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EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY AND THE GENDER LENS

Abstract

Researching 'hidden' forms of social inequality such as gender often poses particular challenges. Not least of these is how to uncover such dimensions of social life whilst preserving the perspectives of research participants, who may not consider such matters relevant to their lives, particularly if other forms of identity or oppression are more prominent for them. Here, I reflect on these issues in the context of researching user involvement in mental health services from a feminist perspective. I show how 'uncovering' gender and other forms of social inequality in the field was aided through adopting a wide analytical lens focusing on power, along with reflexivity and openness in discussing my own political analysis and commitments in relation to the study area with the researched. I also describe how I attempted to resolve the epistemological-ethical issues involved through conceptualising these in terms of 'situatedness' and gender salience and adopting a feminist standpoint which emphasised what researchers can, and indeed should, bring to the research enterprise. Related issues of power and empowerment in the research process are discussed.

Introduction

Disparities often exist between the interests and concerns that researchers bring to their investigations and what participants see as relevant to their experiences and ideas. In sociological inquiry these relate to the fact that whilst this aims to understand and make visible connections between people's experiences and subjectivities, on the one hand, and wider social systems such as those of gender and social class, on the other, 'the

researched' will not always view their own lives in such terms (Millen, 1997). Researching such 'hidden' dimensions of social life, that people may be reluctant to discuss, can therefore evoke issues of interpretive authority as we grapple with the interaction between 'lay' and 'privileged' knowledges (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). The ethical and epistemological challenges for researchers include risks of muting participants' voices and representing them in ways of which they may not agree or approve, as well as the 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1988) of positioning researcher rather than informants as knower and reinforcing the power constituted through the researcher's evaluating authority (Hauser, 1997). Yet equally social researchers must be careful to avoid the 'individuation and fragmentation' (Maynard, 1994: 22) likely to arise from merely describing what participants tell us, and of validating and reinforcing what may be considered problematic dominant understandings and interpretations (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997).

These concerns are especially relevant when researching gender due to its peculiar omni-presence yet 'invisibility' in most arenas of social life. Further, they have been particularly pertinent for feminist research due to its aims - to illuminate gender as central to our understanding of social life (Lather, 1995) and to undertake inquiries and produce knowledge that will benefit the lives of women (Kelly *et al.*, 1994) – not always sitting easily with its additional imperative to privilege women's experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Questions have therefore variously been posed: how to represent women's voices 'in a way which is faithful to their experiences and language, but does not position them as 'other' and reproduce hierarchies of power and knowledge?' (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 19); how to produce 'an analysis which goes

beyond the experience of the researched whilst still granting them full subjectivity?' (Acker *et al*., 1983: 429); how to 'represent women's lives as they experience them while at the same time challenging women's oppression?' (Andrews, 2002: 55).

These questions take on further relevance when undertaking feminist research into dominated or marginalised groups for whose members forms of social categorisation or oppression other than gender are prominent and for whom strategic appeals to epistemic privilege have been politically empowering (Davion, 1998; Bar On, 1993). In these cases, and particularly when the researcher herself is not a member of the group, research which privileges the researcher's perspective risks doing further violence to the group through reproducing institutional relations of oppression. Indeed the question can be posed of whether researchers should even attempt inquiries into 'groups to which we ourselves do not belong - in particular members of groups oppressed in ways we are not' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 1) due to perhaps unavoidable risks of 'colonization' and exploitation.

Andrews (2002) notes that feminist researchers have responded in several ways to these problems, including through recourse to the concept of false consciousness (e.g. Lather, 1986), dialogue and negotiation of meaning between researcher and participant(s) (e.g. Borland, 1991), and the notion of situated knowledges and gender salience - how perceived relevance of gender for understanding experiences can vary 'in different arenas or at different times of life, and in relation to other aspects of social or cultural categorisation and identity' (Chodorow, 1996: 43). Assertions have also been made regarding the responsibilities of researchers and what we can and should bring to the

research enterprise (e.g. Smith, 1986; 1987; Maynard, 1994). Many have pointed to the political significance of publicly highlighting and trying to understand the forms of disadvantage or oppression experienced by 'others' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996) and the need, therefore, to guarde against either a reactionary withdrawal from or relativism in the face of such research (Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000). Instead, feminist researchers have stressed the importance of reflexivity and openness about the choices and relationships involved in research (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Maynard, 1994); of creating 'useful knowledge' in an interactive fashion with the researched (Kelly *et al.*, 1994); and of telling 'better stories' that both reflect the realities of women's lives and help make visible the social forces shaping these (DeFransisco, 1997; Ramazanoglu, 2002).

In what follows, I explore in the context of these issues and assertions my own experiences of researching user involvement in mental health services from a feminist standpoint and as an outsider to the field I was investigating. Initially I describe how I negotiated challenges of presenting myself and the research to the study population, and of bringing gender in as an analytical focus. Subsequently, I consider how women and men members of mental health service user groups oriented to matters of gender during my interviews with them, and their different, and sometimes apparently changing, reflections about these over time. The paper then draws from this account with a discussion of negotiating epistemic privilege and uncovering such forms of social inequality as gender, including with groups for whom other forms of disadvantage or political alignment are more salient. I begin by providing some background to the study.

