

Contextual Vulnerability of the Researcher: Reflections on Methodology

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Abstract

Qualitative research requires careful reflection on the researcher's role throughout the research process, as it is shaped by the researcher's interaction with the field, especially in comparison to quantitative research. However, there remains a need for greater exploration of how the qualitative research context shapes the researcher's ability to navigate the field, experience fieldwork, interact with participants, and manage their emotional well-being. This article addresses three groups of factors affecting researcher vulnerability: first, factors related to the *emotional response* that the information obtained during the research evokes in the researcher; second, the *situational context* in which the researcher conducts their studies; and third, the *attitude of the research institutions* within which these studies are conducted towards the first two groups of factors. The most important factors discussed within the first group are those related to vicarious or secondary trauma experienced by the researcher. Within the second group, phenomena belonging to the general category of vulnerable research will be discussed - both traditional field studies and studies conducted in the online space. In the third group, the actions of research institutions that should take place to prevent or reduce the difficulties discussed in the first two groups of factors will be examined.

Keywords

researcher vulnerability, secondary and vicarious trauma, fieldwork challenges, research ethics, online research

Introduction

The influence of research on the researcher differs depending on whether the research is qualitative or quantitative. Positivist scholars state that the reality they research exists objectively and is external, independent from its observer (Kvale, 2012). Such a perspective allows them to apply methods typical of the natural sciences in social research. In positivist-oriented research, a scholar is duty-bound to remain objective, choose quantitative (or mixed) methods, use neutral language, search for cause–effect links on a conceptual level and explain the encountered phenomena based on general laws (Paluchowski, 2010). For example, it makes no difference who runs a test on a given day; in laboratory research into cognitive functions of children aged 4 to 7, differences between the specific team members who came in on specific weekdays are not described, let alone considered as potential factors in the resulting data. This stems from a belief that a

detailed research protocol supplied to all research team members eliminates all differences between them, such as gender, values or previous experience in observing children (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Any differences in results obtained from children performing identical tasks are ascribed to the children themselves. However, positivist-oriented research still cannot claim to be fully independent from the researcher in question. Their influence is still present in their choice of theory on which the scientific study is based or their choice of

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research methods, but these influences are considered obvious and fully legitimate, not requiring specific elaboration.

Another approach to data collection is a post-positivist or constructionist stance, when research focuses on the individual and its goal is to uncover the nature of a given phenomenon. Interpretation is a core research method, and indeed, this stance is also known as interpretivism, underlining the importance of looking at phenomena from another person's point of view (Straš-Romanowska, 2010). Thus, as the person who performs this interpretation, an individual researcher is far more important. They not only co-create results by designing the theoretical background and research strategy (as in quantitative research), but for research results, they are also interpretative filters, varying according to their individual traits.

The discussion on reflexivity in social sciences has often centred around "reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how process of doing research shapes its outcomes" (Hardy et al., 2001, p. 534). Reflexivity involves reflection on how research process impact what constitutes knowledge (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). Our focus is on how the research process itself, being a rather unique experience, impacts the researcher, and we aim to draw additional attention to the researcher's contextual vulnerability (Micanovic et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2022). Prioritizing the safety and emotional well-being of research participants is essential, yet ongoing reminders and updates within the academic research and ethics community are necessary to ensure consistent practice. Nevertheless, researchers' vulnerability in fieldwork research is still overlooked or considered less important. This paper presents notes from fieldwork research conducted by the authors of this article and doctoral students, during which these researchers were exposed to field-related challenges that significantly influenced their approach to navigating the research field, conducting fieldwork and interacting with participants.

This methodological reflection is guided by the themes identified in literature review on researchers' vulnerability. *First*, the paper defines vicarious traumatising and secondary traumatic stress, as well as challenging research settings, which can create risks to the physical safety and emotional well-being of a researcher. It highlights that not only the physical safety of the researcher but also their emotional well-being in challenging research settings in particular should be taken seriously. *Second*, the risks of a researcher's vicarious or secondary trauma, such as guilt, the emotional burden of (post-factum) introspection of research experiences, vulnerability to being utilised by research participants, and the emotional burden of multitasking in fieldwork on a researcher in different challenging situational fieldwork contexts are analysed. *Third*, drawing from earlier sections, the paper offers recommendations for academic research institutions and their research ethics bodies regarding researchers' safety and well-being. *Finally*, the conclusions underline the impact the entire research process has on the researcher and the emotional

dynamics between the two. The conclusions also call for consistent and sustainable action to solve the salient issues raised in this article.

