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# Theorising researcher self-effacement and youth deep-insiders in HIV/AIDS research: an awkward binary

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## Abstract

The increasing prevalence of infection with HIV among young South Africans necessitates an exploration into their construction of sexuality. This article focuses on how principles of feminist theory can be used to enable young people to serve as researchers in the context of HIV/AIDS. Young researchers were enabled to use interviews and photographs to conduct research within their youth communities and in this way, they served as deep-insider researchers. An exploration into the processes of enabling young people to conduct research, while linking the production of meaning to the possibility of human agency and transformative social action, formed an evolving methodology in this work. Methodological insights into the training and enabling of young researchers and the resultant self-effacement<sup>1</sup> of the lead researcher are described. Insights and principles which emerged when working with young researchers are discussed.

A study<sup>2</sup> of young South Africans was undertaken by the University of Witwatersrand Reproductive Health Unit to explore the spread of HIV/AIDS among them. Nearly one in every four South African women between 20 and 24 years old is testing positive for HIV, according to this study (Reproductive Health Unit, 2004). In the same study, it was found that one in 14 men in the same age category tested positive for HIV. A distinct gender disparity in infection and mortality statistics is evident. According to Klepp, Flisher and Kaaya (2008), the spread of HIV/AIDS has raised concerns in all African countries, especially those which lie south of the Sahara desert. This view is also endorsed by Mitchell (2000) who states:

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<sup>1</sup> **self-effacement** – withdrawing into the background; making yourself inconspicuous  
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/self-effacement>

<sup>2</sup> A survey was conducted by the University of Witwatersrand's Reproductive Health Unit in partnership with the Medical Council of South Africa in 2004 to explore the trends of HIV/AIDS in the South African context. A sample of 11 904 South African young people completed questionnaires and donated oral fluid for an HIV test.

For no generation of young people more than this current one has the fact of sexuality – particularly the risk factors as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic – been under scrutiny. . . . Young people between 10 and 24 years of age account for more than half of new infections after infancy worldwide. The largest percentages of these new infections are in the SADC<sup>3</sup> region. . . . young women between the ages of 15–19 are the hardest hit. . . . There has never been a more serious challenge to. . . our understanding of sexuality and sexual practices, the role of the youth in social change.

## Bringing youth to the research

Mudaly and Sookrajh (2008) cite Sloane and Zimmer (1993) and Milburn (1995) who assert that research about HIV/AIDS among young people needs to be age-appropriate and sensitive to the youth culture. This can be achieved if the researchers themselves are young people who are in synch with the youth culture.

According to Goodyear and Checkoway (2003), young people whose self knowledge makes research more age-appropriate should work with adults as equal partners in research projects. They assert that although young people assist in information gathering, youth participation in research remains a relatively undeveloped field of practice. AVERT.org<sup>4</sup> (2005) support the view that youth involvement in HIV/AIDS has, for too long, been confined to education about HIV transmission, answering questions and handing out condoms. This study aims to transcend these barriers by contributing towards this field of practice through creating a space in which young people can develop as researchers in the context of HIV/AIDS.

Mudaly and Sookrajh (2008) propose the following reasons for engaging young people in the process of research:

1. To encourage active involvement of young people in decisions that impact on **their** lives.
2. To build capacity in young people to serve as researchers generally and in the field of HIV/AIDS specifically.

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<sup>3</sup> Southern African Developing Countries.

<sup>4</sup> AVERT is an international AIDS charity. AVERT.org publishes information on HIV and AIDS.

3. To provide young people with the space to articulate ways in which the HIV/AIDS pandemic can be stemmed among youth, that is, to provide space for grassroots activism in HIV/AIDS prevention education.

In this article, the following research question will be explored: *How can young people be enabled to serve as researchers in the context of HIV/AIDS?* The article draws on data from an unpublished thesis entitled “Empowering secondary school learners to explore risk perceptions and the role of gender among young people in the context of HIV/AIDS” (Mudaly, 2006), and sheds light on how I, as the lead researcher, become effaced from the project as the young researchers’ involvement increases. The young people who were engaged in this study served as co-researchers, and may also be referred to as deep-insider researchers.

## Deep-insider

Brian Edward’s (1999), *Inside the whale: deep insider research*, where he explores the notion of a deep-insider as an approach to understanding the role of the youth researchers, influenced this study.

