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# COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH THE UNHEARD: PARTICIPATORY NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN SENSITIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

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**Abstract**

Sensitive social research often requires a disclosure of private behaviors or attitudes, making effective communication and personal interactions with participants crucial. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is an approach grounded in language, thought, and action that creates personal interaction for effective communication in social research. This study utilized PNI to explore the lived experiences of rural young women who engage in sex work for survival in the suburbs of Mwanza town, Tanzania. Through a PNI process, the study created a safe space for six young women to tell their stories and redefine themselves, enabling them to discuss taboo issues that they would not have been able to speak about. The study highlights the lack of qualitative research in Tanzania, allowing sex workers' voices to be heard by challenging stereotypes, connotations, and skewed perceptions. This paper concludes that PNI in sensitive research empowers participants by providing an avenue for their voices to be heard and encouraging transformative learning.

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**Introduction**:

Sensitive research requires researchers to explore private behaviors and attitudes that people usually keep to themselves or tackle controversial issues that cause discomfort, making effective communication and personal interaction critical. Narrative approach situating effective communication and personal interaction at the core of social inquiry is recommended. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a form of personal interaction that combines language, thought, and action and enhances reflexivity, critical thinking, and transformative learning. This paper describes a study that used PNI to explore the experiences of young rural women in Mwanza town's suburbs who engage in sex work as a means to survive. The PNI process provided a safe space for the six participants to share their experiences, reflect on them, and redefine themselves, enabling them to discuss taboo issues that they would never have spoken about. Lastly, this study emphasizes the lack of qualitative research in Tanzania that enables sex workers to voice their lived experiences and challenges the stereotypes, skewed

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perceptions, and connotations attached to sex work. Therefore, this paper advocates for the use of PNI in sensitive research as it empowers participants, allows their voices to be heard, and permits transformative learning.

## 2. Problem

In Tanzania, young rural men and women who relocate to urban centres in research for a better life but often end up living in suburbs and poor neighbourhoods where rents are low (Bryceson, 2006). In these neighbourhoods they also encounter a wide range of problems, maybe more so than anybody else. The concrete problems include a lack of availability of basic services such as water, food, and health services (Lawi, 2013). As a result, there is sometimes stiff and intense competition with the host communities for resources and services, leading to exclusion and segregation of the new incomers (Msigwa & Mbongo, 2013).

Because of the above situations, young rural-urban migrants find themselves in difficult positions and end up becoming socially immobile and inflexible (Msigwa & Mbongo, 2013). The situation is even worse for young rural women migrants: finding formal work, for example, can be particularly difficult for them, as there are few jobs, and they especially lack the qualifications that are needed for employment in the formal sector (Sommers, 2010). Due to this precarious situation, many of them position themselves and make a livelihood by depending on 'small-small' money, or perhaps by bartering items (Stark, 2016; Wamoyi, Fenwick, Urassa, Zaba, & Stones, 2011) as also reported in South Africa (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). When other options fail, bar attendant and/or sex work become the most immediate means of survival for many of them (Stark, 2013, 2016).

In my working with communities in the suburbs of Mwanza town, as part of the outreach programme of St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT), I met a young rural woman who had been lured into sex work. I was reduced to tears when I heard her many stories of exploitation, oppression, and abuse from men. I passionately wanted to do something about this state of affairs. As a person who had been socialized into patriarchy, I felt that I bore more responsibility for disrupting gender oppression of women which is perpetuated through male privilege, male role, and masculinity (Hearn, Ratele, & Shefer, 2015).

Thereafter I sought to purposefully provide a platform where young rural women who sell in the suburbs of Mwanza town would share stories of their experiences so as to offer me better prospects of understanding their situations and possibly be able to disrupt men's oppression of women. This was important given that there is a general lack of qualitative research in Tanzania which allows women, particularly sex workers, to recount their situations from their own voices and perspectives (UNICEF, 2006). A shortcoming which leads to connotation, skewed perceptions, stereotypes, and categorization of sex workers as deviant and vicious (Matthews, 2008; Quinn & Rosenthal, 2012).

