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**GENDER, CULTURE  
& NARRATIVE**

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## EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS LEARNED — INTERVIEWING RWANDAN SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

JUDITH HERRMANN\*

*Research involving survivors of sexual violence requires particular ethical and safety considerations. In this article I outline challenges that I encountered when preparing and conducting interviews with female survivors of sexual violence in Rwanda. My research design was informed by phenomenological and feminist approaches, which assisted in sensitising me to and addressing matters specific to my fieldwork. Besides methodological issues deriving from the role of a qualitative researcher, the challenges included identifying and inviting participants, managing logistics relating to the interviews, researching in another language, building rapport with interview participants, referral to support services, and self-care. In this article, I discuss what I did to overcome these issues, making reference to existing literature and training that helped me in preparing for my fieldwork. Summarising my experiences, I provide a list of key experiences and lessons learned at the end of the article, aiming to help researchers prepare for their work with vulnerable groups. I also highlight a number of ethical issues that I perceived as particularly challenging and suggest that they require further discussion in the future.*

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I INTRODUCTION

Research involving survivors of sexual violence poses particular ethical and safety issues, especially in settings where there is a high risk of stigma for survivors. As part of my PhD research,<sup>1</sup> I conducted interviews with female survivors of sexual violence in Rwanda. During the preparation of my fieldwork, a number of resources assisted me in understanding challenges associated with researching sexual violence and provided practical guidance on how to address these issues. I also attended various workshops on research with sexual violence survivors, trauma, and self-care, which assisted in preparing for my fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One article published as part of my PhD is: Judith Herrmann, 'A critical analysis of the transitional justice measures incorporated by Rwandan gacaca and their effectiveness' (2012) 19 *James Cook University Law Review* 90. Publications relating to the analysis of my primary data are planned but have not yet been published, since the analysis of my primary data is still in progress at the time of writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The training included the workshop “Designing and analyzing research for sexual and intimate partner violence” by Dr Henrica A F M Jansen at the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (‘SVRI’) Forum in Bangkok, 2013, the workshop “Researcher Self-care” at the University of Wollongong, 2015, facilitated by the

Besides ethical and safety concerns, I also had to consider methodological issues deriving from my research approach. Since it was important to me to give affected women a voice, I had chosen a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with Rwandan survivors. My methodology was informed by phenomenological and feminist approaches to research, which assisted in understanding and responding to challenges deriving from qualitative research. My research design included a built-in reflexivity, which I used to both examine factors that could influence the research process and to address these factors.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I firstly provide an overview of my research and introduce the above mentioned built-in reflexivity. I then outline some of the main methodological, ethical, and practical issues that I encountered during my fieldwork and discuss how I addressed them. Where appropriate, I will refer to relevant guidelines and studies by other scholars as well as training that assisted me in preparing for and conducting my fieldwork. The aim is to add to the body of work concerning research with survivors of sexual violence, and to provide guidance for future researchers to plan and conduct their studies with vulnerable groups.

## II BACKGROUND

My thesis analyses the needs of female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and explores the survivors' experiences with transitional justice processes. My research focuses on Rwanda, assessing the needs and experiences of Rwandan women who participated in *Gacaca* in relation to sexual violence committed against them during the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. *Gacaca* refers to the approximately 11 000 local community courts that were established in 2001 by the Rwandan government to deal with genocide-related crimes.<sup>4</sup>

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 Rwandan women, who were selected based on the following criteria:

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Australian Red Cross and Phoenix Australia, and the workshop "Trauma Awareness and Field Research: How to prepare and deal with traumatic research content", facilitated by Dr Wendy Lambourne at the University of Sydney.

<sup>3</sup> See, eg, Claire M Renzetti, 'Confessions of a reformed positivist' in Martin D Schwarz (ed), *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women: Methodological and Personal Perspectives* (Sage Publications, 1997) 131, 133.

<sup>4</sup> Phil Clark, 'The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda' (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 3.

- 1) The participant had experienced sexual violence during the genocide;
- 2) The participant had raised her case at a *Gacaca* court;
- 3) The participant consented to being interviewed.<sup>5</sup>

My interviews focused on the women's experiences with *Gacaca*. Interview questions aimed at eliciting the women's motivations and needs when raising their case at *Gacaca* and the impact of participating in the process from the survivors' point of view. During my interviews, I was assisted by a Kinyarwanda-English interpreter because I did not speak Kinyarwanda. All interviews were recorded on an audio recording device and were later transcribed and translated by a Kinyarwanda-English translator.

