



Researching victimisation using auto-ethnography: Wearing the Muslim veil in public

Methodological Innovations
2017, Vol. 10(1) 1-10
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2059799117720617
mio.sagepub.com
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Abstract

This article reflects upon my personal experiences of undertaking auto-ethnography on victimisation through wearing the Muslim veil in public. Wearing the veil was suggested by some of my respondents as a way to get insider knowledge of their own day-to-day experiences of victimisation. Here, I explore the emotional, psychological and physical impacts of being targeted because of my (perceived/adopted) Muslim identity. I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of covert auto-ethnographic research and consider the ethical challenges and practical difficulties of performing auto-ethnography. Also, I discuss the theoretical and methodological issues that arise from undertaking auto-ethnography as an insider/outsider when researching the targeted victimisation of veiled Muslim women. Finally, I discuss the usefulness and limitations of auto-ethnography as a method for understanding victimisation. I conclude that auto-ethnographic research into victimisation has great potential, although researchers need to be aware of some risks inherent in this approach and, thus, proceed with caution.

Keywords

Auto-ethnography, Muslim women, veil, victimisation, insider/outsider

Introduction

It has been nearly 2 years since completing my thesis, perhaps a necessary period of time to detach from the experience of employing auto-ethnography on victimisation. In a study examining the experiences of veiled Muslim women as victims of Islamophobia, I was both a researcher and a participant. Specifically, in addition to individual and focus group interviews with Muslim women who wear the niqab (face veil), I employed auto-ethnography whereby I wore the niqab in public spaces at the suggestion of some of my respondents. Wearing the veil myself was something I decided to do after my pilot interviews, when some of my respondents suggested that doing so would enable me to 'see the world through their eyes'. Indeed, being an Orthodox Christian female researcher meant that I was perceived as an outsider by my participants; however, wearing the niqab allowed me to gain insider knowledge (Keval, 2009). The aim of this added layer of auto-ethnography was to identify the role of the 'visibility' of the Muslim identity in triggering Islamophobic hostility in public spaces. As such, I used my experiences, together with those of my participants, to

complement the main research methods of interviews and focus groups. Using auto-ethnography allowed for my experiences to play a valid role in the study because the method includes the researcher as a participant (Smith, 2005). Within the framework of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), this approach led to the co-creation of knowledge by the participants and myself.

Auto-ethnography can be understood as the ethnographic exploration of the 'self' (Ferrell, 2012: 218). It is a research method that uses self-observation and reflexive investigation for the purposes of extending sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2000). However, as Wakeman (2014) points out, 'most criminologists do not like to talk about themselves and

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their feelings very much' (p. 705). In auto-ethnography, there is a considerable emphasis on personal recollections, the evocation of feelings and the exploration of characters. This means that the resulting accounts of auto-ethnography can be highly charged for the author and reader alike (Atkinson, 2015). Despite recent accounts of the role of emotion in criminology and in research (Ferrell, 2006; Jewkes, 2011; Liebling, 1999; Phillips and Earle, 2010), accounts of the self are usually absent. This has often been attributed to the ways in which the discipline is structured – requiring researchers to minimise their selves, 'viewing self as a contaminant and attempting to transcend and deny it' (Wall, 2006: 147).

From a positivist perspective, the researcher ensures objectivity in the research process by denying their identity. However, the postmodern era has made it possible for innovative research strategies such as auto-ethnography to emerge (Mannay and Morgan, 2015). Founded on postmodern ideas, auto-ethnography questions the dominant scientific paradigm and makes room for other ways of knowing through sharing unique, subjective and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned (Wall, 2006). However, auto-ethnography is rarely used to understand victimisation. There do exist some feminist auto-ethnographies of sexual violence (see, for example, Hayes and Jeffries, 2015; Minge, 2007; Winkler and Hanke, 1995), but they do not entail purposeful or tactical use of auto-ethnography, as is the case in this study. To the best of the author's knowledge, purposeful attempts to research victimisation using auto-ethnography (or ethnography) are unheard of within criminology. (A noteworthy exception from journalism is Ray Sprigle (1949) of the *Post-Gazette* (newspaper in Pittsburgh, United States), who posed as a black man to experience first-hand what life was like for Black people living under the system of legal segregation known as 'Jim Crow'.)