Due to the competence of the first author, Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, in migration studies, resulting from 25 years of field research on the subject, many examples used to illustrate various aspects of multiple vulnerabilities in the research process come from the research of PhD students of migration research. The second author, Gilda Seddighi, shares her experiences from her PhD research entitled *Politicization of grievable lives on Iranian Facebook pages*, at the University of Bergen-Norway from 2011 to 2016, which centred on the engagement of Iranian asylum seekers in Norway in online political campaigns orchestrated from Iran. The third author, Morta Vidūnaitė, was responsible for the literature review on researchers' vulnerability, contributed to both the analysis, writing the article.

Does Emotional Well-Being Equal a Researcher's Physical Safety in Challenging Research Settings?

Prioritising the physical safety and emotional well-being of research participants is given much attention, especially in ethics approval applications, in contrast to researchers' vulnerability and consideration for researchers' safety, especially in so-called vulnerable research (Micanovic et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2022). The physical safety and emotional well-being of a researcher in challenging research settings are intertwined. Nevertheless, the physical safety of a researcher in challenging research settings has received much more attention than the emotional well-being of a researcher both in scientific literature and academic practice.

However, the impact of research on the emotional well-being of researchers is gradually gaining increasing importance in academic research and ethical practice. The evidence of this is that since March 2024, a help-the-researchers group has started operating within an international group based at the University of Limerick in Ireland, consisting of researchers and therapists from Europe and Latin America (LauEMiDi) and specifically dealing with research on migration issues. This group holds monthly meetings to discuss the vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress (Baird & Kracen, 2006) experienced by researchers conducting mentally taxing studies. LauEMiDi members also discuss the strategies researchers can use to cope with such traumatic experiences. During the group's meetings, participants emphasise that their experience indicates that this issue is overlooked by academic institutions sponsoring research as well as by institutional research ethics committees that approve research protocols.

Vicarious traumatising is defined as 'harmful changes that occur in professionals' views of themselves, others, and the world, as a result of exposure to the graphic and/or traumatic material of their clients' and is associated with

disruptions to safety, trust, esteem, intimacy and control (Baird & Kracen, 2006). Secondary traumatic stress refers to a set of psychological symptoms that mimic post-traumatic stress disorder, including exhaustion, hypervigilance, avoidance and numbing, but it is acquired through exposure to persons suffering the effects of trauma. Unlike vicarious traumatisa-tion, which is seen as a cognitive phenomenon, secondary traumatic stress is considered a broader syndrome of experi-ences directly linked to post-traumatic stress syndrome symptoms (Baird & Kracen, 2006). In this paper, we use the terms vicarious and secondary trauma to draw attention to the fact that vicarious traumatisa-tion and secondary traumatic stress occur not only in psychotherapeutic settings, but also in fieldwork research, and they should not be ignored.

Challenging research settings, such as vulnerable or dan-gerous research, are ledged acknowledged as causing dis-tressing emotions and feelings for researchers (Brennan, 2005; Lorimer, 2010), as they usually involve research topics such as addiction, illegal activity, mental health and victimisation or take places in dangerous or trauma-triggering research set-tings, such as war zones (Dowler, 2001), among youth gangs (Baird, 2018) or among crack users (Williams et al., 1992). Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) distinguish four major types of physically, emotionally, ethically and professionally dangerous research settings. These settings relate to the ex-perience of threat or risk, with serious negative consequences faced by researchers engaged in qualitative research.

