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The Sensitive and Vulnerable Researcher

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Data collection can be an intense experience, especially if the topic that one has chosen has to do with the illness experience or other stressful human experiences. The stories that the qualitative researcher obtains in interviews will be stories of intense suffering, social injustices, or other things that will shock the researcher.

(Morse and Field 1995: 78)

Each field situation is unique and presents a multitude of problems for the researcher... The [researcher] deals with people, and because of this, fieldwork is subject to all of the complexities, ambiguities, and unpredictability inherent in any form of social interaction.

(Mann 1976: 95–109)

Chapter Objectives

This chapter aims to do the following:

- Discuss important issues pertaining to the researcher who may also be as vulnerable as the research participants.
- Provide a discussion on the issue of self-disclosure of the researcher.
- Point to danger and harm and emotional experiences in carrying out sensitive research.
- Provide a discussion on the impact of sensitive research on the other researcher – transcribers.
- Discuss some strategies to protect the vulnerable researchers.

Introduction

Researching vulnerable and difficult-to-access groups requires extraordinary special considerations and substantial demands on the researchers. Most often, the researchers are confronted with what Alty and Rodham (1998: 275) call 'the Ouch! Factor'. Accordingly, the 'Ouch! Factor' refers to 'certain experiences encountered in the process of conducting qualitative research' which may include 'a short sharp shock to the researcher to those situations and experiences that can develop into a chronic ache if not addressed early'. Essentially, an 'Ouch! Factor is an obstacle to research, which requires the researcher to step back and reconsider the options'. While this can seem like a daunting enterprise, it is also a challenging one (Lee 1993; Warr 2004). In this chapter, I will discuss some important issues which may have an impact on the ways the sensitive researchers undertake their sensitive research and some which may impact on their physical and emotional well-being.

The Sensitive Researcher and Self-disclosure

In conducting sensitive research with vulnerable and hard-to-access groups, self-disclosure is essentially important (Letherby 2000; Tewksbury and Gagné 2001; Johnson 2002; Kong et al. 2002; Wenger 2002; Perry et al. 2004; Weston 2004; Dickson-Swift 2005; Galvin 2005; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2005). Although it is seen as 'contamination' in conventional research (Dunbar et al. 2002: 286), it encourages the participants to elaborate on their subjective experiences. Researchers need to be more open to their participants, that is, they need to be willing to share their experiences with the participants (Vance 1995; Letherby 2000; Perry et al. 2004; Weston 2004). This will facilitate rapport and trust among the participants. As Virginia Dickson-Swift (2005: 101) remarks in her research on doing sensitive research, her participants believed that there was 'a need to create some sort of "level playing field," acknowledging that self-disclosure could enhance rapport, show respect for the participants and validate the participants' stories'. Shulamit Reinharz and Susan Chase (2002: 227) suggest that researchers' self-disclosure occurs when the researcher 'shares ideas, attitudes, and/or experiences concerning matters that might relate to the interview topic in order to encourage respondents to be more forthcoming'. Christopher Dunbar and colleagues (2002: 286) contend that to employ an approach which Jack Douglas (1985) refers to as 'creative interviewing', the researcher 'forges common ground to share with the respondent, so that the subjects behind both interviewee and interviewer share a familiar, if sometimes uncomfortable, narrative space'. In order to encourage self-disclosure, as Jack Douglas (1985: 51) puts it, is to get 'deep-deep probes into the human soul' and the researchers need to 'know thyself' (see also Holstein and Gubrium 2004). Douglas (1985: 25, original emphasis) says,

Creative interviewing... involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction, largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimize *cooperative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding*.

In undertaking a study on sexual abuse or domestic violence, for example, the researchers might disclose their own experiences of having been sexually or physically abused. This self-disclosure may put the participants at ease, and hence help them to tell their stories (Reinharz 1992; Letherby 2000). In her recent study on disability and identity, Rose Galvin (2005: 395–96) tells us that ‘because I am disabled myself I looked upon the dialogues as a space in which to share our stories and to reflect on the various ways in which disability had affected our identities’. Clare Wenger (2002) found in her studies with older people that when she revealed to them that she was divorced, the participants tended to bring out their lived experiences of family life more and admitted that they too were divorced when at the beginning this disclosure was not forthcoming. Wenger (2002: 272) contends that the researcher’s self-disclosure encourages the exchange from the participants as ‘resistance to self-disclosure by the interviewee . . . can create a feeling of imbalance and increase the distance between interlocutors’. Wenger (2002: 272) also suggests that ‘there needs to be giving as well as receiving in these exchanges. Reciprocity is needed to maintain the relationship’.

According to Dunbar and others (2002), the researcher’s self-disclosure is particularly essential when he or she is undertaking research with minority groups. Similar to other marginalised individuals, people of ethnic minorities tend to perceive outsiders with suspicion: ‘years of misrepresentation and misinterpretation have legitimated scepticism and distrust’ (Dunbar et al. 2002: 291). Dunbar and colleagues (2002: 291) believe strongly that ‘it is important to the success of the interview for the researcher to disclose something about him- or herself to the interviewees. This is foundation work: that is, it tells the interviewees where the researcher is coming from’.

In conducting sensitive research with gay men and lesbians, the need for self-disclosure is of particular importance (Kong et al. 2002; Perry et al. 2004; Weston 2004). Prior to being involved in the research, gay men and lesbians wish to know ‘where both the researcher and the teller of that life are coming from, what kind of relationship they are having together, and how intimate details will be used and represented?’ As Dan Mahoney (in Kong et al. 2002: 249–50) has found, his self-disclosure was an effective approach when he was trying to persuade a gay couple to participate in his study. He writes,

Adam [a participant] went about asking for clarification about the nature of the research and what I meant by storytelling. I took the opportunity to speak about the book I was writing on gay men and their families, and my interest in writing about experiences of gay men we haven’t heard about before. James [Adam’s partner] sat and took it all in. He wanted to know about my personal background, why I was studying in England, and why on earth I was living in Colchester. I gave him a short biography of my life. More disclosure about my life precipitated more answers and questions about me and my research interests. I was getting the impression that they were warming up to the idea of being interviewed.

Travis Kong and colleagues (2002: 252) also suggest that researchers should construct ‘an empathic, emotional orientation’ while undertaking sensitive

research with queer participants. When researchers invite gay people to disclose themselves, the gay people need to know if the researcher 'will be open to their lived experiences and is prepared to cofacilitate the interpretations of those events... Deep levels of disclosure will come about only if the subject senses shared understanding from the interviewer' (see also Perry et al. 2004). Kate Weston (2004: 202) too contends that her lesbian identity essentially assisted in recruiting and building up trust and rapport with gay men and lesbians in her study in San Francisco. She points out that 'many participants mentioned that they would not have talked to me had I been straight and one or two cited "bad experiences" of having had their words misinterpreted by heterosexual researchers'.

