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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer practical researcher self-care strategies to prepare for and manage the emotions involved in doing organizational ethnographic research. Institutional ethics policies or research training programmes may not provide guidance, yet emotions are an integral part of research, particularly for ethnographers immersed in the field or those working with sensitive topics or vulnerable or marginalised people.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork over nine months with a voluntary organization in the UK, Yarl’s Wood Befrienders, to explore the experiences and activities of volunteer visitors who offer emotional support to women detained indefinitely in an immigration removal centre. The author is a “complete member researcher”, or “at-home ethnographer”, a volunteer visitor and a former detainee.

Findings – The author describes the emotional impact the research personally had on her and shares learning from overcoming “compassion fatigue”. Self-care strategies based on the literature are recommended, such as a researcher self-assessment, identification of the emotional risks of the research, and self-care plan formulated during project planning. Suggested resources and activities to support the well-being of researchers are explored.

Practical implications – This paper provides practical resources for researchers to prepare for and cope with emotional and mental health risks throughout the research process. It builds awareness of safeguarding researchers and supporting them with handling emotional disruptions. Without adequate support, they may be psychologically harmed and lose the potential to critically engage with emotions as data.

Originality/value – The literature on emotions in doing research rarely discusses self-care strategies. This paper offers an actionable plan for researchers to instil emotional and mental well-being into the research design to navigate emotional challenges in the field and build resilience.

Keywords – Organizational ethnography, Researcher self-care, Emotions, Volunteer, Compassion fatigue, Complete member researcher

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

How research emotionally impacts researchers and how emotions impact their research are equally important questions to consider when embarking upon a study (Brannan, 2014), but are frequently ignored or underestimated. Institutions employing researchers often have health and safety and research ethics policies that focus on the physical dangers and supply preventative measures to avoid risky situations when travelling or doing fieldwork. However, there is little mention of the risks concerning emotional well-being or mental health when undertaking research projects (Melrose, 2002). Safeguarding of researchers may be mentioned alongside safeguarding of participants in ethics guidelines and risk assessments at best (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2005), but the practicalities of *how to* prepare and cope with predicaments that may affect emotional and mental health are limited. This is particularly important for novice researchers, doctoral students and ethnographers researching topics involving sensitive content and/or vulnerable or marginalized people. Merely being exposed to sensitive topics, particularly over a long period of time, or interacting with people that work with vulnerable groups can bring a higher risk of emotional burden to researchers.

I argue that there are limited practical strategies for preparing researchers for emotional experiences, navigating challenging situations and building resilience throughout the research process. This may stem from the continued stigma associated with openly expressing emotions involved in research, voicing mental health issues that arise or personally engaging with emotions as data. The implications of this are suppressed emotions that may harm researchers, and lost opportunities in advancing emotions as central to knowledge building. This paper contributes to the literature on organizational ethnography by offering practical strategies for preparing a researcher self-care plan to navigate emotions in research and, at worst, avoid compassion fatigue or other emotional and mental health issues.

This paper is outlined as follows. First, the theoretical backdrop of emotions in ethnographic research and the contested terms and definitions of compassion fatigue/trauma are laid out. Next, I draw on my personal experience of compassion fatigue during my ethnographic research of a voluntary organization that provides emotional support for women detained in a British immigration detention centre. I reflect on issues I faced during fieldwork and argue the significance of addressing the emotional impact of research and building resilience to safeguard researchers. Finally, I discuss actions I took to overcome compassion fatigue and suggest practical strategies to formulate a researcher self-care plan during project planning to manage expectations and emotional quandaries should they arise. Researcher self-assessment, identification of the emotional risks of the research and suggestions for resources and activities to support the well-being of researchers are explored. I

conclude by highlighting the implications for critically engaging with emotions as data, contributing to the organizational ethnography literature.