Youth researchers can be described as deep-insiders because they have been part of the community for over ten years and will not be guilty of the *get in-get the data-get out* approach to research. In contrast they got deeper into the issues that affect the youth on a day to day basis. Three further observations, borrowing from Edwards (1999), are presented in respect of the researchers researching a group they are a part of for some time.

Firstly, all co-researchers have been in a position for some time whereby emergent theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1991), perhaps less academically informed previously, has been a daily part of the member’s working life. The community has been for some time under unwitting scrutiny and review on an ongoing basis.

Secondly, all co-researchers were exposed to a process of self-interpretation initiated with the change in role in relation to others. As Walker, cited in Edwards (1999) warns, the ‘. . .insider has to establish an authority not ascribed to the role(s) he (sic) normally occupies’. While authority may be appropriate, rapport and trust seemed to be critical.

Thirdly, the co-researchers were aware of the organizational history and personal relationships which were interwoven with that history. Much of this may be undiscoverable to outsiders. The co-researchers possessed reasonable beliefs about the landscape, the territory, the unspoken agendas of political and cultural groups within the community as well as beliefs about the history, the corpses, the heroes, the skeletons, the failures/successes of this community.

As deep insider-researchers they have watched and participated in the community life where groups and individuals “. . .continually construct, manipulate and even recast the social worlds” (Muir and Ruggiero, 1991, p.viii). The richness and texture of that awareness is well expressed by Ginsberg when he speaks of the “‘evidential paradigm’ (which) suggests that unknown objects can be identified through single, seemingly insignificant signs, rather than through the application of laws derived from repeatable and quantifiable observations” (Luria, 1986. p.89). Much of the data collection of the co-researchers happened during informal observations at the different events in the community, which included sporting and cultural programmes. Edwards (1999) warns us that the strength of insider-research is also potentially its greatest weakness. The material is so commonplace, so normal, so everyday for the insider-researcher that the nuances, subtleties and indeed the ‘bleedin’ obvious’ can escape observation!

## Methodology

The study was conducted at a secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. A majority of the learners who attended the school were young Africans who were second language English speakers and who came from the lower socio-economic strata of society. Many of these learners were low achievers academically, with poor language, literacy and numeracy skills; this resulted in a low sense of self. In this work, the tenets of participatory action research, which intersect with feminist theory, and which work for social justice, were applied to the design of the research. The disparity in power and status between adult researchers and young research participants was addressed by engaging young researchers to conduct a large part of the research.

## The research participants

The participants are grouped into four categories. Firstly, there were the *co-researchers*, who were 10 Grade 10 volunteers, at the heart of the project. They were trained to conduct interviews with interviewees, whom they selected. They took photographs to reflect their perceptions about sexuality. This group also analyzed this visual data at the beginning and at the end of their involvement in the project, that is, twice within a period of nine months. The second group was the *interviewees*. They comprised ten candidates who were selected by the co-researchers. The co-researchers selected participants whom they believed might be sexually active, and with whom they had been previously associated. There was a great degree of trust between the interviewers and the interviewees. This was critical in order to obtain candid responses and explicit data about the sensitive, private views on sexuality. The third group of participants comprised 124 Grade 10 *learners* who responded to the questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered by the co-researchers in the classroom. Lastly, the fourth category of research participants comprised a sample of 30 learners who assisted in the *pilot* study of the questionnaire. Ethical requirements were met by obtaining written consent from parents of all the participants, assent from participants themselves, and consent from the Principal of the school. The research instruments were modified to meet the requirements of the Ethical Clearance Committee of the higher education institution which had recommended that the study be undertaken.

## The research instruments

Four main research instruments were used, namely, photographs, questionnaires, interview schedules and reflective journals (which were maintained by the co-researchers). In this article, the use of interviews and to a lesser extent, the use of photovoice,<sup>5</sup> as ways of generating data, are described. Photographs were taken by co-researchers who were trained in the use of visual technological devices. Semi-structured interview schedules were designed by the co-researchers and me. Reflective journals were maintained by the co-researchers throughout the research process. The collection of data

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<sup>5</sup> Photovoice is borrowed from Mitchell, DeLange, Moletsane, Stuart and Buthelezi (2005a, p.258) is a method where photographs are taken and then analyzed.

from reflective journals can be viewed as being a qualitative, introspective technique, which, according to Denzin (1989) in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), is one of the principles of feminist research.

