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Abstract

Embarking upon empirical qualitative research can be a daunting and emotional task, particularly for those who are new to research and for those who research vulnerable groups and emotive topics. Doctoral criminological researchers transect these realms, often making their research experiences acutely emotional and challenging. In addition, researchers must be able to perform emotional labour as an important part of their professional practice. Based on 30 semi-structured interviews, this is the first study to explicitly explore the emotional labour of criminological researchers. Using the lens of emotional labour, the performance and impact of undertaking qualitative data collection in doctoral research is examined. From the interview data, three main themes are discussed: emotional labour, the consequences of performing that emotional labour and coping mechanisms to deal with those consequences. The article concludes with recommendations around support and training for PhD candidates, their supervisors and the higher education sector more broadly.

Keywords

Emotional labour, Criminology, doctoral researchers, qualitative

Introduction

Criminology has, traditionally, been dominated by positivistic and masculine ideologies (Wakeman, 2014; Wykes and Welsh, 2008) which put the researcher ‘outside’ of the research process (Jewkes, 2012). However, emotions, emotion work and emotional labour are increasingly becoming recognised and utilised within the discipline (Phillips et al., 2020). This article focuses in particular on the emotional labour performed by doctoral criminological researchers. This is because these researchers are a population who commonly intersect four key areas: (1) being new to research, (2) engaging in empirical research, (3) researching sensitive or emotive topics and (4) engaging with vulnerable people and groups. Cumulatively this results in doctoral criminological researchers experiencing research in an acutely emotional and challenging way. It is therefore imperative that we understand not only the emotions felt and emotional labour undertaken by criminological PhD researchers, but also the potential impact on their professional identity and wellbeing.

Based on the first empirical study explicitly examining the emotional labour of criminological researchers, this article focuses exclusively on the PhD experience. Starting with

a brief review of the literature and methodological overview, the substantive share of the article discusses three key findings: emotional labour, the consequences of performing emotional labour and coping mechanisms. We finish with six key recommendations on how to better support novice and early career researchers in recognising, planning for and dealing with the emotions and emotional labour of carrying out criminological research.

Literature review

This is one of the first studies to look explicitly at the emotional labour performed by doctoral criminological researchers (see also Waters et al., 2020). As such, there is limited extant literature in this area. There are, however, burgeoning

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considerations of emotional labour within the discipline of criminology more broadly (Phillips et al., 2020) and some discussion of the emotional labour of social researchers in general. Focussing on three distinct stages of the research process – gaining access to the field of study, data collection in the field and exiting the field of study – this section provides an overview of the literature in these associated areas.

Accessing the field

Gaining, and maintaining, access to the field requires researchers to engage positively with gatekeepers (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). Usually involving face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction, this negotiation (Okumus et al., 2007; Patton, 2002; Shenton and Hayter, 2004) necessitates the performance of emotional labour. Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) link this development of rapport and maintenance of access with emotion work and the need for researcher reflexivity. Subsequently, researchers place themselves in situations which they may not have chosen to be in outside the research, resulting in potential self-development. This means that the researcher will have to consider the distinction between their ‘private’ self and the ‘professional researcher’ they may become in the field (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015: 692).

There are also elements of ‘acting’ involved. In order to be accepted by gatekeepers, researchers must engage in surface or deep acting, which can be blended to create something described by Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) as ‘surface authenticity’. This ensures role-conforming consistency between felt and expressed emotion, while the role remains separate from one’s ‘actual identity’ (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015: 698).

This process of gaining access – while being crucial to the study – is hard work and requires both strategy and luck (Van Maanen and Kolb, 1985), and rarely proceeds neatly or predictably. Importantly, it almost always involves a variety of interpersonal skills in order to be effective (Burgess, 1984). In a rare explicit engagement with the emotions of doing criminological research, Drake and Harvey (2014) argue that prison ethnography involves ‘significant levels of impression management’ (p. 490). This, they contend has an affective toll on the researcher that emanates from having to negotiate and renegotiate access on a daily basis which, in turn, accounts for some of the emotional demand of prison research because this rests on having to constantly gain and regain trust from gatekeepers. Although Drake and Harvey are discussing prison ethnography in their example, this ‘toll’ of negotiating and renegotiating access will be felt in other forms of ethnography and criminological research more broadly.