In their research on sexuality with gay men, lesbians and bisexual young people, Catherine Perry and colleagues (2004) write that when the young people learned that Perry was a lesbian, they became more open with their views. Perry et al. (2004: 141) state that 'it appeared that the researcher was able to establish a degree of trust and rapport, and in so doing elicited depth and detail from the interviewees; it appeared that participants felt encouraged to share more of their experiences because they believed that she would "understand" what they were trying to convey'.

Some writers may argue that such self-disclosure has ethical implications as it might be perceived as the exploitation of participants (Hart and Crawford-Wright 1999). However, Wenger (2002) suggests that it is up to the researchers to consider this themselves. It can be difficult in practice in certain situations for researchers to know how much to disclose and what kind of disclosure is appropriate. In some situations, it is appropriate to adopt a 'tight-lipped approach' (Blum 1999: 214). For Donna Eder and Laura Fingerson (2002: 228), researchers must 'think carefully about whether, when, and how much disclosure makes sense in the context of particular research projects and with specific participants' (see also Tewksbury and Gagné 2001). I too believe that this strategy should be adopted so that neither party will feel constrained or embarrassed.

The Researcher as a Person: Social Locations and Gendered Experiences

In doing sensitive research, Reinharz and Chase (2002: 233) suggest that it is essential for the researchers to consider the social locations of themselves and of the research participants, as this may influence their research relationship. This is applicable when women study men and men study women (see Willot 1998; Anderson and Umberson 2004), and in cross-cultural research where ethnicities and social class of the researcher and the researched can be of marked difference.

Shulamit Reinharz and Susan Chase (2002: 231) contend that if social locations of the researchers and the researched differ extremely, 'uncertainty

and discomfort are likely to arise'. But others suggest otherwise. Linda Blum (1999: 213) admits that in the course of interviews of African-American women regarding their breastfeeding experiences, she 'learned most from those facets of African-American women's stories which [she] had the most trouble hearing'. Anne Phoenix (1994) also told us that in much of her research with women, some white respondents were surprised to learn that she, the researcher, was black. Phoenix contends that racial difference can be either inhibiting or liberating for researchers who come from non-white backgrounds.

Kimberly Huisman (1997) carried out research on wife battering in Asian communities on the East Coast of the United States. To gain access to potential research participants who work with battered Asian women, Huisman volunteered to assist at domestic violence shelters where the women sought help. She was the only white academic woman who was working at the shelter. Huisman felt that her race and position was perceived with 'extreme caution and distance'. People often questioned her for her reason to work at the shelters. It took a considerable amount of time and effort for her to build up trust and rapport with workers at the shelter.

In her study with Latino women in New York, Esther Madriz (1998: 5) was extremely cautious about the class differences between herself as a researcher and the women of low status. Due to her middle-class background and her position as a professor in a university, she stood in stark contrast to the women who mainly worked as cleaners, street vendors and nannies. Most of the women were just stay-at-home mothers. However, Madriz (1998: 5) tried to reduce this difference by carefully dressing in the manner of most Latino women who are cautious about the way they dress. She also referred to the women and herself by first names and used informal Spanish pronouns. And by sharing the language with the women, the gap between herself and the women was markedly minimised.

Gender differences between the researcher and the researched play an important role in conducting sensitive research with vulnerable groups or where research revolves around sensitive gendered experiences (see Anderson and Umberson 2004). At a very basic level, the gender of the researchers may influence their own perceptions of the worldview, experience and performance of their research participants. As Kerry Daly (1992: 10) asks, 'How is the interview discourse different when it is man to man versus woman to woman or woman to man?' Maureen Padfield and Ian Procter (1996) conducted a joint study of young women's work and family lives. Both researchers are experienced field workers who adopt a feminist standpoint in their research approach and hence encourage women to talk freely in the interview process. An issue regarding an abortion was not asked directly in the interview, but when comparing their interviews, they found that women who had had abortions tended to reveal this to Maureen Padfield rather than to Ian Procter. This suggests that the gender of the researcher affected the voluntary sharing of such sensitive and personal experiences as abortion.

In researching older people, and particularly older women living alone, Clare Wenger (2002: 264) argues that older people tend to accept women better than

men into their homes, but they may also mistrust young women. In one of Wenger's studies, she used two male colleagues as interviewers where the research involved a brief encounter which did not require the researcher to enter the home of the older participants. She was later told by one participant that she made a mistake by sending two men to ask questions, as the men frightened a number of older people in her area. Even though the two men were established academics with gentle personalities, to older women who lived alone in their homes, 'men clearly could not be trusted' (Wenger 2002: 264). Wenger's (2002: 264) own experience suggests that the interviewers who gain the highest success in acceptance by older people are 'middle-aged or older women with outgoing personalities'. Prager (1995) too argues that older researchers are 'qualitatively and empirically more complete and useful' when it comes to researching vulnerable older participants.

A similar issue emerges when doing research with the difficult-to-access group of gay men and lesbians (Perry et al. 2004). The rise of a lesbian and gay movement from the 1960s onwards has led to a new research direction and strategy. More self-identified gay researchers employed qualitative research methodology and the implication was that only gay and lesbian researchers could undertake qualitative research because they have an in-depth and genuine understanding of issues regarding gay men and lesbians. To put it simply, only those who 'have been there' would understand what it is like to be gay and lesbian.

Safety Issues – Risk and Harm of the Researcher

Risk and danger to the personal security of the researcher is an issue gaining greater recognition within the social sciences. . . . Research can be threatening to the researcher as well as the participants and that researchers may be placed in situations in which their personal safety is jeopardised.

(Jamieson 2000: 61)

Researching some vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations may present a danger to the personal safety of the researcher (Adler 1990; Sluka 1990, 1995; Renzetti and Lee 1993; Lawrinson and Harris 1994; Lee 1995; O'Neill 1996; Craig et al. 2000; Jamieson 2000; Kenyn and Hawker 2000; Lee-Treweek 2000; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000a; Seal et al. 2000; Dickson-Swift 2005). Researchers who carry out research into sexual behaviour, for example, as David Seal and colleagues (2000: 11) point out, 'may be particularly vulnerable to the potentially volatile nature of fieldwork. In addition to the normal difficulties of fieldwork, they must study a behaviour that is deeply private, secretive, and taboo'. Margaret Melrose (2002: 337) also argues that research in the areas of hard drugs, criminal activities and the world of prostitution may 'lead researchers into dubious moral territory' and hence 'may present the researcher with "anonymous" dangers because the researcher is present in an otherwise avoidable, potentially dangerous, situation'.

There are numerous dangers involved in researching vulnerable and difficult-to-reach populations. Danger, according to Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000a: 1) relates to 'the experience of threat or risk with serious negative consequences' which may affect the researchers. They may have to deal with difficulties and dangers in the field during their data collection process (Adler 1990; Dunlap et al. 1990; Sluka 1990, 1995; Lee 1995; O'Neill 1996; Calvey 2000; Jamieson 2000; Hopper and Moore 2001; Warr 2004; Dickson-Swift 2005). Maggie O'Neill (1996: 132), in her research with street prostitutes in Nottingham, tells us that

[t]he issue of personal safety of the researcher is illustrated by my own experience whilst accompanying a health outreach worker in the spring months of 1992. We witnessed at very close range a violent assault on a woman prostitute and attended court four times until the case was finally dealt with. This was the last occasion I visited the street as part of my research.