## Feminist research methodology and findings

This study was informed by feminist research methodology, as well as participatory action research. Through an analysis of feminist research methodology, it was found that its value lay in the theoretical understandings of tensions which arose from different life histories, from privilege, power and oppression as they are lived out by educators and learners in the classroom. Feminist policies validate, recognize and attempt to understand power relations, then work towards changing power relations (Weiler, 1995; Usher, 1996; Middleton, 1993; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995). The barriers between the researchers and the researched were dissolved to some extent by involving learners in this study.

In this work, a tension exists between the methodological angst and the reporting of findings. The outcomes of the training of the co-researchers (methodology) are collapsed into discussion on findings, because it reflects the processes which impacted on their enablement. The evolving methodology generates findings on empowering young people in the field of research. In this article, an attempt is made to show how interviews and photovoice, together with recordings in reflective journals, enabled young people in the field of research. The following description is an example of part of one of the training schedules which was used to prepare the co-researchers to interview candidates.

## Interviews

### (a) **General rules about interviews**

#### 1. *Informed consent*

Importance of informed consent especially when dealing with issues which are of a sensitive nature.

Includes written consent or assent from:

- Participants
- Parents of participants
- Principal of school

Observe protocol (Kemmis *et al.*, 1991 in Cohen, *et al.*, 2000, p.68)

2. *Pleasant demeanour*

Always be polite (Merriam, 1998). Greet participant. Thank interviewee for his/her valuable contribution.

Be friendly.

3. *Attire*

Dress casually to create an environment in which interviewee would feel comfortable.

4. *Dealing with responses which are not readily forthcoming*

Co-researchers were trained not to impose their will by insisting on responses if interviewees were not forthcoming on an issue. The following suggestions were to be considered in this instance:

- Allow silence to prevail if interviewee is unwilling to respond to a question which, you believe, is fully understood by respondent.
- Continue with next question if you believe the respondent will be harmed by pursuing current question.
- Be aware that interviews can create anxiety and trigger grief in the respondents even when a researcher's intentions are to bring benefit to the lives of young people. Apply the motto: 'Do no harm'.

5. *Selection of a candidate to serve as an interviewee*

Select a person who is representative of most of the learners in the sample. The candidate, together with her/his parent/guardian, must have signed letters of assent and consent.

6. *Venue*

- Should be a place where interviewer and interviewee feel comfortable.

- Should be a private space where personal issues can be discussed without threat of being overheard.
- There should be a minimum amount of noise

7. *Reactions of interviewer*

- Interviewer should keep reactions to him/herself (Cohen *et al.*, 2000: pp.122–125).
- Unresponsive body language must be maintained, while conveying a genuine interest in what respondent is saying.
- Do not distract the respondent by your reactions to what is being said. Give the respondent the right to be treated as an autonomous agent with considered opinions and choices (Schenk and Williamson, 2005).

**(b) Lifelong learners**

Emphasize that all participants, including co-researchers and the lead researcher, are constantly learning. Co-researchers should not, on account of their greater knowledge about this research, believe that they are superior to interviewees.

Once the interviews were completed, the co-researchers and I reflected on them to determine the nature of the challenges and rewards in the field when enabling young people to develop skills to conduct research.

## Reflections on interviews

Two of the initial interviews were unclear due to background noise. I explained that the dictaphone recorded most sounds and that the co-researchers had to be mindful of other noises in the room/area. Some of the interviewees chose public places as interview sites for reasons of safety. They indicated that they would rather use a strategically located bench outside the library, an area which had security guards at its entrance, instead of deserted community grounds or isolated buildings. Kirby (2004) has emphasized the need for ensuring young peoples' safety, health and well-being in the field. At the training sessions, it was emphasized that the selection of data gathering venues should be based on safe choices.



A co-researcher made the following journal entry: *‘A good place would be a public place where it is quiet enough to ask questions. The respondent will have to feel safe and we must make him comfortable.’*

In constructing the context and places for the interviews, safety was a priority. It is possible that the co-researchers also took their personal safety into account when they chose the venues for the interviews.

Most of the interviews, however, were conducted in outbuildings and garages which were separate from but on the premises of the main homes of interviewees. The elicitation of highly private and sensitive information, with apparent ease on the part of the interviewees could be attributed to interview sites which both, the interviewer and interviewee, felt were safe, secure and private venues.

