Intersectional reflexivity and an uncomfortable account of researcher privilege

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Abstract

This article responds to a dearth of writing on intersectional reflexivity in organisational ethnography and in Management and Organisation studies. Intersectional reflexivity, used as a methodological tool and a theoretical framing for this article, combines the fundamentals of intersectional feminist theory and reflexive strategy in qualitative research. Although rooted in feminist thought, this approach, while inclusive of gendered considerations, also reflects on other identities of both the researcher and researched that have an impact in the field and ultimately on the outputs and conclusions that are drawn. The article draws on personal experiences of ethnographic research at a UK food bank, exploring the inequalities that culminate here particularly as a researcher occupying multiple relative privileged identities namely class and education. The focus on the notion of intersectional reflexivity as a methodological trope allows the article to explore inequalities that can be present in the research process, additional to considerations that can be made to minimise them. The key contributions of the papers include the role that discomfort, empowerment and care play in ethnographic research, particularly among marginalised participants, and how reflections on these can lead to more ethical and insightful research.

Keywords

Ethnography, intersectionality, reflexivity

Introduction

Amid the growing scholarly and media attention surrounding the growth of food bank usage in the United Kingdom, my PhD study included a 24-month ethnography investigating the experience of in-work poverty for women who were both working and accessing food banks. The experience of conducting this research was emotionally complex, and at times unsettling and uncomfortable. My discomfort was complexly interrelated with my relative position of difference in the research environment as a middle-class doctoral student studying marginalised women. To understand this experience, I combined the fundamentals of intersectionality and reflexive strategy to explore the

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interconnectedness and impact of the multiple identities of both me and the participants. Intersectional reflexivity became a critical aide in informing decisions in the field to safeguard and empower the women I studied. All considered, this account aims to explore intersectional reflexivity with researcher privilege and difference to encourage more informed and compassionate fieldwork particularly when concerning vulnerable participants. While the reflexive dynamics of gender have been widely studied, other identities such as class and education and their impact in the field have, to date, had little attention (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2023). The contributions of the article therefore are twofold – first advancing scholarly understanding of the theory of intersectional reflexivity while second providing insight and examples of how it could be operationalised in the field.

Reflexive strategies in qualitative research are a way to critically understand the 'how' and 'what' of knowledge acquisition (Pillow, 2003). Much like the participants we study, as researchers, we also occupy fluid and changing categories and identities which intersect not only with each other but also with the environments we research and the relationships that develop in the field. Previous scholars have touched upon the complex tensions and emotions that emerge when engaging in ethnography, for example the at times 'painful' nature of immersion in the field (McMurray, 2021). My own interactions demonstrate the value of reflexivity and intersectionality in this research context whereby the interpretations of the narratives were nuanced with many concerns of social and economic justice in the United Kingdom, notably in relation to food bank users. Although I felt uneasy acknowledging and writing about the relevance and impact of my own advantages, this article demonstrates how intersectional reflexivity as a methodological tool can raise awareness of inequalities that emerge in the field and thus make decisions around the navigation of relationships that endeavour to mitigate any negative impacts on participants of research.

This article explores the methodological approach of intersectional reflexivity drawing on my unique experience of researching women accessing food banks from within employment. The findings simultaneously make a theoretical contribution, one deeply intertwined with the methodological insights – in that the concept and operationalisation of intersectional reflexivity are highly valuable in designing more ethical and compassionate research with the potential to empower both the researcher and researched. The article begins with a contextualisation of reflexivity and intersectionality as methodological tools for empowering research then introduce food banks in the United Kingdom and the methods that have been used to study them. Intersectional reflexivity is then explored as the theoretical framing before the main findings are discussed – presented as reflections and experiences relative to certain markers of identity which impacted interactions and relationships at the food bank. The article will conclude by discussing some of the key themes that emerged, these being discomfort, ethics and empowerment. Finally, I reflect on how my own experience can contribute to researcher practices and the management of field relations which are particularly valuable for management and organisation scholars, for example those studying vulnerable participants. I hope that these insights could open opportunities to access more hard-to-reach participants such as those I met at the food bank.

Reflexivity and intersectionality in research

Reflexive strategies in qualitative research emerged in the 1970s in reaction to critique of classical methods, with their value identified as the ability to locate and challenge issues of power in social research (Pillow, 2003). Various descriptions or interpretations of reflexivity exist, but McCabe and Holmes (2009) describe reflexivity as a 'technology of the self' (p. 1524) to be applied with emancipatory power throughout the process of research. I understand this as the way that researchers use reflexivity to critically understand and analyse their own experiences of and their role

within research. This can allow subtle changes to be made throughout the process of research if necessary – ones that can protect and empower the participants and allow for new insights to emerge from a heightened awareness of the complexities and nuances of fieldwork, data collection and analysis. In organisation studies for example, reflexive strategies can contribute to more holistic and responsive ways to manage people and organisations (Cunliffe, 2004). Feminist scholars were pioneering in the development of reflexivity to empower and avoid the exploitation of women, for example Oakley (1981) who inspired social researchers to 'not objectify your sister' (p. 41) through a careful and considered approach of reflexivity.

