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The qualitative researcher: the flip side of the research encounter with vulnerable people

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Abstract

Using data from an empirical study involving in-depth interviews with five qualitative researchers, a conceptual lens based on power dynamics and imbalances is applied to explore the researcher: participant encounter, within particular settings, and conditions. The research relationship rests on the assumption that the researcher occupies a more powerful position than their participant and the knowledgeable and powerful researcher questions the participant whose position is automatically assumed to shift to that of vulnerable participant. However, this paper seeks to show the flipside, whereby research encounters unfold in such a way that the researcher becomes the 'vulnerable'. Although acknowledging the privilege and power of the researcher's position, this article reveals that power is multifaceted and manifests itself in complex ways: as researcher fear of being on unfamiliar territory; researcher anxiety about the unpredictability of participants; and researcher feelings of powerlessness to help, and so on - all impacts which are underexplored.

Key words: researchers, vulnerability, participants, power

Introduction

The proportion of households and individuals classed as 'vulnerable' in the UK is increasing, particularly in light of ongoing welfare reform and austerity measures since 2010 which have led to the abolition or reduction of welfare benefits (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). As the number of vulnerable people continue to grow those on the margins who are leading precarious lives are being researched about their experiences (Cole et al., 2015; Clarke, 2014; Hickman et al., 2014).

The definition of 'vulnerable' is fluid and largely dependent on how vulnerability is conceptualised and by whom. In government policy, certain welfare exceptions are made for those classed as 'vulnerable' such as for under 18s or those with mental health problems. In the realm of social research, few ethics policies and guidelines actually define 'vulnerability' (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017) and research ethics is mainly concerned with groups of vulnerable people with: mental health issues; those with acute or terminal illnesses; the young and the elderly: people in precarious housing / employment situations; and people who are drug and / or alcohol dependent (Burridge and Ormandy, 2005).

The concept of 'vulnerability' is increasingly contested and arguments include: those categorised as vulnerable being excluded from participating in research;

participants themselves contesting being labelled as vulnerable; and power relations in the field in some cases rendering the researcher more vulnerable than the researched (Hoonaard, 2018). However, the participants from the research presented in this paper are situated within the broad definition of 'vulnerable' because their experiences fall into multiple categories of vulnerability, such as being young, homeless and alcohol dependent.

When recruiting participants from vulnerable groups, researchers attempt to empower them by enabling increased participant control over the research process, and in emancipatory research this extends to fuller involvement of participants in research projects for the greater good (Truman et al., 2000). In research that is less emancipatory in approach, but aiming to advance social issues such as homelessness, participant comfort and wellbeing is still at the forefront of research practice. Opportunities are created for interviews to take place in participants' homes, with choice of the gender of the interviewer, and in some research, allowing participants to dictate the terms of reference of the interview, by using topic guides loosely. In providing these opportunities, researchers aim to address power inequalities and protect the 'vulnerable' participant (Downey et al., 2007; Mitchell and Irvine, 2008), but inadvertently, these very choices may render the researcher vulnerable.

Since the early 2000s there has been a burgeoning literature which has explored impacts on researchers (Benoot and Bilsen, 2016; Coles et al., 2014; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Downey et al., 2007; Liamputtong, 2007; Johnson and Clarke, 2003) but is largely confined to the experiences of health researchers. Risk to qualitative researchers emotional and physical remains under-explored in academia, except by a notable few researchers (for example, see Campbell, 2002; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Lee, 1993; Lee and Renzetti, 1990). Where there is exploration, this is discussed within the parameters of the actual process of research: arranging interviews; building rapport; delving into sensitive topics; and maintaining boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006); rarely do we learn of the lived experience of qualitative research, the emergent and situational nature of vulnerability and risk. This paper moves away from those factors which are contingent to the interviewing process, such as procedural issues concerned with researcher safety, working in pairs etc., and instead, focuses on the intrinsic issues; those which are not part of the essential nature of the interviewing process, but nevertheless, impact on researcher sense of safety, well-being, and vulnerability.

The main themes running through this paper are reflected in Chicago Sociology (during the first half of the 20th century) due to the centrality of direct observation of experience and empirical study in this tradition. In studying

4

everyday life, such as street life and gangs (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000) invaluable transferable knowledge on ethics and researcher risk has been passed on from the fascinating accounts of risky researcher/participant encounters.

