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Gender-Sensitive Research in a Chinese Community

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The aim of this article is to foster an awareness of the need for gender-sensitive research in the context of the methodological and ethical challenges posed by such research. We trace the development of gender sensitivity and masculinity in social work practice and research and connect this to an overview of the issues posed by research on sensitive topics. Reflecting on a research project involving Chinese male sexual abuse survivors, we draw conclusions illustrating and proposing a range of methodological practices and ethical safeguards. We underscore the importance of gender-sensitivity in performing research on sensitive topics with men in a Chinese community.

Keywords gender-sensitivity; masculinity; research ethics; sensitive research; sexual abuse

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Awareness of gender roles in Chinese culture has been of growing focus in social work research regarding service delivery and outcomes. However, less attention has been paid to how this plays out in the process of such research. Furthermore, the limited work that has been carried out has focused primarily on the gender roles of women rather than men. In this article, we review what is currently known about these issues in relation to male survivors of sexual abuse. We do not believe there is an homogenous "Chinese perspective" on issues of gender roles in families and intimate relations in general. This research is an account of Hong Kong culture and practice, and we have endeavored to be circumspect regarding any generalizations to wider populations. We connect this to the general literature on the issues involved in engaging with social research on sensitive topics. Drawing on a multi-stage mixed qualitative study of male survivors of sexual abuse in Hong Kong, we explore how these considerations illuminated the research. In writing about gender sensitive research we are covering two closely related, although distinct, questions: questions of gender in general and masculinity in particular, and broader questions of what is entailed when considering "sensitive" research. In recognition of this distinction, we have something to say more generally regarding sensitive research, but focus the implications primarily on questions of gender sensitivity. We draw conclusions regarding future research and practice.

Gender sensitivity and feminist research and practice

Investigations of gender were influenced by the feminist movement of the 1970s (Meyerowitz, 2008). Most studies in the 1970s focused only on women's perspectives, for instance, changes in women's attitudes to sexual roles (Thornton & Freedman, 1979), and challenges women experienced in different settings (Adams,

Lawrence & Cook, 1979; Larwood & Lockheed, 1979; Robertson, 1979). Moreover, women involved were often likely to be among the minorities in society, such as black and minority ethnic populations (e.g. Collins, 1986, 1989), the poor (e.g. Daly, 1992; Ruspini, 2001), and those with physical disabilities (e.g. Begum, 1992; Lloyd, 1992).

Women were the main identified participants in a large proportion of research on sensitive topics, for instance, domestic violence (Bradley, Smith, Long & O'Doud, 2002; Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Kyriacou et al., 1999), sexual abuse (Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Harper, Richter & Gorey, 2009; McDonagh et al., 2005), single motherhood (Blank, 2007; Choy & Moneta, 2002; Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000), and rape (Dancu, Riggs, Hearst-Ikeda, Shoyer & Foa, 1996; McCauley et al., 2009; Nishith, Resick & Mueser, 2001).

Delamont (2009) helpfully suggests four current ideologies of feminist research and methodology – liberal, Marxist, radical, and postmodern. Liberal feminists have faith in rationality, and, in the United Kingdom at least, are committed to the Fabian tradition of research. “If the facts are known, people will change. Small changes are worth making, and basing change on research is always sensible” (Delamont, 2003, p. 9). Marxist feminists view ideals of objectivity as class-based, where the ideas of the ruling class come to be accepted as “objective.” Radical feminists also reject objectivity, although “for radical feminists the myth of objectivity is a male one: man invented science. . . and invented objectivity specifically to exclude women” (Delamont, 2003, p. 8). Postmodern feminism presented a challenge to all schools of feminist – and wider – thought by removing the bases of class, gender, and sisterhood, and undermining the liberal feminist’s hope for objective data.