Engaging with reflexivity is not without its challenges, for example Finlay (2002) describes the way researchers must 'negotiate the "swamp" of interminable self-analysis and self-disclosure' while other scholars recognise the danger of reflexivity as being self-indulgent (Patai, 1993 [1991]). As the experience and outcome of qualitative research is intricately intertwined with a researchers' identity and self, Folkes (2023) raises concerns around positionality. She explores the way that a shallow approach to reflexivity can lead to considerations of positionality risking becoming simply a descriptive 'list' of characteristics that are shared and those that are not – thus unlikely to provide value to research. It is suggested that progressive ways in overcoming this include meaningful discussion at times outside of formal data collection, with both fellow researchers (Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015) and the research participants themselves (Folkes, 2023). My own strategy extended these discussions to others present in the field, for example my fellow volunteers. Folkes (2023) also emphasises the value of using field notes or research journals to draw attention to the often-transient nature of a researcher and researcher's positionality. My own field notes were pivotal in developing the reflections I present in this paper – returning to previously written entries helped me to recognise and understand my perceptions and the role of identity and experience-based biases. A deeper understanding of these biases in the wider context of myself and my participants helped me to mitigate them as the fieldwork continued.

Self-reflexivity has emerged as a valuable and efficient way for researchers to contextualise and understand their emotions and experiences relative to their specific research context and participants (Blackman, 2007; Campbell, 2002; Young, 1997) and to challenges of power and authority that may emerge (Gilmore and Kenny, 2014). An intersectional approach can complement this process (Brah and Phoenix, 2004), for example as the more attuned focus on the intersections of the identities of both researcher and researched helps to overcome some of the challenges previously discussed.

Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality was proposed as a framework to understand oppression and disadvantage faced by African American women. It acknowledges the intersections of identity and their impact on experience, for example overlapping identities such as race, social class and education and the way that they create constructs of discrimination or privilege (Crenshaw, 1994; Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). In this way intersectionality acts as a dynamic analysis that explores power hierarchies created within society and translated in social inequalities and centralises identity in a position to contextualise these power relations (Collins, 1990). With this considered, intersectional reflexivity will be the framing for the article, with further detail on this in the section that follows.

Context of the research case study: food banks in the United Kingdom

I deem it important to introduce the context of food banks in the United Kingdom, however I emphasise that my only experience of food banks has been as a volunteer and as a researcher and never as a service user. This was, and will continue to be significant throughout.

The number of food banks in Britain has grown exponentially since 2010, with an estimated 3000 currently in operation (Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), 2022). Although each food bank has nuanced ways of operating, many use a referral service (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Livingstone, 2015) that once issued allows claimants to collect a 'parcel' containing non-perishable essentials (Bull and Harries, 2013). Food banks in the United Kingdom undoubtedly face a complex dilemma of meeting urgent need versus addressing the underlying contributors of food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Livingstone, 2015).

There is no 'typical' food bank user and the groups vulnerable to needing a food bank vary in gender, age and professional or domestic status (Livingstone, 2015). It has however been suggested that single parents, often young mothers, are the most at risk of the reliance on food banks (Sosenko et al., 2019). Since 2010, welfare reforms and the degradation of labour have been commonly associated with food bank use (Lawson and Kearns, 2018). The experience of using a food bank has been described by affected individuals as shameful, embarrassing, degrading and humiliating (Douglas et al., 2015; Garthwaite et al., 2015).

Studies exploring food banks have largely favoured qualitative methods (Beck and Gwilym, 2020) and more specifically, ethnographic methods (Garthwaite et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Researchers at food banks have identified practical and moral challenges emerging in the field interrelated with their own identities, for example relative to religion (Garthwaite, 2016) and gender (Haddow, 2022). Learning from other researchers' experiences coupled with my own, I recognise the value of both reflexivity and intersectionality in overcoming challenges and unpicking the experience of research in this context. Ethnographic study involving vulnerable populations can arouse complex concerns relative to power imbalances. This includes the power the researcher holds in the researcher/participant relationship especially when the researcher is different for example in terms of class, background and educational attainment. Attention to such imbalances and inequalities present among the participants at the food bank was crucial–having never personally experienced poverty nor food insecurity or the effects, it was difficult to fully empathise. From the outset I was conscious of this, most importantly not wanting to make anyone using the food bank uncomfortable or stigmatised, knowing that many depended on the support to survive and feed their families. A lack of care, consideration and flexibility thus could have been problematic for example leading to the possible reproduction of inequalities.

