

Partisanship and positionality in qualitative research: Exploring the influences of the researcher's experiences of serious crime on the research process.

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Abstract

Debates on positionality and partisanship in the research process are long-standing, complex and often highly contentious. Engaging with, and contributing to, both these key debates, this paper introduces the concept of victim-as-researcher. This draws from the author's experiences of undertaking research in Trinidad and Tobago with a group of offenders who had committed similar offences to that which the researcher was herself a victim. There is a paucity of literature which speaks to the experiences of victims of serious, violent crime who subsequently engage in qualitative research with offenders who have been convicted of offences similar to the ones experienced by the researcher and which, therefore, can elicit trauma whilst in the field and through analysis. This paper aims to extend the methodological literature on positionality and victimology by foregrounding the victim-as-researcher as an important category in reflexive sociological and criminological research.

Keywords: Qualitative interviews, Victim-as-researcher, Victimology, Reflexivity, Positionality, Partisanship, Emotional labour

Introduction

There is a considerable body of literature on partisanship, positionality and reflexivity in criminological and sociological research. Over 50 years ago, Becker (1967) and Gouldner (1968) engaged in a robust debate about taking sides in social research. Becker opined that researchers inevitably (though often unconsciously) take sides and proposed that it is thus imperative that we declare from the outset, whose side we are on. Gouldner countered that researchers should always remain non-partisan. Questions of partisanship in undertaking research—particularly if you adopt Becker’s approach—are underscored by considerations of the background and experiences of the researcher as well as her positionality. These can include age, gender, nationality, and political dispositions among others (Horn, 1997; Poulton, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Ugelvik, 2014). Indeed, all of the foregoing had an impact on the way that I undertook my fieldwork and analysis. Within this paper, I focus on just one aspect of positionality that shaped my research and forced a level of reflexivity that I had not originally anticipated. This paper is about the victim-as-researcher. I define victim-as-researcher to mean a person who has been a victim of a violent, physical crime and has subsequently embarked on a criminological or sociological enquiry which necessitates interviewing offenders who have been perpetrators of criminal acts that are similar to the crime she has experienced. For the victim-as-researcher, the relationship between the researcher’s experience of victimisation and the offender is such that interactions with members of the offender group invoke trauma for the researcher. I do not suggest that there needs to be a precise overlap between the nature of past victimisation of the researcher and the nature of the offence or attributes of the offender, only that interactions with the offender forces the

researcher to remember her experiences and be affected by it in a way that impinges upon the interaction between the two.

Thus, this paper interrogates the experiences of the victim-as-researcher who undertakes research—specifically face-to-face interviews—with perpetrators of violent crime and the challenges and dilemmas of seeking to produce an authentic, appreciative account that foregrounds the voices of the offenders and seeks to humanise them. My doctoral research focussed on giving voice to young men who were convicted of crime and sentenced to a juvenile detention centre. Whilst giving voice to offenders is not unusual, what distinguished my research was that I sought to give voice to convicted young men who were quite similar to my own victimiser. They were within the same age bracket, most were of the same ethnicity, and some of them physically looked like him. There is a paucity of academic literature centred on the victim-as-researcher and within this paper, I seek to bridge this gap, by detailing my own experiences in the field and providing what are hoped to be handy ‘rules of thumb’ for researchers who may find themselves in similar circumstances. It bears stating that this paper does not advocate an approach to research that foregrounds the researcher over the researched. It is a reflective account of my own experiences that is intended to provide a useful set of tools for other researchers.

This paper also makes a contribution to narrative victimology. We can define victimology as “a social science of victims, victimizations, and reactions toward these” (Kirchhoff, 2010: 96) but it is very much a complex sub-discipline that encompasses the work of academics and activists, theories of victimisation, the impact of victimisation, the needs of victims, the fear of crime, and victim surveys (Wolhuter et al, 2008: 13). Pemberton et al (2019) note that there has been an increasing focus on narrative recollections in social

science research over the last 40 years, and this also applies to the sub-discipline of victimology. Narrative victimology focuses on how people understand and experience wrongdoing. Here the focus is on understanding what has been done to us and the impact this has on future behaviour and actions (Pemberton et al, 2019). Setting out my experiences as victim-as-researcher supplements the reflexive process of producing robust research in making clear the circumstances within which my choices and actions were undertaken, and in what context my data were produced.

