

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

What is 'sensitive' about sensitive research? The sensitive researchers' perspective

Journal Item

How to cite:

Mallon, Sharon and Elliott, Iris (2020). What is 'sensitive' about sensitive research? The sensitive researchers' perspective. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (Early access).

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2020 Informa UK Limited



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13645579.2020.1857966>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

What is 'sensitive' about sensitive research? The sensitive researchers' perspective.

Abstract

There is growing consensus in the literature about the emotional consequences for researchers involved in sensitive research. There is also concern about the support provided to these researchers. Such concerns are amplified by a lack of discussion on what exactly researchers themselves consider is 'sensitive' about their involvement in this type of research. This paper draws on data from a roundtable with twelve researchers working across a range of 'sensitive' research areas. It presents an examination of their views on these issues presented in themes that emerged from our analysis of this data. These themes are interconnected with examples from the literature that contextualise and add to our methodological understanding of the issue of sensitivity. Our analysis suggested these researchers' sensitivities were closely linked to the context of the research. In addition, they described how issues of identity, as well as political motivations, meant there was a strong personal and professional investment in the research. We conclude by reflecting on these sensitivities, arguing that although they are supported by current definitions of sensitivity, they are more nuanced than broader discussions of sensitivity allow.

Introduction

"I would have assumed that if you are doing (research about) a traumatic subject...that the topic itself is where the emotion comes from, but what I am hearing is that's not at all really where the emotional risks come from ..." (Author 1)

These are the opening words from a roundtable discussion convened by both the authors of this paper to discuss the issue of sensitivity in sensitive research. We had spent many years working on sensitive topic research studies and were aware of the extensive literature and governance procedures that provide guidance on how to conduct sensitive research. For example, the published literature can give some indication of the likely areas of sensitivity that may arise (Powell et al., 2018). Ethics committees may give some direction on where particular issues of vulnerability may occur, and how these might be managed (Powell et al., 2018). In addition, supervisors may provide support and guidance as the research progresses.

However, it was our sense that the guidance available to researchers was based on presumptive notions of sensitivity that failed to reflect the ‘true’ sensitivity involved in ‘sensitive’ research. Over a number of years, we had conversed about our experiences of undertaking qualitative fieldwork on sensitive topics, as well as the concerns that emerged from our roles managing other researchers. The concept of holding an event emerged from these informal discussions. In short, we wanted to re-examine how sensitive research is experienced by those working as researchers at the front line. Thus, in May 2015, we held a roundtable discussion designed to facilitate an intellectual debate among sensitive topic researchers, providing them with a safe space in which they could share their experiences. Our intention was to explore the issue of sensitive research from their perspective, examining in detail the issues they were ‘sensitive’ about. We were keen to use these experiences productively, to create guidance that could take this issue forward in practical way (see Mallon and Elliott, 2019 for more details). However, the aim of this paper is to shift the analytic gaze from these practical concerns, towards a theoretical analysis of the data that reflects upon how the issue of sensitivity was constructed and enacted by researchers. Lee and Lee’s (2012) systematic review of sensitive research highlighted the need for further

conceptual work in this area, focused on the definition of sensitivity and the emotional demands of fieldwork aspects. It is these aspects that are the subject here.

The paper begins with a brief summary of the literature's approach to defining sensitive research and researcher's reactions to this work. It then outlines the 'research sensitivities' described by the UK researchers who participated in the roundtable. By drawing upon this data, we explore the tensions that exist for researchers undertaking this type of research. In doing so, we reveal that the particular areas of sensitivity they identified were connected not only to the nature of the topics themselves (Lee and Lee, 2012) but were also closely linked to the context of the research. Our approach here is to combine brief extracts from the roundtable with established views from the literature. This allows us to reflect upon, contribute to and challenge our current methodological understandings of the work involved in undertaking 'sensitive' research. In doing so, this article will contribute to the knowledge about the complexities inherent in this type of research for researchers and their supervisors.

What defines a 'sensitive' topic?

Exactly what defines a research topic as being 'sensitive' varies. Sieber and Stanley (1988 p.49) defined 'socially sensitive' research as 'studies in which there are potential consequences, either for the participants in the research or the class of individuals represented by it.'. Lee (1993) argued this definition was too broad and offered a definition of sensitive research in which the topic under investigation, the situation, as well as any other issues, posed a threat to the individuals involved with it. Later, Dickson-Swift et al (2008) highlighted the impact of the research as being the focus of the 'sensitivity'; identifying areas like murder, suicide and domestic violence as sensitive, since they bring to

the fore upsetting emotions for the participant. More recently, Lee and Lee's (2012) systematic review identified various aspects such as the topic of the research as being sensitive. However, methodological techniques, such as interviewing and documentary analysis also featured. The review also identified two emerging areas of sensitivity; internet use in research, and the emotional wellbeing of researchers.

The importance of understanding the 'sensitivities' of researchers.

