

# Reflexivity in Qualitative Research on Female Adolescent Leadership

Eda Lou I. Ochangco

Far Eastern University, Philippines

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7534014>

Published Date: 13-January-2023

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the researcher's position in constructing meanings related to her research process. With awareness of a specific social phenomenon - gender inequality - this paper was not only an attempt to discover other possibilities of looking, presenting, and understanding adolescent women leaders but also an exposition of the researcher's recognition of her position and motivations as an investigator. This paper explores the personal, theoretical, and methodological reflexivity that shaped the entire research process, from identifying the research problem to design, fieldwork, data analysis, and interpretation of results.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Positionality, Interpretation challenges, Meaning Construction.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to qualitative research, all researchers have to contend with the challenge of analysis, interpretation, and abstraction. The all-consuming task is to analyze and interpret so that gaps and even opposing perspectives are fully accounted for without forcing predetermined categories that could otherwise undermine the study's validity (Miles et al., 2014). After all, the decision to conduct qualitative research captures the complexities and contradictions inherent in people's lives and the social order.

Whether we recognize it or not, the researcher ultimately plays an essential role in the success of any research project. The researcher makes all the important decisions and has to be equipped with all the necessary skills to guarantee the study's reliability and validity. According to Morse et al. (2002), "Lack of responsiveness of the investigator may be due to lack of knowledge, overly adhering to instructions rather than listening to data, the inability to abstract, synthesize or move beyond the technicalities of data coding, working deductively (implicitly or explicitly) from previously held assumptions or a theoretical framework, or following instructions in a rote fashion rather than using them strategically in decision making" (pp. 17-18).

However, the role of the researcher becomes more complicated in qualitative research. What exactly is the role of the researcher in qualitative research, for instance, in a case study project? What sort of witness or reporter must a researcher be? On the one hand, according to Willig (2008), "...he or she is expected to be an objective, and neutral observer whose attempt to explain or interpret events should not interfere with his or her recording of observations" (p. 88). On the other hand, it is also essential to acknowledge that how researchers conduct their research depends heavily on their selection and use of implicit concepts or theories. According to Miles et al. (2014):

"The words we choose to document what we see and hear in the field can never truly be "objective"; they can only be our interpretation of what we experience. Similarly, transcription of audio recordings can be done in many ways that will produce rather different texts. Moreover, the influence of the researcher's values, attitudes, and beliefs from and toward fieldwork is not unavoidable. The apparent simplicity of qualitative data masks a good deal of complexity, requiring plenty of care and self-awareness on the part of the researcher" (p.30).

It is not that researchers choose to be subjective and partial but that absolute objectivity and neutrality are simply impossible. Moreover, Freeman (2017) argued:

"What makes analysis challenging to novice researchers is that what is falsely assumed to be a procedure is fraught with conflicting interests. These conflicts have multiple sources. Some of them are internal to the researcher, such as prioritizing certain voices or themes over others, having a preference for certain modes of representation, and bringing preconceived ideas about how the world works and the role research plays in its working. Some are external, such as needing to communicate in a predetermined way to a committee or other researchers in a field or having to recruit participants in ways that alter the original aim or design of the study. And these negotiations do not end there" (pp. 1-2).

Nevertheless, researchers often naively think they can be completely objective. Often, there is no inclusion of personal information or revelation of personal values and beliefs in the research output. In the study of Barusch et al. (2011), reflexivity in a sample of published social work articles needed to be included. Most articles sampled (86%) did not provide information about the authors. Ignoring the subjectivity of qualitative methods and the importance of the researcher's lens, the authors should have disclosed their characteristics or probably believed that personal disclosure would be irrelevant to the research. Thus, this paper attempts to disclose personal information to clarify motivations that were otherwise less discussed in the research manuscript.

#### ***A. Reflections on Research Problem and Theory***

Right at the outset, I knew that feminist research was not the accepted convention in my discipline of Developmental Psychology. This knowledge was why I consciously framed my work within the accepted convention of a developmental approach. Within this developmental approach, I consciously focused on gender. I noted that developmental concerns might be more evident in girls than boys since the physical changes experienced by girls at this life stage occur earlier and are more physically pronounced than those experienced by boys their age. For example, noticeable weight gain or bodily changes among adolescent girls may lead to teasing and social pressure perceptions and were associated with increased depressive symptoms (Rierdan & Koff, as cited in Clemans et al., 2010). Environmental factors in the form of socialization, values, and gender norms eventually shape how girls develop psychologically during puberty and beyond.