The study

'User involvement' in mental health services refers to the active participation of service users, at the levels of both individual usage and the development of services. This doctoral study aimed to explore the outcomes of user involvement policies and practices for such user participation, and for advancing mental health service provision. Conducted from a feminist and critical discourse analytic perspective, its focus was on the operation of power in and through language and on gender as a lens for analysis. It was based in the north-east of Scotland and employed a variety of research methods including government policy analysis, participant observation at mental health service user and community group meetings, and in-depth interviews with members of these groups. This paper draws on data from interviews and other research encounters with men and women service users (nine women and sixteen men were interviewed in total, along with six service providers and practitioners linked to the groups; all were white and most were aged between 36 and 65 years).[1] Both women and men were interviewed due to the recognition that feminist research can often benefit from studying gender relations rather than women alone.

At the time of proposing the study I was a (young, white, female) researcher in a medical school[2] working on a literature review about shared treatment decision-making between psychiatrists and service users, a post I had managed to secure due to my academic background in sociology and psychology, along with experience of undertaking 'support work' in mental health services. Having previously developed an interest in feminism, I noticed how considerations of gender tended to be overlooked in the literature, and was also intrigued by some limited wider literature on user

involvement in mental health services that incorporated a feminist perspective. Wishing

to undertake a PhD, the subject seemed one worthy of further study from a feminist

standpoint and to which my other interest in discourse analysis could fruitfully be

applied. The study was consequently embarked upon, with a broad substantive focus on

all levels at which user involvement in services can occur.

The challenges of feminist research: bringing gender in

One of the first dilemmas that feminist researchers often face is how to present their

research to the potential study population. My initial approach to the mental health

service user groups in this research was to be open about and indeed to try to capitalise

upon the interest in gender and feminist perspective I was bringing to it. This seemed

important in order not to mislead individuals or to foreclose the opportunity of

discussing with them my own interests and concerns in relation to the study area. I also

thought that the strategy would allow me to dispel at an early stage anticipated

problematic conceptions of feminism (and feminists) among group members and would

help me to reduce further ethical dilemmas at the stages of interpretation of participants'

accounts and reporting of the research.

However, whilst this approach appeared to stimulate interest among many individuals,

who consequently put themselves forward for interviews, from others I did not escape

the charge of my perspective being 'irrelevant', and one woman declined to be

interviewed on these grounds. Interestingly, though, my interest in exploring gender in

the study did not seem to put many male group members off taking part, and some even

engaged in discussions with me about its scope. For example, one stated (in an e-mail communication):

> My concern is that if we are to understand gender factors in user representation, we must first understand the fundamental dynamics at work in the system. This we have not yet done sufficiently well even to drive necessary change, so I wonder if we are yet ready to realistically establish gender influences. (Simon)[3]

On such occasions I was compelled to explicate why I felt gender to be a fundamental consideration and that such perceptions of its insignificance were one of the things the study aimed to challenge. These discussions therefore produced preliminary indications of views towards gender issues in my area of research and were also helpful to my (re)conceptualisation of the study, as it became clear that I should - following DeFransisco (1997) - 'move beyond gender alone to study it through a more encompassing lens focusing on power' (42). This was important to ensuring not only people's participation, but also that critical contextual information was not lost and that the study did not 'obscure other dimensions of power and powerlessness' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 4) or do a disservice to the concerns of those who took part, including the men.

The dilemma remained, however, of whether and how to directly address gender during research interviews (or to leave this to 'emerge' from the data). On the one hand my initial interactions suggested a direct approach could potentially jeopardise my rapport with some interviewees (cf. Woodward and Chrisholm, 1981), whilst on the other, I had become aware of a number of gender issues through my policy analysis, participant

observation and informal interactions with group members, and wanted to explore these during interviews. I consequently decided to weave considerations of gender through my interview topic guide and to only raise these in interviews when it seemed appropriate. This was particularly important as I was faced with the difficulty of empathising across difference (with respect to experiences of mental suffering and of using mental health services) and it was important that I did not appear insensitive by raising issues with which participants may not have been immediately concerned.

Of course my policy analysis and participant observation at meetings provided important insights about gender in their own right. But this also eased the business of discussing gender with participants since I had been attending meetings, following events and so on as they had, and so there were often mutual points of reference through which I could introduce the issue. Moreover, this prior involvement and knowledge meant that I felt in a more legitimate position to question participants' interpretations surrounding gender in order to further the interview discussions. This 'interactive' and 'responsive' approach (Opie, 1992) to 'generating' interview data (Mason, 2002) also turned out to be realistic, however, as it became evident that participants often viewed the research relationship as a collaborative one in which we were attempting to come to an understanding of the issues together (cf. Acker *et al.*, 1983; Oakley, 1981). What's more, I found concerns about 'leading' interviewees through my questioning to be largely unfounded as participants normally appeared quick to disagree if my suggestions did not fit with their experience.