Emotions in ethnographic research and their impact on researchers

Scholars in the social sciences have agreed on the importance of recognizing and reflecting upon the emotions involved in the research process (DeLuca and Maddox, 2016; Mazzetti, 2016; Brannan, 2014; Broussine *et al.*, 2014; Burkitt, 2012). Particular emphasis has been placed on the “emotion work” of the researcher (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009; Holland, 2007; Melrose, 2002; Hubbard *et al.*, 2001), building on Hochschild’s (1983) seminal concept. Emotions can be a tool for analysis and a source of data itself (Yuen, 2011; Whiteman, 2010; Holland, 2007; Hubbard *et al.*, 2001). However, incorporating researchers’ emotions in reflexive accounts is often a retrospective activity and a response after an emotional upheaval has occurred (Benoot and Bilsen, 2016; Nocker *et al.*, 2015), frequently leaving one in a state of “emotional paralysis” (Yuen, 2011), shock and distress (Melrose, 2002). Rarely are the emotional outcomes related to researchers’ well-being and mental health explicated in the literature, even within ethnography known for its immersive involvement in the field. More experienced researchers in their disciplines can still feel unprepared for the emotional demands in disturbing environments (see Bosworth and Kellezi [2017], Warden [2013], Melrose [2002]) and lead to serious effects such as burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (see Warden’s [2013] account of PTSD from her ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala City with female sex workers).

The term “burnout” was first articulated in the occupational stress, organizational psychology and work-related literature as “a result of high levels of stress over time” and combined with “emotional and mental exhaustion, anxiety and depression” (Baker, 2012, p. 70). In the 1990s, similar descriptions were used for the terms compassion fatigue/stress/trauma, secondary trauma, and vicarious trauma (Pearlman and McKay, 2008). In the healthcare literature, such as studies on nurses, caregivers/carers and professions that “help” others, either human or animals, these terms are referred to interchangeably (Bride, 2012; Mathieu, 2012). The main distinction in the latter terms is the shared pain and suffering of those individuals “being helped”. Essentially, the “helpers” become affected by the trauma of those individuals experiencing distress after prolonged empathic interaction with them (Bride, 2012). In the humanitarian literature, Pearlman and McKay accentuate the damage of the “cumulative effect of contact” with these suffering individuals, plus the helper’s empathy and sense of “responsibility to help and at times inability to fulfill that commitment” (2008, p. 1).

While the growing literature on emotions when doing research acknowledges the reflective accounts of *what happened* to researchers in their experiences, particularly during fieldwork, there is

still little known about *what they did* to handle or cope with the emotional disruptions (notable exceptions are Fahie, 2014; Bowtell *et al.*, 2013). The deficiency of the literature on researcher self-care strategies as preventative measures integrated into fieldwork preparation fails to safeguard researchers, particularly doctoral students and early career researchers. More than ten years ago, scholars called for “the need for support for researchers who are doing their research with vulnerable people and on sensitive issues” (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 90), and a “plan for their own emotional self-care during the research process” (Rager, 2005, p. 429). In a recent interview with Bosworth and Kellezi, established scholars in prison and immigration detention research, they continue to reiterate this need:

“The distressing nature of detention calls for careful consideration of the psychological impacts on participants and researchers. Ethnography allows [us to] observe such issues without being intrusive and [in] addition to the distress while adapting to uncertainties, negotiate trust and gaining deep knowledge. Whatever method is chosen, researchers need ongoing support during the research and in its immediate aftermath” (Todd, 2017, paragraph 16).

While the necessity of support has been repeatedly identified (Fahie, 2014; Bowtell *et al.*, 2013), it is still far from being realized across UK higher education institutions (with noteworthy exceptions of the Social Sciences Division at University of Oxford offering students a two-day training workshop on secondary trauma, and University of Cambridge’s Counsellors and Mental Health Advisors, individual and group sessions, and plethora of resources). With funding limitations, most universities may externally contract Employee Assistance Programs via phone, available for all employees to discuss any personal and professional issues, or student counselling services to discuss a broad range of topics from accommodation to time management. However, counsellors may not be familiar with the psychological nuances of ethnographic fieldwork or effects of working with vulnerable or marginalized people or sensitive topics.

Nonetheless, organizational studies can learn from the humanitarian aid, development and healthcare literature about building support structures for researchers and their emotional resilience (Gritti, 2015; Blanchetière, 2006; Rager, 2005). Safeguarding the “helpers”, healthcare and aid workers, can be applied to safeguarding researchers. While “emotional experience is central to doing ethnography” (Sanders, 2010, p. 112), our knowledge of emotional resilience and self-care is in a nascent stage in organization studies and organizational ethnography. While we know more about affect and emotions involved in doing research (Tsai, 2015), few focus on the practicalities of preparing for, managing or overcoming the emotional turbulences. This paper contributes to building this knowledge particularly when employing ethnographic methods, investigating delicate topics, in

sensitive environments, and involving vulnerable, marginalized or hidden populations. In these cases, the researcher or ethnographer may also be the vulnerable “other” alongside participants that is often ignored in the literature.