I begin the discussion with a brief overview of my research. I explain the research aims and methodology, and then give a description of the field where I collected data. The paper continues with a recap of the Becker/Gouldner debate and grapples with ideas of partisanship in the research experience. This section explores positionality as a construct, the usefulness of reflecting on one's positionality for the furtherance of 'good' academic research, and flows into a more detailed section on reflexivity in the research experience. Within the penultimate section—my nascent contribution to narrative victimology—I set out my experience of victimisation, how my experience emerged as being relevant in the context of the research, and how it both hampered and facilitated my fieldwork and analysis. This paper concludes with some suggested rules of thumb for the victim-as-researcher undertaking research with offenders. It is argued that despite the considerable emotional labour, being victim-as-researcher can facilitate a more rigorous critical analysis and enable the researcher to provide a more holistic account of research participants.

The study

My doctoral research involved interviews with convicted young men in Trinidad and Tobago. Although it may come as quite a surprise, my decision to undertake this research was in no way influenced by my experience of victimisation. Years before, when I practised law in Trinidad, I became fascinated with the lives of the young men that I saw appearing before the Court. I noticed that many of these young men looked the same—not physically, but socially. They came from deprived communities; they seemed either angry or detached; and sometimes appeared before the Court charged with multiple offences. I became very interested in what their lives were like, how they grew up, what they thought about the criminal justice system they were caught up in, and what they wanted their futures to look like. My research was thus conceived as an avenue into gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of convicted young men in Trinidad and Tobago.

The research was a qualitative case study of a census population of convicted young men housed at a juvenile detention centre between November 2014 and April 2015. One of the main aims of the study was to give voice to convicted young men in Trinidad and Tobago; to detail their life experiences in their own words. Through the use of mostly unstructured life history interviews, I elicited the explanations, justifications and excuses provided by the young men for their pathways into criminality and their hopes for a pathway out. I analysed the perceptions held by participants about themselves, their families and communities, their criminal activity, and society as a whole. The study was a presentation, exploration, and sociological-criminological analysis of the subjective lived

experiences of incarcerated juveniles in Trinidad and Tobago; how they feel, think, act and make sense of the world.

The fieldwork was undertaken at the Rockland Young Offenders' Institution which is used for the detention of convicted and remanded young men aged 16 years and over (the oldest participant was 25 and awaiting sentencing). The institution is fashioned on the old English borstal system—intended to reform delinquent young people—and is militaristic in nature. I was fortunate to be afforded access to Rockland for six months. Whilst I was in the field, I engaged in formal interviews with the convicted young men as well as informal interactions with both the young men and the staff at Rockland. During that time, I interviewed a census population of the young men (there were 52 at the time) and in addition to my day-to day observations, I was also able to gather further observational data through attending social, cultural, and religious functions at the institution.

Partisanship and positionality

As noted above, I was very clear about my intention to present my research from the standpoint of the young men. Becker (1967), in his seminal article on partisanship in research, acknowledges that researchers who undertake the study of the social world are often faced with the very difficult decision of whether they should be partisan or neutral in undertaking their research. For Becker though, this thorny issue is more illusory than real since Becker is of the view that sociologists are intrinsically unable to examine the

social world without taking a side. Thus, the question for Becker “is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on” (1967: 239).

Becker acknowledges that in the course of conducting research, sociologists sometimes fall into sympathy with the people being studied. When these people make up the fringes of society, as is often the case in the study of deviance, the researcher begins to view her research participants differently from the rest of society. Where society might view participants as deviant or unfit, the researcher begins to see them “at least as good as anyone else, more sinned against than sinning” (1967: 240). This makes it increasingly difficult for the researcher to give an objective and balanced picture. Becker suggests that it is likely that the researcher will attempt to highlight the positive aspects of her participants and the ways in which they have been wronged by society, and conversely conceal the participants’ wrongdoing.

Still, whether we undertake research from the standpoint of the marginalised or supraordinate bodies, Becker maintains that we cannot avoid taking sides. He therefore suggests that whatever position we take, we as researchers must ensure that our subjective views do not invalidate our work.