O'Neill lives in a Victorian terrace house and has to park her car on the street. Some nights before the first three court cases, the car was smashed. This frightening incident prompted her to think about the nature of her research and its danger. O'Neill has two small children. She is not only worried about her own safety, but also that of her children and partner. A similar issue is raised by Boynton (2002) in her research in the red-light area in a West Midlands town in England.

Deborah Warr (2004) refers to some of the danger that she had encountered in her work with street sex workers in Australia. She went with an outreach worker to observe the lives of the street workers. The nature of her research necessitated observations very late at night. This led her to experience 'occupational irritations common to street work', even though it was not at the same level as that those women have to deal with. Warr (2004: 580) tells us,

For one thing, there was the gathering cold as the night closed in, despite my being dressed far more warmly than most of the women we encountered. I also experienced the thick darkness of streets specially chosen for the privacy they afforded, and I feared being mistaken for a sex worker by 'hoons', troublemakers whose sport is to drive by and throw eggs or buckets of water at waiting workers. On one occasion, we also endured the ignominy of being stopped and questioned by the police.

Sometimes, the processes involved in collecting data lead to dangers in fieldwork. For example, researchers may have to manage relationships with individuals or groups who act in a threatening way (see Calvey 2000; Jamieson 2000; Hopper and Moore 2001). At other times, however, the difficulties and dangers may come merely from when researchers are trying to get to their fieldwork or research sites. Sam Punch (personal communication in Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000a: 2) was physically attacked by dogs as she walked to remote households in villages when researching childhood in rural Bolivia. I too was attacked by a dog when I went to interview a Thai mother in a suburban area in Bangkok. This incident left me with open wounds on one of

my legs which took a few months to heal. Richard Wright and colleagues (2001: 99) had to deal with many potentially dangerous accounts during their fieldwork including an instance where the participants turned up for their interviews with firearms and on another occasion when they were caught in the middle of a fight between their participants and others. Janet Jamieson (2000: 68), in her research with young men in crime, had to travel to crime-prone/disadvantaged areas in Scotland to interview the young men. She elaborates on this:

Whilst visiting participants' homes the threat of attack or theft on the street was also of great concern... The study necessitated my carrying valuable equipment in the form of tape recorder and laptop computer and I received numerous warnings from the participants about the threat of theft... There was also the general threat of carrying money and equipment about the research sites. Luckily for me I did not experience theft whilst in the field. Given that neither the money nor the equipment was my property, and the equipment was insured, I would have simply handed it over and extricated myself from the situation as quickly as possible.

Those who conduct research in other cultural and social settings, apart from having to deal with the feelings of dislocation and isolation, may also experience some physical dangers due to political and physical environments. Stephanie Linkogle (2000), while carrying out her fieldwork in Nicaragua, had to deal with not only dangers due to political violence within the country, but also due to some day-to-day hazards. In their research with AIDS victims in rural China, Yun Lu and colleagues (2005) had to travel by foot, bicycle or by a *beng-beng che* (a riding cart pulled by a motorcycle-bike). However, very often they had to walk to the village as no *beng-beng che* drivers wanted to get into what they called the 'village of plague'. There was one occasion that they managed to rent a *beng-beng che*, but the driver stopped five miles away from the village and told them that he would not go any farther. Hence, once again they all had to walk to their research site.

The intimate and personal nature of the questions that the researchers are asking as well as the physical environment in which the research occurs may lead to physical danger of researchers undertaking projects with some hard-to-reach groups (Parker and Ulrich 1990; Lee 1995; Calvey 2000; Jamieson 2000; Langford 2000). Very often, the researchers travel to talk to their participants at their homes, and this can be dangerous. Terry Arendell (1997) went to interview a man about living with a chronic illness in his apartment in a middle-class neighbourhood in the United States only to find that he was not interested in being interviewed. He had agreed to take part in her research project because he wanted sex with her. Arendell escaped unharmed but very emotionally disturbed by the incident. Janet Jamieson (2000: 66), in her study on young men and crime in Scotland, elaborates on her experience in one of the interviews: a male resister in his twenties who lived alone.

On arrival at the address there was a delay in his opening the door of the flat and when I finally entered his home he insisted on locking the door from the inside... During the

course of the interview the young man acknowledged that he had mental health problems which, I felt, explained his edginess on initial contact and his obvious discomfort and agitation prior to, and to a lesser extent, during the interview. Furthermore, his locking of the door and his palpable discomfort when he could not see the external door were explained by the fact that he felt victimised by local residents in the area in which he lived. Despite knowing this information I was concerned and felt threatened and the interview was undertaken with as much brevity as possible. Thus, I balanced my own misgivings and anxiety with the need to complete the interview process and fulfil the demands of the research.

There were also unfortunate incidents where the researchers could not escape harm in their fieldwork. Mary Ellen Conaway (1986) and Jennifer Huff (1997) were physically molested and sexually harassed, and Eva Moreno (1995) was raped. These incidents may be rare, but it clearly points to some dangers that researchers working on sensitive areas may have to confront.

There are also times when researchers are threatened by partners of women who participate in domestic violence research (Parker and Ulrich 1990; Bergen 1993). Raquel Bergen (1993: 199) points out that researching marital rape with women who have been sexually assaulted also poses a potential threat to her as a researcher. She remarks that the threat occurred because most interviews were undertaken in the homes of the participants; a place where their (ex)husbands could arrive anytime. Although Bergen felt safe carrying out the interviews, she says 'the possible threat of angry men finding me interviewing their (ex)wives about their experiences was something daunting'.

Researchers may be confronted with legal issues. It is possible that during the research process, the participants may reveal some contentious issues, such as child abuse, which the researchers are required to report to the police under mandatory reporting rules (Morse and Field 1995; Socolar et al. 1995; Steinberg et al. 1999). In Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has warned researchers who undertake research with the vulnerable that 'mandatory reporting of information that has been revealed by a participant may be required' by the court (NHMRC 2002: 132). Because of this legal requirement and also our responsibility as sensitive researchers, we need to inform the participants. This may mean that we will lose our participants, but this is not as detrimental as if our research participants were harmed by the research process.