One co-researcher did not use the dictaphone correctly and her interview was not audio-taped. She expressed great disappointment at this loss of data. The group discussed the importance of using technological devices carefully. They saw, first hand, the difficulties which were faced when a researcher was not adept at tasks like tape recording an interview. They encouraged one another by demonstrating the technique required to use the dictaphone among themselves. The sharing of a difficult experience was therapeutic for the co-researcher who had lost the data. The support given by the group developed team spirit among its members in ways that we (co-researchers and lead researcher) had not imagined possible.

There were many positive responses about the interview experiences from the co-researchers. An example of such a response can be seen in the following journal entry:

I think the interview was well done. I asked a lot of questions that were not on my sheet. I dug deeper into the situation and got more information. I learned a lot when I did the interview. I also understand more about their (adolescents’) lives. I really think the interview was successful.

This co-researcher had developed her technique of asking follow-on questions in a semi-structured interview. She showed a degree of confidence and an ability to probe which are hallmarks of an adept interviewer.

Another co-researcher expressed great happiness because she felt she had executed her task well. In her journal, she wrote: *‘I was excited that I had*

*done a job of this calibre*'. She viewed this experience as a confidence booster. This is in keeping with the feminist qualitative methodology which was integral to the design of this study, and which facilitated work where the participants became empowered to do research.

Strict adherence to ethical requirements was central to this part of the training. The reduction in power differentials between the researcher and the researched by engaging co-researchers to solicit data did not decrease the need for strict adherence to ethical principles throughout the study. A co-researcher wrote that if she were faced with a difficult situation where the respondent was uncomfortable to answer a question, she would do the following: '*. . . maintain eye contact, allow (respondent) to speak, but we can change the question very quickly so we don't hurt the respondent.*'

The ethical requirement of ensuring that no harm would come to the respondent was seen as important to this co-researcher.

As the process of conducting interviews and reflecting on them continued, the co-researchers' confidence increased. This was evident from the following journal entries recorded by the co-researchers:

Undated

I'm really proud of doing this assignment and I've really learned a lot. And I wish next year we could explore a whole new field like prostitution and what problems teenagers face in today's society. After listening to the interviews, I've realized that it is safe to stick to one partner and although a person has a boyfriend/girlfriend, they should think about their future and have sex after marriage. I also have a boyfriend. I choose to reach my goals (reach for the stars) and he should respect and understand (this). I also don't believe in sex before marriage. I want to have fun but fun doesn't include sex.

The co-researcher felt empowered enough to dictate the future agenda for research, as well as to express a greater awareness of relationship issues, not only as they apply to other young people, but also as they apply in her personal life.

15/09/2005

I am glad in some cases the girls are beginning to see the light and are beginning to realize that boys are not everything. I truly believe that we choose our own paths and we need to know what can affect our lives in a major way. AIDS is one of them. Therefore I choose to wait until I find that special someone who is meant for me, to engage in sexual intercourse, because life is too short to blow your virginity over a one night stand and be left with raising a baby when I, myself, am still my parents' baby. I want to have a long life away from harm and AIDS. All good things come to those who wait. We should just sit back, relax and re-evaluate our lifestyles. This is my life's saying: "Listen to your heart and pursue your dreams. What your mind can conceive, you can achieve."

The co-researcher cites the gradual transformation in the world view of girls that ‘boys are not everything’. Her work has spurred her into setting certain moral standards for herself as is evident by the statement: ‘I choose to wait until I find that special someone who is meant for me, to engage in sexual intercourse . . .’. She reflects a heightened sense of maturity and growth which signals her coming of age into young adulthood when she writes about ‘re-evaluating our lifestyles’.

## Photovoice

Photovoice was used to provide a platform for the co-researchers to express their ideas about sexuality. The co-researchers analysed the photographs a week after they were taken (this is referred to as the first analysis), and again, after a period of nine months (this is referred to as the final analysis). During this interval, they generated data by using interviews and questionnaires. The use of photovoice showed a transformation in the co-researchers, which they attributed to personal incidents and experiences in their lives. They indicated that the research process had opened their eyes to new ways of seeing the same picture. A maturity in the co-researchers’ views on traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, as well as risky sexual behaviour, is evident in the analyses on condoms, by two female co-researchers who are called Suri and Nadi.

