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The Emotional Risks of Turning Stories into Data: An Exploration of the Experiences of Qualitative Researchers Working on Sensitive Topics

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Abstract: A great deal of research has been undertaken into areas involving sensitive topics. In spite of longstanding acceptance that such research can be emotionally risky for participants, interest in the impact of this work on the researcher has only relatively recently become a topic of concern. This paper reports on a roundtable convened with qualitative researchers working in sensitive research areas. The article explores their views in relation to the emotional risks they encountered in relation to their work. A grounded theory, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and comparisons are made between researcher experiences and those highlighted by earlier studies. We illuminate how researchers described personal concerns about the emotional risks, before focusing on how the researcher's sense of professionalism contributed to, or protected against, these emotional risks and emotions. This paper also discusses the faltering nature of the support provided to these researchers and the challenges created by the need they felt to create impactful research. The authors conclude by arguing that current support and guidance provided to researchers working in sensitive areas fails to address the complexity of the emotional reaction of the researcher. We call for the development of specialised training and improved use of theoretical concepts such as emotion work, to guide those undertaking this challenging work.

Keywords: ethics; sensitive research; reflexivity; qualitative methods; emotional risk

1. Introduction

Over the past 50 years, qualitative methods have become established as producers of valid forms of evidence, with studies now being published in a wide number of journals [1]. At the same time, a great deal of research has been undertaken into areas involving sensitive topics. The exact definition of sensitive research varies between texts. Authors such as Lee [2] have focused on it being a broad type of research that is accompanied by an intrusive threat because the research asks participants to reveal information about a deeply personal experience within their private sphere. Lee went on to examine three different types of threat; the first refers to an 'inclusive threat' as being those in which the topic of study is private, stressful or sacred (p. 4). While a second threat posited is that of 'sanction' which includes data which exposes forms of deviance or stigma. A final type can be identified as a 'political threat' which emerges when researchers are investigating a form of social conflict. Other authors have focused on the sensitivity of a topic as being related to the likely impact of the research. For example, Dickson-Swift et al. [3] suggest that sensitive subjects are likely to evoke distressing emotions for the participant. While Sieber and Stanley [4] suggest that 'socially sensitive' research is that in which "there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or the class of individuals represented by the research" (p. 49).

It has been claimed that sensitive research methodology developed in response to research on taboo topics [5]. This area of research has been particularly dominated by qualitative approaches and feminist researchers have been forthright in suggesting that sensitive subjects particularly lend themselves to investigation via qualitative methodology because they have the ability to empower the researched [6]. However, the impact that ceding power to participants has on the researcher has only recently been highlighted as being potentially problematic [7]. Others, including Fahie [8], have highlighted the broader emotional impact involved in sensitive research, with Lee and Lee [9] stating that these demands are now "difficult to ignore" (p. 47). In this paper, by exploring the patterns within the literature that have been produced to date, we will argue that despite growing interest in the impact of research on the researcher, there have been few studies that have examined the issue across discipline boundaries and qualitative methodologies. The paper commences with a broad discussion of the theoretical backdrop of both vulnerabilities and emotions in sensitive topics, before moving to discuss the findings of a roundtable event held on the issue of emotional risk with a wide range of qualitative researchers, working in this area of research.

2. Vulnerability and Emotions in Sensitive Research

In order to fully grasp the emotional risks to which researchers are exposed, it is helpful to first consider the theoretical background of vulnerability in the qualitative research process. Evidence of the influence of this issue on sensitive research is apparent through the special consideration that is given to the vulnerability of the participants; for some time, ethics committees concerned about the impact of this type of research on participants, have required researchers to carefully consider the consequences of this type of research on those being studied [10]. Feminists and other critical researchers have been particularly concerned about the vulnerability of research participants. Writing in the 1990s, Behar [11] went so far as to argue that in asking for revelations from others while revealing little of ourselves, "we make others vulnerable but we ourselves remain invulnerable" (p. 273). This type of assertion is typical of an influential and longstanding reluctance within social science to acknowledge the potentially vulnerable position of researchers, with Davenport and Hall [12] even suggesting that admitting to vulnerability can lead to shame and disgrace.

At the turn of the millennium, deLaine [13] commented that sensitive research came with "unknown ramifications for self, research and career" (p. 85). However, within the context of sensitive research, the idea of researchers as potentially being vulnerable participants in the research process is a relatively new concept that has received intermittent attention. This is despite assertions that qualitative research is a social encounter in which "emotional processes are crucial components" that may leave participants feeling exposed or vulnerable [14]. Furthermore, the direct participation and emotional engagement of researchers as 'participants' in the field has, for some time, been actively encouraged by various methodological frameworks [15], with some authors suggesting that the broad turn towards reflexivity may have opened up further vulnerabilities [16]. This gap in our understanding about the vulnerability of researchers may be significant; Bloor et al. [17] have pointed out how we may not be aware at the outset of the research of the vulnerabilities within ourselves that may be touched by our engagement in work. By contrast, vulnerability among therapists is well theorized and discussed. Although they differ from researchers by having an explicit therapeutic intention, there are constants between the two roles, in that actors in both enter similarly emotional arenas with individuals in which they must be open and receptive to distressing details of their lives [18]. Rather hopefully, the recent literature demonstrates a shift that sees increasing numbers of researchers giving up their 'cloak of invulnerability' to make available their experiences both as confessional accounts and as tools of research onto themselves [19]. In a particularly revealing account on the topic of vulnerability, Emerald and Carpenter [20] write of being "awed" by the resilience of the women they interviewed, while simultaneously beginning to "wonder about our own resilience" (p. 741).