It also seemed that as interviewees were generally not thinking in terms of gender, I needed to ask about this directly in order for their reflections to emerge (cf. Chodorow, 1996). In the following example this allowed me to consider the participant's perception of the gender dynamics of group meetings, as well as the accounting resources drawn on to justify these (women's 'free choice'):

> Q. Do you notice anything in terms of differences in how men and women participate in the group?
>
> A. It's not something that I've given any thought to but now that you mention it, it tends to be the men that lead, that chair the meetings.
>
> Q. Yeah more often isn't it, yeah. Do you think that matters, or not?
>
> A. [Pauses] I think that it's important that the women get encouraged to take part, but maybe they're not at the stage that they want to put themselves forward for that. (Discussion with Sarah)

In a number of respects, then, a direct, yet considered approach to introducing gender seemed both appropriate and necessary if this was to be explored in the study. This was also enabled through employing multiple research methods that included participant observation in the field, and through encapsulating gender within a wider study lens examining power, and that could take into account participants' social locations in other terms.

Women's orientations towards gender: taboo, threat or taken-for granted?

The women's tendency not to discuss their experiences with regard to considerations of gender until specifically asked often seemed to reflect among them a kind of taken-for-

grantedness about these. In some of the interviews, there was a sense in which gender was present throughout and framed the whole account, yet not explicitly drawn upon as an explanatory construct. This seems evident in the following extract, which is in the context of the participant's requests to be referred for psychotherapy. Of note is how her manner of response suggests not only a kind of resignation to gender inequalities, but also a reluctance to engage with the issue at a personal level:

> Q. Is there a gender issue there, do you think, was the fact that it was a male psychiatrist significant in any way?
>
> A. Probably, I mean, again I'm not sure. If you would show me a list of his patients who'd asked him for psychotherapy, or for whatever, and so many were male and so many were female, I don't know, but I would think (sighs), the nature of society, there are always going to be gender issues.
>
> Q. Mm. I wonder whether a female psychiatrist there might have made a difference or not.
>
> A. But certainly I felt, sometimes I felt with him – now this can obviously be me more than anything to do with him – [pauses] what was wanted was for me to be the acquiescent little woman saying 'yes doctor, no doctor, three bags full doctor' which I'm not, never have been. (Discussion with Carol)

It is significant here as well how an initial ambivalence about considerations of gender is followed by a qualified response that both presupposes and is used to counter an expectation of herself being positioned as to blame for the interpretation she offers. This kind of hesitant and indirect orientation to questions about gender was often displayed by the women, showing a reluctance to outwardly and 'publicly' express such

views. This could, though, be replaced at the end of interviews (including after the tape recorder had been switched off), with the emergence of a number of reflections about the significance of gender for experiences of interacting with mental health services (cf. Millen, 1997). For instance one woman reflected on the help she was given to get back to work after being in hospital:

> Q. Was there anything else that you wanted to say before we finish?
>
> A. Yes, you see, gender, we have spoken about it, but I feel that gender came in there because I felt that I had been shoved off, you know, … because I was married, … I was 'being taken care of'. Well that's a gender issue isn't it?...
>
> (Maureen)

There appeared as well a difficulty for the women in discussing gender at times due to it raising issues about which they preferred not to be reminded (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002), or because my understandings and interpretations posed a 'threat to their perceptions, choices and coping strategies' (Kelly *et al.,* 1994: 37, citing Acker *et al.,* 1983). This was evidenced in certain distancing strategies used to avoid discussion of their own gendered positionings, for example as responses related instead the situation of 'others' such as 'women within ethnic minorities'.

On other occasions the incompatibility of our discourses and differences of standpoint seemed to act as a barrier to the women engaging with gender as an issue. Like Chodorow (1996), I found participants could be bemused by my, sometimes convoluted, questions about gender, as it became evident that they were unused to considering their experiences in these terms. I hence realized that I needed to phrase

questions in terms closer to the women's own to encourage them to relate their views, and here asking about the 'significance' of a professional being male/female (as above) often proved more fruitful than simply asking about 'gender'. In the context of discussing user and service planning groups, this latter form of question often became construed only in relation to the sex ratio of meeting attendees:

> Q. Thinking through all these experiences of different groups and everything, … do feel that there's anything necessarily related to gender issues that you notice?
>
> A. Well, I think that it's quite a good mix of men and women that come because you tend to find that with a lot of other groups outwith the mental health [field], it's nearly all women that go to things … (Discussion with Jean)

The participant's response here also seems in part to be a reaction to (perceptions of) my status as a 'feminist' and a reminder to me that women can often dominate such meetings. I thus became aware on such occasions of the disparity between my own feminist frame of reference and the 'supportive and rationalising' attitudes (Woodward and Chrisholm, 1981: 172) which participants were likely to express. Comments about the 'equal' nature of the groups to which the women belonged also illustrated this point, and again indicated how matters of gender were not central to the considerations with which they were operating. Again resonating with Chodorow (1996) it was evident that in the context of mental health services, '[structural] characteristics not linked to gender were personally and culturally salient to them' (43) and that the relevance for them of their gender identity was 'modulated' (40) in this context by their primary identification and participation in the groups as 'users of mental health services'.[4]