Moreover, Western culture's valuation of thinness as a beauty ideal is associated with negative body image and higher rates of depression among adolescent girls (Clemans et al., 2010). As such, the physical changes experienced by girls during puberty may present a unique set of problems that were not present earlier in their lives (Girls Leadership Development, 2012; Kagesten et al., 2016). Behavioral expectations, restrictions, and limitations directly or indirectly imposed by family and society may also shape adolescent girls' behaviors and socio-emotional development differently. For example, gender stereotypes and biases may become more apparent for girls at this point, thereby limiting their physical and psychological development (Cavanagh et al., 2007). Carol Gilligan (1982) once posited that the onset of adolescence is associated with the loss of voice in girls in their attempt to conform to cultural stereotypes of feminine behavior (Clemans et al., 2010). I argued that such may not always be the case. Adolescence is a period of vulnerabilities and opportunities (Papalia et al., 2001). However, for the longest time, the emphasis of many youth studies was on risks and problem behavior. Arguably, young people require support beyond regulating or preventing risky or problem behaviors. In particular, young women require support that will enable them to navigate adolescence successfully, one where they are not only forewarned about "storms and stresses" of the changes that adolescence may bring. They also need to be equipped in concrete and pragmatic ways about how to build lives that are as free and meaningful as possible, and also one where they gradually develop agency to transcend limiting stereotypes about their gender.

Admittedly, I hoped that the developmental approach in my study could be an instrument to highlight the gender problem at a particular life stage - adolescence. In framing my research problem, I emphasized the limited investigations on the positive development of female adolescents. In so doing, I wanted to draw attention to the gender problem at a specific developmental stage. I pointed to how many previous studies on adolescent women in the field of developmental psychology mainly focused on sexual and non-sexual risk behaviors and only gave secondary attention to enabling conditions or protective factors like education, employment, meaningful family and peer relationships, attitudes and their values, and self-esteem among many others (Ary et al., 1999). Most studies on adolescent female development are mainly about risk-taking behaviors (Ruffolo et al., 2004; Stone & Sias, 2003), sexual behaviors (Maestripieri et al., 2004; Wusu, 2011), body image concerns (Al-Awadhi et al., 2013; Shaban et al., 2017; Weiss & Wertheim, 2005), and mental health problems among others (Cisler et al., 2016; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). There is a shortage of studies looking at positive qualities or resources

that could help female adolescents survive and thrive. Hence, I thought it essential to envision female adolescents demonstrating many positive qualities during this storm and stress period and identify the resources that support or make these qualities possible.

But why leadership? In my study, I identified leadership as a positive youth development outcome and a protective factor for girls' development. Personally, however, I admit that, like many other feminist aspirations, I believe that there ought to be more girls and women leaders in the spirit of equal representation and social justice. Theoretically, investigating young women's leadership experiences, strategies, and challenges could open a new direction for discussing positive female youth development. Leadership entails skills and knowledge to engage and influence others, take action, and become change agents (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). However, in becoming leaders, many women need help to develop a leadership identity and have to account for gaps in confidence (Kay & Shipman, 2014) and self-efficacy for leadership (Hoyt, 2005; McCormick et al., 2002). They also face structural and organizational barriers in leadership (Eagly & Carly, 2007; Ely et al., 2011). These struggles involve personal and contextual variables of development that merit investigation. What makes girls thrive as leaders? What enables girls to lead meaningful and engaged lives? What are the internal and external resources that led them to leadership paths? What specific individual characteristics enabled them to become leaders? What specific support systems helped facilitate their thriving as leaders? Similar questions should be asked about girls' development as leaders today. It is crucial to investigate how girls survive and thrive, given the unique challenges and dramatic changes they face in their personal and social lives. Hence, to study leadership development among young women is to investigate these sets of skills and contexts/environments – looking at those developed from their innate individual characteristics and those acquired or nurtured by their environments. Arguably, this approach can yield valuable information for highlighting positive development among girls.