### III THE RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY

My research design drew from phenomenology and feminist research. Both approaches informed my research questions and the methods of data collection and analysis. Phenomenological methods are meant to capture 'lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants'.<sup>6</sup> The most common method of phenomenological research are interviews,<sup>7</sup> since interviews can assist in generating 'rich descriptions of lived experiences' of the participants.<sup>8</sup> The focus on experiences of research participants is supported by feminist research, which is concerned with individual experiences of women, particularly those of marginalised groups.<sup>9</sup>

Miller cautions that the personal backgrounds of qualitative researchers as well as their 'political and theoretical understandings of the social world' can influence how the experiences of research participants are interpreted.<sup>10</sup> To address this challenge, I wrote a list with all preconceptions that I had in relation to my research prior to starting my fieldwork.<sup>11</sup> This activity was based on phenomenological ideas, which propose that researchers commence a study by articulating their personal background and any

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<sup>5</sup> See Clark E Moustakas, *Phenomenological research methods* (Sage Publications, 1994) 107.

<sup>6</sup> John W Creswell, 'Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches' (Sage Publications, 2014) 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*; Moustakas, above n 5, 114; Kim Usher and Debra Jackson, 'Phenomenology' in Jane Mills and Melanie Birks (eds), *Qualitative Methodology: a practical guide* (Sage Publications, 2014) 188.

<sup>8</sup> Zina O'Leary, 'The essential guide to doing your research project' (Sage Publications, 2010) 116, 139.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 146; See also Renzetti, above n 3, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Jody Miller, 'Researching violence against street prostitutes' in Martin D Schwarz (ed), *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women: Methodological and Personal Perspectives* (Sage Publications, 1997) 144, 150.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 14 for some examples.

preconceptions they have relating to the topic.<sup>12</sup> The activity was also supported by feminist researchers who suggest to openly acknowledge one's own assumptions, beliefs, and values that could impact research as part of a built-in reflexivity approach.<sup>13</sup> When revisiting my preconceptions after I had collected my data and making a first evaluation of my interviews, I noted that some of my preconceptions were confirmed while others were contradicted.<sup>14</sup> The fact that my data proved some of my assumptions wrong suggests that I did not conduct my interviews in a way to get the responses that I thought I would get, but that my questions allowed new data to emerge.

I also kept a field journal to record external factors that might influence the interviews, as was suggested by other researchers who had conducted similar studies.<sup>15</sup> In this field diary I captured my observations, reflections, and feelings, which can constitute 'data in their own right'.<sup>16</sup> Recording emotions during research can be helpful for the later analysis process since 'emotions can be used as a clue in understanding situations'.<sup>17</sup>

Another challenge associated with qualitative research derives from the intimate relationship between researcher and participant, and the impact this relationship has on the data collection process.<sup>18</sup> Both phenomenological and feminist researchers assume a close, collaborative relationship and reciprocity between the researcher and the 'researched',<sup>19</sup> embracing these factors as important characteristics or their methodologies. Challenges deriving from this close relationship were identified as part of my built-in reflexivity and are considered in various sections below.

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<sup>12</sup> Moustakas, above n 5, 105–6, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Renzetti, above n 3, 133–4.

<sup>14</sup> For example, based on the literature review regarding women's experiences during *Gacaca*, I believed that no woman would have wanted to discuss sexual violence in public. However, one of my interview participants explained to me that she would have preferred to have her case tried in public, seeing that she had also been raped in public in front of her community. Furthermore, based on my literature review, I believed that most women's experiences with *Gacaca* would be negative. I wrote as a preconception 'I believe that the majority of women would be dissatisfied with *Gacaca*, since it added to their traumatisation, community ostracism and stigma, and since *Gacaca* did not provide reparations.' Even though interview participants described their *Gacaca* experience as challenging and traumatic at times, many interview participants commented on positive aspects of *Gacaca*.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Mattley, 'Field research with phone sex workers' in Martin D Schwarz (ed), *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women: Methodological and Personal Perspectives* (Sage Publications, 1997) 101.

<sup>16</sup> See Uwe Flick, 'An Introduction to Qualitative Research' (Sage Publications, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, 2009) 16; Creswell, above n 6, 195.

<sup>17</sup> See Mattley, above n 15, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, above n 10, 145, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Renzetti, above n 3, 133, 135; O'Leary, above n 8, 146. This is also a key feature of all postmodern methodologies.



## IV METHODOLOGICAL, ETHICAL, AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Researchers conducting studies with human beings need to anticipate ethical and safety issues that may arise during the collection, analysis, and dissemination of their data.<sup>20</sup> Research on violence against human beings poses ‘a number of inherent risks to both respondents and interviewers’.<sup>21</sup> Van der Merwe, Baxter, and Chapman caution that research with victims of human rights abuses requires ‘very sensitive methodologies that do not harm (or further traumatise) those participating in research’.<sup>22</sup> Sensitive methodologies are particularly important when research involves violence against women,<sup>23</sup> and even more so when the women have experienced violence of a sexual nature.<sup>24</sup> The World Health Organisation (‘WHO’) explains that ‘the highly sensitive nature of sexual violence poses a unique set of challenges for any data gathering activity’,<sup>25</sup> and developed special ‘ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies’.<sup>26</sup> I used these ethical and safety recommendations as a guideline to organise and conduct my fieldwork.