Ethical regulation in the social sciences is widespread. A key ethical principle is concerned with researchers minimising participant 'harm' by placing participant interests at the forefront of ethical considerations. Key textbooks on qualitative research ethics in the social sciences explore the complex, emergent, and situational nature of ethical issues but again focus on concepts of harm within the context of protecting participants (see Miller et al., 2012; Silverman (ed), 2011). More recently, risks of harm to researchers have been discussed (see Wiles, 2012).

Hammersley and Traianou's (2012) contribution, 'Ethics in Qualitative Research: Controversies and Contexts', presents the ethical ambiguities related to 'harm' inherent in qualitative research, using extensive examples. A few paragraphs draw attention to others affected by research, including researchers themselves. Harm is discussed as the potential outcome of research, but there is little in the way of examples of 'harm' experienced by researchers in the process leading up to, and, actually doing the research. The researcher

experiences captured for the purposes of this paper attempt to bridge this gap in knowledge and underscore the need for research ethics to broaden its scope beyond participant 'harm' and to consider the concept of researcher 'harm' and those factors contributing to it.

Various theorists have debated the different conceptualisations of power (Foucault, 1980; Hay, 2002). In this paper, in line with Foucault (1980) and other scholars (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004) power in the research process and relationship is conceptualised as being fluid, not uni-directional as claimed by many researchers, including those of some feminist traditions who delineate power as exerted from top-down. When exploring power inequalities in research, it is recognised that researchers might lack power. They could be constrained by funders' agendas, which dictate methods, how data is interpreted and presented (Hood et al., 1999). Yet, participants lack power relative to researchers in that they have little or no control /influence over how their data is interpreted and used. Power is also assumed to be a feature of the interview itself, whereby the researcher sets and asks the questions. However, if power is perceived as multi-faceted and everywhere, it is possible to conceive instances when participants might disrupt uni-directional axes of power (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996).

It is argued, in this paper, that currents of power can shift due to the contextual nature of the encounter (such as the researcher entering the unfamiliar fieldwork setting). It is not claimed that everyone in these encounters (the participant or others present) have an interest in exercising power, over the researcher. Indeed, in many cases this may occur inadvertently as a result of the behaviour, information divulged, language, location of interviews (Elwood & Martin, 2000) and surroundings. The paradigm of the research relationship has traditionally focused on the 'powerful' researcher (based on knowledge, position) and 'vulnerable' participant; it is the flipside of this relationship that this paper explores further.

Positioned as a non- white qualitative researcher involved in social policy research with an interest in power differentials between researchers and participants, the author builds on a previous paper (Author, 2017) centred on the experience of researching vulnerable people. This paper presents primary data gathered from one-to-one interviews with researchers - a profession rarely researched - about their experiences of researching vulnerable people on sensitive subjects (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). It explores the intrinsic factors of qualitative interviewing, which contribute to researchers becoming and feeling vulnerable, ranging from experiences of: the built environment, the condition of homes; the symbols within them; and participant unpredictability.

Methodology

In-depth qualitative interviews are used to explore complex and profound experiences and are particularly suitable for researching vulnerable people (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). This paper is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with five qualitative researchers (who are colleagues) about their experiences of interviewing vulnerable people. Three researchers each had over ten years of experience and two relatively new researchers, each had over three years of experience. The researchers were asked in advance to prepare for the interview by recalling one particularly difficult research encounter which made them feel unsettled or distressed. However, in the event, all five researchers recalled more than one example. To frame the subject of this paper adequately, each researcher was initially asked to explain their understanding of vulnerability, within the context of a participant and of being a researcher.

The research was granted ethical approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee, and permission was sought from the participants to use their data explicitly to write a journal article.

Assurances were offered around confidentiality with the caveat that in disclosing their experiences, in detail, on specific research projects, they could inadvertently reveal their identities to fellow colleagues. This concern was

overridden by their knowledge of the institution's move towards a better understanding of, and, support for, difficult researcher experiences in the field. As a result, the researchers expressed themselves freely. Each interview was recorded and lasted between forty minutes and one hour and the data were stored securely. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.

In accordance with a growing concern in social research ethics about researcher wellbeing (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000) the support needs of the researchers were considered. Thus, ethical issues around dredging up previous experiences that the researchers were affected by were addressed by checking with them a few weeks after the interviews to see if they had been caused any harm or required support as a result of sharing their experiences.