Gender sensitive practice and men

Research on gender issues in the region where this present research took place have tended to be mainly liberal or radical feminist in orientation. More generally, earlier gender sensitive research – perhaps especially that of liberal and postmodern varieties – opened the door for criticism of traditional discourses on masculinity that appeared to offer partial justification for abusive behavior (Holland & Scourfield, 2000). No doubt female sensitive studies allowed women’s voices to be heard; however, the voices of men were little heard in that literature and tended to be marginalized in the movement of gender-sensitive research, portrayed as perpetrators and only sometimes as victims (Doherty & Kartalova-O’Doherty, 2010; Judd, Armstrong & Kulkarni, 2009).

Despite the wider development of interest in exploring gender and culture, much of the practice literature persisted in overlooking ways in which such understanding and arguments were equally important for interpreting diverse male experience and behavior (Brooks & Good, 2001; Dienhart, 2001). Gradually, however, scholars and practice leaders began to pay closer attention to the experiences of men.

In this context, it is worth noting that a prevalent theme in Chinese traditional culture values men as rational and independent. This may limit the likelihood that men will be emotionally expressive, especially on sensitive topics. Although the following generalizations are hazardous, certain assumptions by social workers about men seem to be common, not only within large parts of Chinese culture, but also across very different cultures:

- 1 Men are reluctant to ask for help – a perceived reluctance that exists not only among Chinese (e.g. Ma, 2000), but also in the West (e.g. Primack, Addis, Syzdek & Miller, 2010; Scourfield, 2004; Smith, Tran & Thompson, 2008).
- 2 Men are reluctant to express their emotions (Doherty & Kartalova-O’Doherty, 2010; Judd et al., 2009).
- 3 Men show more reluctance than women in terms of being the participants or subjects of research (e.g. Fenton, Johnson, McManus & Erens, 2001).

Interpreting this evidence presents two problems. First, how well founded are these assumptions about men’s reluctance? Second, if plausible evidence should exist, how far may the explanation lie in the inade-

quacies of current social services in eliciting and responding to the distinctive character of men's cultural sensitivities? For example, Green and Taylor (2010) argue that even if men are less likely to express their emotions, it does not imply that men are by nature "unemotional." Essentialist positions regarding human nature are always risky.

Masculinity

It has been argued that social attitudes have led to the marginalization of men and set them as the victims of the gender order instead of women (Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002). There have been various expectations of how masculine identities play out. For example, masculine identities were associated with images of physical strength, competitiveness, aggression, and independence (Courtenay, 2000; Green & Taylor, 2010; Holland & Scourfield, 2000). In addition to these expectations, masculinity was also associated with various problems or deficits, for instance, anti-social, destructive behavior and substance abuse (Holland & Scourfield, 2000; Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002).

These perceptions associated with masculinity have been regarded as relatively fixed. For example, critical theory and inquiry approaches have emphasized the power relations and social dominance of masculinity. Recent writing suggests that the social dynamics that support continued male dominance can helpfully be viewed through an understanding of the nature of privilege in society. Taking a critical postmodern stance, Pease argues, "a critical consciousness of oppression and privilege is central to understand the ways in which our world views are shaped by our social positioning" (Pease, 2006, p. 15). He suggests we see privilege as the other side of oppression, such that for every group that is oppressed, another group is privileged (Pease, 2010).

However, we consider that these perceptions have sometimes obscured and limited the active construction of men's identities. Connell, for example, suggested that masculinities should be seen from a post-structuralist point of view (cited in Scourfield, 2004). The identities of men are not fixed, but should be seen as actively constructed and varied across culture, age, and other factors. In support of this position, Greenland et al. (cited in Scourfield, 2004) found that reluctance among men to seek help was not universal. In addition, Doherty and Kartalova-O'Doherty (2010) indicated factors, for example, socio-economic status and education level, associated with different levels of disclosure among men. In short, these findings supported Connell's idea that men's identities may be actively constructed and not fixed. Connell also argued that men do have privileges arising from their masculinity; however, these privileges may be associated with ambiguous positions for men arising from perceived social implications of feminist standpoints. Scourfield and Drakeford (2002), for example, suggest that various problems, such as substance abuse and destructive and aggressive behavior, might have arisen in part as a result of men's role confusion, where incongruity was found between the masculine privileges and the actual changing social status or power gains for women (c.f. Scourfield, 2004). Masculinity may not render men superior or privileged under all circumstances; however, masculinity might have disposed men to become the victims of a gendered social order if their actual needs are not thoroughly investigated.