In the field

It is recognised that qualitative data collection methods require the acknowledgement of emotions and the performance of emotional labour, including research interviews

(Hoffman, 2007), ethnography (Jewkes, 2012) and autoethnography (Wakeman, 2014). In criminology, much of the writing has come out of ethnographic and autoethnographic research in prisons (Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2012; Sloan, 2016) and ethnographic/autoethnographic work more generally (Copes, 2018; Copes et al., 2011; Ellis, 2016; Harding, 2018; Lumsden, 2009; Poulton, 2012, 2014; Wakeman, 2014). The intensity and duration of ‘being in the field’ should also be acknowledged as part of that emotional labour performance (Morris and Feldman, 1996). The extant literature highlights themes around the use of self, emotion management, display rules, empathy and suppression.

There is an implicit assumption that much qualitative criminological work requires the use of self and that emotional labour plays a role in the generation of data. This is particularly true for ethnography and autoethnography, where the researcher is obliged to adopt multiple personae, sometimes simultaneously, such as participant, observer, researcher, expert and novice. Such role exchanging will almost inherently involve the use of self to manage emotions in order to achieve the research goals. For Drake and Harvey (2014), it is the emotions associated with ‘meaninglessness and fragmentation’ whereby researchers experience a sense of their own weakened identity and a tension between feeling like ‘receptacles and sponges for other people’s pain and suffering’ and a ‘sense of mastery’ (p. 496). The use of self is probably most overtly employed in autoethnography, where it has been used to reverse the ‘ethnographic gaze’ and problematise the ways in which criminology reifies objectivity and restrained language which, by necessity, excludes the researcher, and therefore the use of self, from the process of data generation and analysis (Wakeman, 2014).

Social researchers are required to manage their emotions while in the field: ‘decisions about what level of emotion and which emotions to share are very difficult’ (Hoffman, 2007: 339). Here ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979), which are a set of shared rules that direct how people should feel, guide the ways in which emotions should be used in order to manage the emotions of others through emotional labour or emotion work (James, 1989). Some feeling rules are explicit and formalised in policies such as codes of ethics or health and safety guides for researchers. While other, more implicit, rules are learned by researchers through experience, contact with colleagues and their own philosophical, methodological, theoretical and political standpoints. Taken together, all of these will dictate what are appropriate and inappropriate displays of emotion. Social researchers need to establish within their own research which emotions to display and suppress, and then manage them accordingly.

The ways in which researchers manage their emotions during data collection shapes the generation of that data (Phillips and Earle, 2010). Understanding these emotional reactions is paramount to then interpreting that data. Emphasis has been placed on the need for researchers to display empathy during data collection, particularly as a tool to

build relationships (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). The importance of 'becoming emotionally open' and 'deep acting' have been highlighted as positive emotional displays as they allow researchers to connect with participants on a personal level (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and collect more meaningful data (Copes, 2018). This is because it encourages trust, leading to participants 'opening up' and feeling more able to discuss often sensitive issues (Hubbard et al., 2001). However, there may be those researchers whose empathic displays could result in them becoming 'part of the experience themselves' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 65) and therefore 'catching' the emotion of the participant, described as also 'emotional contagion' (Strazdins, 2002: 232), resulting in the display of emotions similar to their participants.

While some researchers believe in the importance of 'becoming openly emotional' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) as a way of connecting with the participant, others consider emotional displays such as crying, nervousness, anger and disgust to be inappropriate and therefore requiring suppression (p. 65). Reasons for suppression include not wanting to lose or alienate participants (Seear and McLean, 2008), not wanting to appear unprofessional (Seear and McLean, 2008), wanting to portray a 'competent detached researcher' (Fitzpatrick and Olsen, 2015: 52), wanting to maintain 'scientific rigour' (Bellas, 1999; Kleinman, 1991) and, for doctoral students in particular, not wanting to 'let down' their supervisory teams, their institutions and the discipline more broadly (Seear and McLean, 2008). Emotion management is important because the suppression of emotion can lead to negative emotions like frustration (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and guilt (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 112), with such feelings potentially being exacerbated by the expectation to display empathy. It can also result in 'role strain' whereby researchers must adopt a range of 'virtual identities' and engage in impression management in a constantly changing set of contexts (Drake and Harvey, 2014: 494).

The process of suppressing and displaying emotion are critical to the way in which data are generated (Harding, 2018) and analysed. However, due to the autonomous nature of the researcher (Lee-Treweek, 2000), there is a lack of consensus in terms of the extent to which emotions should be displayed. Jewkes (2012), referencing Yar (2009: 8), makes a strong case for seeing researchers' emotional responses to a research situation as 'subjective judgments about objective experiential worlds' in much the same way that our interpretivist forms of thematic analysis are subjective understandings of someone else's reality.

