
12-30-2025

My Research Journey into Family Domestic Work: Methodological Reflections of Conducting Research with Sister-Maids and Sister-Madams in Limpopo

Percyval Bayane

Department of Sociology, University of South Africa, bayanp@unisa.ac.za

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bayane, P. (2025). My research journey into family domestic work: Methodological reflections of conducting research with sister-maids and sister-madams in Limpopo. *The Qualitative Report*, 30(12), 4750-4763. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7319>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



My Research Journey into Family Domestic Work: Methodological Reflections of Conducting Research with Sister-Maids and Sister-Madams in Limpopo

Abstract

Research has been conducted on domestic work in South Africa with studies focusing on domestic workers' conditions during Apartheid and examining the little to no changes post-Apartheid. Domestic work in post-Apartheid South Africa involves the hiring of family and friends as domestic workers, and this is an under-researched area. As a young black man researching family domestic work, I was confronted with methodological challenges relating to negotiating access and conducting interviews with older black women hiring relatives and those working for family members as domestic workers. This reflexive paper reflects on my personal journey and experiences of conducting qualitative research on familial relationships in the domestic work sector, particularly with sister-madams^[1] and sister-maids^[2] in Limpopo. My paper contributes to the conversation on the significance of reflexivity in qualitative research, given how being reflexive assisted me throughout the research process to navigate my personal experiences, position as a researcher, and being a young black man, particularly in accessing participants and gathering data to avoid bias.

[1] The term sister-madam was coined by Bayane (2019) to refer to family members who employ their relatives such as cousins or sisters as domestic workers in their homes to assist with all the domestic chores.

[2] Bayane (2019) also coined sister-maids referring to family members working as domestic workers for their relatives such as sisters and cousins.

Keywords

family domestic work, sister-madams and sister-maids, qualitative research, reflexivity and personal experiences

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the University of Johannesburg for funding my MA through University of Johannesburg's Global Excellence Scholarship (GES).

My Research Journey into Family Domestic Work: Methodological Reflections of Conducting Research with Sister- Maids and Sister-Madams in Limpopo

Percyval Bayane

Department of Sociology, University of South Africa

Research has been conducted on domestic work in South Africa with studies focusing on domestic workers' conditions during Apartheid and examining the little to no changes post-Apartheid. Domestic work in post-Apartheid South Africa involves the hiring of family and friends as domestic workers, and this is an under-researched area. As a young black man researching family domestic work, I was confronted with methodological challenges relating to negotiating access and conducting interviews with older black women hiring relatives and those working for family members as domestic workers. This reflexive paper reflects on my personal journey and experiences of conducting qualitative research on familial relationships in the domestic work sector, particularly with sister-madams¹ and sister-maids² in Limpopo. My paper contributes to the conversation on the significance of reflexivity in qualitative research, given how being reflexive assisted me throughout the research process to navigate my personal experiences, position as a researcher, and being a young black man, particularly in accessing participants and gathering data to avoid bias.

Keywords: family domestic work, sister-madams and sister-maids, qualitative research, reflexivity and personal experiences

Introduction

This paper provides a personal reflection on the research process I undertook while examining familial domestic work, focusing on older black women hiring relatives and those working as domestic workers for family members. My decision to conduct qualitative research on family domestic work emanated from my personal experiences. I grew up in rural areas of Limpopo, exposed to immediate family members working as domestic workers for relatives due to lack of employment opportunities and the need for survival. This exposure made me ask a lot of questions, such as why family members work for relatives as domestic workers and how the employer-employee relationship is navigated in such a setting. I had preconceptions that when one is employed and at work, one is there to work and not to make friends; therefore, such a relationship would be strictly professional and formal. While I was close to familial domestic work dynamics through knowing relatives working as domestic workers for family members and those hiring relatives, I had not directly participated as a domestic worker nor employ a relative, which positioned me as an outsider and yet an insider. This insider-outsider position prompted me to critically reflect on my role and assumptions as a researcher throughout my research journey.

¹ The term sister-madam was coined by Bayane (2019) to refer to family members who employ their relatives such as cousins or sisters as domestic workers in their homes to assist with all the domestic chores.

² Bayane (2019) also coined sister-maids referring to family members working as domestic workers for their relatives such as sisters and cousins.