In summary, men have been invisible in various strands of gender-sensitive scholarship and research. The invisibility and unexamined position of men has probably been reinforced by, in some cases, culturally specific considerations. However, empirical work and shifts in the gendered social order suggest that the identities of men are fluid, even within a continuing culture of male privilege.

Before reflecting on the empirical work referred to in this article, we discuss the notion of "sensitive" research.

Doing sensitive research

Responsive to, fragile, tactful, easily offended, difficult – all are possible synonyms for "sensitive" (Waite, M., Hollingworth, L., & Marshall, D., 2005). Without making the different meanings between these terms

explicit, we can readily recognize that research may be sensitive for participants or for the researcher; it may be ethically sensitive, or socially controversial. The very expression, “doing sensitive research” (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2008) conveys, through its studied ambiguity, that it is impossible to disentangle ideas of being sensitive to something (e.g. responsive, gender sensitive, and tactful) from the sensitivity of something (e.g. controversial or difficult). The research reported in this paper has sensitive dimensions in both of these senses. In order to make these issues transparent, we draw on a systematic search of literature mainly from journals from 2000 onwards. The search makes no claim to be exhaustive (e.g. we have not included studies of sensitive service delivery contexts, e.g. Brown & Wissow, 2009), but probably represents the range of ground covered in the literature.

There is surprisingly little literature that reflects on what counts as a sensitive topic for research. Even research that starts from the assumption that power relations should be shifted in sensitive research tends to bring prior assumptions about which subjects will prove sensitive, and deals with their response within wider discussions of how to manage sensitive fieldwork (e.g. Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens & Sefl, 2009; Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009). Apart from some interesting, if slightly self-contained, literature on risks for the researcher, most of the attention to this theme is around being sensitive to the challenges posed by different subjects and forms of research.

Risks for participants

Mendis (2009) discusses the experience, from a feminist standpoint, of collecting data from mothers who have experienced childhood family violence. She refers to the practice in which qualitative researchers ask participants to read their transcripts and comment on the content. She planned to use the second of two interviews to clarify previous interview transcripts with the women and to investigate additional details for emerging themes. However, only three women agreed to read their transcripts. The others politely declined, saying that they did not want to recall their bitter past again. She observes how this highlights the potential emotional risks to participants in research on sensitive topics and the risk that after reading their transcript, the women may experience different kinds and levels of emotional distress. She concludes that the use of transcripts for authenticity/validation strategies in sensitive research needs careful consideration.

Other researchers have cast some doubt on the plausibility of extending this conclusion more generally. Rabenhorst (2006) assessed the reactions of sexual assault survivors on three occasions following an experimental thought suppression task. She concluded that the majority of sexual assault survivors were not harmed in the short or long term by participation in a thought suppression paradigm introduced by the research team, in which the target was their own trauma. More generally, Corbin and Morse (2003) conclude from a review of the literature that, although there is evidence that qualitative interviews may cause some emotional distress, there is no indication that this distress is any greater than in everyday life or that it requires follow-up counseling. When research is conducted with sensitivity and guided by ethics, it becomes a process with benefits to both participants and researchers.

Some of the most interesting and nuanced work appeared in a special issue of the journal *Violence and Victims* in 2006. The issue explores the impact of data collection methods on both findings and participants. In their editorial introduction to the issue, Rosenbaum and Langhinrichsen-Rohling (2006) recommend that the researcher should consider: (i) what the impact of participation could be for the respondent; and (ii) how the methods used could affect participation, disclosure rates, and validity of the information provided. Even though some control over whether and how such research is conducted is exercised in ethical review processes, they believe that the researcher must bear most of the responsibility for keeping in mind these two considerations: validity of the data and protection of the respondents.