Against this background, my study of auto-ethnography on victimisation is extremely novel in criminological research. In this article, I reflect upon my personal experiences of utilising this method. First, I discuss the main tenets of auto-ethnography, exploring how it was ideal for my research at the same time as it presented challenges. Second, I explore the emotional, psychological and physical impacts of being targeted because of my adopted Muslim identity through the wearing of the niqab. Third, I discuss the theoretical and methodological issues that arise from undertaking auto-ethnography when researching the Islamophobic victimisation of veiled Muslim women as an insider/outsider. Fourth, I discuss the usefulness of auto-ethnography for understanding victimisation. It will be concluded that while researchers need to balance the risks presented by this approach against the opportunities to generate appreciative criminological data, auto-ethnographic research on victimisation offers real potential as a criminological method.

Conceptualising auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography is an emergent method although its tenets stretch back over much ethnographical research (Taber, 2010). Hayano (1979) first coined the term in order to refer to anthropological studies by individuals of their own culture. From this perspective, auto-ethnography was narrowly defined as 'insider ethnography'. More recently, however, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) note, 'the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult' (p. 449). Indeed, an exact definition of the concept of auto-ethnography is rather elusive. Nevertheless, the consensus view is that auto-ethnography relies on using and analysing the researcher's own experiences. Specifically, auto-ethnography can be seen to range from starting research from one's own experience, to studies in which the researcher's experience is explored alongside those of the participants, through to examples in which the researcher's experiences of conducting the research become the actual focus of investigation (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Different approaches in auto-ethnography can be characterised in terms of different relationships between the personal and the wider social world that the writing seeks to enquire into (Denshire and Lee, 2013). These differences have been classified by Ellis and Bochner (2006) in terms of 'evocative' and 'analytic' approaches.

The evocative (also called 'emotive') approach foregrounds the researcher's personal experiences and highlights the importance of storytelling in understanding human experiences. In this respect, auto-ethnographers tend to focus more on the self than on their social world (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Denzin (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2000, 2006) argue for an emotionally engaging auto-ethnography, which is primarily concerned with the researcher's subjective life experiences. In contrast, analytic auto-ethnography connects to 'some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves' (Anderson, 2006: 387). The purpose of analytic auto-ethnography is not simply to document personal experiences and provide an insider's perspective; rather, its purpose is to use empirical data in order to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. In the words of Wakeman (2014: 705), analytic auto-ethnography 'is not so much a method of self-investigation, but a technique of social investigation conducted through the self'. In this regard, the goal is not just to capture emotional and evocative content but rather to develop a broad critical analysis of any given social phenomenon through it. This binary classification is useful as an initial way of making visible the variation in how auto-ethnographic writers integrate the strands of self and culture in their writing (Denshire and Lee, 2013).

However, despite advances made in this field in recent years, auto-ethnography has attracted stern critical attention

from criminologists (Wakefield, 2014). Specifically, auto-ethnography has been critiqued as a narcissistic preoccupation (Roth, 2009), lazy (Delamont, 2009) and antithetical to career progression (Poulos, 2010). By using self as a source of data, perhaps the only source, auto-ethnography has been criticised for being self-indulgent, introspective and individualised (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). Atkinson (2015) states that

the more we celebrate autoethnography, the greater the danger that we treat ourselves as being more interesting than the social worlds around us ... The social world is not a vehicle for our emotional responses, or blank canvas onto which to project our own anxieties and preoccupations. (p. 166)

Following this line of argument, Atkinson (2015: 166) states that we must 'keep autoethnographic writing in its place'. Both Sparks (2002) and Jewkes (2011) recount the multiple years that passed between the events their auto-ethnographies depict and their putting them to paper as indicative of their trepidation to engage in such 'self-absorption'. Crewe (2009: 488) describes his reluctance to foreground himself in his ethnography, 'not because my identity was irrelevant to the study, but because my identity was not what the study was about'.

However, as Wakefield (2014) points out, auto-ethnography – especially analytic auto-ethnography – can provide a sound epistemic platform upon which meaningful challenges to prevailing theories of criminological subjects can be built. Correspondingly, this study subscribes to the analytic approach, using my personal experiences together with those of my participants, as empirical data to gain insight into the targeted victimisation of veiled Muslim women in public in the United Kingdom. Before reflecting on my experiences of Islamophobic victimisation while wearing the veil, I offer a brief overview of the research study and describe the journey from merely using interviews to undertaking auto-ethnography.