Information gathered in some sensitive research such as drug use or illegal activities may be subpoenaed for testimony in court cases (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Marquart 2001; Scarce 2001; Wright et al. 2001; Volker 2004). Researchers have been imprisoned because they refused to provide information to the court of their researched participants. The cases of Mario Brajuha (Hallowell 1985; Brajuha and Hallowell 1986) and Rik Scarce (2001) are two good examples to cite here. Brajuha was a postgraduate student researching a restaurant that was burnt down. It was suspected by the police that it was mob arson and the police took the matter to the court in order to obtain Brajuha's research data. Brajuha, however, refused to surrender his data because he had to protect his

participants and as a result, he was jailed. Similarly, Rik Scarce (2001) carried out his research with environmental activists, a controversial movement at the time. He is the first sociologist who was imprisoned for 159 days because he refused to provide his confidential research data to law enforcement authorities. The activists he interviewed collectively practised radical tactics; they made use of 'direct action' such as speech making to street theatre, property destruction, civil disobedience and letter writing. The university campus where Scarce was studying was raided by and Animal Liberation Front (ALF). One evening, he was summoned to the university police station because he knew one of the suspected cases and his research involved radical groups. He was questioned and later on was ordered to appear before a federal grand jury meeting. Scarce (2001: 262) bitterly laments:

The subpoena frightened me terribly. Though I knew little about grand juries, it was clear to me that they had extraordinary powers and that in a clash with one I would likely have to go to jail rather than discuss aspects of my research that were confidential. It took me nearly two weeks to find an attorney experienced with grand jury procedures, and by then I had lost ten pounds and was getting almost no sleep. . . . I constantly felt sick to my stomach. In short, I was falling apart.

It was clear at the beginning of his ordeal that he would, and could, not cooperate if the law enforcement authorities wanted to access his data which was collected with his promises of confidentiality. Later on, Scarce had to appear before the grand jury and this meeting lasted for nearly eight hours (Scarce 2001: 265).

The government was treating my testimony seriously. I answered all of the prosecutor's questions regarding nonconfidential matters, but I refused to answer thirty-two questions that probed confidential communications. . . . It was my refusal to answer these questions that led to my jailing.

James Marquart (2001: 44), however, was fortunate enough not to be caught in a legal matter as Scarce was. During his fieldwork in a Texas prison, he saw many illegalities but he acted like he 'did not see them'. He said in order to 'block or neutralize the moral predicament of seeing "too much," I kept quiet and simply observed'. During his fieldwork, an attorney in the Special Master's Office, asked him to testify against the Texas Department of Corrections, but he told the attorney that he 'had nothing to say'. He believed what he had collected in the prison was confidential but anticipated that he might be jailed for refusal to testify in court, but fortunately this did not happen. Richard Wright and others (2001) also warn researchers about the possibility of being coerced by legal enforcement in their inquiries with domestic burglars. They were aware of the intrusions from criminal justice officials which could jeopardise their research. As part of their fieldwork was to visit with their participants the sites of recent burglaries, the threat of being confronted with the police was great. Thus, they had made some negotiations with police

authorities not to interfere with the research fieldwork prior to commencing their research. They were then not subjected to police coercion.

It is possible too that the research participants may disclose some illegal activities to the researchers during the data collection period (Adler 1990; Lee 1993; Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Melrose 2002; Volker 2004). This may pose danger to the researchers. As Terry Williams and others (1992), in their research involving the drug culture on crack houses in New York City found, secret police tapped their phones and followed them around while they were conducting their research. Patricia Adler (1990: 105) points out that researchers are likely to confront dangerous situations when researching deviant and illegal activities. Members of these groups may harm a researcher if they believe the researcher has done something to cause harm and this can be just a simple misunderstanding. Alder and her co-researchers were forced to escape their home on a number of occasions when fierce arguments occurred among group members due to misunderstandings. Adler (1990: 106) also points to danger from the police. They were concerned that the local police would discover the nature of their study and confiscate their data.

Being vulnerable to social stigma may also occur with researchers who undertake sensitive research. This has been referred to as 'stigma contagion' (Kirby and Corzine 1981: 3); that is, researchers become stigmatised like those whom they carry out their research with (see Reavey 1997; Boynton 2002; Melrose 2002; Fisher and Ragsdale 2005). Erving Goffman (1963) refers to this as 'a courtesy stigma' (see also Mattley 1997). As Mitchell Miller and Richard Tewksbury (2001: 206) suggest, 'this is the idea of "guilt by association": it is assumed that the only people who would want to study and hang around with "those types of peoples" are others who are also "those types"'. Researchers who examine issues confronting female sex workers may be assumed to be prostitutes. In the same manner, researchers doing their research on homosexuality may be seen by others as homosexual. And if you are a woman researching abortion, it might be assumed that you have had an abortion too. The stigmatised lists can go on. Tewksbury and Gagné (2001: 84) contend that 'when a researcher seeks and gains entrée to stigmatised populations, members often assume or believe that the researcher is actually or potentially a member of the community . . . This assumption may well be because of the strength of the stigma felt by community members. Because they themselves are discredited in society, it is not surprising that such individuals may believe that only similarly stigmatised persons would be interested in them and their experiences'. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that in their study of the transgender community, Richard Tewksbury and Patricia Gagné (2001) were both seen as transgendered individuals and in Tewksbury's study with persons with HIV disease (1994), he was believed to be HIV-positive. This matter is really clear in Gagné's experience, as indicated in her study with battered women who had received clemency. She was introduced to a support group for women who had killed or attempted to kill their abusers as 'This is Dr. Gagné. She's one of us' (Tewksbury and Gagné 2001: 85). In Kathleen Ragsdale's study with sex

workers in Belize (cited in Fisher and Ragsdale 2005: 11), she and her co-researcher unexpectedly came across this social stigma. It was perceived by most key informants in Belize City that researching sex work by female researchers was 'unusual', and in some cases it was 'deemed risqué or aberrant' when they compared the researchers' attempts with 'traditional gender norms for Belizean women'.

Researchers working with vulnerable people may be exposed to what Morse and Mitcham (1997: 650) refer to as the 'compathy' phenomenon. Accordingly, compathy is 'the acquisition of the distress and/or physiological symptoms (including pain) of others by an apparently healthy individual following contact with the physical distress of another'. When we see others experience pain or distress, we may ourselves have the 'compathetic response'; that is, we may feel the pain or distress too. The compathetic response may arise from our direct observation, listening to or hearing the stories, reading stories about distressing experiences, and remembering or thinking about the distressing stories (Morse and Mitcham 1997; Morse et al. 1998; Morse 2000; Melrose 2002). This compathy phenomenon is clearly one of the effects of working with the vulnerable on sensitive researchers, as they often work with distressing and traumatic situations like pain, abuse, loss, grief and death. Through our in-depth discussions, observations and stories being told by our research participants, we too become vulnerable to this compathetic response. As Jan Morse (2000: 540) points out, 'if the researcher is working with his or her emotional pain, for example, the pain caused by listening to descriptions of the dying of the participant's child, then the researcher may also become engulfed with shared suffering. This has a profound effect on the researcher'. Morse (2000: 540) tells us precisely that 'sharing the world of the ill has its own risks for the researcher. I know from personal experience that when working with transcripts or videos of patients in distress, researchers must actively steel themselves and block the compathetic response so that the pain experience is not shared'. The compathy phenomenon has also been referred to as 'emotional contagion' (Miller et al. 1988), 'vicarious traumatization' (McCann and Pearlman 1994; Dane 2000), 'pain by proxy' (Moran-Ellis 1996) and 'labour pains' (Melrose 2002; see the following section).

'Labour Pains' – Emotional Experiences: The Impact of Conducting Research with Vulnerable People

The emotions of researching emotionally difficult topics are often over-looked in academic discourse. Yet, the emotionally engaged researcher bears witness to the pain, suffering, humiliation, and indignity of others over and over again.