An intersectional reflexive approach in practice

To first propose a definition, intersectional reflexivity acknowledges both the researcher and research participants' multiple and fluid identities; the way that these identities interact with each other; the impact that this has on the research process; and the conclusions and implications to be drawn (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Castro, 2021; Joseph, 2006). This continuous process aids a deeper conceptualisation of a researcher's relationship and interactions with their researched population (Adams, 2021; Jones, 2010). For example, while a researcher's gender or class may have a subsequent impact on their own perceptions and the production of knowledge (Banks, 1998), it is also important to consider the role of participants in the research process and the ways that their perceptions of the researcher's identity could also impact or change the study (Padfield and Procter, 1996). It can also help to propose solutions in the face of any emerging challenges such as barriers to access or ethical issues (Rodriguez, 2018). I understand intersectional reflexivity as differentiated from other forms of reflexivity in that it pays closer attention to the role of intersecting identities in experience and interactions rather than just the power of the researcher. In this way researchers can critique their own behaviours and perspectives and most prominently the way these can influence the very field being studied (Castro, 2021). This is a more detailed and holistic

approach to managing power imbalances, informing a more considered and ethical approach to embedding reflexivity into participant relationships.

Scholarly applications of intersectional reflexivity have included studies of various groups, such as self-employed older women (Meliou and Mallett, 2022) and homosexuals working in academia (Jones and Calafell, 2012). Their critical theoretical approaches show advances in understanding blind spots and power struggles in research thus demonstrating the potential of intersectional reflexivity in diverse fields and undertaken by diverse researchers. Both the privilege and disadvantage of researchers in terms of their positionality can be understood relative to their intersections (Castro, 2021; Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2023), and I view my own experience as an important demonstration of the way intersectional reflexivity can be a strategy for 'researchers in a more privileged position to explore their advantage' (Castro, 2021). Reflexive processes in research push scholars to embrace the 'messiness' of complex research (Jones, 2010) which requires deep commitment and high levels of methodological reflexivity and attention (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014).

For my data collection, I conducted an ethnography in which I adopted a dual role as a researcher and a volunteer at two UK food banks to explore the context, experience and impact of food bank use among working women. I spent a period of 24 months volunteering at the food banks during which time I observed the everyday activities and interactions that occurred there. I documented comprehensive field notes during the participant observation and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with women using the food banks and the volunteers also. While I rigorously followed ethical guidelines and exercised practices such as voluntary participation, consent and anonymity – due to the nature of the participant observation it was not always practical to inform every individual present at the food bank of my role as a researcher. I therefore was pragmatic in my approach, for example when I spoke to people, I would inform them of my role and research so that all those whose stories were documented in the field notes had the opportunity to opt-out or discuss what they did and did not feel comfortable sharing any further.

In operationalising intersectional reflexivity, Jones (2014) describes the application as one that 'requires one to acknowledge one's intersectional identities, both marginalised and privileged, and then employ self-reflexivity, which moves one beyond self-reflection to the often-uncomfortable level of self-implication' (p. 122). Castro (2021) proposed a guide to the process of intersectional reflexivity in ethnographic research, including questions to consider such as 'who am I?' and 'what was my positioning at the time I conducted research?'. The guide was pivotal in my own application of intersectional reflexivity – a document that I kept open while writing my field notes and conducting my analysis to provide me with a check list of considerations and a systematic way of gathering my thoughts and perspectives. Scholars acknowledge the importance of reflexivity as a 'live' practice to be engaged with throughout all stages of research (Baz, 2023; Benson and O'Reilly, 2020) and I too take inspiration from Baz (2023) who continuously interrogated her own intersectional identities and the way they influenced interactions. Like Baz (2023), I adopted a process of reflecting on my behaviours and actions with an intersectional reflexive lens and asking myself questions akin to those of Castro (2021).

Previous scholars working with co-authors to conduct intersectional analysis have benefitted from interrogating and challenging each other critically to embed the principles of intersectionality (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2023). My own analysis spanned over an extended period, involving readings and re-readings of my observations, additional journaling and note-taking, and a multitude of informal conversations with peers at the university and the food bank about my experience. This process allowed me to try to make sense of the discomfort and emotions that I felt and wrote about. I combined the conversations and reflections which I had experienced with a thematic analysis of critical moments I identified in my field notes. The result was that the key themes I grappled

with were intricately intertwined with intersections of my own identity – namely class, education and gender. Drawing on work by McCall (2005) I acknowledge that a rigid categorisation based on identity can be seen as a barrier to depth of analysis, especially as many of the experiences I discuss raise themes which indeed intersect these markers of identity. With this said, while my account is presented under these categories, I adopt an intercategorical complexity (McCall, 2005) meaning that these categorisations are used strategically so that the interplays and intersections are still able to be clearly highlighted. For example, I recognise where relevant that my experiences were rarely isolated to an association with one identity, especially class and education which are historically intertwined. The subsequent discussion therefore develops an intersectional reading of these social identities which will contribute to innovative methodological insights relevant to organisational ethnography.

Navigating a class 'clash'

I begin my findings with an exploration of class, feeling that it was a theme that characterised both the interactions I experienced and many of the complex issues surrounding food bank use. As many of the anecdotes reflect, I entered the research field with a naivety towards the impact of class, and this section details the development of my perspective on the role that it played.