**Picture 1 by co-researcher Suri**



*How cool are condoms?*

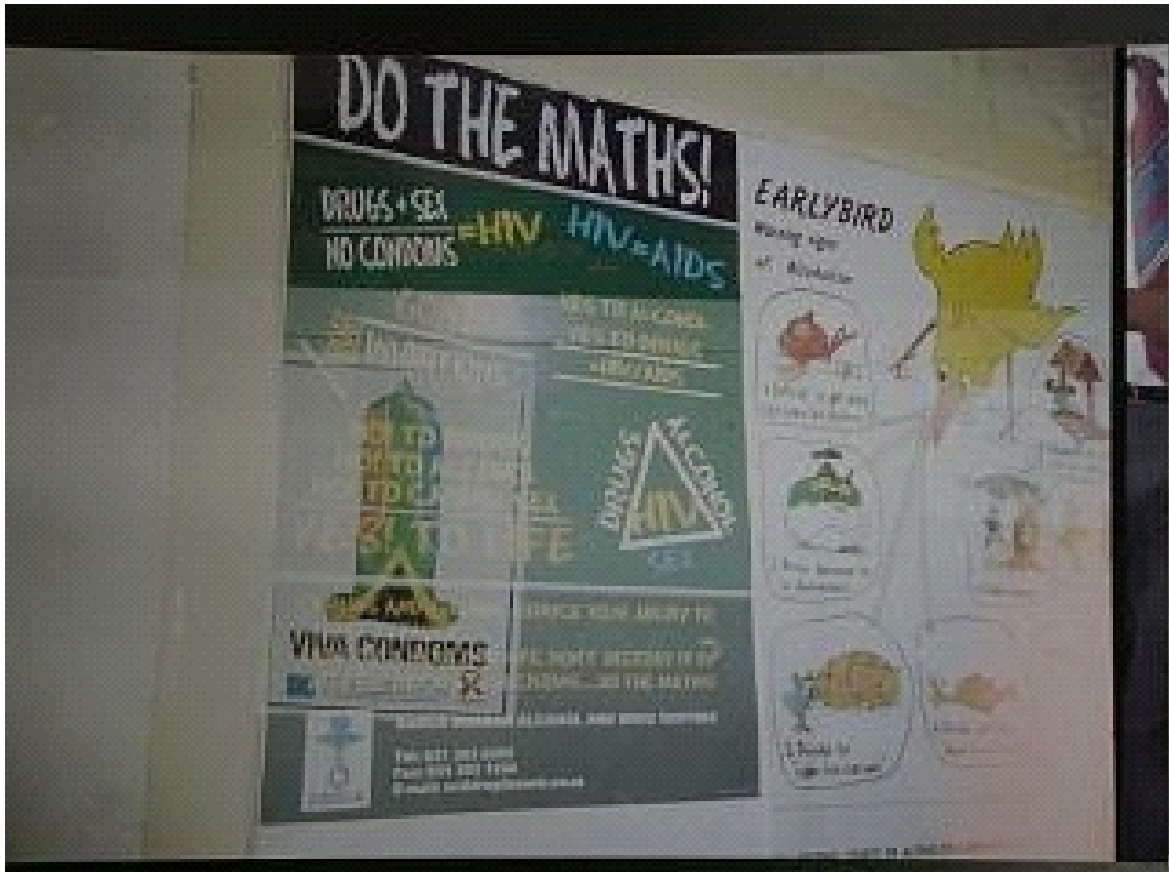
**Suri**

First analysis	Final analysis
<p>Found in a guy's room. Some guys carry them. Some girls carry them. Some guys don't want to use them and some do for protection against HIV/AIDS and the spread (of the disease). Used and thrown (discarded) anywhere. Used once with one partner.</p>	<p>When guys carry condoms they feel grown up. Their friends think they are very cool because they are having sex. When girls carry condoms they are seen as sluts. Like they are dying for sex. Guys and girls should think of the most important thing: PREVENT AIDS. It does not matter who carries a condom. Just use it.</p>

The realization that the use of a condom is more important than who carries it, is evident in Suri's final analysis of Picture 1. A boy who is sexually active earns a positive masculine identity from his peers, according to the final interpretation. Girls who carry condoms are labelled as 'sluts' and acquire a 'poor' sexual reputation. Suri is aware of how traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity impact on sexual behaviour of youth. This awareness could

have resulted from the interview data, where condom carrying boys were perceived to ‘be prepared for sex’, while condom carrying girls were viewed as ‘desperate for sex’.

