are also present in the lives of my participants. Although I appreciate how this complexity can impede objective methodological research, nothing in autoethnographic knowledge building is coproduced in a unique context-dependent link between the researcher and the participants (Gray 2014; Ellingson and Ellis 2008). Indeed, the truth I sought was intertwined with my personal experiences and feelings (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015; Babbie and Mouton 2011; Ellingson and Ellis 2008).

A crucial reflexive question that sprang to mind was the impact of the interview procedure on not just my participants' emotional selves but also the trigger effect this may have had on me. Hearing these men's abuse stories did, in some circumstances, evoke emotional flashbacks of my own IPV experiences. Interacting with social workers at the

general unit of the health facility regularly and participating in the briefing sessions offered by the RHF centre were valuable strategies in maintaining my mental stability.

During the interviews, ethical concerns about the participants' trauma developed. Studies have shown that male IPV survivors are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Hines and Douglas 2010). A lot of the participants were considered traumatised. This was because most of those interviewed were in victimised situations, displaying anxiety, physical pain, and discomfort (Leedy and Ormrod 2001). I ended the session and attended to the participant's immediate needs in such circumstances. Those who required psychosocial assistance were promptly referred to the facility's social workers, while those who required medical attention were referred to the medical officers. This was done in compliance with the WHO's (2010) ethical guideline, which states that participants should be provided with appropriate support services. Participants who had previously received medical assistance were free to return home if they did not want to participate in trauma counselling. They were encouraged to seek sources of support, such as family and friends' homes, to avoid future confrontations with their partners and emotionally distance themselves from the scenes of the abuse events, which exacerbated their trauma (WHO 2010). In addition, as part of my obligations as a volunteer worker at the RHF, I provided participants with follow-ups to track their emotional progress.

In my autoethnographic opinion, participants who were emotionally capable of continuing the interviews and did not desire to stop right away were encouraged to speak up if they felt overburdened or strained throughout the interview. Before referrals, the interview sessions became one method of assisting male IPV victims. These sessions provided an excellent opportunity for these individuals to ventilate, a crucial therapeutic step in treating traumatised clients (Brown et al. 2014; Griffin et al. 2003). However, researchers have noted that third-party responses might inadvertently produce secondary victimisation (Hines and Douglas, 2010), thus during the interviews I made every effort to demonstrate good communication and interpersonal skills, emotional maturity and empathy and to be non-judgmental (Babbie and Mouton 2011).

As I sat face-to-face with the men, empathy and rapport building were at the forefront of my mind. Elemesky (2005) argues that empathy is essential for obtaining detailed information from depressed and disempowered interviewees. I opened each interview by empathising with the participants' situation, telling them that they were not being condemned as victims of women-inflicted violence and encouraged them to speak up. Another method that helped create a conducive discursive environment between myself and the participants was to establish rapport. Establishing a good connection with sensitive individuals who share traumatic experiences, according to Donalek and Soldwisch (2004), may equip them emotionally and cognitively to offer meaningful narratives of their lived experiences. Building rapport with the respondent began with greetings, followed by an introduction, reiteration of the research goal, and assurance of confidentiality. Following that, participants' demographic information was collected,

including their source of income, age, as well as their partners' socioeconomic statuses. As the participants felt more at ease, I began to engage them in more serious conversations that addressed the research question and objectives that I set out to achieve. In the end, all participants stated that the interview sessions were incredibly beneficial, relieving psychological tensions, and did not worsen their traumatic situations.

Although my findings do not include accessing traumatised individuals' reactions to research participation, they confirmed the conclusions of a body of evidence that contradicts notions about the risk of involving traumatic participants in the research process. For example, Griffin et al. (2003) identified no possible danger or harm associated with 430 domestic abuse victims, rape survivors, and physical assault survivors participating in a trauma-focused study. Rape survivors agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews, according to Campbell and Adams (2009), to aid themselves and other possible survivors. Brown et al. (2014) discovered a favourable risk-benefit ratio while researching traumatised populations.

Even though participants in these studies were not involved in the aftermath of traumatic events, I did not notice the overall risk of increased traumatic stress associated with research participants among the majority of participants in my study who were in the midst of their traumatic state. My study participants stated that the interview sessions were valuable and did not find them distressing.