Below I discuss methodological, ethical, and practical issues specific to my research with sexual violence survivors in Rwanda. I consider how ethical issues impacted on and reinforced methodological and practical challenges that I encountered when planning and conducting interviews in a country and culture that I was unfamiliar with. While I was preparing for my fieldwork, I was living and working in Australia. I had no existing relationships with any person in Rwanda and had never been to the country myself.

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<sup>20</sup> Creswell, above n 6, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Carroll Ellsberg and Lori Heise, ‘Bearing Witness: Ethics in Domestic Violence Research’ (Lancet, 2002) cited in Mary Carroll Ellsberg and Lori Heise, ‘Researching Violence Against Women – a practical guide for researchers and activists’ (Guide, World Health Organization, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Van der Merwe, Vicki Baxter and Audrey R Chapman, ‘Introduction’ in Hugo Van der Merwe, Vicki Baxter and Audrey R Chapman (eds), *Assessing the impact of transitional justice: challenges for empirical research* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009) 1, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Charlotte Watts et al, ‘Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women’ (Report, World Health Organization, 2001) 6–7.

<sup>24</sup> Chen Reis, ‘Ethical, safety and methodological issues related to the collection and use of data on sexual violence in conflict’ in Martha Albertson Fineman and Estelle Zinsstag (eds), *Feminist perspectives on transitional justice: From international and criminal to alternative forms of justice* (Intersentia, 2013) 189, 189.

<sup>25</sup> World Health Organization, ‘WHO Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies’ (Report, World Health Organization, 2007) 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*; These guidelines mainly apply to research conducted in ‘emergencies’. However, the WHO also cautions that ‘any inquiry into sexual violence must be designed and carried out with an understanding of ... the specific context in which the inquiry will take place’: *ibid* 7; I found that the ‘WHO Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies’ contained valuable insights into safety issues associated with my research in Rwanda.

Since the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges of my research are interwoven, I discuss them concurrently.

#### V FINDING AND INVITING PARTICIPANTS

Conducting research with vulnerable groups and sensitive topics restricts researchers in their approach to finding participants. Scholars who had previously conducted research with genocide survivors in Rwanda had identified their participants by collaborating with local organisations working on the ground with survivors.<sup>27</sup> Such collaborations can also be helpful to obtain the compulsory research clearance by the Rwandan Ministry of Education, which requires any researcher who plans to conduct research in Rwanda to have an affiliation with a Rwandan organisation. Establishing a collaboration with a local organisation in Rwanda from outside of the country proved difficult for me. For example, emails were not the appropriate means to make first contact with organisations that did not know me. I found that meaningful relationships were best established by meeting face-to-face. Hence, I travelled to Rwanda to prepare my fieldwork and to introduce myself personally to organisations that were working with genocide survivors. This trip was invaluable to my research, since I was also able to find an institution that agreed to support my research as the “Affiliating Institution” required as part of the research clearance process. I also made important contacts who later referred me to Rwandan professionals who could assist in identifying and inviting participants for my study. Finally, during this first trip, I also met with and established a personal relationship with two Rwandan women who later assisted me as my interpreter and translator.

Originally, I had planned to source participants in five different regions of the country to increase the variety of participants. However, once on the ground in Rwanda I realised that identifying and inviting sexual violence survivors for an interview in a safe manner required extensive preparation. Furthermore, interviews needed to be conducted in a safe location and participants had to be provided with the contact details of an affordable and accessible counselling service. Building personal relationships with

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<sup>27</sup> Anne-Marie de Brouwer and Etienne Ruvebana, 'The legacy of the *Gacaca* courts in Rwanda: Survivors' views' (2013) 13(5) *International Criminal Law Review* 937, 943–4; Karen Brounéus, 'Truth-Telling as Talking Cure? Insecurity and Retraumatization in the Rwandan *Gacaca* Courts' (2008) 39(1) *Security Dialogue* 55, 63–4.

professionals and planning my interviews in an ethical and safe manner in five different parts of Rwanda proved impossible with the budget and time available for my research, and I narrowed my research to two provinces.

Two main methods were used to invite women to participate in my research:

- 1) My invitation to participate was verbally passed on to potential participants by the professionals who worked with these women and knew them personally.
- 2) Passive snowball recruitment was used. Women who had been personally invited by the professionals were encouraged to pass on the information about my study to other women who they knew met the selection criteria.

One of the professionals who assisted me in finding participants was a counsellor who ran support groups — both in urban and rural areas of Rwanda — for women who had experienced sexual violence during the genocide. The counsellor passed on my invitation to all those women of her groups who had participated in *Gacaca*. Some of the women invited other women from their community to also participate in my research. This way, I recruited 21 participants. I was personally introduced to each of these 21 women by the counsellor prior to the interviews. Two other professionals who also worked with survivors of sexual violence assisted in inviting the other two women who participated in my study (I interviewed altogether 23 women). The majority of the women who I interviewed lived in rural areas and a few lived in urban areas. All women who were invited to participate in my research agreed to participate.