My first got involved with the food bank to meet new people – however I soon became troubled by the plight faced by women battling work and hardship, noticing the acute vulnerabilities trying to feed themselves and their families. I became interested in a study that could create a space for the women's experiences to be heard. While many researchers choose their research topic and setting based on personal experiences or affiliations (Castro, 2021), I have never used a food bank and I come from a comfortable working middle-class background. I gave little thought to the intersectional complexities of the research setting – focussing more on the outputs and processes that would help me to be successful in my studies, a topic to which I return later in the article. The field notes below document my first day as both a volunteer and researcher:

> As I arrived there were people everywhere – nobody really noticed me. I asked for the woman who I had spoken to on the phone, to which a man said she was out doing a collection but that I could help in the meantime. We started chatting. Unprompted, I began to tell him about my research, university, my doctorate, field notes, and interviews . . . I was so nervous and rambling on. He looked at me blankly handing me over a tin of soup. He muttered 'you are not from round here are you', to which I responded 'no'.

Usually confident in social situations, the volunteer's reaction felt like an indicator that I was different – I was unsure if this was my accent, how I dressed, what I had said, or something else. On this reflection, I consider both my accent and dress to be neutral, however this is something I was attentive to, often finding my regional accent becoming more pronounced and my smarter clothes remaining at home for my shifts at the food bank. I consider this to be a way I deployed class, negotiated over periods of time and awareness. This was less a case of trying to fit in, but more trying not to stand out in ways that could have led to alienation.

Despite the common norm that volunteers in the United Kingdom are generally middle-class, retired women (McGarvey et al., 2019), at this food bank many volunteers had become involved having personally experienced poverty or from having claimed a food parcel themselves. Although studies consider that a researcher's status as an outsider can prove beneficial for example in terms of increasing clarity (O'Connor, 2004), minimising bias (Allen, 2004) and increasing objectivity (Banks, 1998), it made me feel awkward and insecure. In trying to be transparent, I had identified

myself as 'different' which impacted the relational dynamics that I would experience. I recognise the perhaps ignorant assumption I had made entering the field – that others would be interested in my study and thus I introduced it as a conversation starter to settle my own nerves, also raising questions around our educational differences. The reality was that they were occupied with their own missions – and quite understandably so – of supporting the food bank and their community. Certain interactions nevertheless served as powerful reminders that I was different, among other things set apart by certain advantages and experiences I had had and indeed not had:

> A woman I was helping started talking about her Universal Credit payments, which had been disrupted from changing hours in her part-time job. We were chatting on, but as she went into more detail though seemed to realise she had lost me in the intricacies of the payment deductions. She asked me if I was on benefits. In response to my head shake and subsequent silence, she turned her back to me to ask Sarah [food bank volunteer] the same question. They began sharing their tales and woes. I felt awkward, like an intruder, so shuffled off to bag up some bread.

In the example our interaction demonstrates the way that the absence of relatability of experience was a barrier to rapport given that I had no personal experience of claiming welfare. I often observed both service users and volunteers chatting and consoling each other in quiet times of the day – this was usually women with other women of which the male volunteers often made comments such as they are having a 'natter' or 'a mothers meeting'. At times the volunteering team did show a gendered split in this way where the women tended to speak to and support the food bank users whereas the men would focus on more manual tasks such as sorting the stock. As much as I wanted to be part of the women's chats, it did not always feel appropriate, nor would it have been to interrupt to tell them about my research.

Sennett and Cobb (1972) found that in research into life experiences, class differences between a researcher and researched could lead to mistrust and suspicion from participants and thus disconnect in the research relationship. In my own situation, as well as the underlying class disparities between myself and the women, I was conscious of the vulnerable state that the women were often in when collecting their parcel and this added complexity served to heighten our differences. At times I received comments like 'you wouldn't know what it is like' and I was often excluded and/ or silenced in dialogues, like those above, that involved the sharing of experiences.

At times my emotional responses stirred an internal moral conflict. Scholars have explored the meaning of emotions in research both for research participants (Owens, 2006) and for the researcher (Blackman, 2007; Campbell, 2002). This is particularly prominent among sensitive research topics (Johnson and Macleod-Clarke, 2003) however Owens (2006) highlights that any topic or research area could have the potential to become sensitive. Campbell (2002) stated that 'we could learn more about our phenomenon of interest by examining how we emotionally respond to our research'. (p. 28), however what became prominent during an interview with Perry, a warehouse worker was that there was a mismatch between our emotional reactions to the topic at hand:

> Perry was telling me about her life and how her situation had unfolded. I couldn't believe some of the things Perry was telling me, but she just kept chatting on as if she was telling me about any mundane day in her life. Her story was shocking and upset me. I could feel a lump in my throat and tears building in my eyes. I couldn't speak so just murmured 'mmhmm' as she kept talking. She noticed my change and looked at me with a sort of confused bewilderment. I swallowed hard and pulled myself together – we continued.