Like the male participant quoted earlier, another woman responded when asked about

gender: 'maybe when, once the greater issues are dealt with I would imagine that sort of

thing would start coming up' (subsequently stating these great issues as being 'user

involvement in decision-making and in their own treatment').   There were thus

parallels here with the women Marxists in Andrews (2002) study for whom it was the

'system' that was seen to be at fault and women's issues would be dealt with as a 'by-

product of the revolution' (66). Furthermore, the women's responses suggested that my

questions posed an additional challenge to them and to the 'strategic essentialism'

(Spivak, 1987) of the groups, for which attention to gender could be viewed as divisive:

> There's maybe sort of subconsciously I suppose, a feeling that if we start
>
> looking at minor interest issues, it's going to start fragmenting and it's already
>
> difficult enough to get people together. (Carol)

Thus the women often appeared more prepared to reflect on gender in the context of

individual interactions with services than in that of user involvement at the group or

mental health service-planning level, or else found it difficult to connect between the

two levels. Overall, they responded in varied, and often hesitant and ambivalent, ways

when asked about the issue. Typically, they displayed a taken-for-grantedness about

gender inequalities so that they remained implicit to their accounts until spoken of by

myself (cf. Chodorow's, 1996 reference to a lack of gender 'salience') or else the

subject seemed taboo or threatening for the women to discuss (cf. Acker *et al.,* 1983). I

had to be aware that their uncertainty and ambiguous orientations could well have been

as much towards me (the feminist researcher) as towards matters of gender, as they

moved between resisting my ideas and relating to them, perhaps at times in an attempt to 'please me' (cf. Woodward and Chrisholm, 1981). However as with Millen (1997), the women did reflect at times, and often at length, on the gendered dimensions of their experiences, especially towards the end of or after their (formal) interviews. Thus there was also evidence of the research allowing the women to give expression to these, both through providing space for reflection and discussion and heightening the salience of considerations of gender for them, and perhaps to redefine their experiences in relation to gender to some extent (cf. Opie, 1992).

Men discussing gender: resisting, reflecting, engaging

The men interviewees' orientations to issues of gender showed similarities to those of the women. They often resisted engaging with these or else felt unable to remark beyond factors such as aesthetic preference for women mental health professionals. Gender could also be a present, yet taken-for-granted construct in their accounts:

> Q. But you've *never* had an interaction with a psychiatrist that you found sort of empowering or when the psychiatrist has explained something properly, or//
>
> A. Well I was impressed by one of the female psychiatrists, she was quite good. One time I asked her a question and she looked up the answer in a book. That's the first time I've ever seen a medical professional looking up a question in a book; normally they won't admit that they don't know the answer.
>
> Q. Right, do you think it was significant that that was a woman psychiatrist?
>
> A. No, I don't. Well, maybe I'm not sure … Mind you having said that the two involved in my admission, they were both male… (Discussion with John)

For the men as well, then, highlighting considerations of gender could lead them to reflect on their experiences in these terms. Moreover whilst their comments could often be superficial or predictable in positioning men as the victims of female 'dominance' in mental health services, there were times when they seemed more perceptive of, or at least more prepared to openly acknowledge and engage with, the reality and complexity of gendered power relations in the field than were the women:

> A. I mean men are dominant bastards, that's their nature. Unfortunately, it's a sexist remark, but women *are* still considered that they just cook and all, although it's changing and it isn't always the case, but imagine if you're mentally ill, it would be more so. … I mean it is a thing of extremes – you do find you get some right old battleaxe women who are over-the-top feminist sort of thing to others who are totally different, quite happy to let the man, they want the man to make decisions for them; they're very indecisive, you know, 'what do you think?' 'Oh no what do you think?' 'No I wanna know what you bloody think'. It is like that. You have a job to get them to make – again empowerment – to make a decision for themselves; they're so used to having a man do it for them. That's part of how they see their role.
>
> Q. Have you had that kind of experience like in committee meetings or something …?
>
> A. Yes I can say that I've seen that … (Discussion with Colin)

Hence this male participant, whilst alluding to stereotypes of women as either feminist-extremists or passive victims, does also acknowledge men's oppression of women and

go on to make some important observations about the gendered nature of 'empowerment' for users of mental health services. Another male interviewee as well described older women service users' relative silence compared to the men and younger attendees during user consultation meetings. He also reflected on gender differences in 'styles of contribution' among user representatives, noting how women seemed more directed and tenacious than the men (perhaps linked to enhanced initial difficulties for them in speaking out and which I later interpreted in relation to women's history of struggle against oppression).