Ethics and sensitive research

We did not encounter any arguments to the effect that the ethical issues of sensitive research are different from the ethical issues of other research – but rather that they call for more explicit attention. The challenging

question becomes how researchers can involve participants in dialogues about sensitive matters in ethically sound ways. How can a research study be conducted so that it enhances the possibility that people can express personal and sensitive experiences that normally are not shared or are difficult to share with others? Reporting their research with children, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt and Tjersland (2005) suggest that for this process to start and succeed required “preparedness” from the adult to initiate dialogues and to follow up on the child’s initiatives, and also a certain “readiness” from the child to tell. This underscores the reciprocity of the process. General ethical obligations are made more demanding if one accepts the argument that the researcher cannot sidestep an obligation to contribute to the wider good (Bogolub, 2010).

Methods for sensitive research

Jensen et al.’s (2005) conclusions point to the implications of methods used, which should allow for time so the participant can iterate and reiterate their experiences. Sensitive topics are not easily explored through the means of single, direct questions. There is a fair amount of prescription on what methods should and shouldn’t be used in sensitive research, but, on the whole, limited consensus. One senses that researchers may tend to recommend those methods that they find themselves predisposed to use.

Orme, Ruckdeschel and Briar-Lawson (2010) summarize conclusions drawn from the development of methods for researching sensitive topics and giving voice to those within the situations. These include the use of ethnography to understand communication between professionals, the focus on the interrelationships between practitioners and service users in discourse analysis, and narrative research in organizational practice and research. Vignettes, focus groups, mobile methods, performative methods, stage performance, telephone surveys, and automated telephonic methods have all been promoted (Colucci, 2007; Dinitto et al., 2008; Kitzinger, 1994; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Ross, Renold, Holland & Hillman, 2009; Wulff, St. George, Faul, Frey & Frey, 2010; Zeller, 1993).

Managing sensitive fieldwork

One approach to the management of sensitive fieldwork has been to develop protocols, either to aid the researcher in recognizing those who may be at risk of adverse emotional reactions, or to provide guidance for the researcher when such situations arise (Draucker, Martsoff & Poole, 2009; Paterson, Gregory & Thorne, 1999). Less expert-driven approaches rely on addressing the power dimensions of the research relationship. Butler and Williamson (1996), interviewing children who had been in long term care, made sure the children had control of the audio recorder during the interview and could control the recording of any sensitive disclosures. A combination of these approaches is to develop guidance for the researcher based extensively on feedback from participants.

We might reasonably conclude that all aspects of the research process are affected by the sensitivity of the topic or methods. Jaycox et al. (2006) take that wide canvas view in their discussion of the challenges of evaluating school-based prevention and intervention programs on sensitive topics. The research design (e.g. a repeated implementation-evaluation cycle), the recruitment of participant schools, recruitment of participants within schools, and the dissemination of findings all come under their spotlight. They conclude “the need for flexibility and cultural awareness during all stages of the process” (Jaycox et al., 2006, p. 320).

Researcher risks

Mendis remarks “conducting sensitive research also posed emotional risks to me as the researcher” (2009, p. 379). In an overview of the literature on researcher safety, Craig, Corden and Thornton (2000) distinguished four sources of risk to which the researcher may be exposed:

- 1 Risk of physical threat or abuse.
- 2 Risk of psychological trauma or consequences, as a result of actual or threatened violence, or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction.

- 3 Risk of being in a compromising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behavior.
- 4 Increased exposure to the general risks of everyday life and social interaction, for example, travel, infectious illness, accident.