**Picture 2 by co-researcher Nadi**



*Do the maths - does it add up?*

**Nadi**

First analysis	Final analysis
<p>DO THE MATHS would target scholars. It is an interesting combination of education with schoolwork and AIDS. It gives relevant education in a way that is fun, considering it is in a mathematics classroom. It is not monotonous because it is different from what we regularly see. It tells us the exact causes of AIDS and the correct combination (of behaviours) leading to STDs.</p>	<p>This is a wonderful picture. But I don't think the teens get it. I mean, even though it gives the combination of things which leads to AIDS, who listens? Teens still want to have a good time. They like to take the risk of having sex without a condom. They also feel the feeling is better without a condom. They want to feel close to their partners. They feel nothing is closer than sex without a condom.</p>

In Nadi's first analysis, she describes the poster. In her final analysis, she raises deeper questions about the usefulness of such a poster. Her statement "I mean, even though it gives the combination of things which leads to AIDS, who listens?" signals safe sex information fatigue among young people. Nadi doubts the effectiveness of the information communicated by the poster on young people. She highlights the inability of young people to transform knowledge about HIV/AIDS into safe sex behaviour. This co-researcher comes to the realization that the importance of sexual pleasure, as well as the pleasure that one obtains from taking risks, supersedes the importance of safe-sex behaviour which says 'yes' to life.

There was a definitive sense of activist purpose in the co-researchers in the context of HIV/AIDS, as is evident by Suri's statements: "Guys and girls should think of the most important thing: PREVENT AIDS. It does not matter who carries a condom. Just use it." The co-researchers showed a heightened awareness of the social construction of sexuality along axes of differentiation, especially the ways in which the process of gendering and its outcomes are legitimated by prevailing social norms. The increasing involvement of the co-researchers in the project led to a growth of their confidence and their ability to conduct research. This resulted in a decreasing role of the lead researcher in the actual research activities and in the gradual effacement of the lead researcher from the project.

## An insight into self-effacement of the lead researcher

In her poem, *Morning Song*, Sylvia Plath (1981) writes about her daughter a year after the child was born. The following excerpt from the poem explains the concept of *effacement*.

*I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.*

This stanza of the poem involves a wryly ironic sense of the mother's role: she produces the baby just as the cloud, affected by the wind produces the rain. However, in the process of production the mother herself is diminished, it's the child that becomes important just as the cloud is actually dissolved by the rain issuing from it. The opening line *I'm no more your mother* is not meant to

be taken too literally. There is, after all, no rain without the agency of the cloud, just as there is no baby without the mother.

*Effacement* implies a withdrawal, to become unassertive. In the context of this study, I experienced a sense of *effacement* by the co-researchers as they engaged themselves in the frenetic collection and generation of data.

I clearly felt the angst of displacement, at times completely, at other times partially, in ways that found me moving out of the position of the commanding, controlling lead researcher. Lather (2004) talks about moving towards practices that produce different knowledge and produce different knowledge differently. In this study, the different way of producing knowledge was achieved by engaging co-researchers to solicit, generate and interpret data. This resulted in the production of different types of knowledge, for example, the type of language among youth which included concepts of ‘playa’,<sup>6</sup> ‘pleasure principle’<sup>7</sup> and ‘bedroom disease’.<sup>8</sup> The type of knowledge which was produced in young peoples’ efforts to change gendered patterns of behaviour as a way of reclaiming power in sexual relationships emerged.

What was clearly experienced was a ‘forced’ *effacement* at certain points of the study. This was especially felt during the photovoice sessions during which the co-researchers took complete control and effaced me completely from the study. Table 1 illustrates ways in which this *effacement* became operationalized in the study.

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<sup>6</sup> Playa- having more than 1 sexual partner at a given time

<sup>7</sup> Refers to principle which young people adhere to when they risk their lives to experience the pleasure of sexual intercourse.

<sup>8</sup> Belief held by some young people that HIV can only be contracted by engaging in sexual intercourse in the bedroom, that is, location was believed to be a factor related to HIV transmission.