Historically, the literature on the broader issue of sensitivity has tended to focus on the practical and ethical considerations of undertaking this type of research (Lee and Lee, 2012). In part, these ethical concerns have emerged because research on sensitive topics includes an array of topics with participants who may be defined as 'vulnerable'. However, there is growing consensus within the literature of the considerable emotional consequences for researchers who are involved in social research on sensitive topics; with one paper declaring that despite some progress, the demands on those who undertake this type of research are now 'difficult to ignore' (Lee and Lee, 2012, p.47).

The issue of vulnerability, has been discussed from both an individual researcher's perspective (Komaromy, 2019) and more infrequently from the perspective of groups of researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Some awareness has been drawn to the emotional demands placed on the researcher, with an emphasis on the emotional risks of this type of work (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and the ways in which researchers can respond to these risks (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). There has also been a turn in the literature towards using the emotional labour theory to contextualise researchers' responses to their fieldwork (Dickson-Swift, 2017; Komaromy, 2019). Many of those who have published on these issues, have expressed concern about the support that is provided to researchers

(Mallon and Elliott, 2019; Dickson-Swift, 2017). However, such concerns are amplified by confusion on what exactly is sensitive about the researcher's involvement in social research on sensitive issues. The lack of a robust examination of the issue of sensitivity, especially in relation to how it presents itself to the researchers themselves, potentially renders any discussion of the issue an incomplete and ineffectual exercise. This article uses data gathered from UK researchers during a roundtable to contribute towards addressing this gap in our methodological understanding of sensitive research.

Research Methodology

The roundtable was planned in early 2015 and took place in May of that year. We invited twenty researchers from across the UK to participate in the event. Potential participants were initially selected by contacting colleagues who were identified from the literature as working in areas of research that could be loosely defined as 'sensitive'. Those who declined the invitation were asked to pass their invitation to a colleague who was working in the same area of research. Those eventually in attendance at the roundtable had undertaken research into topics such as death and dying, stillbirth, homelessness, abortion, suicide, drug addiction, lived experience of mental health issues and those who had worked with peer researchers. In total, twelve researchers attended the event, eleven were female and one male. Participants crossed disciplinary boundaries, some being social workers and sociologists, while others were from psychology or nursing backgrounds. In addition, they ranged from those who were currently undertaking a PhD (n=1) or had just a few years' experience researching sensitive topics (n=2), to those who had been involved in multiple studies (n=6) and were currently operating as principal investigators (n=3). All of the researchers were from the UK.

The authors acted as the convenors of the discussion. Although we had a plan of topics to be covered, participants were free to talk about whatever issues they felt were relevant to them and a natural flow emerged in the proceedings with little formal direction. The overall tone and direction of the discussion that ensued thus came to reflect the whole spectrum of issues that the researchers found were ‘sensitive’ about their area of sensitive research. Here, our analysis focuses on how the issue of sensitivity itself was enacted from the researcher’s perspective. We have collectively labelled these here as ‘research sensitivities’; by this we mean those issues the roundtable discussion revealed researchers were attuned or sensitive to as they emerged during the process of undertaking all aspects of the research. A broad approach to the issue of ‘sensitivity’ was adopted in our analysis, in that we considered it to be something that has the potential to arouse an emotional reaction (Johnson & Clarke, 2003).

During the roundtable, we used digital recorders to capture the researchers’ discussion; participants were asked to consent to the use of these recordings in the production of research publications. These recordings were subsequently transcribed and analysed by both authors. The intention of this study was to provide an overview of the sensitive aspects reported by these researchers, therefore what follows is a thematic synthesis of the key points. For similar reasons to Powell et al (2018), the ‘treatment of quotes in this article is methodological’ in the sense that we ‘allow (them) to speak for themselves’ (p.652). Our intention in this is to allow the participants voices to speak clearly to the reader, avoiding undue interpretation to be placed upon their words. This is important because the issue of sensitivity is not straightforward, but we have similarly found that it is regularly rolled out in a manner which is under evaluated (Richards, Clark, & Boggis, 2015). However, we diverge slightly from Powell et al.’s (2018) approach by interspersing quotes with

commentary based on the literature and authors reflections. In doing so, we take our understanding of the issue of sensitivity to a new methodological level. All quotes are anonymised and for the purpose of confidentiality we have mostly tried to avoid linking participant quotes to specific topics.

What are researchers 'sensitive' about when undertaking sensitive research?

In this section, we turn our attention to data from the roundtable, highlighting aspects of the discussion that were identified as being integral to the overall emergence of researchers' sensitivities. We demonstrate that the 'sensitivity' was multi-layered, being more than just about the actual topic of research or the potential impact on the participants. Items under discussion include: the researchers' motivations for undertaking the research and sense of identification with the people they interviewed; the emotional reaction evoked by the research, as well as those of the individuals with whom they attempted to discuss these emotions. Finally, we discuss the sensitivities they expressed in relation to the power dynamics that emerged during the research process.