My personal experience as well as identifying a research gap on domestic work in South African literature led me to embark on an academic journey of conducting qualitative research on familial domestic work in rural areas. My research attempted to contribute to the debates about domestic work in post-Apartheid South Africa and provides insights on how the employer-employee relationship and working conditions are navigated in a familial domestic work context. Domestic work is a remnant of the colonial and Apartheid system where marginalized black women worked as servants for white madams (Cock, 1989). Seminal research has been conducted on domestic work during the Apartheid era, describing how such work was exploitative in nature due to intersectional structural issues such as race, class and gender (see Ally, 2009; Cock, 1989; Fish, 2006; Ginsburg, 2000; Van Onselen, 1982). The transitioning into a democratic country also opened up scholarly attention with studies examining the changes implemented post-Apartheid in the domestic work sector – primarily highlighting the recognition and inclusion of domestic workers in labor laws aimed at improving employer-employee relationships and working conditions (Ally, 2009; Budlender, 2016; Dilata, 2010; Nani, 2021; Tolla, 2013). However, domestic workers' working conditions continue to deteriorate in post-Apartheid as they continue to work in poor conditions (e.g., paid below the minimum wage and being exploited; Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2022; Donald & Mahlatji, 2006; Tolla, 2013). Domestic work in black communities involves settings where black women especially relatives and close friends are hired by black madams (Bayane, 2019, 2021; Dilata, 2010; Maqubela, 2016). This remains an under-researched area in domestic work, hence my study examined family domestic work focusing on the experiences of older black women hiring relatives as domestic workers and those working as domestic workers for family members in Limpopo.

As a young black man, conducting research on family domestic work with older black women presented methodological challenges, particularly during fieldwork and data analysis. I became aware early in the research process that my identity as a young black man might shape how participants perceived me and engaged with the research. For instance, this involved me noticing some of the older black women's responses and reactions to our engagement about domestic family work and dynamics, prior to beginning with interviews. These older black women were hesitant to talk about their experiences of being involved in family domestic work. In the context of a study focusing on older black women's relationships within families and households, I understood that the age difference between myself as a young man and older black women proved to be both a limitation and a point of critical reflection throughout the study. This posed a limitation, as I had to be careful of how I approach the interviews with older black women involved in family domestic work, as the earlier hesitancy in engagement represented how age, sensitivity and respect can impact data collection process. Hence the point of being reflexive of issues such as age, respect and sensitivity of family dynamics helped me throughout the research project.

Therefore, in this paper I reflect on my personal experience and challenges of conducting qualitative research on family domestic work with older black women. I also reflect on how my positionality and subjective experiences of family domestic work impacted the research and how being reflexive also assisted me during the research. Reflexivity is a significant tool in qualitative research, as it aids with enhancing the rigor of a study (Patnaik, 2013). Payne and Payne (2004) explained that reflexivity prompts researchers to be self-aware of the impact their beliefs, values and attitudes may have on research. This reflexive paper therefore contributes to discussions on the challenges of conducting qualitative research (Cypress, 2019).

Reflection Of Conceptualising the Study: From Personal Experience to Rigorous Academic Investigation

Reflexivity in qualitative research is significant and begins when researchers are conceptualizing their study (Dowling, 2006; Patnaik, 2013). For me, reflexivity also began during conceptualizing of my study on family domestic work. As mentioned, my master's research emanated from a personal experience of growing up with family members working as domestic workers for relatives. For instance, these family members would sometimes reflect on the difficulty of being family domestic workers, citing the challenge of not knowing when to act as a family member and when to act as a worker. These reflections caught my attention, where I asked myself key questions such as why one is working for family members? My personal experiences therefore grew into academic curiosity about family domestic work.

While social science researchers often explore everyday issues and at times rooted in personal experience (Babbie, 2021), I recognized the importance of grounding my study in academic literature to ensure its credibility and scholarly contribution. Therefore, I undertook an extensive literature review on domestic work in South Africa to identify existing scholarly debates and scientific gaps that aligned with my personal insights into family domestic work. I began by critically reading literature on domestic work in South Africa, attempting to understand how this labor sector had been historically defined and researched. In doing so, I came across scholarly work tracing domestic work under the colonial and Apartheid era, highlighting how the sector has been shaped by racial, gendered and class inequalities (Ally, 2009; Cock, 1989; Fish, 2006). The readings also highlighted how black women served white families under exploitative conditions, and this was primarily due to lack of state regulation of the domestic work sector during the Apartheid era (Cock, 1989).

I also found literature focusing on domestic work in post-Apartheid, noting how the state regulated the sector by introducing labor laws such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), the Labour Relations Act of 1995 (LRA), and Sectoral Determination 7 of 2002 (SD7; Ally, 2009). Nonetheless, studies have consistently demonstrated that domestic workers continue to labor under exploitative conditions (Ally, 2009; Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2022; Fish, 2006; Mbatha, 2003; Tolla, 2013).

As I continued reading, I critically noticed a silence or gap in the literature that resonated with my personal experience of family domestic work. I noticed that much of the literature focused on non-kin employer-employee relationship, particularly white employers and black employees in the domestic work sector. I therefore realized that there was minimal focus on domestic work within Black families, particularly where relatives hire family members as domestic workers and those working as domestic workers for their family members (Bayane, 2019; 2022; Dilata, 2010; Wanner, 2013). It was the absence of family domestic work in literature which complemented my personal experience, that became the foundation of my master's academic investigation. This process of reading and identifying scientific gaps led me to understand that academic research cannot be based on personal experience, but researchers should consult literature to identify scientific gaps, which assist in building a rigorous academic inquiry.