I understood the differing reactions of Perry and I to be influenced by our own relative perceptions, worldviews and experiences. I consider that my relative privilege in comparison to Perry made her

story shocking to me but perhaps 'normal' in her experience – this itself was extremely uncomfortable, as was the reflection that I had wrongly presumed that she would be emotional when speaking about her experience. While the showing of emotion such as tears or distress is often viewed as positive from the view of participants and a factor to foster rapport (Melville and Hincks, 2016) this would generally be sought among comparable experiences and reciprocal dialogue. Akin to Watts (2008) who conducted interviews with cancer patients, without suffering from cancer herself at the time, she spoke of 'an unspoken hierarchy of "authentic" [emotion]' (p. 5) which resonated with my own experience of the role of class and experience in the interaction. Young (1997) too commented that 'when privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the others situation' (p. 48). It was important to be mindful and reflexive of this to inform an appropriate way to behave, interact and, at the time of writing up findings, to represent the women and their circumstances without being clouded by my own emotions or assumptions.

Educational differentials as both a barrier and a bridge

Next, I will discuss education and the implications of being a PhD researcher at the food bank. Although this was not necessarily an obvious or visible aspect of my identity, in wanting to be transparent and ethical, I always spoke about my research where relevant and appropriate. I will discuss the way this influenced the relationships and experience that I had in the field.

In general, I exercised care in the way that I spoke about my research. Like Adams (2021) I recognise that my status as a PhD student and my affiliations with the university meant I held a certain privilege thus evoked power differentials between myself and those at the food bank, particularly as very few had a university education themselves or the opportunity to pursue higher education. While cognisant of this power imbalance and the way I may be perceived, I too faced certain external tensions and pressures from my university. As a scholarship PhD student, I had deadlines and expectations to meet, thus found myself trying to find a balance of being a 'good' researcher and a 'good' food bank volunteer.

Having previously mentioned the relationship with the other volunteers – the interactions that occurred were of significance considering that they acted as gatekeepers to bridge trust and facilitate relationships with other participants (Kerstetter, 2012). Trust was crucial to the research in terms of access (Laenen, 2009), ethics (Punch, 1994 [1993]) and the authenticity of outputs (Orb et al., 2001). It was difficult to find food banks that would take me on as a volunteer–sensing hesitation at the mention of research each time. Once I had started volunteering, although the volunteers were all welcoming and friendly, I did feel that my PhD created a barrier to my inclusion in the group. I recall comments in my early days of volunteering from the volunteers such as 'leave your clipboard at home' and reminders that 'once you walk through that door you are just a volunteer like the rest of us'. Although masked in humour, I sensed hostility and protectiveness. I sacrificed time spent working on my PhD to regularly help at the food bank hoping to minimise the hostility I perceived. This was not always an easy decision as deadlines got closer but over time my continued presence and my commitment to volunteering did help to relieve tensions, showing the value of more time and immersion spent in a research area to forge trust amid differences (Pillow, 2003). Eventually the volunteers became more inquisitive and interested in the research I was doing as our relationships developed.

Over time, I began to meet and talk to more women who were accessing the food bank. Again, despite always being transparent however I often felt misunderstood or that my motivations or intent were questioned by them. PhD study and research were often something unfamiliar to those at the food bank (much like to anyone who has not done a PhD!) at times therefore arousing suspicion:

> I noticed Kayla was loitering around the entrance perhaps waiting for a sign to come in. I smiled and mouthed 'hello' and she came over. In a quiet corner I double checked that she was still OK to do the interview. She looked around and could see there were a few people in and another few waiting outside. She quietly said that she didn't mind doing it but asked if we could go somewhere private. Having pre-empted this, I said of course, and we wandered through to the back. As we sat down, she laughed. 'Thanks' she said. 'I didn't want anyone to see me and think I was sleeping with the enemy'.

Having considered the comfort of my participants and the impact that it had on the research process, I had not considered that their discomfort may arise from their associations or relationship with me and/or my activity. In the way Faria and Mollett (2016) first acted defensively to moments they perceived as '(mis)reading in the field' (p. 87) I found myself upset, frustrated and misunderstood by Kayla's comment. Speaking with a fellow volunteer later in the day she speculated that Kayla may have bad experiences with interviews or interviewers thus could have influenced her view of me as an 'interviewer' and therefore her association with me. The dynamic between us thus was complex, requiring a '[move] away from anxious efforts of correction, instead reflecting on our shared but differently rooted anxieties' (Faria and Mollett, 2016: 87). After the experience with Kayla, I tried to avoid using the word interview, replacing it with 'chat'. Although a minor change, I hoped that it would minimise the distance I perceived between us because of the formality associated with terms such as 'interview'.