Motivation and Identification

In this section, we explore how some of the sensitivities discussed by the researchers emerged from their original motivation for undertaking the research. We will also examine how in some cases this emotional connection to the topic did not pre-exist their work, but rather it emerged for some researchers during the research, in response to a shared sense of identity that developed after meeting participants.

(i) Motivations for entering the field

Schostak and Schostak (2013, p.viii) have suggested that “no research is ever undertaken without a motive”. Despite its clear relevance to the research process, the motivation of the researcher and its potential impact on the research, has been infrequently examined in the literature. Here, the topic of motivation emerged naturally during the roundtable in relation to the tensions that researchers reported in relation to their experiences of undertaking fieldwork. The motivations reported by researchers for undertaking work into their area of sensitive research fell into two groups; the first group had connected with the topic personally, and whether they initially realized it or not, this came to drive their overall experience of the research; sometimes in powerful, constraining ways. The second group described how a broad curiosity had initially motivated them, but a subsequent sense of identification with the participants, emerged and heightened during the research, combining to mean the topic affected them more than they had expected. In this section, we will explore how these two groups described their experiences of sensitivity in the field.

Identification through past personal experiences

Personal experience has long been accepted in the literature as a valid reason for entering a sensitive field of research (Etherington, 2005). The limited material that tangentially examines the issue of motivation and personal experience among researchers, tends to accept personal experience as a positive feature, arguing that it adds insight to the analysis and may make research participants feel more comfortable, and thus likely to reveal more intimate details (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). However, the examples provided by researchers at the round table identified particular tensions in these assumptions, with those who had personal knowledge of the topic they were researching, reporting that in the field these experiences intersected with that of their participants, to shape the overall feel of undertaking the research.

Some researchers admitted that to colleagues they tended to portray their personal connection to the topic in a positive manner, reporting to them that as the literature suggests, it allowed them greater insight into a topic. However, privately they held reservations about it; acknowledging that in practice it was more complicated than their professional position would allow them to comfortably reveal. Those who did reveal a personal connection sometimes felt judged by supervisors, as the following quote illustrates:

... I think my supervisors probably felt I had gone native, in that I would probably, I was not being objective enough with the stories that I was listening to, now whether or not that is to do with my own experience which actually although I was encouraged to reflect on my research, they didn't want to know anything about what had happened to me. (P2)

It is also worth noting that upon entry into their chosen field of research, these individuals were not aware that this would become an issue for them, some felt they had previously achieved a sense of emotional peace that was subsequently challenged by the process of undertaking the research. Overall, the roundtable data suggested that the emotional state of researchers as they enter the field, and how this affects their subsequent reactions to it, were perhaps not always as straightforward as has sometimes previously been acknowledged.

Identification through shared characteristics

It was not only those who had previous experience of the topic who were sensitive to it; in some cases, even if the researcher had no personal experience of the circumstances but could empathize closely with them, they experienced distressing emotions. Researchers who

fell into this second group described how they had been motivated to take part in the research because of a broad sense of curiosity rather than personal experience. However, as the research progressed, they found that this initial ‘naive’ curiosity came to be mixed in with a whole range of emotions that subverted their original neutrality, and heightened their emotional sensitivity to the issue:

...you are listening to stuff that was so close to your heart that it was just really distressing to sort of see people that you identify with having gone through really tough situations... Then when I was out in the world it made me much more emotional when those issues just came up. (P1)

Prior to undertaking this research, this researcher had no direct experience of the specific topic she was exploring. As this quote suggests, however, the material she was exposed to was *close to the heart* because she shared particular characteristics with the participant. These meant she empathised more closely with their experiences. In this case, it was sexuality. However, in other instances the characteristic was gender or shared childhood experiences. This maps with other authors who have pointed out that when one is reminded of a personal circumstance, even one that connects with us only tangentially, our emotional reaction may be more powerful (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2010).

Consequences of Shared Identification

It was notable that in both groups these changes were not confined to the research encounter itself, or indeed the field work stage, but instead resulted in heightened emotional sensitivity that continued for some considerable time after the research had concluded:

... if I look at an interview now, a few years later, I can imagine myself right back in that room and I can see the person, I can hear them... So we are talking about going in once but actually we revisit these stories many times...through the course of data analysis. (P2)

This new-found emotional sensitivity and its long-lasting nature was concerning to the researchers, who felt it made them more receptive to being affected by the emotions of the other participants they were continuing to interview. This was worrying not only because of the need to protect themselves, but also because of an awareness that they may not be able to protect later participants in ways they had been able to when they first entered the fieldwork phase of their research. As this quote succinctly illustrates:

... it is not only ourselves but it is also participants in the research as well, like an emotional risk for them if we are not really grounded... (P3)