Insofar as these men could both afford and had it in their interests to ignore gender inequalities, such revelations on their part could have seemed surprising. However these were highly politicized individuals with their own experiences of oppression, so that they were attuned to various manifestations of this – including as it related to gender, class and other dimensions of social inequality – and for them discussion of such matters would have been in many respects less personally challenging than to the women. It brought to light how men can sometimes be less complicit in women's subjugation than are women themselves, whilst also being implicated in constituting gendered power relations, and thus the complex subject positionings and relations of power in the study field.

Participants' changing reflections over time

A particularly unexpected finding during this study was how for some participants, and especially the women, perceptions of the significance of gender for interpreting their experiences of mental health services had apparently changed when I met them for a

follow-up discussion (often after they had reviewed their interview transcript). For example, in an initial interview, one woman responded 'I suppose gender is not something that shouts out' when asked about this in relation to her understandings of mental distress. However at a later encounter, she seemed to have re-evaluated her perceptions here, describing to me as problematic how the impact of her life as a woman on her feelings had not entered discussion with her psychiatrist. Similarly, another woman told me during a follow-up meeting that although she hadn't previously considered the relevance of gender, she now thought that men were much more likely to be 'listened to' in the context of user involvement initiatives. As well, some of the men related during informal follow-up exchanges issues of gender as relevant to studying user involvement (for example noting how women mental health professionals could be 'more empathetic listeners' than their male counterparts).

Again the reflections that emerged during these discussions could not be separated from the nature of the research relationships and could have been interpreted as participants' increasing felt need to identify with my concerns. However from the women I also got the sense that these 'informal' (unrecorded and therefore less 'public') encounters provided a discursive space, perhaps elsewhere lacking, in which they were in some sense *permitted* to talk about these aspects of their lives. Thus once more apparent was gender oppression as a 'subjugated truth' (Foucault, 1980) not usually (or at least publicly) given an airing, and certainly not in the context of women users' interactions with mental health services. In addition, and again particularly for the women, the 'effects' of participating in the research in terms of drawing participants' attention to gender as a relevant social category for explaining their experiences (cf. Chodorow's

(1996) notion of 'gender salience'), and perhaps allowing for some re-evaluation of their experiences in gender terms (cf. Opie, 1992), did seem visible here, and the (re)negotiation of understandings on such occasions often proved valuable to furthering the insights generated from the study.

<u>Negotiating epistemic authority; uncovering gender</u>

The Gender Lens

Demonstrated by this study was how studying gender, including in relation to groups for whom other forms of social marginalisation or political alignment are more salient, can be both facilitated and enhanced through an analytic focus on power that attends to multiple and intersecting 'axes of oppression' (Millen, 1997: para 9.2; Defransisco, 1997). This allowed me to achieve a fuller understanding of the forms of power and oppression operating in the field as well as to negotiate 'appeals to group-based epistemic privilege [that] have been important in empowering members of oppressed groups' (Davion, 1998: 108). However since such complex socio-political relations also undercut any simplistic understanding of a link between epistemic advantage and the identity and experiences of socially marginalized groups (Bar On, 1993), they also reiterate the importance for researchers of not overlooking 'hidden' forms of social inequality, such as gender and social class, and of listening to and attempting to comprehend the multiple and contested voices, within these. This includes to the voices of women, which in groups where men are present are often less likely to be heard (as was evident in this study, including from the fact that women were less likely to come forward for interviews; see also Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000). Perhaps they even suggest the value of such an approach in challenging the 'otherness' and 'spurious

homogeneity' of groups (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 15), which in the case of this

study itself worked to pathologise, individualise and therefore disempower group

members in certain respects. This could partly explain why at the point of presenting

and discussing study 'findings', they tended to welcome its analytical focus on various

and overlapping dimensions of power.

Emphasized here as well (following Smith, 1987) could be the responsibility of the

researcher in drawing out the constructs underlying participants' accounts (which in this

case included gender as well as social class and age), and in interpreting their varying,

ambivalent and shifting viewpoints, which consequently are often unclear (Davion,

1998). This was important in this study since there were facets of gender that emerged

during research interactions without them being discussed in these terms. Furthermore,

in accordance with Chodorow (1996), it became apparent (particularly at the stages of

analysis and writing up) that rather than a gender blindness, there were times when

participants displayed 'different forms of gender consciousness than I and experienced a

different salience of gender as a social category' (24): they often took gender

inequalities for granted, so that these underpinned their accounts in certain respects

without being articulated as such (see Smith, 1997). But it was only through bringing a

gender 'lens' to the research, that I was able to highlight and challenge such taken-for-

granted dimensions of the field.

Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996) note objection to such a stance for 'projection, on to the

oppressed Other, of the political and social ideals of the person representing them' (14).

However bringing this lens into focus at times during interviews and other fieldwork

interactions suggested how for many participants – and particularly the women - considerations of gender were in fact both pertinent and relevant; it was just that they were not salient or discussable in other contexts. Consequently they had to be explicitly introduced (and, like Andrews (2002) in a manner which to them made sense) in order for them to be explored (cf. Chodorow, 1996). In this manner I found it possible to negotiate many understandings about gender through dialogue with participants (cf. Borland, 1991), allowing me to test out, elaborate and strengthen points; and here discussions with the men as well as the women proved illuminating to the research. Moreover, at follow-up matters of gender were sometimes raised by participants rather than myself.

