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Conducting Research in Non-Traditional Settings: Research Assistant Experiences in a Gay Bathhouse

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Abstract

Research conducted in traditional and non-traditional settings remains essential to understanding behaviors and attitudes among diverse populations. The effective preparation of research assistants is essential in order to conduct ethical research and ensure safety for the participants and those conducting the research. One such example pertains to examining the behavior of men who have sex with men (e.g., gay, bisexual, other MSM) within bathhouse settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among six graduate students and alumni examining their overall interest in conducting research as well as their thoughts and feelings prior to, during, and after collecting data at a gay male bathhouse, and the overall impact upon their professional growth and development. Thematic findings centered around conducting research within a bathhouse setting, navigating personal feelings and reactions, and strengthening connections between personal and professional selves, among others. Implications for effectively training and preparing student research assistants to conduct data collection with unique and non-traditional settings will be examined.

Keywords

Research Assistants, Non-Traditional Settings, Training, Gay Men, Bathhouse

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Conducting Research in Non-Traditional Settings: Research Assistant Experiences in a Gay Bathhouse

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Research conducted in traditional and non-traditional settings remains essential to understanding behaviors and attitudes among diverse populations. The effective preparation of research assistants is essential in order to conduct ethical research and ensure safety for the participants and those conducting the research. One such example pertains to examining the behavior of men who have sex with men (e.g., gay, bisexual, other MSM) within bathhouse settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among six graduate students and alumni examining their overall interest in conducting research as well as their thoughts and feelings prior to, during, and after collecting data at a gay male bathhouse, and the overall impact upon their professional growth and development. Thematic findings centered around conducting research within a bathhouse setting, navigating personal feelings and reactions, and strengthening connections between personal and professional selves, among others. Implications for effectively training and preparing student research assistants to conduct data collection with unique and non-traditional settings will be examined. Keywords: Research Assistants, Non-Traditional Settings, Training, Gay Men, Bathhouse

Introduction

Research conducted in traditional and non-traditional settings remains essential to understand behaviors and attitudes among diverse populations as well as best practices related to working within diverse settings. The effective preparation of scholars, researchers, and research assistants is essential in order to conduct ethical research in a safe environment for both the participants and those conducting the research. One such example pertains to examining the behavior of men who have sex with other men (e.g., gay, bisexual, other MSM) within bathhouse settings. Such settings may be considered non-traditional as they are private locations in which MSM typically seek partnerships that may include developing friendships, consensual sexual encounters utilizing prophylaxis, or sexually risky behaviors which can lead to HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, such settings may include the use of alcohol or other drugs (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine), as well as polysubstance use. The effective preparation of research assistants whether at the graduate or doctoral level across disciplines including social work remains essential to ensure their safety, the ability to effectively conduct research with effective protocols and standards and collect data that can be useful to inform practice skills and standards within the community. Faculty

mentors must work to create protocols to effectively train, mentor, brief and debrief with research assistants throughout the data collection process.

Background

The setting for social research is ideally determined by the questions a study seeks to investigate. For some studies, data collection can be as simple as distributing surveys to a university class or a convenient online sample population. Studies tackling complex social issues, however, especially those that are less prevalent or public, require research in non-traditional settings. This is especially true for socially stigmatized populations (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Hart-Johnson, 2017; Worthen, 2014). It is often the ethical responsibility of researchers to connect with hard to reach populations such as MSM in carefully designated, private environments (Heggen & Guillemin, 2012; Sydor, 2013). Collecting data in unique physical environments raises important issues about needs and risks for both researchers and participants, yet this issue receives insufficient attention in the literature (Sampson & Thomas, 2003).

Sexual health is a research area often requiring non-traditional approaches to data collection and methods. Numerous studies have noted relationships between gay male bathhouses and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (Bell et al., 2001; Bradford, 1983; Fairley, Frost, Friedman, Caputo, & Horrocks, 2001; Fairley, Leslie, Nicholson, & Gust, 1990; Farley, 2002; Frankis & Flowers, 2005; Haubrich, Myers, Calzavara, Ryder, & Medved, 2004; O'Sullivan et al., 2002). Though there is no clear consensus on such correlations, or whether they are more significant than STI transmission rates within other settings (Binson et al., 2001; Haubrich et al., 2004), newly-diagnosed cases of HIV are rising among gay males in the United States, specifically among Hispanic males and African Americans between the ages of 25-34 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). A public health issue of this magnitude warrants continued investigation of behaviors and attitudes among gay male bathhouse patrons, necessitating data collection in a notably rare and uncommon location.