The organizational ethnography: supporting women in immigration detention

Background of UK immigration detention and Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre

It would be difficult to understand the work of volunteer visitors to immigration detainees, a vulnerable, marginalized and hidden population, without a brief background of the UK immigration detention system. The UK’s detention facilities are the second largest in Europe. In 2016, a total of 28,908 people were detained in nine immigration removal centres (IRC), three short-term holding facilities and prisons across the UK (Home Office, 2017b). At the end of March 2017, 2,930 people were in detention, 90% men and 10% women (Home Office, 2017a). Yarl’s Wood IRC, near Bedford, England, is the main facility for women with a monthly average capacity of 302 detainees and maximum capacity to hold 410 people at any given time (IMB, 2017). Detainees may be held for numerous reasons under the Immigration Act powers, such as lack of identification or travel documents, disputed age cases, “overstaying” beyond visa expiration dates, awaiting an immigration caseworker’s decision to allow or deny their entry into the UK, or awaiting their “removal”, deportation after serving a criminal sentence or transfer to another European country where their asylum claim will be processed. About half of the people in detention are seeking asylum (Home Office, 2017b).

In the UK, there is no time limit to how long people may be detained; it is the only country in Europe to have a policy of indefinite detention. In Yarl’s Wood, 91% of the people detained in 2016 were held for up to three months, but only 21% of people were removed or deported from the UK, drastically lower than the national average of 47% across immigration removal centres (IMB, 2017, p. 15). In other words, 79% of women detained in Yarl’s Wood are eventually released into the community, leaving many “questioning the initial decisions to detain” (IMB, 2017, p. 15). Yet detainees may not be aware of their rights to apply for release on bail after seven days, to free legal advice or to challenge the Home Office for possible grounds of unlawful detention (BID, 2017). The heightened state of distress, anxiety and worry caused by the unknown amount of time in detention and the outcome of their cases often leads to lack of sleep and physical health issues, further exacerbating detainees’ mental and emotional states (Turnbull, 2015; Kellezi and Bosworth, 2016).

Personal involvement

I experienced how immigration detention could affect one's mental and emotional states when I was accidentally detained in Yarl's Wood for one night in 2007. As an US passport holder I didn't require a tourist visa, but the civil servant did not believe that I was on holiday with my boyfriend, a British-national and now my husband. I was not unruly and had not broken any laws, but I was detained in a back room at the airport for over six hours with other people, with no communications to my partner waiting with our luggage. I was interrogated, fingerprinted, and not told where the officers later were taking me in an unidentified white van with bars separating the officers and passengers. I was confused – I had not committed a crime, nor was I an asylum seeker. Yet, I was traumatized to the extent that I could not talk about the experience for years without getting emotional. I was introduced to this regime of hidden social spaces I never knew existed and vowed I would return to this mysterious topic one day and dig deeper, re-read my copious notes I wrote in my diary and invite the memories to come back.

Seven years later, I had the opportunity to re-design my doctoral research project and decided to find a way to both face the experience that haunted me and contribute to new knowledge. With a personal and professional background in non-profit and voluntary organizations, I knew from the outset that I wanted to conduct my research in this sector and take a "complete member researcher" approach (Adler and Adler, 1987). This has also been referred to as an "at-home ethnography" (Alvesson, 2009) or "insider research" (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). A similar approach is Garthwaite's (2016) "volunteering ethnography" in which she took a temporary membership as a volunteer in a UK foodbank. Volunteering with a charitable visitors' group in a detention centre came about opportunistically when I stumbled upon the Yarl's Wood Befrienders (YWB) during my Internet search to figure out where I was taken that unforgettable night I was detained.

In the past decade there have been more studies on life in immigration detention from detainees' (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2015; Bosworth, 2014; Griffiths, 2014) and custodial staff's perspectives (Hall, 2012). However, little is known about the voluntary sector support in detention centres. My exploratory organizational ethnography aims to better understand what volunteer visitors "do" (what is everyday volunteer work like for them?) by employing the methods of participant observation, unstructured interviews and solicited participant diaries. Gaining and maintaining access to YWB was smooth. With my previous work experience and brief detention in Yarl's Wood, the Board of Trustees accepted my offer to volunteer and was willing to participate in my research and assist in recruiting their volunteers to take part in my study. In a subsequent meeting, the Board agreed to disclosing their organization's name in my research, but participants' names remain pseudonyms. Contrary to Fine and Hallett's argument that "the ethnographer who goes native

refuses to use her privileged role to advance knowledge” (2014, p. 194), my personal involvement assisted me in advancing knowledge and the trustees also expressed privilege in taking part in this.

