



The emotional turmoil of contract research

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1. Introduction and aims

Since 2008, changes in policy introducing austerity measures and more punitive welfare conditionality have been the focus of much research. Emphasis has been placed on understanding the lives of vulnerable households trying to manage day to day within these ever increasing punitive conditions. The contract research centre on which this paper is based has a clear policy focus and as such has seen a growth in the exploration of every day lived realities of households and individuals facing difficult circumstances. Hearing these life experiences has inevitably exposed researchers to mounting emotionally laden research and increased the likelihood of them experiencing vicarious trauma. The research centre, despite understanding the concerns of researchers, has been slow to recognise the demands placed on them in collecting evidence and listening to growing stories of hardship, and thus researchers are finding themselves lacking support, overloaded, burnt out and emotionally drained.

Although there is a growing discourse concerning the emotional well-being of researchers, little has been written exploring this specifically in a contract research setting. This paper addresses this gap and aims to broaden existing discourse on the wellbeing of researchers. It explores the impact of undertaking simultaneous fieldwork on a number of projects over time and how this affects researcher emotional health. Moreover, it highlights some of the tensions for the research centre, in maintaining a balance between the need to deliver contracts within client deadlines and financial constraints, against supporting the emotional needs of the researcher.

2. The nature of contract research

It is important to make clear the contract research setting being considered in this paper. It has a number of defining features. It is fast paced and reactive and requires high productivity in compressed time frames. The centre is responsible for its own income generation, responding to tenders quickly and concurrently. Moreover this is coupled with continuing research on other ongoing projects. Pressure for researchers to contribute to academia in the form of academic outputs, conferences etc is also expected. Project work is governed by tight deadlines and financial constraints. Researchers are permanent staff members, and work on a number of projects simultaneously and concurrently, with often overlapping and prolonged periods of fieldwork.

While work by [Peake and Mullings \(2016\)](#) highlight the move within Universities to what they term “Neoliberalisation of the academy” whereby there is an economic ethos encroaching into universities, placing high demands on staff, the research centre in this paper has operated within this ethos for some time; it has a clear business focus. Centre staff have always worked under some of the pressures discussed above. Over the past few years however, the research focus has changed within the centre as UK policy has introduced stringent and austere measures. Recent research is taking a much more human approach and personal circumstances are at the forefront of interviews. Researchers are therefore facing the same business demands but this is overlaid by increasing exposure to disturbing and challenging interview scenarios, listening to traumatic narratives of individuals in crisis and difficulty, trying to get by and navigate institutional settings such as claiming benefits or securing housing for example. Although these subjects may not seem to be considered traumatic in the literal sense of the word, and do not reflect the traumatic experiences described by researchers in the fields of health or disaster research for example, nevertheless, the cumulative effect of continued exposure to challenging interviews can be debilitating and pervasive. Although strictly adhering to ethics and health and safety policies ([Social Research Association, 2016](#)), ensuring the safety of participants and the physical safety of researchers, little credence is given to researcher emotional well-being ([Dominey-Howes, 2015](#)). Delivering policy research to clients, on time and within budget, places high demands on researchers' emotional well-being often leaving limited time for reflection or recovery.

3. Existing debate

Literature considering researcher well-being undertaking contract research has tended to focus mainly on practical issues such as human resource concerns, career development ([Athena Swan, \(undated\)](#)) and conditions of employment ([Oxford Brookes University, 2012](#)). Literature considering research safety and contract protection focusses on those primarily employed on a temporary or part time basis, undertaking fieldwork activities with only partially or disjointed involvement in the research process ([Mitchell and Irvine, 2008](#)). Discourse outlining academic well-being provides a cursory overview of researcher and academics stress and burnout while chasing research grants, resulting in negative impacts on family life ([Herbert et al., 2014](#); [Hogan et al., 2014](#); [Kinman, 2014](#)). Despite a growing interest in emotional well-

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being of researchers there is an absence of literature concerning this in a contract research setting.

Care and concern has traditionally focussed on the protection of the participant. Despite researcher physical health and safety being considered, the emotional well-being of those working, particularly in challenging and sensitive areas, has been insufficiently recognised or marginalised in research practice (Yeo and Graham, 2014; Moncur, 2013; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015; Gilbert, 2001; Lalor et al., 2006; Rager, 2005; McCosker et al., 2001; Johnson and Clarke, 2003). Authors have begun to produce a number of testimonies writing from a personal perspective discussing their experiences. Emotional considerations have focussed mainly on self-reflections of fieldwork activities while undertaking a specific project in the fields of health, disaster research or oral history (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Lalor et al., 2006; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Calgaro, 2015; De Nardi, 2015; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015; Eriksen and Ditrich, 2015). These experiences have begun to highlight the need to think carefully and proactively about managing researcher well-being and emotional risk (Mitchell and Irvine, 2008).