As set out at the beginning of this section, these issues of motivation and shared identification were not a direct focus of our discussion, thus we have only been able to brush the surface of these issues. In preparation for leading the roundtable discussion, we had undertaken a broad scoping review of the published literature. In a rare publication, Roberts (2007) determined that interest in a topic, relevance to work, gaps in literature and personal experience all contributed to a researchers' reasons for entering the field. However, we found that motivation for undertaking research has achieved little critical attention within the literature on sensitive issues; those that have commented on it have assumed that motivation based on personal experience is a positive thing which promotes engagement and revaluation (Etherington, 2005). The lack of critical exploration of this issue is notable; in areas of comparable work, in which an individual enters similarly emotional arenas with vulnerable

individuals, such as counselling and psychotherapy, therapists are required by professional bodies to expressly undertake initial personal therapy and on-going supervision. The purpose of this therapy is, at least in part, to facilitate the critical examination of how this motivation might impact upon the clients and themselves (BACP, 2018). Similarly, social workers are now encouraged to reflect upon their past experiences as part of their on-going professional development (Houston, 2015). Our data shows there is clearly a need for more in-depth work to explore the emotional state of researchers as they enter the field; as well as issues related to motivation and identification, and how this affects their subsequent emotional reaction to the work.

To sum up this section on motivation and identification, we conclude that the literature as it currently stands, contains a potentially irreconcilable tension; for while there is wide acceptance of both the positive and negative emotions that may result for those who are participants in research, little attention has paid to the vulnerability and reaction of the researcher, both to entering the field and their subsequent reaction to data that is collected. An enhanced vulnerability is particularly apparent when aspects of the researcher's life or identity connects with aspects of the lives under investigation, either through past experiences or an emotional connection with the lives of those being researched. We explore these emotional reactions in greater detail in the next section.

ii) The emotional reaction evoked by the research

It has been suggested that interview encounters will inevitably be emotional (Powell et al., 2018). Certainly, feelings of sadness that result from undertaking sensitive research are widely supported by the literature (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). However, our data also showed that researchers were sensitive to other emotions they experienced during the

research; these included feelings such as guilt, anger, fear and states of hopelessness. It is these emotional reactions we turn to in this section.

One of the emotions reported by researchers was guilt, this focused around the passivity of the research role and as this researcher pointed out, the very process of turning the encounters they had with their research participants into data:

you are supposed to turn these experiences and stories into data but they are not, they are still stories and experiences with you, but if you are working with these things day to day then you could have a very direct relationship to the processing of those experiences into strategies of care plans whatever else but we don't do we, they just sit with us for years and then we mind them every now and again and then feel guilty about it. (P4)

Other researchers discussed powerful feelings of anger. These feelings have already been discussed in the literature on sensitive topics. For example, researchers such as Hubbard et al., (2010) have commented on experiencing anger that was directed at the participants of the research. At our roundtable, this emotion emerged as a feeling of generalised anger about the situation faced by the research participants, rather than directly at them as an individual:

to sort of see people that you identify with, having gone through really tough situations but I think then that it was a real, just very angry and frustrated (P1)

In several cases, this anger was connected to frustration at not being able to do more to change the situation faced by those they were interviewing. Thus, it was not just the direct content of participants' testimonies that affected the researchers, but the broader discourse the

research takes place within, as well as the perceived passivity of the role of the researcher in the encounter. We discuss this again in the final section.

An additional emotion experienced by researchers that is rarely mentioned in the literature was that of fear. As this researcher summed up:

I was quite scared of telling people the reaction I was having because I didn't want to lose my PhD or my job (P5)

Later the same participant expanded on the reasons for this fear:

How do you as a contract researcher admit that you are struggling because it is your job, you can't, you need to not be signed off, you need to not damage your career, your reputation, so that nobody will employ you to do that job again, these are all reality (P5)

In these quotes, we see the inherent and multilayered vulnerability in being a contract researcher, Early Career Researcher or PhD student. It is notable that the emerging and powerful emotion of fear is not, as is so often made the case in the literature, connected to the content of interviews or the physical context in which they take place, all of which are often carefully governed in lone worker and debriefing policies (Kenyon & Hawker, 2010). Rather the fear is connected to the *consequences* of sharing the details of the emotional reaction the researcher is experiencing. In this sense, it is connected to the professional expectations and working conditions imposed upon the researcher. This seems particularly significant as Visser (2017) has pointed out that debriefing opportunities are too often absent from social

researchers. In the next quote, we see how the risk associated with sharing emotions was also closely linked to the researcher's personal sense of professional identity:

... some of the interviews we were doing, I found them very emotionally affecting and then I had all the dilemmas about (it) because I want to be seen as a professional researcher, I don't want to risk being signed off sick, I don't want to risk losing my job, all those things, but sometimes I just couldn't help it because you know hearing other women's stories I just found, they were very moving, I couldn't help it (P6)