(Campbell 2002: 150)

All too often, sensitive researchers neglect to discuss their emotional experiences of doing research (Dunbar et al. 2002). This is mainly due to their fears about being accused of having 'bias' (Campbell 2002). But this has begun to change

as more qualitative researchers have started to write about their subjective experiences and how they are affected by the field relationships in their field-work (see Kleinman and Copp 1993; Moran-Ellis 1996; Mattley 1997; Stanko 1997; Letherby 2000; Lather 2001; Campbell 2002; Melrose 2002; Grinyer 2005; Hallowell et al. 2005). Margaret Melrose (2002) names this emotional distress as 'labour pains' or 'emotional labour'. Melrose (2002: 345) contends that emotional labour involved in interviewing sensitive issues is indeed 'hard work' and it can be 'sorrowful and difficult', as it involves 'dealing with the participants' feelings about "telling" and with the feelings involved in the researcher by "hearing" such accounts of appalling abuse'. The researchers may experience 'subjective distress' because they have to 'endure and share the pain' of their research participants. Thus, these labour pains are real for many sensitive researchers who carry out their research with extremely vulnerable people. Researching child prostitution, Melrose (2002: 337) points out, 'is an emotionally sensitive area to investigate. When conducting research of this kind, researchers may be entering an emotionally charged experience where anxiety levels are unpredictable and this level of sensitivity makes it a potentially threatening excursion for both researchers and researched'. See also a chapter on 'Emotions' in Nina Hallowell and colleagues (2005: 11–41), where several sensitive researchers tell their emotional stories in conducting their research with vulnerable people.

Researchers have discussed how the process of conducting research in sensitive issues has affected them personally (Riessman 1990; Moran-Ellis 1996; Rowling 1999; Calvey 2000; Lankshear 2000; Letherby 2000; Gilbert 2001a; Lather 2001; Campbell 2002; Melrose 2002; Dickson-Swift 2005; Hallowell et al. 2005). And for some researchers, this may also have an impact on other parts of their lives (Moran-Ellis 1996; Jamieson 2000; Lankshear 2000; Letherby 2000). Katherine Riessman (1990: 225) says, in her writing about the experiences of divorce of women, that the interviewing process had an effect on her as an interviewer. She says, 'listening to people's painful accounts of their marriage and trying to probe sensitively for their understanding of what had happened was sometimes difficult'. Lather (2001) tells us that listening to the stories of women living with HIV/AIDS brought many tears to her eyes. Not only that, she realised that in working with these women, she had to manage her own relationship to loss. Due to this, she began to think whether and how she could even continue to work on the project.

In doing sensitive research with vulnerable people, researchers may be involved in a number of emotional experiences. Some researchers have talked about their emotional distress when their participants die (Dunn 1991; Cannon 1992; De Reave 1994; Beaver et al. 1999; Rowling 1999; Campbell 2002; Gair 2002; Warr 2004). Others point to their emotional exhaustion (Parker and Ulrich 1990; Cannon 1992; Gregory et al. 1997; Letherby 2000; McCosker et al. 2001; Melrose 2002; Johnson and Clarke 2003; Dickson-Swift 2005) and guilt (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Melrose 2002; Warr 2004). In Rubin and Rubin's study (1995), one participant committed suicide not long

after revealing some secret stories in the interview. The timing of this participant's death made Rubin and Rubin wonder if the death was linked with the interview. And this does not leave them with a good feeling at all.

Some researchers cry with their participants in the interview (Matocha 1992; Burr 1995; Stanko 1997; Lather 2001). They have feelings of helplessness (Cannon 1992; Melrose 2002), pain and anger (Rothman 1986; Kitson et al. 1996; Stanko 1997; Haris and Huntington 2001; Hubbard et al. 2001; Rosenblatt 2001; Campbell 2002; Melrose 2002). Dunn (1991: 390), for example, was 'choked with emotion', and Rowling (1999: 172) had tears in her eyes, while collecting data in their research.

The emotionally draining experience during the course of doing sensitive research of some researchers deserves greater elaboration here. In her work with women who have experienced infertility, miscarriage and child death, Gayle Letherby (2000: 103) laments, 'half way through the fieldwork I felt very low... The emotional involvement and emotional work involved in the fieldwork also led to emotional exhaustion'. And when May, one of the participants, talked about the feelings when she failed to conceive a child as 'her time in the wilderness', Letherby felt that that was her own story. For Kathleen Gilbert (2001a), the emotional distress has resulted in many disturbing dreams during her fieldwork on the study of loss, grief and coping of parents who lost a child in pregnancy. Julia Brannen (1988: 562) tells us that the emotional drain from listening to research participants' stories and distress for a long period was so great that she believed that 'no psychiatrist or psychotherapist would work (or be allowed to work) under these conditions'.

In Linda Matocha's study (1992) on the effects of AIDS on family members responsible for care of PWAs, the PWAs were often very ill, and within the two-year fieldwork, they all had died. In carrying out this study, Matocha (1992: 72) tells us,

I experienced strong emotions while conducting this research. I cried, laughed, and exhibited anger and confusion along with each participant. I did not remain untouched or removed from the participants. The sessions were full of sharing... Family secrets were shared. This was important information, but frequently there was an accompanying burden of knowledge placed on me.

In her research with women working on the streets, Deborah Warr (2004: 583) contends that because researchers are immersed in the data and the research participants in their research, the stories they are given or hear and see often stay with them, and this can be emotionally heavy. Warr interviewed one sex worker who was only 14 years old. The girl told Warr that she had a regular customer who would pick her up very early on Saturdays. Each time, the man gave her a wrist bracelet as a gift. The girl then rolled up her sleeve on the left arm to show Warr the gifts she had received from this man. Warr (2004: 583) remarks: 'I was shocked to see that they reached almost to her elbow! For me, the benign bracelets became symbols of her stolen youth as well as of the man's selfish and exploitative desires'. After this incident, she

would see a lot of girls and young women wearing similar bracelets. This may make the girl similar to other women but her situation was dramatically different from those girls. Warr (2004: 583) says:

I felt angry with the unknown man when I imagined him procuring more bracelets in preparation for his weekend trysts. Most of all, I was overwhelmed by the futility of research and its inability to change anything in the lives of the women we were interviewing.

One important study on the emotional impacts of carrying out sensitive research with vulnerable people is that of Rebecca Campbell (2002). Campbell (2002) individually interviewed 12 researchers in her study about their experiences of doing research with rape survivors at the end of her project. This was to give her research team a chance to 'talk, reflect, vent' their personal experiences in doing this kind of research. Many of the researchers in Campbell's project remarked that they were personally impacted by their involvement in the research, including by feelings of numbness and not wanting to react. Some talked about physical and emotional safety. Some had to hold their thoughts in abeyance while others had outbursts like anger and crying. Campbell alerts us that although not all researchers may experience emotional distress in doing research with vulnerable people, we must appreciate that it can potentially have an impact on the researchers. Campbell suggests that researchers working with vulnerable people and 'emotionally difficult topics,' (like being a rape victim in her study) need to develop some strategies to make the impact minimal for them before embarking on this type of research. This may prevent some emotional distress and hence harm on the part of the researchers.