Apart from creating a platform for sharing stories, I also envisaged that a new set of social and cognitive processes would unfold that would be cathartic to young women who were surviving in and negotiating a complex body-related industry. This was critical in the context of Tanzania where sex work – apart from being tedious, challenging, traumatic, dreadful, and dangerous – belongs to the realm of taboo where sex workers are not expected to talk about and/or reflect on their lived experience (Beckham, 2013). Besides, sex work is illegal in Tanzania and is therefore criminalized and socially regarded to be reprehensible (Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1981). Because of this, some people come to believe that stigmatizing or even abusing a sex worker is justifiable, as she is seen as a criminal who deserves no good. As a result, sex workers often suffer from deeply held feelings of abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, oppression, and social stigma from many facets of society, including police and health officers (Beckham, 2013). Catharsis was therefore thought important as an explosive release of deeply held negative feelings which occurs when a person starts to experience validation and is given an opportunity to speak about and confide his/her lived experiences in someone interested and caring, alongside the opportunity to work through and express emotions (Darra, 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Johnson, 2009).

## 3. Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Kurtz (2014) participatory narrative inquiry (PNI) which is regarded as a very pertinent approach for allowing people to be heard was found a pertinent approach for this study because of its capacity to free the voice from whatever disenables it from coming into being, and to face facts about the self (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). PNI is and inductive approach which blends participatory and narrative approaches (see Figure

1) for a group of people to work through their so as to unravel their complex situations (Kurtz, 2014). I chose PNI particularly because one of its essential characteristics is the discovery of knowledge by working bottom-up, using participants' lived experiences to decipher broad and interconnected themes. In this way, PNI allowed me to explore the lived experiences of participants from a new and different perspective, with freedom and openness as to the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

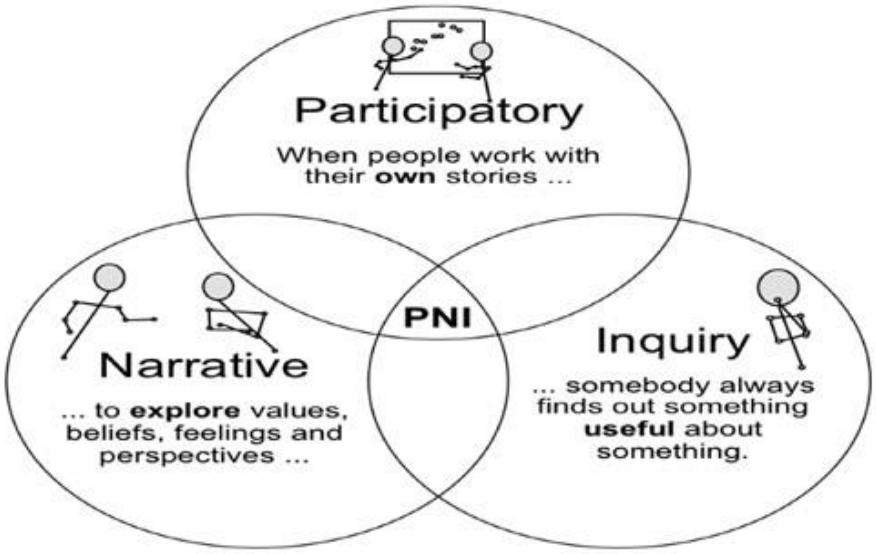


**Figure 1.** Blending participatory and narrative approaches to form PNI. **Source:** Kurtz(2014).

PNI is also credited to be, and often is, an instrument which provokes affective thinking about events through talking about them and hearing them being told (Abbott, 2008). It is said that memory itself is dependent on the narratives, for "we do not have any mental records of anything until narrative is presented as a kind of armature, giving shape to the records that are in our minds (Abbott, 2008; Schwandt, 1994). Moreso, PNI is founded on the ideas that "to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it" and that reality manifests itself through multiple and intangible mental constructions which are socially and experientially based (Schwandt, 1994). In this respect, PNI takes seriously social contexts, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives in obtaining new knowledge (Kurtz, 2014). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) write that PNI focuses not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional fabrics within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. In contexts where little previous exploration of social relationships and group behaviours has been done, PNI is credited for capturing the conditions which affect people's lives (Crooks, 2001). Most importantly, PNI is also sensitive to "subtle textures of thought and feeling" (Webster & Mertova, 2007), at play in an account of lived experiences and allows for the events that have been of most significance to be brought forth in the stories participants tell. A researcher using PNI, simply proposes paths along which to look but does not point at what is to be seen (Blumer, 1954). He/she collects stories, asks questions, and lets the participants look at, think, and talk about the patterns themselves. He/she does not decide for the participants what the stories might mean (Kurtz, 2014; Schwandt, 1994) but rather lets the participants' voices surface with the hope of gaining in-depth understandings of their lived experiences (Guignon, 1999). In other words, the role researcher in PNI process is to present both the opportunities for emancipation and transformation which allow individuals to speak and become privileged sources of information (Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1984; Rogers, 1980). In this way, participants are seen less as subjects than as individuals who are actively doing something positive for their individual and collective well-being (Yeich, 1996).