The organizational context

Yarl’s Wood Befrienders is a voluntary organization and registered charity comprised of almost all women, 53 volunteers and 3 staff members, who have been visiting women detained in Yarl’s Wood IRC since 2001 when the Centre was built. Befrienders aim to offer emotional and practical support to detainees to reduce their isolation, affirm their human dignity and restore self-esteem. The impact of detention on detainees’ mental distress has been found to be significantly higher in Yarl’s Wood compared to the other immigration removal centres in England (Durcan *et al.*, 2017). Research has identified women as a vulnerable group in detention (Shaw, 2016) and with higher levels of depression, particularly pregnant women or those with physical or mental health issues before they were detained (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2015). Suicidal thoughts and self-harm are commonly found inside Yarl’s Wood, but the inconsistent quality of mental health services drive women to seek multiple sources of support to endure confinement, including contact with people outside the Centre mostly via issued mobile phones (Kellezi and Bosworth, 2016).

To emotionally support women that may not have visitors, YWB runs an individual visiting scheme and organizes social activities inside the Centre. A detainee is either referred by Centre staff, other detainees or charities, or can self-refer to be matched with a Befriender who visits her weekly in the public Visits Hall until she leaves the Centre. Aside from not giving legal advice to detainees and committing to weekly visits, Befrienders have a large amount of autonomy in their role to organize visits, communicate in between visits, bring detainees small gifts, refer them to other relevant charities or contact their solicitors. Befrienders set their own boundaries as to how they develop relationships with their allocated detainees and how involved they are in their cases, ranging from strictly visiting once a week to in-depth casework support for ongoing asylum claims (which was beyond the charity’s remit).

In March 2016 I began volunteering with the charity to raise funds and improve its monitoring and evaluation systems. The following month I underwent training to become a “Befriender” and immediately began visiting a Chinese woman since I was the only volunteer with Mandarin language skills. When she broke down in tears about her story of forced labour in a human trafficking network, I quickly came to realize the importance of my role and ability to relay information from vulnerable women with no English skills. She had not told her story to anyone before.

Participants who were compassionate volunteer visitors to immigration detainees, alongside my own participation, seemed a good “fit” with the confessional aspects of ethnography. However, I was naïve and unprepared for the emotional toil the dual roles would have on me. My emotionally

engaged and participatory approach to my ethnography of the voluntary organization became an “advocacy tale” (Van Maanen, 2010), but this was not intended from the onset. For nine months, from June 2016 through February 2017, I conducted participant observation in the charity’s office and at social events we organized for detainees, bail hearings and visits in the detention centre. I also conducted 22 unstructured interviews with Befrienders and collected solicited diaries they kept for three months from most of them. I continue to volunteer as a Befriender and Trustee, and also as a contracted consultant for short-term projects.

Figure 1 Membership roles in the organizational ethnography

{see separate file “JOE_ResearcherSelf-Care_FIGURE1.docx”}

The vulnerable ethnographer

Participant observation as Befriender and Trustee was emotionally draining and all-consuming. Studying one’s own membership group is not a popular approach mostly due to the “enormous amount of energy permitting one to do two jobs simultaneously” (Czarniawska, 2017, p. 5). The emotional impact on me was not only from indirect and direct contact with distressed women separated from their families, most seeking asylum, but also from dealing with my own return to the same Centre where I was held nearly ten years ago. Simultaneously handling my own sense-making and listening to someone else’s was challenging at times. As Holland asserts in her research on memory work and emotions, “The remembered episodes remain significant and the engagement with the past in the present represents a continuing search for intelligibility and understanding” (2007, p. 198). When I first began befriending, I would leave the Centre after visiting a detainee often carrying dynamic tensions of guilt and relief that I was the one walking out into the “free world”. As a participant-Befriender I visited nine Chinese women individually in Yarl’s Wood and spent time speaking on the telephone with them, their solicitors and other charities that assisted in their asylum cases. My Mandarin skills are intermediate and there were numerous legal and medical technical words that I did not know, so I often had to take copious notes in order to look them up later when I returned home. Because they did not speak any English, adding to their vulnerability, they often relied on me to call their solicitors or verbally translate letters from the Home Office that were written in legal jargon that I could barely understand even in English. For me, the tasks doubled, I was exhausted and felt like I was working two jobs, as Czarniawska (2017) points out, as an aid worker and ethnographer.