There has been considerable hesitancy in the literature to overtly acknowledge vulnerability of researchers within the research process, there has been some substantive interest in the emotional

impact of this work on the researcher. An early example came from Moran-Ellis [21] who used the term 'pain by proxy' to describe the emotional upset that can occur when researchers listen to the painful events experienced by their participants. In contrast, Harris and Huntington's [22] seminal edited collection helped to gain wider acceptance of emotionality as a central tenet of the qualitative research process. However, Campbell [23], Johnson and Clarke [24], and Dickson-Swift et al. [25] were among the first to undertake qualitative work into the emotions of researchers as a topic in its own right. Their studies suggested the emotional demands placed upon researchers who undertake research in these areas may be considerable. Recent and growing interest has led to a number of studies that have usefully highlighted the importance of protecting the researcher against harm [8,19] as well as demonstrating the embodied impact of the work [19]. These papers have continued to enlighten our understanding of emotional vulnerability and have helpfully made some recommendations in regard to working towards establishing the emotional stability and safety of qualitative researchers. Nevertheless, their findings are limited because in spite of Dickson-Swift et al.'s [25] call for empirical qualitative studies on researchers from a range of backgrounds and from other global contexts, many of the studies have been undertaken in a particular context [26]. Others continue to be dominated by single or dual authored accounts [27,28] or those based on teams of researchers working on the same project Bowtell et al, [29]. The recent literature also shows a turn towards those that take an auto-ethnographic approach [19] or autobiographic accounts [8], with few researchers writing frankly about their experiences in accounts that are directly integrated within their methodology [30]. It has also been suggested that such conversations still tend to happen in "the hidden spaces and fringes of knowledge production" [31].

Some of the recent studies have sought to use the 'emotion work' theory to contextualise researchers' responses to their fieldwork [32,33]. These studies include a discussion of 'emotional labour' as dealing with the emotions of another individual and in doing so also working to regulate your own feelings [34]. In an early example, Campbell [23] argued that in undertaking interviews with victims of rape, her research team were undertaking emotional labour. However, other researchers have been slow to apply this theory to sensitive research [3]. In addition, despite concerns about the emotional labour and potential risks to researchers involved in this type of work, professional research bodies have been slow to respond to the issue [17]. Similarly, within a policy context the issue has received little attention. In the UK, the recently published Framework for Mental Health Research, offers a collective view of how mental health research should move forward over the next decade [35]. However, it makes no mention of the need for research that evaluates the impact of this type of work on the mental health of those conducting the research. This is surprising given our increased awareness of the importance of good mental health at work, which includes 'good work' dimensions of control, meaning, agency [36].

As a result, the area of emotional responses and risk among sensitive topic researchers remains relatively poorly understood. Given the types of social problems and issues that now require research, and the broad increase in qualitative studies, the number of researchers working on qualitative studies into sensitive areas is only likely to increase [13]. This would suggest that there is a worrying gap in our understanding of the potential emotional pitfalls within sensitive research and a need to develop a set of action points that can guide researchers and their supervisors when undertaking research on sensitive topics. It is this gap that this paper intends to address.

3. Aims

We set out to explore the emotional impact of work on sensitive topics among researchers working across a range of qualitative research studies. We were particularly interested in building on previous research by Dickson-Swift et al. [25] in exploring the issue of emotional risk among this group. Our overarching aim was to broadly examine emotional responses, with a focus on emotional risk, and how researchers have responded to it. Our purpose was to explore how this might have evolved over the last decade and to develop recommendations which could inform researchers and their supervisors on the emotional risks associated with undertaking this type of research and guide them on what can be done to manage these risks.

4. Subject and Methods

The concept of holding a roundtable was established following a discussion between the authors about their personal experiences of undertaking qualitative fieldwork on sensitive topics and of having responsibility for supervising other researchers working in these areas. The authors both have a long history of researching sensitive subjects working within the academic, public service and the charitable sectors. Our objective in holding a roundtable event was to facilitate a broad intellectual debate among qualitative researchers that would enable the production of a framework for taking this agenda forward.

The roundtable took place in May 2015. The authors identified a range of key informants from across the UK, all of whom under Lee's [2] definition of sensitive research had undertaken qualitative research into an area that could be considered to be sensitive. To enable our findings to be as inclusive as possible, we set out to speak to a wide range of individuals across a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, social work and nursing, who were at various stages of their career. As a result, researchers invited included those from a range of sensitive topic areas. They were invited to participate in the roundtable by email, with those who were unable to attend being asked to nominate a suitable replacement. The membership of the group was intended to draw upon a wide range of experiences, including those of researchers who had only been working in the area for a short amount of time and those who had considerable experience across a number of studies. In total, eleven researchers attended on the day of the event; those who eventually participated in the study included those who had undertaken research into areas as diverse as death and dying, stillbirth, homelessness, abortion, suicide, drug addiction, lived experience of mental health issues and those who had worked with peer researchers. They ranged from those who had a few years' experience researching to those who had been involved in multiple studies and were currently operating as lead investigators. All the disciplines set out above were also represented.