The research study

The study examined veiled Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobic victimisation in public in the United Kingdom. According to Mythen et al. (2009), the concept of 'victimisation' is understood as the act by which someone is rendered a victim, the experience of being a victim in parallel with the socio-cultural process by which this occurs. Following terrorist attacks such as 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in the United Kingdom, there has been much discussion about the growth of Islamophobia in the West (see, for example, Allen, 2010; Poynting and Mason, 2007; Sayyid and Vakil, 2011). However, this discussion has not been accompanied by as much empirical analysis of Islamophobic victimisation as one might expect (Moosavi, 2015). In particular, there is a dearth of studies examining the lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the niqab in public in the West. As a result, they remain a relatively invisible population in research

terms, despite their vulnerability to Islamophobic hostility and attacks in public spaces.

The research took the form of a qualitative study based on individual and focus group interviews with veiled Muslim women coupled with auto-ethnography whereby I wore the full veil – including jilbab (long dress), hijab (headscarf) and niqab (face veil) – for prolonged periods of time in public (see image below).



Figure 1. The Author

The fieldwork took place in Midland City¹ between 2011 and 2012. The study comprised 60 individual interviews and 20 focus group discussions with veiled Muslim women who had been victims of Islamophobia. Prospective participants were identified through local Muslim organisations, including mosques, Muslim schools and Islamic centres. Additional steps were taken to access potential participants who may have remained unidentified by these organisations, and this helped to broaden the sample at least to some extent. For example, I attended a number of social events for Muslim women in Midland City in order to raise awareness about the study and identify prospective participants. Additional assistance in securing access to participants came from the Student Islamic Societies at two local universities. Participants unaffiliated to any local Muslim organisations or groups were also recruited through snowball sampling. Participants were given the option of taking part in either an individual interview or focus group discussion. Individual, in-depth interviews allow for 'rich' data to be collected with detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). This approach is especially valuable for researching sensitive issues that require confidentiality and a more intimate setting for data collection, and this is particularly appropriate for hard-to-access groups such as veiled Muslim women. Focus group interviews incorporate

the strengths of qualitative research in terms of gathering rich data while generating additional insights through group interactions (Curtis and Curtis, 2011). In the context of this particular piece of research, the focus group method afforded the possibility of open discussion among veiled Muslim women with similar or different experiences of Islamophobic victimisation while also highlighting collectively held beliefs and attitudes.

With respect to employing auto-ethnography, I wore the veil for 4 weeks as part of my daily routine in public places in Midland City, including streets, shopping centres and public means of transport. This aspect of the research followed an open-ended process. I began with a specific question, 'How does my perceived identity as a veiled Muslim woman render me vulnerable to victimisation in public places?' Throughout the fieldwork, I kept a diary in order to record my experiences and reflections. However, it is important to point out that auto-ethnography was not part of my original research methodology. When I was initially developing my research project, my plan was to use individual and focus group interviews with veiled Muslim women. However, during the pilot interviews some participants suggested that I wear the veil in order to see for myself the level of abuse and hostility that they suffered on a daily basis. Some participants (although not all, as discussed later) actually insisted that I wear the veil in order to accurately interpret their stories and represent their voices regarding the nature, extent and impact of Islamophobic victimisation. I responded to my participants' suggestion/invitation to dress as – and therefore have the experiences of – the insider. As will be discussed later, this approach did improve my ability to understand and analyse the data gathered through the individual and focus groups with veiled Muslim women. Also, adopting this approach did get me closer to those participants who supported this method (particularly in terms of access and quality of data elicited in interviews and focus groups), although for those who disapproved of this approach I may have actually constructed barriers and therefore lessened access and rapport. With respect to my experiences in the field, the various situations that I encountered because of my adopted Muslim identity resulted in me being subjected to verbal abuse, harassment and potential physical attacks.

Experiences of victimisation

Verbal harassment and intimidation

My experiences of harassment and victimisation as a result of adopting a 'visible' Muslim identity included name-calling, swearing, threats of physical violence, persistent staring, derogatory forms of humour and direct accusatory questions. Underlying all these forms of verbal harassment and intimidation was a clear sense of Islamophobic sentiment and hostility, and this was made apparent through the language used by the perpetrators. Typical examples of the comments people

made included shouting 'Muslim terrorist', 'suicide bomber' and 'you lot are terrorists', which indicated people's perceptions of veiled Muslim women as a security or terrorist threat. Indeed, research shows that visible Muslims (i.e. those readily identifiable as Muslims through their dress or other aspects of their appearance and behaviour) and veiled Muslim women, in particular, are often targeted because their abusers hold the view that all Muslims are terrorists or terrorist sympathisers (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010). Seen in this light, the veiled female body offers a visual representation of 'radical' Islam. Additionally, I was subjected to swearing such as 'Muslim whore', 'fucking bitch', 'Muslim scum' and 'your religion is filth'. The comments and gestures perpetrators made were sometimes threatening as indicated in the following diary extracts:

A skinhead man made knife gestures at me whilst I was walking on — Lane. I feel like a walking target. I fear for my life.