Interviews with participating Befrienders, who were aware of my researcher and Befriender dual roles, brought overwhelming emotions for them and me at times. We shared befriending stories and sometimes, if the moment felt right, I would disclose my personal story of being detained in Yarl’s

Wood, but was aware of the need to bring the focus back to their experiences. I had moments of shock when participants described the atrocities that some women had fled from or endured, such as physical or sexual abuse, human trafficking or female genital mutilation. Some participants became tearful during our interviews when they spoke about their close relationships with women they had befriended. They were tears of joy, fondness, sadness and frustration when participants talked about the women who had become close friends and were later removed from the UK. Some Befrienders grew to deeply care for detainees as additional family members (Vincett, 2017), and detainees sometimes reciprocated by calling them “mama” or “grandmother”. One male interviewee became emotional and tearful when speaking about the injustice of asylum seekers in detention and the shamefulness of his country’s government. Then he became concerned for me by his sensitive reaction, hoping I wasn’t embarrassed by it. Even though I had a moment of discomfort, I felt privileged that he was comfortable enough to open up and express his emotions. Later, transcribing interviews also stirred emotions for me (Kiyimba and O’Reilly, 2016) from having to repeatedly “listen to and type powerful and often distressing stories” (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 89).

Last, the emotional impact on researchers while analyzing participants’ diaries cannot be underestimated. Diaries provided further insight into the volunteering experiences of Befrienders, their actions to support detained women and how they felt about their work, but written in their own private time. What some people may not say to another face-to-face, they may be inclined to write about, therefore another layer of intimacy about their relationships with detainees and attempts to resolve issues was obtained through this method. Many wrote about their personal challenges to bear with the emotional burden of befriending. “Even so there have been a few detainees that I became too involved with and still feel bad about them to this day” (Alice’s diary, 13 July 2016). Another participant who was visiting a detainee who would soon be deported, wrote about her dilemma of what to say to her:

“I am really troubled about the effect the actual physical deportation process will have on my Lithuanian lady and I am torn between explaining it to her or not. [...] I really worry about this. So I decide to ask her during my good bye call this evening. [...] My last call to my lady is rather difficult for both of us. I hang up and I am rather distraught. I sob uncontrollably. We got very close over the space of just a few weeks and the idea of her going back to what could be a long prison sentence in a harsh environment really distresses me” (Natasha’s diary, 12 August 2016).

While reading diary entries, I often found myself in awe and dissonance at participants’ descriptions of detainees’ chaotic histories before arriving the UK, thinking they would be safe, and their struggles to cope with confinement and separation from their families.

“My lady was arrested 10 years ago – her father was in the army but had joined a rebel group. She, along with her mother and sister, was arrested one night by the army who stormed into their house where her father had hidden weapons. She has no idea where her mother and sister were taken, she never saw them again, and to this day doesn't know what has happened to them. She was beaten and raped repeatedly and sequestered somewhere very isolated. [...] A member of her family highly ranked in the army helped her escape and obtain a visa to come to the UK. She immediately applied for asylum but her case has been ongoing for nine years now. [...] My lady tells me she suffers from various ailments as a result of the beating and raping, but also suffers from insomnia and depression, severely aggravated by detention” (Natasha’s diary, 1 September 2016).

By the fourth month of fieldwork, deep in the dark depths of women’s horror stories and atrocities, I hit rock bottom. The sixth detainee I was befriending, detained for nine months, tried to kill herself one night by ingesting laundry detergent. In prior visits, I saw signs of her declining mental health, such as erratic moods, but I felt helpless to improve her situation aside from encouraging her to see the psychologist. She was already on “suicide watch” in the Centre. I spoke to her on the phone the morning after her attempted suicide and I was at a loss for words. After I hung up the phone, I called my colleagues in the charity to find out more information and to offload my mixed emotions. I was deeply concerned for the detainee, confused as to what exactly happened and how, and angry towards the custodial officers in the Centre and the detention system.