We captured informants' critical reflections on professional practice by starting with a main roundtable discussion with all participants. Contributors were invited to share their thoughts and experiences of working as qualitative researchers across their areas of research. A list of topics developed from the literature that related broadly to the issue of emotional risk were put to the panel (See Appendix A). These were designed to act as conversational trigger points, and they ranged from operational and practical issues, to those related to the institutional role in managing risk. These topics were considered to be anchor points only and researchers were encouraged to discuss any insights they had from their personal experiences of acting as researchers in this area. We also wanted to gain an awareness of how emotional risk varied across the various stages of execution involved in a research study. Therefore, we included questions about the perceived demands of different parts of the research process, including the use of different forms of qualitative research and those that used mixed methods, though the focus of the discussion tended to be on interviewing and the emotions attached to this encounter. To reflect the potentially sensitive nature of the topics under discussion, approximately half way through the main roundtable we also formed two break out groups. This gave researchers an opportunity to discuss issues within a more intimate setting.

During all the roundtable discussions, we used digital recorders to capture the researcher's conversation; 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 analysis began with a first round of open coding of the interview transcripts. This was completed line by line by both authors. During this phase, our main concern was 'what are the main issues being faced by participants?' The next step followed the process of conceptualization as set out by Glaser [37] in which codes with similar content were clustered together to create broader level concepts. Constant comparison of the concepts that emerged through this analysis ensured that eventually the emergent social pattern was revealed. What follows in this paper is a thematic presentation of the emergent topics from our analysis of the issues discussed during the roundtable. The findings are organised around a series of themes and subthemes that we have embedded within

the discussion. We have included direct quotes from these discussions in this paper; identifiable features have been removed to protect the confidentiality of those individuals who took part.

5. Results

Descriptive detail of the four dominant themes that repeatedly arose in the discussion are presented in this section. These are: Personalisation; Professionalism; Sources of support; Endings. A discussion of the subthemes identified is also provided.

5.1. Personalisation: Guilt, Shame and Risk

The majority of researchers perceived the qualitative research they had undertaken into sensitive topics to be inherently emotionally risky. Researchers' strength of feeling about this risk was such that they considered it to be a distinguishing feature of this type of research. Although some of this risk was attributed to the personal nature of the topics under discussion and the intimate depth of the conversation, a significant degree of risk came from unanticipated disclosures during the interview:

> *… qualitative research is something that really lays itself open to disclosure of very unexpected things, you know. (Participant A)*

These disclosures contributed to a lack of control over the interview encounter. Researchers described having far reaching conversations with participants about unforeseen issues that were not related to the topic they had been employed to research:

> *… too often… in qualitative interviews … you ask a question and then you know they start answering and they want to talk about something else … and trying… some ways to kind of move back onto the interview schedule. (Participant B)*

The challenges associated with making sure recruitment targets and overall expectations of principal investigators were fulfilled received universal comment. As the following quote suggests, in many cases these expectations appeared to work against the narrative that research participants were attempting to convey. The tension this created was a consistent concern for the researchers, many of whom reported long-term feelings of guilt at the process of turning stories 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 (…) they just sit with us for years and then we mine them every now and again and then feel guilty about it. (Participant C)*

As this quote indicates, in some cases it was the passivity associated with the research role and lack of direct therapeutic intervention possible as a researcher that became a source of tension. For those researchers who felt they had gained professionally from the interview, there were additional emotional burdens:

> *… I felt like I was using people's tragedies for my own gain almost, 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. (Participant A)*

For some of the researchers, discomfort around the balance of risks and benefits to the participants underpinned these emotions:

> *… I feel like I am kind of going in and hearing a lot from them […] they take part in research, they are giving something of themselves and hopefully they do get something out of that as well but I think, there is a risk for them as well as a benefit. (Participant D)*

One researcher was candid in speaking about her frustration at feeling unable to publish 'honest' accounts of her experiences of working with people, who upon reflection may have been too vulnerable to take part in the research:

(a fellow researcher), has written (in an article) that we are beneficial to participants. I want to write up the ones where I don't think I was beneficial, where actually I felt they should have been left alone and I should not have gone out … (Participant E)

Although all of the researchers spoke about having careful procedures in place to protect the participants of their research, there remained a sense of shame about the disparity of giving and receiving that occurred during the research interview:

… (there) was a feeling of slight shame actually, … something about it which is to do with the ethics of … going into someone's home … interviewing them about very intimate issues (…) but then withdrawing going back out into the world, going back to the office or wherever and then maybe actually having no further contact with them for months, if at all … (Participant E)

5.2. Professionalism: Permission, Identity and Personal Intrusions

This theme was concerned with the broad issue of professionalism. It contained three sub-themes that characterised the reactions that were placed under this heading. The subthemes were permission, identity and intrusions.