In town a group of white British men shouted at me 'we will burn your fucking Quran. You Muslims kill Christians, so all of us Christians will come kill all of you Muslims. We want to teach your kind a lesson'. I think they are EDL [English Defence League] members because they are carrying EDL flags. I feel very intimidated and I am worried that they might be carrying weapons.

The wearing of the niqab carries connotations of gender inequality, religious extremism, lack of integration and threats to 'British/Western ideals' (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012). It has been referred to as the 'icon of the intolerable difference' between 'us' and 'them' (Scott, 2007: 5). Correspondingly, there were incidents where the nature of the verbal abuse suggested Islamophobic, racist and xenophobic sentiments, as demonstrated in the following diary extracts:

I was walking on — Road today and a group of teenagers began mocking my niqab and swearing at me. They told me to 'fuck off back to Afghanistan' and one of them also shouted 'EDL, EDL, EDL!'

I was on the bus going home and an elderly man moved seats as I sat next to him.² When I got off the bus he told me 'you're not welcome here, go back to where you came from'.

As these quotes demonstrate, Islamophobic attitudes are often intertwined with racist and xenophobic sentiments. However, this is not to overlook the fact that veiled Muslim women become victims of targeted violence because their abusers have been motivated either solely or partially by other factors. For example, the sight of the veiled female body might provoke anger in some individuals on sexist as well as Islamophobic grounds. In this sense, the face and body of a woman are an object of sexual attraction, and when these are covered, it disrupts public expectations of how

women should behave and dress in public in order to visually ‘please’ men. This emphasises the notion of appropriate feminine sexuality, which ensures that the behaviour and attire of women are strictly monitored (Dwyer, 1999). This was evident in incidents where I was subjected to sexual harassment such as whistling, catcalls and kissing sounds. These experiences were typical of those mentioned by my participants. This form of sexual harassment is motivated by a male gaze that desires possession of women’s bodies and ‘wants to see’ (Al-Saji, 2010).

While in most cases verbal abuse was momentary when walking on the street or while waiting for the bus, in other cases I was subjected to sustained periods of invisible Islamophobic victimisation, particularly when being stuck within a confined space, such as on public transport and in a shop. By invisible forms, I am referring to what might be best described as subtle and potentially more pervasive manifestations of hostility. This can be the case where Islamophobic prejudice or hostility is manifested in a less overt manner than that typically associated with Islamophobia, and this highlights the importance of appreciating Islamophobic victimisation as a continuum rather than as discrete one-off incidents (Zempi and Chakraborti, 2014). Specifically, unnecessary or persistent staring and being ignored were common experiences as a veiled woman. The following accounts are taken from my research diary to illustrate examples of invisible Islamophobic hostility in terms of being ignored or refused to be served:

I am in the fruit market in town and the stall owner refuses to serve me. I feel humiliated and ashamed.

I am waiting in the queue to pay for an item in a shop in [a shopping centre in MidlandCity]. In front of me there is a white man who is served immediately. The person at the till seems to ignore me. I can’t help thinking ‘is it because I’m wearing the veil?’ I feel angry as I am a regular customer at this store but it seems that the moment I put on the veil, the quality of customer service changes from excellent to zero.

Furthermore, the only example of a physical attack was when a passing car threw eggs at me, as indicated in the following diary extract:

I feel quite upset as a car drove past me on — Lane and a white male threw eggs at me and then he shouted something about Muslims. I am so shocked that I did not manage to get the car’s number plate.