Becker’s article has been widely cited. It has most often been taken to establish that sociologists are inevitably partisan and should be clear and upfront about their biases (see for example Galliher, 1995, cited in Hammersley, 2001: 91). Perhaps Becker’s harshest critique came from Gouldner (1968). Gouldner states that instead of undertaking partisan research, sociologists must strive for objectivity. He criticises Becker’s position as romanticist and condemns it as encouraging ‘zookeeping’ since he

claims that Becker wishes to 'protect his collection' from the outside world, neither ready to facilitate his participants' condemnation by society nor prepared to allow them to go free.

Hammersley (2001) offers a different interpretation of Becker's article, an interpretation with which I am inclined to agree: that Becker was not suggesting that researchers *only* focus on the subordinate or produce partisan studies, but simply that we acknowledge the personal and/or political limitations which we bring to our work and understand the ways in which these limitations might affect our research. What Hammersley makes clear is that "the problem is not that an objective or balanced view is impossible in principle but rather that it is very difficult to achieve in practice, and that we have to carry on with our work before it is achieved" (2001: 97).

My own reading of Becker's work leads me to agree with Hammersley's interpretation. If I were to ask myself the question, whose side was Becker really on, I would say that Becker was on the side of rigorous, credible and trustworthy research. An acknowledgement by the researcher that she has come to a study with personal and/or political 'baggage' or preconceived notions should not prevent the researcher from objectively employing disciplinary theory or methods. It should in fact, prompt the researcher to more rigorously and objectively apply relevant theory and methods to ensure credible work.

For me, the question of taking sides was complex. At times, I was confronted with feelings of extreme empathy for participants, and at other times—particularly because of my past experiences—feelings of revulsion and fear. From the outset, it was clear to me that I

wanted to interrogate the experiences of convicted young men in Trinidad and Tobago and it was thus relatively straightforward for me to state that I was approaching the issues from the vantage point of the young men rather than the guards or the police. In many instances, I did find myself “falling into deep sympathy with” participants (Becker, 1967: 240). The majority of young men came from socially and economically deprived backgrounds and many of them suffered abuse in childhood. Nevertheless, I was keen to heed Becker’s (1967: 246) advice to ensure that my research met the standards of good scientific work, and that neither my sympathies nor my fears rendered my results invalid.

So, in presenting participants’ narratives, I endeavoured to present their stories as objectively as possible and to analyse rigorously their narratives as well, by maintaining a critical distance. Admittedly, I did sometimes express sentiments which condemned “those respectable citizens who, we think, have made the deviant what he is” (Becker, 1967: 240). Indeed, it would have been difficult not to do so given the material circumstances of participants and the socio-economic climate of Trinidad and Tobago in times of austerity. Nevertheless, I did try to ensure that what was presented was not a “whitewash of the deviant” (Becker, 1967: 240), as I presented the young men’s narratives, some painful and others incensing, as honestly and openly as they were narrated to me. I also analysed these narratives with a sociological-criminological lens. What this means is that although I did not quieten the participants’ voices, I also added my own voice, sometimes challenging the narratives presented, but more often, exploring, explaining and critically analysing these narratives with the use of relevant theory and concepts.

Giving a reflexive account

Valerie Yow, an oral history researcher, in 1997 posed a question that I imagine confronts many social scientists grappling with issues of partisanship in ethnographic research, 'do I like them too much?' Much like Becker (1967) and Gouldner (1968) in the sociologist camp, Yow explores subjectivity in research but from the perspective of an historian. Given the fact that historians, much like social researchers (and indeed more so in some cases) are usually exhorted to produce objective accounts of the worlds they study, I found Yow's article to be enlightening.

On the issue of objectivity in recording historical accounts, Yow (1997: 58) explains that such objectivity is rarely achieved:

Every historian knows that he manipulates the evidence to some extent simply because of who he is (or is not), of what he selects (or omits), of how well (or badly) he empathises and communicates. Those 'fallibilities' have been frequently confessed in the abstract. Yet the process by which a particular personality intersects with a particular subject matter has rarely been shown, and the intersection itself almost never regarded as containing materials of potential worth. Because 'objectivity' has been the ideal, the personal components that go into historical reconstruction have not been candidly revealed, made accessible to scrutiny.