Exiting the field

Disengagement from the field is both a methodological and emotional challenge. Researchers must devise an exit strategy so as to avoid 'burning' the field for future research, whether this is the return of the same research team or a new project (Gobo and Molle, 2017). Looking at the methodological exit

from the field, Gobo and Molle (2017) suggest three potential reasons: institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Institutional reasons are external to the researcher and might include coming to the end of funding or the end of doctoral research. Interpersonal reasons for ending research are the result of interactions between people. This might include conflict between the researcher and gatekeepers or the researcher and participants. Intrapersonal reasons, on the other hand, are internal personal reasons and might include mental exhaustion, emotional overload, guilt and paranoia. Sloan (2016), on exiting the field, cites King and Liebling's (2007) maxim to discontinue research 'once compassion fatigue sets in' (p. 30). Ellis (2016) suggests that while one can physically leave the field, it may be more difficult to mentally disentangle from the experience and emotionally 'exit the field'. Watts (2008) also questions whether anyone truly leaves the field due to the emotional consequences of the fieldwork. Interpersonal and intrapersonal reasons can be related to emotions and their consequences, and emotional labour. In some fieldwork, the researcher might find themselves leaving the field temporarily. This could be for any of the reasons mentioned above. Returning to the field needs as much thought and planning as leaving the field. Both Blagden and Pemberton (2010) and Gobo and Molle (2017) stress the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with participants. Researchers must be aware of the practical implications of staying in touch or reconnecting with the field and the potential harm to their participants and themselves.

The emotional consequences of withdrawing from the field have been documented, including the leaving behind of close relationships with participants and gatekeepers. Feelings of indebtedness, betrayal (particularly if participants experience social deprivation or hardship) and relief (following tiresome relationships) have all been noted (Gobo and Molle, 2017). For Ellis (2016), there is the feeling of guilt around how he actually had the choice to 'exit' the 'drudgeries, various difficulties and potential threats' when those he met did not have the same option (p. 16). Drake and Harvey (2014) argue that while some emotions can be examined in situ to alleviate emotional pressure, the emotional dimensions of the research need to be revisited after some distance from the work. These emotional consequences need to be acknowledged by encouraging and supporting researchers to devise coping strategies and extraction policies for exiting and, if required, returning to the field.

Methodology

Thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with criminological researchers in the United Kingdom. A convenience sampling approach was taken, with potential participants being identified via word-of-mouth, Twitter and conference presentations. Participants self-selected into the research and self-identified as 'criminologists' or identified their research as 'criminological'. Areas of doctoral research

undertaken by our participants included police, prisons and prisoners, probation, youth justice, victims and victimology, people with convictions, drugs and alcohol, hate crime, terrorism, restorative justice, violence and green criminology.

The aim of the interview was to explore the emotions experienced and the emotional labour performed by these researchers while undertaking their doctoral research, alongside the associated consequences and coping strategies. Participants were asked about educational/employment history, research methods training and about all of their research experiences to date, with a focus on qualitative criminological research projects. This article focuses exclusively on the doctoral experiences of these researchers and therefore utilises only part of the original interview data. The interviews themselves lasted approximately 1 hour, were conducted either in person or via online telephony, were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

This research project was conducted ethically and in accordance with the Sheffield Hallam University ethical protocols. All participants provided written informed consent to partake in the research and were assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy and assure confidentiality. As this research discusses individual doctoral projects, which could themselves be a potential identifier, the research team have made a conscious effort to omit specific, identifiable details of participants' research projects.

Overall, the sample had a mean age of 35.3 years, ranging from 23 to 52 years, and consisted of 24 (80%) women and 6 (20%) men. All participants were based in the United Kingdom and were predominantly White (90%). A breakdown of ethnicity shows 19 (63%) White British, 3 (10%) White Irish, 5 (17%) White Other and 2 (7%) Mixed Ethnicity. One person did not disclose their ethnicity. In terms of career position, 15 (50%) participants had a doctorate degree, while a further 12 (40%) were in the process of completing their PhDs.

A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews, focusing on the doctoral experiences of the participants, was carried out by the research team (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Key themes were identified in the areas of emotional labour performed by participants, the consequences of this emotional labour and the subsequent coping mechanisms utilised. As the emphasis of this article is on the emotional labour of PhD research, this provided a further lens through which to carry out the analysis. The remainder of the article explores each of these themes in turn.

Findings and discussion

Across the interviews, our criminological researchers described performing emotional labour in the field while carrying out their doctoral research. All of our researchers commented on the overall 'emotionfulness' of undertaking doctoral research (Baptista, 2014; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2010), and identified the need to engage in emotional labour during their PhD

studies (Aitchinson and Mowbray, 2013; Brown and Collins (2018). While a number of themes were identified in the analysis, those discussed here have been highlighted as being particularly pertinent to the PhD experience.