Similarly, my participants described incidents where they had eggs, stones, alcohol, water bombs, bottles, take-away food and rubbish thrown at them by people on the street or from moving cars. Nevertheless, I felt somewhat lucky because, unlike some of my participants who suffered more serious incidents of physical abuse, I only experienced relatively low-level manifestations of Islamophobia. For example, several participants described suffering physical abuse such as having their veils taken off, pushing, shoving, experiencing

sustained physical assaults and even incidents where passing vehicles had attempted to run them over. Knowledge of these incidents heightened my concerns that verbal abuse could escalate into violent assault. Indeed, I was afraid that I could suffer similar experiences. I knew that I was also vulnerable to physical abuse because of the visibility of my perceived Muslim identity and as a result, I was scared for my safety in public.

Impact and responses

Verbal attacks coupled with the possibility of suffering physical attacks affected me emotionally, including feeling afraid, shocked, upset or angry on particular occasions. Such feelings were particularly pronounced immediately after an incident, but they seemed to develop into long-term anxieties. I soon developed sleep problems and lost my appetite. Moreover, there were days when I felt reluctant to leave my house. I started to feel cautious, nervous, suspicious and distrustful of people I encountered in public spaces.

The possibility of verbal or physical violence meant that I felt anxious, vulnerable and exposed when walking on the street or travelling on public transport. I soon became isolated and withdrawn. Experiences of Islamophobic victimisation also increased feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and anxiety among the veiled Muslim women who took part in the study. Bowling (2009) states that persistent victimisation can undermine the security of actual and potential victims and induce fear and anxiety. Participants reported panic attacks, worry, extreme anxiety and depression, which were said to derive from the fear of future victimisation.

Clearly, employing auto-ethnography had emotional, psychological and physiological impacts upon my wellbeing. Denshire and Lee (2013) argue that ‘putting the self into the picture at all is challenging enough in this context, but putting the very notion of a self at risk opens up places of vulnerability’ (p. 224). However, at the time I consciously downplayed the seriousness of the situation and felt a strong need to portray myself as coping with the fieldwork to my PhD supervisors, colleagues and all others around me because I feared that I would be prevented from completing the auto-ethnographic part of the research. I suffered in silence and received no support for experiencing this victimisation. Nevertheless, as discussed below, the value of potentially putting myself at risk was premised on the insights into the victimisation of veiled Muslim women that auto-ethnography provided me with, which would only have been possible through wearing the veil myself. In other words, gaining insider knowledge is something that I would not have learnt from the interviews alone.

Outsider versus insider status in auto-ethnography

As an Orthodox Christian woman investigating Islamophobic victimisation, my research was primarily from an outsider perspective. The researcher’s positionality as insider or outsider

in relation to their participants influences all aspects of the research process including research design, access, data collection and data interpretation. Positionality is determined “by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’” (Merriam et al., 2001: 411). In insider research, the researcher conducts research with a group of which he or she is a member, based on characteristics such as religion, race/ethnicity, gender and sexual identity (Kanuha, 2000). Insider research is considered to be from an emic perspective, as it involves the description of a phenomenon that is understood by the researcher who has also experienced it (Spiers, 2000).

Employing auto-ethnography in research into Islamophobic victimisation allowed me to gain insider knowledge. As Atkinson (2015: 28) points out, it is not simply enough to understand the social world ‘from the point of view’ of your participants; rather, the ability to take the role of the other and to enter into some sort of interpretative comprehension is crucial for producing knowledge. In the context of this study, role adoption includes taking the role of the other in order to make sense of veiled Muslim women’s lived experiences and the world around them – a process of attempting to put into writing ‘what it is like to be somebody else’ (Van Maanen, 2009: 16). By employing auto-ethnography, my reality, as researcher-participant, offers a window onto the world as experienced by participant (Mykhalovskiy, 1997), one that could have been experienced only through wearing the veil. Becoming an insider allowed me to better tell the story of my participants and incorporate my own views, thoughts, and personal stories of victimisation in public in order to complement and, as a result, enrich the story of my participants (Denzin, 1989; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

A common argument in the research literature is that insiders are more likely to be able to understand and accurately represent participants’ experiences (Labaree, 2002). This can be particularly useful in research with groups that have been under-represented and socially or culturally marginalised. Similarly, participants might be more willing to share their experiences. It is as if they feel, ‘You are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don’t understand)’ (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 58). Correspondingly, outsider researchers are accused of lacking understanding (Savvides et al., 2014). From this perspective, outsiders cannot understand or represent accurately the experiences of their participants. This is important when research is conducted with oppressed, marginalised and ‘other’ communities (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015).