The politics of sex, gender, and non-traditional research settings. Research on gender roles and sexual issues often requires investigators to place themselves in uncommon settings (Lyons, Krüsi, Pierre, Small, & Shannon, 2017; Sydor, 2013). Female investigators Sampson and Thomas (2003) conducted ethnographic research on cargo ships as part of a larger project on transnational seafarer communities. The research setting was complicated due to the female identity of the researchers on ships with nearly all-male crews. Situational risks melded with gender-role risks, and Sampson and Thomas reported frequent hostility and harassment. Lyons et al. (2017) interviewed transgender sex workers in Vancouver, Canada, who performed their work in outdoor spaces as a result of gentrification and construction in their former urban work territories. When sitting for interviews in these outdoor spaces began to disrupt sex work opportunities, researchers began engaging in hour-long ethnographic walks with participants to collect data about their gender-based experiences.

Gender and sexual issues may become more complicated in settings where drug and alcohol use are present. Palmer and Thompson (2010) studied the culture of alcohol at Australian Rules football games in the United Kingdom and observed that, when intoxicating substances are involved, researchers must simultaneously identify allies and gatekeepers in the research setting while considering the validity and quality of participant responses. On several occasions during data collection, Palmer and Thompson made the decision not to include testimony from inebriated participants. Defending the nature of her non-traditional research setting with academic peers was also a challenge—her own colleagues jokingly referred to her

field site as “Man Land” (Palmer & Thompson, 2010, p. 432), which she perceived as the trivialization of a very complex arena of gender politics.

Settings for data collection assessing sexual behavior and health. Settings and unique spaces have remained integral to research with regard to studies on sex and sexuality, (Bain, & Nash, 2007). Cohen, et al. (2005) performed a systematic literature review of quantitative studies on sexually transmitted infection (STI) screenings in non-traditional settings throughout the United States. Among the research sites studied were schools, emergency rooms, jails, and juvenile detention facilities. While jail- and emergency room-based studies were able to screen the highest numbers of people, the researchers recommended more research in other community-based settings.

A recent, large-scale research endeavor in the UK explored public attitudes about HIV testing within non-traditional settings (Rayment et al., 2012; Thornton, et al., 2012) The HINTS (HIV Testing in Non-traditional Settings) study explored both staff and participant experiences of HIV testing in an emergency room, acute admissions clinic, primary care practice, and dermatology outpatient department. The questionnaire-based research results revealed a 92% acceptability rate among patients for testing in these settings, but only 54% of healthcare staff expressed feeling comfortable delivering HIV testing themselves (Rayment et al. 2012). Thornton et al. (2012) noted, however, that staff comfort level increased significantly once they were informed of the high level of acceptance among patient populations. This study sheds light on the importance of the attitudes and experiences of professionals (albeit researchers or medical professionals) collecting public health data.

Research within bathhouse settings. Gay bathhouses are relevant examples of non-traditional social settings where gender, sexuality, and health issues intersect. Several studies have been conducted both within and about gay bathhouses in recent years. Haubrich et al. (2004) conducted interviews with gay and bisexual men focused on their bathhouse experiences and perceptions of risk for contracting HIV within that setting. While the participants were all self-described as bathhouse patrons, data collection did not actually occur within the bathhouse itself. Themes that arose around bathhouse culture were characterizations of anonymity and de-personalized non-verbal contact, descriptions of others using moralistic terms, the management of identity through disconnecting emotional needs and sexual needs within the bathhouse context, and the utility of bathhouses for sexual release, recuperation from addiction, and social interaction with men who have sex with men (2004).

A systematic review of quantitative studies on sexual behaviors of MSM within public sex environments (PSEs) distinguished bathhouses as different from the settings they were studying (i.e., public parks and bathrooms), labeling them as public sex venues (PSVs) (Frankis & Flowers, 2005). PSVs are described as “private indoor spaces that are specifically (though sometimes unofficially) marketed as sex on the premises spaces and require entrance fees or cover charges” (p. 203). While PSVs were described as safer than PSEs, both brought with them elevated rates of male participants with an HIV positive status.