Emotional labour

The need to present an empathetic and, for some, a sympathetic demeanour, particularly when interviewing people as part of their doctoral research, was commonly expressed by our researchers, and indeed is regarded to be an important skill in carrying out qualitative research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Empathy was an emotion that was spoken about as simultaneously being needed and needing to be guarded against. Natalie expresses this rather succinctly:

I think empathy comes the more you do this type of research, because you have to kind of form human connections with the people that you are interviewing and you are researching and I don't think that I was totally lacking in empathy before I did it but I definitely think I would be more empathetic now and also as a flipside of that, the ability to protect yourself from the emotions of others, so understanding someone's pain without necessarily needing to make it your own pain and realising that is not your place in this dynamic and that you don't need to go along that road with them, you can let them do that and you can kind of share the moment, but not necessarily take it on.

The literature reflects this dichotomy with emphasis on the need for researchers to display empathy during interviews (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), but also the requirement to portray the 'competent detached researcher' (Fitzpatrick and Olsen, 2015: 52).

Arguably this can result in those undertaking doctoral research being unsure as to the extent to which empathy should be displayed to participants and also whether sympathy should be expressed (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). For some, empathy is recognised as an important emotion to show to their participants:

On my part empathy really. I tried very much to give them space to express themselves and not allow my emotions to affect their stories that they were sharing with me . . . So it's negotiating that process of being sympathetic but not trying to move on or trying to over . . ., [pause] or not trying to affect their story. (Grainne)

Grainne describes empathy which seems to be managed in order to ensure that her participants remain central to the interview process, and as Grainne suggests, to 'construct their stories' (Johnson, 2009: 197). Others describe empathy more as sympathy, or in fact refer to the need for sympathy directly in their descriptions of the emotions they show to participants:

Showing as much empathy as you can . . . So very much validating each story . . . I've hugged quite a few participants

and shed tears in a couple of interviews where I felt it was appropriate. (Trina)

Sometimes quite deep sympathy, people really telling very sad stories of either their histories or their current situations [. . .], but also some horror stories of being arrested, having to spend time in prison cells, possibly having to go through court processes, but I would sum that up, from my perspective, as sympathy towards them and sometimes quite a deep sympathy, yes, I would feel it. (Richie)

What can be seen in the comments made by Trina, and Richie particularly, is the display of a genuine emotional response. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) describe this as a third way of performing emotional labour – in addition to surface and deep acting, with the former being the feigning of emotion, while the latter is the alignment of emotional display and feeling (Hochschild, 1983). They maintain that emotional labour is still required when displaying a genuine emotional response because it still needs to be regulated in order to be appropriately displayed. This regulation is described most clearly in the comment by Trina.

Skakni (2018) maintains that students are expected to be autonomous, but also align their practice with the norms and informal rules of the community of practice they find themselves in. Therefore, as suggested by Brown and Collins (2018 citing Beeler, 1991; Golde, 2005: 202), doctoral students characterise their identity as ‘liminal’, and this seems to be reflected in the emotional labour they perform. It can be seen from these extracts that while there is a clear understanding that emotional labour is required in the field when undertaking doctoral research, exactly what is expected, for example, in terms of the empathy or sympathy to be displayed is often not clear to our participants.

Concomitantly, the majority of our researchers felt ‘imposter syndrome’ at some point during their doctoral research. This is a common feeling for PhD students (Bothello and Roulet, 2019) arguably linked to the initiatory dimension of this type of study (Skakni, 2018). For our researchers, ‘imposter syndrome’ comprised feelings of incompetency and being ill-equipped, as well as dread as they wait to be ‘found out’:

sometimes even now I still feel like a bit of a research novice, even though I’ve taught research methods modules, I’ve taught undergraduate and postgraduate level and supervised students and stuff like that, but I still sometimes feel like maybe I don’t know what I’m doing, if that makes sense and if that’s okay to say. [. . .] I know that loads of people experience that, it’s very common particularly when you’re doing your PhD, ‘what am I doing here? Why should I be here?’ all that kind of stuff. So I am kind of comforted by the fact that other people go through it too. (Aoife)

Some also worried that their participants would ‘find out’ they were not ‘real’ researchers:

I think that it is a general imposter syndrome that I have towards my PhD, and that came out in my interviews inevitably as well, or at least I don’t know if it came out to them, but I felt like that. (Sofia)

Despite Sofia recognising that her anxiety of feeling like an imposter may have been visible during her interviews, it was also commonly acknowledged by our researchers that this feeling should be suppressed. This can be achieved through either surface acting or deep acting. Therefore, however out of their depth our researchers felt during their doctoral research, they did their best not to let it show to participants, supervisory teams or institutions. Sofia made it clear in her interview that she did not speak to anyone about feeling insecure or feeling like an imposter, either during her research or after, and in fact it was only in this interview that she had finally spoken about it.

