QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER VULNERABILITY

Negotiating, Experiencing and Embracing

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Chapter 4

SUPPORTING EMOTIONALLY DEMANDING RESEARCH

Developing Guidance for a University Research Centre

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4

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Developing Guidance for a University Research Centre

Susie Smillie and Julie Riddell

Throughout this chapter we will use the term 'emotionally demanding research' to describe research with participants, data or environments that has the potential to impact upon the wellbeing of the researcher. We use the term 'researcher' for brevity, but we encapsulate within this all those involved in the research process, staff members or students, including administrative and support staff as well as academic staff.

Background

Secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue are all similar concepts that describe the impact that emotionally demanding work can have on an individual. Whilst there is substantial literature exploring the impact of emotionally demanding work, it has typically focused on those professions providing care, such as mental health workers, medical professionals, and support workers for marginalised or clinically vulnerable populations (Williamson et al., 2020).

Although research can often deal with emotionally demanding topics, the view of research as 'objective' or 'detached' from the subject can mean that the full impact of these topics on researchers is not fully acknowledged. The shift towards understanding the impact of emotionally demanding work on researchers, therefore, has been relatively slow (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006; Nikischer, 2019) with researchers not seen as being 'at risk' in the same way as front line support staff (Williamson et al., 2020). Indeed historically, it has been seen as the mark of 'professional' research when one can remain objective and not become emotionally involved in the work (Williamson et al., 2020).

When the emotional impact of research is acknowledged within the literature the focus is most often on the emotional demand placed on participants that comes from discussing sensitive topics (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Micanovic, Stelko, & Sakic, 2020) or on the positive effects that may result from taking part in research

(Gilbert, 2000). However, conducting research can expose researchers themselves to emotional demands in a variety of ways and increase the likelihood of negative effects on their physical and mental wellbeing (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2008).

While the focus of this book is on qualitative research, close and/or repeated interactions with participants or sensitive data can occur at many points during the research process irrespective of the discipline, subject matter, or methods of recruitment, data collection, or analysis. Collecting qualitative data directly from participants about their experiences of sensitive or emotive topics (e.g., in an interview about experiences of terminal illness) is perhaps the most obvious mechanism by which the researcher can be exposed to emotional demands, but it is not the only one. Other points in the research process that might provoke an emotional response include, but are not limited to, literature review, secondary analysis of data (including prevalence statistics), analysis of oral histories, photos, videos, case files, health records or other documents, survey data entry, transcription, paper writing, and reviewing (Arditti, 2015; Butler, Copnell, & Hall, 2019; Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020).

Researchers are often drawn to, or become invested in, particular areas of research, employing empathy throughout the research process. The researcher's empathy can play a valuable role in building trust and rapport with participants, which can enable researchers to better conceptualise and analyse the data (Arditti, 2015; Davison, 2004). Emotional vulnerability is inherently linked to the process of being empathetic, but this emotional openness can be difficult to balance (Davison, 2004), and encouraging reflexivity and introspection in researchers needs to also take into consideration the potential negative effects that such individual responsibility might have (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2021). For participants, research can provide a space for those who want to share experiences, to talk to someone who actively wants to hear their experiences, which may feel empowering for the participant (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2020). However, this can result in challenges for the researcher in maintaining and communicating boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Fenge, Oakley, Taylor, & Beer, 2019). Whilst researchers can signpost participants to appropriate support, their role is not usually to provide a service which may actively help the participant. This can lead to feelings of guilt or discomfort when researchers feel that they are 'taking' the participants' experiences without providing anything in return (Nikischer, 2019). Blurring of boundaries between research and care-giving can occur during rapport building with participants, which plays an integral part of qualitative, and sometimes quantitative, participant recruitment and data collection (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). These are particularly challenging to navigate when participants disclose experiences which resonate with those of the researcher themselves (Gill, 2021; Rowling, 1999). Furthermore, in circumstances where research is being carried out by those trained in a particular field (e.g., nurses, dieticians, counsellors, physiotherapists) or the intervention being evaluated is delivered by the researchers themselves, these boundaries can be even more challenging to maintain (O'Connor et al., 2022).