## Positionality and insider ethics

Beyond my representation of African men being victims of IPV, there were insider ethics I had to grapple with. As an African man, a victim of abuse, and a volunteer worker (insider) at the facility where fieldwork was undertaken. I was aware of how my professional and personal experiences affected how I view women who perpetrate violence against men (Koopman, Watling and LaDonna 2020; Mason-Bish 2019; Gabriel 2015). I knew I needed to recognise and accept that I am emotionally and experientially related to the problem (Medzani 2021). I used to believe that state protection of women and societal stereotypes against men who experience IPV influenced women's use of violence and men's silence in victimisation; however, as I navigated through the research process the lens of autoethnography and reflexivity came to the fore and my conceptions where controlled (Koopman, Watling and LaDonna 2020).

Throughout the research process, I kept reminding myself that the goal of this study was not to demonise women but to raise awareness of men's experiences with violence and the impact it has on their lives, thereby asking for gender justice. While I was conscious that my gender played an essential role in the research reflexivity process (Wiederhold 2015), I found that being a man looking into the victimisation experiences of other men made my talks with these men easier. Many wanted to talk to someone

who understood or was willing to comprehend their situation without passing judgment. There were times when some men expected me to understand and agree with them on issues that they brought up during interviews. While this made me uneasy, I nodded as if in agreement and swiftly turned and deflected such inquiries with a new query. Despite my gender and status as a researcher, these men were willing to talk about the study's research question. Thus, in probing the question of masculine shifts because of IPV experiences, I was conscious of my preconceptions about what a change in masculinity means for them and me as I investigated the subject of masculine alterations resulting from IPV experiences. Despite being assaulted by their female spouse, a couple of the men continued to give narratives of embodying hyper-masculinities and active agency. For instance, men like Chucks affirmed his masculinity by saying:

> What we know we men to do is to forget things and move forward. Men use to endure things. That is what they know a real man use to do. That is why I endure everything.

This seemed counterintuitive because my autoethnographic experience had taught me that a man's agency is frequently depleted in such situations. However, reflexivity allowed me to separate my personal experiences from the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees (Gray 2014; Anderson 2006). Reflexivity made me aware of my subjective ideas and position in the research process and the effects this had on the objective outcome, and this aided me considerably in gathering data that was otherwise lacking. The data has a broader base because it highlights also the narratives of other men who describe IPV as having pathological, emasculatory, and shifting impacts on their sense of self. Bafana stated how his partner's practice of control and harassment has conditioned him into a powerless position in the relationship, and how this has profoundly affected his image of manhood:

> Yah, it has changed it. I don't still see myself as a man, I feel like I'm powerless now**.** For example, when she talks, I have to keep quiet. I don't want to argue with her, when she starts her fighting, I leave the house and come back later maybe after two hours.

Another man, Andile, felt the contestations in his relationship had "made me less of a man". Their verbal presentations were helpful in understanding their ideas about masculinity, gendered expectations, and shifting gendered relationships. For example, the study revealed that most males still maintain traditional ideas on topics like provider, financial control, decision-making, housekeeping, and sexual intercourse, while others developed more progressive views on the same issues. These men were frequently interested in these discussions because they want to prove how egalitarian or traditionally conformist they were.

As a volunteer worker at the RHF facility, I grappled with an ethical quandary. In connection with the participants' positions, I was continuously aware of my position as a volunteer worker in the institution. I recognise that my position as a worker gave me an advantage and created a power disparity between the participants and me (Berger 2013). With this in mind, I was careful not to exploit the participants; instead, I negotiated, solicited, and explained the research objective to them, giving them the research information sheets to read and making sure they signed the consent form before the interviews (Creswell 2013). To mitigate the power imbalance between me as a volunteer worker and the participants as clients, I made sure the in-depth interviews were as conversational as possible, neither commandeering nor pushing out comments from the participants (Mason-Bish 2019). I was both involved and disengaged. While I tried to understand their psychological reality, I allowed participants to freely express themselves and create meaning of their IPV experiences.

Furthermore, IPV is a touchy subject (Watts and Zimmermann 2002), as men find it difficult to describe their victimisation experiences; this was especially true of some males from South Africa and Nigeria. They kept trying to keep their experiences from being revealed explicitly. However, I obtained material essential to addressing the study question by careful involvement, presenting myself as a non-judgmental and interested party.