Farley (2002) makes strong assertions about the correlation between urban bathhouse activity and the spread of HIV, referring to such facilities as “critical hotspots for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases” (p. 36). Noting that a resurgence of syphilis among bathhouse frequenters left men more vulnerable to the transmission of HIV, Farley takes the radical position that the only recourse for combating the spread of sexually transmitted infections is to close down bathhouses altogether. As bathhouses play a social role encompassing much more than acting as a location for sexual acts (Bain & Nash, 2007; Bérubé, 2003; Frankis & Flowers, 2005) the idea of closing them has not been historically popular.

Bathroom culture and history have been studied and critiqued for their importance in politics and social identities. Bathhouses are viewed as transgressive in their promotion of gay and lesbian sexual practices (Bain & Nash, 2007), and have been subject to raids, fines, and unjust police action, especially during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Bérubé (2003) asserts that, while public health is usually the platform of those opposing bathhouses, stigma and disruption of heteronormative culture have been catalysts for the heavy scrutiny of bathhouses. Expression of queer identity and assertion of the validity of non-heterosexual orientations for men and women (Hammers, 2008) rely on venues like bathhouses as safe places (Bain & Nash, 2007; Haubrich et al., 2004; Nash, 2014).

Role of researchers and research assistants. Studies in non-traditional settings are complex to navigate, even for experienced researchers. For more early-career researchers such as graduate students, data collection may come with additional challenges. Lack of confidence, discomfort with interviewing, and limited experience with recruitment are cited in the literature as common challenges among graduate student researchers (Hoskins & White, 2013; Rimando et al., 2015). When collaborating with faculty, graduate research assistants occupy a space between student and employee, and work under both the guidance and the authority of primary investigators (Flora, 2007). Some research has explored research assistants' experiences of recruiting and interviewing participants, and other aspects of data collection, noting the need to learn about research assistants' experiences in these research processes (Cambron & Evans, 2003). Other scholarship promotes the idea that research assistants should have the opportunity to talk about their experiences engaging in research, to ask questions, and to share information with other research assistants and supervisors. Naufel and Beike (2013) developed a Research Assistant's Bill of Rights to minimize negative impacts—physical, psychological, and social—of data collection on students involved in research under faculty supervision.

Need for further research and considerations for researchers. The gay bathhouse as a non-traditional research site holds continued importance. As its symbolic importance in political and social resistance to oppression of sexual identities and behaviors enters the public dialogue, their importance with regard to public health research is invaluable (Bérubé, 2008; Binson et al., 2001; Frankis & Flowers, 2005; Haubrich et al., 2004; Parker, 2000). Current studies, however, focus more on the data collected from bathhouse patrons and less on the experience of investigators collecting such data. In fact, the methods employed in studies and the ethics governing researcher and participant risk are relevant not solely related to study results but are also relevant to conducting future bathhouse research.

As medical treatment and outcomes for those living with HIV has improved considerably since the late 1990s, understanding the attitudes, fears, and levels of complacency among members of the gay, bisexual and MSM communities remains critical for continued education and prevention efforts. As Bérubé (2008) notes, “the gay community must be allowed to devote all of its resources, including the bathhouses, toward promoting the research, health programs and safe sex educational measures that will save lives” (p. 53). The bathhouse as a non-traditional setting can provide important insight into understanding health and mental health factors impacting those that frequent such settings, as well as underscore the relevant work of investigators participating in such non-traditional research.

This study examines the role of graduate research assistants collecting data within a gay bathhouse setting, as well as their relevant thoughts, feelings and experiences before entering the bathhouse, while conducting data collection, and after concluding the research. While there remains a dearth of research pertaining to bathhouse culture and patrons, there is even less scholarship that provides insight related to research assistant experiences collecting data within such non-traditional settings. The primary research question for this study was: What are the

perceptions related to overall interest in conducting research and the experiences of graduate research assistants before, during, and after collecting data on HIV/AIDS complacency in a gay male bathhouse?

Methods

Context. This study evolved out of another research project exploring HIV/AIDS complacency among gay and bisexual men in a gay bathhouse in a large Midwestern city (Lloyd, 2015). The first and second authors worked with a team of Master of Social Work (MSW) student research assistants (Ras) to conduct survey-based research with bathhouse patrons. While preparing to train the Ras in data collection procedures, including sensitizing them to bathhouse culture (e.g., hypersexualized atmosphere, public displays of sex, potential for open use of substances), the first and second authors became interested in gaining an understanding of the Ras' interest in collecting data in a gay bathhouse, their experiences around data collection in the site, and any lessons learned while engaged in the overall project. The first and second authors invited the third author to join them in interviewing the Ras to bring additional methodological expertise and phenomenological perspective to the study.