**Table 1: Charting the *effacement***

<b>Effacement moments of the lead researcher</b>	<b>Lead researcher</b>	<b>Co-researchers</b>	
Total control: no effacement at the beginning	<b>Preparation</b> Training sessions →	Photographs Interviews Questionnaires Journal entries	
Effacement begins	<b>Planning stage</b> Questionnaire design →  Interview schedule →	Input in terms of pilot study  Input in terms of certain questions	
Effacement strengthened	<b>Data Collection</b>	Interview process Selection of interviewees Selection of interview site Determining times at which interviews will be conducted Use of probes to guide course of interviews	
Effacement complete		<b>Photovoice</b> Choice of data for photographs Taking photographs Techniques of using cameras Choice of sites Interpretation of photographs Deeper insights into interpretations of pictures	



My *effacement* occurred on two levels: firstly, from the research project itself and secondly, from the co-researchers. Table 1 details the ways in which I was gradually effaced from the research project after the co-researchers assisted in the final compilation of questions which were admitted into the questionnaires and the interview schedules. This occurred during the planning stage.

*Effacement* from the project increased when the co-researchers entered the field to collect and generate data. I did not make any input into the selection of interview candidates, the selection of sites where interviews took place and where photographs were taken. The co-researchers analyzed their photographs independently, without any influence from me.

The reporting on the findings of this study was guided by the co-researchers voices and feelings which were embedded in their journal entries. I refrained from analyzing the co-researchers photographs to allow for their voices to be heard fully, without being filtered through my interpretations. This resulted in a degree of *effacement* during the report writing process.

## Working with young researchers: emerging insights

Both participatory action research as well as qualitative feminist research methodology, which informed this study, have the primary goal of transforming people who are involved in the research, into researchers (Haworth and Haddock, 1999). The importance of co-learning, which is a primary aspect of participatory action research, was achieved by training co-researchers and engaging in reflective sessions on the research process. This type of collaboration allowed for the generation of several insights out of the joint space which was shared by the co-researchers and the lead researcher.

Firstly, young people have different levels of cognition compared to that of adult researchers. Miers and Murphy (2004), in their article entitled 'Giving Kids a Voice: Methodological and Practical Considerations in Conducting Research with Children and Young People' refer to Piaget theory of cognitive development to remind researchers to be aware of the developmental capabilities of young people who are involved as research participants. They assert that young people's levels of reasoning and ability to use language and think logically is different compared to that of adults. In this study, the co-researchers inability to use technology (the dictaphone) effectively was probably due to their lack of patience and their inattention to detail. Further self-reflection on the training of young people has led me to conclude that I

might have rushed training process. Atweh and Burton (1995), Kirby (2004) and Alder and Sandor (1990) emphasize that researchers should not underestimate the time which is required to train young people as co-researchers. Research skills need to be developed by creating the opportunity for more practice sessions for young people (for example, the practical issues around data collection which include the selection of sites for capture of data and the use of technological devices like cameras and dictaphones). Role playing as a preparation for conducting interviews is vital in developing interview skills. The research roles must be appropriate to young people's level of development and expertise.

Secondly, young people experience extremes in terms of their emotions. They have higher highs (great excitement, high levels of confidence when things go right) and lower lows (bitter disappointment, feelings of being disempowered) when things go wrong in the field. In this study, the co-researchers and I were not prepared for the content of some of the interviews. There were interviewees who viewed unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners as 'cool' and modern; these views, apparently, were not shared by the co-researchers. Another interviewee prided herself by asserting that she was 'the bitch of the millennium'. Two interviewees appeared to think that the co-researchers were 'out of synch' with contemporary youth culture; this made some co-researchers experience a sense of sadness and powerlessness. The lead researcher cannot expect young people to regard their 'low moments' in the field as a part of a learning curve during the process of research because, unlike adult researchers, young people may lack the experience to deal with difficulties in this way. The lead researcher needs to provide a highly supportive environment in order to nurture developing young researchers. This can be done by reminding co-researchers to apply Durkheim's first principle, cited in Tonkiss (1998, p.234), which is to "abandon all preconceptions". The importance of detaching oneself from the data is vital during training young people as researchers. Young researchers need to be constantly reminded to expect the unexpected.

The co-researchers reported many 'high moments' in the field. In relation to the photoshoot activity, the following journal entries signal empowerment and excitement experienced by the co-researchers: 'I did not only take the shots, I also called the shots'; 'I was excited taking photos. The photos were perfect'; 'I really enjoyed taking the photographs out. I had a lot of fun and the pictures came out great.' A boost in a co-researcher's confidence to gather data is

evident in the following entry: ‘It was the first time I used a camera. After being told how to use it, I felt ready to take my first photo.’