There is a growing discourse acknowledging emotional pain and trauma can affect those involved in research. Despite methodological issues, health and safety and risk being taken into consideration during the planning and conduct of research, it is impossible to plan for every possibility. Researchers are often faced with revelations, tensions and dilemmas during interviews that can be difficult to cope with (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Emerald and Carpenter, 2015; Wolf, 1996; Rowling, 1999). Indeed, it is difficult to be prepared for the range of eventualities that the reality of fieldwork can present. Moreover, emotional challenges can sometimes arise that are unconnected to the research focus leaving researchers feeling unprepared for the individual's revelations (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015; Hubbard et al., 2001). The research process can evoke highly emotional responses in both the participant and the researcher, and researchers are often left unsupported and alone, to deal with feelings of concern, worry and guilt leaving them potentially open to emotional exhaustion, desensitisation and fear of being seen as weak (Yeo and Graham, 2014). Emotional as well as physical exhaustion and stress were also common feelings reported by researchers during prolonged and simultaneous fieldwork activities (Cowles, 1998; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Authors are concerned with the long term impacts and the constant exposure to challenging interviews and how this effects researchers capacity for 'empathic corporeal exchange' (Robinson, 2011) or becoming desensitised to emotion (Lee-Treweek, 2000; Hubbard et al., 2001; Bloor et al., 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Lee and Lee, 2012; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015; Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). These interlinked points discussed above are particularly pertinent to contract research where researchers are required to work on projects simultaneously and concurrently over long periods without time out for reflection or respite. There is a continuous churn of beginning and completing projects without breaks.

The literature tells us that researchers tend to mask their emotions; keeping emotions in check with a sense of detached objectiveness (England, 1994) hiding emotions from colleagues after periods of fieldwork (Lalor et al., 2006). Tensions and dilemmas in the field can create emotional exhaustion and burnout that can be hard for researchers to acknowledge. Hochschild (1983), discusses researchers need to hide distress or anxiety, a process she refers to as 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 1983; 42–43) after challenging fieldwork activities. Silencing or ignoring emotions is perceived as essential to give the impression of professional competence, as are concealing emotions and denying self-reflection for fear of being viewed as inadequate or weak (Bloor et al., 2010; Hubbard et al., 2001). Moreover, Wolf, 1996, suggests that dilemmas confronting researchers in the field, what she refers to as 'secrets' often remain hidden, disclosure perhaps being perceived as exposing personal vulnerability, weakness or inadequacy (Wolf,

1996; Hubbard et al., 2001; Lalor et al., 2006; Yeo and Graham, 2014).

Emotional feelings and discourse concerning emotional labor strategies are not often acknowledged or debated openly, leaving researchers alone to manage their emotional stability (Woodby et al., 2011). Emotional labor therefore becomes a 'lived experience' for those undertaking difficult relationships with research participants over long periods of time (Bloor et al., 2007; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015). Clearly, investing emotion in the interview to build rapport can be exhausting, requiring extensive emotional labor to maintain equilibrium. As Emerald and Carpenter (2015) suggest 'Emotional labor can manifest exponentially as involvement and personal interaction with research participants increases' (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015: 747).

Investing so much in interviews over long periods, it is not surprising that researchers can become fatigued, both emotionally and physically. Moreover, repeated exposure to participant revelations and challenging circumstances can have a negative cumulative effect on researcher well-being (Tufford and Newman, 2012; Sanders et al., 2014; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015). Indeed, discourse has begun to reveal the manifestation of both physical symptoms and emotional exhaustion (Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015) both during and after research activities. The source of exhaustion was twofold; the sheer number of interviews and the research content (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Deleterious outcomes of distress and vicarious trauma such as headaches, sleep disturbances, insomnia and nightmares (Cowles, 1998); gastrointestinal upsets, increased stress and loss of appetite have been experienced and documented (Dominey-Howes, 2015; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015), as have a full range of emotions - frustration, loneliness, sadness (Nutov and Hazzan, 2011), guilt and crying (Lalor et al., 2006; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), and an inability to concentrate and think (Eriksen and Ditrich, 2015).

4. Coping mechanisms

The need for researcher reflection and reflexivity is considered to be a critical component of the research process and is vital in helping researchers have time out, recover from vicarious trauma, reduce stress and begin the recovery process, thereby weakening the subsequent development of further trauma (Dunn, 1991; Chatzifotiou, 2000; Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Bloor et al., 2010; Moncur, 2013; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Counselling has been suggested in some cases providing a 'neutral' to listen but is acknowledged may be of limited use (Corden et al., 2005; Rager, 2005). Wincup, 2001, suggests peers are felt to be the most appropriate debrief confidant and help researchers to recognise their emotional feelings are not unique. Peers provide reassurance; help address issues of isolation and more importantly have an acute appreciation of the feelings and emotions experienced by fellow colleagues, having been involved in the same or similar research. (Wincup, 2001). Warr, 2004, expresses concern that senior researchers or Project Directors may not necessarily provide the most appropriate debriefing partner; they may lack awareness and insight into the kinds of issues raised by research topics or have not experienced the interviews first-hand (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Warr, 2004). Friends and family members have also been suggested as support mechanisms offering debriefing opportunities (Dunn, 1991; Chatzifotiou, 2000; Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Moncur, 2013; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015), but it has been argued that debriefing with family does not give the opportunity to separate the role of work and family (Johnson and Clarke, 2003). Additionally, debriefing with family does not perhaps offer the same level of understanding as a personal encounter with a colleague who has the potential to better understand similar feelings (Moncur, 2013). Other beneficial practices including diary keeping or journal writing (Dunn, 1991; Rager, 2005) have also been shown to be effective in relieving emotional concerns.

Exploring the unknown, can require researchers to engage in emotional laden research requiring a great deal of investment on the part of

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