Sample. All Ras working on the research project exploring HIV/AIDS complacency among gay and bisexual men were invited to participate in in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews exploring their interest and experiences with data collection in that unique setting. Non-probability purposive and homogenous sampling provided useful frameworks for recruitment (Fortune & Reid, 1999). Non-probability purposive sampling intentionally recruits individuals thought to exhibit the phenomenon under study, and homogenous sampling offers a focused form of recruitment that seeks to reduce variation in the sample, thereby simplifying and honing the analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 1994; Patton, 2001). Six Ras participated in the study ($N = 6$). All Ras initially identified and recruited for interviews consented. Table 1 presents respondents' self-reported pseudonyms, academic status, age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Given the unique nature of the Ras experience of conducting data collection in a bathhouse, self-identification as a gay, bisexual or queer and male identifying was a prerequisite for the study.

Table 1. Respondents' Self-Reported Sociodemographic Information

| Respondent ^a | Academic Status ^b | Age | Race/Ethnicity ^c | Gender Identity ^d | Sexual Orientation ^e |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Andrew | S | 37 | AA | M | G |
| Chet | A | 23 | W | M | G |
| David | A | 25 | W | M | G |
| Eric | A | 33 | W | M | Q |
| Nelson | A | 42 | W | M | G |
| Patrick | A | 30 | W | M | G |

^a Pseudonyms used; ^b alumnus (A) or student (S); ^c Asian American (AA) or White (W); ^d male (M), ^e gay (G) or queer (Q).

Procedures. Ras were invited to participate in the current study following completion of their work collecting survey data for the study on HIV/AIDS complacency among gay and bisexual men. Invitation occurred through a study recruitment email. Those who responded affirmatively to the recruitment email were invited to work with the research team to schedule a time to review the consent procedures and conduct in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews. The first three authors each interviewed two Ras. Interviews were conducted on the second and third authors' university campus in private, secure office spaces. Respondents were invited to select a pseudonym that was used during the interview, which was also used during analysis. Interview questions were open-ended and included a focus upon respondents' overall interest in conducting research as well as their thoughts prior to, during, and after collecting data while at the bathhouse. Interviews varied in length, ranging from 29 to 51 minutes and were audio recorded with respondents' consent. Respondents did not receive compensation for their participation in the interviews. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the university institutional review board.

Analysis. Data analysis incorporated elements of grounded theory (Miles et al., 1994) in order to develop a thematic narrative (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), which is presented in the findings section. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed by the fourth author. Interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible in order to prioritize participants' responses. The first and fourth authors performed quality checks of the transcripts by choosing five-minute sections from three transcripts. This data quality assurance process produced few transcription errors from the selected data.

For the first phase of analysis, the first and third authors independently read the transcripts, considering them as a complete data set, and engaged in an initial open coding process. Following the initial open coding process, the first and third authors met to review their work by discussing consistencies and inconsistencies in their codes. When discrepancies arose, they explored the codes and other related data to reach a consensual understanding of the code or to develop it into a new or expanded code. This process resulted in an initial coding structure that highlighted respondents' unique experiences before, during, and after collecting data in the bathhouse. For the second phase of the analysis, the first and third authors used the initial coding structure to guide deeper coding of two transcripts, which included the identification of important themes at each time point (i.e., before, during, and after) of the data collection process in the bathhouse. They met to review their work and found a great deal of consensus among the codes. Having reached a satisfactory amount of consistency among two transcripts between the two coders, the first author coded the remaining four transcripts.

Following completion of coding and the development of themes, we conducted a member check focus group with the respondents, during which no discrepancies arose. These themes were then used to develop the thematic narrative presented in the findings section. The use of two coders and member checking lends confirmability and credibility to this analysis, which ultimately increases the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Our qualitative study of six research assistants examined their perceptions related to overall interest in conducting research and their thoughts and experiences before, during, and after collecting data within a bathhouse setting. The majority of participants self-identified as White, gay, and male, and their ages ranged from 23-42 years. Participants were alumni of the same graduate social work degree program and one was a student at the time of data collection. In response to the questions pertaining to participants' feelings and thoughts about collecting

data before entering the bathhouse, two key themes emerged (the “before” stage) including: 1. “General interest in conducting MSM focused research”; and 2. “Specific interest in conducting research within a bathhouse.” With regard to the second period pertaining to their thoughts and experiences with collecting data while in the bathhouse (the “during” stage) the following three themes emerged: 1. “Managing pre-conceived notions of stigma: Bathhouse settings and patrons”; 2. “Navigating personal and professional roles and boundaries”; and 3. “Emotional reactions to the setting and patrons.” Finally, the two key themes that arose in the period noted as the “after” stage of collecting data included: 1. “Strong desire to continue conducting research”; and 2. “Strengthened connectedness between personal and professional growth.”