The interviews were analysed by pulling out the key themes and select quotes relating to researcher concerns and vulnerability. The following themes were derived from the data: a) defining participant vulnerability and researcher vulnerability b) seasonal conditions c) the research setting d) fear of participants e) the unknown f. powerlessness g) impact on researchers h) gendered dimension to vulnerability i) reminders or triggers. These are discussed in turn in the findings section.

Findings

a. Defining participant vulnerability and researcher vulnerability

Seen through the lens of the social researcher, the term 'vulnerable' was problematised due to it encompassing such a wide range of people. *'It's a label that we apply quite liberally, vulnerability, or marginality, or talk about vulnerable groups',* but, in Anthony's (researcher) view, if the question of defining vulnerability was put to those who are researched, many of them might challenge it. Nevertheless, in justification of its use, the term vulnerable is applied by social researchers for good reasons in attempting to ensure that the discomfort of research participants involved in the research is actively minimised - *'Its important to acknowledge that people need support, or reassurance…..you need to be conscious of their emotional situation when you're working with them, when you're researching them'.* The different levels of vulnerability were also highlighted in researcher accounts.

Within the context of their research experience, all five researchers recognised that an individual might be defined vulnerable due to a range of reasons: being in a precarious housing situation, or, being homeless; in debt; subject to benefit sanctions; having physical and/or mental health problems; having a drug and/or alcohol dependency. Importantly, vulnerable people were described as often

experiencing numerous issues simultaneously. Nicola (researcher) highlighted that the majority of people interviewed for her project were, *'either in one of the following categories or multiple ones: mentally unwell; substance abusing; on a low income; breaking the law; being abused in some way'*. According to the researchers, the vital factor determining vulnerability was an individual's lack of control over their circumstances, causing them *'distress and anxiety'* (Susan - researcher).

Further, an individual's inability to cope without help, or to make decisions independently, was seen as underpinning vulnerability. However, the example of poverty was used to emphasise how the label of 'vulnerable' might be considered incongruous or contested by those with particular life challenges as some people find ways to cope due to their resilience and optimism.

The *'exposure'* to both physical and emotional danger was consistently outlined as the defining factors of ***researcher vulnerability***:

> *'I might be at danger of being physically harmed in the field...but, on another level, there's emotional vulnerability, in a sense that I could never predict what I'm going to be exposed to during a research encounter'* (Nicola).

'Exposure' was explained in terms of researchers not being able to predict, or, prepare for, what they might see and hear during the research encounter, including witnessing dire circumstances and *'being exposed to stories that you might not want to hear'* (Susan). A lack of knowledge is conveyed as creating lack of control (also power) in research encounters.

b. Seasonal conditions

The researchers conveyed that some conditions were beyond their control, occasionally, in research encounters, for example, during autumn and winter when darkness fell earlier, this caused some fear about personal safety:

> *'It would definitely be different if it was in the evening...if it was dark outside...I remember travelling back from fieldwork when it was sort of dark and being on a train platform when it was quite lonely. I remember feeling a bit frightened at that point' (Stella - researcher).*

Spatial-temporal factors created researcher vulnerability, particularly as different spaces such as high-density estates, isolated train stations and bus stops were perceived as presenting more danger in the dark. The unfamiliarity with research environments led to a greater fear of crime, and getting lost, more so at night than in the day. Stella commented:

'If it's like in an isolated area and I don't know the area, it's dark, so you might lose your way...that definitely worries me'.

She went on to express her *'slight panic'* after finishing interviewing late one winter's day; it was dark, she was alone, and she lost her bearings using the google map. This situation made her feel particularly vulnerable.

c. The research setting

The fieldwork environment more broadly, including the specific fieldwork area that a researcher works in, the public transport links, using maps, finding the way to participant's homes and whether researchers have to wait at a bus-stop to get back, in an area they don't feel comfortable in, are all factors highlighted as affecting the researcher, when in the field.

Nicola relayed two incidents that happened on the same day on a research project exploring the impact of a home improvement programme on residents. Although she frequently worked alone on the estate conducting interviews with residents, on that particular day she was accompanied by a colleague, not for her safety, but for his professional development. The geographically isolated estate surrounded by fields was described as creating a feeling of being *'marooned'* whilst there. Nicola struggled to find her way to the participant's home, in a block of flats and she recounted the apprehension caused by the

unfamiliar and unaccommodating built environment she had to negotiate to arrive at his home, *'really awkward, kind of windy corridors, and really hard to figure out where you were going'.* The physically restrictive layout of the building in which the flat was accessed - *'a little windy staircase through multiple doors'* - immediately affected Nicola causing her uneasiness even before she arrived at the participants door.