A Reflexive Glimpse into the Methodological Procedure of My Master's Study on Family Domestic Work

In examining family domestic work through the lens of older black women hiring relatives and those working as domestic workers for family members, this study was guided by a feminist research paradigm, as I intended to produce knowledge from the perceptions and experiences of black women employers (sister-madams) and employees (sister-maids). I chose

the feminist paradigm and approach to counter the male-dominated approach to social science (Babbie, 2021; Kiguwa, 2019; Parry, 2020). As such, feminist-grounded research critically engages issues related to women with an aim to ensure that their voices are acknowledged in the process of knowledge production (Sarantakos, 2005). Likewise, sister-madams and sister-maids were at the center of knowledge produced on family domestic work (Bayane, 2019). I collected data from older black women hiring relatives and those working as domestic workers for family members, and their experiences and insights were analysed and used to write the findings of the study.

The qualitative research methodology complemented the feminist paradigm. In contrast to the quantitative approach dealing with numerical data and a large sample, I chose the qualitative methodology to subjectively engage with a small sample of participants and gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences of family domestic work. Scholarly works by Sarantakos (2005), Creswell (2009), and Babbie (2021) highlight that qualitative methodology is suitable for research aiming to understand individuals' actions, meanings and exploring reality from the inside. The qualitative methodology therefore assisted me to closely engage with participants using qualitative semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of sister-madams' and sister-maids' experiences of family domestic work.

For my study, Nkowankowa was the selected research site, and this is in the Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality in the Limpopo province. The research site was chosen because I grew up observing several black women from surrounding rural areas working as domestic workers in this location. During the time I conducted my master's study and to this day black women are still working as domestic workers in households at Nkowankowa. Most households in Nkowankowa consist of black women working in professional jobs such as teaching; therefore, domestic services are used to aid with household duties (Bayane, 2019; 2022; Maqubela, 2016). As much as the research site is suitably described to consist of numerous people working as domestic workers, accessing participants, particularly those hiring family members and those working for relatives, was challenging due to multiple issues such as sensitivity of family dynamics, age difference between myself and older black women involved in family domestic work.

Sister-maids consisting of relatives working as domestic workers for family members and sister-madams – family members hiring relatives as domestic workers, were my key participants. For my study, I adopted the non-probability snowball sampling method because I knew that it would not be easy to get people hiring family members and those working as domestic workers for their relatives. This belief emanated from a personal observation that family domestic work is not as popular compared to non-family domestic work – which is common in many areas. Babbie (2021) highlights that snowball sampling is often employed in a study where each person interviewed may be asked to suggest people they know and matching the characteristics of the study. In my case, I knew a person working as domestic worker for their family member and significantly relied on her after being interviewed to suggest others engaging in family domestic work.

Prior to beginning with data collection, I approached a sister-maid and requested her assistance to establish a circle of participants matching the characteristics of the study. This opportunity enabled me to learn more about the research site and build rapport with potential participants of the study. De Vos et al. (2011) also emphasize the importance of researchers building relationships with participants before officially collecting data. During the “getting to know” participants stage, I engaged with individuals referred to me by the sister-maid, which helped me identify those willing and available to participate in my study. My experiences of building rapport with participants assisted me in understanding the sensitivity of the topic, and I also became cautious not to allow my positionality as a young researcher to impact the data collection process. This caution emanated from my prior engagement with older black women

about family domestic work and the issue of age was revealed from one of the potential participants' responses such as, "As a young man, I still want you to have your own family. Therefore, there are certain things about family conflict, which I do not want to share with you." This quote is from one of the potential participants I approached, and the rejection at first made me worry about whether I would be able to get the anticipated number of participants for the study. However, when I got the second rejection citing the similar issue, I therefore realized that the issue was my position as a young (age) researcher and the sensitivity of the topic on family domestic work. From all the potential participants approached, I got three rejections, which for me reflected the issue of age and sensitivity. This led me to critically reflect before approaching more potential participants.

While I reflected with an intention to minimize the impact of my positionality, I also acknowledge that researcher positionality inevitably shapes the research process and the data collected (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity was thus crucial in mitigating potential biases, as I continuously reflected on how my positionality influenced interactions with participants. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, I approached it as an opportunity to deepen my understanding that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, and they influence each other during a research project (Berger, 2015). This made me realize that me being a young researcher could impact how older black women involved in family domestic work share their experiences during data collection, which would ultimately shape the knowledge production on family domestic work. Reflecting on this therefore made me to approach interviewing older black women involved in family domestic work with caution, understanding that my position as a researcher can influence how participants respond to questions or sharing their experience. Being cautious when interviewing older black women was to ensure participants are comfortable to share their insights about family domestic work. As much as being cautious meant I had to respectfully ask questions, I also learned that at times the questions we prepare as researchers can be phrased differently, especially in instances where participants are not comfortable – which is an exercise of being reflexive. In this case, being cautious did not limit the engagement with older black women about issues of family domestic work, I rephrased the questions, and this allowed me to gain insights. It is also important to note that during the process of rephrasing questions, I did not discuss this with older black women, as I noticed how the prepared questions made them react. I therefore continued with rephrasing questions during interviews, and older black women were comfortable to share their experiences.