Conducting Research: The “Before” Stage

Before entering the bathhouse, two key themes emerged regarding interest in conducting research. The first pertained to a “General level of interest in conducting MSM focused research” overall, and the second pertained to a “Specific interest in conducting research within a bathhouse” setting. Examples of participant responses based upon these two themes follow. Please note that all names reflect self-reported pseudonyms.

General Interest in Conducting MSM Focused Research. This theme is defined as participants expressing an interest in conducting GBTQ focused research. This interest was often fostered in the MSW program. Working as an RA for the study provided participants with an opportunity to apply their interest and classroom knowledge to the field. Patrick summarizes this idea with the following comments by integrating his student identity and research goals, which connect to his interests in participating in the project, particularly a GBTQ focused study.

It was just exciting to be participating in research that was taking place at [name of school] and being gay identified... it was nice to participate in research that would directly benefit... people I know, and myself as well... in terms of... contributing to public health issues and understanding like how and where and why these risks are taken, what people’s perceptions are about them, so we can do more effective outreach and educate people better and potentially develop interventions that work a bit more effectively than the things we’ve got right now.

Patrick’s excitement and passion for research inspired him to participate in the study, specifically GBTQ focused research at his university. He also expresses a hope that the research will offer opportunities to develop GBTQ specific health interventions.

Specific Interest in Conducting Research Within a Bathhouse. This theme is defined as interest in the unique venue and setting of the bathhouse being a draw for the participants. After sharing thoughts about research possibilities in general, as well as a specific interest in the MSM population, research assistants identified the bathhouse setting as a specific draw to the project. The uniqueness of the setting was identified by the participants as an important venue for conducting research, particularly with regard to the MSM population. David shares his thoughts on how the venue impacted his decision to participate in the study:

I’ve heard of... the bathhouses and I’ve had clients who frequent [them]. So, I thought this was a great opportunity for me to kind of see what goes on... behind those doors, and I just wanted to be involved that way. I was just interested all

the way around... hearing about what a bathhouse was and how it operated, personally and professionally, versus going in there to actually see what the reality was. That was probably one of my biggest motivations. To even partaking in—as a research assistant.

David links the venue to his client experiences and combines his own interest in learning about the bathhouse to the benefit this knowledge may bring him professionally. He also touches upon seeing the “reality” of the venue as motivation to participate in the project. It is also possible that this information may assist David with future MSM clients, illustrating another example of research informing practice.

Conducting Research: The “During” Stage

Three key themes emerged in the time period noted as “during,” which included: “Managing pre-conceived notions of stigma: Bathhouse settings and patrons”; “Navigating personal and professional roles and boundaries”; and “Emotional reactions to the setting and patrons.”

Managing Pre-Conceived Notions of Stigma: Bathhouse Settings and Patrons. Participants met with the principal investigators for an initial orientation to the research project and bathhouse setting before they began data collection. During this training various discussions regarding the bathhouse culture and the role of the researcher were discussed. The principal investigators explained the layout of the bathhouse as well as what potential experiences the research assistants might encounter within the venue. This training became important when conceptualizing the findings of the study. Specifically, participants entered the bathhouse with ideas related to the setting, the type of patrons who might frequent the setting, and activities that might occur. This theme then is defined by considering the stigma identified by the research assistants related to the bathhouse venue as well as the patrons of the setting as they entered the space.

Many participants identified the stigma they felt toward the space and patrons alike. However, thoughts and perceptions changed for some of them while they were conducting the study as evidenced by Andrew’s statement:

I did come in very hyper-vigilant, and it was a lot tamer than I thought it was going to be... definitely wasn’t what I expected, kind of going in... there were people in towels for the most part... but it wasn’t very crowded, and there wasn’t as much... overt sexual behavior that I saw... I kind of went away from the experience thinking this is actually not a bad place. Like, actually I think it’s something that’s healthy for our community. Whereas, kinda prior to going in... I felt like there was a lot of stigma, and a lot of people that have low opinions... of the bathhouse... so I think that might have influenced my perceptions of it... prior to going in, and kind of going through the experience I thought it was eye-opening. It definitely wasn’t what I was thinking it would be.