Yow explains that the historian's reluctance to make clear which personal experiences have influenced her writing is often based on a fear that the written work produced will

deal with the researcher's personal experiences and the research topic will take a back seat. To this, Yow counters that it is not her suggestion that the researcher's personal reaction become the focus of the research, nevertheless she maintains that when researchers pretend that there is nothing personal or political going on that is influencing the research and interpretation, researchers prevent themselves from using an essential research tool. Furthermore, in some cases the reader needs to know what influenced the research and interpretation.

And so, just as important as partisanship in framing the research question, and in the analysis, interpretation and presentation of research, is the issue of recognising potential bias in the field. Yow urges researchers to recognise how personal feelings can affect the interview process and thereby influence the data produced. She advises that researchers be aware of any personal limitations that might influence the like or dislike of an interviewee.

Liking or not liking, feeling repelled by difference in ideology or attracted by a shared world-view, sensing difference in gender or age or social class or ethnicity, all influence the ways we ask questions and respond to narrators and interpret and evaluate what they say. As analyst and fieldworker George Devereux argued nearly 30 years ago, we must view our difficulties (and I would add, pleasures as well) as important data in their own right (1997: 78).

In sum, the decision to be (or not to be) partisan in undertaking research, recognition of and reflection on personal attributes and experiences, and the way that this influences the research process are all part of being a reflexive researcher. Reflexivity has been

defined by many researchers (Attia and Edge, 2017; Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002), here I use the definition provided by Berger (2015: 220):

Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome... It means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective.

Attia and Edge (2017) rightly note that reflexivity forces the researcher to acknowledge her positionality and standpoint and challenges the researcher to be open to the possibility of having that standpoint changed. The authors further explain that there is a difference between prospective and retrospective reflexivity. They suggest that prospective reflexivity is the type that researchers most often concern themselves with. This is the effect of the researcher on the research—issues of gender, class, ethnicity etc. They note that retrospective reflexivity, though less often discussed, is also important—the effect of the research on the researcher.

Whilst undertaking my own research, I endeavoured to take heed of the robust academic guidance on positionality and reflexivity. As a female researcher in a male-dominated

environment, I heeded Gurney's (1985: 43-44) advice and steeled myself for potential derogatory remarks and worked to create a nonthreatening air whilst in the field. I was always armed with chocolates, sweets and an air of pleasant naiveté. Like both Gurney (1985) and Horn (1997), I found that confessions of ignorance were a valuable asset in the field, and I freely admitted my lack of knowledge about participants' lives and 'street talk'. I was mindful of Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007: 68) advice to be cognisant of the sort of impression one wishes to create and to manage appearances accordingly.

Thus, there were a number of aspects of my positionality that I reflected on before entering the field, whilst undertaking my fieldwork, and through the analysis of my data. These included my sex and gender, class and social status, legal background and knowledge of the criminal law, my perceived status as a 'foreigner' because I was affiliated with a University outside of the Caribbean, and my conflicting status as an insider, because I was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago. And I believe that reflecting on my positionality in this way was tremendously useful in undertaking my research, particularly in the analysis and write-up, as it made me think about whether my interpretation and analysis of participants' narratives were useful and fair in the context of their lives rather than my own.

The victim-as-researcher experience

One aspect of my personal experience that I paid little attention to before entering the field, but which had a significant impact on my experience in the field and during analysis, was being a victim of crime. In January 2012, I was a victim of violence in my home. At

the time, I was living in Trinidad and on the day in question I stayed home from work. A young man (he looked to be in his early twenties), posing as an electrician sent by my landlord, convinced me to let him into my apartment. I was physically assaulted and robbed. I was made to comply with the assailant's requests through physical abuse and repeated threats that I would be shot if I did not comply. I thought that I would die that day. In the months that followed, I jumped at my own shadow, was unable to be alone in my home and checked the locks on the gates and doors multiple times a day. When I was out in public, I was hypervigilant and avoided young men whom I did not know. Eight months later I moved to the United Kingdom to commence my studies.

