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The Advantages of Qualitative Research into Femicide

Abstract This article reviews the state of the art of qualitative research on femicide, which, until the publication of this Special Issue, has been extremely sparse. The paper mentions some of the limitations of the qualitative approach, such as time consumption, ethical liabilities, and non-generalizability. However, it advocates qualitative research because of its advantages in capturing the context, describing the experience, identifying the motives, highlighting the relationship between perpetrator and victim, identifying the risk factors, and suggesting apt policies. The article concludes by cautiously recommending a mixed-/merged-methods approach, which, in turn, depends upon the research question and has its own inherent disadvantages.

Keywords Femicide; Survivors; Qualitative Research; Non-Generalizability; Narratives; Interviews; Perpetrator; Victim; Policy; Mixed-Methods

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In the past few years, there has been a surge of articles on femicide, which had previously been "invisible" (Weil 2016a) in sociology. While domestic violence is a common object of enquiry, its fatal consequence had been relatively ignored. Now, due to the activism of several organizations, research into femicide is on the rise; however, the vast majority of the studies are quantitative. As in sociology in general, qualitative sociological research into femicide has been relegated to an inferior position in the discipline, and represents a minority sub-discipline.

It is a truism that it is difficult to conduct qualitative studies of femicide, not least because the victim is dead. The qualitative researcher therefore often takes recourse to studying "failed femicides"

of survivors. By "failed femicides," the intention is "an attempted femicide where the medical examination of the victim confirmed a life-threatening event, the victim had been hospitalized in emergency, and she or the perpetrator had described the event as an attempted murder" (Weil 2016b:7). In the WHO report on femicide, the authors were keenly aware of the untenable situation in which survivors find themselves and proposed legal reforms globally to protect them. The report stated: "Studies are also needed to investigate cases of near-fatal intimate partner violence, not only to understand the needs of survivors and characteristics of perpetrators but also to shed light on the factors that may prevent femicide" (WHO 2012:6). Nevertheless, to date, the majority of studies of femicide survivors that *do* exist are quantitative in nature, and shed little light on the circumstances of the murder of a woman because of her gender. Qualitative studies of femicide are sparse and, by definition, restricted to small numbers. They are even rarer among displaced, refugee, or migrant women, who may make up a disproportionate share of attempted femicide victims.

This article reviews the use of qualitative methods in the study of femicide, and argues that a qualitative approach can be of great use to researchers of the phenomenon. Qualitative studies are usually small-scale micro studies, which are discovery-oriented, typically yielding detailed descriptions, and revealing experiential data. Often, they produce hypotheses that can later be tested in larger-scale studies. Clearly, there are different kinds of qualitative studies ranging from the examination of paper or internet documents, media reports, medical docu-

ments (if released), and court and other transcripts. Qualitative studies can consist of interviewing, focus groups, and the collection of narratives. Observations, the classic mark of ethnographic research, are necessarily rare in femicide studies. To date, and up to the publication of this Special Issue, the multiple forms of qualitative research into femicide have been largely neglected.

In the first section of this article, I shall review the state of the art of qualitative research on femicide, as it stands today. In the second section, I shall mention some of the limitations of the qualitative approach, and in the third section, I shall discuss its advantages. I shall conclude the article cautiously recommending a "mixed-methods" approach.

Qualitative Research on Femicide: The State of the Art

Most qualitative studies of femicide utilize some form of interviewing technique, usually focusing on the survivors of "failed femicides," but also recording the narratives of "significant others," such as perpetrators, relatives, and neighbors, in "successful" femicide cases, where the woman is eliminated. A pioneering research with a "semi-qualitative," face-to-face orientation was the questionnaire administered by McFarlane and colleagues (1999) to 65 attempted femicide survivors during the years 1994-1998 in 10 U.S. cities, in order to examine the phenomenon of stalking prior to an attack. The victims were identified from closed police records and contacted by mail. Trained doctoral students ran a questionnaire, including an 18-item stalking survey; the interview took one hour. However, the

results neither contain quotations from the victims, nor do they convey the quality of the lethal experience.