Andrew acknowledges his “hyper-vigilance” while entering the space, yet his expectations were challenged and ultimately changed during the data collection experience. Throughout the process, he expands beyond his personal preconceived thoughts and beliefs about the bathhouse and those who use it. In addition, he considers how others may stigmatize the setting and how might have served to influence his interaction with the space and patrons.

Navigating Personal and Professional Roles and Boundaries. While participants had preconceived notions of stigma, they also entered the unique research setting with personal and professional roles and boundaries. Participants were completing their MSW studies during data collection at the university affiliated with the research project. This led to unique dilemmas for them related to the intersection of professional and personal roles and boundaries. This theme considers how participants navigated their personal and professional boundaries. For example, some participants were approached and propositioned by bathhouse patrons during the data collection process. Chet describes ones of these experiences:

I tried to keep my mind focused on the fact that we need to get a certain number of surveys done... I had a gentleman come up behind me and, like, lick my neck... I turned around... and you know, politely asked him if he'd like to fill out a survey... I definitely felt like... that sort of disbelief of "is this actually happening to me right now?" And in, in that moment, checking myself and being like ok, "What am I here for again?"

As Chet's quote demonstrates, participants were not immune to advances from bathhouse patrons and were challenged to remain focused on the purpose of data collection, while at the same time navigating the space of personal and professional boundaries. While Chet questioned this potential violation of his personal boundaries, he refers to "checking himself" and deciding stay focused on his professional goal of asking the patron to fill out a survey. David identified instances where he was forced to negotiate between the personal and professional roles and navigating boundaries during his time collecting data:

Kind of taking in the scenery of, like, the porn [on the televisions] just having that in the background... at first it's very much in your forefront, then after a while, you almost like forget it's there... you kind of just [laughs] acclimate to the area... I was more interested about the demographics of people who were there... if I met someone outside of here would I think, "Maybe I would want to meet up with them, get a drink with them, date them, but now that they're in a bathhouse, all of a sudden do I have this personal bias," like, "Oh, they frequent a bathhouse, what does that mean?"

David considers his professional role working as a research assistant in an environment with erotic visual content and how over time he is able to acclimate. He also notes being cognizant and curious of his personal feelings regarding patrons and how their presence at the bathhouse may impact his thoughts and feelings about the person as a whole.

Emotional Reactions to the Setting and Patrons. This theme is defined by the self-reported emotional reactions the RA's had towards the bathhouse setting and/or the patrons. The following reaction by Chet illustrates the theme of navigating emotional reactions to the setting and patrons:

By the end of the week I was just walking home, and I didn't want to listen to any music, I didn't want to touch anyone, I didn't want to talk to anybody... I just started to separate myself from it completely... it's an intoxicating environment... and then it can become a toxic environment... that sheen sort of wears off of excitement and very quickly fades into: "Ok, I kinda don't want to be here anymore."

Chet expresses having shifting emotional reactions to the setting, moving from initially intoxicating to toxic. He also reflects upon his personal and quite often emotional feelings related to the bathhouse patrons:

I would see people there who I would have considered to be very attractive, good looking young men [who] just looked very defeated... I couldn't help really feeling for them... I remember there would be nights when I would go home and be really emotional about it, because I thought of myself, but I also thought of my close friends, and wondering if people go and seek out locations like [the bathhouse] just because they feel like, that's it. And that's sort of the only way that they're going to be able to receive emotional [or] physical attention from anyone.

In addition to discussing emotional reactions to the setting and the patrons, participants reported being emotionally affected by the overall research experience. Andrew, who identifies as Asian, experienced emotional reactions related to his racial and ethnic identity, stating:

I'm also very aware about... my own kinda like personal place within the community... and it's not just that I don't have experiences at bathhouses, but also, like being [an] Asian male within the community, how does that play in? I think I only saw one other Asian person at the bathhouse. I'm not sure, you know, if it's a place that Asians generally just don't go to. So, I also felt a little out of place because of that.

Andrew went on to discuss and reflect on how his experience of seeing few Asian men at the gay male bathhouse reflects his thoughts of how Asian men are perceived in LGBTQ communities:

I think there's stigma within the LGBTQ community about Asians, kind of like their role, not just in sexual relationships but just any sort of a relationship. I was thinking about all of that stuff, maybe not like consciously thinking about them, but I think that was part of my unconscious thinking and you know, do I feel accepted in this bathhouse?