When I began planning my fieldwork, I gave no thought to how this past experience could affect me. I had not disclosed my experience to my supervisors, so although we discussed generally how I would deal with the emotional pressures associated with my research, I made no specific plans on how I would deal with the issue of reliving the trauma from my prior victimisation during my interaction with participants. Indeed, I did not think that I needed to; almost three years had passed since the incident and I had essentially put it out of my mind. However, in my very first interview I realised that it was indeed something that I needed to deal with. Phillip, the first interviewee, spoke openly and easily about his use of violence, "killing somebody easy, you just have to point and squeeze [the trigger]." The revulsion that I felt during and after that interview made me reflect on why I had had such a visceral reaction to Phillip. I realised that although I had expected difficult and challenging narratives, I had not fully understood how these narratives might challenge my own feelings: revulsion, a strange empathy, and at times, fear. During my subsequent interviews, when participants talked about robbing people

with weapons, assaulting their victims and the feeling of power that they derived from these encounters, I sometimes had to pause before proceeding.

The following interview excerpts illustrate the way that some of the participants talked about using gratuitous violence and these are examples of the interviews that I found particularly challenging.

I will scrape [rob] somebody, normal, quick; rob them they gold. I will go up with a gun and rob you. Sometimes it don't have no bullets in it, sometimes I rob with a dummy. I never rob people with knife. I don't like that. I feel frighten, I feel I go stab you up. Some people don't take rob. A time I rob a man and he don't want to take no rob; I buss up he head. He lucky too, I glad the gun didn't have no bullets, I woulda kill him.

- Jackson

Would you feel guilty to hurt somebody?

If I beat up somebody I not going and feel guilty. But you see when it come to shedding somebody blood, yeah. At first when I shed your blood I going and get quiet, then after like my blood going and start to get hot. My heart going and start beat fast and that fear gone and I feeling [I want] to see more blood. When I done deal with you, later on in the night or whenever when I really lie down in my bed and I study it, I go feel guilty but it doesn't really last long. I does think it worth it.

- Derek

Many of the young men demonstrated desensitisation, sometimes a lack of empathy for their victims, and a sense of excitement when discussing confrontations with the public.

I rob people with gun and thing. You doesn't really feel no way. When I do that I does kind of be hoping for people to just take rob, that's what I does be hoping for. If they take rob normal and everything just go normal then nothing can't happen to nobody. I doesn't want to shoot nobody but if it have to happen it go happen. When you now start to do them kind of thing you does feel excited but after a while you stop feel anything when you doing it.

- Liam

These excerpts highlight the ease with which many participants not only spoke about but also resorted to violence. This may seem unsurprising given their lifestyles. If you are going to rob someone—with or without a weapon—it would make sense to incapacitate them, either with fear or with violence, so that your robbery is successful. It would be unproductive to empathise with your victim in such a scenario. However, participants sometimes went further than merely distancing themselves from victims. They sometimes expressed a lack of empathy that I found to be quite alarming.

Have you ever witnessed violence in your community?

Fed up. Fed up. I actually see a man shoot a person right in front of me already, by my aunt place.

How did that make you feel?

That make me feel real stink. Blood splash up on me. I don't care about he you know, but the blood make me feel stink. I don't like blood on me, boy. Is a youthman who get shot. Hear it—

I don't think I want to hear this story...

Nah, you hear it on news already. It was on the news. Is a youthman in [one area] who they drag up in [another area] and they kill him. They torture him first and they kill him. You must hear that on the news. That was last year... Piece of brain there, blood, eye... Sorry...

Is that type of violence something that you see regularly or was that a one-off thing?

Yeah, regular. One day I was up [in one community] with one of my uncle driver. I was up on the block and something they say about an informer. They break down the man door, pump [gun] straight in he face. No, first a gunman come—

No it's okay you don't have to tell me that. How does it make you feel to see that?

No boy, I can't stay and just watch dead people just so. Well I could, but at that point in time nah... Dead people... That normal for me eh, because remember most of the times I accustomed seeing that while we on shootings, fellas have guns, dead. But the kind of sound and the smell, I can't stand that.

- Lionel

Lionel's narrative was a bit more conflicting and nuanced. At first, he appeared to be more concerned with the state of his clothing and shoes than the victim of the crime that he witnessed. But later on, he confessed that he did not like seeing death around him. Nevertheless, he was eager to tell me the gory details and I had to ask him to stop on more than one occasion.