The experience of interviewing participants in their homes presented researchers with the advantage of seeing first-hand their participants' worlds: their housing, some insight into the local amenities, and a sense of their networks. Whilst acknowledging the insights gained from researching people in their homes, researchers reported being deeply affected by 'near miss' experiences with a range of people: some were aggressive; many had mental health conditions, and in one/two cases the participants were perceived as harbouring more sinister motives of physical/sexual assault. This 'not knowing' about the participants disposition, who else might be present at the home, fear of aggressive dogs etc., created the most unease and concern amongst researchers:

'I do feel nervous about interviewing in peoples' homes. I would much prefer interviewing with someone in that situation because I think you can focus without feeling worried' (Joanne - researcher)

The condition of participants' homes created unease and signalled in advance to researchers that the surrounding chaos might possibly reflect the chaotic state of mind of participants. Anthony recalled interviewing an older woman who was very unhappy and potentially struggling with mental ill health. He noted, *'when you walked into the house, the first thing that struck you was just there was just stuff everywhere...piled up'.* It was a small terraced house and within it there was *'just about space for two chairs'.* This was a hoarder's house, the bed was downstairs and the curtains were closed. It was *'boiling',* and *'dark'*, the only light coming from a floor standing lamp. Whilst the woman did not present any physical threat, Anthony knew that there were probably going be some issues because of how she lived. In this instance, power relations weren't exercised by the participant over the researcher, rather, the researcher's assumptions about his participant were drawn from discourses on poverty and mental health.

The smells, the mustiness of the house, were recounted by the researcher, and in a different example provided by Nicola. She could distinctly remember the

poor condition of her participant's home, the smell, and the gloom - *'it was a very run down house internally….it was dark, it was cold, smelly, unpleasant'.* This encounter was left imprinted on her mind as was another experience of walking into a flat, which was very bare, sparse, with very little furniture. The participant's situation affected her deeply, he, *'was sat in this room with no furniture and no carpet, and no telly'.*

Visible **signs of risk in participant's homes** were highlighted by two researchers as perturbing them, quickly setting off alarm bells about the disposition and strangeness of those individuals, which was unsettling for the researchers. Stella was shocked to discover images of cartoon porn plastered from floor to ceiling of her participant's flat. She explained:

> *'I thought he was a just a bit eccentric at first, but only when I sat down and started kinda looking around the room a bit more did I start - well and the participant actually started pointing things out...it were really disturbing...disturbing images and DVDs.'*

She also noticed his passion for Disney items, including wigs, which he had hanging of a back of a chair and he was wearing a wig at the time. Stella's first reaction was, *'I immediately felt this is weird, I need to get out of here'.* Here,

power relations played out in such a way that the participant's behaviour directly influenced the researcher's behaviour.

In a second example, Nicola, paired with a male colleague entered an open-plan flat, which she described as nice, and neat and clean - *'the sort of things that would comfort you ordinarily'.* However, the condition of the flat was incongruous with the decor, particularly in light of *'some strange wallhangings'* linked to a martial arts religion, which instantly made Nicola and her colleague feel uneasy. In this situation, and that involving the cartoon porn, the researchers wanted to leave immediately, but feared the reactions of their participants who were expecting an interview to take place. Indeed, the following quote from Stella's account succinctly conveys the sense of panic and urgency to remove herself from the situation:

> *'I'd probably use the word vulnerable actually in that situation...what was going through my head was how am I gonna get out of this, what am I gonna do, what if he doesn't let me out. I did feel vulnerable myself, even though he (the participant) was in that category as well, I did at that time feel vulnerable.'*

Having no obvious way out of a participant's home or feeling trapped was the situation in which researchers felt at their most vulnerable. Nicola recollected

the pair finding themselves trapped physically - with the participant's furniture so close to the exit, *'it wouldn't have been easy to slip past him'.*

In another example, for his PhD, Anthony had arranged an interview with a man in his 50s in his home. Upon arrival at his home, Anthony thought the participant locked the door, but he couldn't be sure. Whether this was perceived or real, Anthony felt at risk, because the man was particularly aggressive, he explained, *'I felt this could go horribly wrong'.* He wanted to leave, but judged that trying to leave before the interview started could put him in danger. They were both standing in the kitchen, but Anthony couldn't physically get out because the participant was standing near the door. In this case, Anthony felt exposed to the possibility of physical harm. The scenario as it unfolded is reported in the next section.