Exposure to emotionally demanding experiences, material, or processes can impact upon physical and mental health. Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) suggest that emotionally demanding research can have negative outcomes for the researcher, including but not limited to, sleep problems, headaches, exhaustion, stomach issues, depression, anxiety, feelings of being emotionally and physically drained, and threats to physical safety. These can not only have short-term direct effects on researchers' productivity and ability to engage with the material but can ultimately result in long-term burnout which may lead to researchers moving away from topic areas or research careers completely (Williamson et al., 2020). The impact of losing staff who are highly trained and have expertise within these fields can lead to significant costs to institutions in terms of both funding opportunities and institutional knowledge. Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) highlight the multiple ways in which research can be emotionally demanding and the potential long-term effects this can have on researchers and their work. The authors emphasise the need for embedding support at an institutional level in the systems and processes that already exist in research governance, as well as providing direct support through appropriate mentoring, supervision, and counselling.

In 2019, during a panel discussion on challenges in mental health research at an internal conference in the research unit where we were both based (Medical Research Council/Chief Scientist Office Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow – MRC/CSO SPHSU), the subject of emotional impact on researchers was raised by a number of staff. In response to this, Susie was tasked with collating feedback from staff and postgraduate research students on their experiences of emotionally demanding research. This consultation with staff and students informed guidance that we then developed together, along with the input of a small group of colleagues, aimed at improving consistency in facilitating and supporting emotionally demanding research (EDR) being carried out within the research unit. During this process, we identified a gap that we felt able to attempt to fill by establishing a peer support network in Scotland, which we opened for membership in 2021 (Emotionally Demanding Research Network, Scotland).

The process and findings of this work form the basis of what is presented here, and in addition, we include reflections on both of our personal experiences with emotionally demanding research and on the input we have received from the wider research community as we have taken these conversations beyond our workplace. Personal experience with the impact of emotionally demanding research fuelled our initial interest in this area, but conversations with colleagues, both informally and in more formal settings, continue to drive our desire to contribute to change in the way researchers are supported with emotionally demanding research. We firmly believe that the integrity of the research we do is directly affected by the presence or absence of adequate support, so while institutions have a moral obligation to ensure the impact of emotionally demanding research on researchers is minimised, they also stand to benefit from the improved productivity of researchers and quality of research that can be produced when their staff and students are well supported.

Our Personal Perspectives

We both have experience of emotionally demanding work both in and out of academia. For the last decade, that work has been in academic research environments but prior to that was in clinical, therapeutic, or educational settings. In some of these roles, we have been prepared for the work to be emotionally demanding, have seen appropriate structures in place to minimise the potential impact, have been supported throughout our work, and have felt able to draw on our personal knowledge of how to manage our own mental health in response to such challenges. However, we have also experienced an unexpected emotional demand, a lack of support and situations in which we have not felt personally prepared or equipped to cope with that. Since we began developing this guidance and peer network, we have been lucky to connect with many others who have experienced similar challenges and feel grateful to have been able to share with them and support each other.

Researcher Consultation Process

In 2019, staff and students at the MRC/CSO SPHSU were invited to provide feedback on their experiences of emotionally demanding research in a group setting or individually. In response to this, some researchers shared relevant literature they had come across, some emailed their experiences and thoughts or met in person to share these. Those who were willing and available to take part in a larger group discussion met in May 2019.

A key piece of literature that was shared with us by a colleague was guidance that Emma Nagouse and Kay Guccione developed at the University of Sheffield in 2018–2019 (Guccione, 2019). The University of Sheffield guidance itself, and the accompanying explanation of the process through which Nagouse and Guccione had gone in developing this document and their local peer network (Guccione, 2018), informed our decision to structure our group discussion session into four main areas:

- **Our Experiences**: What types of experiences had been emotionally demanding for researchers.
- **Impact on us**: How researchers reported this kind of work had affected them.
- **Safeguarding and Coping**: Measures or strategies employed or experienced by researchers in the past, or currently, that were helpful.
- **What we need**: What researchers felt would be useful in addressing the need for support when dealing with emotionally demanding research.