Nelson's emotional reaction was quite personal, having been a patron of the bathhouse previously and now feeling as sense of relief of being in a different position in that space:

Everybody's endlessly walking around... hunting something, or being hunted by somebody, or you know... there's the more personal side because this is a place that I was a patron of... infrequently, but, you know, enough to have a membership [laughs]. And so, some reflection about that, like you know to be honest, it was a feeling of relief. Like, "I'm glad I'm not in that place anymore, in that kind of endless...cycling around, looking, looking, always looking."

In this excerpt, Nelson note how the research experience has provided him with an opportunity to reflect on being a former patron of the bathhouse. He feels an emotional sense of relief in being back in the bathhouse is a completely redefined role.

Conducting Research: The “After” Stage

Finally, the key themes that arose in the period noted as the “after” stage of collecting data included: “Strong desire to continue conducting research” and “Strengthened connectedness between personal and professional growth.”

Strong Desire to Continue Conducting Research. This theme is defined as participants expressing a desire to continue conducting research. While some participants expressed a desire to continue engaging in research during their MSW studies, others expressed a desire to stay engaged with research after graduation. For many, their continued interest in research was due to their involvement in the project. In the following quote, Patrick expresses an interest in conducting research during his post-graduate career:

I’d do it again in a heartbeat. It was a great experience, and I think hopefully it leads to more similar research... I’m familiar with some of the history [of the bathhouse] and [the local health department], and there’s been kind of a tense relationship, and it’s been because of research like this that we’ve been able to remove some of the stigma against the LGBT community and against HIV positive people, and against men who sleep with men in general... and kind of keep a place that has been a mainstay in the community kind of open and working and... advocating, spreading accurate knowledge about risky behaviors and how we can better come up with health interventions and educational materials.

Patrick not only expresses an interest in staying engaged in research, he also identifies the importance of continuing to conduct research with LGBTQ populations in spaces in which they gather. He contends that doing so may help address stigma for sexual and gender minority communities.

Strengthened Connectedness Between Personal and Professional Growth. This theme is defined as participants realizing that their personal and professional growth were both impacted and enhanced through the research project. David speaks about his own personal and professional development:

I was really captivated through the whole [project]. Probably going back to those personal and professional sort of intentions and motivations and... kind of checking my own biases of why I wanted to be there, what was I expecting beforehand, what did I actually find. It definitely gave me the perspective of being in a bathhouse and when my clients talk about going to the bathhouse over the weekend... even knowing the space, I can kind of picture, just the fact that they were there, and what sort of population [they ran into]... it kind of motivates me to want to do something more with... either the bathhouse specifically or HIV testing.

David captures the essence of this theme by connecting his personal experience in the bathhouse to his professional perspectives and aspirations. Understanding his preconceived notions of the experience and comparing this to the reality he experienced allowed him to connect more with himself and his current and future clients. This experience has provided him with motivation to continue to do work in this area.

In summary, the role of research assistants collecting data within a bathhouse setting had a profound impact upon the six participants as evidenced in their reactions, feelings and perceptions captured before, during, and after collecting data. Implications for the effective training of research assistants at the undergraduate, graduate and doctoral level, while navigating feelings related to stigma, professional roles and boundaries, as well as the importance of continued collection of such data within non-traditional research settings will be further examined in the following discussion section.

Discussion

Conducting research within non-traditional settings such as a gay bathhouse remains important with regard to assessing behaviors, attitudes and health and mental health risk factors for gay and bisexual men, as well as MSM. Understanding how to effectively prepare research assistants for conducting such research within unique settings remains equally relevant in order to ensure their safety, ethical conduct, and provide a space for them to discuss their feelings, thoughts and experiences (Cambron & Evans, 2003; Naufel & Beike, 2013). In addition to training on research protocols and methods, researchers must assess how much additional preparation is necessary to effectively train research assistants so that they also understand their role in entering such unique spaces, the history and relevance of such public or private spaces for diverse communities (Bérubé, 2003; Nash, 2014), and be responsive to any questions or concerns that may arise. We examined research assistant's overall interest in conducting research within a bathhouse setting as well as their thoughts prior to collecting data, experiences related to collecting data while at the bathhouse and lessons learned as well as the overall impact upon their professional growth and development. It may be helpful to first discuss methods for effectively training and preparing student research assistants to conduct data collection with unique and non-traditional settings.