Initially, participants considered me as an outsider to their religion, culture and experiences as victims of Islamophobia because of my religious identity as an Orthodox Christian. Some of my participants insisted that I wear the veil in order to accurately interpret their stories and represent their voices regarding the nature, extent and impact of Islamophobic victimisation. Despite explicit religious differences between participants and myself, auto-ethnography fostered empathy, rapport and trust. In this regard, wearing the veil enhanced

access to participants by demonstrating that I was willing to ‘take the extra step’ in order to develop in-depth knowledge and understanding of their experiences. As Zubair et al. (2012) point out, researchers’ bodily appearances and bodily actions, adaptations and interactions are important markers of their identity in the fieldwork. Participants may perceive and judge researchers positively or negatively and/or as insiders or outsiders based on their embodied identity (Ellingson, 2006). Okely (2007: 71) argues that researchers often have to learn to adapt their bodily performances and actions – including the way they dress – in order to fit in with, and be accepted among, those they are researching, especially when they are closely scrutinised and instructed. Attempts to change, however clumsy, are often interpreted as signs of respect. This demonstrates the important role the researcher’s body and behaviour in developing trust and rapport with participants.

Overall, I won a great deal of approval among most participants. I felt accepted by certain individuals, who were perhaps reluctant to take part in the study because of my non-Muslim background. In addition to providing me access, using auto-ethnography enhanced participant engagement and revelation throughout the research process. Sharing similar experiences with participants granted me legitimacy in the field, at least with some of the respondents. However, although the majority of participants were supportive of my decision to wear the veil, some participants expressed disagreement. One participant felt that it was disrespectful to Islamic laws to wear the veil as a non-Muslim. She felt that the veil is not simply a piece of cloth that anyone can wear; rather, it is part of practising Islam in line with praying five times a day, reading the Quran and fasting during Ramadan. Moreover, in the context of a focus group discussion in a mosque, some participants argued that by wearing the veil as a social experiment, I was minimising the Muslim woman’s experience. They argued that spending a day, a week or a year experiencing the stigma, prejudice and discrimination that veiled Muslim women deal with on a day-to-day basis does not actually reflect their true experiences. In both cases, the authenticity of my veiled auto-ethnography and my ability to fathom veiled Muslim women’s experiences as victims of Islamophobia were questioned.

According to Labaree (2002), the advantage we have in knowing the community may be weakened or strengthened based on the ways in which our various social identities may shift during interaction with participants or based on the degree of perceived or real closeness to participants as a result of shared experience or social identities. On one hand, researcher self-disclosure might reduce the hierarchical nature of the researcher–participant relationship and encourage participant disclosure and facilitate trust and mutual identification within the relationship (McDonald, 2001). However, self-disclosure might also make the researchers vulnerable and open them to criticism from others, including participants and other researchers (McDonald, 2001; MacCormack,

2001). It is not always easy or, indeed, possible to predict how one will be placed by the participants – how commonality or difference will be constructed, interpreted or experienced (Ryan and Golden, 2006).

Relatedly, I was often asked (especially by older participants) whether I wanted to convert to Islam. Since my answer was negative, I was questioned as to why I was interested in doing this research and even wearing the veil. A couple of participants gave me booklets, which included information about the benefits of converting to Islam, or prayed for me to convert to Islam. For me to ask them not to pray for me or refuse these booklets could have jeopardised rapport and even their participation in the study, so I accepted their booklets and prayers. Zubair et al. (2012) point out that research participants are not necessarily a vulnerable and passive group vis-à-vis the researcher but can be active agents who exercise considerable power over the research process and research relationships.

Irrespective of whether respondents approved or disapproved of my decision to wear the veil, a key concern among all participants was the fact that I would be recognised as a Muslim. Participants felt that being identified as a follower of Islam comes with tremendous responsibility. They explained that the veil is not merely a covering but, more importantly, it is behaviour, manners and appearance in public. They advised me to dress and behave in a religiously and culturally appropriate manner throughout the fieldwork, which I took seriously during fieldwork. For example, they advised me to wear a black veil instead of a colourful one, for the purposes of modesty. Also, they advised me to avoid wearing excessive make up (especially in the area around the eyes). Moreover, they pointed out that it was not appropriate to be seen to shake hands with men, to sit or stand next to them or to talk to men unnecessarily. They also advised me to avoid eye contact with men in public. Thus, the process of becoming an insider through veiled auto-ethnography involved learning about cultural and religious norms as well as codes of behaviour for veiled Muslim women in Islam, in addition to knowledge about Islamophobic victimisation. Overall, I usually followed their advice during fieldwork in order to minimise the risk of portraying Islam in a negative light. However, it was not always easy to remember to follow their suggestions, particularly in relation to sitting or standing next to men.

