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Abstract

There is a relative paucity of studies specifically exploring the experiences of qualitative researchers undertaking research in socially sensitive areas or with marginalised groups. This paper reports some of the findings of a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of ten participant researchers. The findings of this study suggest that participant researchers are cognisant of issues of power and privilege in conducting their research. They also illustrate the motivation to enact change via the research findings. However, they demonstrate the complexities of power, privilege and change in the research process and how these concepts can be related to researcher guilt. The study shows that experience can act as a buffer in the qualitative research process but that further work in researcher resilience is required. Participant researchers suggest the need for more honest and open discussions around foundational principles of qualitative research. They suggest further development of cross institutional spaces for these discussions to take place. However, the paper also illustrates the necessity to consider issues of power, privilege and research as social change at individual, institutional and systemic levels,

Keywords: Qualitative, Power, privilege, researcher, experience, change, guilt.

Introduction

This research study has its foundations in the experiences of three qualitative researchers in the UK at different stages of research careers, undertaking research which could be considered to focus on sensitive topics or with marginalised groups. Our research concerns a broad range of areas including abuse in faith settings, experiences of sex work support services; bereavement; homelessness; experiences of disability; and experiences of LGBT citizens. Our work crosses disciplinary boundaries including psychology, sociology, social work and social policy. Through discussions around our research we became cognisant

of some of our own personal challenges and the need to better understand qualitative

researchers' experiences of undertaking research with sensitive topics and/or marginalised

groups. We were also mindful of the tensions experienced in conducting research which

seeks to address issues of abuse, justice and inequality and the limits on developing actions as

a result of our research. Discussion with colleagues undertaking qualitative research in

cognate areas demonstrated a range of challenges at personal, organisational and systemic

levels, but an absence of opportunities to fully discuss these. This led to our decision to

conduct this study.

The current UK research context can be argued to play a role in framing research

focus and decision making. Watermeyer and Hedgecoe (2016) discuss the 'audit culture' that

dominates the UK context with each Higher Education Institution being entered into an

assessment exercise, – the Research Excellence Framework (REF), to evaluate the quality of

research produced. This last occurred in 2014 and the next will occur in 2021. Research is

judged on the quality of outputs, impact beyond academia and the environment that supports

research (Watermeyer & Hedgecoe, 2016). On the basis of discussions by reviewing panels

decisions are made about the quality of the research activity of institutions and future funding

is attached to these decisions. Pertinent to this paper is the increasing focus on 'impact

beyond academia' in this evaluation exercise increasing from 20% weighting in 2014 to 25%

in 2020. Watermeyer (2012) comments upon the imperative to embed impact in research. In

this context research with marginalised groups or in sensitive topics, which has real world

applications, and can be evidenced to impact policy and practice can be argued to contribute

to the impact agenda. Thus, more emphasis on the need to conduct this form of research may

be being given by UK HEIs.

This is a further argument for the need to better understand researchers' experiences

of conducting such research. The need to explore researchers' experiences is shared by others

such as Kennedy, Hicks and Yarker (2013) who explored experiences of UK cancer researchers. Their findings suggest that researchers' experiences of undertaking sensitive research were often overlooked and under investigated.

Certainly, there is literature documenting some of the challenges associated with qualitative research. Parker and O'Reilly (2013) note that there is a growing concern for researcher safety. This includes concerns for physical safety, management and risk and the emotional responses of researchers. A key challenge reported is the management of emotional labour when undertaking research into sensitive topics or with marginalised groups (Drake and Harvey, 2014: Brougham and Utterly, 2017). It can be difficult to anticipate problems that might be encountered and undertaking qualitative research can lead to a range of emotional responses including anger, guilt, shame, fear, sadness, feeling scared and depleted (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall and Limjerwala, 2014; Pio and Singh, 2016). In some cases, researchers may experience nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and difficulties in concentration (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall and Limjerwala, 2014). Pio and Singh (2016) highlight the importance of focusing upon researcher care within qualitative research and the emotional impact undertaking such research can have upon the researcher. However, Jackson, Jackson, Backett-Milburn and Newall (2013) suggest coping with the emotional demands of a research study is construed as a private activity that the researcher undertakes individually whilst managing their own emotional state. Further, although codes of ethics include consideration of protection for the researcher from harm, much of the focus of ethics committees and processes is upon protection for the participant (Pio and Singh, 2016).

Further challenges for qualitative researchers concern dilemmas and tensions that may occur as a result of conducting sensitive research or work with marginalised groups. McQueeney and Lavelle (2017) note the difficulty of negotiating worldviews which clash

with those of their participants and the dilemmas created in seeking to Portray accurately and fairly interpretations of research findings.

Ballamingie and Johnson (2011) suggest that more consideration needs to be given to the ways in which researchers are vulnerable within the research process. They report that their qualitative doctoral research rendered them vulnerable in numbers of ways including through the challenge of exposing injustice whilst attempting to prevent exaggeration of the tensions associated with this. They suggest that attention must be paid to 'professional vulnerability' in the research process. Similarly, Raheim et al (2016) note a variety of ways in which qualitative researchers, using a range of participatory methodologies, reported experiencing vulnerability.

