Sorry to say goodbye: the dilemmas of letting go in longitudinal research.

Abstract

The emotional dilemmas and challenges facing researchers within the research process are beginning to be documented within the literature and academic interest is in ascendency. This paper adds to this growing discourse by taking a reflective journey through nineteen years of research practice. It presents an honest and revealing manuscript highlighting in particular, researcher emotional dilemmas experienced when disengaging from participants at the end of longitudinal research studies. It uses case studies to highlight some of the challenges maintaining participant - researcher boundaries and the emotional dilemmas this creates when trying to say goodbye. It argues that blurring the boundaries of participant - researcher relationships and establishing a trusting relationship, can present emotional difficulties for researchers during and long after the closure of a research study.

Key words: emotional well-being, researchers, disengagement, vulnerable, boundaries, friend, therapy.

Introduction

This paper takes a reflective journey through nineteen years of research practice to explore the emotional challenges faced by researchers when disengaging from research participants involved in longitudinal studies. The projects involved vulnerable individuals, 'getting by' on a low income, experiencing homelessness, 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2016) and individuals experiencing welfare changes. The catalyst that prompted the writing of this paper was the closure of a three year research study exploring the lived realities of individuals experiencing welfare conditionality. Relationships with these participants in particular were difficult to conclude, after getting to know them over a three year period. Participants were vulnerable and were experiencing very complex life circumstances.

Thinking about my own research career, I began to think about how we as researchers participate in the act of disengagement and how we manage our emotions during this process. In some cases, although the physical process of disengagement was completed, research participants were still very much alive in my mind. Reflecting on research practices and the dilemmas of closure with research participants, I realised that little emphasis is placed on this consideration in the literature. Amongst my research colleagues it is something that has remained opaque and something we don't reflect on as part of the research process.

Drawing on written research diaries, field notes, memory and participant transcripts, this paper aims to add to the dearth of literature specifically exploring the emotional feelings of researchers after disengaging from participants involved in longitudinal studies and expands the discussion of researcher emotional well-being. Specifically, it aims to highlight some of the emotional elements experienced by the researcher at the point of concluding and leaving the final interview which has received less scrutiny in the literature. It also adds to the growing debate concerning emotional dilemmas long after the research process is complete. It is hoped that by bringing out into the open some of the emotional challenges and experiences faced by researchers, it will help to raise the profile of the disengagement process within longitudinal research.

Existing debate

A review of the literature reveals particular insights from feminist and ethnographic approaches that suggest researchers invest heavily in research studies. Other commentary highlights the importance of reflective practices and the blurring of boundaries, particularly when conducting in depth longitudinal interviews exploring emotionally laden experiences. Feminist thinking suggests that the interview process should be empathetic and balance power relations between participant and researcher, perhaps using self-disclosure as good practice (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). Moreover, Holland suggests 'the interviewer must invest their personal identity in the exchange, even becoming friends with the interviewee' (Holland, 2007:202). Building comfort, trust, and rapport between the participant and the researcher (Fontana & Fey, 1994; Cutcliffe & Goward, 2000; Berk & Adams, 2001; Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Dickson- Swift et al., 2006) is important, especially when studying sensitive topics (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Renzetti & Lee, 1993) or working with vulnerable populations (Moore & Miller, 1999).

In depth qualitative interviews depend heavily on the participant - researcher relationship to garner data (Ritchie et al., 2014). This is particularly important in longitudinal research where a series of visits are planned and the fear of attrition is pressing. Both feminist and ethnographic approaches favour the building of relationships based on trust and rapport to aid the gathering of data. Both approaches embrace the development of close ties, a genuine familiarity and friendship as a way of building the participant - researcher relationship and challenges the older established binary relationships of the past whereby interactions were non reciprocal and power remained largely with the researcher. Balancing the power relationship and developing strong bonds between researcher and participant can weigh heavily on researchers emotions and raises the issues of blurred boundaries such as

friendship, counsellor or therapist that become hard to dislodge when concluding research studies.

The participant - researcher relationship also has an impact on participants. Participant emotional perspectives discussed in the literature suggest that emotional dependence can be created through intimate conversations between the researcher and the participant (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002; Renold et al., 2008). Vulnerable people may feel abandoned when ending the participant - researcher relationship (Cannon, 1992). In Morrison's study of adolescents, participants articulated feelings of anger and 'feeling used' and abandoned at the end of the study (Morrison et al, 2012).

Another concern regarding the emotional needs of participants is to ensure participants are prepared for transition and closure (Booth, 1998; Read & Papakosta-Harvey, 2004; Campesino, 2007). A vague or unclear ending can also leave participants surprised or shocked (Iversen, 2009; Russell, 2005). Even where there has been a clear exit strategy in place participants may resist and desire ongoing communication and contact with the researcher post-research (Gregory, 1994).