Studying leadership development among adolescent females could also be helpful on different levels. Female positive youth development is understudied, yet the results have been promising in several studies that looked into female adolescent participants. For instance, the study of Li, Lynch, and colleagues (2011, cited in Lerner et al., 2012) looked into some positive outcomes like higher behavioral and emotional engagement for girls and youth who come from higher family SES. Similarly, the study of Lerner and colleagues (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009, cited in Lerner et al., 2012) identified positive outcomes for girls from low-asset neighborhoods, for instance, lower levels of depressive symptoms and risk behaviors due to engagement in extracurricular activities. Studying leadership provides a much-needed additional perspective to studying adolescent females, focusing on understanding personal and environmental assets that enable and empower them. What is most significant in using the Developmental Assets Framework from the Positive Youth Development approach is how it emphasizes the dynamic interaction between youth and specific contexts of development.

Furthermore, I was insistent on arguing that studying leadership among adolescent females could be pragmatic for at least three reasons. First, I hoped my investigation could help identify leadership skills, which could emphasize investigations on adolescent females' many different capabilities and sense of agency. Hence, identifying leadership qualities could lead to starting and sustaining dialogues about developing functional skills among adolescent females. Dialogues like these are critical because they convey to young women that they have skills, talents, and capabilities waiting to be developed and negate common but limited cultural perceptions of girls and women (Zaslow & Schoenberg, 2012). Finding out what individual characteristics (ex., resiliency, conscientiousness, high self-efficacy, and assertiveness) helped them thrive as leaders may add to the wealth of information that could be used to help other young women thrive, whether as leaders or as more skilled and well-rounded individuals. Second, my study focused on identifying the different support systems available to adolescent female student leaders, which assumes that support systems from families and communities are necessary for youth leadership development (Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007). My study presented which social assets were helpful in the female adolescent's leadership path. Finding out how some girls became leaders in their schools may illuminate concerns regarding gender stereotypes and gender biases when assuming leadership roles. Lastly, through role modeling, my study helps encourage or prepare other female adolescents to take on leadership roles in different areas of social life, at present and in the future. Leadership is a stereotypically male role in almost all societies worldwide, and there is a considerable gap in the representation of women leaders in various institutions (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Women are almost always underrepresented as leaders, whether in the political arena, corporate boardrooms, or higher education institutions, possibly in part due to "leadership stereotypes and biases by gender [that] hinder women's leadership experiences and advancement (Catalyst, 2007, cited in Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). My choice of study would help society have a more balanced representation of leaders. More female leaders could translate to more positive outcomes for society because more issues concerning women and children could get more attention from women leaders who could quickly identify with these concerns.

### ***B. Reflection on Self and Positionality***

I did not explicitly frame my project as feminist research. However, I knew that I was committed to what Ackerly & True (2010) explained, "A feminist research ethic is, above all, a commitment to continually reviewing and challenging notions of what are appropriate and reliable ways of knowing and understanding the world – in particular by reflecting on the different ways they appear from the standpoint of different individuals and social groups" (p.25). Simone de Beauvoir once argued, "One is not born a woman but rather becomes one." Societies could either present opportunities or hindrances for girls' development. A girl is gradually influenced by her external world to become a woman through complex socialization patterns that eventually interact with her biology and personality. Unfortunately, many societies have not been culturally supportive of women's thriving. Many cultures direct their attention either toward regulating women's bodies or women's agency. Because of this, I have decided to focus on the study of adolescent female leadership development—to underscore the strengths and capabilities inherent in women. I decided to focus on adolescent women on the assumption that more authentic and self-directed leadership development begins around this time. Incidentally, this is also the time when society becomes more restrictive and demanding of female gender role expectations related to beauty standards, female fertility, caregiving duties, or social mobility (or the lack thereof). My decision to study female adolescents, in particular, required sensitivity to the implications of gender analysis, which "reveals the power of epistemology to mask important differences, and inequalities..." (Ackerly & True, 2010, p.26)

Admittedly, however, a female researcher like me needs to discuss my personal and epistemological reflexivities inherent in this research. "In qualitative research, inquirers reflect on how their role in the study and their background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data. This aspect of the methods is more than advancing biases and values in the study. It matters to emphasize how the background of the researchers may shape the direction of the study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). More so, my position as female requires that I attend to how my context and perspective might have affected knowledge construction for this particular study. Research is an exercise in knowledge creation or production. As such, it matters that we examine how power is exercised throughout the research process through reflexivity, which "questions the authority of knowledge and opens up the possibility for negotiating knowledge claims as well as holds researchers accountable to those with whom they research" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p, 495).

I have always been attracted to women's issues. At present, my teaching takes a similar bent. I have been active in Women's organizations, conferences, and research since my undergraduate years. I have also spent a few years as a volunteer and intern for an NGO that supports vulnerable young women. I serve as the adviser of a university-based and women-only student organization. Growing up, I was the eldest child with two male siblings. As the only daughter in the family, my early experiences made me see highly differential socialization patterns, values, and traditional parental expectations related to my siblings and me.