Many of these narratives were painful for me to hear. Because of my own experience with crime, I sometimes felt intense fear, revulsion, and anger, both during my interviews and in the subsequent write-up and analysis. It was sometimes a challenge to hear narratives about violent offending without personalising the stories that were being told to me. And yet, these feelings were often mixed with other more positive ones—empathy for those participants who had been abused growing up, frustration at their lack of prospects for social mobility, and even admiration for their resilience in maintaining a strong sense of self and positive hopes and dreams for the future. It can be quite challenging to navigate and analyse conflicting narratives—and the young men's narratives were certainly that. But my own inner-narrative was equally conflicted: I needed to unpack feelings of anger and fear whilst also having strong feelings of empathy and genuine (and surprising) affinity for participants. I believe that my status as a victim-as-researcher greatly aided me in navigating these conflicting narratives. Because I was acutely aware of the impact of the young men's actions, I did not feel the need to highlight their positive aspects and conceal their wrongdoing. So, I did not fall into the trap of creating a "whitewash of the deviant" (Becker 1967: 240). And my positive experiences with participants during the fieldwork also meant that I avoided being overly condemning. In this way, I think that my prior experience of crime aided me to analyse and present my data more rigorously and

more fairly. My victim-as-researcher experience thus facilitated a more authentic account. It enabled me to provide an informed, grounded insight that in many ways benefited from my own experience but was not over-shadowed by it. I would suggest that the experience of the victim-as-researcher who acknowledges the impact of her victimhood but does not lose the ability to listen to, understand, (and perhaps even like) her participants is well-placed to provide robust, reflective work.

Nevertheless, this was not a straightforward undertaking. Upon leaving the field, I began searching for literature to help me explore and explain my experiences of victim-as-researcher and was confronted by the paucity of offerings in this area. There is certainly a growing body of literature on victimology and co-production of research with victims of crime. Yet I found no literature that helped me unpack my experience of undertaking research with offenders whilst being a victim of the type of crime in which participants were implicated. And so, I decided to make my own offering. It is hoped that the foregoing discussion and the advice that follows create a space for and a foundation upon which to build learning in this area.

Some rules of thumb

I. Before entering the field

Be prepared

The most fundamental error that I made when entering the field was not giving thought to how my previous experience of crime might affect my research. From initial interactions with participants, to undertaking the interview, to analysing data and the

write-up, it is crucial that the victim-as-researcher is well-prepared for the experience to come. My advice would be to reflect on your past and how that may make you feel. It is important that you come to grips with your emotional responses and how you feel, both about your previous experience and about your participants. You may not be able to control how you feel, but you can control what you present to the world, if you are prepared. Ensure that you have a plan for how to deal with strong emotions and that you have someone to talk to. Before entering the field, you should have a good idea of the research design, questions, and outcomes. Think through possible scenarios and decide how you might best respond to them. It is, of course, unlikely that you will think of all possible situations, nevertheless, being prepared can increase confidence and this will stand you in good stead for responding to negative emotions whilst in the field. This is good advice generally for preparing to enter the field, but it can be particularly useful for the victim-as-researcher.

II. In the field

Don't be afraid to hit pause

Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) exhort us to remember that sensitive research has the potential to have an impact on all the people who are involved in it, including researchers. They therefore encourage researchers to examine the potential for harm not only to the research participants, but to the researchers as well. The authors refer to the work of Hochschild (1983, cited in Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 62) whilst explaining the emotional labour and emotion work inherent in undertaking research. Emotional labour, in this context, refers to the way that researchers manage their own emotions whilst in the field, and emotion work relates to the way that researchers manage and deal with the emotions

of other people who are encountered during the research experience. As researchers, we engage in both emotional labour and emotion work. This can be quite difficult to manage for any researcher but can be particularly trying for the victim-as-researcher. When faced with a problematic or emotionally-charged situation, researchers attempt to manage their emotions.