A similar but more recent study on the impact of researching vulnerable people on the researchers is that of Barbara Johnson and Jill Clarke (2003). Johnson and Clarke interviewed researchers whose research was on sensitive areas including HIV/AIDS, cancer, death and dying. Johnson and Clarke (2003: 423) argue that these types of research topics potentially have an 'emotional and moral unease' impact on the researchers. The research participants in this study made remarks on this impact such as being unprepared to carry out the research and worried about being in 'uncharted territory' (Johnson and Clarke 2003: 425). Many had problems with the conflict of their roles as a researcher and as a friend in their attempts to build up rapport. Feelings of isolation and lack of emotional and practical supervision were raised by the participants. Clearly, this study points to the many emotional burdens of researchers who work in this vulnerable area of research.

Often, these researchers have to 'pent up' their emotions and find ways to release them when they return home (Campbell 2002; Gair 2002; Melrose 2002). Some researchers argue that very often, researchers have to 'hide' the truth, pretend not to know or suppress their feelings in order to protect their research participants. This can leave researchers with emotional problems and physical danger too. And when it comes to the time of analysing the data and

writing, Adler (1990: 107) laments, 'we were torn by conflicts between utilizing details to enrich the data and glossing over descriptions to guard confidences'. This problem has been the experience of many researchers dealing with hard-to-reach people or very sensitive research topics (see Humphreys 1970, 1975; Scarce 2001; Melrose 2002).

When the research is completed, researchers may experience some difficulties with leaving the field (Stebbins 1991; Cannon 1992; Booth 1998; Russell 1999; Robertson 2000; Baca Zinn 2001; Hubbard et al. 2001; Kondo 2001; Boynton 2002; Cutcliffe and Ramcharan 2002; Dickson-Swift 2005). Through the process of extensive involvement with the researched participants in qualitative research in general and through established rapport developed with vulnerable people in particular, the participants may not wish to end their involvement (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2005). Very often, researchers working with vulnerable people develop friendships with their research participants (Acker et al. 1991; Stebbins 1991; Watson et al. 1991; Cannon 1992; Boynton 2002; Gair, 2002). And this may make leaving the field difficult for some researchers. But as Carol Warren (2002: 96) suggests, 'like most things, qualitative interviews come to an end... but sometimes... interviewers do not necessarily end their relationship with respondents at the conclusion of their interview'. This is referred to as the 'unfinished business' (Burr 1995: 174). Researchers may have 'on-going feelings of concern for the fate of each person' (Burr 1995: 177). Wendy Booth's research with people with learning difficulties (1998) did not end when the study was completed. Booth suggests that when researchers take on research with some vulnerable people, sometimes relationships may need to be maintained, and this is both necessary and ethically responsible. In her case, the relationships with some research participants continued for more than ten years. At the time she published her work in 1998, she stated, 'the reality is that 11 years on from the first project, I am still contacted by, and in contact with, five women who chose to attach their own "terms and conditions" to their participation in my research' (Booth 1998: 134; see also Stalker 1998).

Emotional feelings such as depression and guilt amongst the researchers when leaving the fieldwork have also been reported in some studies (Cannon 1989, 1992; Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Burr 1995; Miller 1997; Letherby 2000; Sque 2000; Boynton 2002; Melrose 2002; Dickson-Swift 2005; Sin 2005). Gayle Letherby (2000: 101), in her study with women who cannot have children or have lost children through miscarriages and child death, laments that 'I did wonder sometimes if I had encouraged respondents to re-live difficulty experiences and then abandoned them to come to terms with their distress alone. I still feel uncomfortable about this aspect of the research'. In her study of breast cancer, Sue Cannon (1989: 74) admits that it was extremely difficult for her to leave the field. During the course of her study, 21 women died. This has greatly affected Cannon's emotions. She tells us that she felt sad, depressed, shocked, angry and at a great loss. This research had greatly impacted her life and, because of this, it was difficult for her to finish her research with the

women. In Petra Boynton's research with sex workers (2002: 10), she contends, 'we felt depressed, deflated and lethargic following the end of the data collection phase. We were concerned about the safety of the women we had interviewed and wanted to know they were "okay"'. Magi Sque (2000: 32), in her research with bereaved relatives of organ donors, talks about her guilt feeling – 'at times I felt guilty about my comparative riches. For instance, I was deeply touched by a young mother whose baby son died as a result of an unusual accident. She told me how resentful and angry she felt when she saw other people, including her own sister, with their children; somehow, I felt almost guilty that, as far as I knew, my sons were at home and well'. And Margaret Melrose (2002: 347) admits that 'to walk away from some of the young people after an interview was, to say the least, difficult, when one knew that they would be going out afterwards to suffer the same kinds of abuse they had just been describing. My feelings often seemed to parallel those expressed by my participants, that is, anger, guilt, powerlessness and frustration'. Whenever she saw men in 'grey suits' in the street, they reminded her of the abuse that young girls received from these men, and she had to 'suppress the desire to scream' at them. The kind of emotional distress (labour pains) that sensitive researchers experience in researching vulnerable people, Melrose argues, can seriously damage the health of researchers.

The impacts of sensitive research on the researchers extend beyond researchers who use reactive research methods to those who adopt an unobtrusive method in their research with vulnerable people (Alexander et al. 1989; McCarroll et al. 1995; Milling-Kinard 1996; Driscoll et al. 1997). These unobtrusive researchers experience similar physical and emotional impacts to those who use in-depth interviews and other qualitative methods in their studies. In their research on researchers who reviewed case records of sexual assault and rape victims, Alexander and colleagues (1989) assert that these researchers experienced emotional distress and had sleeping problems like the experiences of those researchers who had a direct contact with the vulnerable research participants. Similarly, Milling-Kinard (1996) reports feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and helplessness among the researchers who reviewed the records of children experiencing abuse.

Many researchers undertaking research with vulnerable people are not well prepared to deal with sensitive and often delicate situations in their research (Rowling 1999). Very often too, researchers underestimate their emotional well-being in undertaking research with vulnerable people. Janet Robertson's study with mature women with bulimia (2000) is a good example of my point here. Robertson was an ex-bulimic person, but she considered herself as recovered from the illness. Due to her personal experience, Robertson decided to undertake research on this issue hoping that her research will help other women to be free from their silent voices. However, this was not so. This is what Robertson (2000: 533) says:

I felt secure in the knowledge that I considered myself 'recovered'. Consequently, I was rather shocked when I realized during a period of my intense interviewing and

transcribing that I was experiencing a return of the feelings that I remembered from when I was 'bulimic'... The dominant image of the researcher as 'in control and successful' meant that it was not easy to admit to feelings of vulnerability, even to myself.