The issue of permission arose when researchers spoke about having experienced an emotional reaction to the data. There was often a sense of tension associated with this admission. For some, this tension revolved around allowing themselves permission to experience these reactions:

… I had this kind of perception that you know, I should be able to handle it, I should be able to manage it … because I didn't recognise my own needs in that situation … and I didn't have that kind of acceptance around, because I just thought it was part of the job description of what we are supposed to do. (Participant B)

This act of permission was significant as the difficulty of engaging with participants within their own homes, on topics that are emotionally challenging often without feeling able to show one's emotions, required there to be a safe space for researchers outside this environment in which they could explore their own reactions. Furthermore, it was clear that while 'permission' was an issue of concern for most researchers, it was complicated by the sense that the particular emotional reaction varied from one team member to another. For example, one researcher indicated that this sense of 'professional permission' seemed to be easier for male members of the team:

it's amazing to see how I think anxious (she) was that she wasn't perceived as being an over emotional hysterical woman. Where (he) and I were able to just throw these things out unproblematically and know that people would understand how traumatic this had been… (Participant C)

Researchers also spoke about the challenges and risks associated with speaking out about their emotional response to the research because of the sense of hierarchy within the research team:

… 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 ... But you are not in a position where you can say actually hold on a minute you know … (Participant A)

Their personal sense of vulnerability in this regard was obvious:

… some of the interviews we were doing, I found them very emotionally affecting and then I had all the dilemmas about (it) but 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 … (Participant E)

Fears of being seen as unable to handle the work or being seen as unprofessional resonated in many of the accounts. Professional identity was particularly fragile for those on short-term research contracts and PhD students at the beginning of their career. The same researcher spoke clearly about this sense of personal risk and how it had changed now she had a permanent contract:

> *… now that I am not a contract researcher any more I feel much more comfortable ... 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 … (Participant E)*

For some researchers, this sense of vulnerability was a double-edged sword, as their concern for themselves combined with worry that their emotional state would also impact on those they were interviewing:

> *… it is not only (for) ourselves but it is also (for) participants in the research as well, like an emotional risk for them if we are not really grounded … (Participant F)*

One of the researchers suggested that rather than having to gain permission for her emotional reaction, it should have been accepted as a natural part of the process:

> *We are humans, we get affected and impacted by other humans so, acceptance around that … being in a supportive framework that allows, like that's natural that is going to happen ... (Participant B)*

Researchers particularly struggled to maintain a neutral emotional stance when conducting interviews on topics with which they personally identified. Significantly, this struggle continued even after the interview was over, as one researcher described how outside of the interview setting, her outlook remained altered:

> *… 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 … it kind of heightened my emotional sensitivity. Then when I was out in the world it made me much more emotional when those issues just came up. (Participant F)*

The longer-terms effects of undertaking sensitive research were a common feature among our group. Researchers described how intense memories stayed with them long after the fieldwork had been completed. Note the embodied, physical nature of the memory recounted in the following passage:

> *… a few years later, I can imagine myself right back in that room and I can see the person, I can hear them, you know. So we are talking about going in once but actually we revisit these stories many times don't we ... (Participant A)*

The stories sometimes intruded into their memories at times completely unrelated to the research process. This situation is best described by the following quote, which recounts vivid details from a research interview:

> *… one of the (interviewees) … talked about going down and standing by the river and hearing the waters rushing and then hearing this voice saying to him no it is not your time … but just every now and then that quote comes back to me if I am out for a walk or something, I see a river and think oh my goodness that was probably 15 years ago that we did that work, it is still there somewhere. (Participant D)*

5.3. Support Needs: Family Intrusions, Peer Support and Self-Care

In this section, we explore the theme of support needs. We examine how these needs presented themselves and how researchers spoke about the challenges they faced in this regard. We also reflect on the researchers' agency and strategies for self-care and management. We begin by considering the issue of intrusion as this illuminated how, in the immediate aftermath of the interview, researchers became aware of its emotional impact on them. As the following quote illustrates:

> *… I was coming home and telling my 16-year-old son, and thinking afterwards that I was traumatising him, you know just having to talk about it to somebody. (Participant G)*

The intrusion of the research into family lives was widespread; this type of informal debriefing was common among researchers. However, there was almost unanimous concern about the involvement of family members in this way. It was only when some researchers found alternative

sources of support that they realised they had been acting in a way they subsequently found unacceptable:

> *peer (support) thing … happened by accident and that was when we realised that we were going home and being and saying things to our families that we didn't want to. (Participant C)*

Surprisingly, there was a degree of consensus around the limited role that the principal investigator could be expected to take in relation to providing support for the day-to-day emotional challenges faced by researchers. A number of reasons for this emerged from the data but it appeared that a sense of competing demands was a common issue:

> *your principal investigator is too close to the material and has this other hat on, wanting you to finish your research (Participant B)*

For others, issues around power and hierarchies appeared to be the driving force. Again, in these cases, a valued peer emerged as a vital support:

> *Both myself and my colleague … anticipated that it wouldn't be ok to ring … the principal investigator … we didn't have access to anybody outside so we used to ring each other... (Participant D)*

The ability to select the person with whom you formed a supportive relationship seemed crucial to creating a supportive peer to peer relationship:

> *… (the) peer supervision that we set up within the research team it became a lot easier because of being able to be kind of raw, honest outside of the hierarchy … that was incredibly useful that you were able to choose the peer ... (Participant C)*

There were, however, some mixed views about the value of some forms of peer support. One researcher pointed out that teams are often made up of contract researchers who may ultimately compete with each other for positions within the department. For these reasons, it was reported that support needs were best met if they were culturally embedded at the departmental level.