## Insider advantages: "Dialogue sessions"

Between October 2018 and April 2019 I worked as a volunteer without pay, providing counselling and referral services to victims and survivors of abuse who visited the facility while also observing and collecting data to meet the research objectives. According to Gobo and Molle (2017), an excellent qualitative strategy is for the researcher to create direct contact with the participants by immersing himself in their surroundings to observe, participate, and characterise their behaviour over time. Thus, the character and procedures of the qualitative dialogue between the researcher and the participants are central to a modern qualitative method (Tedlock 1991, cited in Sluka and Robben 2007). In this way, providing assistance and communicating with all domestic abuse victims becomes a creative qualitative process of fusing with victims' actual experiences and acquiring a better knowledge of their position. At the same time, the goal is to procure data. My volunteering as a worker demonstrates a commitment to reciprocity - giving something helpful back to study participants in exchange for their time and effort. According to Robben and Sluka (2007), this is a new method of qualitative fieldwork in which, in my opinion, supporting the local community and gathering research data are both equally vital.

As a volunteer worker at the facility, I was involved in all aspects of the operation, from attending RHF staff meetings to participating in community awareness campaigns

and attending staff meetings and pieces of training. I arrived at the facility at 9 am for service and would leave at 3 pm as a worker. My ability to gather an insider's perspective and subjective data (Creswell 2013) evolved into a participant-observer who was fully immersed in the site's activities. I began by observing the site's more extensive details before focusing on difficulties related to my study's questions and objectives (Creswell 2013). The facility's physical environment, organisational documents, activities and talks of staff members, contacts between participants and staff members, and bodily injury and behaviour during visits, for example, were all recorded. I also kept track of my personal experiences, hunches, responses, and casual chats and exchanges with the study's informants and participants. I observed and took notes on the attitudes of some individuals in waiting lines, for example. Approximately five people in the queue expressed their dissatisfaction with the delay. One of the study's informants, a nurse at the facility, saw this and said that patients are seen on a first-come, first-served basis, save in emergencies.

Working at the facility allowed me to interact with the participants, in this case, clients, listen to them, and provide support. These client sessions aided in developing a better grasp of the dynamics and settings of victims' experiences. During these sessions, participants and other male clients discussed the character of their relationships and the sources of tensions and problems. These were brief sessions highly focused on obtaining information about their situation to provide survivors with informed guidance and referrals.

These survivors must be followed up to assess their progress and provide more instruction and direction. In the case of male clients, if they are still in a relationship, an invitation to talk in a "dialogue session" was issued to the alleged abusive partner. The dialogue sessions were usually more engaging and less emotional because, at this time, the clients were refreshed and revived. In total, nine (9) heterosexual intimate partners used dialogue sessions during fieldwork, two of whom were participants in the current study. For example, one Congolese participant named 'Lukah,' who claimed that his South African girlfriend used her son and brothers to inflict harm on him, came to the following conversation session with his partner. After hearing his partner's version of the tale, this session highlighted how Lukah's drinking was a component in his being assaulted, which he never revealed to me during our interview session. She told me that Lukah drinks and creates a quarrel at home, something he couldn't refuse. During the dialogue session, another participant, Kgaogelo, pledged to avenge his injury. All attempts to persuade him and his partner to overcome their disagreements failed, and even his partner's pleadings failed to persuade him to change his mind. However, a few weeks later it was revealed that they had reconciled, and Kgaogelo's partner expressed her gratitude for the intervention. Although the atmosphere during discourse sessions can be compared to that of a focus group (Creswell 2009), the discussions were not audiotaped, but I collected descriptive observational notes afterward, interpreting my observations regarding the current study's goal. The decision to withdraw as a volunteer

worker was made later because it was essential to engineer a critical and objective distance because the researcher's emotions were beginning to be weighed heavily by the very intimate connection with the participants. I was urged to conclude my volunteer work at the RHF respectfully.

## Conclusion

The autoethnography approach is reinforced in this paper as a powerful qualitative method for drawing attention to our understanding of social issues otherwise ignored by mainstream research. The article displays the researcher's self-reflexive practice concerning ethical consequences in his work and the realities of the benefits of autoethnography, reflexivity, and insider researcher dynamics in researching sensitive themes. The researcher's autobiographical stories and how they led to the conception of the research and the tactics used to address methodological ethics problems are unique and novel models that future researchers may consider. The article also reflects on the narratives of the men, thus generating empirical knowledge of the abuse experienced by men from their female partners and how these impact masculine self-perceptions.

The use of dialogue sessions with some of the participants was an innovative qualitative method of gathering real-life data that allowed the researcher to observe and interact with participants who had been involved in recent instances of abuse with the alleged abusive partners present in the same room. The researcher undertook participatory fieldwork and displayed reciprocity by volunteering to aid and support IPV victims at the referral health centre and serving the local community, while simultaneously collecting research data that benefited both the community and the field of academic research. These are unique methodological techniques and innovations to improve research quality and practice.

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