### 3.1. Data Collection

Knowing that many young rural women who relocate to urban centres in search of a better life often end up living in the suburbs and working as barmaids and/or sex workers, I made efforts to visit several bars in the

suburbs of Mwanza town and made contact with potential participants of the PNI. This task would fall into what Dickson and Green (2001) call "bridge activity – something short term to help with entering a site or community, and giving its members a chance 'to size you up and get to know you"' (see also Smith (1995)).

I soon became acquainted with a bar manager in one of the popular bars in the neighbourhood who played a role in connecting me to two barmaids, and a purposeful dialogue and reflexivity started from there onward. I recall how difficult the initial contacts with these two barmaids were as I attempted to explain my process of PNI and relate it as humanly as possible. I had to step out of my relatively privileged position that men in Tanzania generally occupy (in relation to women) to ask delicate questions in a non-offensive manner, but also to be friendly, courteous, conversational, and unbiased towards the young rural women who were surviving by using unconventional livelihood strategies, including sex work.

On occasions, the two young women would talk to me about their issues, hoping that I would be able to access practical support and/or help. They often portrayed themselves as suffering in need of help, expecting me to personally bring that help about. At times, I felt anxious, afraid that they would lose interest if I did not attend to their needs. I felt the challenge of enhancing rapport – building a considerate and sympathetic relationship of trust. I did this in several ways: acknowledging their difficulties, remaining respectful, validating their stories, and offering a meal or a drink. In this way, there was a possibility of breaking the ice and establishing a sympathetic mutual relationship of kinship. Let me add that Oakley (1981) ways of doing feminist research were helpful. I became conscious of the need to strike a balance between being humorous and serious. The idea was to put the young women at ease so that they could be themselves and talk freely.

I was naïve, however, to assume that I would find it relatively easy to contact and interview a barmaid and/or sex worker. I soon learned from the two young women that there were several groupings of young rural women who sell sex in suburbs of Mwanza town, with different temperaments and social statuses. This posed challenges for my PNI process. I had not conceptualized the situation before the inquiry began. I recall how difficult it was when I planned to visit brothels, for example, as this would interrupt the work and/or arouse suspicion. If I bought the time to interact with the young women in the brothels, I would not face strong resistance. However, this would present a number of ethical issues. Most critically, I thought paying an interviewee in a brothel might be fruitless, as she might decide to say what she thought I wanted to hear rather than what she lived and knew. It was not something I was comfortable doing or wished to do in this process of narrative inquiry.

At this stage, used a snowball sampling technique so as to reach out to young women in their respective categories (Maher, 2000). My initial contact with the two barmaids, therefore, became providentially helpful in connecting and familiarizing me with their associates. The technique was possible thanks to the solidarity that existed amongst young rural women who work as barmaids and/or sell sex in the suburbs of Mwanza town. The fact is that they knew each other well and met regularly for social and psychological support. I therefore had a rare and important opportunity to 'enter' their wider community, in which I became "a member of the landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Once a close relationship was built between me and the young women who sell sex in the suburbs of Mwanza town, I purposefully recruited six participants, for several reasons. First, a relatively small number of participants would foster trust more easily. Second, a small number of participants would keep the process very personal and active, and would make our contact more direct and consistent, as suggested by Ospina (2004). Third, with a small number of participants, we could access thick and rich data, which is an important aspect of qualitative research (Langdridge, 2007). In selecting the six participants, I made sure that the different categories of young rural women who sell sex in suburbs of Mwanza town were represented in the sample. I targeted those aged between 18 and 25 years, an age group that I thought would articulate their lived experiences well.

At this point, I sought the informed consent of the participants as we agreed on the use of pseudonyms for anonymity and preventing harm (see also Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach (2009)). We also agreed on how to store the data in a protected way. In this vein, we agreed on the need and importance of having a field diary where we would document and keep everything observed, heard, and found. We carefully selected times and locations for our PNI process with a view to maintaining safety. Most of the places where most of our meetings took place were considered marginal locations, thus presenting ambiguous statuses as sites that are both

constraining (lower status and poor) and enabling (providing a safe space) for activities that are morally condemned by the state and the law (see also Hubbard (1999)).