Training research assistants. Creating a comprehensive training plan to effectively prepare research assistants must include the requirements of one's home institution such as institutional review board (IRB) and ethics trainings, a comprehensive review of study methods, protocols, procedures, and ways to insure participant safety (e.g., consent, assent), especially while collecting data with live subjects in vulnerable or unique settings. One important method may include the use of peer-based trainings that utilize existing or advanced graduate or doctoral student research assistants mentoring those junior to them. Such peer-based training can provide important mentorship in which successes, challenges and insight can be shared in a comfortable and affirming format along with guidance from faculty researchers or primary investigators (PIs). The training plan must include protocols for safety in the event that research assistants are ever placed at risk or feel or sense discomfort in any fashion during the data collection process (Naufel & Beike, 2013). Therefore, we suggest a training plan and methods that includes three tiers of preparation, such as those utilized in this study. First and foremost, graduate assistants must be adequately trained in advance of collecting data. Secondly, they must have a safe space for briefing and debriefing during data collection processes that may include text messaging, small group formats, direct access to PIs, etc. Third, once data collection is completed, research assistants should be brought together to debrief on the entire process, share insights about lessons learned, challenges, and thoughts about moving forward with future research projects in the future.

Stigma, roles and boundaries. Entwined within the effective preparation of research assistants to conduct research among diverse populations is the need to ensure topics related to identifying and managing stigma, exploring clarity of role(s), and navigating boundaries are

addressed (Benoit et al., 2005; Hart-Johnson, 2017; Worthen, 2014). Understanding the intersection of personal feelings and professional roles and duties entails addressing biases and stereotypes we may have related to diverse populations associated with racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. In the same regard we may hold assumptions about unique and non-traditional settings such as bathhouses that can impact our ability to be neutral or affirming researchers. Being open to addressing such stigma, biases and potential challenges related to boundaries is a strength rather than denying or repressing such feelings and thoughts. Researchers and PIs can best assist their research assistants by promoting a safe and affirming space for them to raise such concerns and feelings at any time (Naufel & Beike, 2013). The ultimate goal for openly addressing such thoughts among research assistants would be to ensure (as much as possible) an affirming and safe experience for participants and communities being studied.

Research agendas, diverse populations, and non-traditional settings. Our study underscores the need for continued research of diverse populations such as MSM within unique and non-traditional settings such as bathhouses. Understanding health and mental health behaviors that can impact risk for alcohol and substance use, and potential exposure to STIs, among other factors for diverse populations as well as the training of students to effectively practice among such diverse communities remains critically important to social work and other related professions. Therefore, research agendas that promote examination of behaviors among understudied and diverse populations must be sensitive to entering spaces in which they live and socialize as well as utilize a participatory approach whenever possible (Sydor, 2013). Participatory methods succeed by including the voices of diverse populations from the beginning of developing a research study, through the data collection and analysis components, as well as understanding implications that can directly impact the same communities.

Limitations. Findings from our study should be interpreted as contextually specific. The exploration of only one non-traditional setting and the recruitment of a small sample size of research assistants limits the generalizability of the findings presented in this study. That being said, the selection of such a unique research setting allowed for an in-depth examination of the processes involved in effectively preparing graduate research assistants for data collection in three key time periods including “before, during and after.” Additional research is needed to determine whether the experience of research assistants in other such non-traditional settings share similar or uniquely different experiences. Regardless of these limitations, the current study does provide unique insight with regard to understanding the experience of six graduate research assistants, along with the need for effective training and preparation, briefing and debriefing processes and time, as well as other key areas.

Conclusions

In this study we examined research assistant experiences conducting research among gay and bisexual men, and MSM within a bathhouse setting. Effectively preparing graduate and doctoral students to conduct such research includes foresight by researchers and primary investigators to move beyond review of methodological protocols or IRB training and must address relevant feelings that may arise before, during and after such data collection occurs. Grooming students to become future researchers, scholars, and educators also includes a process of critical self-reflection by existing researchers to think beyond traditional ways in which such processes occur. One example is to include research assistants in all processes from study design to IRB submission, data collection, analyses, and dissemination of study results via co-authorship. Ultimately such research methods and protocols should be always be viewed

as a collaborative process between primary investigators and research assistants. The insight, feedback and reflections of research assistants, such as those provided in our study, can be invaluable in many ways as well as have a long-term impact upon education, practice and research.

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