Accessing participants was also challenging because other potential participants I approached declined to participate in the study because of the sensitivity of "family settings and relationships" with their relatives. For instance, one potential sister-maid I approached mentioned that she had unresolved issues with her sister-madam, hence she cannot engage in conversations with me about family matters. Another factor which contributed to the refusal was that I was a young black man attempting to speak to older people about their family issues or relationships. I remember one potential participant politely declined to be interviewed, saying that I am still young, and she wishes me to have a family; therefore, she cannot share problems that come with family relationships and members. As this was part of my prior engagement with potential participants, I just thanked them for their time. Upon reflection, I then could tell that there were family issues with her sister-madam, which she was not ready to share with a younger person, as such the age difference between us played a role in the refusal to participate in the study.

The reluctance of older individuals to engage in discussions about personal or family matters with younger researchers can be understood through the lens of cultural norms that emphasize respect for elders and hierarchical knowledge structures (Sefa Dei, 2020; Van Aardt, 2014). In many African cultures and societies, age is a significant factor in shaping social

interactions and power dynamics (Van Aardt, 2014). For instance, wisdom and authority are traditionally associated with age, making it challenging for younger people to be considered credible when discussing sensitive issues (Sefa-Dei, 2020). This dynamic is particularly pronounced when discussing family conflicts, as older individuals may feel that younger people lack the lived experience to grasp the complexities of such issues. As such, I argue that researchers should be reflexive, as factors such as age, especially from a cultural perspective, can influence participants' willingness to participate or share information during a research project. Reflexivity and caution may be exercised by researchers noting if participants are not comfortable to participate in a study due to issues of age and sensitivity, they should let go of such participants, and approach those willing to participate in the study.

These experiences, such as refusals based on my age, and participants' hesitations to speak openly, highlighted how my positionality as a young black male researcher shaped access and the flow of information. I became aware that the age difference influenced participants' comfortability of sharing their experiences and reflected issues of authority and respect. Reflecting on these dynamics during and after each interview helped me adjust my approach to be more sensitive and culturally aware during the research process. For instance, when conducting interviews, I would start by encouraging the participants to feel free to share their experiences and thereafter I pose questions respectfully. In instances where participants would share minimal information, I would strategically probe, using the arguments they raised during their response to questions, and this allowed me to gain more insights.

Finally, building rapport with participants through informal conversations before formal interviews also helped foster trust and comfort. These early engagements also enabled me to assess whether the developed interview guide resonated with participants' lived experiences. In some instances, I refined the phrasing of questions to ensure clarity and cultural sensitivity, thereby improving the effectiveness of the interview guide in addressing the study's objectives. For instance, questions such as, "tell me more about the relationship you have with your employer," I would phrase them with respect and cultural sensitivity during interviews, by asking participants to share with me how they are co-existing with their relative (sister-madam or sister-maids).

I phrased the question in this manner due to understanding from other interviews I had conducted that many participants considered family domestic work as reciprocal care, hence, to gain information about the relationship they have with their sister-maid or sister-madam, I had to ask the question like this to show a sign of respect and understanding. The word co-existing was also befitting in this context, as it resonated with family domestic work interpreted as reciprocal care, which assisted participants to understand and share information about their relationships with me.

Nevertheless, other individuals willingly agreed to participate in the study. I ensured that they were given the participant information sheet detailing what information would be collected during the interviews for use in academic writing projects and the consent form to sign, as an act of voluntarily participating in the study. I therefore collected data for my study using semi-structured interviews. This method allowed participants the time to share their stories, and interviews were guided by two interview guides. One guide was used for sister-maids, and the other for sister-madams. The interview guides consisted of open-ended questions developed in alignment to the objective of the study. Naz et al. (2022) and Roberts (2020) add that an interview guide constitutes a list of questions framed using knowledge extracted from a literature review of the studied phenomenon. In the same manner, interview guides of the study had open-ended questions developed from my literature review on domestic work and aligned to the primary objective of the study. These interview guides had demographic questions aimed at obtaining the overall profile of participants, as well as questions about their working experiences and conditions. For instance, for demographic

questions, I asked participants to provide information about their age, marital status, highest qualifications etc. For working experiences and conditions, I asked participants to share how they feel about working for relatives and what kind of work they do daily, etc.

It is also significant to interview participants in a space and at a time which is convenient to them, as this assists with gaining in-depth information about the studied phenomenon (Bless et al., 2013). Participants in my study were interviewed at their homes and at convenient times. For instance, not to complicate the relationship between sister-madams and sister-maids, I interviewed sister-maids in their own homes and the same applied for sister-madams. I did this taking into consideration the sensitivity of the study and not to interfere with the relationship between sister-madams and sister-maids.