## VI INTERVIEW LOCATION

Researching topics that are linked to violence against women can pose risks for participants, their families, and also the fieldworkers involved in a research project.<sup>28</sup> Researchers need to provide for physical and psychological safety for both the participants and the research team.<sup>29</sup> Safety needs to be considered when finding an

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<sup>28</sup> Henrica A F M Jansen, 'Swimming against the Tide: Lessons from field research on violence against women in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati (Report, United Nations Population Fund, 2010) 5, 27.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid*, 29; World Health Organization, *above n* 25, 16.

interview location.<sup>30</sup> Jansen claims that interviews of a sensitive nature require a private setting.<sup>31</sup> The WHO recommends conducting interviews with sexual violence survivors in 'a safe place ... that does not draw unnecessary attention and does not raise suspicion, and where participants cannot be overheard.'<sup>32</sup>

The professionals who supported my research by inviting participants also assisted with the provision of interview spaces. For example, the counsellor who helped to recruit 21 women made her office space available for the majority of my interviews. This was the same location where meetings of the support groups for the women were usually held, which meant that most women were familiar with the interview location and people living around the location were used to seeing women go in and out of this office.<sup>33</sup> Using this office as an interview location was consistent with good practice recommendations made by the WHO, which states:

some data collectors have found that obtaining information about women's experience of sexual violence can be done discreetly by arranging to conduct interviews in the context of other activities that draw less attention, for example, in women's centres ... that routinely offer a variety of services and activities for females.<sup>34</sup>

Another interview location was the house of one interview participant situated in a rural area where no office spaces were available.<sup>35</sup> The participant was a member of one of the support groups run by the counsellor mentioned above, and group meetings were frequently held at her house. Therefore, people living in the village were familiar with seeing women go in and out of the house regularly, and our meetings did not draw attention within the village.

One issue relevant to such fieldwork, particularly in rural communities, relates to the apparent tensions between two ethical concerns: avoiding any appearance of

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<sup>30</sup> See 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research' (National Statement, Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, Revised Ed, 2007) 25 <<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/e72>>.

<sup>31</sup> Jansen, above n 28, 29.

<sup>32</sup> World Health Organization, above n 25, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Brounéus conducted her interviews with Rwandan women who had survived the genocide at the office of the widows' association, Association des Veuves du Genocide d'Avril ('AVEGA'): Brounéus, above n 27. De Brouwer and Ruvebana conducted their interviews with genocide survivors at the office of the organization Solace Ministries: Brouwer and Ruvebana, above n 27.

<sup>34</sup> World Health Organization, above n 25.

<sup>35</sup> The counsellor contacted the woman in advance to get consent to conduct interviews at the woman's house, which the woman readily agreed to.

inducement to participate and making sure that participants are not economically disadvantaged by their participation. I conducted a number of interviews in remote locations where opportunities to purchase food were limited. In addition, many of the women were extremely poor and did not have the financial means to buy food when travelling around. Women lived up to eight hours, by foot, away from the interview location. To minimise stress for participants and to ensure their physical well-being during my research, I offered each woman a soft drink and a small snack during the interview. I had not made indications about the catering before the interview to ensure that there were no perceived material benefits for participating in my research.

What I had promised during the information session was that I would reimburse each woman for costs associated with transport to and from the interview location. I wanted to ensure that a woman did not have to walk for hours and miss out on a whole day of work by participating in my research. Providing for transportation was also a way to address issues of physical safety for participants, ensuring that women could safely make their way to the interview location and back home. The professionals who had assisted in inviting women helped me to determine appropriate reimbursement for transport, since they knew where the women lived and the usual costs for transport in the area.

## VII INFORMED CONSENT

Studies with human beings usually require the researcher to obtain informed consent from participants.<sup>36</sup> Informed consent in human research of this kind is usually gained through the provision of a consent form that is read and signed by the participants.<sup>37</sup> However, the WHO ethical and safety recommendations caution that 'asking for a signature to confirm that informed consent has been given may not always be appropriate, [because] a signature will identify someone and possibly place that individual at risk'.<sup>38</sup> This concern was confirmed by the professionals who assisted with finding participants, flagging that it was not appropriate to ask any woman to write her full name in a readable manner on a consent form. I had addressed this issue when

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<sup>36</sup> Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, above n 30, 12, 16-8; See also World Health Organization, above n 25, 22.

<sup>37</sup> World Health Organization, above n 25, 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* 23 [6.5].

planning my consent gathering process, and interview participants could consent to being interviewed and audio taped by putting an “x” into the signature field, or, if they personally chose to, by adding their signature.<sup>39</sup> My interpreter then acted as an “impartial witness”, signing the consent form after the participants had put down an “x” or added their signature.<sup>40</sup> Afterwards, I signed the document as a means of additional confirmation that the interview participant had given consent.<sup>41</sup> All women who were invited to participate gave consent to be interviewed and to be audio-recorded.