Pio and Singh (2016) suggest that in addition to considering researcher harm and vulnerability it is also important to consider the topic of researcher resilience, that is being able to continue despite challenges and to manage with adversity. They suggest that lacking resilience "can have serious implications for the well-being and performance of researchers" (Pio and Singh, 2016, p232). They note the necessity of developing resilience within researchers and the risk that researchers might be deterred from undertaking sensitive research due to the perceived Possible negative psychological impact of conducting such studies. Vincett (2018, p45) argues that there are "limited strategies for preparing researchers for emotional experiences, navigating challenging situations and building resilience through the research process" and that while the need for support for researchers is recognised it is still not realised in many UK HEIs. Therefore, Vincett (2018) argues for the need for researchers to engage in self-care, to develop a self-care plan. This message is echoed by Barker (2017) who wrote a zine (self-published work of text and images, often magazine or informal style) about the importance of self-care and noted that this acts as a form of self-preservation, enabling individuals to maintain energy, to support others and to engage in

society in order to bring about change and make a difference. A further factor related to the development of resilience is the experience of the individual undertaking the research study. Kendal et al 2007 (cited in Kennedy, Hicks and Yarker, 2013) suggest that experienced researchers should be recruited for end-of-life research as younger researchers could experience unnecessary distress. Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003) argue that age and life experiences of the researcher influence how undertaking research impacts upon them. Kennedy, Hicks and Yarker (2013) found that less experienced researchers were often impacted by the emotional pressure of undertaking research in oncology, whilst more experienced researchers did not report this challenge. However, all researcher participant's in their study noted the risk of becoming involved in participant's lives and the emotional impact that could result and even experienced researchers can feel ill prepared for the emotional demands placed on them in the research process (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017)

Thus, there is a body of work highlighting some of the challenges and potential risks encountered by qualitative researchers. However, much of this work to date focuses upon specific topics or is located within specific disciplines (Kennedy, Hicks and Yarker, 2013; Fahie, 2014; Siegel and Wildt, 2015;2016; Pio and Singh, 2016). Often, work discussing the impact of undertaking qualitative research arises out of reflections upon a specific research project. There is a need for work which crosses disciplinary boundaries and seeks to develop a more integrated and holistic understanding of the range of challenges faced by those undertaking qualitative research.

Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) note that qualitative research often has at its core the desire to understand in depth the experiences of others. The motivation for undertaking qualitative research can be the desire to share experiences, injustices and inequalities with a view to bringing about change. Derickson & Routledge (2015) note that people are often driven by a powerful emotional response to injustice and that this motivates

scholar-activists to conduct research to bring about change. Holloway and Biley (2011) suggest that qualitative research does occasionally change the lives of participants and some of this change can be long-term. However, sometimes the good intentions of qualitative researchers are not always effective.

In seeking to explore the experiences of others, qualitative researchers are cognisant of the power imbalances that exist in society and power relations which exist between researcher and the participants in the study (O'Connor and Neill, 2004). Qualitative researchers are deemed to occupy a privileged position in comparison to research participants and focus upon power imbalances is a common theme in qualitative design (Raheim et al 2016). Additionally, qualitative research rejects the traditional conception of researchers as sole contributors to the thinking within a project and therefore power in the process is more equitably shared with participants (Reason, 1994 cited in Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009). Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009, p.279) suggest that qualitative research "presupposes a redistribution of power". One of the challenges in this redistribution is in seeking to employ an appropriate methodology that facilitates the redistribution of power whilst seeking to give voice to the participants. This is especially the case in research with sensitive topics or marginalised groups. Rapport building with participants can be an integral part of creating an environment in which individuals are able to share their stories (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009).

However, Holloway and Biley (2011) note that strategies that seek to give voice are not always effective or useful. Indeed, the whole concept of giving voice is questionable and reflection should be made upon whether qualitative researchers are best placed to give voice to others. Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, (2009) suggest that power relations in qualitative research are complex. They may be best thought of as existing on a continuum. At times the researcher holds more power and at times the participants may be in a more

powerful position in terms of the research process, and this could be especially pertinent during the data collection phase of a research study. At each stage of the research process the researcher should reflect with participants about the partnership and power balance. These critical considerations of redressing power, research motivations and giving voice are essential to the development of authentic qualitative research, which mirrors the underpinning ideology of reflecting upon power in the research process . Willig (2013) notes that qualitative researchers hold particular power at times of data interpretation and with this power comes responsibility for the researcher. Thus, in some ways qualitative researchers can clearly hold power and privilege but in other ways they may be vulnerable within the research process. This study aims to explore further researchers' experiences within qualitative research processes. The research question is 'What are the experiences of qualitative researchers conducting research into sensitive topics or with marginalised groups?'

Method

This study took a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of researchers working with sensitive topics or disturbing data. The aim was to understand these experiences in depth and thus a qualitative approach allowing detailed exploration of personal experience was appropriate and important (Forrester, 2010).