One aspect of emotion work is management of emotion. Hochschild (1998: 9) defines emotion management as 'an effort by any means, conscious or not, to change one's feeling or emotion'. As part of the emotion work that we do while undertaking qualitative research we manage our own feelings and outward displays of emotion. This is what Hochschild calls 'emotion management' and it is an integral part of the emotion work process. (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 68)

Embodied feelings of anger, fear, anxiety or disgust can have a significant impact on an interview. Rolling one's eyes at a participant, clenching one's jaw or fist, laughing with derision, can all cause an interview to shut down. The victim-as-researcher must be cognisant of this and ensure that a tight rein is held on emotions and coping mechanisms are pre-established before the interview. Sometimes this is possible with a deep breath, and a smile. But sometimes the researcher needs to hit pause. Taking the time to check the recording device, breaking eye contact and writing notes, or stopping the interview entirely to make a phone call or go to the bathroom are all useful ways to pause an interview without alienating a participant.

Whilst undertaking my own research, I sometimes found it necessary to halt the interview. More often than not, it was only for a minute or so, and I would have a drink of water or check my recording device, but I found this to be a good way to re-centre myself and to refocus the interview when I felt control slipping away. As researchers, particularly those of us who undertake research with vulnerable groups, we are acutely aware that the research is not about us, but about our participants. We are encouraged to remain objective in the field, and though this is changing, there has traditionally been a feeling that the emotions of researchers should be excluded from research accounts, and we learn to suppress these emotions:

As students, researchers and professionals, we are products of a long process of socialisation into academic life, often heavily reliant on the value of science and objectivity above all else. The difficulties that researchers have in speaking about their own emotions in their research may be borne from this. It is not surprising that scientists (including social scientists) are trained to suppress emotions (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 66).

A good researcher will be attuned to the emotions of her participants—this is part of the aforementioned emotion work. If a participant becomes emotional and needs a minute or two (or longer) to compose herself, we would quickly and happily oblige. Yet, we tend to ignore these feelings in ourselves. Ethical guidelines proscribe putting ourselves in harm's way; too often we forget that this includes not only physical harm, but emotional harm as well. This is particularly important for the victim-as-researcher, and we should not be afraid to halt an interview in order to reassess, recompose, and return.

Your experience is yours

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 72) note that it is often difficult for researchers to determine how much personal information to disclose to participants: “it is hard to expect ‘honesty’ and ‘frankness’ on the part of participants and informants, while never being frank and honest about oneself.” Nevertheless, your experience is yours, and you should disclose as much or as little as is right for you. With the young men, I decided very early on that I would not disclose my own experience with crime. I made this decision after one of my early interviews. On that occasion, a participant asked me whether I had ever been robbed. When I told him that I had, he laughed. The embarrassment and anger that I felt that day led me to never volunteer this information again. There may, of course, be situations where it feels right to the researcher to have this conversation with a participant, but it is certainly not obligatory.

Be clear about the parameters of the research

Here I will refer to the oft-repeated phrase, the research is not ‘me-search’, it is not about you. This is not to suggest that the research experience cannot have emancipatory effect on the victim-as-researcher and for others reading as well. Nevertheless, the researcher should not use the interview or research process to challenge participants outside of the scope of the research aims and questions. There are places and spaces to deal with and talk through these experiences, but more often than not, the field is not that space or place.

Being clear about the parameters of research can also be quite useful in steering an interview away from emotionally challenging narratives that are not necessary for the researcher’s purposes. Cook (2014) notes that asymmetrical power dynamics usually

exist when undertaking research interviews, particularly in sensitive research. Cook argues that in sensitive research, the interview may become threatening or discrediting for research participants but rarely so for the researcher: “as such, the interviewer is essentially an agent of power who can divest as little or as much as he or she feels is required to effect the best possible data” (Cook, 2014: 337). I would suggest that this power dynamic can be very different for the victim-as-researcher undertaking research with offenders. Lillrank (2014) acknowledges that power is relational and explains that the interviewer’s dominant position may become subordinate during the interview. From my own experience, I can say that this was sometimes the case. In some interviews, particularly those where participants were keen to discuss in detail aspects of their prior offending behaviour, I felt quite powerless. Did I wish to halt the interview because I was afraid? Would another researcher who had not experienced what I had, be able to listen to the narrative being offered? Was this necessary to answer the research questions that I had set? Being clear with yourself, and where appropriate, your participants, about the parameters of the research can be quite useful in preparing for difficult narratives and managing emotionally challenging interviews.