This is also the experience of others such as Burr (1995), Kiesinger (1998) and Hubbard et al. (2001). In her work with critically ill patients, Burr (1995: 174) tells us that her level of preparedness, training and skills is inadequate for the extensive disclosure that her participants bring out. Kiesinger (1998: 73) was not prepared for the intensive emotionality of her researched participants. Hubbard and colleagues (2001: 128) felt unprepared for dealing with participants who cried when talking about the deaths of their fathers. This level of emotional unpreparedness has great impact on the researchers. One of the research teams reveals her feelings that after the interview she would be 'crying in private confines of her car'.

I must also point out that there are times when the researchers may feel that doing research with the vulnerable is rewarding too (see Kondora 1993; Hutchinson et al. 1994; Cook and Bosley 1995). According to Hutchinson and colleagues (1994), there are some positive aspects including the sense of purpose, being able to help people who are more marginalised than the researchers, catharsis, empowerment, healing and having a voice heard (see also Brannen 1988, 1993; Cowles 1988; Lee and Renzetti 1993; Owens 1996; James and Platzer 1999; Sque 2000; Dickson-Swift 2005). Feelings of being privileged are also mentioned by some (Cannon 1992; Rosenblatt and Fischer 1993; Sullivan 1998). Sullivan (1998: 74) tells us that 'at the forefront of my mind was always the thought that to be permitted a private view of another person's past, their pain, and their sorrow, was a privilege'. Sometimes the researchers may be a concern of the research participants. The participants in Letherby's (2000) study were worried about her emotional well-being when they were discussing their distressing experiences of miscarriage, child death or infertility treatment. They were concerned that what they were telling Letherby would upset her because she had lost a child through a miscarriage and thereafter been unable to have children.

These kinds of privileged feelings have also been my own experiences in working with vulnerable women from ethnic communities (see Liamputtong Rice et al. 1994; Liamputtong Rice 1996, 2000). Very often, I would leave the participants with feelings of gratitude and debt to these individuals who gave me the opportunity to share many intimate details of their lives.

The Other Vulnerable Researcher – A Transcriber

In doing qualitative research, often there are others who also play an important role during the life of the research and this includes transcribers and research assistants (Burr 1995; Kitson et al. 1996; Gregory et al. 1997; McCosker et al. 2001; Gilbert 2001b; Darlington and Scott 2002; Warr 2004; Benoit et al. 2005;

Dickson-Swift 2005). Issues confronting research assistants are largely similar to those confronted by researchers that I have discussed (see also Benoit et al. 2005). Here, I wish to examine the issues facing transcribers who transcribe our tape-recorded interviews.

Data gathered in qualitative research requires a transcription for in-depth analysis. It is likely that some transcribers will become emotionally distressed if they have to listen to and type powerful and often distressing stories of the researched participants (Matocha 1992; Cameron 1993; Gregory et al. 1997; McCosker et al. 2001; Darlington and Scott 2002; Gair 2002; Warr 2004; Benoit et al. 2005; Dickson-Swift 2005). As Deborah Warr (2004: 586) asserts, transcribers are 'absorbing the voices and stories of research', just as are the researchers who are eliciting the stories in their data collection processes. For example, the transcribers who are involved in sensitive research like domestic violence and murder, experience emotional and physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal upsets, exhaustion and depression, and sleep problems and nightmares (Cowles 1988; Burr 1995; Gregory et al. 1997; Ridge et al. 1999; McCosker et al. 2001). Miriam Cameron (1993: 224) talked with the transcriber who transcribed interview tapes on living with AIDS and this is what she said:

When you are plunged into the dictation equipment, you are living somebody else's experience. You hear if they hurt or don't hurt and they're happy or sad. I wanted to tell somebody, but I couldn't because of confidentiality... I felt that I got to know them as persons because they really opened up.

In researching the effects of AIDS on family members responsible for care of PWAs, Linda Matocha (1992: 72) employed two people to transcribe the data for her. She instructed both transcribers to maintain confidentiality of the researched and the content of the data. She tells us that 'the transcriptionists experienced powerful emotions and high stress. They grieved and became angry as the lives of the participants unfolded, and I spent hours listening to them and assisting them to resolve feelings'. Similarly, in Cecilia Benoit and others' (2005) research with sex workers, as a number of transcribers were ex-sex workers, what they heard from the tape brought them back to their own stressful experiences while working in the trade. Deborah Warr (2004: 585-86) asked one of the transcribers in her research about how she felt listening to the stories of disadvantaged young people. The transcriber responded with a story that she could not forget and she called it the 'chin-ups story'. It was a story of a young homeless man who would hang off the side of a bridge by his fingertips; he was practicing chin-ups. He would do the chin-ups until his arms ached and he felt as if he was almost falling from the bridge as a way for him to tempt his fate. Warr (2004: 586) tells us that: 'the woman who had done the transcribing described to me the tremendous edge in the young man's voice, which made his story ring true for her, and the despairing image she had of him hanging from the bridge, inviting his hands to slip but still not wanting to choose death'. Warr (2004: 586) puts it succinctly that 'clearly,

transcribers who work with sensitive data are also absorbing the voices and stories of research'. They are indeed affected by emotional problems as researchers are.

The Vulnerable Researcher: The Need for Support

What I have discussed thus far clearly points to the need for support for researchers who are doing their research with vulnerable people and on sensitive issues (see also Renzetti and Lee 1993; Payne 1994; Rubin and Rubin 1995; Moran-Ellis 1996; Schwartz 1997; Lee-Treweek 2000; Letherby 2000; Sque 2000; Gilbert 2001a,b; Meadows et al. 2003; Perry et al. 2004; Warr 2004; Dickson-Swift 2005). Very few research projects provide mentors who can talk with researchers about how to deal with the emotional burden generated from their interviews with vulnerable research participants (Schwartz 1997). There appear to be very few support programmes for researchers who work with the vulnerable and this also includes research students. Jan Morse (2000: 540) firmly asserts that

[m]ost of you, I know, will be able to recall large blocks of quotations and hear the participant's voice in your head many years after conducting a heart-wrenching interview. Yet, oddly, how advisors should be monitoring and debriefing their student researchers is not discussed in the literature.

Some suggestions have been made to assist and support researchers working with the vulnerable and these include access to a professional confidant (Brannen 1988; Kitson et al. 1996; Robertson 2000), formal supervision (both academic and therapeutic supervision) (Etherington 1996; James and Platzer 1999; Meadows et al. 2003; Warr 2004; Dickson-Swift 2005), regular meetings (Meadows et al. 2003; Jewkes et al. 2005) and emotional support (Moran-Ellis 1996; Sque 2000; Ellsberg et al. 2001; Gilbert 2001b). With a few exceptions, most of the support currently available for researchers who work with the vulnerable is from friends, family members and some colleagues (Lee-Treweek 2000; Letherby 2000; Ellsberg et al. 2001; Melrose 2002). It is essential that a formal support guideline should be developed to assist the vulnerable researchers to be less vulnerable in their research enterprise and this may include some of the points I have mentioned above. Catherine Perry and colleagues (2004: 146) suggest forming a small team of researchers to support those who carry out 'sensitive and emotionally laden' tasks. Perry and others, in their research on sexuality with gay, lesbian and bisexual young people (2004: 146) tell us,

We have found that supportive and constructive teamwork, which actively brings researchers and their emotions center stage, can be beneficial in enhancing the integrity of the research as well as in sustaining researchers through difficult periods.