The strategy could have been criticised for encouraging participants to 'collude' with problematising inequalities of gender - either to please me or due to the evaluating authority that accompanied my position as an academic researcher (and 'feminist') (Hauser, 1997). But the alternative one of leaving the matter unaddressed would have reflected the general societal 'collusion' in not doing so, as failure to reveal one's political persuasions 'may [also] influence the mutual construction of data by researcher and participants' (Oleson, 2000: 233). It was therefore in accordance with a social constructionist approach to research in which data are seen to be 'generated' rather than 'excavated' during fieldwork interactions (Mason, 2002), and with a feminist epistemology in which knowledge is produced through the subjective exchanges between researcher and participants, which constitute learning experiences for both (Henwood and Pigeon, 1995; Lather, 1995; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

There were times of interpretive conflict about gender between participants and myself (cf. Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997; Millen, 1997). However again, this is something that could be considered not only inevitable but the responsibility of the researcher to 'explicitly … address and theorise' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997: 573). Central to doing so was a level of reflexivity that aimed to 'relativise and problematise … [my feminist] perspective' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 17).[5] This involved disrupting my own 'subjective investment in the enquiry' (Wilkinson, 1996: 13) as I came to realize how - like Chodorow (1996) and Andrews (2002) – both participants' and my own understandings of gender were derived from our social and cultural locations (and were also generationally dependent since most participants were older than myself). As for these two authors, participants did not always provide me with what I hoped to discover, and interview interactions often revealed manners in which my own perceptions and discourse around gender had been shaped by the influence of academic feminism, as when questions were apparently misunderstood or when I received unexpectedly hostile reactions to my research concerns (cf. Reissman, 1987). My assumptions about the 'relevance' of a gender perspective to the study area were in some ways challenged, and I was forced to explore the implications of these resistances for my analyses. Accordingly, it was through reflexively considering in respect of the field 'how and why women [and men] regard gender in the way they do' (Andrews, 2002: 74), which necessarily involved examining my own expectations and situatedness vis-a-vis the research and the researched, that a number of important insights were gained.[6]

Crucially as well this inverting of the research gaze was facilitated by openly discussing my own ideas and political commitments with participants, something which may be

considered integral to a strongly reflexive approach (Davion, 1998), and which

participants generally rightly expect of researchers (who always bring their own

perspectives to an inquiry). This allowed participants the opportunity to engage with or

dispute my ideas and observations about gender (cf. Andrews, 2002, critiquing Millen,

1997), which I was already developing from the other research methods employed.

Confronting issues and differences between participants and myself (Kitzinger and

Wilkinson, 1996) early on in the research also helped resolve problems at later stages of

dissemination to the study population - something Millen (1997) does not address in

relation to revealing the feminist concerns of her research only at the stage of writing

up.

A multi-method approach to inquiry

Issues of epistemic authority were also negotiated in this study through employing

multi-method and ethnographic research techniques. This provided a number of ways

of uncovering the social processes I was interested in, allowing for the development of

ideas and constructs in ways that would not have been possible through a unitary

approach.[7] Having reference beyond participants' assessments of the phenomena I was

investigating also enabled me to explicitly raise and explore matters of gender during

interviews, and sometimes to challenge participants' suppositions, in ways I otherwise

may have not. As previously noted, this was again important in furthering

understandings of gender in relation to the research and to strengthening some of the

claims subsequently made.

Interacting with participants in a variety of speech genres (including informal face-to-face and telephone conversation as well as e-mail and postal communication) and allowing time for reflection and re-negotiation of understandings during follow-up encounters also proved highly revealing of aspects of gender in the field setting. Understanding the situatedness of knowledge means paying attention to context as well as time, space and interactional form in the analysis of interview data, and, like Mauthner (1998), I found that in 'semi-public', one-off formal interviews, participants were reluctant to express certain feelings and concerns (evident largely from their tendency to be much more critical 'off-tape'). This seemed especially true of the women, including with respect to their reflections about gender, which often emerged after their formal interview or at follow-up (cf. Millen, 1997). The range of means of communication with participants additionally provided a number of opportunities for them to express their views, and for understandings to be reached in the course of discussion (verbal or written) with them. Employing a variety of informal methods of data production and reflexively engaging with the meaning of participants' different, or apparently changing, reflections over time and in different genres and contexts was therefore telling of the silences in the 'official' spheres of user involvement, including in relation to gender as a dimension of power relations in the field, as well as constructive to many other insights about gender generated from the study.[8]

The multi-method approach consequently allowed me to preserve participants' voices as central to the research whilst also looking beyond these in an attempt to achieve a fuller analysis (cf. Kelly *et al.*, 1994). It did not diminish, but rather built on the experiences of individuals with an analysis in which they could recognise their experiences whilst

emphasis was placed on linking these to wider social political institutions (cf. DeFransisco, 1997; Bem, 1993). In this respect it had something in common with Smith's (1986; 1987) explication of institutional ethnography as a feminist research strategy in which a variety of investigative methods is employed to uncover 'ordinary invisible' relations 'determining everyday worlds' (160), and in which an analytical focus on power can help illuminate intersections between the experiences of marginalised groups and wider socio-political relations (Wright, 2003).