Many of our researchers felt great sadness during their data collection; they spoke about being upset, feeling grief and becoming depressed. Feelings of anger, frustration and disgust were also mentioned. Often, as in this instance for Mark, many of these emotions overlapped:

I found that very difficult and I found it hard, because on the one hand what they were telling me was evoking quite profound anger in me and on the other hand it was provoking quite a lot of sadness, it was provoking some very kind of turbulent and tumultuous kinds of feelings of resentment, of anger, of hurt, of sadness for the experiences, but of course you can’t reveal some of that because you don’t, or I didn’t want to come across as either condescending or patronising, or on the other hand, like I am revelling in the detail that they’re giving me, but also I didn’t want to cause them further trauma, I didn’t want to cause them further hurt.

As discussed with reference to imposter syndrome, we see Mark describing the need to suppress emotion (Hochschild, 1983), in this case anger, resentment, hurt and sadness, but also elation or perhaps excitement at the prospect of gaining important insights into the participant’s world for his research project.

Susan describes how deep acting is required in order to ‘set aside’ feelings of disgust and horror:

I’ve also had judgements [. . .] doing research groups with sex offenders, [It is] really, really difficult, like to set aside feelings of absolute disgust and horror.

She also highlights the difficulty faced in presenting appropriate emotional displays. Indeed, at times it proves impossible for researchers to deep act and it is at these times there is a need to surface act, particularly in potentially dangerous situations such as that depicted by Rose:

I don’t know. In terms of the guy that threatened me, I think I was – I maybe tried to – how can I phrase it? Almost play it cool a little bit. Inside I’m thinking, okay, this guy’s threatened me, he’s actually pretty crazy and really scary, you should be quite fearful here.

Where neither deep nor surface acting is possible, some researchers described finding it necessary to disengage from emotion:

Well, either, because the story that he provided, reacting negatively to that and showing I was not happy, or I was frankly horrified about what he had done paints one picture about how I see him as a person. Any positive reaction to that paints a picture for him about what I'm like. I didn't want either. So that middle ground I think is better, because in the same way as everybody else mitigates against any other negative stuff that they do, I also have felt that I don't want to come across and look like I'm condoning this thing or that I think that that is alright, because obviously for me it's not. (David)

I don't know that, but from my perspective at the time it was important for me regardless of whether I thought it was right or not to not add to either the frustration felt by residents [in prison] who were feeling unjustly dealt with, but I couldn't just say 'Oh, I think this is terrible, I'm angry' or make members of staff feel bad that maybe the decisions they were making were not in the best interests of the residents, the public or themselves or whatever else. So I just remained neutral at that point. I guess when things like that happened, that's where the relationship stops and that is where the emotion stops. (Tom)

David attempts to adopt a 'middle ground' in terms of the emotional displays presented to the participant in order to traverse the complex emotions he was feeling and displaying. Tom on the other hand describes understanding the need not to exacerbate the situation, and so effectively 'detaches' emotionally (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Kadowaki, 2015) from the situation in order to display neutrality towards the events that have just occurred.

What can be seen from the above examples is the need to engage in various techniques in order to present appropriate emotional displays, and while these participants seem confident in their description of the emotional labour they regarded as necessary, other participants describe a lack of certainty as to what emotions should be displayed with many commenting on not being sure about the 'right' level of emotional display:

I was constantly trying to be a professional, or what I thought was a professional and not kind of come across as too emotional but, you know, if people told me sad things I would look sad and feel sad and I didn't cry in front of them, but acknowledging that is really horrible, like sad faces and trying to be sympathetic. (Amy)

What Amy is describing resonates with the fact that feeling rules are often implicit, leading to flexibility in terms of the emotional labour to be performed. However, this can also result in a lack of certainty, particularly in relation to PhD students and early careers researchers, in terms of the appropriate emotional displays to present to participants (Skakni, 2018).

Consequences of performing emotional labour

The consequences of performing emotional labour have been described as a 'double-edged sword' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 96) because its performance can have both positive and negative consequences for workers (Pugliesi, 1999). This was also described as being the case with reference to our participants following the performance of emotional labour during their doctoral research.