> *… there needs to be somebody who is … familiar with research but not involved in that project to be giving some sort of emotional therapeutic supervision … where supervisors are like you will be giving therapeutic supervision to my PhD students and I will be doing it for maybe your PhD students … (Participant B)*

Letting researchers know what to expect was seen to be a crucial part of the process and it was suggested that it should be part of the researcher's induction programme:

> *… if you are working on a research project, these are the sorts of things that if you are working in this department. This will be provided for researchers. There will be a forum for discussion … (Participant C)*

Institutional responsibility in relation to the support needs of researchers was generally perceived to be lacking. It was clear that while institutions acknowledged the physical risks associated with research, consideration of the emotional risks was worryingly absent. This researcher described how:

> *… the university … was very good at you know, lone worker policy, so if I went into a house on my own I would have to ring (a nominated person) … but (they) didn't acknowledge that emotional risk is a thing ... (Participant E)*

This reflected a troubling tendency among institutions to think purely about the risks of research more broadly, without asking questions about the particular complexities of undertaking research into sensitive subjects.

Researchers described feeling dazed and numb after doing the interviews**.** Notably, they struggled to identify when they should press the principal investigator for greater guidance,

especially when faced with unfamiliar situations. In most cases, over time they came to develop their own self-care techniques:

> *Sometimes I find it quite hard because I don't always have support (…) sometimes … I come out from doing an interview, I think, oh there's stuff in there … I can leave the office, I go for a walk … that is one of my strategies, coping strategies ... (Participant D)*

In most cases, the principal investigator had not budgeted for external support for the researcher. This led to a situation where even if such support was needed, it was not available. In a couple of cases, this resulted in private therapy being utilised for work-related issues:

> *I have been to see a therapist in fact and I had gone to see them about some stuff that was nothing to do with work and actually then when I started doing research that was having an emotional impact on me I used our sessions, to talk about that ... (Participant G)*

There was strong agreement from all researchers that it would be helpful to have regular access to a counsellor who understood research. For many, this was a considered a necessary "resource":

> *I do think that counsellors should be available for researchers, not compulsory obviously, if and when the individual researcher feels that they need that ... (Participant H)*

Opportunities to talk about their emotions appeared to be limited for most and a number highlighted that the roundtable had been the first time they had been able to discuss freely these issues:

> *I think what I am struck by is that we have talked a lot about peer support and this (the roundtable) very much feels like it's peer support but … there doesn't seem to be that outside of this … (Participant I)*

The lack of an established professional space to share concerns was a particular challenge. It was suggested that a sense of professional identity and reflective practices forged through training, would be helpful in protecting researchers:

> *… if you are a clinician there is a kind of expectation of reflection as part of your practice … you're professionally trained that that is part of what you do … but I don't really get a sense, (that) this is a valuable professional practice for researchers (Participant F)*

5.4. Endings: Ownership and Outcomes

The final theme identified in the data was concerned with researchers' reactions to the outcomes of the research. Our analysis showed that as a result the final outcomes of the research took on a particular significance. Some researchers felt particularly discouraged when undertaking research on sensitive topics by their inability to influence the impact of the research, beyond the production of the standard end of study "report":

> *you feel like you want to give something back in a way … you type your findings up and at the end you can send someone a report and that's where I always felt a bit, you sometimes feel a bit empty that you can't do more with your research … (Participant J)*

Most of the researchers who took part in the roundtable were professional researchers and not clinical practitioners. Their accounts showed the negative emotions they experienced when they felt they were not delivering research that could contribute effectively to real change:

> *… 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, care plans, whatever else, but we don't, do we?. (Participant C)*

It was notable that those who had been able to ensure that outcomes were meaningfully designed from the outset found this to be emotionally protective:

> *we were clear that there was something going to happen with that; that was written into the project from the outset. Actually for us at least that was quite a heavy protective factor because … you are clear about that with the participant … you go in and say "this is what this (research) is for" and "are you ok with that?" and actually that clarity of objective I have found really useful ... (Participant C)*

However, this was not a universal feeling. Many researchers felt that insufficient steps were being taken to cultivate an integrative culture within sensitive qualitative research; these steps should include mechanisms to allow researchers to take a greater role in decisions relating to the research. The challenges of including researchers in the design phase in a world of short-term contract research was acknowledged. Nevertheless, a number of researchers felt they could have been assisted in overcoming some of emotional challenges they encountered by being encouraged by the principal investigator to develop an objective that would allow them to reframe their role to the research:

> *… you have got the kind of formal objectives of the research project but also it is fine to have your own personal objectives which may well be related … (Participant G)*

This sense of ownership and goal setting were echoed by another participant who recalled how direct campaigning eased the emotional reaction she experienced after speaking to participants:

> *I am much more involved outside in campaigning … 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 ... (Participant F)*

6. Discussion

This roundtable event explored the emotional experiences of qualitative researchers working in sensitive areas. Our findings echo earlier works that have raised awareness of the emotional risks faced by this group [25,23], and supports more recent studies that have called for renewed and substantive attention to protect the emotional safety of qualitative researchers [9,38]. Collectively, these, and other such studies, have revealed some of the unique challenges that face researchers who work in these socially, politically, and sometimes ideologically sensitive areas. However, in contrast to many of the existing studies, our data capture the collective experiences of researchers speaking in a group setting, from a wide range of sensitive research areas, working across a range of disciplines, with a varied career trajectory. Our analysis thus adds updated and broadened insight into this under-researched area. We begin our discussion by examining both the resilience and vulnerabilities of researchers in this field, before examining some of the overarching themes in the data through the lens of the emotional labour theory. We conclude with a series of actions points we believe are supported by our findings.

6.1. Resilience and Vulnerabilities

The individuals who took part in the roundtable were reflective and insightful research professionals, each of whom reported experiencing complex personal and professional emotions in direct response to their work. On a positive note, they demonstrated considerable resilience, and openly discussed the range of techniques they had developed to manage the challenges associated with qualitative interviews on sensitive topics. These reflect the strategies set out in a recent publication about self-care in ethnographic research [39], thus reinforcing the importance of self-responsibility as a key strategy used by researchers to manage their vulnerability and emotions in this field of work. Our researchers had motivations similar to Vincett [39] in being keen to publicise practical strategies for managing emotionality in research. They echoed the concerns of Lee and Lee [9] and Clark and Sousa [38] in also stating that further encouragement was needed to allow other researchers to both acknowledge their emotional reaction to their research, and to assist them in their efforts to develop the capacity for self-responsibility in managing them.

However, their accounts also clearly demonstrated the exceptional emotional burden that continues to be placed on those working in these areas of research; without exception, these researchers thought the work they had been involved in had long lasting and sometimes negative consequences on their mental health. At times, some of the researchers continued to struggle in making sense of their reactions to the research and to those they interviewed, continuing to question their professional abilities for some time after the work had concluded. In addition, some had experienced intrusive and embodied memories long after they had completed their fieldwork. These intrusions are not surprising; Ahmed's [40] work, among others, tells us that fieldwork involves emotional encounters that may become bodily memories. However, the discomfort these unexpected intrusions continued to cause demonstrates how poorly de-briefed researchers were, both on the impact this type of research might have on them or how they might manage this. Furthermore, these revelations are in contrast to the positive 'personal growth' narratives that are so often evident in similar autoethnographic and biographical accounts of emotion in research [20,29]. Our sense, as conveners of the roundtable, was that their revelation within this peer setting reflected both the benefit of group discussion in opening up these issues, as well as the value of the anonymity afforded by the knowledge that the eventual reporting of this data would be undertaken by two authors unconnected to the researchers' original roles and supervisors. This allowed researchers to more comfortably shed their 'cloak of invulnerability' without having to attach it to some greater 'confessional', epistemological purpose and in the safety of knowing there can be no potential comeback from supervisors. This has important implications for those who want to explore the impact of this type of research in the future.

6.2. The Theoretical Position of the Emotional Labourer

As set out at the beginning of this paper, we believe theory has an important and under-exploited role to play in offering researchers a way to both relay and manage their emotional responses to their research. Although researchers continue to be slow to apply the theory of emotional labour to sensitive research [3], there is growing interest in this area (See [41,42,7]) and recent examples have helpfully used it to add to our understanding of the emotions experienced during both fieldwork and analysis [33,41]. We believe the value of this theory in sensitive qualitative interviewing is further supported by our findings around both the emotions that researchers experience when undertaking sensitive research and the responses of their supervision to efforts to communicate these emotions. For example, we argue that the emotion work undertaken by researchers is clearly demonstrated in Theme 1: 'Personalisation' in which researchers attempted to describe the emotions they experienced. Theme 2: 'Professionalism' illustrates the complexity of the emotional labour involved in this work, as these researchers' attempts to regulate and rationalize their emotions clashed with their sense and expectations of their professional identity. The latter theme also sets out how, despite previous acknowledgement of emotional labour in similar situations and within the literature, the researchers undertaking this work had little or no theoretical understanding of its role in explaining and validating their responses to these sensitive encounters. Perhaps more crucially, we believe that the evidence provided in the final two themes suggests that this emotional work continues to be unacknowledged by either their supervisors (Theme 3) or their funders (Theme 4).