(*In order to differentiate our research participants from their own participants in their studies, we will use the term 'participant researchers' to refer to the ten participants in this study.)

As researchers, we were cognisant of previous studies and the key issues highlighted in these and therefore decided to use semi-structured interviews to allow exploration of issues arising from previous research studies but also to allow participant researchers flexibility to

raise issues relevant and important to them (Runswick-Cole, 2011). This, approach therefore allowed for the construction of new knowledge (Mason, 2018).

Funding

Obtaining funding to conduct research into researchers' experiences is challenging. However, Bournemouth university operate a Pump Prime scheme to allow researchers to undertake pilot studies in order to build towards a larger research bid. This study was awarded funding from this scheme in January 2018. The scheme required the study to be complete by the end of July 2018.

Ethics

The study obtained ethical approval from Bournemouth University Social Science Ethics Committee in 2018. It complies with the BPS Code of Ethics (2011). As a research team we were aware of the delicate nature of some of the research being conducted and the necessity to protect both the participant researchers and in turn their own participants from harm. All participant researchers were provided with an information sheet and opportunities to ask questions prior to interview. They were asked to sign a consent form and their right not to answer questions and to withdraw their data were made clear prior to and at the start of the interview process. Participant researchers were provided with details of agencies to contact should they wish to speak to someone following the interview.

Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were of the upmost importance to our participant researchers. Some expressed clear concern that their contribution should not be identifiable. This was especially the case where research areas were relatively small, or a

researcher's approach was quite unique and thus too much detail could lead to identification. Great care was taken in the transcription process to remove identifiable details including any mention of the area of research within participants quotes. In dissemination activities confidentiality and anonymity have been maintained.

Participants

The Research Team

It is usual for the discussion of participants in a qualitative research paper to focus on recruitment and selection of the individuals who took part in the research. However, we felt it was important to include a brief discussion of the research team in this paper. The reason for this is because the constituency of this team was a determined part of the research process. The initial idea for the study arose out of discussion between the Professor and Senior Lecturer who constitute part of this team. In deciding to develop this project both were mindful of the research that suggested that stage of career could impact experiences of conducting research. Therefore, we deliberately chose to employ a research assistant who was at the early stage of their research career. The combination of early expertise, mid-range expertise and developed research expertise was felt pertinent to allow for detailed discussion of the research findings, through the lens of varied experiences of the research process. In this way, as a research team we sought to reflect a range of experience of conducting research and to incorporate this in discussions of the findings.

Research participants

This study represents an exploratory study of researcher's experiences. The funding provided allowed for interviews with 10 participants. The sample was purposeful. Earlier research suggested that previous work tended to focus on particular disciplines or study

topics. Therefore, one of the aims of this study was to cross disciplinary boundaries and to speak to researchers conducting research on a range of issues. A further consideration in participant recruitment was to try and include a range of research experience in the participant group as previous work had suggested this could be a factor to explore. Thus, we sought to recruit early career researchers, midcareer researchers and highly experienced researchers. Therefore, the participant group was selected to meet the criteria discussed above.

Participants were recruited through email. There was significant interest in the research study leading to offers of participation from a range of researchers. It is anticipated that a larger research project could include some of those we were unable to incorporate into this research study. As recruitment provided more participants than we were able to interview, we made the decision to include participants researching different areas, from different disciplinary backgrounds, with a different key focus topic and with different length of experience in conducting research. Those participants whose work represented duplication of topic and length of experience across these criteria were thanked and asked if they would be prepared to be part of a larger study in the future. Table one shows details of the participants recruited. Although we sought to include a variety of topics, we recognise that there is a focus on faith or spirituality in four of the researchers. However, their length of time as researchers and stage of career are different as are their specific research topics.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Procedure

Participant researchers were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview, either face-to-face or via Skype. Eight participants chose to take part in a Skype interview, two

participants chose to take part in a face-to-face interview. For many participants the ease of Skype was preferred as this enabled individuals to conduct the interview within other activities for that day.

The interviews consisted of eight questions relating to the length of their research experience, impact of conducting research into sensitive topics or working with marginalised groups, the challenges and benefits of being a researcher in this area. Participant researchers were also encouraged to share any other information they felt relevant to the topic. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, with participant permission interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stage model of thematic analysis. Initially the transcripts were read and listened to a number of times to ensure familiarity. Reading and listening to the transcripts allowed us to ensure that we did not lose the meaning or the manner in which something was said. The transcripts were coded looking for individual units of meaning, and these codes were then reviewed to ensure they represented the transcript and to search for shared meanings. Those codes with shared meanings were grouped into sub-themes and further review lead to the development of six superordinate themes. Each of these themes represented a different aspect of the participant researcher experience. The fourth stage of Braun and Clarke's model is to review the themes. At this stage we met as a research team and discussed the findings, analysis and themes. We wanted to ensure that all members of the team were able to actively participate in this review as we were cognisant that our different levels of experience may present different lenses with which to view the data and themes arising. In this discussion all themes were explored. At this stage the theme of methodology was identified as a superordinate theme. However, in

discussion we recognised that decisions about methodology were led by two predominate rationales. The desire to empower or rebalance power in the research process led to the employment of particular methodologies. A further factor related to this was the desire to 'give voice' to participants. Participant researchers chose methodologies that seemed to offer the best chance of participant empowerment and for the participant to be able to 'give voice' to their own experiences. Therefore, the decision was made to include methodology within the broader discussions of power and giving voice. A further discussion took place around names of these themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the sub-themes and codes of which they were comprised and that they reflected the main messages of the interview transcript. At the end of the discussion there were five superordinate themes.