I hung up with Ming - I was shocked, numb, but then it turned to being upset and angry. I rang Pat at the office. My eyes were filled with tears, my voice was shaking. Now I'm angry - shouldn't the custodial care be the Centre, where she is. That is how she has gone mad.

I could tell my boundaries of involvement and care were blurring. My hands were shaky and I was agitated (Extracts from fieldnotes, 23 September 2016).

As I continued in my dual role after this traumatic incident, depression soon enveloped me and I felt I needed help to resurface for air. I had not appreciated the accumulating compassion stress and emotional burden that I had been carrying. I often offloaded my restrained mixed emotions onto my sympathetic husband or other Befrienders after returning from a visit at the detention centre, but this was not enough. I did not need to see a doctor to know what was happening to me. I reflected on my moods and behaviours in the past months since I began fieldwork. I was constantly reading condemning reports about the negative effects of detention, reading news articles on failed asylum seekers or stateless people stuck in detention. I often became cynical about government policies and heated when I spoke about my work or wrote in my journal about migration crises, the injustices of immigration detention, and my visits to women detained there.

The disturbing part of the visit today was seeing an old lady wearing a sari sitting at the table next to us in a wheelchair. She looked frail. Her head was bowed down as if she was sleeping sitting up in the wheelchair. She had two other visitors with her that just sat there, no one was talking. They all had grim faces. I asked Ming who that lady was. She said she was such a sad story, that she needed help being fed and washing herself. It was inhumane to see this women detained in her condition. She should be in a hospice type of facility, not detention centre. I wondered if she or her family members knew her rights to apply for bail, or if they had a solicitor. I had only read about cases like this in the news or campaigning organisations, never seen with my own eyes. It was clearly wrong and I do not know how the arresting officers that brought her to the IRC could live with themselves (Extract from fieldnotes, 25 October 2016).

In general, I was becoming an angry and sarcastic person, losing interest in what would normally interest me and having disrupted sleep at night – all opposite to how I usually am. I had difficulty detaching myself from thinking about the women I befriended and their desperate situations. I was frustrated that I was unable to change their situations, give legal advice, or change immigration policies. I could only visit, listen to them, signpost them to relevant charities and wait until they received a decision from the Home Office about their release or removal from the UK.

It is not out of guilt or blame that I feel for myself. It is out of sadness for her and her situation. It is such a horrible feeling of not being able to help someone who is calling out for help. Like a baby who is crying and holding his arms up in front of you, trying to say “lift me up, carry me, cuddle me”, but your hands are tied and you cannot. [...] The journey continues and will continue for as long as she is detained or does not succeed in taking her own life, I realise now (Extracts from fieldnotes, 23 September 2016).

I procrastinated transcribing interviews and reviewing my fieldnotes. The thought of going over and over sensitive stories was bleak. There were few happy endings to them. The common signs of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma in researchers were present, such as feelings of "reluctance about engaging with the data" and "distress at re-visiting the data" (SSD, 2016; Melrose, 2002, p. 348). In a monthly update meeting with my supervisors, they admitted what I was going through was outside of their scope and experience in supporting doctoral students and they encouraged me to seek other resources. Ultimately, who is responsible for preparing and safeguarding researchers (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009)? The answer is debatable in policy and practice. Without sparing any further time to contemplate, I took it upon myself to immediately act and not allow my compassion fatigue to further affect my research, volunteer work and personal life.

Discussion: practical strategies for researcher self-care

Fortunately, my qualification in professional coaching and previous work experience counselling postgraduate students instilled an underlying level of self-awareness in me. I was emphatic that I

would not show the stress I was suffering in front of my two sons, one and three years old at the time. Ironically, they were both the reason I had little personal time and the source of welcome distraction. They were a constant reminder of my sense of purpose to carry on. With limited resources in my university to support postgraduate student researchers' emotional well-being and mental health, I devised my own strategy to lift myself out of depression and fatigue. Rather than be a victim and look for who or what to blame, I took actions to prevent any further suffering I was enduring and created a self-care plan. Psychotherapist Meg-John Barker's defines self-care as "an act of resistance against culture messages that certain categories of people should serve others, be valued less, put others first, protect others, or do all the emotional labour. It insists we're no more or less valuable than anyone else" (2017, p. 16). Resolute that self-care is *not* self-indulgence, Barker illustrates her argument with a metaphor of an airplane oxygen mask, "On a plane you're instructed to secure your own masks before helping somebody else" (2017, p. 16). I realized I could not be of any support to my family, my colleagues or detainees without practicing self-care and becoming more resilient, nor could I produce a quality ethnography or disseminate learnings from my study to help other researchers.