In the study on child rape undertaken by Rachel Jewkes and colleagues (2005: 1811), meetings of research teams were done on a regular basis. In each

meeting, all the researchers reported on each interview they had carried out and any support that they needed was discussed. The research team made sure that no one on the team would be unduly distressed by the interviews and support was provided to all members. Cowles (1988), Stoler (2002) and Warr (2004) suggest that there should be a debriefing session with a therapist and colleagues after a stressful data collection period.

Jo Moran-Ellis (1996) recommends that researchers who carry out sensitive research need emotional support, and this support should form part of the context within which the research is undertaken. In her research on violence against women and children, she strongly argues that

I propose that all research that is concerned with violence against women or children should have, as part of the method and as part of the process of conducting research, a clear mechanism for giving support to all staff engaged on the project, including support/administrative staff as well a researcher. I would go so far as to say that no research proposal should be approved by a funding body unless it has this support clearly built into the structure, and that in referring such research proposals this is a point that should be made.

Others suggest that it is imperative that researchers working with vulnerable people need good training in carrying out this type of research (Anderson and Hatton 2000; Sque 2000; McCosker et al. 2001; Meadows et al. 2003; Dickson-Swift 2005). Extensive training for the researchers is needed. But this training needs to go beyond the methodological issues and include things like how to manage distress and end difficult interactions (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000b). Not only good training on how to handle the research processes, but also training on how to deal with delicate and distress situations is advocated. Some suggest that researchers working with the vulnerable need good counselling skills as well (Lee 1993; Coyle and Wright 1996; Sque 2000; McCosker et al. 2001).

Safeguard the Vulnerable Researcher

The discussions in this chapter point to the need for some strategies to safeguard researchers. In particular, when planning research involving dangerous fieldwork, safeguard strategies are essentially important (Kenyan and Hawker 2000; Craig et al. 2001). David Calvey (2000: 57) suggests that the use of practical equipment such as mobile phones, the selection of setting and letting someone know your whereabouts are necessary (see also Jamieson 2000). He also suggests that researchers may need to be 'artful and skilled in impression management in the field' such as planning about cover stories and leaving the field when necessary.

It was recognised in Jamieson's (2000: 63) study of young men's resistance to, desistance from and persistence in offending in Scotland that there were risks to the researchers during the fieldwork because the interviews were carried

out in unfamiliar locations and often after working hours. The young people in their research involved in some 'risky' behaviour. Hence, she and her co-researchers planned several safety procedures in order to reduce the threat to themselves as researchers. They tried to conduct their interviews within office hours as much as possible. They carried mobile phones while they were out in the field. They made sure that they had access to a car. They informed office staff at the university about their whereabouts. And if they were very concerned about a particular interview, the office staff would be alerted. The use of 'partnered interviews' was also adopted. Jamieson and another researcher made special attempts to be in the same area in order to minimise the likelihood of physical threat and their fears of actual risks. However, in reality, adherence to all these precautions may not be too practical and researchers may have to find other ways to reduce potential risks. In her work, Jamieson (2000: 69) suggests the following to safeguard researchers' safety:

- Have a thorough and careful research plan.
- Be always conscious about safety in the field.
- Keep alert to some likely risks.
- Be prepared to respond to threat, even if one has to leave the research field.

Petra Boynton (2002: 8) suggests several strategies for researchers working in the red-light area who, like their research participants, often work on streets late into the night. These include the following:

- Do not work alone. This can be done by informing others of the location that the researcher will be working on that particular day or night, or working in pairs with another researcher.
- Always carry a mobile phone while in the field.
- Discuss any problems emerging in the field with the research team members.
- Use comfortable clothes that provide confidence while in the field.
- Try to be 'visible' in the field and at work.
- If the interview is done inside the home setting or office, try to stay near the door.
- If essential, seek advice and use support from security services such as the police.

Terry Williams and colleagues (2001: 219) provide simple styles of safety in doing research with crack dealers in New York City and other difficult-to-access groups such as burglars, robbers and drug sellers. Amongst these, style and demeanour are essential. 'First impressions are very important', they recommend. Researchers should feel that they belong to the research setting by wearing clothes that are appropriate to the environment. What the researchers wear and their behaviour will be seen as their 'willingness to fit into the social setting'. This may also prevent drawing unnecessary attention from the local people. Williams and colleagues (2001: 219) point out that 'failure to establish this presence, and especially being perceived as a victim, by those in the drug business for instance, may greatly increase personal dangers of theft/robbery

and difficulty in establishing rapport with potential subjects'. They also provide other recommendations which are similar to what Jamieson has given. (See also Craig et al. 2000; Kenyon and Hawker 2000.)

For transcribers, David Gregory and colleagues (1997) suggest several strategies to reduce any harm and these include the following:

- Before taking up a job, transcribers need to be fully informed about the nature of research and the data they will be working with.
- The researcher needs to organise regular debriefing sessions with the transcribers.
- They should be alerted about difficult interviews they will be transcribing.
- They should be prepared for the termination of the research they are working on.

In order to help their RAs with emotional distress, Cecilia Benoit and colleagues (2005: 274) assign two transcribers to work together to ensure that they have each other for companionship when dealing with difficult material. One of the transcribers remarked on this that, 'I think that working in a team is very effective if something's upsetting to you or it triggers up a memory because you have someone to bounce [it] off [and] you can talk about it'.

Conclusion

Sensitive research often also has potential effects on the personal life, and sometimes on the personal security, of the researcher.

(Lee 1993: 1)

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, undertaking sensitive research with vulnerable people places a great many demands, physically and emotionally, on the researcher. Conducting sensitive research has a great impact on the researcher's personal lives (Lee 1993). In his well-known book, Raymond Lee (1993: 16) warns us that, as researchers, we 'need to find ways of dealing with the problems and issue raised by research on sensitive topics. The threats which the research poses to research participants, to the researcher and to others need to be minimized, managed or mitigated'. Virginia Dickson-Swift (2005) alerts us that as researchers, we must prepare ourselves for physical and emotional danger in our fieldwork and find ways to disengage ourselves when our research ends. One way to do this is to tell the stories of the vulnerable researchers to others – to let our stories and our voices be heard in a similar manner to the way we make the voices of our research participants heard in our research endeavours. Amanda Coffey (1999: 1) convincingly suggests that

[i]t has become increasingly fashionable for individual researchers to 'personalise' their accounts of fieldwork. But there has been little systematic attempt to reflect upon their experiences and emotions that are reported in any overarching collective or epistemological sense. All too often, research methods texts remain relatively silent on the ways in which fieldwork affects us, and we affect the field.

TUTORIAL EXERCISES

1. You are assigned to conduct a project with women who have experienced domestic violence, drug users and dealers and street sex workers. How do you plan to do this in a way to minimise danger and harm that may occur to you in the fieldwork?
2. You are about to embark on a research project with homeless young people who have been sexually abused. What issues are you likely to encounter and how will you deal with these?

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