In overall terms, the issues of epistemic authority that can accompany research efforts to 'uncover' gender outlined at the beginning of this paper were negotiated with a feminist standpoint epistemology in which 'the importance of listening to the voices of marginalised subjects need not be construed in terms of ... [a] kind of ultimate epistemic privilege' (Davion, 1998: 109). Indeed, following Henwood and Pigeon (1995), I found that some degree of interpretation and abstraction was not only an inevitable consequence of research but also one expected by those who took part, that could be considered the job of the social researcher (cf. Smith, 1987). From this perspective, 'the nature of 'otherness' ... is potentially most firmly grasped by those with daily experiences of subordination and exclusion' (Ramazanoglu, 2002: 113), and these are considered foundational to the constructing of 'less distorted' and more socially just knowledge (Henwood and Pigeon, 1995; Harding, 1991), but the role of political consciousness and the existence of knowable gendered power relations (as well as those of other forms) are acknowledged (Ramazanoglu, 2002). Sociological research therefore becomes about building on the (partial) perspectives of all involved in order to make visible the ways in which these tie to wider social relations of power and ordering

- including gender (DeFransisco, 1997; Harding, 1991; Ramazanoglu, 2002; Smith, 1987).

<u>Power and empowerment in the research process</u>

The empowering or emancipatory potential of this research lay in its analytical focus on the socio-political dimensions of mental distress and of (user involvement in) mental health services. This could have operated at the individual level of interactions with research participants (which provided opportunity for reflection and perhaps redefinition of experiences in these terms), as well as at the stage of presenting and discussing study findings with the groups (when again emphasis was placed on conceptualising experiences – such as problems of 'confidence' about taking part in meetings – in a broader social context). Following Opie (1992) the research could also have been considered potentially empowering to participants, whose views were socio-politically marginalized, in assuming the value of their contribution 'to the description and analysis of a social issue' (64).

Support for these assertions came from the (unexpected) ways in which some of the women took up and further discussed gender in relation to their experiences during research interactions, as well as expressions from female participants especially about the 'therapeutic' nature of our interchanges and the value of the research in helping validate users' views. These findings could also be related to the women seeming to take up less discursive space than the men in the (other) arenas of 'user involvement' (in accordance with my earlier conjecture) and to the silence around gender (and, to a lesser

extent, other dimensions of social inequality) within these. Beyond this, however, it seemed difficult and perhaps inappropriate to speculate.

It was important not to overestimate the impact of the research on individual participants (cf. Skeggs, 1994), many of whom were highly politicised in their own right. The women sometimes rejected my feminist understandings or displayed their own forms of 'gender consciousness', and whilst it did seem to heighten the salience of considerations of gender for some, collective courses of action arising from such 'empowering' ideas were largely absent in the study locale (leaving in question whether these could translate into actual empowerment). The potential of the research to be damaging rather than empowering to participants also had to be borne in mind. Its subject matter meant interviews could sometimes be difficult or upsetting (for both participants and myself), and for this reason participants were left to opt-in to follow-up interviews and the reviewing of their interview transcripts.[9] The research could also have been criticised for 'undermining [the women's] immediate coping strategies' (Millen, 1997: para 2.3); breaching the interviewee's right *not* to know their own innermost thoughts' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 1); and raising issues in the women's minds but ultimately abandoning them to deal with these alone (Maynard, 1994).

Ultimately though I derived it both responsible and proper at all stages of the research to in any case *offer* my interpretations and insights to participants, who it often seemed were looking for something 'back' from me in this respect (cf. Acker *et al.*, 1983, Oakley, 1981) and who could then make their own assessments of these (cf. Kelly *et al.*, 1994; Skeggs, 1994). I had to exercise judgement here, but generally, and particularly

when asked, the position of Skeggs (1994, drawing on Oakley, 1981) that 'researchers should productively use their power by offering any information and knowledge which they may have that may be useful to the researched' (82) felt ethically and practically appropriate. Furthermore, the experiences of conducting fieldwork served as a reminder of how gender oppression and marginalisation can often just be accepted by women as part of the status quo, whilst its most insidious workings can be in terms of women's self-blame. Consequently on occasions questioning rather than validating participants' interpretations seemed more ethical (cf. Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997; Kelly *et al*, 1994).

In terms of whether the research was empowering to participants in assuming their contribution to understanding the field, an attempt was made to maximise its potential in this respect through discussing and disseminating findings in the study locale,[10] whilst ensuring in the process to affirm and build on their experiences and insights wherever possible. However whether this was experienced by participants as empowering was again dubious, particularly as the research did not have the 'impact' in the field that I and many participants perhaps hoped. Further, the 'unfortunate' fact of my institutional authority being needed to legitimise their concerns to others and to afford credibility to their views was indicated by some participants. Hence the costs of this representation - working in some ways to reproduce and reinforce social relations of domination and exploitation and therefore to *disempower* participants, as well as to 'reinscribe the values and practices used to socially marginalize [the group]' (Bar On, 1993: 96-7) - had to be weighed up against any benefits (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996).