This session involved 12 participants that included a mix of academic and support staff of varying levels of seniority, and postgraduate researchers (PGRs) at various stages of study. The session was audio recorded and we used flipcharts to record and reflect on contributions throughout the session. After the session we produced a summary of the main points, incorporating feedback from individual discussions we

had with those who did not take part in the group session. This summary was then circulated to the researchers involved to check, comment on, and approve.

This summary document formed the basis for a guidance document written in conjunction with other members of the Research Support Group at the MRC/CSO SPHSU and drafts were circulated for comment to those researchers who had taken part in the feedback session and who were keen to contribute further.

Key Elements of 'Guidance on Facilitating and Supporting Emotionally Demanding Research'

The guidance document that we produced reported on the feedback we had received in our consultation with staff and students, alongside recommendations for improving support from the planning stages onwards. This guidance was developed to encourage researchers, and research teams, to acknowledge their own vulnerability in doing research, whilst encouraging those involved to find strategies to manage emotional demands appropriately. In the guidance our aim was to highlight to those involved in planning, or conducting, research projects how their projects might become emotionally demanding for researchers, how those demands might then impact on the wellbeing of the researcher(s) involved, and how they might consider mitigating and managing such risks. Within these areas, we summarised, thematically, the feedback we had received from staff, and included hypothetical or anonymised examples for illustrative purposes based on the examples offered to us by researchers. In the following three sections that follow, we present these three areas in a similar way having elaborated on some elements based on the work we have done since then, establishing and managing a peer support network.

Ways in Which Research Can Be Emotionally Demanding

In defining and categorising emotionally demanding research, Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) include Lee's (1993) definition of 'sensitive research' alongside three other types of emotionally demanding research:

> *sensitive issues, personal trauma previously experienced, experience of traumatic life events during research, and unexpected events that arise during research in what was previously not identified as a sensitive issue.*
>
> *(2018)*

They acknowledge that this categorisation is not exhaustive and is ever expanding. While we would agree with their conceptualisation, we propose an alternative categorisation which expands on this to include two areas that have been frequently raised by colleagues during the course of our work. Firstly, research conducted in environments, or with specific populations, that impacts on the emotional wellbeing of the research team member, regardless of the topic of the research. Secondly, the impact of the relationship with a research participant, and the sense of responsibility and duty

towards participants that this can evoke in researchers. For the purposes of our guidance document and based on the feedback we received from researchers, we thematically categorise the ways in which research can be emotionally demanding as follows:

- Context:
  - The research topic itself being sensitive or distressing to the researcher, for example, researching experiences of bereavement;

  And/or
  - The level of exposure to the data, for example, repeated reading of transcripts of sensitive or distressing content;
  - The impact of the researcher's personal context, for example, if the researcher has had personal experience related to the topic area that causes them to be more susceptible to being emotionally affected by it than others;
- Setting of, usually, the fieldwork itself, including:
  - Concerns researchers have around personal safety or being in unsettling or upsetting environments, for example, in a prison environment;
  - Exposure to potential or actual harassment or discrimination, for example, experiencing verbal abuse as a fieldworker recruiting participants;
  - Witnessing emotionally distressing situations or events during fieldwork, perhaps unrelated to the research topic itself, for example, participants living in extreme poverty.
- Concern for participants:
  - The emotional response of researchers that comes from being concerned about the impact they, or the research process, have had on participants, especially when the research topic is particularly sensitive or distressing to the participants, for example, researchers being left ruminating on thoughts like 'did I cause harm' or 'did I do enough to safeguard'.

Impact of Emotionally Demanding Research

Participants in the group discussion session were asked to reflect on how they felt that doing emotionally demanding research had impacted upon them. Researchers discussed specific examples of direct impact as well as general effects on wellbeing they experienced, in the short and longer term, that they attributed to periods of engaging in emotionally demanding research, often without adequate support. Grouped and anonymised examples of these were incorporated into the guidance document produced in order to offer both insight to those who have not had personal experience of the impact of emotionally demanding research, and reassurance and acknowledgement to those who have. A summary of the examples given by researchers is shown below but should not be considered an exhaustive list. We have categorised these effects to summarise for readers, but it is important to note that some of these may be experienced at any stage of emotionally demanding research and not necessarily in this order.