The researcher's positionality is not fixed but dynamic. Aguilar (1981: 24) argues that insiders and outsiders 'must meet diametrically different demands ... the outsider must to some extent get into the natives' heads, skins, or shoes, whereas the insider must get out of his or her own'. Auto-ethnography blurs the boundary between researcher and researched by '[situating] self within the research process and its written products, by making the self the object of the research and by developing a 'reflexive connection between the researcher's and participants' lives' (Brunier, 2006: 410). By employing auto-ethnography, I was neither a complete

outsider nor a total insider, thereby operating in a fluid space somewhere between the two. The notion of the 'space between' considers qualitative researchers as 'multiple insiders and outsiders' (Labaree, 2002: 102). As Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle (2009) point out,

the notion of the space between challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status. To present these concepts in a dualistic manner is overly simplistic. It is restrictive to lock into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out. (p. 60)

Within this framework, researchers are not either insiders or outsiders; rather, they continuously negotiate their multiple identities and aspects of the research process by moving fluidly within the space between.

Usefulness of auto-ethnography for understanding victimisation

Using auto-ethnography for understanding victimisation is novel in criminological ethnography. Purposeful attempts to research victimisation this way are almost unheard of. My experiences of auto-ethnography on victimisation suggest that this research method can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, using auto-ethnography offered unique methodological advantages. Specifically, the inclusion of auto-ethnography during fieldwork shows that research participants are neither passive nor neutral. It is interactive, creative, selective and interpretive, giving meaning and suggesting further paths of enquiry (Rock, 2015). Concurrently, my positionality changed from outsider to insider, thereby operating in a fluid space somewhere between the two. According to Atkinson (2015), flexible fieldwork means that our work is a developmental, interactive process. Fieldwork conducted in a reflexive mode can help generate insightful perspectives. This ties in with the logic of grounded theory, which entails going back to the data and forward into analysis and then returning to the field to gather further data and refine the emerging theoretical framework (Atkinson, 2015).

On the other hand, using auto-ethnography in the form of covert research entailed certain ethical problems. During the process of auto-ethnography, I assumed a covert role and did not disclose the fact that I was a researcher to members of the public. As Murphy and Dingwall (2007) point out, auto-ethnographers find it especially difficult to establish the boundaries of informed consent and whether or not to divulge researchers' identities in certain cases. This is not because researchers wish to engage in covert research, but because of the nature of the research itself, it becomes all but impossible to solicit consent to the research that is informed, in the sense of being predictable before the research itself is carried out (Atkinson, 2015).

Admittedly, using auto-ethnography in the form of covert research was perhaps ethically dubious due to there being a

level of deception involved. However, covert research can uncover phenomena that would otherwise remain inscrutable (see, for example, Prokos and Padavic (2002) who documented sexism in a police academy). In the context of this study, assuming a covert role was essential for the success of the research. It is highly likely that people's awareness of my status as a researcher would influence how they treated me, which would potentially mask the true dimensions of public expressions of Islamophobic prejudice and hostility. Also, I caused no harm to those people who victimised me, and I did practice self-disclosure with women who wear the veil – the research was negotiated with them. Therefore, although there are important ethical questions here, with some feminist scholars positioning self-disclosure as sound and necessary research practice (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992), the fact remains that in this instance, withholding my true identity was ethically defensible.

Insider knowledge generated through auto-ethnography makes a substantive contribution to our understanding of Islamophobic attacks and the impact they have upon veiled Muslim women. Despite putting myself at risk, wearing the veil helped me to deepen my understanding of the targeted victimisation of veiled Muslim women. It allowed me to experience many of the emotions that Muslim women feel when they wear the veil in public, such as depression, fear, anxiety, suspicion, anger and isolation. This would not have been possible through the interviews alone. Consequently, auto-ethnography affected the formulation of knowledge and its interpretation. At the same time, knowledge is provisional, bound temporally and contextually, shaped both by the particular purposes and experiences of the researcher-participant and by the encounters which researchers had with others in the field (Rock, 2015). From this perspective, perhaps I can only claim to have secondary knowledge of veiled Muslim women's experiences as victims. My secondary knowledge may be useful, public, accessible and illuminating, and it is also dependent and derivative. Wearing the veil for a limited time does not allow me to fully understand the depth of veiled Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobia in public. The ultimate authority on experiences of Islamophobia remains veiled Muslim women themselves, and my own experiences can only complement their stories. As a result, one might argue that employing auto-ethnography in this study was not quite authentic and certainly not the real thing itself (Rock, 2015). One might also argue that employing auto-ethnography was not necessary, and one might even go further and argue that it undermines attempts to assert agency for the female veil-wearing Muslim population – or that it patronises them.