Moreover, I grew up in a larger family circle where men did most of the talking and women did most of the listening. This experience made me question the 'order of things' at an early age, and as if to answer my questions, the females in my family insisted that women need to defer to men because they "know better" and are "smarter." Back then, my vocabulary was limited, and my ideas were inchoate. This was before the internet.

My interest in women's issues shaped my interaction with my case study participants. I was keenly interested in what they all had to share. Instead of being fearful over unconventional or non-mainstream data, reflexivity helps highlight alternative forms of knowledge, "Negotiating power is not simply changing the relationship between researcher and researched" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.503). Thus, during my interviews, I learned about the family histories of my participants in connection to their leadership journey. All participants started early in their leadership paths. One participant gave credit to her upbringing as partly the reason for her early leadership preparations, while another shared that her student leadership path started in second grade when her classmates elected her as classroom secretary. Parents and close family members supported all participants.

Six of the eight participants live with both parents who work locally, one participant has a supportive father who works abroad, and only one was without a supportive father. Three participants are middle children, another three are the youngest, and two are the eldest in their families. None of them is an only child. For the younger case study participants, their early years took work. Getting the cooperation of their groupmates, classmates, or schoolmates proved to be a challenge at first.

Meanwhile, participants in late adolescence shared vital experiences that helped them realize and clarify their approach to their leadership roles and duties. In addition to key experiences, I also asked participants about what they can advise girls who aspire to become leaders like them. Arguably, their pieces of advice helped show their current beliefs and values related to leadership. Their basic ideas about leadership, practical approaches to common leadership problems, their sense of purpose and resolve, and the areas they value were expressed in the advice they shared with girls when asked during the interviews. Their willingness to advise other girls indicated their desire to support other girls aspiring to take the leadership path.

Just like the participants of this study, I was a student leader in high school. I was the student council vice president, CAT officer, president of our English club, and writer for our school paper. I also represented our school in various public speaking contests. I enjoyed being a student leader and actively engaging in numerous school activities all year round. Unfortunately, formal recognition and rewards were reserved only for academic achievements and win in beauty contests. This lack of recognition was discouraging. Over the years, I learned to censor myself and worked extra hard to be likable and sweet. These things made me feel confused and somewhat angry as an adolescent. Because I was angry, I rejected or could not see helpful feedback. Growing up made me second-guess myself and other women. I also went through an "angry feminist" stage but once out of it, I realized that there has to be something more than all these oppressive social scripts. Later in college, I started educating myself in feminist literature and post-modern ideas. At the back of my mind, the study I conducted was my attempt to make meaning from the past. In effect, my study was my attempt to honor young women's voices and include them in the leadership conversation by looking into their views, perceptions, support systems, and socialization patterns. My research work aimed to show young women in a different light – not in a state of vulnerability or risk and certainly not in need of fixing or policing.

The trickiest part of conducting this research was coordinating with school officials, waiting for IRB approval, and obtaining consent from parents. Once these were already accomplished, sessions with participants more or less progressed without significant interruptions. However, conducting the interviews within the school setting had a limiting effect. If the interviews had taken place outside the school, there would have been fewer physical and psychological barriers. Physical barriers could mean noise coming from the hallways and corridors, while psychological barriers could mean internal constraints or forms of self-censorship (ex., frustrations, disappointments, cases of online bashing from classmates, perhaps). In such instances, I learned to be more acutely observant of non-verbal language and sensitive to details that contextualized participants' responses. It is true that "You cannot do good interviews unless you can accept differences between yourself and your interviewees. It teaches you to listen and hear between the lines" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.234)

Concerning the study's results, the initial organization of responses was relatively easy because one had to align each response to the research objectives. The tricky part was the thematic coding of responses. Because of the length of responses, organizing their ideas felt like putting together pieces of a puzzle and making general interpretations from different personalities. Despite the length of responses, I was also concerned about self-censorship, which might be a function of the age or status of the researcher. I was acutely aware that "...through the in-depth interviewing of people with divergent views, we learned that reality is more complex and usually much more interesting" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.235).