Short-term impact (during or soon after research task, 'in the moment')

- Challenging emotions as a result of empathising with participants' experiences, for example, sadness, anger, repulsion at what they have experienced;
- Negative emotions towards participants as a result of particular disclosures or opinions voiced by participants, for example, participants expressing bigoted views;
- Becoming distressed *during* research activities:
  - Impact on ability to continue with work in that moment;
  - Attempting to avoid being upset at work leading to 'taking it home';
  - If upset during participant contact:
    - Feeling unprofessional;
    - feeling worried about impact of this on participants;
    - feeling worried about impact of this on research data;
- Difficulties maintaining boundaries:
  - Balancing research commitments/workload/deadlines with duty towards participants' wellbeing;
  - Researchers who were responsible for delivering interventions, or researchers who are practitioners in, or have a background in, health and social care fields reported challenges with maintaining boundaries between their roles in collecting data, delivering interventions, or having a sense of professional duty or knowledge that went beyond the scope of their research role.

Medium-term impact (after research tasks, 'after the moment')

- Anxiety in relation to the research topic, for example, increased fear of experiencing the same as participants;
- 'Taking it home'/Feeling emotionally burdened;
- Feeling a strong sense of responsibility to participant(s):
  - Guilt around impact of research on participants;
  - Sense of inequitable exchange ('taking' data without offering sufficient compensation/support);
  - Concerns that not enough was done to safeguard or signpost participants, or that signposting may not be sufficient;
- Rumination, visualisation, and intrusive thoughts related to specific research data.

Longer-term impact (secondary, delayed, or 'knock on' effects)

- General mood changes outwith research environment and not directly related to thoughts about the research itself, for example, increased anxiety, lowered mood, and associated impact on behaviour, thoughts, physical feelings, and wellbeing;

- Vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990);
- Feelings and thoughts *as a result of feeling emotionally impacted* by the research, '*feeling bad about feeling bad*':
  - Guilt and feelings of letting others down:
    - Around impact on quality or volume of own work;
    - Around impact on supervisors or colleagues, for example, concern around 'offloading' or not 'pulling weight';
    - '*I should be able to cope with this*';

  - Isolation:
    - within the workplace, especially if the researcher is not working in a team or doing the same work as others;
    - outwith work where researchers are unable to talk to family/friends;

  - Feelings of inadequacy, self-criticism, low confidence in abilities;
  - Desensitisation towards a sensitive topic and the longer-term impact of this on researchers and how they approach their work, participants, and others in the team;

- Practical difficulties and behaviour changes:
  - Avoiding emotionally demanding tasks (including in those related to dissemination of the research and impact on career of this);
  - Taking longer to complete emotionally demanding tasks than the time allocated/expected;
  - Impact on other workload and productivity generally;
  - Concerns about implications of disclosing the emotional impact to managers/supervisors.

Challenges as a manager/supervisor of researchers engaged in emotionally demanding research
- Difficulties balancing demands of a project with ensuring team wellbeing;
- Vicarious trauma;
- Feeling unable to support appropriately or lacking signpost/referral options for staff;
- Concerns about impact on participants and research output.

Mechanisms of Support

A list of considerations and strategies for mitigating and managing the risks of impact from conducting emotionally demanding research were incorporated into the guidance. These were based on the suggestions made by researchers during the discussion session but additionally drew on the broader literature and advice of researcher development staff. As we have developed the peer support network and continued to have conversations about what works, and does not, when it comes

to supporting emotionally demanding research we have added to and amended this list, the expanded version of which we present below:

- Training: Improve awareness of emotionally demanding research and its potential impact by including information in training at the individual project level and broader departmental/institutional level. Researchers should be encouraged to participate in training that improves awareness of, and preparedness to plan or conduct, emotionally demanding research regardless of whether they are currently working in research of this nature.
- Study planning/design:
  - Risk Identification/Assessment: Potential emotional risks to researchers should be identified and assessed. If possible, this should be done in conjunction with the researchers who will be working on the study/project/task. This process should be given as much consideration as physical health and safety risks to researchers, and emotional risks to participants are given. Understanding where and when research can become emotionally demanding (see above) can help to identify risks. Whilst fieldwork and face-to-face participant contact may seem the most likely setting for research to be emotionally demanding, attention should also be given to other research and administrative tasks, and to varying research methodologies and study designs.
  - Appropriate mitigations should be included in study design in response to the identification of these risks, for example:

    - Timing and work allocation – Workload allocation and project timeframes should reflect consideration of the emotional risks to researchers that have been identified (see above). For example, allowing for slower pace of working, sharing of particular tasks amongst team members or adequate breaks to limit lengthy periods of exposure to emotionally demanding tasks.
    - Communicate role boundaries to participants – Participant information and scripting used with participants should emphasise the role of the researchers, especially where this is likely to be confusing, for example, where research is being conducted in healthcare settings alongside healthcare professionals, or where researchers are delivering interventions alongside data collection. Debriefing of participants, verbally or in materials given, can reiterate these roles and provide appropriate signposting to available support.
    - Physical boundary setting – Choices around physical settings of the research should reflect consideration of emotional wellbeing of researchers. Where possible researchers should be given information and guidance in preparation for entering emotionally challenging settings, as well as being appropriately supported during and after working in these settings. Home-working may require additional consideration of the impact

of sensitive or upsetting research materials being in researchers' homes, as well as how best to support researchers who are working remotely.

- Procedures for safeguarding participants – Researchers should be fully informed about escalation procedures for reporting safeguarding concerns and options for signposting participants in need of support. Ensuring researchers have confidence in such escalation procedures, understand their roles and responsibilities within them, and have options to signpost participants to can mitigate against feelings of 'not doing enough' to support or safeguard participants, or others.
- Plan and budget for specific support for researchers – see below.

- Providing Support to researchers:
  - Seek available resources in advance and signpost when appropriate. Having an awareness of available resources, training, workshops, and services within or through their institutions or research bodies will allow for quick responses to researchers in need of support. Having these available also sends an important message to researchers that their wellbeing is valued and fosters an openness that can encourage researchers to speak up about how they are feeling.
  - Debrief – Debriefing provides a space for researchers to express how they have been emotionally affected by particular tasks, in a timeframe that is as close to those tasks as possible (e.g., after an interview with a participant). Such conversations might include sharing or exploring possible coping strategies or might simply be focused on normalising and making sense of emotional reactions. The structure, length and frequency of these might alter throughout a project as different tasks are undertaken or different needs arise or dissipate.
  - Check-ins – If regular debriefing is not feasible, having a regular brief contact with researchers to both remind them of the need to protect their wellbeing during research and to allow an opportunity for them to raise any issues that cannot wait until the next supervision or line management meeting.
  - Peer support – While some researchers may rely on informal peer support from colleagues, providing space and time to do this in a more formal way can encourage researchers to take part and contributes to a culture that is supportive and understanding of the impact of emotionally demanding work. As with debriefing, peer support can create opportunities to share coping strategies but can help normalise emotional reactions to research and foster collegiality and solidarity among researchers involved in this kind of work.
  - Coping strategy identification – Allowing time for training, support, and self-reflection can encourage researchers to develop a sense of what works best for them in different contexts, identifying personal coping strategies. Having knowledge of these allows supervisors and line managers to have

better insight into both how to appropriately support individuals and how to plan similar studies in the future.
- Therapeutic support – providing access to formal counselling with trained professionals outwith the research team should be considered where appropriate. Models of clinical supervision from fields such as counselling and clinical psychology may also provide valuable insight for developing similar methods within research supervision.

- Ongoing study and line management/supervision:
  - Standing agenda items in line management or supervision meetings can allow regular review of emotional wellbeing and foster a sense of normalising discussions around impact of emotionally demanding work.
  - Discuss with researchers what support is helpful (or not) and what might need to change, encouraging reflection and adjustment of coping strategies and supports as an ongoing practice.
  - Consider the changing emotional demands as studies progress: analysis, writing, and dissemination may be emotionally demanding when taken in isolation, but even if this is not the case, if earlier stages of the study have been particularly emotionally demanding, then later stages may act as triggers.
  - Flagging data – Include content warnings on data to allow researchers working with this data in the future to be aware of, and assess, potential emotional risks. Field notes might also include details on settings for future waves of data collection or similar studies.