The feeling of responsibility towards participants was expressed as both a positive and a negative consequence of the emotional labour performed in research. Positively, and in response to feelings of gratitude, our researchers wanted to give voice to their participants; they felt a sense of responsibility towards their participants. This sense of responsibility often meant increased productivity and motivation in terms of writing, and presenting at conferences, in an attempt to 'give back' to their participants. It also had an impact on an increased sense of 'doing justice' and awareness raising, often re-invigorating the researchers themselves. Trina expressed a sense of 'emotional responsibility towards doing right towards [your participants] because they have really opened up to you', and Maggie 'felt a big responsibility not to let the women down'.

Negatively, and in response to feelings of anger, disgust, frustration and feelings of wanting justice for their participants, our researchers were burdened by their emotions and the emotions of their participants (Sampson et al., 2008); they felt too much responsibility. They felt as though they were not doing enough for their participants:

I don't like the fact that I'm just having to quantify these numbers that people have given me and put them on the page. I hate that so ideally I'd interview all of those people that filled out [forms] for me and be able to give them a voice in my research but it's just not feasible really to do it with so many people. (Rose)

A sense of responsibility towards their participants can be framed simultaneously as both positive and negative, with both being linked to wanting to 'give voice' to their participant:

if me going away and having a bit of a headache afterwards is the outcome of that then I really think that's a small price to pay, if we can change policy and if we can really give people a voice and make some kind of difference for them. But all of that is dependent on whether the research is of good enough quality and has enough to say, so I do feel a level of responsibility to my participants for that reason. (Grainne)

Guilt was one of the strongest emotions expressed by our participants; for asking their participants to share difficult experiences and stories, for invading their privacy, for any potential 're-traumatisation' as a result of participating in the research and for taking up their time. Trina sums this up nicely:

[I felt a] bit of guilt, that small aspects of exploitation . . . research to get these people to tell their hard story and then we go and get a career from it. That I struggle with sometimes.

Guilt has been recognised as an emotion that arises as a consequence of performing emotional labour as a researcher. It has already been demonstrated that our researchers understand the necessity to employ different forms of emotional labour during doctoral research, including surface acting and genuine emotion, and it is this engagement that can contribute to feelings of guilt in the researcher. Surface acting is required as a result of having a research agenda, and the need to build rapport and trust with participants. However, this way of performing emotional labour may suggest that participants are commodities: ‘their stories intended for exchange in an academic market that is inaccessible to them’ (Mamali, 2019: 247). Genuine emotional responses may well, in a similar way to genuine participation, ‘contest’ the researcher–researched relationship. Mamali (2019) also suggests that the ‘crossing of the line between friendship moments and surface acting’ can also exacerbate feelings of guilt on the part of the researcher (p. 247).

All of our researchers experienced being overwhelmed at some point during their doctoral studies. These sensations comprised emotional exhaustion, ‘emotional hangovers’ (Lindsey), depression, burn out, spill-over and desensitisation (i.e. being ‘numb to it’):

the vicarious trauma, I think that’s the big risk and that’s why you have to do the stuff like the closing down, the debriefings, the reflective practice, because sometimes you do come across some really painful, disturbing stuff and you remember the people and you can feel helpless and demoralised and sad and angry and upset and then you’ll remember that pain of that individual. So I think it’s really difficult . . . it’s inevitable and you can get burnout and you probably shouldn’t do it forever. (Susan)

These consequences came about as a result of having to engage in emotion management, whether that be the display or suppression of emotions (Hochschild, 1983) such as sadness, grief, anger, frustration, empathy, sympathy, disgust, as well as emotions felt as a consequence of performing emotional labour within the field (e.g. guilt, responsibility, hypersensitisation and self-blaming).

Furthermore, much of the research carried out by our researchers involved listening to, or reading about harrowing, traumatic and difficult to hear/read stories and experiences. Without the proper support, our researchers became emotionally overwhelmed and overloaded.

Coping mechanisms

In order to negate the potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour – some of which we describe

above – during their doctoral research, our researchers developed and employed coping mechanisms. The central coping strategies discussed here are self-care, space creation and communities of coping.

Self-care ‘is any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health’ (Michael, 2018). For our respondents, this was exemplified by things like taking a shower, changing their clothes, reading, swimming, reflective writing, keeping a research diary, going to the gym, talking to their partner, engaging with a counsellor and clinical supervision (Shanley and Stevenson, 2006). Amy describes how she would take care of herself:

I would drive home, because it was about a 20 minute drive and that gave me a bit of decompression time and then I would say I would generally go for a swim, so I didn’t have to talk about it to anyone and it made me feel better. I would always go home to my mum and dad and my mum would be there and so there was that bit of self-care at home as well.