Adhering to ethical procedures for conducting this study, I applied and received ethical approval and clearance (REC 02-0046-2018) from the University of Johannesburg (UJ)'s Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. In addition, the rights of participants were protected, as they were all furnished with a participant information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, risks and their rights to withdraw at any time. I clearly explained to participants that the study was on family domestic work particularly focusing on the experiences of sister-madams and sister-maids, and this assisted them to make an informed decision to participate (Bless et al., 2013). In adhering to the ethical principle of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants when presenting quotes from participants, and this assisted with ensuring confidentiality. During the research, participants mentioned that talking about being sister-maids and sister-madams is sensitive as it can have a negative impact on their familial relationships, hence they specifically requested their identity to be protected.

Reflexivity In Data Collection: Navigating Age and Positionality as a Young Black Man

Being reflexive continued during the data-collection process with sister-madams and sister-maids. In preparing for data collection, I was mindful that my position as a researcher, student and a young black man could shape the process of collecting data from older black women employers and employees in family domestic work setting. Literature has also demonstrated that research can be shaped by multiple factors such as age, gender and race (Berger, 2015; Manderson et al., 2006). Hence, I began the data collection process by engaging with and asking sister-madams and sister-maids to reflect a bit about their involvement in family domestic work, and this assisted me with building rapport.

During the actual data collection process, I had become aware that emphasizing my position as a researcher, particularly when engaging with participants in a formal way, influenced how interviewees responded to the questions asked. For instance, prior to interviews, participants approached were freely sharing jokes about their involvement in domestic family work. However, when we officially began with interviews, I formally introduced myself as a student conducting research on family domestic work and started recording, I realized that participants no longer talked as freely as they did about family domestic work. As such, I was mindful of this and had to reassure participants that no information shared during the interviews will be accessible to their sister-madams or sister-maids. Reassurance was also achieved by encouraging participants by using statements such as, "feel free to share your answers to the questions asked and whatever you said here will not be shared with your sister-madam" and this assisted some participants to share their experiences of being involved in family domestic work.

However, I also recognized that reassurance alone did not always overcome participants' reservations. In some cases, participants remained cautious, particularly when discussing tensions with their relatives. For instance, during an interview with one of the sister-

maids, I requested that she share a bit about the disagreement she had with her sister-madam. She paused, looked at me, and then softly said, “You are still young, and I cannot talk about such things with you. You will think badly of us.” This moment reminded me how respect, age and sensitivity shaped the conversation, not just what participants were willing to say, but how they viewed me as someone young man to carry such sensitive stories. In cases where participants shared brief responses, I would strategically ask more questions about what they shared, and this assisted with gaining more insights. Other older black women eventually shared more insights about their involvement in family domestic work. This shift made me reflect on how the formality of the research process, especially introducing myself as a researcher and using a recording device, may have disrupted the informal rapport that existed beforehand. It reminded me that participants may self-censor in formal interview settings, especially when discussing sensitive familial roles, and that trust-building goes beyond verbal reassurances. I also used a notebook to capture participants’ responses and behavior during the interview sessions.

As a young man, interviewing older black women working as domestic workers for family members and those hiring relatives was difficult, and this contributed to some participants’ reluctance to share their personal experiences of family domestic work. This was noted during interview sessions when I asked questions, but some participants simply laughed and said they do not want to share family issues or politics with me. In one instance, I interviewed a sister-madam and asked her to describe how it was like to have a relative working as a domestic worker, specifically how she manages being a family member and employer. She laughed and said she could tell me, and I would be able to write my research, but she will be the one left in a fight with her relative. For me, this reply was more than reluctance, as it revealed her awareness of the possible consequences of disclosure of family issues. The sister-madam feared that speaking openly, even in a confidential setting might disrupt family harmony between her and sister-maid. The reluctance of participants was not only tied to the personal nature of the subject discussed but also to the intergenerational dynamics between a young male interviewer and the older women participants. In many cases, participants would speak freely about chores or daily routines but be silent or hesitant when I asked about conflict-related topics. I realized that their silence was not refusal but a communicative act drawing boundaries around what was speakable and to who about their family members. These moments helped me see how age can operate as a gatekeeping mechanism in the transmission of knowledge as many would indicate that they preferred not to disclose family-related issues or broader political topics with someone they perceived as too young. This concurs with Sefa-Dei (2020) and Van Aardt’s (2014) assertions that age plays a significant role in shaping social interactions and dynamics in many societies, particularly African and South African families and communities.

These moments were not only methodologically challenging, but emotionally uncomfortable, as I felt excluded from family conversations. I found myself navigating a delicate line between being respectful and being analytical. For instance, I would also question whether it was respectful to ask older women about private household dynamics, particularly in a culture where age and respectability define interaction. Being a young man also made me think that asking probing questions might also be disrespectful to older participants who were prompted to speak about their families. In African and South African communities, respect and age intertwined and often serve as the foundation of social hierarchies, roles and interpersonal relationships (Omoteniola, 2023; Reddy & Sanger, 2012; Van Aardt, 2014).