Another study of the qualitative aspects of femicide was carried out by Nicolaidis and colleagues (2003), who conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 women who had survived an attempted intimate partner femicide in six cities in the U.S. This was part of a larger, 11-city case-control study setup to determine the risk factors of actual and attempted intimate partner femicide. The female victims described in their own words their relationship with the partner, and their understanding of the events prior to the attempted femicide (Nicolaidis et al. 2003:2).

Sheehan and colleagues (2015) interviewed co-victims, family members, and close friends of femicide victims. They also examined criminal case files and media reports. Their study was insightful in that it showed acute risk factors prior to the femicide, identified changes in the perpetrators' behavior and the perpetrators' perceived loss of control over the victim, and described barriers that victims faced when attempting to gain safety (Sheehan et al. 2015). McNamara (2008) interviewed friends of victims of an intimate partner femicide in Australia. Dobash and colleagues (2004) managed to conduct qualitative interviews with perpetrators. In a relatively large qualitative study, Adams (2009) interviewed 31 killers of women and 16 perpetrators of attempted femicides by means of an in-depth structured interview that included 30 open-ended, as well as closed questions about their childhoods. The researchers also accessed the men's criminal history records.

Limitations of Qualitative Research on Femicide

The major limitations of qualitative research are its time consumption, its non-generalizability, and ethical liabilities.

Time Consumption

In dental public health research, Gill and colleagues (2008) distinguish between three basic types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. In femicide research, I would suggest that structured interviews are of little use, since the researcher is seeking in-depth information. Semi-structured interviews pose several key issues that the interviewee can discuss. Unstructured interviews may be particularly useful in asking about femicide incidents. Nevertheless, Gill and colleagues (2008) caution:

Unstructured interviews are usually very time-consuming (often lasting several hours) and can be difficult to manage, and to participate in, as the lack of predetermined interview questions provides little guidance on what to talk about (which many participants find confusing and unhelpful). Their use is, therefore, generally only considered where significant "depth" is required, or where virtually nothing is known about the subject area (or a different perspective of a known subject area is required). [p. 291]

Open-ended or even semi-structured interviews, which attempt to capture an experience, take much longer than simple questionnaires. Much depends

upon the interviewee and the context. In the case of Ethiopian female migrants whom I interviewed in Israel, most interviews took several hours—one took nine hours—and had to be preceded by a ritualized coffee ceremony in which the interviewee gains the confidence of the interviewer (Weil 2016b:12).

Not all qualitative research into femicide is, or has to be, by means of interviewing. Forming a focus group may take months. Media data, the analysis of criminal records, and numerous other techniques are also legitimate qualitative tools, but gaining access to archives or police records can also take weeks.

Ethical Liabilities

For both the qualitative and the quantitative researcher, it is essential to receive ethics approval from universities or ethics committees from the relevant professional associations in order to conduct a femicide study. While content analyses of news releases of femicide cases may not involve extra ethical considerations, interviewing "failed femicide" survivors or kin, including orphans or people who might have been present at the time of the murder, requires special skills and involves special ethical considerations. Particularly if the interviewer is male, and the interviewee is a close friend or relative of the victim, or a survivor of an intimate partner homicide attempt, the interview situation itself may involve transference issues. It also may be the first time that the interviewee has reenacted the lethal killing and it may represent for the victim a cathartic experience.

Even good interviewers may be ill-equipped with the knowledge of how to handle situations in which the interviewees may cry, shout, or express deep emotions. McNamara (2008:202) was more suited than some other researchers to elicit qualitative data, since she is an experienced social worker and psychotherapist. However, researchers have to be aware that participants in a study on intimate partner femicide may be emotionally fragile and that an interview or involvement in a focus group may potentially place a participant at mental health risk.