## VIII CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEWS

Each interview was recorded on an audio recording device and took on average one hour. My interview schedule was designed as ‘an informal, interactive process ... [with] open-ended comments and questions’,<sup>42</sup> allowing the participants to talk in depth about what it was like to participate in *Gacaca*. Based on advice by Moustakas, I had developed ‘a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account’ of the women’s experiences with *Gacaca*.<sup>43</sup> In some interviews I used all the questions that I had developed; in other interviews only a few questions were needed, since the participant shared ‘the full story of ... her experience’ without the need of additional prompts.<sup>44</sup> I frequently encouraged participants to elaborate on certain aspects of their narrative and to provide further insight into the words they chose to describe their experience.<sup>45</sup> I also used questions of ‘what something felt like’ rather

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<sup>39</sup> This process had been approved by the Ethics Committee of James Cook University and the Rwandan Ministry of Education. 22 women chose to place their signatures (none of them were placed in a readable manner), one woman put an “x” in the signature box.

<sup>40</sup> Even though the interpreter is a party to the interviewing process, she does not have a personal interest in the data per se, but solely acts as an intermediary between the researcher and the participant. That is why she was considered to be a suitable person to witness the participants’ consent. This process of using an impartial witness was based on recommendations by the public research institute University of California, Irvine (‘UCI’): University of California Irvine, Consenting Subjects Who Do Not Read, Speak or Understand English (UCI Office of Research) <<http://www.research.uci.edu/compliance/human-research-protections/researchers/consenting-subjects-who-do-not-read-speak-or-understand-english.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> This was consistent with the WHO recommendation on how to gain consent of survivors of sexual violence: see World Health Organization, above n 25, 23 [6.5]. My consent gaining process was approved by the Ethics Committee of James Cook University (‘JCU’) and the Rwandan Ministry of Education.

<sup>42</sup> Moustakas, above n 5, 114.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

than asking 'why' and 'how' questions, which had been advised by O'Leary to elicit meaningful responses.<sup>46</sup>

Even though I had informed each participant that I would not ask questions about the genocide,<sup>47</sup> most women voluntarily talked about their experience with sexual violence during the genocide. Many would do so at the very beginning of the interview, often as a response to questions regarding their marital status and children. I was aware that women might want to include personal experiences from the genocide, based on Byamukama's experiences when interviewing Rwandan genocide survivors.<sup>48</sup> Even though Byamukama's research, like mine, focused on the participants' experiences with *Gacaca*, she explains that it was 'nearly impossible to interview a survivor of genocide, especially women who had been sexually assaulted, about the *Gacaca* process without dedicating at least 30 minutes to the genocide itself and their personal experiences.'<sup>49</sup> In Byamukama's view, listening to the women's genocide experiences was a necessary step and assisted in building rapport with the participants as well as creating a relationship of trust.<sup>50</sup> Further ways to create a safe environment and establish rapport are explained in the following section.

#### IX ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

Researchers who had conducted similar research flagged the importance of establishing rapport between researcher, interpreter, and participants. Rapport was needed to gain women's trust to participate in the interviews and to meaningfully share information about their experiences. Ample consideration of rapport building seemed particularly important due to my outsider status (being of different nationality and skin colour).<sup>51</sup> One way of establishing rapport is through association with a person who the participants know and trust. Sharratt explains that during her interviews with female

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<sup>46</sup> O'Leary, above n 8, 139.

<sup>47</sup> My PhD research does not focus on the experiences relating to the actual sexual violence, but on the experiences with the justice process dealing with cases of sexual violence.

<sup>48</sup> Shivon Byamukama, *Justice in the Aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide: A Study of Gacaca Courts* (Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Glasgow Caledonian University, 2008).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid* 39–40.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* 40.

<sup>51</sup> While I was in Rwanda, I was frequently called a "*Mzungu*", a Swahili expression meaning "white person".

survivors of sexual violence,<sup>52</sup> 'many women ... would not agree to participate unless someone they knew and trusted was part of the project.'<sup>53</sup> Brounéus, who was assisted during interviews with female genocide survivors in Rwanda by counsellors working for a local widows' association,<sup>54</sup> explains how invaluable the professional help was because the interview participants trusted the counsellors.<sup>55</sup>

The counsellor who was running support groups with survivors of sexual violence and who had assisted in recruiting 21 participants, organised and facilitated initial meetings between myself and the women to whom she had passed on my invitation. These meetings not only assisted in sharing important information about the study, but also provided an opportunity to build rapport between the women, myself, and my interpreter. Some of these initial meetings involved several women, while others involved individuals. Where a number of women attended at the same time, I initially had concerns about confidentiality, seeing that the participants would be implicitly identified as survivors of sexual violence. However, neither the counsellor who had organised these meetings nor the women who participated appeared to be concerned. Most of the women who attended these joint meetings knew each other from the support groups, during which they had already addressed issues of confidentiality. To account for those participants who were not part of one of these support groups, the counsellor reminded all women during the meetings how important it was to keep confidential everyone's experience, to which all participants agreed. Overall, I had the impression that the survivors of sexual violence I met had formed a remarkably close community and were committed to protecting each other's confidentiality.