I had the capacity to take self-responsibility, but needed to be equipped with resources that were accessible and effective for me. Therefore, I drew on resources from other higher education institutions and academic and practitioner literature to prioritize practical actions I could take immediately:

- I created a list of people who would be my emotional support network throughout my research (Seppälä, 2017). I sought support from Yarl's Wood Befrienders by talking to staff members, one of whom also volunteered with the Samaritans, a UK charity that offers general listening support via the telephone to people who are struggling to cope. In addition, I regularly talked to a Befriender who was a counsellor and another who had befriended a detainee with a history of attempted suicides.
- I enrolled myself in a professional training course on "building resilience and well-being" (see www.samaritans.org/for-business/workplace-training).
- I began reading more practitioner resources on resilience (e.g. Mind, the mental health charity; Employee Assistance Programme contracted firms; Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley).
- I wrote reflexive journal entries in a free-writing style without judging or criticizing myself (Newman, 2016). This gave me a "safe space" for unlimited catharsis of my mixed feelings and emotions and to make sense of them rather than repress them (Yuen, 2011).

- I changed how I spent my personal time: I stopped watching the news and other dark films that provoked depressive feelings and opted for light-hearted ones; I stopped reading articles in the media related to the migration crisis and immigration detention.
- I limited the amount of time I spent talking about my research or volunteer visiting. I didn't discuss these with friends or family unless they were part of my emotional support network.

The acute awareness of how my research was emotionally impacting me helped me to gradually build up my resilience as my project continued. Resilience has been defined as “the flexibility in responding to challenges and changing situational demands, and as the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences” (Gritti, 2015, pp. 451-452). Organizational ethnographers can draw on the literature from multiple disciplines, from humanitarian aid and development, psychology, nursing and healthcare to learn more about resilience. A researcher self-care plan centres on “resilience factors both at individual and environmental levels” (Blanchetière, 2006, pp. 9-10), customization and flexibility since “one size does not fit all” and “there is no ‘right’ way” (Barker, 2017, p. 13). It also serves as a resource to refer to if emotional dilemmas arise. Ideally, creating a self-care plan from the planning stages of research can build researchers’ awareness of the potential harms of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma and building emotional resilience to overcome them. A summary of recommended strategies from the literature and from my personal recovery is outlined in Table I.

Table I. Suggested strategies for researcher self-care [see separate file “JOE_ResearcherSelf-Care_TABLE1.docx”]

Conclusion: emotions as data

Compared to the growing contribution of emotional experiences during the research process, there is still little known about *how* researchers deal with emotionality. I have shared lessons from overcoming compassion fatigue specific to my approach studying the organization where I also volunteer and work, but these may be applied to all researchers, especially those studying sensitive topics or working with vulnerable or marginalized people. With commitment to self-care, a process begins of embedding practical habits and activities into researchers’ lives to safeguard themselves alongside participants.

Researchers cannot predict every possible emotional encounter or anticipate how a study may impact them before embarking on a journey, but building a self-care plan into a study may help prepare or prevent fatigue/trauma should the signs arise. The simple act of creating a basic, personal self-care plan may seem like common sense, yet few researchers undertake this exercise and many

are eager to jump in to fieldwork. Across academic institutions, there is inconsistency in offering researchers training and support in emotional well-being and mental health. When issues develop, people rarely speak up about their struggles to cope. There is still much work needed to “relax the taboo on telling one’s own story” (Anteby, 2013, p. 1278) and “reduce the stigma associated with anxiety and depression and provide practical help and emotional support to university and college students” [1]. Even seasoned scholars have experienced the “‘affective toll’ of ethnographic research, and the way unacknowledged (or suppressed) emotions manifest both during and after fieldwork” (Drake and Harvey, 2014, p. 490). Nevertheless, the literature remains sparse on practical strategies to prepare or support researchers. Without adequate support, researchers may not only be psychologically harmed, they may withhold emotions and miss opportunities to face their emotional experiences as data.