### 3.2. Tools of Data Collection and Analysis

Keeping a field diary was important in this PNI process. I always took notes during our meetings so that I could focus on the person, using journal records (see also Ellett (2011)). I also conducted unstructured open-ended interviews that were dyadic or one-to-one (see also Polkinghorne (2005)). In addition, written or visual documents such as personal text messages, photos of the participants or artworks, for example, were collected as important pieces of information. This process of narrative inquiry revealed that statements became more meaningful within the context of a story (see also Polkinghorne (2005)). Therefore, taking notes on where and when the narrative emerged, and the circumstances surrounding it, was very important (see also Ellett (2011)).

The stories were first written in Kiswahili were afterwards transcribed into English. Attention was paid to ensure that all the participants were provided with the opportunity to use their own words when sharing their stories, and the exact words were transcribed verbatim in the field diary (see also Cordero (2014)). On some occasions, texts were transcribed immediately after the meeting, to avoid accumulating a backlog or forgetting the material. The process of transcription confirmed the importance of accessing and understanding the contexts so as to correctly situate the lived experiences of the participants (see also Berger and Luckmann (1967)). Some of the stories were repeated and paraphrased several times so as to make sure that the interpretations of the participants' words were made correctly.

I and the participants decided not to tape-record the stories, for several reasons. First, we were aware of Edwards and Holland (2013) warning that narrative inquirers should "think carefully about the analytic status they bestow on recorded accounts" and should "not fall into mistaking the socially shaped interview performance for a capture of the real and authentic" experiences. We therefore became concerned about the way tape recorders would cut across the socio-emotional signals between us in face-to-face interactions (see also James and Busher (2006)). This was especially critical for this particular PNI, the purpose of which was not to discover truth in any absolute sense, but to enrich and broaden understanding experiences of selling sex, from the participants own voices and perspectives.

Second, some participants were nervous about tape recorders and did not want to be recorded. Therefore, we felt it was not mandatory to make any audio recordings of this particular PNI process. Instead, we decided to generate stories from and with actual living bodies of the participants. In this respect, we also observed and made use of the participants' presentation of their bodies when narrating stories of lived experiences so as to know more than just facts but to engage emotionally with those experiences.

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis in line with the general inductive method. This was because of its applicability to a study design whose aim is to describe and make sense of a phenomenon (Thomas, 2006). I particularly liked this way of data analysis because it involves relating the facts obtained from the field to concepts drawn from models or theories – that is, it is data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, thematic analysis, as part of the general inductive method, would immerse me in the raw material so as to allow me to look for more details and establish patterns of relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In course of doing this, I was aware that I carried my own personal baggage and perspectives which might influence how I infer meanings from the participants' voices – a temptation to intrude and take over the voices of the participants for my own purposes (see also DeVault (1999)). With this in mind, I made an effort to refrain from overriding the voices of the participants. Instead, I assume the role of a passenger rather than a driver behind the steering wheel so as to allow the participants' authentic voices to take the lead (see also Mazzei and Jackson (2009)). I therefore avoided interference and self-indulgence (see also Taylor and White (2000)). In this way, the participants' agenda becomes the central feature in the process of data analysis (see also Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009)).

### 3.3. Emotional Upheaval

The need to feel how the participants felt during their experiences, was very important. I was particularly worried that to expect a value-free position of neutrality for the sake of objectivity might lead to what Shacklock and Smyth (1998) call an "obscene and dishonest position." I was concerned that a failure to engage emotionally with the experiences of the participants, could itself produce a distorted data analysis (see also Jackson, Backett-

Milburn, and Newall (2013)). I wanted instead to see a process of inquiry that was not only as an intellectual exercise, but also as "a process of exploration and discovery that is felt deeply" (Gilbert, 2001a). The logic was that reason alone could keep the brain operating, but without emotions it would become difficult to gain an in-depth understanding of lived experience of the participants (Kurtz, 2014).

In the above perspective, therefore, I and the participants allowed ourselves to have certain feelings as a fundamental aspect in this sensitive process of inquiry (see also McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber (2001)). After all, one of the fundamental aspects of being human is the capacity to feel, show, and express emotions. However, one effect of allowing feelings in sensitive inquiry of this kind is emotional upheaval. In the course our interactions, I and the participants were often emotionally drained and overwhelmed – a reported threat to qualitative researchers (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; McCosker et al., 2001). Some of the stories represented, in the participants' own words, lives that had been shattered by incomprehensible acts of cruelty, violence and neglect. The details given were graphic, containing explicit and vivid descriptions of the dire circumstances to which the participants were subjected in their everyday lives. The emotional impact of such stories was unbearable, as a few selected stories tell it all:

Many of us were sexually abused even before we moved here, sometimes by our own people, the people we trusted so much, so we ran away from that. Imagine your own relative or someone you trusted so much rapes you and feels justified in doing so (Siti, 24 years old).