As mentioned, the importance of researchers' physical safety has been acknowledged in the scientific literature and in research practice. Adam Baird (2018), who conducted field-work with youth gang members in Medellín, Colombia, ar-gues that it is crucial for researchers to develop an intuitive sense of danger. This includes the ability to discern, anticipate and respond to the various forms of insecurity encountered in the field and to gain a nuanced understanding of the specific rules of engagement, drawing from Bourdieusian principles, by gaining a 'feel for the rules of the game' (Baird, 2018; Bourdieu, 1992, as cited in Baird, 2018). Acquiring this in-tuitive sense of danger should equip researchers with the tools to consider how they can be protected and supported as an integral part of their research process – before, during and after conducting research (Woods et al., 2022).

In their classic work, Williams et al. (1992) provide advice based on 25 years' experience of fieldwork with crack users. Among their general recommendations, they list proper in-troductions and dressing and behaving in certain ways, which exhibit a sense of belonging to the setting. They suggest establishing one's own presence in the field, talking to par-ticipants and building rapport with them, as well as creating a certain mind set and avoiding a victim role (or fearful be-haviour) to increase one's own safety. Creating physical and psychological safety zones and relying on prudence, common sense and a 'sixth sense' can help reduce physical violence to a minimum, while using humour and neutrality can be beneficial.

Dowler (2001), who conducted fieldwork in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 'the 1990s' to reflect the lives of women in war zones chose to explore 'the everyday construction of violence'. She believes that to live and work in daily life, acquire local knowledge and conduct open-ended interviews that are rooted in respondents' everyday lives 'are more productive than a highly sensationalised image of the re-searcher in a clandestine meeting' (Dowler, 2001, p. 415). Dowler simply had to live with the threat of violence as part of her workday life and shed her preconceptions of her infor-mants as agents of violence. As for a female researcher, 'the simple act of 'hanging a proper laundry' was also a test of credibility' (Dowler, 2001, p. 415).

Nevertheless, the researcher's emotions, emotional re-sponse and emotional health in research are being better acknowledged in scientific literature and academic research practice. The emotions the researcher feels during the research process, the perspective they adopt, possibly quite divergent from their own, when performing an interview, when col-lecting data and then analysing and describing it are important. The researcher's emotional health should not solely be a personal matter for them but also for the academic institution and community they are part of. Looking after the emotional health of researchers is a good option and should become an important part of preparing researchers for fieldwork (Davies & Spencer, 2010, Grimm et al., 2020). Many scholars advise self-awareness of researchers related to their own emotional baggage or dynamics from their own childhood and life ex-perience, which can help them deal with feelings in fieldwork and better understand the research subject and participants (Cook, 2010; Davies & Spencer, 2010; Hage, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Lorimer, 2010; Rosaldo, 1993; Winfield, 2021). In the same line of thoughts, Behar (1966) argues that the outcome of research is always shaped by the relationship between the researcher and the subject. Challenging academic guidelines for anthropological research which often emphasize the im-portance of staying faithful to the information gathered, Behar (1966) highlights that as researchers collect data in the field, they inevitably experience emotions triggered by the infor-mation they encounter. Drawing from this, some researchers (Collins & Cooper, 2014) have suggested emotional intelli-gence as a framework for supplementing methodological reflections during fieldworks in order to strengthen re-searchers' ability to connect with participants, engage actively in interviews, and gain a clearer understanding of the ex-periences participants describe.

Regarding vulnerability in research, Taylor, Paige Winfield (2021) advocates researchers' knowledge of their personal limits and that they should learn to recognise when certain situations exceed their role and skills. She stresses that a researcher is not a mental health professional for their research participants, who should be advised to contact mental health professionals in the case of obvious need. Finally, Winfield underlines importance of effective boundaries and self-care by creating and maintaining clear physical or symbolic

boundaries, cultivating social lives outside the field and engaging in personal self-care routines, which can all help investigators avoid burnout and emotional enmeshment with participants and preserve good emotional well-being.

A recent trend has emerged among scholars working on climate change to share their feelings regarding the process of climate change. Their emotional responses can be used to form new questions, support each other and aim to act with their research towards positive change (Simpson, 2020). Ashlee Consolo (2020) admits that ecological grief is driving action and anger, as well as huge changes in policy, as it becomes part of the public narrative. Deanna Witman (2020) refers to specialised psychological help and community dialogue as important strategies in processing ecological grief.