Until I overcame my compassion fatigue and took the time and actions to create an emotional distance, I did not realise that my emotions were data in their own right. Sanders reminds us that “when the researcher does confront his or her fear and creatively devises ways of dealing with both the danger and the anxiety, useful data is acquired and new insights arise” (2010, p. 110). I learned that reflexively writing my emotions into my fieldnotes brought deeper insights into the volunteer work of befrienders and their/my acts of compassion. I was then able to unpick the emotions I encountered and analyse them as data alongside those reported by my participants. In management studies, Gail Whiteman refers to the “overwhelming distress” that arises from data as “heartbreak” (2010, p. 328). She admits to missing the opportunity of confronting her vulnerable self and unveiling her emotions in and with the data. “These insights remained hidden for a long time because I shied away from using heartbreak as a way to enrich my academic analysis” (Whiteman, 2010, p. 331). Taboo lingers in the academic arenas of organization and management studies, with the pressure to “maintain scholarly composure” (Whiteman, 2010, p. 333) and be cautious about intense personal involvement in our research (Anteby, 2013). Unless we rise up against stigma and taboo, we will continue to lose the potential to critically engage with emotions as data. Organizational ethnography has the potential to move this agenda forward with its inherent embodied approach to producing knowledge. However, this first requires ethnographers to centralize and openly acknowledge how their research emotionally impacts them and how their emotions impact their research.

Notes

1. Student Minds, UK, “Looking after your mental wellbeing”, <http://www.studentminds.org.uk/looking-after-your-mental-wellbeing.html>

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Table I. Suggested strategies for researcher self-care

Self-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw a personal historical time line and identify major events that may have been particularly traumatizing (OBMHNHS, 2006). This helps identify your emotional risk factors. By doing this personal audit, you will be more aware of what topics you are more sensitive to and what could trigger additional stress during the research process. If the past experience is something that you have not accepted or overcome, it is worth addressing sooner than later.
Emotional proximity and distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify ways that help you connect with your emotions, describe them, and better understand how, why and when they emerge. This may be through reflexive journals (Rager, 2005) or creative writing (Yuen, 2011), discussion, art, or other outlets. • Likewise, balance your emotional connection by setting personal boundaries. This may help bring emotional distance in certain situations to maintain realistic expectations of yourself and “criticality” in your research (Anteby, 2013, p. 1282).
Physical health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a regular sleep routine (Student Minds[i]). • Exercise, if even briefly each week; practice good hygiene and have a balanced diet (Blanchetière, 2006). Drink water; limit alcohol intake. • This does not suggest depriving yourself of all the things that you enjoy eating and drinking that may be considered unhealthy, rather practice consuming moderately and be aware of emotional eating/drinking as coping mechanisms.
Mental time-out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make time for mentally “switching off” or “just ‘being’ and not ‘doing’” (Barker, 2017). Practice mindfulness and/or meditation (Newman, 2016). • Spend time with people you care about and on activities that you enjoy to help take your thoughts away from your research, participants or the “other”. • Listen to music that lifts your spirits (Warden, 2016). • Watch comedies or light-hearted shows and avoid any films/shows that are intensely disturbing or sad. It may help to avoid watching the news (Gerlach, 2017; Warden, 2016).
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create your own social support network (Seppälä, 2017; Dickson-Swift <i>et al.</i>, 2009; Rager, 2005; Melrose, 2002): One of the most important things is to identify and write down a list of people or groups that you can talk to both on an urgent and regular basis if needed. It is best if they are active listeners, non-judgmental and compassionate. This may include personal and professional contacts, such as friends, family members, colleagues, counsellors or mental health advisors available through your university/institution or Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). • Consider who you are comfortable speaking with in your research community: Supervisors, mentors, other academics, peers; research groups that may have people also working with sensitive topics or vulnerable groups. Your research community may extend beyond your university/institution. • The people in your support network should be helpful and positive people rather than those that may frequently complain or discuss negative situations in their personal/work lives.
Enabling environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take breaks outside to get fresh air regardless of the weather. This is particularly helpful for researchers who spend a lot of time writing in front of a computer screen indoors. Breaks are especially important when transcribing interviews, organizing messy data or analyzing data. • Surround yourself with opportunities to engage in relaxing or positive stimulating events and with optimistic people. You may choose to disassociate yourself with friends or acquaintances that project negative energy and deplete your energy just by being around them.