Have someone to talk to

Of course, it is not always possible to navigate away from challenging topics. Certainly, within my own research, it was sometimes necessary to talk through offending behaviour that made me feel anxious (or afraid, or angry). But participants also shared with me stories about being abused, about feeling helpless, having a lack of agency in their lives, and their frustrations with what they considered to be a broken criminal justice system; these narratives presented a different emotional challenge. Challenging narratives are often the mainstay of sensitive research, and as researchers, we must plan for how we

will deal with them: “Researchers need to be able to undertake a level of ‘self-care’ to ensure that they are not adversely affected by the work that they do” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009: 74).

During the six months that I spent in the field, my sister picked me up from Rockland every day and during the hour-long drive home, I would talk through some of my feelings that I had suppressed during the day. It was a useful way to destress, decompress and ensure that I was prepared to return to the field the following morning. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) note that many of the researchers on their project similarly used informal support networks—trusted friends and family members. However, James and Platzer (1999: 76) note that although this can indeed be quite useful, sometimes it is not enough,

Making the best use of peer support and informal networks for our participants and ourselves does help, but it is not ideal. Self-care is crucial, but where there is considerable emotional labour involved in research interviews we suggest that there is a requirement for formal supervision, not only of the academic but also of the therapeutic kind.

For the victim-as-researcher, this is particularly useful advice. A friend or family member, PhD supervisor, or research colleague can offer support on many issues. But, if there is need for it, therapeutic support should be sought as well, and the researcher would do well to plan for this before entering the field.

III. After leaving the field

Be rigorous and reflexive

Transcription, data analysis, and writing up can all bring up strong emotions from the field. If we are to follow Becker's (1967: 246) advice of ensuring that our subjective views do not negate or invalidate our work, and that whatever point of view we take, our research meets the standards of good scientific work, then we must ensure that we are both rigorous and reflexive in our analysis and write-up. Again, this is particularly important for the qualitative victim-as-researcher exposed to potentially harmful narratives from participants. Presser and Sandberg (2019: 138) note that taking a narrative approach compels researcher reflexivity, "narrative criminology compels researchers to locate themselves in the story and to clarify their role within it."

This means acknowledging where our biases and emotions might have led to a particular question or interaction, understanding how our participants may have been influenced by our demeanour or questions, and distinguishing between personal feelings and data. "During content analysis and reporting, it helps in alerting oneself to 'unconscious editing' because of own sensitivities and thus enable fuller engagement with the data and more in-depth comprehensive analysis of it" (Berger, 2015: 221-222). I do not suggest that this is an easy process, but it is a necessary one, and one which will ensure that we produce robust scientific research.

Conclusion

This paper highlights some of the challenges inherent in undertaking research with offenders when the researcher has been a victim of serious violent crime. Undertaking sensitive interviews with vulnerable groups can be quite emotionally challenging for any researcher, but the victim-as-researcher may feel a heightened sense of anxiety, fear, disgust, and anger whilst engaging with the narratives of offenders. As Dickson-Swift et al., (2009: 72) rightfully note, “the emotional and physical exhaustion that accompanies the research experience is not always related to the data that is being collected, but it may be related to the researcher’s reaction to the data.” Therefore, I encourage researchers—particularly those who are undertaking emotionally-challenging research—to be clear (with themselves and with their audience) about the way that their positionality has affected the research. And I encourage researchers to engage in both prospective and retrospective reflexivity (Attia and Edge, 2017). It is important that as researchers we are conscious of and open about the effect that we can have on our research. Of equal importance is thinking about the effect that the research can have on us.

Green and Pemberton (2017: 98) note that victimisation can create a loss of sense of self and a consequential disruption to a victim’s life story:

Severe instances of victimisation become part of the fabric of a person’s life story, of the unfolding narrative of life. Like with other profound experiences, victimisation contributes to this narrative, most often for worse, sometimes for better.

I would therefore encourage the victim-as-researcher to be mindful of her 'victimology narrative'. This paper contributes to the sub-discipline of narrative victimology in the focus that it gives to my experience of crime and its impact on me whilst undertaking fieldwork and analysis. I suggest that even if the victim-as-researcher chooses not to disclose details of victimisation within her findings or publications, there is nevertheless great strength in engaging in the reflexive process of examining her 'narrative victimology' for understanding the impact of crime, and being cognisant of the potential impact on the work she produces.

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