Furthermore, our findings in both Themes 2 and 3 suggest that the emotional labour required by researchers is exacerbated by the suppression they must undertake to avoid revealing their 'inappropriate' emotions to their superiors [43]. This is disappointing because shifts in the ideology and attitude of the broader qualitative research community have included repeated and renewed calls for our emotions to be used as an "epistemological tool" [7], (p. 83). However, our evidence shows that there remains a dominant culture of hierarchy within the supervisory relationship, be it between a PhD supervisor and student, or principal investigator and the research assistant, that continues to see emotions in the research process as "suspect" [6], (p. 2). Instead of being seen as an authentic aspect of the research process, and one which can be mobilised through theoretical reasoning, it becomes an additional burden, one which is borne not only by the researcher but

potentially by the researched who may be affected by researchers who themselves have become 'sensitive' to the research.

6.3. The Realities and Professional Position of the Emotional Labourer

The lack of engagement by all parties in the emotional labour involved in this work is further demonstrated by the evidence that these researchers continue to be failed by a lack of supportive leadership. Our data clearly highlights the ambiguous role that was played by the employers of these researchers in providing practical support. Participants at the roundtable spoke forcefully about the need to encourage a new approach to sensitive research that provides external supports for those impacted by their work on these interviews. This aspect of our data is particularly disappointing as these emotional responses and the need for support to manage them, were remarkably similar to those described in other studies of sensitive researchers [25]. In addition, we heard how in the absence of institutional support researchers relied upon family members to provide important debriefing opportunities; many felt they had little or no guidance on providing self-care or obtaining peer support. Worryingly, the lack of meaningful support, or a safe space in which to reflectively analyse their emotions, also meant that researchers became worried their struggles would affect their ability to undertake fieldwork and to protect their participants. Again, this is concerning because as ethics boards have been keen to stress, the participants of sensitive research are potentially vulnerable to further distress from their participation in the research.

The experiences reported here thus clearly indicated that previous recommendations in regard to providing support for researchers have yet to be substantially taken up by principal investigators, or their institutions in the UK [17,25]. Given the increasing evidence of support needs among these researchers, it is perhaps worth reflecting upon why it is that qualitative researchers working in these areas continue to have limited training and support. The emotional responses of these researchers have much in common with those who work therapeutically in counselling settings with clients presenting with sensitive or traumatic issues. Yet within these settings, it is widely acknowledged that such work carries with it an emotional risk that needs to be professionally managed. In addition, research in other areas associated with work-placed trauma has shown that with proper support and professional training, a great deal of this emotional risk can be minimised or avoided [44].

6.4. Responsibility for Supporting the Emotional Labourer

From our findings, it thus appears that complex questions remain about whose responsibility it is to provide support and what that support should look like. We shall discuss each of these areas next. Firstly, in terms of whose responsibility it is to provide support, our researchers' testimonies in relation to the current lack of funds for external supervision, minimal emotional support offered by principal investigators, as well as the lack of institutional level protocols, show that this is not currently considered to be part of the formal conditions of employment. In addition, from a policy level there has not yet been a systematic role for relevant professional research bodies and government agencies in accepting or planning for the potential and unique emotional risks to researchers involved in this type of work [17,35]. As already suggested, this contrasts with clinical fields where supervision is systematically provided to protect the emotional health of professionals and their clients, and in which this need has been set out in relevant policies by associated professional bodies [45]. Our evidence suggests that taking up some of the responsibility for protecting the emotional health of researchers would therefore require a crucial shift in the mindset of leaders involved in designing, funding and ethically reviewing qualitative research in sensitive research areas. Furthermore, for any sea change to be successful, it would need to be clearly embedded within the governance structure and financial decision-making process proposed at the outset of the research design process.

Secondly, in terms of what form the support should take, we have developed some action points in relation to the support needs that emerged from our analysis of the roundtable discussion (Appendix B). We particularly want to stress our recommendations in relation to two areas that were

particularly prominent in the analysis. The first relates to researchers' comments about the absence of a formal community of sensitive topic researchers with whom they could share their concerns and dilemmas. This is something that can be quickly addressed by qualitative research leaders. At the time of writing, we note that some moves to respond to this are already evident within the UK, with the establishment of a number of events relevant to emotions in sensitive research. Our study shows that there are many commonalities among researchers working in sensitive topics, therefore we sincerely hope these events become a routine part of the culture of qualitative research and a formal part of relevant national and international conferences, instead of being hidden within informal spaces [31].

Our second point relates to the power wielded by principal investigators within qualitative research. As our final set of findings revealed, there is a fundamental tension within the supervisory/managerial relationships of researchers in which researchers must juggle their commitment to the research subjects and those of the funders. Mc Queeney and Lavelle [7,46] raised similar issues in relation to critical ethnography and our research shows that researchers from across a range of subjects and disciplines involved in broader qualitative methodologies experienced similar tensions. It has been suggested that attending to our emotional reactions can allow us to gain insight into our position as researchers operating within larger power structures [31]. The emotional reactions described here show that the positionality of the researcher within the research power structure was a source of emotional distress in itself. The emotional impact of this type of research was thus determined not only by interactions in the field, but also by the material they produced from it. They reported strong emotional reactions in relation to having to balance representing the lived experience of participants, with the imperatives of what they perceived to be outcome-driven research. There was some evidence that focusing relentlessly on funder-driven aims made researchers particularly vulnerable to longer-term negative emotions. There were particularly high levels of concern among the researchers about how to manage their personal sense of responsibility towards their interviewees with their status as short-term contract researchers who had little or no long-term job security. To some extent, managing the strategic funding requirements of funders is layered among all qualitative research, not just those on sensitive topics. However, it has been suggested that sensitive topic researchers feel a greater burden in this regard [24]. This aspect is especially concerning in the post austerity research climate within which many researchers now operate [47].

