

## **The emotional turmoil of contract research**

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### ***Introduction and aims***

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

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

### ***The nature of contract research***

It is important to make clear the contract research setting being considered in this paper. It has a number of defining features. It is fast paced and reactive and requires high productivity in compressed time frames. The centre is responsible for its own income generation, responding to tenders quickly and concurrently. Moreover this is coupled with continuing research on other

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

### ***Existing debate***

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

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

There is a growing discourse acknowledging emotional pain and trauma can affect those involved in research. Despite methodological issues, health and safety and risk being taken into consideration during the planning and conduct of research, it is impossible to plan for every possibility. Researchers are often faced with revelations, tensions and dilemmas during interviews that can be difficult to cope with (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Emerald, 2015; Wolf, 1996; Rowling, 1999). Indeed, it is difficult to be prepared for the range of eventualities that the reality of fieldwork can present. Moreover, emotional challenges can sometimes arise that are unconnected to the research focus leaving researchers feeling unprepared for the individual's revelations (Emerald, 2015; Hubbard et al., 2001). The research process can evoke highly emotional responses in both the participant and the researcher, and researchers are often left unsupported and alone, to deal with feelings of concern, worry and guilt leaving them potentially open to emotional exhaustion, desensitisation and fear of being seen as weak (Yeo & Graham, 2014). Emotional as well as physical exhaustion and stress were also common feelings reported by researchers during prolonged and simultaneous fieldwork activities (Cowles, 1988; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015).

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

The literature tells us that researchers tend to mask their emotions; keeping emotions in check with a sense of detached objectiveness (England, 1994) hiding emotions from colleagues after periods of fieldwork (Lalor, et al., 2006). Tensions and dilemmas in the field can create emotional exhaustion and burnout that can be hard for researchers to acknowledge. Hochschild (1983), discusses researchers need to hide distress or anxiety, a process she refers to as 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 1983; 42-43) after challenging fieldwork activities. Silencing or ignoring emotions is perceived as essential to give the impression of professional competence, as are concealing emotions and denying self-reflection for fear of being viewed as inadequate or weak (Bloor et al., 2010; Hubbard et al., 2001). Moreover, Wolf, 1996, suggests that dilemmas confronting researchers in the field, what she refers to as 'secrets' often remain hidden, disclosure perhaps being perceived as exposing personal vulnerability, weakness or inadequacy (Wolf, 1996; Hubbard et al., 2001; Lalor et al., 2006, Yeo & Graham, 2014).

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

Investing so much in interviews over long periods, it is not surprising that researchers can become fatigued, both emotionally and physically. Moreover, repeated exposure to participant revelations and challenging circumstances can have a negative cumulative effect on researcher well-being (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Sanders et al., 2014; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes,

2015). Indeed, discourse has begun to reveal the manifestation of both physical symptoms and emotional exhaustion (Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes, 2015) both during and after research activities. The source of exhaustion was twofold; the sheer number of interviews and the research content (Dickson Swift et al., 2007). Deleterious outcomes of distress and vicarious trauma such as headaches, sleep disturbances, insomnia and nightmares (Cowles, 1988); gastrointestinal upsets, increased stress and loss of appetite have been experienced and documented (Dominey-Howes, 2015; Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes, 2015), as have a full range of emotions - frustration, loneliness, sadness, (Nutov and Hazzan, 2011) guilt and crying, (Lalor et al., 2006; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and an inability to concentrate and think (Eriksen and Ditrich, 2015).