The third insight is that when young people examine data gathered by each other, it is necessary for feedback to be sensitive to their feelings. The lead researcher needs to emphasize the importance of constructive criticism of young people’s research efforts by their fellow researchers. A sense of intragenerational and intergenerational respect should pervade all feedback sessions. Praise for each other’s efforts needs to be encouraged to boost young researchers confidence. London, Zimmerman and Erbstein (2003) allude to the need for respect, communication and collaboration in a research culture which celebrates contribution by youth.

The co-researchers general transformation and enablement in the field of research are marked by the following features:

- Dialogical engagement about issues that concern them directly through their involvement in designing instruments, data collection and data generation, and data analysis.
- Fostering youth social identity in providing individuals (other young people who responded to their research probes) with the spaces to present themselves in *their* voice.
- Promotion of learning and change by, firstly, actively participating in a research project and secondly, by taking action on issues that directly affect *them*.

## Young researchers: significant research principles

*Epistemologically*, youth-based research acknowledges the value of multiple ways of knowing and more significantly, it recognizes the value of knowledge contributed by members of the youth community. Through praxis, critical consciousness develops, leading to further action through which people cease to see their situation as a “dense, enveloping reality or a blind alley” and instead as “an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire, 1972, p.58).

In *ontological* terms, youth-based research adopts a postmodernist perspective in relation to the exploration of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is as much about politics as it is about understanding. Therefore, understanding research focuses not only on method but also upon the ways in which knowledge is contrived and the benefits that amass to people who control the creation and production of knowledge. Indeed, the inquirer and the participant are perceived as being connected in such a way that the findings are inseparable from their relationship (Lincoln and Guba, 1989).

In youth-based research, the *knower* participates in the *known* and that evidence is generated in at least four interdependent ways – experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical (Heron and Reason, 1997). A subjective-objective ontology means that there is “underneath our literate abstraction, a deeply participatory relation to things and to the earth, a felt reciprocity” (Abram, 1996, p.124 cited in Heron and Reason, 1997). As Heron and Reason (1997, p.279) further explain, this encounter is transactional and interactive. “To touch, see, or hear something or someone does not tell us either about our self all on its own or about a being out there all on its own. It tells us about a being in a state of interrelation and co-presence with us. Our subjectivity feels the participation of what is there and is illuminated by it.”

## Conclusion

This study has revealed how young people can be engaged to solicit the type of data from their peers which unleashes details of sexuality in a way that disrupts ‘static truths’. This could be attributed to the minimizing of hierarchy which is entrenched in research in general. In addition to enabling young people to engage in work for young people, this type of research creates a space for co-operative learning.

Young researchers can enable one to examine the notion of power, which organizes the categories of sex to make its gender inscriptions appear to have a natural origin, from new perspectives. It allows for analyses of data that begins by not taking categories for granted but by questioning their autonomy and naturalness (St Pierre, 2001). Future research projects, where youth researchers play a role, can make possible the examination of various versions of power, politics and identity, and create a space for different formulations around these areas.

It is cautiously suggested that adults who investigate and theorize about risky behaviour among young people are ‘theory hunters’. The ‘what we (adults) can do for them (young people)’ in the form of benevolent intervention reproduces power differentials.

This study has revealed how the lead researcher becomes effaced from the research project as well as from the young researchers. This is a natural consequence of applying feminist methodologies (Olesen, 1994; Luke, 1992; Lather, 1991), which call for research participants to become researchers themselves. It involves a process during which the lead researcher becomes lost over uneven social spaces, and experiences, what Lather (2004) refers to as ‘a slippage of the self’, while entering zones of unequal access to the hegemonic language of the youth. This ‘getting off track’ of the lead researcher involves exposing oneself and one’s work to the risk of doing things differently, in order to obtain knowledge from and as a community of young people.

The use of feminist research methodologies, which intersect with tenets of participatory action research (reflexive critique, dialectical critique, collaborative resource, risk and plural structure), can empower young people to generate data and formulate intervention programs. These programs can take into account contextual factors which impact on sexual decision-making of young people, in order to become effective in the struggle against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

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