CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?:
Navigating secrecy in qualitative empirical abortion research

Rishita Nandagiri
PhD Candidate, Dept. of Social Policy
London School of Economics and Political Science
r.nandagiri@lse.ac.uk
@rishie_
TENSIONS IN ABORTION RESEARCH

There is an inherent tension in conducting abortion research:

i. navigating secrecy to recruit participants who have terminated a pregnancy,

ii. maintaining and securing that secrecy, whilst

iii. avoiding inadvertently stigmatising abortion further by privileging secrecy.
POWER & ABORTION RESEARCH

- Other qualitative health research—e.g. HIV, has also managed secrecy, stigma, and power.

- Abortion research contends with the gendered, episodic, hidden nature of abortion, and the particularity of abortion stigma.

Door with anti-sex selective abortion posters, at a primary health centre
Abortion stigma: a negative attribute ascribed to women seeking abortion, marks them (internally or externally) as inferior to ideals of womanhood

Secrecy: fundamentally social phenomenon, attribute of relationships constructed, negotiated, and maintained by intentional social actors
WHAT’S TRUST GOT TO DO WITH IT?

- Researcher roles- affective (sympathetic vs unsympathetic) and cognitive (naïve vs informed)

- Trust-building: implies understanding of context and of common notions governing relationships.

- So, how do you build trust?
IN PRACTICE...

- Silence & secrecy in recruitment
  - Timing

- The spaces to speak
  - Sites
  - Centring agency

- Safeguarding secrecy...
  - In recruitment
  - Data management
IN PRACTICE...

- Listening as a methodological tool? (ref: Dr Mirna Guha)
  - Reflexivity
    - insider/outsider
    - the different selves

Waiting room scenes, in a primary health centre
SPEAKING SECRETS

- Feminist imperative to ‘voice’
- Speaking as relief

My heart feels lighter after talking to you - I didn’t speak about it [after the procedure] until you came.
The impact of stigma and secrecy must be explicitly accounted for in abortion research design.

Trust-building in abortion research requires a careful understanding of power & position.

Towards a feminist ethics of research design
  A reflexivity of discomfort
  Understanding and accounting for the emotional
I heard abortion and reproductive justice is a basic right!

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS?
THANK YOU.

R.NANDAGIRI@LSE.AC.UK

@RISHIE_