In the initial meetings, the counsellor introduced me to the women as a person whom she knew and trusted. I was then given time to talk about myself and my research. Based on the experiences of other researchers, I was aware that the women might like to know about me personally.<sup>56</sup> Byamukama explains that offering participants to ask the researcher some personal questions made them feel comfortable.<sup>57</sup> 'Being direct and

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<sup>52</sup> Sharratt interviewed female survivors of sexual violence testifying before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY): see Sara Sharratt, *Gender, Shame and Sexual Violence* (Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 48.

<sup>54</sup> Brounéus, above n 27, 63–4; Brounéus worked with AVEGA.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>56</sup> See, eg, Renzetti, above n 3, 140.

<sup>57</sup> Byamukama, above n 48, 38.



blunt' is, according to Byamukama, not appreciated in the Rwandan culture.<sup>58</sup> Her interview participants were mainly interested in knowing who she was rather than finding out details about her research. These experiences assisted me in being prepared for personal questions. One of the first questions that women asked me was whether I was "still a girl" (single) or "a woman" (married). In contrast to Byamukama, I found that women would also ask detailed questions about why I had chosen Rwanda for my research and what I was intending to do with my data later.

Besides gaining trust, the interviewer also needs to have adequate skills to encourage participants to share their experience.<sup>59</sup> Jansen reports great willingness of women to tell their stories about violence against them — even in settings in which these topics were usually considered a taboo — provided that interviewers had appropriate skills,<sup>60</sup> including 'creating a safe space and empathetic atmosphere'.<sup>61</sup> Through my work and training as a mediator and conflict coach, as well as through various workshops preparing me for this type of research, I had gained skills to conduct my interviews in an encouraging and empathetic manner. These skills include demonstrating attention to interview participants and deep listening, involving minimal responses as well as non-verbal behaviour such as supportive facial expressions and body language.

In all interviews, I was assisted by the same interpreter. A relationship of trust between the interpreter and the participants is an important requirement when conducting interviews.<sup>62</sup> Brounéus cautions that 'interview material will lose its value' when there is a lack of trust between the interpreter and the participants, for example because the participant may not speak freely.<sup>63</sup> During her research with genocide survivors, Brounéus was supported by Association des Veuves du Genocide d'Avril ('AVEGA') counsellors as interpreters and describes how important this assistance was, because the participants trusted the counsellors.<sup>64</sup> My interpreter had both the personal characteristics and professional skills to support the creation of a safe and empathetic environment. She was a Rwandan woman from the same area as the participants (albeit

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid 39.

<sup>59</sup> Jansen, above n 28, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Jansen refers to interviews that her team conducted in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, see *ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>62</sup> See, eg, Renzetti, above n 3, 127; Brounéus, above n 27, 63; Sharratt, above n 52, 60.

<sup>63</sup> Brounéus, above n 27, 64.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

being unknown to the women) and shared a common history with them, which I believe assisted in establishing rapport between the participants and my interpreter.

Interpreters need not only be trusted by the participants but also need to be adequately trained and skilled to conduct interpretation in an ethical and professional manner. Data translated by an interpreter could lose its meaning if the interpreter chose to hide facts or distort information according to their own opinion.<sup>65</sup> My interpreter had useful qualifications, including a degree in clinical psychology and public health, and was enrolled in a PhD in public health. She had previously conducted research herself with vulnerable groups in Rwanda and was familiar with methodological issues.

I felt that one of the most important qualifications of my interpreter was her education and experience as a psychologist, since many of the participants felt distressed at some stage during the interviews. In a number of cases my interpreter had to take on the role as a counsellor to provide emotional support. On one occasion, I thought we should stop an interview because the participant got quite distressed, but my interpreter encouraged the woman to continue. My interpreter later pointed out to me that it had been very important for the woman to continue and that she would have felt much worse if she had stopped in the middle of the interview. Indeed, the participant expressed positive feelings about having continued at the end of her interview and stated that she was feeling a great sense of relief after having spoken to us.

Feeling relief after participating in the interview appeared to be a common reaction in nearly every interview. Each woman thanked me at the end for having taken the time to speak to her and explained how important it was for her to have participated in the study. Only one of the 23 women who participated in my research arrived late to her interview, and this was due to personal reasons. The majority of women, including those who lived several hours away, arrived early to their interview appointments, sometimes several hours early. One participant explained to me that she was several hours early because she 'could not have missed the opportunity to talk to me'. Another woman revealed during her interview that she was HIV positive, explaining that she had never shared this information with anybody outside her family before. These experiences gave me the impression that my "outsider" status had not prevented women from talking

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

frankly during my interviews. On the contrary, I sensed that women felt encouraged to share even extremely sensitive information, since they did not have to fear that sharing this information would have negative consequences for life in their community.