Reflexivity

Throughout the research process we engaged in reflexivity, trying to explore how our different positions as researchers impacted upon the researcher process and how the process impacted upon us (Probst & Berenson, 2014). We were aware that we bought different disciplinary and experiential lenses to the research process, we were all qualitative researchers who studied sensitive issues or worked with marginalised groups. Therefore, we shared many commonalities with our participant researchers. We saw this as a strength in that our different perspectives allowed for detailed discussions about findings and added to the integrity of the process (Probst & Berenson, 2014). The data analysis process led to a series of Skype and face-to-face meetings where we discussed themes and interpretations of data in detail. We recognise that the findings are therefore, co-constructed with the participant researchers, but they are clearly rooted in the research data. An important part of the process was to review the themes and ensure that those that were identified could be tracked back into the data. We believe the themes were a trustworthy interpretation of the

data, which could be carefully evidenced. The discussions we engaged in at regular intervals gave ongoing opportunity to be reflexive throughout the process.

We are aware that our participant sample only consists of females. We did seek to recruit male participants, but those who agreed to participate were female and given the short timescale required by the funding for completion, we interviewed the ten participant researchers in this study. However, moving forward we aim to have a much larger participant researcher sample including males and a further range of disciplinary and research areas.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of five superordinate themes. These were preparedness, power and privilege, researcher as an agent of change, voice or voicelessness and positionality of researcher. This paper will focus on the themes of power and privilege and researcher as an agent of change. These two themes were prevalent in the research data and importantly seemed to be interconnected in many ways. The other themes will be published in further papers.

Table two provides an overview of the five super-ordinate themes identified and the sub-

[Insert Table two here]

Theme 1: Power and Privilege

All of the interviews contained discussion of power and privilege. These discussions were dual focused, incorporating the positive and negative aspects power and privilege in their own experiences as researchers' conducting sensitive research or working with marginalised populations.

Positive aspects of power and privilege in qualitative research

Researcher as privileged

Participant researchers commented upon the privilege it is to undertake research into sensitive areas,

"Please don't write something that says – it's terrible doing socially sensitive research, it's bloody hard work for sure, but it is a total privilege ", P10 15-16,

"…the positives outweigh the negatives 100%. Absolutely 100%" P5, 204.

Others stated that being in a position to listen to the stories of participants, sometimes for the first time was a huge privilege,

"I feel very privileged because they're telling me something that they haven't told anybody else, P4 230-231,

Others acknowledge their own learning in the research process.

"I always come away from every encounter I have with the groups that I'm researching with gratitude from them, and also I always feel like they teach me a lot about challenging myself, challenging my own perceptions" P5 132-134.

Another participant researcher commented upon the privilege of creating a space in research in which people enjoy telling their story and where self-perceptions can be reflected upon,

"I was just thinking about this chap again who just so enjoyed reliving those experiences, because it, kind of gave him a nice place to go to in his head and to think about… The conversations that I had with this group of participants you can see … it changes their own self-perception" P7, 192-194; 226-230.

"I think for a lot of the women I've spoken to they've been really happy to tell their story they are really pleased that someone is interested in their lives", P9, 38-39.

Others noted the privilege of making space for difficult emotions within the research process,

"I think the reward is knowing that you've allowed people to be sad in a world where we try to remove that", P4, 267-269.

One participant researcher commented upon the reality that researchers have their own lives and can walk away from the difficult experience of their participants and in this sense, they are privileged,

"I think it's also important to keep in mind that we're in a privileged position in the sense that you can leave at any time", P1 168-170.

Experience as privilege

A more experienced participant researcher suggested that experience was a form of privilege as more experienced researchers have developed resilience through previous research studies,

"I think from my experience, the longer I do this the better I get at handling sensitive topics. I feel like compared to the way I struggled in my PhD, and the way it affected me, erm, it's different now. It is a learning curve" P1 53-55.

For others their experience prior to becoming a researcher was seen to privilege them in equipping them with knowledge and skills to be effective and resilient in the research process,

"I come to this with a professional social work background, so I have approached the interviews that I've done, those difficult conversations, really by using all the skills that I've

developed over a longer than 20-year professional career, So, then taking all of that experience, I never particularly worried about it. Just because it's a sensitive subject, to be honest I'm used to having those very emotionally charged conversations, so it didn't worry me" P7, 33-36; 44-46.