### ***Coping mechanisms***

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

Counselling has been suggested in some cases providing a 'neutral' to listen but is acknowledged may be of limited use (Corden et al., 2005; Rager 2005). Wincup, 2001, suggests peers are felt to be the most appropriate debrief confidant and help researchers to recognise their emotional feelings are not unique. Peers provide reassurance; help address issues of isolation and more importantly have an acute appreciation of the feelings and emotions experienced by fellow colleagues, having been involved in the same or similar research. (Wincup, 2001). Warr, 2004, expresses concern that senior researchers or Project Directors may not necessarily provide the most appropriate debriefing partner; they may lack awareness

and insight into the kinds of issues raised by research topics or have not experienced the interviews first-hand (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Warr, 2004). Friends and family members have also been suggested as support mechanisms offering debriefing opportunities (Dunn, 1998; Chatzifitou, 2000; Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Moncur, 2013; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015), but it has been argued that debriefing with family does not give the opportunity to separate the role of work and family (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). Additionally, debriefing with family does not perhaps offer the same level of understanding as a personal encounter with a colleague who has the potential to better understand similar feelings (Moncur, 2013). Other beneficial practices including diary keeping or journal writing (Dunn, 1998; Rager, 2005) have also been shown to be effective in relieving emotional concerns.

Exploring the unknown, can require researchers to engage in emotional laden research requiring a great deal of investment on the part of the researcher with a need to demonstrate understanding and empathy during the interview and this emotional connection is well documented in the literature (Kleinman and Copp, 1993; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Jaggar, 1996; Sciarra, 1999; Harris & Huntington, 2001; Hubbard et al, 2001; Rager, 2005; Calgaro, 2015;). Indeed Sciarra (1999) suggests that “Because entering the meaning-making world of another requires empathy; it is inconceivable how the qualitative researcher would accomplish her goal by distancing herself from emotions” (Sciarra, 1999,:44). Listening to individuals in crisis or experiencing difficult circumstances requires a huge degree of 'emotional labor'. Emotional labor a concept developed by Hochschild (1983) “is the effort a person invests in expressing or coping with his or her emotions so as to achieve objectives pertaining to his or her work” (Nutov & Hazzan, 2011:20). Clearly this concept neatly fits within the research paradigm requiring researchers to demonstrate substantial effort to both actively engage with participants and to also control their own emotions during fieldwork activities.



***Emotional well-being in a contract research setting***

As discussed in the introduction, UK policy context has been changing, with the introduction of austerity measures and stringent welfare conditionality. These measures have led to the nature of the centre's research portfolio adjusting to capture the impact of these policy changes. The research I have been involved in over the last ten years has increasingly become more about capturing the experiences of those individuals struggling with life, dealing with financial hardship, homelessness and those with multiple and complex needs. Meeting these individuals puts into sharp focus the lives they lead and how they are coping with the issues that are facing them. Therefore as a researcher you witness participants anguish, watch their body language, see their tension and anger and walk away at the end of the interview. Reflecting on my own experiences I realised that I was not coping with the mounting strain I was under. It had crept up on me, much like the mounting pressures described by participants. A typical week in busy periods might involve travel away from home for two or three days, conducting interviews all day and sometimes until after 9pm, depending on people's life patterns. In order to maximise efficiency, breaks were often missed as interviews more often than not ran over time. The cumulative effect of these time pressures coupled with listening to endless similar stories had taken its toll on my depleted emotional resources. My work life balance was heavily weighted towards work. It not only encroached on my physical time with my family but it overwhelmed my thoughts. I was prompted to write this paper after a short period away from work suffering from stress after being involved in a long period of fieldwork, spanning three projects in particular: exploring the lives of people with chaotic or unsettled lives, homelessness and mental health and getting by in challenging times. These projects were additional to beginning year two of a three year project looking how people were coping with the changes to welfare conditions, with a particular focus on offenders, the homeless and those with anti-social behaviour orders. On my return to work, feeling better, I quickly realised that nothing had changed. I would be facing the same pressures and I worried that they would again take their emotional toll on my already

fragile wellbeing. Writing this paper helped me to put into perspective my needs as a researcher and prompted me to bring these concerns out into the open within my working environment.

The next section of this paper reports on some of my personal reflections and experiences while conducting a number of research projects over a period of eighteen years. It draws heavily on my recollections as a researcher, and to some degree on anecdotal evidence from other researchers within the centre, who have been involved in difficult and challenging interviews and longitudinal research with participant panels. The paper strengthens the growing discourse concerning researcher emotional well-being and then goes on to discuss this further within a contract research environment.