Space creation is how our researchers fashioned physical and mental space in their lives away from their research. Physical examples of space creation include commuting (travelling to/from work, travelling to/from the research site), and keeping home and work life separate:

I asked him one day how he [a colleague] does it and he said that he separates work from home life completely, so he never ever does any work at home. So he goes into the university to do work. So he creates these sort of artificial, physical separations of his life. (Susan)

Mental space creation could comprise taking a break from studying/researching and/or escapism. Examples of escapism included consuming alcohol, watching TV, playing violent video games and reading magazines and novels. For our researchers: Trina said she drank too much alcohol, Tori played Assassin’s Creed and other violent video games and Aoife watched ‘The Bachelor’. These were ways in which our participants blocked out difficult or distressing emotions that arose as part of their research.

Many of our researchers described what would be recognised as ‘shedding’ rituals (Orchard et al., 2013), although few participants used this term themselves. These rituals often incorporated space creation with elements of self-care. For Susan, she used washing and changing her clothes in a ritualised way to foster self-care and create space between her and the field:

I try and have a bath or a shower and change my clothes, just sort of do some sort of mental closure . . . I think it just creates a sense of its over, like the connectivity with that person, you’ve moved on past it. So whether it’s symbolic or whether it’s real at some vibes level I don’t know, do you know what I mean, but that’s the technique that I do. (Susan)

Similarly, Trudy discussed ‘the ritual of closing the door behind the custody suite, getting in the taxi back to the hotel, doing some sort of standard self-care stuff like having a shower, getting changed, [and] having breakfast’.

Sometimes our researchers consciously created the space, while other times, they had the space created for them (e.g. commuting, maternity leave). This creation of ‘space’ between themselves and their research was important, and in some cases, absolutely necessary, for our researchers. It gave them time to reflect on and process their research experiences.

Communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003) were often described by our researchers as a way of dealing with the emotional labour required, and emotions felt as a result of engaging in empirical research. These – often informal – networks included peers, other PhD students and/or supervisors and might exist in-person, online via social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) or across both. Given that there is a tendency for people to cope ‘communally and socially’ (Korczynski, 2003: 58) with the potentially negative consequences of having to perform emotional labour, communities of coping can be very valuable:

There is a sense of solidarity I suppose isn’t there with people who just know what interviews are like and who know what it’s like to turn up at somebody’s house and its 10am and they’ve already finished a bottle of wine and offering you some . . . Yeah so it that was useful to have the [postgraduate] resources in the form of people to offload onto. (Raegan)

As Wincup (2001: 29) suggests, peer discussion ‘can provide reassurance and helps to overcome feelings of isolation by recognising your own emotional experiences are not unique’.

However, we would be remiss if we did not follow up our discussion of these informal communities of coping with a discussion about the lack of formal support felt by our researchers during their doctoral studies. The sense of being unsupported came from emotional states of grief, depression, trauma, disgust and ‘imposter syndrome’, accompanied by feelings of being out of their depth, outside their area of knowledge, not being adequately trained or prepared and not having an appropriate outlet:

Outside of my supervisors who I’ve spoken to on a meaningful level through my PhD there is no training or no preparation for the emotional impact of it which in many respects is maybe, well, it was, could be considered catastrophic for some people. I’m pretty sure that sort of thing is behind the increasing levels of mental health . . . PhDs and increase in drop outs that we see from PhDs. I’m pretty sure. Obviously I can’t prove it and I don’t know but I would bet my mortgage that the lack of support for the emotional aspects of the process is behind that kind of stuff. (Ryan)

There was also a distinct sense of frustration by many of our researchers with their supervisory team, who were often

seen as un-supportive and un-relatable, leaving them feeling isolated, vulnerable and not wanting to appear ‘weak’:

So I suffered in silence but also I was very reluctant to reveal these emotions to my supervisors because I feared that they might stop me from completing the autoethnographic aspect of the research and I also thought that they might think I am weak, vulnerable, not good enough to do this project, not strong enough; so I feared for how they would perceive my skills and my ability to do this project. (Elena)

The consequence of these feelings meant that our researchers felt unsupported in three fundamental areas: (1) supervisor/supervisory team support, (2) institutional support, (3) institutional training/education. Generally they felt particularly unsupported by their supervisory team. It is important to note that some PhD students had very good emotional supervisory support, but this appears to have been unpredictable and at the discretion of individual supervisors. There was no consistency on this among the different members of the same supervisory team, with some being far more or less supportive and emotionally available than others: ‘if you were feeling emotionally unsupported or upset . . . there wasn’t really any of that supervisory support there’ (Emily). Based on our researchers’ comments and experiences, it appears that female supervisors and those with relatable emotional research experiences were the most likely to provide the much needed emotional support.