It has generally been acknowledged that in the social sciences there are more obvious risks to the researcher from qualitative methodologies. Part of the risk stems from a blurring of the boundaries between the researcher and those participating in their study. While it would be naive to suggest that researchers are unaware of boundaries (c.f. Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2006), this does not preclude the likelihood that research will have impacts upon them, and perhaps especially in sensitive research (Stacey, 1988). In a subsequent article drawing on the same data, Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) urge that researchers need to consider occupational health and safety issues when designing projects that deal with physical and emotional risks.

The literature on sensitive research suggests three guiding considerations. First, clearer thought and planning is called for in relation to the nuances of different elements of “sensitive” research. In particular, the distinction between the sensitivity of the research topic and the demands of being sensitive to something are different but equally important elements. Second, we are concerned lest social work researchers get unduly drawn in by the “vogueish” popularity¹ of a postmodern orientation that neglects continuing elements of privilege. Finally, while qualitative methods have particular advantage – and while there are no firm grounds to conclude that specialized methods are called for – research in this field calls for a variety of qualitative methods that will facilitate a range of method-linked knowledge claims. In the light of our earlier comments about research ethics, such methods will also require a reciprocal readiness between participants and researchers. The research described in the following paragraphs sought to reflect aspects of both good practice concepts (such as preparedness) and the methods and management of sensitive research.

A Hong Kong case

There has been growing sensitivity to the distinctiveness of men’s culture and needs among scholars and social workers in Hong Kong, and an increasing body of research focused on Chinese men (e.g. Chan, 2006, 2009a,b). A significant shift occurred in the 1990s (Au, 1992; Au & Choy, 1998; Choi, 1998). As an understanding of the relevance, in some contexts, of distinguishing service delivery to men and women has grown, various organizations have taken a more active role in attempting to understand the various and distinct needs of men. Nonetheless, Hong Kong is still in the early stages of investigating and understanding this subject.

In the past 30 years in Hong Kong, increasing numbers of Chinese men have sought help to solve problems or issues related to their children or marital relationship (Chan, 2009a,b; Chan & Chan, 2000). Even though the number of Chinese men approaching social services has steadily increased, research focused on gender sensitive issues toward Chinese men has been limited. The reasons for this are not fully clear. Although sexual abuse has been increasingly discussed in current literature, it remains a sensitive topic in daily lives, and Chinese male sexual abuse survivors have particularly been largely neglected.

Research methods

The data in this article is drawn from a qualitative process evaluation conducted by the first author. The aim was to identify the implications of masculinity for male survivors who had encountered traumatic childhood experiences in general, and sexual and physical abuses in particular. This research provided a space for male sexual abuse survivors’ voices to be heard. The overall design of this research is briefly illus-

¹A search on “postmodern*” on social work journal sites suggests the likely element of fashion in the employment of this term. Shaw (2003 a,b; 2010 a–e) has lamented this tendency in social work research.

trated below. It was conducted in cooperation with Caritas (Hong Kong), which provides multiple services, including services for men. Twelve Chinese male sexual abuse survivors, who were openly recruited by Caritas-Hong Kong through various methods (such as posters and websites), took part in this research. All participants were sexually abused at ages ranging from 3–31, and their mean age was 34.6 years, ranging from 27–40, at the time of commencement of the research.

The research consisted of three phases. The first phase was an intervention program: the Caritas Project for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma, which included six group sessions for the male sexual abuse survivors to disclose and share their personal stories related to their sexual abuse experiences. The group workers adopted a support group model to facilitate disclosure of the traumatic experience and mutual support among the group members. The second phase involved three focus groups, in that one male and one female researcher would lead the sharing with the presence of one responsible social worker, to understand the aftermath of sexual abuse incidents and to discuss their processes in seeking help and the assistances received. The last phase included in-depth individual interviews with eight male sexual abuse survivors. The interviews provided opportunities to listen to and understand their accounts and life stories. Coping, in terms of sensemaking and benefit-finding, was the main focus of the interviews.

Rather than offering a full account of the findings of the research, we focus on the ways in which the research addressed the challenges of sensitive fieldwork.