d. Fear of participants

The participant *'ranted for about an hour'* spewing out his racist views, which made Anthony uncomfortable. He also talked about developing psychosis as a result of his illicit drug use. Anthony was *'frightened'* for the first half an hour of their encounter because of the man's aggression and having learned of his violent background. A state of confusion ensued because Anthony could not determine whether the participant's aggression was actually directed at him,

and this led to feelings of vulnerability *'in the sense of physical safety'*. During

the subsequent half an hour, Anthony felt considerable *'discomfort',* but listened

to the participant as he judged this to be the *'easiest way of diffusing the*

situation'. In this case, power rested with the participant; his aggressive

behaviour from the outset of the encounter determined the researcher's

behaviour in wanting a quick departure. Arguably, dominant discourses on

mental health conditions and offending may also have influenced researcher

behaviour and feelings of vulnerability.

Nicola and her colleague went into the flat expecting to interview one man, but

were confronted by two *'body-builder beefy men'. 'They were extremely racist*

and they had some weird extreme beliefs', which were disturbing. Both

researchers sensed the disappointment of the two men when Nicola's colleague

turned up with her. A short interview was conducted and the researchers

extracted themselves from the flat very quickly, believing it to be a *'near miss',*

and particularly fortunate for Nicola that she was accompanied in the field on

that particular day:

> *'We both afterwards said it was really uncomfortable and we both*
>
> *recognised that actually maybe they had hoped to get a female on her*
>
> *own.'*

Nicola was *'shaken'* by this experience immediately after the interview, but felt relieved and grateful to be out of the flat. However, her day didn't end there, continuing with the interviews that she had arranged for that day, she went into another part of the estate to an older man's (participants) house; it's decrepit state was described earlier as affecting Nicola. The participant's response to sensitive questions about his house further unsettled the researcher; as the interview began *'he was extremely angry about various aspects to do with the process of doing his house up...to the point where he was foaming at the mouth and sort of spitting'.* This is an example of how power relations are constantly in a state of flux, constraining researcher behaviour, fuelling participant behaviour, and occasionally manifesting as resistance. The participant's reaction and the unexpected element to the encounter, along with examples of other researcher experiences, are discussed in more detail in the next section.

e. The unknown

Narratives around the *'unpredictability'* of, and, gaining *'unexpected'* distressing insights from, research participants revealed researcher unease, as in the instance of Nicola's encounter who clearly expressed concern in relation to this, stating, *'he was unpredictable and that made me feel uncomfortable'.* His frustrations strayed into areas that the researchers weren't expecting,

specifically when he started talking about having terminal cancer - triggering the researcher's emotional vulnerability in a complex way; resulting from his furious response juxtaposed with his sad news.

Not being in control of situations e.g. when participants failed to cooperate, or totally veered off the subject, generated a great deal of researcher anxiety. During Stella's encounter with the young man in his flat covered in cartoon porn, she immediately realised that the participant (in his mid to late 20s) had mental health issues and that he didn't want to talk about the research topic. At one point, he pulled out pornographic DVDs, keen to show the researcher and her colleague his belongings.

Further, similarly to Nicola, Stella hadn't expected anyone else to be present during the interview, but two of his flat mates were there sat on a couch when she arrived. She found it *'quite intimidating to have them there',* and, in this situation, the control had shifted from the researcher to the participant and his friends, who also *'commented, but totally off topic'.* Here, Stella sensed the need to *'sensitively close down the interview and get out'.* Sensing a level of unpredictability and potential mental health issues, the researcher was afraid of upsetting her participant through his knowledge that she was purposefully cutting the interview short, she therefore tried asking adequate questions to

allay any suspicion, and was able to remove herself from the situation, leaving her cardigan behind in her haste. In this situation, power is manifested through a network of relations, consequently researcher conduct is governed (in a broader sense) by the research participant and his friends' actions.

f. Powerlessness

A feeling of *'powerlessness'* emerged as a major theme associated with researcher vulnerability. Researchers expressed concerns about discussing sensitive subjects with vulnerable people and then leaving them without being able to offer adequate help to *'resolve'* some of the potential issues arising from participation in the research. For example, Anthony commented, *'we (researchers) dredge out difficult stuff and then leave'.* He recollected the interview with Irene during which she became visibly upset. She was desperate to move out of her home, desperately unhappy, having experienced antisocial behaviour and vandalism. At the end of the interview, Anthony explained that it was longitudinal research and sought permission to return the following year, to which she replied, *'I don't know if I'll be here next year',* clearly alluding to suicide. The researcher was deeply concerned about Irene, but as a junior researcher at the time, felt inadequately trained to deal with the emergent

safeguarding situation - *'I didn't know what to do...at the same time I thought, she's sort of, maybe she's a bit of a catastrophist'.*

He was *'scared'* to explore her comment any further in fear of opening up further issues that he couldn't deal with. This encounter was reported to the project manager, who provided some advice, but nevertheless Anthony was affected by this incident and was left with feelings of powerlessness, fear and pity.