Rebalancing Power through qualitative research

Many of the discussions in the interviews related to the issue of power in research and the desire of participant researchers to rebalance power in the interview process. In many ways it was perceived as a privilege of the researcher role to develop research in a manner which redressed power, and this drove decisions about methodology, research design and analysis.

"Right from the inception of a study it's threaded through how you develop that study, how you anticipate on collecting that data, how you're going to interact with the participants, how you're going to recruit them. It's like a layered cake, every stage you have to make sure the ingredients are right. Then you conduct your study and make sure your participants truly-obviously come to no harm, but more than that, they feel in control. For me that's the most important motivator", P3 81-85.

A recurrent message in the interviews was that one of the factors that influenced participant researchers' discussions about research methodology was the drive to rebalance power.

"I want to come away with a feeling that that participant felt they were in control of it; to redress the power imbalances that you naturally are afforded being the researcher, P3 86-87; 80-81.

The desire to redress power imbalance was carefully considered in choosing the most appropriate choice for data collection,

"…so if you can find a way of not increasing the stigmatisation or vulnerability of those potentially marginalised groups, people on the fringes of society, but doing it in a way that they are part of that process" P5 289-291.

Often the method chosen to redress power including spending time and building rapport with participants,

"It involved a lot of 'getting to know you' time, you can't just walk in and expect someone to open up about their stories of abuse" P10, 50-51. "…when you've built some sort of rapport with individuals that you've interviewed" P2, 546-547.

Negative aspects of power and privilege in qualitative research

Research as disempowering

An interesting discussion by some of the participant researchers was around ways in which they were actually disempowered in the research process and how the assumption of power in qualitative research requires critical thinking in order to ensure that the nuances of this are reflected upon,

"We had a lot of understanding of power dynamics and that sort of thing, the idea that you were going in as a privileged individual being the researcher, but there was a lot less reflection, particularly on things like 'actually, what if you're not in the privileged position? P6 88-91.

Stage of career was also related to disempowerment for some participant researchers. A number commented upon feeling vulnerable as early career researchers,

"…as soon as you attach the label 'PhD student' to anybody, people automatically think you're an expert on the subject. I would go into situations and people think you've got all this knowledge and you know everything there is to know about it, and I'm like 'actually, you know more than I do at this Point in time, that's why I'm here'. That's a really uncomfortable place to be" P2,229-235.

Others noted the need to support early career and doctoral students more as sometimes a lack of support led to individuals dropping out,

"I've seen colleagues of mine who've dropped out of doing their PhD studies because they just couldn't cope". P1 361-362.

Participant researcher eight reflected that research supervision purely based on discussion of methodological issues silenced discussion of, emotional impact and vulnerability. This silencing she witnessed resulting in researchers with limited experience being unable to finish their research projects.

"Their research supervision was great in that it said 'well how's your research project going? What can we do next? Have you done the ethics? Have you done the research methodology? Your literature review?' But nobody actually took account then of the awful way this was impacting on them as individuals. In fact, interestingly, neither of them finished that research, which speaks volumes." P8, 47-53.

However, there were examples of proactive supervision to support students conducting sensitive research projects,

"We did quite a lot of work before with that PhD student to prepare them and talk about this and say 'you're probably going to find some upsetting things'. To be honest with you I don't think they fully appreciated that until they were in the field… we were quite keen

that they didn't feel alone so we used to set up skype meetings with our PhD student and then they could just offload" P6 95-102.

It was interesting to note that experience did not always lead to resilience as one experienced researcher commented in her interview,

"*I said to the refuge staff 'actually I am finding this quite emotionally difficult and I didn't anticipate this because I'd already worked in the area for ten years'*", P3, 128-129.

Therefore, assumption of resilience in more experienced researchers could lead to them being unexpectedly vulnerable in the research process.

A further consideration was related to participant researchers and philosophically questioning whether all research in some way disempowers participants for the benefit of the researcher,

"*I've actually toyed with myself and struggled with myself to come up with a moral framework for carrying out this research with marginalised Populations that doesn't just exploit them for the purpose of academic progression, or promotion, or for bolstering the needs and the interests of a research-based university*". P5 36-39.

Theme 2: Researcher as an agent of Change

A recurrent message in the interviews was the notion that participant researchers undertook qualitative research with socially sensitive topics or marginalised populations in order to bring about some change. This change might be in policy or practice or in intervention strategies, it might be giving voice to silenced stories or facilitating self-reflection in participants. Therefore, social and personal change was often a key motivator for engaging with the research process. However, a further message from the participant researcher interviews was the common feeling of frustration experienced by researchers when

unable to bring about change, in some cases researchers reflected upon the harm their research may have caused to participants and to themselves, albeit well-intentioned.

Motivation

Participant researchers reported being motivated to engage with socially sensitive research in order to bring about improvement in the lives of those co-partnering in the research process. *"the core motivation which is about improving people's lives"* P7 325-26,

"The reason I started to do this type of research was because I wanted to genuinely help make some practical contribution to those environments for marginalised groups", P1, 50-51.