Yet I would still concede that it is better for researchers to concern themselves with, to document and to expose the (often previously silenced) experiences of 'others' rather than to ignore and erase these, thereby precluding the possibility of producing knowledge which my be useful to those researched (cf. Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996). It has also seemed to me in hindsight important that researchers aren't dissuaded from conducting valuable research due to *their own* discomfort about, rather than any actual, exploitation of or damage to those taking part.[11] This does, though, point to the responsibility for researchers, both of approaching research from a politically engaged viewpoint that asserts the interests of those who have been subjugated or disempowered, and not only of making publicly available, but of presenting and discussing knowledge and insights generated from research with participants, as well as others and including those in positions of more power in the field, if it is to contribute to progressive social change. From my experience, being realistic about and discussing with one's study population and participants the uses and outcomes of research from the outset are also essential.

<u>Conclusion</u>

In this article I have explored some of the ethical-political issues and challenges involved in negotiating epistemic authority whilst 'uncovering' through research such forms of social inequality as gender – including in that with groups for whom other forms of disadvantage or marginalisation are more salient. Whilst these undoubtedly require careful consideration in the context of every research project to which they are relevant (see Ramazanoglu, 2002, Part III for guidance), I have suggested adopting a

wide analytical lens focusing on power through which gender as well as other intersecting forms of oppression can be studied (cf. DeFransisco, 1997). I have also indicated the importance of discussing in a reciprocal manner with participants the researcher's own political analysis and commitments vis-a-vis the study area, whilst ensuring a strongly reflexive approach in which these are openly scrutinised and relativised (Davion, 1998; Edwards and Ribbens 1998; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996). Lastly, I have demonstrated the value of a feminist standpoint epistemology in which the salience of gender for understanding experience is linked to the social situatedness of researcher and researched (Chodorow, 1996; Andrews, 2002) and participants' experiences are treated as central to the analysis but the role of the researcher in interpreting these is emphasised (Davion, 1998; Henwood and Pigeon, 1995; Ramazanoglu, 2002; Smith, 1986, 1987, 1997). Within this approach the responsibility of the researcher in linking experience to wider socio-political relations and in constructing more socially just knowledge claims is recognised (see also DeFransisco, 1997; Maynard, 1994; Collins, 1997). It is these facets of the approach which are considered potentially empowering, and which additionally imply the importance of upholding the intention implicit in feminism of sharing knowledge and so of ensuring study 'findings' contribute towards the social struggles of the researched.

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Notes

[1] Fieldwork involved gaining permissions from Grampian Research Ethics Committee.

[2] I relocated university departments during the course of the study.

[3] All names have been anonymised.

[4] Although the conflict for individuals here was that the 'user' label encouraged a homogenised and pathologised conception of them principally in terms of their 'illness' and relationship to services.

[5] Related levels entailed consideration of my gender and social class background as integral to the research undertaking and understandings reached.

[6] For example, regarding how social inequalities can be addressed within user involvement policies in the mental health sector without undermining the status and activities of service user groups.

[7] For example, a masculine conception of the 'service user', demonstrated through analysis of mental health policy documents, was related to data from observation and interviews regarding legitimacy to take part in user involvement initiatives as tied to gendered psychiatric diagnostic categories.

[8] Of course there were issues of consent here, with which ethnographic research always grapples. I attempted to negotiate these through ensuring participants knew all 'encounters' were part of the research process and asking them if they minded me using e-mails, letters or notes that were made. (Such notes were also sometimes sent back to participants for reviewing, as were their interview transcripts if participants desired.) Another tactic I used was to keep notes of informal conversations fairly general (rather than attempting to reproduce verbatim what people had said) and to exercise judgement about whether to treat these as 'data' or whether to use them contextually to inform the analysis and interpretation of other data. However these were not concerns reserved for data produced outside of formal interviews since as Finch (1984, cited in Maynard, 1994) and Duncombe and Jessop (2002) point out, 'informed consent' is always a matter of degree and 'disclosure' is also encouraged in interviews for which this has been obtained. So at the point of writing up, it was representation of participants and responsible use of data - however gleaned - that seemed even more crucial to negotiate (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996).

[9] The importance of this was highlighted when one participant informed me she did not want to review her interview transcript as this would entail 'going over' her distressing experiences again. The occasion thus served as a reminder that follow-up research encounters entail further imposition and intrusion into participants' lives that may not be welcome. Of course these also enhance the emotional demands of fieldwork for researchers.

[10] This included discussing preliminary findings with members of the participating groups, writing articles for their newsletters, and disseminating a research briefing paper and academic journal article, including to service managers and policy-makers.

[11] Thanks to Christine Nugent for this point.