Nicola talked about her difficulty; she couldn't say or do anything to help her participant who was dying of cancer. He looked terribly ill, *'almost yellow...overweight, smelt bad, horrendous situation'.* Nicola felt a huge amount of sympathy for him and thought about his family and the grandchildren that he mentioned and also felt sorry that he had to end his days living in such a *'horrendous environment'.* However, this sympathy was complicated by his extremely aggressive behaviour. Whilst she curtailed the interview, this experience was described as, *'the worst kind of dilemma'.* Afterwards, she questioned the participant's real objective for wanting to take part in the research - *'did he want someone to talk to'?*

A further example of researcher feelings of powerlessness was provided by Susan, in researching people subjected to benefit sanctions. Her participant had experienced multiple sanctions, was suffering with mental health issues,

and was cold, hungry, and relying on a homeless centre and food banks. He hadn't spoken to anyone about his circumstances and in his fragile state broke down during the interview. *'He talked about suicide and he'd be better off if he was dead'*. Susan terminated the interview and sat with him while he cried, allowing him to gain his composure.

She felt worry, guilt, a level of despair, and overwhelming sympathy after learning of his dire circumstances, and these feelings were exacerbated by a sense of helplessness. Torn between her role as a researcher and that of a support worker, wanting to help him, but knowing there was very little that she could do:

> *'He (the participant) was completely worn-out, he was fairly clean, he had quite a thick jacket on...but he'd got big circles under his eyes...he was really thin. He told me he'd lost two stones. It was just really hard to see him and know that you couldn't do anything about him'.*

Further attempts to hear any news of him were in vain and the researcher was left feeling worried wondering what happened to him.

Occasionally, researchers speak to people who clearly need support, but, for certain reasons choose not to take up the support available. This was demonstrated in a case described by Joanne who conducted an interview

evaluating a support service for carers. Her participant had a huge caring

responsibility and the researcher felt that, *' he was in a very precarious and*

vulnerable position', but he was turning down support because of his

commitment to his marriage vows. The researcher found it difficult because

there was very little that she could do without overstepping the boundaries of

her role, '*I felt a bit powerless I suppose because he wasn't accepting it, and I*

wasn't really in a position to do anything about that'.

g. Impact on researchers

In all of the examples shared by the five researchers, they all confirmed that

their difficult research experiences were embedded in their memory for several

weeks, or permanently, after the encounter. For example, in the incident

concerning the woman with suicidal thoughts, Anthony was so disturbed by it

that it took him some time to put the episode to one side, and he was riddled

with guilt.

Although contact was made with the woman the following year and she was

well, the researcher was so affected by this particular experience that he

occasionally thinks about it several years later. Similarly, Susan reported that

the experience of interviewing the homeless man, *'still sticks'* with her. She was

deeply affected by the research encounter; his circumstances and not knowing what had happened to him:

> *'I wondered if he was alive, I wondered if he was still upset, I kept thinking about him sat with his girlfriend in a cold flat with nothing to eat, with no hope.'*

The anxiety caused by not knowing the course a participant' life had taken was re-iterated by Stella who commented that two years on she was still thinking about her participant in supported housing - *'I still feel sad that I don't know how she is now, I can't speak to her now'.*

Susan's concern about the homeless participant manifested itself in emotional distress and an inability to sleep – and this problem was echoed by another researcher.