Going to school one dull morning, I met a man who pushed me into the bush and raped me. Later he warned me not to tell anyone or risk being beaten each time I met him. I went to the victim support unit at Kiomboi to report the case. But nobody there believed me, and the man who raped me was not apprehended. I continued to see him around, and because of that, I decided to run away, as I was afraid he would beat or even kill me (Kibibi, 19 years old).

Having been raped before, it somehow prepares you for this work. You feel like nothing worse would ever happen to you again. You feel rubbished and garbage! It is like people can just come, get you, use you and throw you down there like a dirty piece of cloth. I probably would not have been so uncaring, so reckless about my life and myself, if I had not been sexually abused before (Kibibi, 19 years old).

It was so throbbing to hear that entering sex work, for most of the participants, was far more multifaceted than a simple distinction between voluntary and involuntary motives would suggest. Sex work fell along a continuum of violence against women under male rule and hegemony. Accustomed to frequent violence and exploitation, some of them came to think that sex work was in the nature of things or a role they ought to play well for their own survival. Thus, sex work was a 'choice' made by those who have no choice in patriarchal society, as we find in the following stories:

I got into this work soon after my mother's death. We depended on her for food, clothes and education – for everything. She left us helpless: two little sisters and I. We had nothing to eat, never mind clothes and other things. I decided to take my siblings to our grandmother before I moved to Mwanza to work, so that I could help them in return. When I moved here, the only available work was to become a barmaid. It was so tough to work there at first. I did not know how to get enough money for myself and for my siblings. I gradually learned to get cash from sex for myself and my family back home (Bahati, 25 years old).

I used to work in a hotel when I first came to Mwanza. If I did not provide sexual favours to the managers, they would not promote me. If I refused to give in, I would receive very little pay and sometimes no pay. I would be insulted and threatened with dismissal when I protested. It happened countless times that I had to dance to their tune or risk losing the job, and it became a way of life. I feel better now because I have freedom to decide who to have sex with, how much, where and when (Adama, 22 years old).

Not only that but also some of the participants' stories depicted situations that were still ongoing in their lives, reflecting the freshness of the memories:

I am scared each time I go to meet clients. First, you don't know the person, you meet once or twice, say in a bar, and there, off you go. Second, you don't know his behaviour, never mind what he might be carrying in his belongings. Worse still, he dictates where to go, and you don't know the area well. This way of life is risky and frightening (Chiku, 18 years old).

I don't know what may happen to me in the middle of the night. Whether you know him or not, it doesn't make things any easier, he is always a stranger. Let us say you perhaps know him a little, fine, but he can turn against you any time. In his mind, you are only a whore who deserves no good at all (Kibibi, 19 years old).

It is disgusting to feel the sweat, the smell, whatever! It is like, oh gosh, why am I doing this? I don't like to sleep with a man who stinks, I do it only for money. Truthfully, I am beside myself when lying with him, I feel rotten, hate myself and life as a whole (Siti, 24 years old).

Some of the participants described near-death experiences when they found themselves completely vulnerable and confronted by their own mortality:

The man beat me almost to death because I refused to have 'unusual sex' with him – 'sex from behind'. He tried to seal my mouth. I grew angry and fought back. I know I can be very brave and strong. I know I am a fighter and a survivor. I pushed him down and escaped. When I think about it now, I feel disgusted and sometimes angered (Atupele, 21 years old).

Because sex work is illegal and socially reprehensible in Tanzanian society, at least in daylight, the participants were reluctant to report the violence meted out to them for fear of being mocked, and also for fear of provoking punishment from law enforcement agencies. Even when they managed to report the violence they experienced, the police tended not to take them seriously:

If we go to the police to report, we are told that 'you deserved it,' 'you are even lucky you survived.' We are then chased away. When you report the abuse to other government officials, you are warned of harassment in retaliation. I brought a case to the department of social welfare against a policeman who had physically assaulted me, only to be rearrested a week later by the same policeman (Atupele, 21 years old).

I went to the police to lodge a complaint. The police officer asked me to come in, then I saw another police officer drinking alcohol and smoking. He inquired about me. He was told everything about my awful experiences in the brothel. After a while, he took me to a room and asked me to have sex with him instead of helping me. He warned me not to reveal it to anybody, threatening to shoot me if I opened my mouth (Chiku, 18 years old).