However, although I had a fleeting glimpse of matters known much more intensely and extensively by veiled Muslim women themselves, auto-ethnography provided a nuanced and unique insight into their vulnerability to Islamophobic victimisation in public. The use of my own experiences of Islamophobia through 'veiled auto-ethnography' seems to be very distinctive. Although I am not Muslim, my experiences

are no less valid to the experiences of my participants. In fact, it is my non-Muslim background that makes my experiences so useful in terms of recognising the role of wearing the veil as a 'trigger' to Islamophobic attacks. Clearly, these attacks would not have happened to me had I not wore the veil. The fact that I do not normally wear the veil allowed me to see the difference in people's behaviour in public spaces.

Finally, auto-ethnography inspired data analysis and writing. Not only did it inform the construction of the text (because of my status as the producer and to some extent, the product of the study) but it also moved me to write. Despite my non-Muslim background, I felt connected to my participants, and thus, I became more passionate about this subject. This notion of responsibility to 'do justice' to their experiences, and commitment to maximise the impact of the research, stemmed from the fact that I was now 'one of them'. As such, using auto-ethnography helped the interpretation of the data in terms of understanding veiled Muslim women's experiences as victims of Islamophobia and inspired me to make a difference in their lives through raising awareness about this problem through publications, conferences and engagement with local and national organisations. Despite the emotional, psychological and physiological costs, using veiled auto-ethnography enriched the stories of my participants and added credibility to the research and investigation of a marginalised and hard-to-reach population.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the application of auto-ethnography to the study of victimisation. Specifically, I reflected upon my personal experiences of undertaking auto-ethnography on victimisation through wearing the Muslim veil in public. I argued for the novelty of using the auto-ethnographic approach for the study of victimisation. Indeed, this approach is extremely novel in criminological research.

I described the stigma, prejudice and discrimination that I experienced when wearing the veil in public. Moreover, I provided a glimpse into the stigma felt by these women who wear the veil every day of their lives, and how they have to navigate themselves through a hostile world that most people fail to acknowledge. Despite my outsider status, I used auto-ethnography purposefully and tactically in order to research the experiences of victimised others. This approach illustrates that we can understand identity as flexible rather than fixed; researchers can use their identity as a tool in the auto-ethnographic toolkit. My personal experiences of using auto-ethnography on victimisation demonstrate that auto-ethnography is neither narcissistic nor lazy. In this study, it involved being directed by participants in the research and being willing to expose myself, emotionally and physically. This research strategy challenges those who say that auto-ethnography is too personal, narcissistic and self-indulgent and those who fear that the researcher's identity is now what the research is about.

My strategy illustrates something new for auto-ethnographic methods: the opportunity to research victimisation through auto-ethnography. In this regard, there are advantages and disadvantages that can be applied for others who might consider using a similar approach. For example, doing auto-ethnography allowed me to gain insider knowledge, which would not have been possible through the interviews alone. Importantly, gaining insider knowledge contributed to the process of understanding, empathising and more accurately representing victims' experiences. Nevertheless, there were costs involved. Using my own experiences as the vehicle, I illustrated the harmful effects of victimisation such as emotional, psychological and physical impacts. Also, there were ethical issues involved such as putting myself at risk, doing covert research and upsetting some participants by offending Islamic sensibilities. Therefore, researchers need to balance the risks presented by auto-ethnographic research on victimisation against the opportunities to generate appreciative criminological data.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. I have anonymised the city where the fieldwork took place. 'MidlandCity' is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse cities in the United Kingdom, with a high population of Muslims, specifically of veiled Muslim women.
2. I acknowledge that this could be seen as a contradiction because, as I will discuss later, appropriate behaviour to accompany wearing the niqab included *not* sitting or standing next to men. However, I sometimes forgot that it would be inappropriate for myself (as a veiled Muslim woman) to be seen to sit or stand next to men.

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