The long-term impact of harrowing experiences in the field was reflected in Stella's concern about subsequent visits to participant's homes:

> *'I think I'm probably more apprehensive as to what to expect now. As that person (research participant) opens the door, I'm always kind of, there's always something in the back of my mind thinking, what if, what if the same happens again'.*

Nicola restated this apprehension about doing subsequent interviews after her alarming experience in the field, explicitly referencing the gendered dynamic (discussed later) of this encounter and the impact this had on her feelings about doing interviews involving men on their own. These concerns stayed with the researcher for some time afterwards, as she explained, - *'it's always that, what if...what if I'd have gone in there on my own, would my life be totally different now'.*

In her second example of a challenging interview, the experience with the terminally ill man left her feeling *'sad and confused'.* She started to think about her own family as well - what if one of them ended up in that awful situation. In the week immediately after the interview, her thoughts were preoccupied by this man; his face which re-entered her mind again and again - *'it was haunting',* and the environment within which he was living his last days:

> *'I think I thought about it for quite a while. I think I remembered the smell. I can almost still remember the smell, and I remembered him and his face - yellowness'.*

Whilst all the researchers placed the greatest emphasis on the emotional impact (in the short and long-term) of their work in specific situations, they also recognised the intersection between the emotional and physical aspects of their

work, for example, researcher Joanne reaffirmed, *'physically feeling quite overwhelmed by it'.* Doing heavily emotional, sensitive research, was highlighted as physically draining, and more so when researchers had to do subsequent interviews on the same day.

h. Gendered dimension to vulnerability

The narratives of two researchers revealed how the level of vulnerability can be shaped by gender. After her uncomfortable research encounter with the two men, Nicola felt *'uneasy'* and *'exposed', 'young and small and very female'.* Whilst in general interview situations, she had rarely considered her gender in terms of vulnerability, on that day she was acutely aware of being a woman and this gave the encounter a totally different dynamic. Afterwards, Nicola reflected on the times she had been alone with men in potentially risky environments, with them holding a physical advantage over her:

> *'I'm thinking about all the times I've been on my own in funny, dingy places where I can't easily see a way out, with men on my own. It's not just men you should worry about, but they've got a physical advantage haven't they, in terms of strength, which is a bit of a worry'.*

When considering the experience with his aggressive participant, Anthony deliberated over the gendered element to such encounters whereby, on the one

hand, female researchers may feel more at risk, although on the other, the

participant *'might have tempered his aggression if it was a woman (researcher)'.*

Nevertheless, this experience made him more aware of going into peoples'

houses, especially men's.

i. Reminders or triggers

An unexpected finding that is rarely reported, if at all, emerged from the data.

The long-term impact of such encounters was bound up in certain reminders

and triggers, which were constant and served to prolong researcher anxiety.

Nicola explained that in light of welfare reform, her participants stories of

suffering mirrored those of people portrayed by the media - *'it's a face that you*

can put to all the stories you see in the news and in the newspaper'. This view

was shared by Susan who reported being reminded of her homeless participant

each time she heard stories similar to his, with certain encounters playing on

her mind as a result of the images and stories:

> *'You can picture people's houses that you went to, you can picture that*
>
> *you never took your coat off because it was too cold...mould on the walls.'*

Further, Joanne identified that she was reminded of specific challenging

encounters when doing interviews on a similar topic or writing about a particular

project; in these situations, their stories were replayed in her mind.

The area where participants live, especially if local to the researcher, can also trigger memories when the researcher passes by/through that area. For example, Stella was profoundly affected by her repeated research with a woman living in supported housing and two years on, she continues to *'wonder how she is'* each time she passes the area her participant lived in.

This finding challenges literature on the ethics of the research relationship that suggests that once researchers "leave 'the field' participants are effectively reduced to being sources of data" (Hugman et al., 2011:1278) and there is no further connection. Indeed, in some cases, for researchers, the memories and concerns live on.

Discussion

This paper connects discussions on power with empirical data revealing power (and vulnerability). The multifaceted and complex nature of power is illustrated through researcher accounts. Their empirical insights reveal that researchers work within challenging power/knowledge relations that shape their practices of knowledge making. Importantly, it challenges the fixed notion of the powerful researcher and vulnerable participant, instead opening up a debate about the shifting nature of power that in some instances renders the researcher

vulnerable, indicating a need for research practice and support that adequately protects researchers from harm in addition to research participants.

Some of the causes of *participant vulnerability* described by the researchers seemed to mirror the causes of *researcher vulnerability*. The concern with creating a comfortable and familiar environment for the participant, inevitably, exposes the researcher to unfamiliar environments and can inadvertently compromise their own sense of comfort and security.