For instance, age is typically associated with wisdom and experience, as such elders ought to be respected by younger people in families and communities (Reddy & Sanger, 2012). Manderson et al. (2006) also highlights that data collection using interviews can be shaped by social, structural and contextual factors such as age, gender and ethnicity; therefore, researchers

should be reflexive by being observant of such issues during fieldwork. Hence, I was conscious of constantly asking follow-up questions to avoid being perceived as disrespectful, and this sometimes limited the depth of exploration. However, I came to understand that these moments of tension were also part of the research process, as they revealed how culture and age intersected to shape data collection process. Looking back, I now see that the silences, hesitations, and partial disclosures from older black women were actual data. They showed how navigating family, work, and tradition is not just a topic, but a lived reality masked in respect and silence. Although I did not fully explore these silences in my original analysis, I now recognize that what participants withheld, due to cultural norms and discomfort, was just as telling as what they shared with me. These limitations made me reflect on how my identity as a young black man researcher may have shaped what participants felt comfortable disclosing at the time. As such I think that had I worked with an older woman as a co-researcher, participants may have opened up more, as they could relate in terms of age, and this might have enriched the data. These reflections show how access, power, and positionality are not just methodological concerns but shape the knowledge we produce as researchers.

Although my cultural background particularly relating to participants in terms of language gave me some access, I became aware that my positionality as a young black male researcher placed me in a complex space of being both an insider and an outsider. Reflexivity during data collection meant being constantly alert to the discomforts that shaped the interviews, as well as the ways participants negotiated what they felt was appropriate to disclose to a young man. It is also important for researchers to reflect on the dynamics of gender, age and other factors when collecting data in qualitative research, as these influence the process and participants' responses to questions.

Reflexivity In Data Analysis: Balancing Subjectivity and Rigor

Reflexivity also occurred during data analysis, where I reflected on issues of my personal experience, age and respect. Reflexivity in qualitative research is essential for maintaining methodological rigor, as it helps researchers critically examine how their positionality, assumptions, and experiences shape data analysis (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this study, I employed thematic content analysis, following the structured approach outlined by Rosenthal (2016), which involves transcribing, coding, and interpreting data systematically.

Since all participants were comfortable speaking their vernacular language, the interviews were conducted in Xitsonga, which is also my home language. Conducting interviews in a shared language facilitated richer, more nuanced responses that might not have been fully articulated in English due to linguistic barriers (Manderson et al., 2006). However, I also encountered moments where certain expressions in Xitsonga carried emotional or cultural meanings that were challenging to translate directly into English. For instance, one participant said, "Vana va munhu va xekelana nhloko ya njiya" – a phrase that literally translates to: "siblings share the head of the locust." This metaphor, which emphasizes shared hardship and mutual assistance, reflected how some participants viewed family domestic work as reciprocal care between family members rather than a formal employment arrangement. I paused on this phrase during analysis, unsure whether it should be interpreted as genuine reciprocal care or a way to mask the unequal nature of the working relationship.

To guard against the impact of my personal experience of family domestic work, I consistently returned to transcripts and recordings, ensuring meanings were grounded in participants' words and not my own assumptions or personal experience. To ensure accuracy in representation, I transcribed all interviews verbatim using both audio recordings and handwritten notes. This dual approach minimized transcription errors and preserved the

authenticity of participants' narratives and responses to questions. Additionally, I consciously set aside my personal experiences by systematically cross-checking transcripts against recordings, allowing participants' voices rather than my own interpretations to guide the analysis.

However, being reflexive in analysis also meant confronting moments of discomfort. There were times when I recognized themes that echoed my own observations of being exposed to family domestic work, such as the normalization of exploitation in family domestic work. For instance, one participant recounted how she cleaned, cooked, and even looked after her sister-madam's children beyond what was expected of her because that is what family is all about. This mirrored my own memories of relatives doing similar work for family members, and I had to pause, ask myself: am I analyzing this as unpaid labor or reciprocal care amongst family members? I had to ask myself whether I was seeing what participants said or interpreting their narratives through the lens of my own familiarity with these practices. This prompted me to revisit transcripts and recordings multiple times to ensure that emerging themes and arguments were grounded in participants' words and not in my personal assumptions.

The coding process involved a thorough reading of all transcripts to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in participants' responses to questions asked. I employed a color-coding system to mark emerging themes, ensuring that the categorization was rooted in the data rather than preconceived notions (Nowell et al., 2017). To enhance reliability, I revisited the recordings whenever I did not understand something, ensuring that the participants' intended meanings were accurately captured. Interpreting the data involved organising the identified themes to align with the study's primary objectives. During this process, I found myself reflecting on whether as a younger researcher, was I critically interpreting and representing the emotional and social lives of older women working as domestic workers for relatives and those hiring family members as domestic workers. I was aware that age and cultural norms often influence whose voice is seen as legitimate when speaking about familial matters. This awareness shaped how I then constructed themes, and narrated findings. For instance, I constructed a theme titled "my employer is my sister-madam," to represent participants' voice of emotional contradictions of being both kin and worker. I was cautious when constructing themes and to ensure that participants' voice (not my voice) was at the centre, and I also included direct quotes to support the arguments raised. In this way, reflexivity during analysis was not just about technical rigor, it was about ethical humility.