As Winfield (2021) emphasises, it is crucial for researchers to learn to recognise situations where their role and skills may be exceeded. In alignment with the insights provided by Woods et al. (2022), it is imperative to plan for critical conversations with senior researchers before, during and after conducting research. Such conversations can reassure researchers, particularly early-career researchers, and provide avenues for collaborative and constructive approaches to navigate through the fact that they are not alone in their experiences, emotions and feelings, rather than ignoring or avoiding them, which can be detrimental (Woods et al., 2022, p. 73). To better support researchers' well-being in the face of trauma-triggering research settings, it is essential to implement policies, processes and strategies aimed at reducing harm and promoting coping skills and healing at both the individual and institutional levels (Woods et al., 2022).

Addressing Researchers' Risks of Vicarious or Secondary Trauma

In challenging research settings, especially involving dangerous research, researchers understand that they lack autonomy over the research process, mirroring the lack of autonomy experienced by research subjects in their own bodies and life situations. Losing autonomy over one's life situation could be a trauma-triggering experience that profoundly influences the research journey.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the most important tool for gathering data. At the very start of a process, the researcher must reflect on their own values, the frequently not conscious assumptions they have made and their possible biases (Creswell, 2013). Those reflections must continue throughout the research process and expand into giving the scholar a sense of their own experience and an awareness of how the process influences them in turn, as this influence may then impact the data analysis phase. One of these reflections is how a researcher can give voice to the participants while preventing harm. Understanding what harm is depends on researchers' reflections of the social and political contexts and their role in the research process. For example, in research in

an authoritarian political context, when a research object is under constant threat and harm, the researcher's reflection of their role ends with a feeling of impotence, and the researcher finds themselves contributing to suppression rather than making a voice for research participants living under suppressive conditions.

Below, this paper explores the different situational contexts from fieldwork in which researchers experience various emotional responses and consequently face risks of vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress. The effects of guilt, the emotional burden of (post-factum) introspection of research experiences, vulnerability to being utilised by research participants and the emotional burden of multitasking in fieldwork on a researcher are explored, as well as the need for continuous support and positive feedback from the research institution even when the research is conducted in more ordinary settings. The section highlights the need for ethical remedies for a researcher's contextual vulnerability.

Emotional Response to Guilt

A researcher's guilt in challenging research settings can be a risk factor for developing vicarious traumatisation and secondary traumatic stress. The online research becomes more frequent in the case of dangerous research settings also exactly because of the physical danger for the researcher. In the example below, the second author, Seddighi, reflects on her research on digital political activism orchestrated from Iran, the authoritarian political structure that created a dangerous setting for the research participants and a vulnerable research situation for the researcher. In this study, *Politicization of grievable lives on Iranian Facebook pages*, experienced bloggers in Iran being killed while she was interviewing Iranian bloggers and including their voices in the research.

The day after an interview, I woke up with the news that an Iranian blogger, Satar Beheshti, died in custody. During digital ethnography, the interviewees, such as Iranian bloggers, chose devices that they believed to be safe to be used for interviews. In many cases, they chose Facebook, as it was filtered in Iran and accessible only through proxy. Therefore, many believed Facebook was a safe place to have dangerous discussions. I was totally left by myself to reflect on whether I put any person in danger in this process. When I got to know about the killed bloggers, I felt guilty for putting a person in danger.

The fact that research is conducted and enabled through digital media makes it even more unclear for the researcher to estimate how digitally enabled interactions might increase harm to participants. However, the emotional response of guilt is not merely a reaction to putting a person in danger; it is also an experience stemming from a vulnerable research context in which researchers overestimate their capacity to impact the research field. This vulnerable research context is characterised by the fact that political activists are unable to freely

exercise, protect or promote fundamental human rights. Their ability to influence or act related to these rights is restricted or suppressed, often by external forces, such as an authoritarian government or political system. This political context diminishes the researcher's ability to reflect on their role in the research process and estimate how they might have an impact on the safety of research participants, which can, in turn, result in feelings of guilt.