Participants frequently displayed overwhelming emotion in telling their experiences and sometimes revealed issues that were unconnected to the topic of discussion. Exploring the impact of benefit sanctions on homeless individuals in particular, revealed a range of stories fraught with starvation, poverty, crime and mental ill health and in some cases exposed participants deep seated emotional issues such as abuse, both sexual and physical, with participants breaking down and weeping during interviews. In some particularly difficult interviews, individuals have become agitated and threatening and also revealed feelings of suicide that I was ill prepared to hear. These revelations left me in a heightened emotional state experiencing fear in some cases, but also feelings of empathy, sympathy and powerlessness, unable to help or counsel them in their distress. Occasionally these experiences left me with a dilemma of fighting back my feelings to keep a sense of objective distance and professionalism but also knowing I may have to continue with the interviews after the periods of distress for both of us had passed.

When interviewing individuals involved in a longitudinal panel exploring 'getting by' and managing on a low income, it was heart wrenching to revisit participants and listen to them describing their deteriorating circumstances and envisaging little hope for a positive future. Re-engaging with these participants, I found myself feeling emotionally drained, anxious, and particularly worried and guilty at the thought of leaving them having explored very emotive and difficult subject matters. These experiences brought to the fore a range of skills that I realised I needed more than ever, such as empathy (Woodby et al, 2015), caring, active listening, and being supportive (Rager, 2005) all involving huge investment in terms of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983).

During intense periods of fieldwork, interview numbers can remain high for prolonged periods and continual exposure to fieldwork activities, together with periods away from home, can manifest themselves in emotional exhaustion (Rager, 2005). Being involved in simultaneous and concurrent projects required me to draw on my emotional reserves to ensure time and effort was dedicated to each interview and the appropriate degree of empathy was employed to ensure a 'good' interview and make sure all the topics were explored fully. However, during intense and prolonged fieldwork, I found myself exceptionally stressed and worn out that I had periods of 'absence' where I had clearly 'switched off' from the interview for a few moments, and had paid no attention to what was being said by the individual (Eriksen and Ditrich, 2015). At some low points I felt unable to carry out simple tasks or even participate in conversation with anyone, I just needed to be quiet. However, on entering the interview scenario, I switched to 'researcher mode', putting my own anxieties aside and carried out the interview with professionalism and then returned to a state of malaise until the next scheduled interview. Clearly, the degree of emotional labor I had to use during interview periods left me mentally exhausted. Hearing stories of everyday struggles, starvation and hopelessness, over and over again I was aware that I was

becoming increasingly desensitised to the interview 'stories' as a coping mechanism to deal with my mounting negative emotional feelings.

Trying to desensitise one's self for self-preservation purposes is a difficult process and hard to achieve permanently. Having access to limited debriefing opportunities, resulted in me 'carrying around' a raft of worrying feelings. Holding on to emotions can be debilitating and I have found it difficult to share some of my experiences but have thought about them often; they remain 'voices in my head' (Warr, 2004). I can still vividly recall an interview I conducted ten years ago with a street sex worker, what she looked like, her story and struggles and these memories still trigger a pit in my stomach. Stories do have a lasting effect and a strong emotional impact, staying with you for years, despite attempting to push them to the back of one's mind. Moreover, my dormant memories and emotional responses have been triggered during subsequent interviews, with individuals who are experiencing similar circumstances, and have awakened latent emotional stress that I found hard to cope with (Warr, 2004; Yeo & Graham, 2014; Emerald, 2015). Indeed while writing this paper I have been involved in a project exploring the mental health needs of homeless people. During the course of an interview one respondent sobbed uncontrollably during the whole process, insisting they wanted to carry on and complete the interview, and revealed traumatic experiences of rape, abuse and crisis. The encounter has continued to replay in my mind and I have found myself seeing their face and hearing their voice over and over again in subsequent weeks. Moreover, I was immediately transported back to previous interviews with other participants, reliving their stories again and feeling the same emotional stress and anxiety. Each traumatic interview added to my growing weariness and over time I felt myself internalising my thoughts and emotions (Emerald & Carpenter, 2015).