Non-Generalizability

The sociological sample in qualitative research into femicide is necessarily small, both because it may be difficult to identify the object of study and because the cases are rare. In my own study of migrant women from Ethiopia in Israel, only three women were included in my sample. Clearly, one cannot generalize from three cases to larger populations, either of migrant women or of Ethiopian women. Nevertheless, as I showed (Weil 2016b), the three cases were independently very similar and the narratives the women told in open interviews, that often took many hours, were remarkably similar. Therefore, the issue is more of whether one can generalize from a small or minute sample to a population based on inferences. This follows Ercikan and Roth's (2006:22) statement with respect to qualitative studies in education: "generalization is not a feature of mathematization but a descriptor for the tendency of inferences to go beyond the context and participants involved in the research."

Advantages of Qualitative Research on Femicide

In the past 30 years or so, both the quality of qualitative research and its legitimation have improved,¹ such that it is timely to record here the advantages of the qualitative study of femicide.

Capturing the Context

Recording narratives by survivors, close kin, friends, or even perpetrators of femicide attacks is the most efficient way of capturing the context of a lethal murder. The context may include the location of the homicide and identify a domestic or non-domestic arena. It may include the history of the victim and the perpetrator and pinpoint their relationship. It may relate the months, days, or even hours leading up to the murder. In McNamara's (2008) qualitative descriptive case study of Australian femicides, friends narrated the impact of the murder on their life-world. Their reactions depended upon the relationship of the victim with her assailant, whether children were involved, and whether friends and family were threatened. Surprisingly, both the friends and the victim were from middle-class backgrounds, who, like other femicide victims, lacked the power to protest domestic violence. The study was carried out by one-off focus groups preceded by long telephone interviews (McNamara 2008:202); it revealed insights that no quantitative study could have explored.

¹ The quality of qualitative research debate is huge with thousands of references. It also embraces QHR (Qualitative Health Research) (Calderón Gómez 2009).

Describing the Experience

Femicide narratives thus provide understanding into women's subjective experiences, the ways they understand events, and the episodes they are trying to organize in their heads. Sometimes this is coincidental with a phenomenological approach in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experience about femicide as described by the participant in the study.

Quantitative research cannot capture an experience. An attempted femicide or watching a femicide may be the most traumatic episode in someone's life. Asking a respondent to recount the narrative of the dreadful night or day in an unstructured interview clarifies for the listener and the reader exactly what femicide is and what the victim suffered. It heightens awareness for both the narrator and the narrated.

Recounting it provides the narrator with an identity as a "friend of" or "bystander," but gives the narrated more information than numbers alone can provide. It allows readers, academics, and advocates to understand the event, and perhaps to find solutions or implement guidelines. Describing the experience of femicide, particularly among migrant female survivors, may become an increasingly important tool for policy-makers to understand how femicides occur, how they are perceived by victims, perpetrators and society, and how they can be combated.

Identifying the Motives

Statistics on homicide or even disaggregated data on femicide do not identify the motives for femicide. In order to prevent femicide, it is essential for

practitioners to understand the underlying motives of the killing. Some countries blur the data by lumping femicide with homicide, while the motivations for femicides remain unknown. In many cases, the murder is carried out for one reason only: that the victim is female. A substantial percentage of femicides are intimate partner murders, where the victim knew her murderer. In some cases, the femicide is solely misogynist. In a study of 60 wife-killings in Ghana reported in a national daily newspaper, jealousy and suspicion of infidelity overwhelmingly provided the basis for femicides (Adinkrah 2008).

Motivations are never clear-cut. The WHO (2012:2) report on femicide states that the motive for what is branded "honor" killing could be a cover-up for other vices, such as incest, that could only be revealed by a sensitive in-depth interview.