The impact of the above stories must not be understated. Listening to and writing them down gave me and the participants a heightened sense of trauma – as if it were happening now. This was similar to Moran-Ellis (1996) experience of reading accounts of child sexual abuse, which made her feel "much pain by proxy." While the participants and I were able to enter into a dialogue about the emotional demands of those stories in our various meetings, for the most part the emotional experiences were deeply active and privately felt (see also Jackson et al. (2013)). Managing the sadness, horror, and anger arising from those stories was incredibly difficult, and we often felt lonely (see also Coles and Mudaly (2010)).

In the above context, Hochschild (1979) theory of emotional labour was very helpful as it provided us with a better tool to conceptualize and manage our emotional states. Rosenberg (1990) refers to it as an invocation of altered internal emotional states so as to carry out the cognitive work required for data presentation and analysis. However, this was not easy at all, it required from us considerable levels of what Rosenberg (1990) calls "mental selfmanipulation." I recall the enormous cognitive effort required to regulate, control, reduce, and sometimes displace feelings of immense sadness and bewilderment as I fought back my tears (see also Jackson et al. (2013)). As a necessary self-care strategy and an impetus for good research, however, I also thought that by trying to feel less, I would minimize the emotional distress of the participants (see also Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong (2008)). I was particularly aware of Malcolm (2012) remark that to try to feel something different, or to feel less, especially when there is an impetus to be a 'good' researcher, can lead to ethical uneasiness and/or could itself produce a distorted data analysis (see also Jackson et al. (2013)). In this respect, I and the participants took Gilbert (2001b) recommendations very seriously: "boundaries must be negotiated and renegotiated, an ongoing part of the research process, as a balance is sought between the dangers and benefits of being too far in or too far out of the lives of the researched." In this vein, I and the participants talked openly about the issue of boundaries as an impetus for a good PNI process, which also helped to protect us from becoming emotionally overwhelmed (see also Green et al. (2006)).

I also invited the participants to begin with stories they considered positive or good about their lives (e.g. stories that gave them a sense of pride) before telling the more disheartening stories. This was helpful for the

management of our emotional landscapes, as it led us to see and think about the participants' lived experiences beyond the incomprehensible acts of cruelty and negligence (see also Kurtz, 2014: 4–5), as narrated here below:

I don't know what is bad about exchanging love for money. It is thanks to it that all my sisters have been able to study in good schools. I still support the family in all ways. It makes me laugh when some people think that I am a bad girl because of what I do. Of course, it is very ugly work, but it gives you what you want, and I still hope for the best (Bahati, 25 years old).

The employer will pick you for the job [housemaid, barmaid, maid in a hotel] only when he thinks he can mould you as per his wishes. In the bars, for example, many employers would often pick newcomers who would not resist their demands for sexual favours. I went through that myself when I just started to work in the bar. I wanted some respect and because of that I choose to operate on my own (Chuku, 18 years old).

I also encouraged the participants to metaphorically place the story on a table and invite others to view and internalize it without exposing ourselves to the same degree of emotion as would arise if the story was stated directly (see also Kurtz (2014)). Even though some of the participants' stories were in the present tense, reflecting the freshness of the memories, I encouraged them to use the *past tense* when telling their stories, so as to create an emotional distance from the narrated events (see also Kurtz (2014)).

When I was hustling for my life in the village, my friend invited me to come here for work. She introduced me to this kind of life and assured me of making lots of money if I stayed longer in Mwanza, and that she would be there to support me. Since I liked everything about her, her clothes, her hairstyle, her shoes, and above all her freedom, I chose to give it a go. I looked forward with excitement to becoming like her. (Adama, 22 years old)

What do you expect of us? It is like inscribed in our blood that as soon as we become adolescents we must leave home and go to urban centres for work [as domestic workers or barmaids]. For us, it is an expected deal which every girl back home longs for. When I was still young, I knew so many women in my own village who went to big cities to work and brought wealth back to their families. Prior to me, my own sisters and some members of the extended family worked here in Mwanza too. They brought us shoes and nice clothes. Through them, and from a tender age, I imagined a better world beyond my rural community. (Atupele, 21 years old)

On the other hand, giving the participants the freedom to choose the stories they wished to tell helped us all to manage our emotional states. It not only provided us with an emotional safety net, but also afforded the participants the chance to tell stories that had a cathartic benefit, as I already explained in the previous section (see also Johnson (2009)). The cathartic benefits happened not only to the participants, but for me too. I was confronted with the potential costs of masculinity – the rigid culture-specific ideas, roles, and behaviours that we (men) have to live with to prove our manhood in patriarchal society. I became convinced that unless men's practices and attitudes change, the efforts to achieve gender equality in Tanzania will face an uphill struggle.