One way in which participant researchers sought to improve the lives of others was by tackling stigmatisation through their research,

"...trying to let people see a bigger picture, ...the biggest challenge is stigmatisation. That's kind of the general overall aim of whatever I try to do is reduce some of that" P5 255-257.

A further consideration was embarking upon research in order to facilitate individuals developing clearer understandings of their own experiences.

"The whole point of any kind of research...in sensitive topics, is part of that research will help them make sense of their world". P4 130-132

Others noted a societal issue which needed research and further understanding as motivation, *"...you're doing research on a sensitive topic because there's an issue within society. P1 159-160.* Participant researchers were not naive to the challenges faced in seeking to bring about change but reported that the possibility of change motivates at such times,

"Sometimes it is tough when you constantly come up against a brick wall, but the thought that it is possible to make a change keeps you going" P10 424-426.

An interesting reflection by one participant researcher was the potential positive impact of REF on research into sensitive topics and with marginalised people. The focus on impact can act as a facilitator and motivator for such research and may perhaps open up more opportunities for researchers in these areas.

"REF is changing … we are seeing more emphasis put on impact case studies, that should free up researchers who are doing research with marginalised and sensitive communities, potentially vulnerable communities, to think 'actually, I do need to do more with this' P5 243-246.

Frustration

Participant researchers in the study noted frustration linked to the desire to bring about social change through their research findings,

"I honestly thought I could change the world… I really did and I was crushed when that didn't happen – I was naïve P10 – L22-24.

One noted the frustration of good quality research having little of the anticipated impact

"The frustration of not seeing change as quickly as you wanted to, or not at all, or … things going backwards and you're just like-the frustration of having done research that I feel like is quite sound, and it having absolutely no impact". P1 176-179.

Another reflected on the frustrations with professionals who seemed to ignore the outcomes of the research,

"Practitioners I have found quite frustrating…With stakeholders … who have done nothing, again, with the information they have been privy to" P2 295-300; P2 308-313.

Feelings of responsibility to their participants were evident in the interview transcripts and these led to further feelings of guilt linked to frustration of failing to bring about enough change

"…learning more and more about how people are really disadvantaged and really struggling with different aspects …. You feel like you are not doing enough for people". P9 61-66.

Another participant researcher noted the difficulty associated with not being able to help participants

"…that's the biggest challenge I feel I face is not being able to help somebody sometimes, and always trying to find a way to help them out of that" P5, 172-173.

One participant researcher commented that not being able to achieve more through research led to her decision to take time out of academia

"For me personally I also decided to retrain and leave academia for a while, because I found it so frustrating to not be able to do more" P1 344-347.

Causing Harm

In addition to the feelings of frustration the participant researchers discussed some also acknowledged causing harm to participants in the research process as they were unable to bring about the change they had hoped to and for some, felt they had promised to their participants.

"It caused harm in the sense that people were set up to believe that they could go out there and tell their story, and then weren't allowed, and were again shut down. It was a huge mess, it was terrible" P1 505-507.

For some participant researchers there was concern about harm caused to individual participants through the research process,

"I have often reflected on what happened, what happened to that guy? ...He definitely wasn't in a good place where we left him. I do feel guilty about that" P6 600-603,

Another focused upon possible harm to the group represented in the research process,

"That's my biggest thing is just making sure that whatever research I do does not exploit the people that I'm researching with and does not fuel any particular argument that can do this Population harm –P 5 P216-218.

One participant researcher suggested that less harm could have been caused if she had been given a mentor for the research process,

"If I had had a mentor who actually got what I was doing, and cared, it would've made a huge difference. I could have avoided some of the mistakes that I made, some of the harm that I caused in the field, and some of the harm that I caused to myself." P1 455-457.

Other participant researchers suggested researchers could be better protected from harm to themselves and others if there were spaces for researchers to openly discuss the impact of research,

"I do think there needs to be spaces where people can be upset and angry and crying and whatever, because of what they've heard, or they've seen... Just imagine having a space in your institute or wherever you work, where you can actually talk about how you feel in your research" P1, 363-365;375-377.

Another suggested that cross institutional opportunities to share are required,

"There could be networks within institutions and between institutions that talk about these specific issues" P2 617-618.

In terms of PhD student's participant six suggested the need for more training to be available,

"I think it should definitely be on PhD curriculums, so when they've got these training programmes, like you have one on how to do an interview or how to do content analysis or whatever, I think there needs to be a dedicated session to researching sensitive issues, I think maybe supervisor training as well, because not everybody's got the same background and experience" P6, 676-680.

These spaces and training opportunities could provide a means to reflect upon some of the issues raised by participant researchers in conducting research in these areas and thus address what participant one refers to as the 'hero complex'

"I now call it the hero complex, and that really gets you into trouble because you feel like it's up to you to solve all the problems, like individual and also the structural problems in society, and that just gets really really overwhelming" P1, 75-76.