This researcher experienced a strong feeling of guilt and loss of appetite when one of the online campaigns followed an imprisoned human rights activist, Nasrin Sotoudeh, on a 50-day hunger strike. During her imprisonment, her role as a mother of young children was leveraged to mobilise support on social media and advocate for justice on her behalf. Sotoudeh resorted to hunger strikes to secure the right to see her children, and these became pivotal moments that inspired many to engage in political issues through social media channels transcending international borders.

In the autumn of 2012 and the winter of 2013, she embarked on a 50-day hunger strike in protest against a travel ban imposed on her daughter. While archiving online materials from the campaign, I became acquainted with how individuals commenting on the online campaigns experienced guilt. They grappled with feelings of guilt because they were unable to participate actively in political activities due to concerns for their personal safety. During this time, I was a guest researcher in the UK and had limited access to my supervisor and my network in Norway.

As the researcher has had the background as political refugee and experienced political violence in young age, the researcher's guilt can deepen and, therefore, heighten the risk of vicarious or secondary trauma. In this case, it was burdened by the fact that the researcher was a guest lecturer in a foreign country and had limited communication with her supervisor and social network in Norway, where she lived and worked.

Emotional Burden of (Post-Factum) Introspection of Research Experiences

The researcher who interviewed refugee artists granted asylum in a Nordic country noted her feelings and impressions after each interview, expanding the overall insight into the artists' experiences while promoting introspection and the subsequent inclusion of those experiences in the analysis (Różańska-Mglej, 2022). Her noted experiences included information on the way participants reacted to the interview, their body language and motivation to participate, as well as information on her own motivation and emotions during the interview process:

... when they spoke of highly emotionally charged experiences, the respondents showed high bodily tension (clenched fists, creaking voice, tensed muscles), and some relieved it by crying

towards the end of the interview. Most of the respondents expressed gratitude for being able to tell their story and spoke of [the] relief they felt when sharing their experiences with an empathetic listener. Some even compared the interview to a session with a psychologist. They also felt strongly motivated by their need to testify against the regimes of their countries and to speak on behalf of those artists who could not.

The researcher's own subjective emotions also surfaced throughout the interview and usually reflected the difficult moments of the research process. Most often, the researcher felt curious and invested, due to being interested in the subject, but she also felt uncomfortable when the respondents gave details about their most traumatising experiences. At those times, the researcher had to use vicarious traumatising protection techniques. Because she was working on such difficult subjects and with persons who experienced multiple traumas, the researcher made sure to offer them ample space and time for closure, even if this went beyond the allotted time or required another meeting to continue. She also felt highly responsible for the data collected, understanding that her respondents were public figures, often still targeted by the regimes or extremist groups from their countries of origin, and who could be in danger or whose families could be in danger, as a consequence of mishandling the data. (Różańska-Mglej, 2022, p. 128)

Thus, the research process influenced the scholar by leading her to introspection and to consciously include her feelings in the process of understanding the studied phenomenon. Her emotions included curiosity, investment, discomfort, the need to protect herself from vicariously reflecting the trauma described and a very strong feeling of responsibility for the information she was entrusted with, since the data could endanger her participants or their families if it got into the wrong hands. Her account clearly shows the burden that collected data places on the researcher, and she recognised that burden as a risk of suffering vicarious traumatising, not only during the interview process but when she became the holder of sensitive data which could lead to great danger for both her participants who had fled their countries and for their families still there, if released even accidentally.

The information obtained during the interview exerts its traumatic impact on the researcher on various levels—not merely through the necessity of maintaining confidentiality but on a much deeper level, specifically by confronting the researcher with a conflict arising from her professional role. According to the ethics of scientific research, the researcher should include all the material collected within a given project in the presentation of results. This situation becomes even more complex when disclosing the content could put the respondent at risk, potentially even endangering her life.

Research conducted by the first author among refugees from the North Caucasus seeking humanitarian protection in Poland provided an example of such a situation. One of the respondents, simply by disclosing the information to the

researcher, became a potential target for retribution from both their country's authorities and a criminal organization operating there. The researcher decided to entirely omit this interview and exclude the individual from the study group and collected materials, even though the interview had otherwise provided very unique data. This difficult decision caused the researcher stress and a sense of helplessness.