Despite the moments of tension and awkwardness that I experienced, over time I came to concur with Garthwaite's (2016) experience conducting ethnography at a food bank in that '[service users] were more interested in my role as a food bank volunteer, and how I can help them' (p. 4). Ultimately it was naive to consider that those at the food bank would place the same significance on academic research as I did (Young, 1997), especially those who were battling to simply feed themselves. In some cases, simply 'hanging out' allowed discussions to occur more organically (Browne and McBride, 2015), and even opportunities where my differences fostered connection:

> I was sat working on my laptop before I headed home. A young woman awkwardly loitering around waiting for her food, so I invited her to join me. We started chatting and she asked me what I was doing, and I told her about the [Human Resource Management] essays I had been marking. 'So do you know about CVs and stuff then?' she asked me. Admitting I was no expert but that I would be happy to help, we agreed to meet again in the food bank the next week and I would help her. We kept chatting until her food parcel was ready, and she smiled and waved at me as she left.

Whereby acts of service and support both with the volunteers and with the food bank users were pivotal in easing tensions and establishing trust within relationships, like Blix and Wettergren (2015) I deliberated over the strategic nature of these actions and the ways that this could compromise authenticity. I spoke openly about my conflicts with the other volunteers, for example when I felt frustrated and impacted by Kayla's throwaway comment I was reassured by being able to talk about and unpack it. I nevertheless came to ascertain that the time, commitment and consideration that was required demonstrates the genuine care and interest that I invested in the research, the environment and the participants.

The role of gender and feminist research

As a woman, feminist and with a keen interest in women's experiences and social justice, my own gendered identity was not insignificant during the study. An intersectional lens however reminded me that gender is not understood in isolation, and the reflections that follow explore the way shared identity as a woman, although at times meaningful, was also influenced by other factors.

Reflections of gender and intersecting gendered identities had a significant impact on my experiences and understandings at the food bank. I was guided by feminist ethics and principles informed by academic literature and inspired by scholars before me. This included paying attention to power differentials in relationships (Ackerley and True, 2010), overcoming hierarchies (Oakley, 1981), and the value of reflection and reflexivity (Ackerley and True, 2010). I soon realised that many of the principles were mirrored in the behaviours and traits of the volunteers at the food bank – clearly underpinned by values of compassion, understanding and care. Although the volunteers did not speak of feminism nor specific ethics or values, their approach to their roles as volunteers in many ways complemented my own approach to feminist research at the food bank. The volunteers were driven by the motive of social justice and dedicated time and effort to listen to people's stories and show compassion. Mirroring these, over time helped me to minimise the distances and imbalances that I felt because of social identities relating to class and education as previously mentioned. This also made it easy to adopt my role implicitly as a feminist researcher and a woman at the food bank, and I believe it to have forged a connection between others in the field.

In relationships with the women accessing the food bank, although I have highlighted various examples of the way differing identities caused tensions and discomfort, I also experienced interactions that were enhanced by building on shared identities and experiences as women, for example with Allie with whom I felt I bonded with over the shared experiences of work:

> I had met Allie a few times before – as always, she was dressed professionally – in bright colours with a striking red lipstick, with her work lanyard hanging around her neck. She asked me how my 'project' was going to which I rolled my eyes . . . 'slowly', I then admitted. She laughed, and sympathised, confiding with me about frustrations she had had that week with her colleagues which had delayed preparation that they had been set for an upcoming meeting. We were busy ranting away and hadn't noticed that her parcel had been ready and waiting for her. 'Oh gosh look at the time!!' She exclaimed and bustled off with her bags.

My impression of Allie was that her femininity was bound with her identity as a professional, relating to her appearance and the way she spoke of her experiences at work. As a proud worker, it seemed that she appreciated the relatability between us as working women – we spoke of the pressures faced, relationships with co-workers, she voiced concerns about the price of buying 'nice' work clothes. While I had struggled to bridge gaps and tensions with other women due to class and educational differences, I enjoyed the chance to speak to Allie 'woman-to-woman' and in that moment I felt that we were neither researcher and researched or food bank volunteer and service user, but just two women sharing their stories and frustrations. Allie worked in a full-time corporate role – perhaps therefore fostering a relationship with me not just based on shared identities as working women but also due to my associations with a more corporate environment, as she knew of my links with the university Business School. Allie's performative style of behaviour, presentation and the way she spoke of work appeared to be a strategy to assert her identity as a worker and not as a food bank user, but nevertheless this made the relationship akin to that of my own peers.

As Allie agreed to a more formal interview for my study I reflected on our relationship, paying attention to the way I worded questions and framed the interview. In many ways this drew similarities with reflections I had about my experience with Kayla – however in a stark contrast, certain formalities felt more appropriate with Allie. While not wanting to exploit the bond we had developed, I neither wanted to cause discomfort for her in threatening the pride that she carried as a worker. I considered the way differing identities help to foster relationships and the ways that these could be supported either in interviews or ongoing discussions. These could be considered as

'points of relevance' for addressing approaches to interviews and ethical dilemmas (Gergen and Gergen, 2000).