Developing a Peer Support Network

Peer support was discussed at length during the feedback session we held with researchers and more informally between colleagues and during the writing of the guidance. Most researchers we spoke to had reached out to colleagues for support in informal ways, some had sought out a more formal mentor-based relationship, but it was almost universally agreed that having an organised peer support network would be particularly beneficial. In the beginning to develop ideas for how to prepare for, and set up, the network, we sought the advice of the Researcher Development team at University of Glasgow, and colleagues in other departments and institutions who had similar interests in this area. It was decided that we would set a geographical boundary (Scotland) in order to keep the administration of the network manageable and to increase the chances of in-person meetings when pandemic restrictions allowed, but that we would revisit this decision once the network was established.

We set up a small website[1] on a blogging site containing a brief explanation of emotionally demanding research and the aims of the network, and invited people interested in joining to provide contact details. We registered a Twitter account[2] for the network and in September 2021 began circulating the website link via social

media, word of mouth, direct emails to colleagues, internal mailing lists, university news items, and through researcher development network contacts. As of November 2022, we have around 200 members based in, or researching in, Scotland. We have an additional 30 contacts from outwith Scotland who have requested to be kept updated with activities of the network, or who are interested in setting up similar networks where they are. Our members come from a range of sectors including academia, government, the National Health Service, voluntary and private sectors, as well as freelance researchers, and cover a wide range of research disciplines and methodologies.

We held our first meeting in November 2021 and asked attendees in advance to complete a series of questions around expectations and preferences for the network, including what researchers hoped to gain, how regularly they would prefer to meet, how they would like meetings to be structured, and what activities, beyond regular meetings, they felt would be beneficial. Themes from these responses were then presented at the first meeting and attendees were invited to discuss these further. When asked what members hoped to gain from being part of the network, the main areas were: sense of community/somewhere to turn; opportunity to learn from others; opportunity to talk about their own experiences; networking and collaboration (around impact of emotional research as well as own areas of research); support with raising awareness and encouraging change in organisations/institutions around emotionally demanding research.

Following member feedback, we formed a working group to manage the network and drive forward the various ideas that members had suggested and have begun to take action on some of these. Currently, we hold two types of meetings: (1) Monthly 'drop in' discussion sessions where people can share how they are feeling in an environment supported by others who have similar experiences. (2) Quarterly meetings where we update members or plan future activities and host a guest speaker or workshop facilitator to present to the group. We have an online private forum where members can introduce themselves, discuss particular issues, share resources, strategies, and literature. We have established a shared database so members can add their details and research experience if they are willing to be contacted by other members looking for someone with experience in a particular area.

Reflections and Recommendations

Based on our personal experience, and the work we have done in developing guidance and managing the peer network, there are certain elements that appear to contribute to reducing the negative impact of emotionally demanding research on researcher wellbeing and that to some extent can be put in place or supported at an individual project/department level:

- **Planning** that takes this impact into consideration from the outset.
- **Reasonable support options** available to the researchers involved throughout the project should they need it.

- **Personal toolkits** developed by, and unique to, individual researchers in response to lived experience in and out of work, as well as opportunities for training and learning.