Vulnerability to Being Utilised by Research Participants

In vulnerable research contexts, in which participants might experience a lack of autonomy over exercising fundamental human rights, they may strategically use research settings as a means of seeking protection. This can, in turn, place researchers in situations that deviate from fundamental ethical guidelines for avoiding harm to participants by anonymising them, leaving the researcher with insufficient knowledge on how to protect themselves from harm.

During her research, Seddighi encountered such a situation of her research being utilised by the participant, particularly when she interviewed bloggers residing in Iran. Given the precarious political climate in which several bloggers had been arrested and imprisoned (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) and some journalists had been executed (Afshar, 2011) in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement social uprising, seeking visibility through research participation became a protective strategy. The research participants believed that by having their names associated with research conducted outside Iran, they might garner support from international organisations such as Amnesty International if they were to be detained. Seddighi recounts an incident as follows:

On one occasion, after interviewing a blogger, the blogger gathered information about me, including some private pictures, and created a blog post discussing my research and reflecting on my research questions. When I requested the removal of my private pictures, he claimed not to understand that these images were considered private. Moreover, he sought visibility as a political activist through his involvement in my research. He achieved this visibility by referencing the ongoing research and interview guide.

This example illustrates that researchers may find their own privacy compromised in research conducted digitally and in a vulnerable research context. Seddighi encounter with a blogger who posted her private pictures and details online without her permission illustrates the risk of having personal boundaries crossed. This violation underscores the potential dangers researchers face when participants, perhaps out of desperation or misunderstanding, disregard the privacy and ethical norms typically upheld in research settings. Navigating these complex situations can cause significant mental distress for researchers.

Seddighi's situation, in which she had to address the unauthorised sharing of her private information and the

participant's exploitation of the research for personal visibility, highlights the emotional and ethical dilemmas researchers face. The stress of protecting both the participants' and their own well-being while adhering to ethical standards can be overwhelming. Often, there is insufficient institutional support for researchers dealing with such ethical and emotional challenges. The absence of robust guidelines and backing can leave researchers feeling isolated and stigmatised, particularly when they encounter situations that deviate from the norm. Seddighi's experience underscores the need for institutions to provide better support and clearer guidelines to help researchers navigate these ethically fraught and emotionally taxing situations effectively.

Emotional Burden of Multitasking in Fieldwork

Researchers might face risks of vicarious traumatisation or secondary traumatic stress in less dangerous or less emotionally charged research settings, for example, when facing multitasking in research fieldwork.

Research among Polish economic migrants in Spain (Szydłowska-Klakla, 2022) reflects the interdependence between the physical safety and emotional well-being of the researcher, who must deal with various challenges posed by a multilayered research context, which, according to the account of the scholar herself, posed a risk of vicarious traumatisation:

When reflecting upon the research process, I realised that my fluency in [the] Spanish language, as well as my several months' long stay in the country (as well as a previous year spent at the University of Granada), was a factor in the research process – both when interpreting data and when interviewing children, because Polish was a second language for many of them. ... My knowledge of Polish and my Polish origin made it easier to connect with the parents and build trust. They also helped me recruit respondents through Polish Saturday schools. As a person coming from Poland, I could also activate experiences related to Polish culture when interviewing parents and children. Thus, my Polish nationality was a resource but also a limitation. My experience of living in Spain gave me some insight into the cultural context, as well as linguistic competences, and this let me understand my respondents' experiences better: their investment in maintaining their Polish identity and absorbing some elements of Spanish culture.