Building on ethical dilemmas, I was driven by feminist principles such as ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) and 'do no harm' (Wiles, 2012) – considerations that were brought to the forefront of my decisions on meeting Maria, a young part-time nurse, who initially agreed to meet me for an interview:

> Since meeting Maria we had exchanged a few messages and had agreed to sit down and have a chat when she was in to grab her parcel. I received a text just as I was starting my shift reading 'Not up for it today – sorry'. I replied reassuring her that it was no problem and reminded her she was under no obligation. She never showed up that day, even to collect her food parcel, and I felt a heavy guilt that it was somehow my fault.

Although impossible to know Maria's real reason for not showing up that day, relaying the experience to a senior male colleague at my institution, I was advised to be more assertive and forthright or that my data collection would 'suffer'. I felt uneasy at the idea. Relating back to the recognition of my position as a PhD student and my lack of experience in research, I questioned whether the way I responded would have an impact on my study or even on my career – thus felt conflicted on how to use his advice. Although a male colleague, there was no way of knowing if this was a gendered response, one from seniority, or from unfamiliarity with the complexity of the research context (or a combination). Either way, I chose to disregard his suggestion.

I reflect on the literature on the ethics of minimising harm and oppression in social work (Clifford and Burke, 2009) and additionally the role of a feminist ethic in my reaction to the situation. Gilligan (1982) regarded moral thinking as distinctive from traditional male thinking, in that this could come from a justice perspective (in the case of my colleague perhaps from the value of the research) whereas a feminist rationale would incorporate more of a care perspective. I deemed it inappropriate to pursue Maria further given the already sensitive nature of her visits to the food bank, and understanding the implications it was important to me in this case to de-prioritise the research not only as a feminist but as a volunteer at the food bank too and the responsibility of care that came with that. This example is an important reminder that research is often dual in nature. While it does often serve to produce advancements for the author, for example in career development, it too can be simultaneously a tool of care and empowerment for the relative participants and indeed the researcher as demonstrated here.

Discussion

This article presents a personal account of my experience as a volunteer and researcher in a food bank. I aim to develop understanding of the application of intersectional reflexivity as a methodological aide by exploring the tensions and complexities that, as a research location, the food bank was fraught with. Reflexive strategies are critical to inequality research particularly when the researcher holds certain privileged identities relative to the research participants (Desmond, 2017). In my own circumstance I have no lived experience of in-work poverty nor food bank use thus I came to understand the need for the careful navigation of relationships. This discussion will consider some of the key themes that emerged from my findings and the way my experience of them was processual. The acknowledgement of interlinking factors among the themes of discomfort, care and empowerment supports the discussion in the way intersectional reflexivity both exposed and transformed my own experiences. From this, several implications can be gleaned for

Management and Organisation researchers, particularly engaging in ethnographic research in locations such as food banks where participants are likely to be vulnerable.

Akin to the experiences of other scholars (Pillow, 2003; Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2023), my experience of reflexivity brought me discomfort both within and beyond the field. I found myself confronted with the uneasy contrast of my difference relative to that of the women using the food bank and several of the volunteers too – this resulted in moments of tension and alienation, and an overall vulnerability relative to the injustices I was witnessing and that I somehow felt part of due to my classed and educational advantages. On reflection I find solace in discomfort, viewing it as a meaningful alternative to complacency or apathy towards others' hardship. Drawing on Bracke's (2016) work I too saw the exploration of my vulnerability as a resistance to injustice in place of a 'resilience' that is often associated with the dispossession or detachment from discomfort. While my discomfort did unearth several of my own anxieties and vulnerabilities, this process resulted in the establishment of deeper connections with the participants at the food bank. In retrospect, from at one point trying to escape and minimise my discomfort, it later transformed to motivate the adoption of certain practices of care throughout the stages of research which I build on later. I strived to communicate discomfort into the presentation of my findings (DeVault and Gross, 2007) to reflect the uncomfortable nature of the very need for food banks in the United Kingdom and the rising number of people accessing their support from within work.

Intersectional reflexivity was valuable in my research in that it helped to draw out issues around care (Rodriguez, 2018) and specifically the role it plays in researcher and participant relationships (Ellis, 2007). Although I followed ethical procedures and consulted numerous papers prior to and during my time spent in the field, I learnt that caring approaches to research (much like the relationships and positionalities that developed over time) required flexibility and a 'spirit of openness' (Bell and Sengupta, 2021)–in many ways interrelated with the way I embraced the transformation of my discomfort. The theme of difference underpinned my experience in the field, thus while relatability was not always attainable, I remained attuned and responsive to differences between myself and the participants. I considered different strategies which would help to negotiate new grounds to connect with the women while navigating power imbalances–for example providing support and building on shared frustrations, or even simply at times knowing when to stand back or say nothing. 'Live' decisions were made around behaviours and communication styles, for example while Perry and Allie shared many of the same challenges and everyday struggles, the ways they presented themselves and responded to and interacted with me were notably distinct. My approach and style to interviewing with the two women therefore required adaptation to reflect these nuances.