We have already discussed how recent literature has tended to focus on the emotional reaction of the researchers. Here, and elsewhere in the roundtable discussion, it was apparent that researchers were not always sensitive to the nature of their emotional response. For example, this researcher is clear in stating she was aware that she “*just couldn't help*” this reaction. Instead, the concerns of this researcher and others at the roundtable were centred around the reaction of *others* to these emotions, and the consequences for their job and professional identity. We have found limited commentary on these vulnerabilities in the literature, or of the fear that was associated with them. Behar's (1996) work is one example in which concern about sharing experiences in relation to these types of reaction is referenced. In it, Behar suggests the power/gender structures of academia, especially in oral presentations where one is publicly open to immediate criticism, is a key prohibitive factor in revealing such emotions. Another example can be found in Woodthorpe (2011) in which it is argued that some of the more demanding emotional components of social research are kept ‘firmly in the closet’ (p.107).

Fear about events which *may* happen, relating to job security and professional image, are notable and in part speak to the precarious nature of many sensitive topic researchers. However, it is worth noting that these fears were not always based on hypothetical summations of what might happen. Rather, some researchers became fearful after they had attempted to talk through their emotional reactions to their research with their supervisors. There was sense in the room, from almost all the researchers, that attempts to share the types and intensity of the emotions they had experienced were met with reactions that led them to believe they were inappropriate and unprofessional. As the quote earlier demonstrated, the deep rooted adage of '*going native*' was prevalent for those who already had experience of the topic they were researching. However, it was not confined to this group. Instead, other researchers also reported feeling judged when they revealed they had emotional reactions to the research with supervisors suggesting this meant they were not undertaking '*proper research*':

people have a very particular narrative around what is proper research, what is robust research that sense of objectivity being claimed and that sense of distance you got...judgement of you talking about your emotional content of your research. (P1)

This went even further for some participants, who felt that the judgment levelled at them by their supervisors about the emotions experienced in response to the research, extended beyond them, towards the people they had interviewed:

... you feel emotionally attached to these people so when your supervisors start to critique what they have told you, that is a problem, you know and I found that really, really, quite

difficult to deal with....But you are not in a position where you can say actually hold on a minute you know, who are you say that.... (P2)

As this quote shows, researchers were sensitive about the perceived insensitivity of other members of the research team, towards the participants to whom they had formed a bond. The desire to protect these participants was closely connected to the final area of sensitivity we identified at the roundtable, that of the power dynamics the researchers experienced during the research process, and those they tried to resist. We explore these in the next section.

iii) Sensitive about the power dynamics in the research process

The power dynamics in research, particularly sensitive research, have been the subject of much attention. For example, it has been claimed that sensitive research methodology was developed partly in response to research on taboo topics (Faberbow, 1963). Sensitive topic research has also been particularly dominated by qualitative approaches. However, the use of qualitative methodologies in these areas has tended to be uncritical. For example, feminist researchers have been forthright in suggesting sensitive subjects particularly lend themselves to investigation via qualitative methodology because these methods have the ability to empower the researched (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). However, we found that the issue of power within the research process remained highly problematic for many of the researchers who attended the round table; the majority of whom had almost exclusively used qualitative approaches. As this next quote shows, there was a continuing sense of concern about the potential exploitation inherent in the research process:

it's that sense of exploitation isn't it, that is involved in the research process and the disparity ... the power in the relationship (P6)

There were repeated references during the roundtable to this sense that there was a '*disparity of giving*' when undertaking research on sensitive topics. Overall, researchers felt there was a lack of acknowledgment in the literature about the true imbalance of power within the interview situation. They reported that although it was helpful to think of the process of interviewing as being the key to the empowerment of the research participants, it was sometimes experienced by researcher as a troublesome undertaking.

it became a real kind of burden and tension because you are going in and watching and coming out (P5)

It is particularly interesting that the process of undertaking a qualitative interview was experienced here as '*watching*', as this links with a significant theme that ran through the data about the passivity of the role of the researcher, which for most researchers was a source of tension and frustration. As the broader discussion from this researcher alluded to, this sensitivity was heightened when the impact of the research, in the form of changing practice or opinions, was less assured.

Self-gain from the research was a pertinent issue for some researchers who described how the research was "*almost a bit selfish*" because the use of the stories had ultimately led some of these researchers towards a PhD qualification or enhanced their academic career:

because you know, it was about finding out about what had happened to them... and hopefully changing practice through dissemination but there is always that worry that actually it was almost a bit selfish to go in there and sort of use a story which would get me a PhD and then would later get me a job (P2)

Some researchers found the interviews themselves to be emotionally charged because of the power imbalance. However, imbalances in power that were 'sensitive' emerged across the whole research process, not just the interview encounter itself. Some emerging once again in arguably a more sustained way, during analysis and dissemination. In these cases, it was often about the lack of power of the researcher to make change happen:

...I struggle sometimes with the change that I am hoping to see at the end of that research project that is ... going to happen well after I have been involved so this idea that I am not going to help the person that I interviewed, you know they are still going to carry on, in the conditions that they are living in...(P7)

As this quote indicates, researchers were particularly sensitive about their role as an intermediary and their lack of control over implementing changes which could bring about an end in suffering for the people they had interviewed and formed a connection with.