Discussion

The findings from this research study illustrate that participant researchers were deeply reflective about their own positions and the Power and privilege associated with these. There was careful consideration of adopting methodologies that sought to redress power in the research process (O'Connor & Neill, 2004). The researcher practitioners demonstrated their sense of responsibility to the participants and to conducting high quality research (Willig, 2013). The interviews also demonstrated the desire in many qualitative researchers,

working with sensitive topics or marginalised groups, that their research should promote some personal or social change. For many the possibility of change motivated them as researchers.

However, the findings also illustrate some of the deep complexity of power and privilege in qualitative research and the manner in which researchers themselves may feel and be vulnerable in the process. The findings suggest critical reflection and change needed at the individual, organisational and systemic level. There are several important observations we would like to present from the study and then develop these into suggestions for future practice and research.

Firstly, assumed and held power and privilege of qualitative researchers can be part of the rationale to develop methods to redress Power imbalances (Karenli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009). These methods often encompass more rapport building and deeper relationships with participants than other research methods (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009). Further, Sibbald, Tertroe & Graham (2014) note the increased emphasis funders are placing on the depth of participant engagement in the research process, seeing this as being linked to successful application of the research findings. Building relationships with participants can be suggested to create a situation in which there is an enhanced feeling of researcher responsibility. It was clear in the study that building relationships with participants and hearing their stories led to increased awareness of the challenges they faced and a more elaborate sense of needing to provide solutions. In getting to know participants the feeling of responsibility towards them can be considered to grow further as can feelings of guilt and anxiety about the research process of findings. This can be considered one of the tensions encountered in the qualitative research process (McQueeny and Lavelle, 2017).

Hoskins and Stoltz (2005) note the feeling of anxiety associated with the research process, Hoskins became physically unwell during her PhD due to her concern about the impact of her narrative analysis on her participant, who she had built a relationship with, and the potential for causing offence to her. Mamali (2018) discusses the concept of 'researcher guilt' and suggests that one cause of this is can be researchers punishing themselves because of becoming over invested in the research process. The more invested we become the more potential for responsibility and researcher guilt. The work of scholar activists adds further depths to this discussion. In such research, working in collaboration with participants, relationship building, and detailed social interaction are seen as core to effective research (Derickson & Routledge, 2015). However, through this process Derickson & Routledge (2015) suggest that shared emotions and a collective sense of identity with participants is often developed. This researcher guilt could be more enhanced if coupled with the desire our participant researchers expressed to create the opportunity for social or personal change through research. However, it could be suggested that in a prevailing discourse of researcher power and privilege discussions of researcher guilt can be effectively silenced. Further, perhaps there is a need for more realistic expectations about the degree of change that is possible through the qualitative study (Holloway and Biley, 2011). A possible challenge to this position comes from the work of Derickson and Routledge (2015) who suggest that perhaps a shared identity with research participants could be strategically mobilised to bring about some of the changes that are needed. Perhaps the role of the researcher is indeed as an agent of social change but as one agent in a community of participants who might have the 'motivation, commitment and sustained participation' to bring about such change on the basis of the research evidence and findings. Again, this discussion necessitates deep critical reflection on the role of qualitative research in underpinning social change.

The participant researchers also commented upon ways in which they felt vulnerable in the research process, which has resonance with other studies with qualitative researchers (Raheim et al 2016). Vulnerability was for some associated with the realisation that they did not occupy a position of power within the research and that there was insufficient opportunity to discuss this. Others commented on the various ways in which early career researchers can be vulnerable and need support. An example of detailed support for a doctoral candidate was provided by a participant researcher. This, in part, was as a result of her own experience as an early career researcher.

In the current UK HE context academic positions are becoming ever more difficult to obtain. staff are assessed against a range of metrics including research performance (REF), teaching performance (Teaching Excellence Framework – TEF) and knowledge exchange performance (Knowledge Excellence Framework - KEF). In this metric driven context there is a very real threat of 'professional vulnerability' (Ballamingle and Johnson, 2011). Critical consideration is urgently required at asystemic level as to how effective such measures are in achieving the excellence in HE provision and research that they are intended to ensure. At organisational levels reflection is needed as to how to best support early career researchers to be able to openly express concerns and vulnerabilities without fear of redress in the form of limited ongoing career opportunities (Ballamingle and Johnson, 2011).

How then do we seek to balance the necessity to consider power within the research process when currently there is little space to authentically discuss issues of researcher vulnerability and guilt alongside the reality that power is a multi-faceted entity? The answer in part lies with the participant researchers from this study. Their suggestion is that there needs to be a more determined effort to build spaces and platforms for training and conversation in which qualitative researchers can discuss their experiences openly. This includes emotions, challenges, privileges, impact and notions of power. These spaces need to

exist within and between institutions. They need to allow for open, honest and critical debate. However, the creation of such spaces may well be thwarted by the current environmental HE context. Thus, such changes must be underpinned with institutional support.