Method for sensitive research: 3-Phase Design

A key rationale for the 3-Phase design was to help participants gradually build up “preparedness” for sharing their experiences in relation to this sensitive topic. Because time and space were provided for the male sexual abuse survivors to express their thoughts and experiences, in-depth and increasingly extended information and understanding were obtained through the staged sharing. This supported both participants and researchers in achieving certain level of “preparedness” and “readiness.”

One female and one male researcher were placed to handle this research, in part to foster cultural awareness during the process through responsiveness to gender differences. In Phase 1, one female and one male social worker from Caritas handled the six-session intervention program, while the male researcher participated as a member and sat in three out of the six sessions. This served as a familiarization and desensitization process for the participants and readied them for the presence of and interaction with the researcher in the subsequent focus groups and individual interviews. Additionally, it sensitized the researcher in reacting to and understanding the male sexual abuse survivors. Observing participants during the intervention program demonstrated the value of an ethnographic element in carrying out this research.

Carrying out focus groups in Phase 2 also illustrated how this research provided opportunities for these long-isolated male sexual abuse survivors to share their experiences. Participants viewed the sharing as a form of support that made focus groups an effective method for research on sensitive topics (Colucci, 2007; Kitzinger, 1994; Zeller, 1993). The intervention program in phase 1 and focus groups in phase 2 seem to have built up rapport and trust between the male sexual abuse survivors and the researchers, and also their “preparedness” for the individual interviews.

Managing sensitive fieldwork

Participants could exercise choice and control over the research process. They had the right to choose their participation phase by phase. Ten and eight participants chose to participate in phases 2 and 3, respectively.

The project, as part of the risk assessment, had processes in place to manage possible unanticipated harm to participants. They had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. During phase 2, a participant experienced emotional distress and left the group; he then decided to withdraw from the research. Immediate follow-up work was implemented by the social workers. Indeed, one reason for having social workers partake in the focus groups and individual interviews with the researchers was to enable and guarantee that

all the participants were ensured appropriate and responsive concern. The social workers facilitated follow-up work where necessary, providing guidance, useful information, and personal counseling.

Risks for participants and researcher

Despite efforts to anticipate difficulties for participants, the sexual abuse incidents perhaps inevitably influenced how participants perceived masculinity and how they interacted with the male researcher. In the beginning of Phase 1, participants showed suspicion and strong mistrust of the male researcher. Participants were sensitive to and exhibited challenging attitudes toward the perceived intentions of the researcher, such as “you really cannot understand the situation,” and “what do you want to know...?” As indicated above, one participant experienced emotional distress during the therapeutic group discussion and decided to leave. Moreover, in Phase 2, participants complained about the researchers’ body language, for example, upright sitting posture and serious, non-smiling faces, which made the participants uneasy.

These uneasy and suspicious feelings undoubtedly created risks for the participants, even though follow-up work was executed to respond to their emotional distress. In addition, these incidents created emotional doubt and distress to the male researcher. The researcher found it slightly stressful in building rapport and appropriate ways of interacting with the participants. He became doubtful as to whether he should encourage the participants to further elaborate their experiences or halt the sharing in order to avoid emotional breakdowns. In turn, the invisible stress and uncertainty of the researcher might have induced indirect further risks for participants. The use of language and hostility among Chinese participants might even be stronger than in some Western male communities, given Chinese traditional expectations toward men. For example, one might shout or swear whenever he perceived that he was being attacked or challenged by the researcher. Emotional distress experienced by the researcher might be hazardous in such incidents. All in all, the risks for participants and the researcher are reciprocal.

The social workers involved had built rapport with the participants before the commencement of this research. Beside providing guidance and counseling to reduce the risks to participants, inclusion of the social workers in the focus groups and individual interviews probably also served as a mediating function between participants and the researcher. This served not only to prompt the participants about their right to decide whether or not to answer, but also as a reminder to the researcher about the boundaries to the questions being asked. Furthermore, debriefing sessions between the social workers and the researchers were held after every focus group and individual interview. The social workers, through their established rapport with and understanding of the participants, provided valuable feedback for the researchers. The feedback helped reduce the emotional distress and uncertainty experienced by the researchers.