Some researchers recognised that in the longer term through the research, they could contribute to the empowerment of these individuals. However, they also reported feeling like they were not helping the person in the immediate encounter was sometimes tough to deal with:

...ultimately then our relationship is severed and then it goes back to the service to make those changes, we don't have any kind of control in that situation (P2)

The sensitive nature of the types of topics these researchers were exploring meant special consideration had often been given to the vulnerability of the participants. Ethics committees, concerned about the impact of this type of research on participants, now require researchers to carefully consider the consequences of this type of research on those being studied (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). In addition, trends within research funding have resulted in an increased involvement of peer researchers in the research process, with some associated concern about the impact of this on the mental health of those involved (Brett et al., 2014). The discussion at the roundtable suggested these changes between the interaction between the researcher and the participants were not without consequences for the researchers themselves. For example, some of the sensitivities reported in relation to the interview process itself, came from the sense that researchers were being encouraged to reduce the power inequity that is inherent in the process, with a lack of support or direction on how to manage the consequences of this:

... there is sort of stuff about power, there is stuff about equalising relationships...and opening yourself up but not necessarily then a conversation about how might that be for you and how are you going to manage it...(P8)

Notably, researchers at the roundtable were less sensitive to this impact if the involvement of their participants was carried out in a meaningful way:

I think maybe that is why the more action type research projects or where you are involved people (researchers) might find a little easier to deal with because you feel that you are actually helping in some way or having an impact. (P6)

All of the researchers, without exception, described being sensitive to the potential lack of meaningful impact of their research. This was described by one researcher as bringing about a deep feeling of “*discomfort*”. The idea of justice was also prevalent here, as was the desire to give something back to their participants. This broad issue was compounded by the sense among researchers that research was rarely designed from the outset as an endeavor in which the meaning of the study would come directly from the participants and benefit their lives. As this quote suggests:

...I am all for knowledge production that is great but I am also for the deployment of that knowledge and if you build that into the research design from the outset it makes it a lot easier to then remind people, and also just normalising the fact that you are going to feel not so cool sometimes when you are doing research in uncool areas (P4)

As authors, we had been particularly struck at the roundtable by the remarkable sense of commitment researchers had shown towards to the projects they had worked on. They valued the contribution that was made to the research by each of the participants they worked with and were deeply invested in ensuring their voices were heard. Our sense, from the discussion, was that much of the sensitivity they experienced in relation to the topic emerged from a sense of responsibility connected to this commitment. However, while this was not inherently problematic, feeling they had not been taught how to develop and manage the emotions experienced in relation to this responsibility, was problematic:

.. actually that clarity of objective I have found really useful, but it was never taught; we were never really taught that (P4)

The “clarity of objective” described here was important to all of the researchers, as the following quote demonstrates, research was less emotionally challenging when it was perceived to be part of something bigger, even when the subject was itself, emotionally troubling:

that was probably one of the most emotionally raw areas of research I have done actually, there was so much satisfaction in the ways that it travelled or the sense that it was part of something bigger, so it wasn't just research it was part of a bigger part of my life. (P1)

Researchers repeatedly described the protective impact of well-planned outcomes and campaigning research, which in some sense diminished some of the sensitivities they felt around collecting the data:

... I am much more involved outside in campaigning and political activity as well and I think rather than make that more emotionally challenging for me, I think it makes it somehow easier because you feel as though you are doing something as well rather than just go in, get the job done, take the data, leave them alone never bother them again. {...] if you are helping, or you are hoping to help to do something that will make a difference... (P6)

Similarly, another researcher reported how it felt like being “*a member of a social movement*”, as the research could be a valuable and empowering resource to the people that were affected by the issues they were researching.

Conclusions

In their systematic review, Lee and Lee (2012) identified that the methodological literature on sensitive topics showed a continuing lack of interest in developing the core concept of what is ‘sensitive’ in meaningful, practical ways. In responding to this, we sensed there was a pressing need for us to understand more about how the issue was constructed and enacted by researchers. As reported here, we collected data from a roundtable discussion in which researchers undertaking work on sensitive topics were invited to talk about their experiences. Elsewhere, we have discussed how researchers responded to emotional sensitivity within the interview setting, how they managed the consequences of it in the longer term, alongside practical recommendations for supporting these researchers (Mallon and Elliott, 2019). Here, we have developed and deepened our understanding of these issues, focusing our analytic lens more directly on the researchers’ overall experiences, in order to report upon those issues they were particularly attuned or sensitive to. Consequently, the experiences described here represent those of a group of researchers, each of whom had been working in an area that could be described as ‘sensitive’. The quotes included here indicate their sensitivities, and in conjunction with those reported in the literature to date, comparisons and key discussion points have already been made in the text. There are a number of limitations to the data presented. Firstly, the experiences represented here are of a small number of researchers from the UK. As a result, it cannot be assumed that they are representative of a unified ‘sensitive researcher’ perspective. In addition, the authors

convened and contributed to the discussion analysed here. While every effort has been taken to maintain a critical distance in the analysis, it is inevitable that our role and presence in the discussion will have influenced the type of topics discussed as well as their selection and emphasis here.