The discourse of power that commonly exists in qualitative research presumes an assumption of researcher power which can be argued to create a void in which to discuss possible disempowerment, vulnerability and guilt of the researcher in the process. Certainly Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) note that discussions of power are complex in qualitative research and reflect stages of the research process where participants may hold more power than researchers. Mamali (2018) suggest that researchers are vulnerable in their reliance not only in accessing key participants but also to the degree of involvement and data that participants provide. Thus, there is a move to more fully explore the dimension of power within qualitative research. The findings from this study extend this debate further and suggest aspects of power within the research process the should be considered by those embarking on and supervising qualitative research into sensitive topics and with marginalised populations globally. Specifically, researchers should be helped to explore individually in what ways they hold power in the research process and in which ways they may be disempowered.

Probst and Berenson (2014) suggest the necessity for ongoing reflection in the qualitative research process. Questions and reflections about empowerment, privilege and disempowerment should occur throughout the research process to reflect the probability of the changing nature of these phenomena. We need to move the expectation that reflections on power, emotion and vulnerability are a 'private activity' (Jackson, Backett-Milburn and Newall, 2013), into seeing these all as important topics for a 'public conversation' that acknowledges the complexities and reality of these issues.

One of the factors that we sought to explore in this study was the impact of researcher experience on the research process. It was clear from the interviews that many researchers commented upon experience as a form of privilege and a factor in building resilience in the research process. Being experienced provided the researcher practitioners with tools and strategies both in terms of research design but also in managing the impact of emotional or challenging research studies. Some researcher practitioners also described how the knowledge they developed through previous studies, built confidence that enabled them to negotiate their way through their current research. A further aspect of resilience derived from previous careers held by the researcher practitioners. Skills, abilities and complex situations previously learned and negotiated built a toolkit from which to draw upon in the research process. It also provided a buffer against the impact of listening to distressing stories, having previously established strategies for offloading and processing such accounts. However, it is not a simple equation that researcher experience equals resilience, and one of the more experienced researchers recounted being unexpectedly impacted during the research process. Therefore, these findings support the notion of needing to understand better issues of researcher resilience (Pio and Singh, 2016). Part of the development of researcher resilience may be related to the topic of self-care. The development of a self-care plan (Vincett, 2018) could become a required element of a research proposal. However, the challenge would be in ensuring this could be adhered to in an academic institutional context which can promote overworking and silence concerns. Perhaps it is essential that self-care of researchers is deemed as self-preservation and seemed as essential to maintaining the energy and resilience required to undertake research (Barker, 2017). Such reflections demonstrate that whilst it is vital that we continue to understand the ways in which researchers are vulnerable in the process, it is also important that we consider the ways in which resilience can be developed

and the factors that negate resilience, even in experienced researchers. The findings of this research present a call for continued research into qualitative researcher resilience.

The findings also call for systemic reflections upon the content of doctoral training programmes and training for those undertaking doctoral supervision. Questions are needed about how training can explore and extrapolate the complexities of power and privilege in the research process, whilst also striving to provide effective practical strategies and processes for ensuring these issues are more fully incorporated into ongoing discussions about qualitative research in psychology more generally.

Simultaneously, there is a necessity to synergise these discussions with continued discussion and interrogation of participant's power or powerlessness in the research process. Work such as that of Lawthom, Sixsmith and Kagan (2007) illustrates detailed critical reflection of the multifaceted nature of power in the research process and the requirement for researchers to constantly reflect upon the research process and practice. These reflections could usefully draw upon some of the established work in critical disability studies and community psychology, which has a history of engaging with debates on power and privilege (Goodley & Lawthom, 2005; Lawthom & Goodley, 2005). Out of such reflections new or more nuanced macro and micro understandings of power and privilege could arise. These may have micro level implications such as forms of data collection and macro level implications may lead to changes in qualitative methodology teaching in psychology and impact thinking and decision making of grant funding bodies. The necessity for ongoing reflection at all levels is emphasised by the findings of this research project.

Summary

This cross-disciplinary study sought to explore qualitative researchers experiences of conducting research into sensitive topics or with marginalised groups. The findings illustrate

participant researcher's awareness and experiences of power and privilege but also reported issues of disempowerment and vulnerability. They demonstrate the motivation of social and personal change as a focus for many researchers and the frustration and harm that participants and researchers can encounter in the research process. They suggest a much more detailed discussion of motivation, power, privilege and researcher responsibility is required. The findings illustrate that researcher experience can be a factor in building researcher resilience but that the area of resilience needs more investigation. The findings also present a call for more spaces to be created in which qualitative researchers can authentically share their experiences and critically debate the factors which shape them, these spaces need to be internal to educational establishments but also cross disciplinary and institutional boundaries. These spaces may provide a non-judgemental atmosphere in which researchers do not feel they need to be 'heroes' but rather are enabled to honestly reflect upon the reality of their experiences and through discussion to authentically develop the field of qualitative research further. However, the context in which such developments could take place must be critically considered and change and development in notions of power and privilege call for reflection at systemic, organisational and individual levels.

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