Returning to the idea of my experience as processual, I see the transformation of my discomfort into strategies of care as a means of empowering both the participants and I as a researcher. I paid careful attention to listening to the women and made decisions based on individuals and interactions rather than a homogeneous 'sample'. This complemented a more sensitive approach to the women's intersectional identities, experiences and relationships therefore empowering their stories (Bell and Sengupta, 2021). This empowerment would derive from learning from the situational dynamics of advantage and power (Castro, 2021) and dismantling dominant identities such as economic privilege, education and the associated status (Levine-Rasky, 2011). As a result of writing about my embodied vulnerabilities that I felt among the complex injustices present at the food bank, I problematise the role that my own privilege played thus was able to compassionately navigate researcher and participant relationships. Summarising these themes, I found that operationalising intersectional reflexivity meant being open minded and adaptive to change to learn from interactions. I view this as a strategy to demonstrate care for and empower the individuality of each participant and their unique story. In turn, I felt empowered as a researcher in being able to make

decisions which cared for and considered the women I met, which indeed aligned with the primary motivations of my research.

Finally, having considered the way that intersectional reflexivity was transformative in my study at the food bank, I hope that other researchers can also reflect on and learn from my experiences. First, to early career or inexperienced researchers, I hope that this article serves to break down barriers or taboos around how we are supposed to feel, respond and behave in the field particularly when confronted with difference, the unknown and unease. I support the work of Campbell (2002) in that we can learn from our emotional responses to our research. I build on this, inviting doctoral students and early-career researchers to locate their responses and thus also their behaviours, approaches and decisions relative to their own identities, that of their participants, and each unique intersection of both. I believe this can contribute to new insights about the people and places being studied but also to more ethical and compassionate research. For more experienced researchers, while the former applies, I hope that this article can serve as a reminder that our identities and experiences shape us in the same way it does our participants. Entering a new field should never come with complacency but instead with an open-mindedness to different dynamics of relationships and a willingness to adapt as necessary. More importantly, I hope this article highlights that we can all learn from experiences despite the extent of one's knowledge and success and the privilege that comes from this. More broadly, looking to the wider field of Management and Organisation studies, intersectional reflexivity offers a new tool particularly useful to ethnographic studies and it enables greater consideration of themes of care and empowerment. Its advancement in the field could help to open new doors to vulnerable, silenced, or hard-to reach participants thus potentially unlocking the value of a wider group of voices to contribute to our understandings of workplaces and society more generally.

Conclusion

To conclude the article, the reflexive strategy informed by intersectionality was a process that was at times chaotic (Adams, 2021) and unsettling (Jones, 2010). Nevertheless, it was a critical lesson in exploring the impact of my presence in the field both on the participants I met and their impact on me, and on the process, and presentation of the research more generally (Caretta and Jokinen, 2017). I recognise that many of the tensions that I experienced as a researcher and as an individual reflect the wider social issues tied up with food bank usage – namely vulnerability, inequality and marginalisation. Intersectional reflexivity allowed these to be considered through the multiple lenses of social identities and their roles in interactions and relationships, for example as researcher/ researched, as volunteer/food bank user, as women and as workers. It should be considered that the recognition of intersecting differences and similarities between myself and the women I researched contributed to more insightful data and more ethically informed decisions around access and behaviours in the field.

To clarify the discussed contribution of the article of being able to develop insight around the operationalisation of intersectional reflexivity, I see that the process of embracing discomfort through a lens of care and understanding resulted in tangible strategies to empower the women. Building on the guide provided by Castro (2021), my own experiences offer insight into the way such considerations could manifest and thus impact fieldwork. Some of the examples I share include modifying my styles of communication and behaviour, knowing when to step back or say nothing and providing help or support where appropriate. Although these examples are all unique to this specific field and group of participants, they are driven by an ethos of seeing, hearing, considering and understanding our participants to then act accordingly. These strategies are

particularly relevant in fields of research, such as the food bank, that revealed multi-layered tensions around image, identity and status (Douglas et al., 2015; Garthwaite et al., 2015).

Unique in the field, this article has been the first to consider an intersectional reflexive approach to research in a food bank thus making both methodological and theoretical contributions. The article has raised a myriad of tensions concerning intersectional identities between researcher and researched at the food bank and highlighted the significance of understanding the context of relationships and behaviour in determining appropriate courses of action in terms of the progression of the research process. I hope to highlight intersectional reflexivity in this way as a tool for researchers to increase consideration and care towards vulnerable members of a research environment, shining light on certain encounters which I hope will inform future research of how to deal with similar challenges or experiences in the field (Dean, 2021). As a closing point, I hope that from my experience scholars can learn to be humble in their research pursuits while remaining attuned to both the powers and pitfalls of difference relative to participants – the goal being to produce more inclusive and contextually informed research that empowers the individuals we study and the stories they kindly and bravely share with us.

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