Simultaneously, I was conscious of how my position and interaction with my case study participants created an imbalance of power. Indeed, it matters that we recognize relationships of power in our research (Ackerly & True, 2010). Participants were aware that I am a graduate student from the University of the Philippines, and this made me wonder how this affected their decision to participate and respond to my questions. They also knew I was a teacher at another university and addressed me as "ma'am" throughout the interview. In this concern, "It also matters that we recognize how our social, political, and economic ties impact, which "means being attentive to the ways in which social, political, and economic processes make many people and social processes themselves invisible or silent" (Ackerly & True, 2010, p.37).

In general, I was pleasantly surprised and intrigued at how my case study participants were able to make meanings out of their student leadership experiences. Even though they were relatively young and their leadership experiences were still a little extensive, they had much to say about the research problem. Most of them talked with conviction and passion. I sensed their seriousness and a strong sense of purpose. I also sensed their frustrations and disappointments, already apparent at their young age. Admittedly, I experienced inner conflict when it came time to probe the participants' frustrations and disappointments, particularly their negative experiences of bashing and gossip. Although I was very much interested to hear more about these details, I was also careful of the unintended consequences that such a line of questioning may bring. I had

to wait for clues that invited further probing (ex., eye contact, tone of voice). Indeed, eliciting their personal stories would not have been possible using a quantitative approach to the problem. Thus, using a semi-structured interview guide was beneficial in allowing for depth of discussions while remaining focused on the research problem.

Conducting case studies within several school settings also necessitated interaction with school administrators, advisers, office secretaries, and even campus security personnel. These interactions placed me in different positions within the power grid and have made me think about how, aside from the case study participants, such interactions could seriously change or even hinder the research process. According to Hesse-Biber & Piatelli (2007), "Interrogating the self or selves is more than just examining one's social location and its effect on the field; rather, this reflexive process also involves negotiating one's positionality and recognizing the shifting nature of power relations from site to site" (p. 499).

## II. CONCLUSION

Can I say I was a neutral and objective observer in my qualitative research? Or is it more accurate to say that I also wrote about my condition as a woman in various leadership capacities in writing about others? There are very personal reasons why we devote our time and energy to specific projects. We cannot escape the lenses we implicitly or explicitly use to recognize issues or problematize phenomena around us. Understanding why we resonate with specific social or political issues or adhere to certain epistemological or theoretical paradigms requires awareness, reflection, and disclosure. Researchers need to accept that these are all inherent in our work. Rubin and Rubin (2012) argued, "As long as we reported accurately what we saw and heard, did not distort the findings to meet some preset agenda, or lead the reader with emotion instead of evidence... there was no reason to separate political life from research. We could use our findings to call attention to the need for reform and to suggest what proposals might work, yet still do good and ethical, social science" (p.235). Presumably, we do research not just to describe the world but to change it one research project at a time. Social science objectivity does not mean indifference to the world around us. It is that we care enough to take on a research problem that is otherwise unrecognized or ignored. Instead of pretension to absolute objectivity or neutrality, what matters more is that researchers become aware of the extent of our position and reflexivity. Awareness of our positionality, predispositions, or affinities with certain academic traditions must not preclude sound and valid empirical findings. Once we become aware of our positions and predispositions, this is the time we take on measures of trustworthiness more seriously in our research process, all the way down to complex interpretations and rigorous reporting of results. After all, "The idea that research must be balanced and nuanced has encouraged us, not just in our work but in our lives, to be careful not to oversimplify... People are complicated, a mixture of good and bad, sometimes making the wrong decisions, sometimes stepping up to the plate to do what is right" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 236).

Researchers are not exempted from this complexity. Finally, completing my work made me more attuned to local and international developments in female leadership. In other parts of the world, female prime ministers and presidents were making great strides in this pandemic. In the Philippines, however, highly qualified female leader candidates were eschewed by voters in favor of traditional male leaders. Although this is nothing new, recent developments in my country gave me more resolve to reflect on my interest in this topic. In most parts of the world, male leaders are still significantly overrepresented and preferred by millions of voters, even while adult female leaders are found to be more skillful and qualified in almost every aspect of leadership. Current events made me reconsider the whole point of doing my study. What is the value of working on female leadership when it appears that all over the world, people will repeatedly choose a male leader? After all that has been said and written, what is my research purpose, my work in particular? Research, especially qualitative research, is an exercise in interpreting multiple and conflicting realities. Hence, "The purpose of research is not to validate a Truth, but to enable different forms of knowledge to challenge power. Multiple truths and diverse knowledges become the actual product of research when the subjectivity, location, and humanness of the knower are included" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.498).

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