#### X RESEARCHING IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Making sense of the stories of research participants may require the researcher to understand the meaning behind words used by the participants to describe their experiences.<sup>66</sup> Since my research involved interviews with participants whose language I did not speak, I had to identify special ways to ensure that I could understand the above mentioned “meaning behind words”. During my interviews I relied on my interpreter’s ability to correctly translate meanings from the Kinyarwanda language into English. My interpreter and I acknowledged that exact interpretation would frequently be impossible, and recognised the need to identify potential different meanings and interpretations of words. I had a close working relationship with my interpreter and we held a debriefing session after each interview day to clarify in detail the meaning of ambiguous words as well as particular expressions used by the participants.

All interviews were transcribed in Kinyarwanda and then translated into English by a Rwandan translator. Initially, I had planned to only transcribe the English interpretation, provided by my interpreter during the interviews, myself. As a way of quality control, I had planned to have the interpretations at the time of the interview cross-checked by an independent translator. However, out of interest, I had one interview transcribed and translated in full. In direct comparison with the interpretation on the day of the interviews, the translated transcript was far richer than what my interpreter had been able to convey during the interview. I therefore had all interviews fully transcribed in Kinyarwanda and then translated into English. For each transcript I worked closely with the translator to clarify any questions and to obtain additional explanations of the possible meanings of various expressions and their implications. Working closely with both my interpreter and translator assisted me in clarifying misunderstandings and preventing me from missing important data if words had particular connotations in the Kinyarwanda language.

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<sup>66</sup> O’Leary, above n 8, 139.

## XI REFERRAL TO SERVICES

Researchers are required to provide for the psychological wellbeing of participants, including minimising stress for participants and preparing adequate psychological support.<sup>67</sup> The WHO recommends for researchers to ensure that 'basic care and support to victims/survivors ... [is] available locally before commencing any activity that may involve individuals disclosing information about their experiences of sexual violence.'<sup>68</sup> Jansen suggests that interviewers need to have available information on support services that can be provided to participants after the interview.<sup>69</sup> I had to consider that the availability of support systems in rural areas may be limited, and even if they are available, they may not be suitable to assist the individual.<sup>70</sup> Jansen suggests that the researcher, together with the local people who assist with research, should identify 'the most appropriate and accessible resources for each area, eg, church-based resources or health services' before conducting an interview.<sup>71</sup>

I was fortunate to work closely with the counsellor who assisted me with my research. She volunteered to counsel any woman who participated in my interviews if needed. On one occasion, a woman got so distressed during the interview that my interpreter and I decided to stop the interview. We encouraged the woman to get in contact with the counsellor, which she did on the same day. During this conversation the woman asked the counsellor to arrange for another meeting with me, since she really wanted to participate in the research. We met a second time, during which the woman was able to respond to all questions and complete the interview.

One ethical concern during research with human beings relates to avoiding any appearance of inducement to participate. When conducting fieldwork in rural communities, this concern may be in tension with the ethical requirement to ensure accessibility of referral services. Many women who took part in my research lived several hours, by foot, away from the counsellor's office. Even though most women possessed a mobile phone, many of them did not have the financial means to buy phone credit to get in contact with the counsellor. To ensure that the identified counselling

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<sup>67</sup> Jansen, above n 28, 29; World Health Organization, above n 25, 16.

<sup>68</sup> World Health Organization, above n 25, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Jansen, above n 28, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

service was accessible, I provided a small financial contribution so that the participants could afford phone credit to contact the counsellor after the interview if needed. I did not mention this contribution until the end of the interview to not give the appearance of any financial benefit in taking part in my research.

## XII SELF-CARE

Not only the participants, but also the researcher and interpreter working with sensitive topics can feel distress during fieldwork. The WHO requires 'all members of a data gathering team ... to receive ... ongoing support.'<sup>72</sup> Jansen suggests providing some debriefing opportunities so that interviewers get a chance to talk about their most important experiences and let off stress.<sup>73</sup> Hearing accounts of rape and sexual torture from survivors was distressing for me at times. My interpreter and I spent at least an hour together after each interview day and talked about the most stressful moments of the interviews.

In workshops on researcher self-care, I had learned how important it was to look after my own well-being when conducting research that could be distressing for me. I exercised regularly while in Rwanda, and maintained my mental well-being by staying in regular contact with my family and supervisors. Furthermore, I ensured that I got time away from my research to switch off and regain energy by enjoying non-research related experiences in Rwanda, such as trips to various national parks.