What we mean by 'personal toolkits' are the varying personal support and coping strategies that individuals mould throughout their lives and careers, as they learn about what impacts upon them emotionally, and what might help, or hinder, in different circumstances. Opportunities for training and skill development in the workplace can, of course, help and we use the term 'personal' to highlight the uniqueness of individual coping strategy 'toolkits' and not to place the responsibility fully on individuals to develop these alone. Developing these tailored and individually appropriate sets of strategies requires support and guidance from the literature, peers, line managers/supervisors, and institutions themselves. These toolkits might include self-care practices or a personalised 'tried and tested' understanding of helpful coping strategies (Butler et al., 2019; Rager, 2005). They might also include the less tangible, for example, a mindset that acknowledges and balances the risk of emotional impact with the value that emotional vulnerability can bring to the role (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001). Opportunities to prepare oneself as much as possible for the upcoming research task, being given as much information as possible about potentially emotionally demanding elements, might also be seen as part of this toolkit (Fenge et al., 2019). The level of development of this 'personal toolkit' is often seen, mistakenly, as the only factor in determining whether someone is likely to be affected by emotionally demanding research and words like 'resilience' are often used to evaluate it, placing the onus on the individual researcher to be prepared. Considering *only* levels of preparedness or resilience focuses attention on the individual rather than the organisational structures and their responsibilities (Conolly et al., 2022). Likewise, considering these concepts as acquired skills assumes that senior or experienced researchers will not be affected by emotionally demanding research, which is not the case (Fenge et al., 2019). A problem that we have regularly encountered is the conceptualising of resilience as an end point: a skill to be acquired, a training box to be ticked. We propose that a more helpful view of resilience is as an ongoing practice involving elements of emotional vulnerability, reflexivity, and adjustment, often requiring concurrent support and guidance. However, we acknowledge that it can often be challenging as a researcher, particularly for those on short-term contracts (Leathwood & Read, 2022) or with budgets to manage, to balance project demands with the time and resources required to provide this support. There may be a view that this is 'wasted time' compared to time spent on tangible outputs such as publications or grant applications (Leathwood & Read, 2022), which is why support for change in practice must come from the institutional level. In our experience, the researchers most likely to be impacted by emotionally demanding research in a way that affects their wellbeing are not those without the personal toolkit, they are the ones without the adequate support available, working on studies where the emotional impact of the research has been overlooked. While developing our own coping strategies for

doing emotionally demanding research should be as important as developing our other research skills it should not be considered the only aspect, or linked to seniority or level of experience.

The purpose, therefore, of these guidelines is to support researchers to move away from traditional ways of working where vulnerability and emotional responses are seen as negative individual responses which should be suppressed or resolved by training or 'upskilling'. Rather we support the view that vulnerability, or being open to emotion, can play a valuable role in qualitative research. As researchers, we are often drawn to the work we do, and driven to continue in it, because of empathy. This empathy can be an asset in steering us to do research with integrity and purpose, but it opens us to emotional impact (Davison, 2004). With emotional impact comes the risk that without good planning and support the wellbeing of researchers could be negatively affected and in turn the work that they do and their drive to continue doing it. We would suggest that by planning to minimise unnecessary risks, and embedding appropriate support from the outset of a project, the risk of negative impact on researchers will be reduced and that doing so will have a positive impact on the work they do. We feel strongly that this support should not simply be implemented at an individual level and that changes are needed even beyond those at a project or departmental level.

The supports and changes that we have been able to contribute to in writing guidance for researchers, developing a peer network, and indeed contributing to this book are small offerings in a landscape requiring more long-term adjustments at a more structural level. This work, for the most part, has been driven forward by early career researchers in their own time, those who are not only more likely to experience the impact of emotionally demanding research (Bloor et al., 2008; Hubbard et al., 2001) but are also more likely to be managing additional stressors such as lower pay and job precarity (McKenzie, 2021). The involvement of more senior colleagues in initiatives such as this is essential not only to help sustain measures and supports and raise awareness of their need, but also to encourage an attitudinal shift acknowledging the impact that emotionally demanding research can have at any career stage. Similarly, there is a need to raise awareness of the breadth of ways that research can be emotionally demanding, across different disciplines, employing different methods, and at multiple stages of a project. Acknowledging this within the research community can not only improve how studies are designed and carried out but might go some way to reducing the stigma around asking for support that prevents researchers from being more vocal about how this work is affecting them. The wider systems surrounding research have a role to play in shifting research culture by explicitly encouraging and recognising the importance of embedding researcher wellbeing throughout the research process (Bloor et al., 2008; Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2010). Existing processes that are already in place to protect participant wellbeing and researcher physical safety could be adapted and expanded to require reflection on potential emotional risks to researchers. Funding bodies and ethics committees could explicitly request evidence that emotional demand has

been considered in planning and budgeting, with suitable mitigations put in place. It is our view that if you have researchers who feel that you recognise the challenge that emotionally demanding research can pose, are willing to support them when they need it, and value the importance of providing that support, then you will have researchers who are more likely to do their best work. Appropriately and meaningfully supporting researchers doing emotionally demanding research can affect the participants they work with, the data collected, how it is analysed and interpreted, written up and disseminated, and ultimately the broader impact that research has.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 https://emotionalresearch.wordpress.com/.
2 https://twitter.com/EmotionalResrch.

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