During intense and long periods of fieldwork activity, which occur periodically, but are increasing, in contract research, feelings of physical sickness and panic were common occurrences for me.

The thought of getting on a train, travelling long distances and staying away from home, only to be faced with another round of fieldwork listening to stories of crisis and difficulty were emotionally overwhelming and at times I felt like running away and hiding in a quiet place. Crying when returning home or to a hotel room alone were also frequent patterns of behaviour. I found myself feeling more emotional and unable to deal with my intensifying anxiety. As my emotions intensified I found myself experiencing disturbed sleep, nightmares, stress and a lack of concentration, drawing on my deep emotional reserves to cope. In fact, looking back, I became an angry person and this played out negatively around my family and friends. However, none of these feelings were displayed during working hours as I was trying to appear in control but underneath I felt like I was falling apart and had reached my emotional limitations.

Contract research is characterised by multiple project working, typically five to seven projects simultaneously, in extreme situations, up to eleven projects, over long periods, often including overlapping fieldwork activities involving regular and unsociable travel times to maximise project time and cost. Long distances result in long working days and periods away from home separated from personal, familial and collegiate support networks, inevitably leading to feelings of loneliness and exhaustion that can have a detrimental effect on emotions and bring into question one's own vulnerability. Being without collegiate support, particularly when fieldwork was conducted in geographical locations where overnight stays were required, left me feeling isolated and forgotten (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). Moreover, undertaking interviews concerning individual stories of catastrophe, emergency and struggle, left me feeling emotionally distressed. Being alone, reflections on the days interviews became internalised and heightened and despite wanting to share these feelings, I was unable to do so. It felt uncomfortable to share over the phone with family who may not understand fully the gravity of my emotions (Moncur, 2013; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Dickson-Swift (2007) highlights the notion of desensitisation where researchers have reported they have become immune to the 'stories' during interview as they have heard similar in previous interviews (Campbell, 2002; Melrose, 2002). As Dickson-Swift note, 'the extraordinary becomes the ordinary' (Dickson-Swift, 2007:341). I have experienced such feelings particularly after longitudinal interviews exploring 'getting by' and managing on a low income. Individual stories revealed harrowing accounts of living with no heating, little food and clothing compounded by debt and benefit cuts. I began looking at the participant in terms of 'a good story' that would exemplify the findings, rather than seeing them in difficult circumstances. I was rapt by feelings of guilt at viewing such circumstances with disregard and being exploitative of their situation. Furthermore, I frequently experienced a burden of responsibility for the participant's welfare and well-being, wanting to intervene and offer support helping to change their circumstances for the better or ensuring they accessed interventions where they could.

When there had been instances of trauma consistently revealed during interviews, I felt emotionally vulnerable and on returning to the office, I found myself in difficulty, unable to acknowledge to colleagues that I had been adversely affected by the interviews for fear that I would not be given other work in this field or that I would be seen as delicate or fragile (Hubbard et al., 2010). Despite wanting, and in some cases needing, to unburden myself of my feelings, and expose my 'secret', I felt the need to mask my emotions, being often disguised by light hearted discussion with colleagues over making coffee (Hubbard et al., 2001), being careful not to appear too emotional. Would I be perceived as weak and delicate by my colleagues? The fear of exposure was devastating. The concern of being viewed as weak, needy or indeed incapable, has been voiced by Hubbard et al., 2010 and I would echo these sentiments. On writing this paper I realised that I engaged in the role of 'deep acting', hiding levels of upset or distress on many occasions, afraid for my professional integrity. Moreover, adding to my emotional burden, I was overwhelmed by my own feelings of self-doubt and failure. Should I be

able to cope? Feeling unable to express my feelings to colleagues for fear of inadequacy, and stigma I might be facing revealing my emotional state, I felt myself becoming anxious and stressed, incapable of switching off and continuously thinking through the stories I had heard. Additionally, I was trying to find additional strength from my already depleted emotional reserves to carry on.