A number of the themes included here relate to the emotions the researchers experienced, thus reflecting some of the current trends in the published literature (Vincett, 2018).

However, our analysis goes further, in describing not only the emotions themselves but in revealing how rather than the emotions being a source of discomfort for the researchers; much of the associated sensitivity came from the reaction of others to them, and in some cases their unexpected origins. Furthermore, our sense from the discussion was that much of the sensitivity they experienced emerged not from the topic itself, but from a strong sense of responsibility connected to their commitment to the research participants. This has previously been under acknowledged in the literature. It leads us to commence our concluding remarks with our primary insight, that based on our analysis it appears that the ‘sensitivity’ of a sensitive topic research is not just connected to the actual topic under investigation. Instead, the discussion of sensitivity encountered here shows that it was multi-layered. It was connected to the overall context of the lives that were examined in these studies. It was also influenced by the research environment in which the researchers operated, both institutionally, professionally and more broadly, as they struggled to create research that could impact on societal values and attitudes. Perhaps most crucially, our discussion demonstrates how the reaction researchers’ received when admitting to their supervisors they were having emotional challenges in response to their work, were instrumental in shaping their experiences of undertaking sensitive topic research.

We conclude by highlighting a number of points that are worthy of further consideration. Firstly, our findings illuminate how researchers described being motivated to study sensitive topics because of personal, ideological and political motivations. This analysis provides considerable insight into how these connections brought with them sensitivities that affected their experience across the whole research process. In some cases, this was connected to a pre-existing emotional connection to the topic under discussion, and in others to identifications that emerged through the process of undertaking the research. For too long, the issue of motivation and personal investment in sensitive research has been either ignored or straightforwardly reported as a positive feature. In the literature, it is frequently suggested that the consequences of identification can be positive, in the sense that the researcher's experiences and emotions can add context to the subject under investigation. Such is the strength of the argument that personal experience is beneficial to the research, that some writers have suggested it can be challenging for those who do not have such experience to find their 'voice' and position within an area of sensitive research (Mallon, 2017). The overall flow of the roundtable discussion showed that enhanced emotions can be experienced when the researcher's personal experience, or identification with, a phenomenon intersect with the topic they are researching. This intersection, has hitherto been both underplayed and under explored in the literature. Of course, researchers have a right to choose their own research interests, including those topics they personally connect with. However, the roundtable demonstrated there were drawbacks to this enhanced sense of connection. This connection does not need to be problematic; as Woodthorpe (2011) has pointed out, acknowledging that we are not neutral or objective can allow us to find ways to scrutinise the impact of the topic more closely. It is notable, that over the past few decades, a range of safeguarding procedures have been established to protect the participants of such research, with a number of gatekeepers including ethics committees,

service organisations, professionals, practitioners and occasionally parents or caregivers determining whether vulnerable groups can participate in research (Powell et al., 2018). However, little consideration is given within the formal governance framework, to examine the suitability of researchers, or preparing and supporting them in the work they undertake. As Robinson (2020) has pointed out, ethics tends to be focused on procedural elements, or ‘paper ethics’, rather than real world research. We suggest more thought could be given to the impact of researcher experiences on their choice of research topic and the sensitivities this may bring. This is crucial if researchers are to be adequately supported and protected from the harm that can result from their engagement in research.

Additionally, as has been increasingly acknowledged in the literature, these sensitivities went beyond the fieldwork phase of the research and continued into broad concerns about how the data of the participants was handled, published and disseminated. Lee’s (1993, p.4) original definition of sensitive research, pointed out that it was not only the collection of data that was ‘sensitive’ but that the ‘holding and/or dissemination of research data’ was also inherently sensitive. Overall, our data supports this assertion, suggesting that the emergent nature of the researchers’ sensitivities are poorly accommodated in the definitions that are currently used for sensitive research. In fact, as our data also showed, one of the main issues researchers were sensitive to was the reactions and guidance of their supervisors. Additionally, and arguably more crucially, the sensitivities of the researcher is an aspect of sensitive research that needs to be managed more carefully by supervisors, because it is the front-line workers who witness and hold the sensitivity across all the coal-face aspects of the research process.