Highlighting the Relationship between Perpetrator and Victim

Quantitative studies often fail to understand the relationship between perpetrators and victims, and specifically intimate partner history. Victims may have turned to the police, social workers, or other authorities complaining of severe domestic violence; they may have been hospitalized in the past as a result of severe beating or attempted strangulation. Perpetrators may have had previous sentences, or a history of substance abuse or alcoholism. Either of them may have been treated for mental disorders. All of these variables, including socio-economic factors, come to the surface in qualitative research, but are rarely investigated once the victim or the perpetrator is simply a statistic.

Identifying the Risk Factors

In the quest for comparability, quantitative data is often standardized, thereby removing any hope of receiving indicators of risk factors. In an attempt to discover the risk factors in intimate partner homicides, Campbell and colleagues (2003) carried out a large survey of 220 victims. They discovered that the major risk factor is prior domestic violence. However, femicides far outweigh homicides in intimate partner homicides and constitute four to five times the rate of male victims. Other important risk factors include alcohol and drug use, the perpetrator's access to a gun or a previous threat with a weapon, the perpetrator's step-child residing in the home, estrangement, especially from a controlling partner, stalking, and more. While this study represents a leap forward in research on femicide, the authors are quick to point out that more information beyond that collected through police homicide files could be achieved by innovative means. The researchers themselves also interviewed a family member or close friend of the victim as a "proxy" informant. More research needs to be carried out to identify patterns which can help prevent the risk of femicide.

Suggesting Apt Policies

The criticism of qualitative research in general gave rise to criteria in order to assess qualitative studies, and a relatively large number of guidelines used to evaluate qualitative research in the social and health sciences. The discrepancies between different guidelines and criteria tended to reinforce the impression that qualitative research

was confusing and “unscientific.” However, qualitative studies of femicide can produce greater in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Once it is demonstrated by qualitative means that orphans left behind after their mothers have been murdered have largely been neglected or “forgotten” by different authorities (Kapardis, Baldry, and Konstantinou [in this issue of QSR]), policies can include support programs for these children, too.

If policy-makers wish to suggest guidelines once they understand the motivations for femicide or what actually happened on the fatal (or near-fatal) night, they can consult qualitative researchers. It is for this reason that a Femicide Watch, promoted by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,² and a European Observatory on Femicide, promoted by COST Action IS1206 on “Femicide across Europe,”³ should collect not only quantitative but also qualitative data in the form of case studies or analyzed according to type.

Conclusion

This article clearly demonstrates that qualitative research can provide insights into femicide, not readily available by quantitative studies. However, qualitative studies have limitations and that is why many methodologists add information culled from other qualitative techniques or champion the “mixed-methods” studies or a holistic approach to

² See: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2016/November/systematic-collection-and-documentation-of-killing-of-women-and-girls-needed-to-combat-femicide-say-participants-of-symposium-in-vienna.html>. Retrieved June 24, 2017.

³ See: press release: www.femicide.net. Retrieved June 24, 2017.

a phenomenon. In a brief 2015 article, the methodologist Gobo argued that the next challenge is to move from mixed to a fully “merged methods.”

In femicide studies, some qualitative studies do not yield sufficient information in order to write up policy guidelines. That is why researchers (e.g., Sheehan et al. 2015), upon the completion of interviews, supplement the collected data with other sources of data, such as media releases or affidavits by policy officials. When one cannot generalize from qualitative data, researchers may also seek the statistical context in order to document trends.

The choice of qualitative or quantitative methods is often dictated by the research question. One type of research is not always conducted at the expense of another, and a holistic-, mixed-, or merged-methods approach can often be the ideal. As in the collected volume edited by Ercikan and Roth (2009), we must get beyond the qualitative and quantitative polarization. This in turn may have its challenges in that the use of multiple methods may be both expensive and take extra time because of the need to collect and analyze different types of data. To date, femicide studies have not received high priority as funding goals.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) for supporting Action IS1206 “Femicide across Europe,” which provided the opportunity to network with other femicide researchers.

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