### 3.4. Credibility and Ethical Considerations

Any process of inquiry that involves building of human relationships, like this one, raises issues of credibility and ethical questions, particularly on issues of power relations between the researcher and participants (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The most obvious questions are about who the gatekeeper of knowledge is, and also about which objective facts are to be selected and which are to be excluded in an inquiry of this nature (Grant, Ward, & Rong, 1987). The less obvious, but perhaps the most difficult, question is the positioning of the inquirer/researcher, especially when factors such as gender, education, and social status may weigh on the entire research process (Narayan, 1993). Because of all this, I had to take ethical issues very seriously in our PNI process, bearing in mind that questions could be raised as to whether a male inquirer, from a highly patriarchal background, can effectively study and understand the lived experiences of young rural women who sell sex for livelihoods in a patriarchal society. What might be his source of motivation?

Thus, apart from acquiring ethical authorization from the Research Ethics Committee of SAUT and the office of the Regional Commissioner of Mwanza, I also made a deliberate effort to communicate clearly to the participants the risks that were involved in this sensitive process of inquiry, so as to gain their informed consent. I also drew on Witkin (2014) advice to be both an internal and an external researcher which helped to clear up some ethical questions. As an internal researcher, I became mindful of the cultural and social contexts, especially the dos and don'ts. These protected me and the participants from any potential harm. As an external researcher, a university

lecturer, I was perceived by the participants as unbiased and non-aligned with any subgroups. In that way, I gained their trust and won their confidence (see also Merriam et al. (2010)).

To account for any power imbalance, our PNI included a process of reflexivity (see also Maxey (1999)). With reflexivity, I was particularly made aware of gender stereotypes, and I was often reminded to act only as a catalyst to promote a process of inquiry into issues that affected the participants (see also Shacklock and Smyth (1998)). This enabled me to also document my personal biases and to think critically about the entire process of PNI (see also Watt (2007)). I should say that, although it has been claimed that most researchers have organizational and institutional power (Henry, 2003), this was not strongly felt in this PNI process (see also Grenz (2005)). Quite often, I and the participants experienced varying levels of power in different phases of our PNI. At some stages, I felt that power was fluid and possessed by nobody – neither the participants nor I – an idea also noted by Tang (2002). At the beginning of the inquiry, for example, I felt powerless while trying to recruit the participants, afraid that they would lose interest in the process of PNI. I struggled several times to enhance the sense of rapport between me and participants, or among the participants themselves, so as to build a considerate and sympathetic relationship (see also Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009)). Eventually the PNI process placed me and the participants in a friendly and supportive context where we felt protected and confident as a group.

## 4. Discussion

The above treatise underscores the need for space and safety when carrying out research which involves dealing with multiple beliefs and delicate feelings. It was with such an awareness that PNI was sought to help participants tell their stories in a confident way, make sense of their complex situations, and redefine themselves (find meaning in their lives). When a person has the space to tell a story, that space communicates a world of meanings and allows an appreciation of the attention given. The space also allows listening and caring, rather than judging and interrogating. Kvale (1996) argues a space for storytelling and listening can be an essential strategy if we want to understand the other person positively, warmly, with interest, and respect.

As storytelling creates an emotional distance between the narratives and the events narrated, it is also suitable for researchers who seek to uncover a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) urge that in order to enter the world of those who are suffering, researchers ought to employ narrative approach which "penetrates people's defences" and makes them "open up about their feelings." In the same vein, McCosker et al. (2001) recommend that "if we accept that qualitative research work is emotional work, we also ought to accept the embodied nature of the work" (McCosker et al., 2001). The need to do so is important in all qualitative research, and particularly in sensitive studies like this one.

It is therefore fair to suggest that research based on rigid professionalism is not only inappropriate but can also "create unnecessary boundaries and unrealistic expectations" (Green et al., 2006). Fook (1993) argues that maintaining professionalism at all costs can be counterproductive to good practice. This literature encouraged me to consider boundaries in our PIN process as stretchy pieces of elastic or a continuum between the 'professional' and the 'helpful friend', rather than setting up a binary dichotomy between professional and non-professional, as is found and emphasized in some research (see also Green et al. (2006)).