During my fieldwork there were times when I found it distressing that I was limited to the role of a researcher, and that I could not help the women other than by listening to them and by later ensuring that my research would not be confined in a document on a bookshelf. However, it seemed like being listened to did have a positive impact on the participants. I got the impression that it gave the women hope that someone had come to hear their stories and advocate for their needs by publishing about them. I believe this helped me to come to terms with my limited role. Since I have returned from my fieldwork, seeking opportunities to tell the women's stories has given me a sense that I can do something for the women, even though it is only a small contribution.

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<sup>72</sup> World Health Organization, above n 25, 24.

<sup>73</sup> Jansen, above n 28, 33.

## XIII CONCLUSION

In this article, I have outlined methodological, ethical, and practical challenges that I encountered when planning and conducting research with survivors of sexual violence in Rwanda. Reflecting back on my experience, I believe I was as well prepared as I could be from outside of Rwanda, assisted by valuable resources relating to this type of research.<sup>74</sup> My initial visit to Rwanda was crucial for me to understand which context-specific challenges I had to address, and I made a number of changes to my participant recruitment and interview process after this visit. I learned that various practical aspects of my fieldwork could not be organised in advance from outside of the country, such as scheduling meetings with interview participants. It was vital for me to first establish a relationship of trust with a middle person (eg, the counsellor), which I believe can only be done face-to-face in the Rwandan culture. Assisted by the middle person, I was then able to get to know interview participants face-to-face in an initial meeting, allowing me to establish important rapport with the women. Only then was it possible to meaningfully organise dates and times for interviews that were suitable for the participants, as well as for me and for my interpreter, seeing that we had to travel several hours to get to each interview location.<sup>75</sup> Summarising my experiences discussed in this article, and supported by relevant literature, I have developed a brief “checklist” (see text box below) aiming to assist future researchers when organising research with survivors of sexual violence or other vulnerable groups.

Further reflecting on ethical issues, I found particularly challenging the tension between seemingly competing ethical concerns, such as avoiding any appearance of inducement to participate on the one hand, and ensuring that participants are not economically disadvantaged by their participation on the other hand. Another tension that I found challenging related to what an Australian ethics committee would deem to be ethical and what appeared to be both safe and practicable on the ground in Rwanda. I felt at times that it was advised to rely on what the middle person and the interview participants considered as practical and safe,<sup>76</sup> rather than sticking to rigid

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<sup>74</sup> Including guidelines, publications from other researchers, and relevant workshops.

<sup>75</sup> Some of the meetings were scheduled three weeks ahead and I was worried that women would forget and either not show up or be late. However, as mentioned above on page 15, only one woman was late for her interview, which was due to personal reasons.

<sup>76</sup> This point is supported by the WHO ethical and safety recommendations, suggesting to consider locally established procedures when researching sexual violence: see World Health Organization, above n 25, 3.

procedures.<sup>77</sup> A discussion on differing standards and views on what is most ethical whilst considering safety and practicability when conducting sensitive research in various contexts deserves more attention in relevant literature in the future.

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<sup>77</sup> For example, it was a requirement that I included my Australian office number on the information sheet for interview participants. I could not include my Rwandan mobile number. On the ground in Rwanda, it was unrealistic that a Rwandan woman who only spoke Kinyarwanda would ring an international number to get in contact with me. During the initial information session we organized for the middle person (eg, the counsellor) to facilitate phone communication between the women and myself if needed.

**KEY EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED DURING MY RESEARCH**

- ✓ I accounted for particularities deriving from the role of a qualitative researcher by taking a built-in reflexivity approach to my research;
- ✓ Since I was not familiar with Rwanda, an initial visit was invaluable to prepare my fieldwork. During this visit I could commence establishing relationships with local organisations and individual professionals to support my research;
- ✓ All logistics relating to my interviews had to be carefully planned, which included finding a safe and confidential interview location and considering travel time, transport, and food for the participants, my interpreter, and myself;
- ✓ The sensitivity of my research required me to address particularities relating to the process of receiving informed consent from my interview participants;
- ✓ Prior to conducting my interviews, I developed knowledge and skills on how to establish trust with interview participants as well as how to create a safe space and empathetic atmosphere;
- ✓ On several occasions, the psychology background of my interpreter was invaluable, since she could attend to interview participants when they felt distressed;
- ✓ Since my interpreter was not a professional interpreter and did not speak English fluently, I had my interviews transcribed and translated by a translator. These translations provided richer and more accurate accounts than the interpretations at the time of the interviews;
- ✓ When identifying a local counselling service for the referral of interview participants, it was important to ensure the accessibility of the service for the participants;
- ✓ Researching a sensitive topic with vulnerable participants required me to handle intricate ethical issues. I based my decisions on what appeared to be both safe and practicable in the views of the interview participants and the local professionals who assisted with the research;
- ✓ I supported my mental and physical well-being during my fieldwork by debriefing with my interpreter, staying in contact with my family and by exercising regularly.



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