The home, as a research site, is perceived as offering comfort and familiarity, which encourages research participants to open up and share detailed accounts (Downey et al., 2007). In doing so the home potentially becomes a space of 'emotional' vulnerability for participants who unintentionally disclose too much sensitive information (Author, 2017). Conversely, the researcher is entering the 'unknown', having little information in advance about who else might be present during the interview, the participant's disposition etc. While qualitative research has increasingly concerned itself with minimising power relations between the researcher and participant (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009), an unexpected shift in power may occur when the participant is in their 'familiar' space, and the researcher in the 'unknown'.

Researchers, described feeling *exposed* in situations beyond their control, and, *unprepared* to deal with the settings, information, circumstances, and/or emotions in the unfolding encounters. Researchers struggled to cope with the harrowing stories they had heard, and to put behind them their temporary experience of the dismal situations that reflected their participants' realities. The *unpredictability* of participants created feelings of risk and insecurity. The conceptual researcher power controlling the terms of the research encounter was disrupted by participant unpredictability, frustration and anger. By veering off subject, participants inadvertently took control of the encounter.

Vulnerability, due to a sense of powerlessness to help participants in dire circumstances was conveyed, and, a tension emerged between the role of researcher and support worker in some cases. Blurred boundaries, are arguably compounded by cuts in public services and higher rates of unrecognised mental health problems, and deeper mental health problems (BMA.org.uk, 2016; Knapp, 2012), perhaps leading to a situation where vulnerable research participants were/are more likely to treat the research interviewer as surrogate or 'helper', inadvertently intensifying the interview as a mode of social interaction. Feelings of powerlessness to change participants' circumstances were conveyed by researchers, leading to guilt, worry, and sympathy, but these did not stray into partisanship or the politics of 'taking a

side'. Given the opportunity to express themselves freely, participants conveyed frustration, and anger, potentially changing the power dynamic between researcher and participant. Researchers described feeling most vulnerable in situations when they were unable to determine who the anger was directed at: the welfare system; their troubled pasts, or, at the researchers themselves.

Ferguson's (2010) contribution on the 'Walks, Home Visits and Atmospheres' of social work practice highlights that the *'understandings of risk need to be grounded much more in the lived experience of social work'* (pg. 1101). He explains how the analysis of practice and risk in terms of the lived experience - of the senses, movements, actions and emotions - is largely absent in social work. Similarly, the lived experience of social research practice involve: journeys to and from the interviewees' homes by car, taxis, trains, walking (often) in deprived areas, and entering deprived homes - into the unknown - yet the interrelationships between these experiences, risk and vulnerability, is under-explored.

Qualitative researchers go beyond asking research questions, by absorbing (temporarily) the wider context of an individual's reality. In practice, qualitative research involves the senses: hearing, seeing and smelling the misery, illness,

and poverty that characterises participants' lives. In the field, researchers experience the environments within which people live and negotiate their daily lives; witnessing and gaining insights into their participants' social connections, their amenities, resources, or a lack of them.

Emotional responses such as guilt, sadness, fear, are all recognised as sources of researcher vulnerability and interviews involving sensitive subject matter are seen as the main source of some of these emotions (Dickson-Swift et al, 2006). However, this paper advances this discussion by revealing the intrinsic and external factors to researching vulnerable participants, for instance, how the built environment can serve to create fear and/or trigger/remind researchers of their participants' harsh realities, which in turn fuel emotions and/or prolong researcher vulnerability. Passing through a particular neighbourhood, seeing/reading media advertisements or news may trigger emotional vulnerability of researchers. Reminders, and making connections between the material they have seen and the dire circumstances of their participants may cause researchers to relive the research encounter(s). Little, if at all, has been written about the impact of reminders/triggers on researchers, calling for further research in this area.

The scope of this paper prevents any firm conclusions being made about the role of gender in research encounters, power relations, and vulnerability, for example, whether women enhance or temper feelings of aggression. Further, within the confines of this paper, the differences between new and longstanding researchers' experiences of vulnerability are inadequately explored. Future research to explore these areas is also required.

This exploration is not concerned with conveying opposing binaries in the research relationship, rather, it is aims to highlight that power fluctuates and shifts from one person to the other throughout a research encounter, crucially, recognising that there are repercussions for the researcher too. As emphasised earlier, participants might unknowingly hold or exercise power in a research encounter, but until we do more research with them to gain their insights we have a gap in our knowledge. Importantly, the research community must continue to place the interests of research participants at the centre of their practice, but also sustain a dialogue in social research about the challenges encountered by qualitative researchers. To better understand the complexities of in-depth qualitative research it should be incumbent upon researchers to embed reflexivity in their research practice to ensure that lessons are shared and learned.

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