As a final point, we turn to Lee and Lee’s question ‘is there a simple relationship between sensitivity and stress, such that the more sensitive a topic studied, the more likely there is to

be emotional consequences?’ (2012, p.46). Our data suggests not, but shows that what makes a topic sensitive, certainly from the researcher’s perspective, cannot be reduced to a single factor. Rather it is underpinned by the researcher’s relationship with the topic, both as it exists when they enter the field, and as it develops throughout the fieldwork and into analysis. In addition, it is affected by complex relationships between the researcher, their immediate peers, supervisors and the overall institutional environment in which the research takes place. Sensitive research is thus uniquely 'sensitive' to the researcher in ways the literature currently fails to fully acknowledge but which are worthy of further examination. The benefits of refining our understanding of this are widespread. Helping to protect not only potentially vulnerable participants, but also in providing protection for researchers and helping supervisors and managers be better prepared to respond to the potential vulnerabilities that may emerge during such research. Ethics committees and reviewers will also be in a better position to advise on the ethical conduct of such studies.

References

- BACP. (2018). *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bloor, M., Fincham, B., & Sampson, H. (2010). Unprepared for the Worst: Risks of Harm for Qualitative Researchers. *Methodological Innovations Online*, 5, 45-55.
doi:10.4256_mio.2010.0009
- Brett, J., Staniszewska, S., Mockford, C., Herron-Marx, S., Hughes, J., Tysall, C., & Suleman, R. (2014). Mapping the impact of patient and public involvement on health and social care research: a systematic review. *Health Expect*, 17(5), 637-650.
doi:10.1111/j.1369-7625.2012.00795.x
- Dickson-Swift, V. (2017). Emotion and Sensitive Research. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*. Singapore: Springer.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007). Doing sensitive research: what challenges do qualitative researchers face?.. *Qualitative Health Research*, 7(3), 327-353. doi:10.1177_1468794107078515
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: qualitative research as emotion work:..
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468794108098031>. doi:10.1177_1468794108098031
- Etherington, K. (2005). *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using ourselves in research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Faberbow, N. L. (1963). *Taboo Topics*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Houston, S. (2015). Enabling others in social work: Reflexivity and the Theory of Social Domains. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 3(2), 245-260.

- Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K., & Kemmer, D. (2010). Working with emotion: Issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645570116992>. doi:International Journal of Social Research Methodology, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2001, pp. 119-137
- Johnson, B., & Clarke, J. M. (2003). Collecting sensitive data: the impact on researchers. *Qual Health Res*, 13(3), 421-434. doi:10.1177/1049732302250340
- Kenyon, E., & Hawker, S. (2010). 'Once would be enough': Some reflections on the issue of safety for lone researchers. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2(4), 313-327.
- Kleinman, S., & Copp, M. A. (1993). *Emotions and fieldwork: Qualitative research methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Komaromy, C. (2019). The performance of researching sensitive issues. *Mortality*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2019.1635104>, 1-14.
- Lee, R. M. (1993). Doing Research on Sensitive Topics. In. London: Sage.
- Lee, Y.O. Lee, R.M. (2012) Methodological Research on “Sensitive” Topics *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology* . 2012;114(1):35-49.
- Lee-Treweek, G., & Linkogle, S. (2000). *Danger in the Field: Risk and Ethics in Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Mallon, S (2019). Cream Cakes, hungry cats and hugs. In McSweeney, F. and Williams, D. *Designing and Conducting Research in Social Science, Health and Social Care*. Routledge, Oxon.
- Mallon, S. and Elliott, I. The Emotional Risks of Turning Stories into Data: An Exploration of the Experiences of Qualitative Researchers Working on Sensitive Topics. *Societies* 2019, 9, 62.

- Powell, M. A., McArthur, M., Chalmers, J., Graham, A., Moore, T., Spriggs, M., & Taplin, S. (2018). Sensitive topics in social research involving children. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(6), 647-660.
doi:10.1080/13645579.2018.1462882
- Roberts, B. (2007). *Getting the most out of the research experience*. London: Sage Publications.
- Robinson, C. (2020). Ethically important moments as data: reflections from ethnographic fieldwork in prisons. *Research Ethics*. 16 (1) 1-15
- Richards, S., Clark, J., & Boggis, A. (2015). *Ethical Research with Children: Untold narratives and taboos*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sieber, J. E., & Stanley, B. (1988). Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research. *American Psychologist*, 43, 49-55.
- Schostak, J., & Schostak, J. (2013). *Writing Research Critically: Developing the Power to Make a Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Vincett, J. (2018). Researcher Self-Care in Organizational Ethnography: Lessons from overcoming compassion fatigue. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 7(1), 44-58.
- Visser, R. (2017) "Doing death": Reflecting on the researcher's subjectivity and emotions, *Death Studies*, 41:1, 6-13
- Woodthorpe, K. (2011) 'Researching death: methodological reflections on the management of critical distance', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14, 2 pp. 99-109