It has been clear for some time that researchers play an important role in the delivery of this type of qualitative research and that their participation has emotional consequences. It is therefore important they feel a sense of confidence in their own mental health, and their ability to maintain this, especially when faced with challenging situations and listening to material they may find traumatic. It thus appears that acknowledgement is needed of the 'coal face' role of the researcher in this process and formal recognition should be given to the emotional toll this may have on them. Their connection with participants is vital in allowing us to link the everyday experiences of those they interviewed on sensitive topics, with the sometimes remote world of report writing and journal article production. Here, and elsewhere, it has been shown that a shared sense of purpose and control over the research process can develop a culture of empowerment for the researcher and this appears critical in ensuring that researchers maintain a good sense of mental wellbeing [48].

7. Conclusions

Over the past fifty years, qualitative studies into sensitive topics have fundamentally changed our understanding of emotional issues that were once considered too challenging and intimate to research. However, these important research studies are only able to deliver valuable knowledge because of the skills and commitment of the researchers who collect and analyse these data. Our study adds broad insight and new cultural context to the area of emotions in sensitive research, and collates the experiences of researchers working across a range of topics.

As qualitative research becomes more popular, and we become more aware of the potential emotional impact of this type of research on the researcher, it is important that we move forward

with our exploration of the issue of emotional risk towards the researcher, in meaningful, practical and non-alarmist ways. Maintaining the mental wellbeing of those involved should be a prime objective for all those involved in safeguarding the research process.

Our conclusions and action points have been developed as a renewed prompt, with the intention of impressing again to leaders in qualitative research, host institutions and professional bodies, that the approach to undertaking research into sensitive topics must acknowledge and manage the potential impact of this work on the researchers. We look forward to, and envision a dynamic process, whereby the inclusion of these supportive elements is an integrative part of the research design process.

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Appendix A: Topic Guide

- What were the emotional reactions and risks and reactions experienced by researchers and how have these been managed in research projects?
- What aspects of research practice are particularly emotionally risky?
- Was their role in the study impacted by their emotional experiences and reactions and how did they manage this?
- What training did receive in relation to the emotional impact of this work? What training would have been useful?
- What factors impact upon the degree and effect of emotional risk?
- Are certain methodologies more emotional/emotionally risky than others?
- Which theories are relevant to understanding research and emotional risk (self care and management, creating boundaries)?
- How do emotional experiences link with the stage of research?
- How were researchers affected after completion of the project?
- *W*hat kinds of supports have they been offered or made use of?
- How useful has this support been—and what factors determine this?
- How do you feel you/others process these emotions?
- What do you do to look after yourself (before/during/after event, ongoing, over time)?

Appendix B: Action Points for Qualitative Research into 'Sensitive' Topics

Action points for supervisors and principal investigators

- When developing budgets for funding applications, include costs for external support for researchers.
- Let researchers know what they can expect from the interview/fieldwork stage of the work and brief them on how the issue of vulnerability may affect researchers as well as research participants.
- If appropriate, sensitively explore the researcher's motivation for working in a particular area of sensitive research.
- Work towards creating an environment and supervisory relationship in which researchers can openly discuss the emotional impact of this research both on their personal and professional identity.

- Work with researchers to ensure that outcomes are meaningfully designed, and develop opportunities that allow them to influence the impact of the research.
- Assist researchers in the management of emotions that emerge during the work by using examples from the literature and in particular by engaging them in the concepts of emotional labour.

Action points for Institutions and Funders

- Invest in counselling supervisors who can be available to researchers undertaking interviews with participants about sensitive topics.
- Set up peer support networks within institutions to address issues of isolation among researchers.
- Ensure training and induction packages for research roles involving sensitive research topics, include training on issues relating of self-care and support services available to employees and students.

Action points for Ethics Committees

- Check that applicants have acknowledged and considered both the emotional and physical risks associated with any proposed research into sensitive topics.
- As part of the review process, be mindful of and ask questions about, the particular vulnerabilities and impact on researchers of proposed research into sensitive subjects
- Ensure research proposals provide researchers with both formal and informal opportunities to debrief, where they are able to freely discuss emotional reactions without fear of professional consequences.

Action points for researchers

- Acknowledge that research may have an emotional impact in ways that are not anticipated or easily rationalized.
- Keep a research diary to track ongoing areas of concern, identify particular areas of vulnerability and monitor the emotional impact of the research and responses to individual interviewees.
- Seek out both formal and informal opportunities to debrief, where it is possible to freely discuss emotional reactions without fear of professional consequences.
- Ask for supervisory guidance in identifying external, professional peer networks with other researchers undertaking similar research.

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