### ***Responding to emotional risk***

As evidence is gathering, supporting the notion of emotional well-being, changes to existing inadequate support structures are needed. Many academic institutions struggle to recognise researcher emotional well-being as something they need to acknowledge and address. Moncur, 2013 suggests “that institutional practice does not usually cater for researcher well-being or provide formalised access to support and opportunities for reflection” (Moncur, 2013:1888). This has certainly been the case in the contract research setting from which this evidence is drawn. Despite growing awareness of these needs, and a willingness to provide support, implementation to aid researcher emotional well-being is fraught with challenges.

Until recently, the emotional needs of researchers have been hidden, mainly due to the reasons discussed above; many researchers being afraid to speak out. However, within the research centre concerned here, emotional stress and trauma has begun to be raised as an area of concern and researchers are pressing for recognition of emotional well-being. Senior researchers/managers have until recently had limited understanding of the emotional exposure researchers' face working on multiple projects, undertaking uninterrupted or cumulative fieldwork activities especially over long busy periods, as their role is predominantly management. More importantly, and of concern, is the fact that they lack training to deal with emotional issues raised by researchers (Warr, 2004; Johnson & Clarke, 2003). Within my own experience, there is no formalised mechanism to deal with emotional issues that arise during the course of fieldwork.

Researchers tend to rely on informal mechanisms with trusted colleagues as a way to debrief and share their anxieties. However, researchers are also acutely aware that their colleagues carry their own emotional burdens, therefore the issue of researcher fatigue or emotional trauma often goes unreported, unnoticed and therefore unaddressed.

Despite some formal processes being built into each project within the research centre, these are mainly concerned with fieldwork progress, driven by the financial constraints of the contract. Little consideration is given to formal opportunities for researchers to debrief or reflect on the pressures in the field, the emotional and physical tensions experienced or indeed existing work practices (Yeo & Graham, 2014). The compounding nature of fieldwork, resulting in researchers being required to work continuously on projects, can leave very little time, if any, for recovery or reflection. As Palriwala, 2005 suggests, lack of non project time leaves very few opportunities to share emotional distress or clear one's head (Palriwala, 2005). Indeed, lack of formal debrief opportunities can be detrimental not only for the researcher, but for the centre as a whole, as the potential for learning and adopting supportive structures are missed, leaving emotional well-being silenced and secret.

Although self-care has been advocated as an important strategy to minimise harm, (Campbell, 2002; Scheyvens et al., 2003; Dowling, 2005; Dickson Swift et al., 2007) there is a tendency within contract research, for researchers to neglect their emotional self; something I am indeed guilty of. Attention to self-care is often dwarfed in the overwhelming need to be productive, maximising the number of interviews in one day, well aware of the financial constraints involved within the project. My own experience of 'keeping going' required a great deal of inner strength and drawing on my emotional reserves to ensure that work was completed and delivered to deadlines. I frequently put undue pressure on myself to undertake this strategy particularly during intense periods of fieldwork; the driving factor being the need to 'get it over with' and



maximise time and travel to perhaps release time for reflection. However, this perceived time gain was then immediately filled with other project work or academic pressures. Taking a lead from Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, (2015), we as researchers need to take some responsibility for our own welfare and protect ourselves as much as possible from deleterious outcomes and emotional harm. This is challenging however, in a contract research environment. In order to demonstrate their capability researchers often place impossible demands on themselves, keep emotional 'secrets' and bear the brunt of emotional interviews alone; these actions driven by fear of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Recently, emerging recognition within the research centre, that researchers are suffering from burnout, has prompted more awareness of and the introduction of area saturation where researchers conduct fieldwork at least in pairs. This provides an 'on hand' support network enabling researchers to share any emotional concerns immediately with colleagues who understand their feelings (Wincup, 2001; Rager, 2005; Dickson Swift et al., 2007). This 'pairing' strategy was particularly useful when it was revealed to me during an interview that the participant was feeling suicidal, was contemplating it soon after our interview and sobbed uncontrollably. Having a colleague to provide a listening ear immediately after the incident enabled me to recognise that I was not alone and it was perfectly reasonable to be feeling stressed. More importantly it enabled me to gain strength for the remaining scheduled interviews during that day. However, area saturation, although admirable, is not always possible within a contract research environment where funding is constrained and staff availability is limited due to multiple project commitments. Researchers are more often than not out in the field alone.