Our researchers also felt let down by their institutions, with little access to institutional support, education or training opportunities:

how important it would be for PhD students but also for research teams to have institutional support and that there should be built a culture around that, where it should be not seen as a weakness. (Trina)

When our researchers did speak about training, this tended to come from past professional lives and/or third sector organisations with which they have volunteered:

I don’t think that people called it emotional resilience or professional resilience then, but yes. We were certainly trained in how to manage difficult situations and how to work with difficult caseloads and maintain your own sanity, so yeah, I would say that I have had some, as part of my professional training rather than my academic training. (Sandra)

This overall lack of support exacerbated many of the difficult emotions felt as part of the research. It also meant that our researchers often did not have someone to ‘turn to’ to discuss their emotions, their emotional labour, the impact these both had on their lives and how to cope. The coping strategies most frequently employed by our researchers to combat the lack of support included continuous professional development (CPD), communities of coping, self-care and escapism.

Recommendations and conclusion

We finish this article with some practical suggestions about what supervisory teams, institutions and individual researchers could do to address some of the issues raised around the emotions experienced and emotional labour performed by doctoral criminological researchers. From the existing literature and our research findings, we make six recommendations to help researchers cope with the consequences of performing emotional labour and therefore improve their research experience and outcomes:

1. There needs to be more training provided at all levels around emotions and emotional labour. This training should be aimed not only at doctoral students and early career researchers, but also supervisory teams so that they are better able to support their PhD students. Areas for training should include acknowledging and performing emotional labour, understanding how emotions are used in research, planning emotional wellbeing into research projects, the acknowledgement and mechanisms of self-care, and asking for help and accessing support. Training could be included as part of the PhD programme of study. Academic institutions should also learn from the third sector, where training around the use of emotion and emotional labour are employed to a greater degree.
2. Supervisory teams and institutions should actively promote and encourage self-care and self-care strategies in their doctoral students. PhD students themselves should also embrace this mindset. Creating a 'self-care strategy' should be part of the planning process for all research projects and could include elements of 'cleanliness' and 'shedding', physical activity, reading and writing, talking and listening, and engaging with mental health professionals (ideally provided by the institution).
3. Institutional ethical approval forms should have a section for reflecting on the potential emotional impact of the research on the researcher(s). The emotional wellbeing of the researcher(s) conducting research should be considered of equal importance to their physical safety and to the physical and psychological safety of their participants. Equally, this should not become an administrative burden nor be used as a way to prevent certain types of research (or researchers).
4. The creation of formal and informal support networks and communities of coping is needed. As different researchers will need different types and levels of support at different times, it is important that a variety of support options are available. Potential support networks could include mentoring schemes or 'buddy' programmes, social media groups, walking groups and pub nights. Attending

and presenting at academic conferences was also identified as a source of support. It is important that doctoral researchers have the space to talk about their emotions. The creation and promotion of support networks is particularly pertinent for doctoral researchers as they are often new to the discipline and new to the academy, and because PhDs are often in themselves isolating experiences (Azad and Kohun, 2006; Garrihy and Watters, 2020; Kay, 2017; Skakni, 2018).

5. Clinical supervision (Shanley and Stevenson, 2006) should be recommended in emotionally high-risk pieces of research, and encouraged to any researcher who may benefit from it. Research might be considered to be emotionally high risk due to the research subject, environment or participants or the needs of the researcher themselves.
6. We need to improve the culture within the criminological community to allow for emotions, emotional labour and their consequences to be openly and critically discussed. One of the key issues raised by our researchers was why the same formal and informal support systems that exist for other professions who perform 'emotional labour', such as psychology or counselling (Brannen, 1988), do not exist within criminological research practice (Letherby, 2003: 113). It is widely recognised that psychological professionals can suffer vicarious trauma (McCann and Pearlman, 1990), yet this is only recently being acknowledged within criminology (Moran and Asquith; Fohring; Guerzoni – all in this issue). There is still too much silence and stigma within criminology around the discussion of emotions and emotional labour, and how these impact on the research process, including access, data collection and analysis. Although culture change is difficult, the preceding five recommendations go some way to addressing this step change.

Acknowledging and beginning to address these recommendations will have a substantial impact on PhD students and early career researchers, creating a better doctoral experience and better introduction to the academy more generally. Finally, a greater appreciation of the emotion work and emotional labour inherent to qualitative research enables researchers to collect data more effectively and analyse it in a way which makes those data more meaningful. More meaningful data lead to greater trustworthiness and authenticity (Guba and Lincoln, 1986), a profounder relevance to those being studied, and more significant contributions to knowledge.

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