Ethics

Aims and procedures were clearly explained to the participants. Both verbal and written consents to participate and to be videotaped were obtained ahead of the commencement of each phase. Participants also had their right to and control over whether to terminate their participation. Confidentiality was also emphasized throughout, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect the confidentiality of participants in the analysis. Through a responsible worker, the final report was then sent to participants for their approval to publish the results. The worker paid special attention to whether the participant manifested any emotional distress in reviewing the report.

All participants were comfortable with the level and nature of personal disclosure and agreed that their identities were protected.

Discussion and implications

We endeavor to highlight the sensitive aspects of working with and researching vulnerable and potentially marginalized male groups in a Chinese community through the use of a staged and ethically

careful mixed qualitative method study. This facilitated “preparedness” among participants and researchers, minimized potential risks, and assisted the process of investigation. This is essential to avoid harm that might derive from the process of research. This supports our earlier conclusions from the survey of literature on sensitive research that the distinction between the sensitivity of the research topic and the demands of being sensitive to something are different but equally important elements. Also, while there are no firm grounds to conclude that specialized methods are called for, research in this field calls for a variety of qualitative methods that will facilitate a range of method-linked knowledge claims.

Participants in the research were able to express their experiences, emotions, and needs regarding their sexual abuse experiences as they saw the research as being handled ethically and sensitively. For example:

I felt very hopeless previously because I could not strive against the abuser.

I was always being beaten by my parents, and I felt being loved and concerned while being sexually abused by my father.

The latter comment in particular would almost be seen as shocking in Chinese family culture, as fathers are expected to protect their family members and the legacy of masculinity is inherited by the father-son dyad. The absence of gender-sensitivity toward men in the process of research means that male participants not only experience difficulty or hesitation in discussion and disclosure, but they may also experience re-victimization. Men’s reluctance may result from the absence of gender-sensitivity toward men, which further reinforces existing preconceptions and places male participants in a marginalized position. This raises an important question of how far the patterns evident among men are different from those among women, and whether research sensitivity entails different requirements. We suggest that the core principles largely overlap, but will need tailored practices in each case. Meanwhile, researchers have to be aware of and prepared to deal with possible verbal or physical attacks, hostilities, or challenges made by male participants. In order to carry out research on sensitive topics ethically, gender-sensitivity is a significant element in reducing potential risks for participants and researchers.

The case illustrations of gender-sensitive research for male sexual abuse survivors in a Chinese community remind researchers about the dimensions of managing possible risks when dealing with men on sensitive topics. More generally, we affirm the importance of ethical, sensitive, cautious, and thoroughly planned tailor-made research methods for research involving all groups of people (e.g. minorities, elderly, children, women) on sensitive topics, and not limited to research on male sexual abuse survivors.

We acknowledge that a limitation of this study is its small sample of 12 participants, although the recurrent fieldwork gave depth to the data.

We have spelt out the main implications and conclusions about research on masculinities and sensitive research. We also have referred to the ways in which principles of good research have parallels by way of implications for good practice. While we focus on sensitivity in research, it is probable that a reciprocal preparedness for practice would apply in comparable ways. Our observations lead us to underscore the inadvertent and invisible harm that may be inflicted on parties involved in research when unreflective, predetermined frameworks are implemented. It is essential when planning and carrying out research that shows cultural awareness and allows time and space for participants to attain “preparedness” to speak out on sensitive topics, to do so in ways that reduce potential risks for both participants and researchers. Failure to take into account the need for reciprocal preparedness between participants and researchers, the broader implications of mixed qualitative methods, and the relevance and value of wider arguments about sensitive research together increase the danger of oppressing respondents and unwittingly putting them and probably researchers at risk.

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