While professional distance can be important in narrative inquiry, it can also be flexible and elastic while still ensuring competent and appropriate practices (Green et al., 2006). Flexibility and elasticity of boundaries in narrative inquiry allow inquirers to imagine, initiate, and build rapport with the participants which, in the end, the inquirers to access the participants' stories of lived experiences (Scopelliti et al., 2004). To simply expect a value-free position of neutrality for the sake of objectivity in narrative approach might lead to what Shacklock and Smyth (1998) call an "obscene and dishonest position." In this respect, narrative inquirers are urged to be as reflexive as possible (Kimmel, 2000) part of which means being honest and ethical, and avoiding the elevation of researchers as "'shamans' of objectivity" (Ruby, 1980). In other words, narrative inquirers may allow themselves to have certain feelings, but also deny or put aside emotions which they see as inappropriate for their social and educational enterprises (Gilbert, 2001a).

It is in the above context that narrative approach can become quite therapeutic. Indeed, some aspects of stories in narrative inquiry can become strikingly similar to those of therapeutic interviews (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006, 2008; Emmerson, 2006) as also experienced in this PNI. At times I felt confused as to whether I should accept

or avoid being placed in a therapeutic role, because of my lack of skills to administer therapy. This concern has also been raised by other narrative inquirers (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002). In this context, narrative inquirers are encouraged to follow (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002) advise, to involve some therapeutic aspects in their researches as there no neat boundaries around 'rapport', 'friendship' and 'intimacy' in qualitive research. In its place, narrative inquirers should convert themselves into active listeners while they also encourage their participants to use the storytelling as therapy in itself (Emmerson, 2006). This is especially important for social work researchers who uses perspectives such 'person-in-situations' or 'person-in-environments' to view their clients within their physical and social environments (Thompson & Stepney, 2018).

However, I am also aware of the criticisms made against narrative approach as if it were the only authentic source or mode of representing situations that affect people's lives (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). The use autoethnographies in narrative approach, for example, has been disapproved for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). While these criticisms are legitimate, it can nevertheless be argued that the purpose of narrative approach is not to discover truth in any absolute sense, its main drive is to enrich and broaden understanding of the other person positively, warmly, with interest, and respect (Kvale, 1996).

After all, in narrative approach, inquirers or researchers work through the gathered stories and look for supporting evidence from other literature (Polkinghorne, 2007). Their primary interest is to capture the 'voices' of the participants and seek input which fit their contexts (Kreitzer, 2012). Most importantly, the main concern of narrative inquirers is the creation of a space where participants would acquire practical life skills such as communication, problem-solving, and negotiation – a pedagogical practice which leads to emancipation (Sewpaul & Raniga, 2005). Put differently, a chief aim of narrative approach is to develop 'living knowledge', where the inquirer or researcher becomes a catalyst who looks with participants at issues which directly affect them in society (Swantz, 1996).

I am also aware of the danger of drawing sweeping conclusions from a small-sample design in narrative approach (Creswell, 2014). However, what is central in narrative inquiry is not about the generalization of findings, but about articulating a summary of the lived experiences of a particular group of people, as was this particular PNI process. A useful theoretical justification for this is provided by Romney, Weller, and Batchelder (1986) and Weller and Romney (1988). Their consensus theory approach allows populations within a larger society to be reflected through small samples if appropriate sampling techniques are applied (see also (Langdridge, 2007; Trotter II, 2012)).

## 5. Conclusion

PNI afforded the young rural women who sell sex for livelihood in the suburbs of Mwanza town the chance to freely tell their stories so as to enrich and broaden the understanding of issues that affect their life. The process was also cathartic is the sense that it rendered opportunity for the participants to validate their lived experiences, but also work through and express their emotions (Darra, 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Johnson, 2009). While at times it was noticeably painful for the participants to recount their abusive relationships, they particularly noted that the sharing of stories was part of a healing process and a source of empowerment. Hence, it is important that a platform is provided in sensitive research of this nature when participants can freely tell their stories for healing, regaining control, and most importantly giving meaning to their lived experiences from their own voices and perspective. This is particularly fitting for PNI which is often credited for creation of a space where participants would acquire practical life skills such as communication, problem-solving and negotiation – a pedagogical practice which leads to emancipation (Sewpaul & Raniga, 2005). Put differently, a chief aim of the PNI process is to develop 'living knowledge' where the researcher is a catalyst who looks with participants at issues which directly affect them (Swantz, 1996). It is therefore important that researchers consider using PNI in their social and educational enterprises with their own epistemological stances, particularly in sensitive research.

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