Dickson Swift et al., 2007 have suggested that one mechanism for addressing the impact of emotionally laden research is to schedule time in-between interviews, rest breaks and space to debrief (Hubbard et al., 2001; Lalor et al., 2006; Dickson Swift et al., 2007). These are all

meaningful considerations but are a challenge to implement in contract research. Project funding, day rates and staff commitments do not always allow for adequate spacing of interviews sometimes necessitating researchers to secure a large number of interviews in one day. When rest breaks are possible they are often taken travelling between and preparing for further interviews.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has broadened the debate concerning researcher emotional well-being. While reinforcing existing literature, it highlights some of the tensions inherent in supporting researcher well-being in a contract research environment. There is no doubt that researchers are experiencing emotional ill health, which they clearly feel the need to mask and keep hidden for fear of perceived judgement from colleagues and management. One of the dilemmas facing the research centre is striking a balance between delivering projects within contractual obligations and supporting researchers. The pressures of financial considerations, time constraints and multiple project working remain at variance with implementing helpful solutions to give researchers breathing space. Emotional well-being of researchers is an important aspect of contract research and needs to be given full consideration when preparing bids and throughout the research process. Perhaps it is time to consider the need for 'slow scholarship' cultivating caring academic cultures and processes (Mountz et al, 2015:1238). However, the responsibility for the implementation of better working practices does not just lie within management, researchers need to be courageous and highlight the importance of an open dialogue to promote positive emotional well-being.

While discourse is beginning to grow concerning emotional well-being of researchers, it is mostly reporting researchers' experiences working on one particular project. While this paper is not denying the negative impacts reported by this literature, contract research is slightly different.

## The emotional turmoil of contract research

Firstly, researchers face cumulative, long term and intense project working like walking a continuous treadmill, which they are unable to get off. Once a project is completed, researcher involvement continues on their other projects. Moreover, completion of one project releases time to be allocated to new projects rather than protecting that time for recovery and reflection. Simultaneous project working means that projects inevitably overlap requiring researchers to continually undertake a number of different tasks on several projects. Secondly, multiple project working also increases the likelihood of researchers being continually exposed to emotionally laden research without periods for recuperation or time to deal with emotional revelations. Thirdly, working alone while undertaking fieldwork is common practice, often with long distance travel and periods away from home; isolation being a major issue. These working practices above are clearly a challenge to sustain; indeed they place unreasonable demands on researchers. Finally, on returning to the office, researchers lack a supportive environment to talk about their experiences in an honest, non-judgemental and supportive environment for fear of being exposed as someone unable to cope.

### ***Recommendations***

Formal mechanisms should be introduced to try and mitigate researcher trauma. At the time of writing discussions are now in progress due to the courage of researchers speaking out.

Encouragement should be given to researchers to talk about their emotions with an honest and open dialogue. Sharing with colleagues in particular should be encouraged within a supportive and respectful environment without fear of retort or judgement.

There needs to be greater understanding by senior staff and managers concerning researcher investment in projects. This would enable them to appreciate the stressors and dilemmas faced by researchers while undertaking intense periods of fieldwork.

## The emotional turmoil of contract research

Formalising consideration of emotional well-being as part of the health and safety protocols should be a regular part of project planning and ongoing review. Sharing researcher concerns and experiences provides ongoing learning relevant for future project implementation and management.

Where possible, projects should include costed time for researcher debrief and reflection. However, it is acknowledged that this may be a challenge in a financially driven research environment.

Researchers need to take charge of their own emotional health. Self-reflection and peer support through buddying or mentoring, may be a way to release some of the tensions and improve working practices. Strategies need to foreground collective conversations and find communal ways forward (Mountz et al. 2015).

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