As a scholar and a psychologist, I found the study an interesting experience that taught me a lot, but [it] was also a challenge. I had many emotional interviews with the respondents, stretching well into the night and often keeping my mind occupied well afterwards. The interviews meant staying away from home for a long time, sleeping in hostels [and] returning from Madrid suburbs where the respondents lived by the metro late at night. All this was quite an adventure, but [it] frequently came with a feeling of personal danger, happening outside institutional spaces, without company or support from anyone I knew. Apprehension and lack

of security were also frequent motifs in my respondents' tales about the start of their life in Madrid. The two types of anxiety were not comparable, however, since my respondents found themselves in a much more uncertain situation – not knowing how long they will stay, whether they will find a job or not and not speaking the language. Nevertheless, the feeling of personal insecurity could have been similar and perhaps allowed me to understand the parents' situation. I was happy to be part of the Polish diaspora, even for a while, and take an active part as a child psychologist in the Polish school. Those tasks were all very intense, however, and as such they were a risk factor for vicarious traumatisation and professional burnout.' (Szydłowska-Klakla, 2022, pp. 287–289)

This account highlights several aspects of the research project. The scholar's own Polish nationality, as well as that of her participants, was an important resource that influenced the way she could communicate with them. At the same time, without her knowledge of Spanish – the language of the receiving culture – this would have been insufficient. Her competence in Spanish was particularly important in her interviews with the children, who did not speak Polish well enough to fully express themselves and describe their everyday experiences.

Another problem Szydłowska-Klakla (2022) encountered was the conflict of social roles. Her participants wanted to see her as a psychologist who could influence the negative behaviour of their children, whereas her role as a data-gathering researcher precluded her from making such interventions.

The interviews were difficult due to their subject matter and, as such, placed an emotional and intellectual burden on the researcher, one which persisted for some time after the process itself had ended. Intense field research came with physical fatigue and, at times, with a feeling of personal danger when traversing the city alone at night, with no company or support. The researcher was pushed to reflect on the research she was conducting, and she experienced further lasting tension when actualising those feelings during the data analysis phase of her project. The circumstances of that project showcase the vulnerable researcher phenomenon – the fact that a scholar is exposed to danger and, in a way, helpless when doing field research (Tang et al., 2020). Including safeguards for field researchers should be an ethical requirement for scientific work (Tang et al., 2020).

Contextual Vulnerability of the Researcher and the Need for Ethical Remedies

Psychology has been particularly remiss in exploring researchers' experiences related to the research process and the way in which participating in a process influences them in turn. It is a problem of the lack of scrutiny of protocols approved by institutional research ethics committees regarding the time needed to conduct highly demanding research. Too

short a time necessitates conducting several interviews a day, leading to researchers' psychological exhaustion, a sense of guilt for inadequate attention to subsequent interviews on a given day and, ultimately, a decrease in the quality of the collected data. Protocols lack information on the possibility of debriefing for researchers operating under such strong pressure, as well as the need to occasionally take breaks in research and take a day off for the sake of mental health (Lusk & Terrazas, 2015). Requirements for actions aimed at protecting the well-being of researchers before, during and after research, as well as providing them with appropriate support, are lacking. Such actions should involve mentoring, supervision during research and pre-research training for researchers dealing with individuals with trauma (Branson & Radu, 2018; Matos et al., 2023; Močnik, 2019).

The situation of conducting field research under dual pressure—difficulty accessing respondents and minimal financial resources and time within which the research could be conducted—necessitated accepting every opportunity to carry out the study under the conditions proposed by the respondents. This applied to the research's timing and the location where it was conducted. Some respondents agreed to be interviewed only after returning home from work, often located in neighborhoods far from the city center. As a result, interviews took place in the evening, and the researcher returned to her hostel in the city center at night. The vulnerability of research participants can put the researcher in vulnerable situation.

During the interviews, the researcher faced a conflict between two norms: the social norm of reciprocity and the norm of proper diagnostic procedure. The norm of reciprocity, arising from the respondents' agreement to participate in the interview, was reflected in their expectation that the researcher, as a child psychologist, would provide opinions and guidance on preventing behaviors they perceived as undesirable in their children. On the other hand, the norm of proper diagnostic procedure excluded forming such an opinion under the conditions in which the study was conducted (a completely different purpose agreed upon with the respondents, lack of privacy, and short-term contact). The respondents primarily perceived the researcher as a psychologist and, implicitly, a diagnostician who could "incidentally" help them with parenting issues during the course of the research.

