

## Ethics: what about the researcher?

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998 Words

### **Abstract**

As researchers, we strive to conduct research ethically. Discussions of what this “ethical research” might look like are often centred around the well-being of our participants. Whilst this is important when conducting research, we often forget about the well-being of ourselves, the researcher. This article argues that we need to increasingly recognise the impact our research has on us and pay more attention towards our own well-being as researchers.

### **Article**

I was lucky enough to attend a “Challenging Fieldwork” workshop at the University of Bath earlier this year, which looked into some of the ethical, practical and political issues of doing research. Amongst the many discussions had on the day, were some interesting discussions surrounding the ethical challenges of fieldwork. Since then, one of the points raised has lingered in my mind: what about the ethics and well-being of the researcher? Guillemin and Gillam (2004) reference a woman from their research, who disclosed during an interview that she had recently found out her husband had been sexually abusing her daughter. Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 262) discuss the importance of being able to respond to such disclosures and other “ethically important moments” with reflexivity in order to reduce harm to the participants and ultimately practice ethical research. Indeed, when we consider what practicing ethical research looks like, our focus tends to be on our participants. Feminists have made a strong case for research practices which set out to reduce some of the power relations between researcher and researched, where the researcher is often the one in the position of power (McDowell, 1992; England, 1994). As such, we focus on how our participants will not be exploited, subjected to unnecessary harm and ensure that we ensure their well-being is cared for throughout. Consent forms inform them of their rights to withdraw from the research process and we practice reflexivity and reflectivity in order to ensure we are constantly improving ourselves as ethical researchers. However, with so much attention focusing on our participants, we often forget the other party involved in the research process: us. This article argues for increasing consideration for how the researcher might be impacted by the fieldwork process and how we might move forward to incorporate consideration for our own well-being in future practice.

Fieldwork can have significant impacts on our emotions and well-being. For instance, Robinson (2011) described the impact her research had on herself, how she wept for a whole day following the completion of her fieldwork. She reflected how “the stories sat raw, troubling my nights”, experiencing “a process of unescapable, corporeal, transcription” as the interviews replayed themselves (Robinson, 2011:51-52). She realized we cannot simply enter and exit the field, and that the field can leave permanent traces on us. In the same vein, Lund (2012:94) describes how she “could no longer ignore my feeling of

discomfort” when she was in Sri Lanka, following the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. She offers insights about:

*“the emotions of the researcher herself: her sadness at meeting devastated people, anger and guilt about the situation, and fear about her own personal safety” (Lund, 2012:94).*

On a more personal note, during my undergraduate research (with people experiencing homelessness), I was impacted by the research, both in and out of the field. I want to keep the specifics of these experiences private, as I do not have the consent to share these stories beyond the dissertation I was working on. However, there were moments during and after my research, as I read through interview transcripts and my research diary where I cried; my heart breaking for these people I had come to care so much about. I kept this distress secret, convinced that if I admitted my upset at these stories that I would be considered a weaker researcher. Someone not cut out for the job. However, from reading some of the accounts in the literature and through conversations with other researchers about the impact of fieldwork on us as researchers, it is clear that becoming affected by our fieldwork does not make us weak researchers. It makes us human.

Perhaps one of the reasons I felt so ashamed at experiencing these emotions is because it is not talked about enough in academia. Amongst the preparatory lectures prior to my undergraduate dissertation that focused on methodology and practice in the field, nothing was said that might indicate sometimes fieldwork can be upsetting. Reading through methods books now, in preparation for my masters thesis, there is very little mention of how the process of research might impact upon the researcher. I have found some interesting reflections on the embodied and emotional experiences of doing research and the impact the research had on the researcher (see Robinson, 2011; Lund, 2012; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010), but these took some finding. Hence, whilst the subject of researcher well-being is something we are increasingly focusing on, this has not necessarily trickled into many methodology discussions. If we want to take seriously the well-being of a researcher, then surely, we need to increasingly acknowledge the impact research can have on us, so we can learn from these experiences and better prepare for how we will manage our own well-being during research.

Perhaps incorporating discussions on how we handle our own well-being could be a useful addition to ethical procedures. Applying for ethical approval from university ethics committees certainly forces us to reflect on how we will practice the most ethical research, which will minimise harm to our participants (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Adding a section where we have to discuss how we will consider our own well-being during the project (be that having a supportive group of peers to vent to or familiarising ourselves with counselling services) could also encourage more of us to prepare for and think about our own well-being during research. However, the concern with such an approach is that well-being becomes just another “box to tick”, rather than something we think through carefully. Rather than attempting to solve this issue in a short article, I want to conclude by thanking those who openly and honestly write about their experiences and the impact their research has on them. By sharing these experiences, they enable others to better anticipate and prepare for what they might experience in the field. I hope we will see more discussions of

this matter in the future, as we continue to strive for ethical research, for both our participants and ourselves.

### References

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