By ethical humility, I mean recognising that, as a young black man trying to make sense of the stories of older black women involved in family domestic work, I had to be aware of the limits of what I could fully understand. These women were sharing personal and often painful experiences, not just giving me information to analyse. I needed to remember that their stories were part of their real lives – not just words to turn into academic findings. Being ethically humble also meant accepting that I might not completely grasp everything they told me, or that some parts of their stories might make me feel uncomfortable or confused. It required me to slow down during analysis, to listen carefully to what was said, and to keep checking that my interpretations were based on their words, not just my own thoughts or assumptions. It was about showing respect, being careful, and remaining open to learning rather than rushing to making conclusions.

In presenting the findings, I prioritised the authenticity of participants' voices. As a key aspect of reflexivity, I kept an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, modifications, and reflections throughout the research process. This practice not only strengthened the transparency of my research but also allowed me to critically engage with my positionality as both a researcher and member of the community being studied (Payne & Payne, 2004). Being part of the community helped me understand subtle references and silences in participants' stories. In other words, being familiar with the area and Xitsonga language that participants

used, assisted me to critically think about their responses of family domestic work. But this also meant I had to be cautious not to overlook complexities on the basis that I am familiar with the research area and vernacular language. These tensions shaped how I framed and presented findings, always reminding myself that knowledge production is a co-constructed and relational process. By integrating reflexivity throughout data analysis, this study upholds qualitative research's commitment to methodological rigor while acknowledging the role of researcher subjectivity. This approach aligns with broader discussions on qualitative validity, ensuring that findings are both credible and contextually grounded (Tracy, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the critical role of reflexivity in qualitative research, particularly in studies exploring sensitive topics such as family domestic work. My reflections highlight that researchers are immersed in their work, making it imperative to continually assess how personal experiences, positionality, and assumptions influence the research process. As a young black male researcher working with older black women in a rural South African context, I encountered moments of disconnection and discomfort, especially when participants kept on making examples of how they could not share family information with me due to being young. As such, the constant negotiation but importantly reflexivity assisted with how knowledge was produced, interpreted, and presented. By maintaining reflexivity, I was able to navigate the complexities of studying sister-maids and sister-madams, ensuring that my personal background did not overshadow participants' voices. Negotiating access and building rapport emerged as key challenges, particularly given the cultural and intergenerational dynamics at play. I was forced to think not only about what participants were saying but about how my presence shaped what they chose to say, and what they withheld. For me, these moments of challenges and reflections illustrate that research is about relational meaning-making with both researcher and participants influencing and contributing to knowledge production.

My reflections note the necessity for researchers to remain adaptable, acknowledging the ways in which their identity – whether as a young black man or researcher – can shape interactions with participants. Moreover, reflexivity in data collection and analysis proved essential in maintaining methodological rigor, allowing for a more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretation of findings. My study thus highlights that reflexivity is not an afterthought in research; it is a continuous, embodied, and ethical practice that shapes every stage of the inquiry. Importantly, my positionality allowed for insights that may not have emerged through a different researcher's lens. While it came with its own limitations, it also brought a unique perspective that connected structural analysis with lived familial realities - which speaks to the value of positionality in qualitative research.

References

- Ally, S. (2009). *From servants to workers: South African domestic workers and the democratic state*. Cornell University Press.
- Babbie, E. (2021). *The practice of social research* (15th ed.). Cengage.
- Bayane, P. (2019). *Sister-madam and sister-maid: An exploration of the experiences of black women employers and employees in the domestic work sector in rural South Africa* [Master's thesis, University of Johannesburg].
- Bayane, P. (2021). 'Sister-madam': Family members navigating hiring of relatives as domestic workers in Nkawkawa, Limpopo. *Community, Work & Family*, 26(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.1920370>
- Bayane, P. (2022). Navigating family-work relationships during Covid-19 Pandemic: Family domestic workers in rural Limpopo, South Africa. *Labour, Capital & Society*, 50(1&2), 36–53. <https://hdl.handle.net/10500/29729>
- Berger, R. (2015). "Now I see it, now I don't": Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Bless, C., Higson-Smith, C., & Sithole, S. L. (2013). *Fundamentals of social research method: An African perspective* (5th ed.). Juta.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Budlender, D. (2016). *The introduction of a minimum wage for domestic workers in South Africa*. Conditions of work and employment series No.72. International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_465069.pdf
- Cock, J. (1989). *Maids and madams: A study of politics of exploitation*. Women's Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Cypress, B. S. (2019). Qualitative research: Challenges and dilemmas. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 38(5), 264–270. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DCC.0000000000000374>
- Dawood, Q., & Seedat-Khan, M. (2022). The unforgiving work environment of black African women domestic workers in a post-apartheid South Africa. *Development in Practice*, 33(2), 168–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2115977>
- De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Fouche, C. B., & Delpont, C. S. L. (2011). *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (4th ed.). Van Schaik.
- Dilata, X. P. (2010). *Between 'sisters': A study of the employment relationship between African domestic workers and African employers in the townships of Soweto* [Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand].
- Donald, F. M., & Mahlatji, L. (2006). Domestic workers' experiences of power and oppression in South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 16(2), 205–213.
- Dowling, M. (2006). Approaches to reflexivity in qualitative research. *Nurse Researcher*, 13(3), 7–21. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2006.04.13.3.7.c5975>
- Fish, J. N. (2006). *Domestic democracy: At home in South Africa*. Routledge.
- Ginsburg, R. (2000). 'Come in the dark': Domestic workers and their rooms in apartheid-era Johannesburg, South Africa. *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 8, 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3514408>
- Kiguwa, P. (2019). Feminist approaches: An exploration of women's gendered experiences. In S. Laher, A. Fynn, & S. Kramer (Eds.), *Transforming research methods* (pp. 220-235). Wits University Press.
- Manderson, L., Bennett, E., & Andajani-Sutjahjo, S. (2006). The social dynamics of the interview: Age, class, and gender. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(10), 1317–1334.