Recommendations for Academic Ethics Committees regarding Researchers' Emotional Well-Being

Although frameworks like emotional intelligence offer methodological reflections on how researchers' emotions influence the research process and interactions with participants, little attention has been given to the impact of fieldwork on researchers' emotional well-being. We consider the recommendations for academic ethics committees regarding

researchers' emotional well-being important. However, we suggest them not as some fixed part of ethical protocols, but less formal recommendations, which, however, should become a part of research training for Master, doctoral and other young or emerging researchers. Their less formal nature would also invest more trust in and provide more agency for instead of control of those researchers, who are in the earlier stages of their career.

1. Ensure that research plans and protocols are realistic regarding the time and other resources needed to conduct highly demanding research. Protocols should include information on the possibility of debriefing for a researcher operating under strong pressure, as well as the need to occasionally take breaks in research and take a day off for the sake of their mental health.
2. Establish the requirements for actions aimed at protecting the physical safety and emotional well-being of researchers before, during and after research, as well as providing them with appropriate support, including mentoring, supervision during research and pre-research training for researchers dealing with individuals with trauma. Requirements or recommendations should cover working in pairs in dangerous research settings.
3. Acknowledge that a researcher's emotional health should not solely be the personal matter of the researcher, but also of the entire academic institution and community they are part of. Therefore, building skills to protect researchers' emotional well-being should become part of preparing researchers for fieldwork. To better support the well-being of researchers in the face of trauma-triggering research settings, it is essential to implement policies, processes and strategies aimed at reducing harm and promoting coping skills and healing at both the individual and institutional levels.
4. Arrange for mental health professionals to be available for researchers, especially those doing dangerous, sensitive or another challenging research.
5. Provide training for researchers on their own emotional health, which would teach them self-awareness related to their own emotional baggage and the dynamics from their own childhood, personal limits and boundaries, and self-care.
6. Ensure that competent and experienced advisers are employed and available to scholars, especially young scholars, for advice on practical challenging situations, from the physical safety of the researcher to recognising and addressing trauma and such situations as the researcher facing sensitive information about them being exposed, especially when conducting sensitive, vulnerable or dangerous fieldwork, to avoid secondary trauma.
7. Establish compulsory empathetic mentorship of young researchers, which would not be overbearing but would provide them with agency and autonomy in conducting their research. Their supervisors should keep in constant contact with young scholars conducting field

research and support them in making decisions that keep a balance between attaining research goals and their own physical safety and emotional well-being. Conversations should reassure young researchers that they are not alone in their experiences and help them navigate through emotions and feelings and deal with a sense of loneliness while in the research field.

Conclusions

Guided by the themes identified in the literature review, this paper aimed to reflect on fieldwork notes and highlight aspects of researchers' vulnerability that have received little attention. Unexpected emotional strain on researchers may stem from their (especially young researchers') limited understanding of the research context, creating vulnerable conditions for both the researcher and the research outcomes.

The article has explored how research's impact on a researcher should be wisely managed, paying special attention to vicarious and secondary trauma experienced by a researcher. It stresses that emotional distress or even exhaustion can be a particularly significant issue here, especially when researchers are exposed to dangerous situations or are privy to highly emotional and intense narratives during fieldwork. It draws attention to such situations, which create contextual vulnerability, in which researchers find themselves unsafe or overwhelmed by the context in which they are conducting their data collection.

The article draws on earlier studies on researchers' vulnerability and theories of trauma to shape its methodological reflections. We have presented a reflexive account of research projects that highlights the integral role of emotion within the social, political and cultural contexts in which field researchers operate. They have explored how these emotional dynamics influence the relationship between the researcher and their project from two interrelated aspects. The overarching goal of this paper is to draw attention to the contextual vulnerability of researchers and advocate for consistent and sustainable strategies for the protection and well-being of researchers, particularly those who are younger and less experienced.

The intention is not to claim that the recommendations offered are exhaustive, nor that implementing such guidelines will eliminate all challenges. Instead, the goal is to promote recognition and awareness of researchers' emotional well-being at both institutional and educational levels. These recommendations aim to provide essential emotional support to researchers, fostering a more humane approach to qualitative research. This approach highlights empathy for researcher as a constant guiding principle.

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