- <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306294512>
- Maqubela, L. N. (2016). Mothering the 'other': The sacrificial nature of paid domestic work within black families in post-Apartheid South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour*, 14, 7214–7224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X231211455>
- Mbatha, G. (2003). The predicament of an African woman: A critique of current legislation relating to domestic workers. *South African Mercantile Law Journal*, 15, 407–413.
- Nani, L. V. (2021). *The realisation of decent work for domestic workers in South Africa* [Master's thesis, University of Johannesburg].
- Naz, N., Gulab, F., & Aslam, M. (2022). Development of qualitative semi-structured interview guide for case study research. *Competitive Social Science Research Journal*, 3(2), 42–52. <https://cssrjournal.com/index.php/cssrjournal/article/view/170>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Omoteniola, S. A. (2023, September 23). The ageless wisdom: Exploring respect and age in African cultures. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@Adeloposumayyah/the-ageless-wisdom-exploring-respect-and-age-in-african-cultures-48230ca48edc>
- Parry, B. (2020). Feminist research principles and practices. In S. Kramer, S. Laher, A. Fynn, & H. Janse van Vuuren (Eds.), *Online readings in research methods* (pp. 1-28). Psychological Society of South Africa. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BNPFS>
- Patnaik, E. (2013). Reflexivity: Situating the researcher in qualitative research. *Humanities and Social Science Studies*, 2(2), 98–106.
- Payne, G., & Payne, J. (2004). *Key concepts in social research*. Sage.
- Reddy, V., & Sanger, N. (2012). Matters of age: An introduction to ageing, intergenerationally and gender in Africa. *Agenda*, 26(4), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2012.793062>
- Roberts, R. E. (2020). Qualitative interview questions: Guidance for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(9), 3185–3203. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4640>
- Rosenthal, M. (2016). Qualitative research methods: Why, when and how to conduct interviews and focus groups in pharmacy research. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 8, 509–516. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2016.03.021>
- Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social research*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Sefa Dei, G. J. (2020). Elders' cultural knowledges and African indigeneity. In J. Abidogun & T. Falola (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of African education and indigenous knowledge* (pp. 279-301). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38277-3_14
- Tolla, T. (2013). *Black women's experience of domestic workers in Mpumalanga*. University of Cape Town. <http://www.psychology.uct.ac.za/sites/default/Tsidiso.Tolla>
- Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “Big-Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16, 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Van Aardt, J. M. (2014). *Young adults' experiences of respect in their relations with older people* [Master's thesis, Northwest University].
- Van Onselen, C. (1982). *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Ravan Press.
- Wanner, Z. (2013). *Maids in South Africa: 30 ways to leave your madam*. Jacana Media.

Author Note

Percyval Bayane is a Lecturer at the Department of Sociology, University of South Africa (UNISA). He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Johannesburg (UJ), which examined male and female Uber drivers' precarious working conditions and navigation of work-life balance in Johannesburg, South Africa. He also obtained his Master of Arts in Industrial Sociology from UJ. His publications and research interests include sociology of work, family domestic work, gig economy and work, digital platform work, Uber, precarity and precarious employment, and work-life balance in the digital age. Please direct correspondence to bayanp@unisa.ac.za

Author Contribution: I have solely written and contributed to the paper.

Acknowledgements: I acknowledge the University of Johannesburg for funding my MA through University of Johannesburg's Global Excellence Scholarship (GES).

Copyright 2025: Percyval Bayane and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Bayane, P. (2025). My research journey into family domestic work: Methodological reflections of conducting research with sister-maids and sister-madams in Limpopo. *The Qualitative Report*, 30(12), 4750-4763. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7319>