Evidence has suggested that researchers undertake reflective practices and share some of the emotional turmoil experienced by participants and are not immune to emotional difficulties. Being heavily invested in the research relationship, we as researchers can, and do react, to participant stories, experiences and lived realities. Although we may try, we cannot stop our personal feelings being affected by the stories we hear. As researchers, we along with participants, are also involved in the interview and are 'not immune to emotional experiences in the field' (Hubbard et al., 2001:120). Authors suggest researchers can feel relieved or concerned and distressed by ending relationships (Iverson, 2009). Other emotional feelings such as relief and happiness (Stebbins, 1991), guilt, (Russell, 2005), anxiety or pressure from participants (Snow, 1980), being emotionally overwhelmed (Dickson-Swift, 2006), sadness (Watson et al., 1991) and deflation, depression and lethargy (Boynton, 2002) have also been highlighted. Feelings of rejection, emptiness and anger have received less prominence in the literature and as will be revealed in the case studies that follow, these feelings can cause some long term emotional effects and are worthy of note.

Moreover, authors have also documented how they continue to think about participants even after the completion of research studies (Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Sherry, 2013; Sanders et al., 2014) and have stayed connected with participants because of social involvement, personal connections, future research opportunities or ethical obligations (Stebbins, 1991).

When interviewing, we ask participants to reveal their inner most feelings, secrets and circumstances. The quality of contact is fundamental to the building of empathy and rapport and must be done with care and be of high quality (Norfolk et al., 2007). Dickson-Swift et al (2006) and other authors (Guillemin and Heggen, 2009) examined the blurring of boundaries between researchers and participants. They suggest that the process of building rapport and the sharing of personal stories between the participant and the researcher can create emotional difficulties for the researcher.

Gilbert (2001) also comments on the blurring of boundaries.

The combination of highly charged topics, an in-depth and long term contact with the phenomenon and the evolving emotional environment of the researcher's own social world may result in a lack of clarity or "fuzziness" in boundaries. These boundaries must be negotiated and renegotiated, an ongoing part of the research process, as a balance is sought between the dangers and benefits of being too far in or too far out of the lives of the researched. (p. 12)

The blurring of boundaries has been discussed in health research and highlights issues of professional detachment, which assists in the setting and maintenance of safe boundaries between worker and client termed 'distancing' (Goffman, 1961). These boundaries are thought to prevent workers becoming emotionally overwhelmed. This concept has been explored in a research setting by Dickson-Swift et al., (2006), who concluded that researchers were concerned about the blurring of boundaries, distancing themselves and how this impacted on 'being professional'. This dilemma stems from the need to build rapport and establish a participant - researcher relationship that enables the researcher to hear the participant's story (gather data). The rapport building process however, may lead to the blurring of boundaries between participant and researcher.

Lee (1993) suggests in conducting sensitive research, researchers often become involved in *"a growing closeness which creates a blurred line between the role of friend and that of research participant"* (Lee, 1993:107). It is acknowledged in the literature that there is a fine balance between research interviews and therapy or counselling. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) highlight the dilemma of blurred boundaries and attest "Although researchers do not wittingly assume the role of therapist, they nonetheless fashion an interview process that can be strikingly therapeutic" (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992:123).

Some aspects of qualitative interviewing particularly exploring sensitive topics are very similar to aspects of therapeutic interviews (Gale, 1992; Dickson-Swift et al 2006). Fontana and Frey (1994: 367), reiterate the 'traditional' concern that establishing close rapport may

create problems for the research as the researcher may lose his or her distance and objectivity, over-identify with the individual or group under study, and 'forgo the academic role'. The researcher is not merely an instrument to facilitate data collection; researchers have emotions too (Dickson-Swift et al 2009; Author, 2018).

The literature regarding boundaries is particularly pertinent to the discussion that follows with regard to saying goodbye. Looking at the extent to which researchers invest themselves in relationships provides us with a framework with which to explore the disengagement process. It is precisely the emotional investment placed by the researcher within the interview process, together with the strength of emotional attachments over long periods that creates the emotional dilemmas and challenges for researchers. These close ties, sometimes blurring the boundaries of participant - researcher relationships, aid in the collection of data but can create emotional anguish for researchers when leaving the field and continue long after the conclusion of the fieldwork encounter.

Methods

The evidence from this paper is drawn from personal reflections, research diaries and transcripts while undertaking a number of longitudinal studies over nineteen years of research practice. The longitudinal studies involved using in depth qualitative interviews to explore very complex individual life journeys, often involving homelessness, mental health and getting by on low incomes, often in peoples homes. Pseudonyms have been used in the case studies to protect anonymity.

The case studies

Exploring the literature has highlighted the importance of the participant - researcher relationship, the blurring of boundaries and reflective practices and the emotional dilemmas faced by researchers in the field and beyond. The following section of the paper uses longitudinal case studies to illustrate how the disengagement process unfolds in practice and reveals the often negative emotional impact for researchers. Presenting the case studies in detail enables this paper to build on and add to a growing tradition of sharing the challenging moments in qualitative research.

Stretching the boundaries …remaining in contact?

In the first case study I explore the notion of the researcher-friend relationship (Dickson-Swift, 2006; Watson et al., 19991) and how this exacerbates the emotional feelings of the researcher at disengagement stage of the research. Joey was a participant in a three year study exploring getting by and managing on a low income. On my first visit he lived alone and was unemployed. His health was becoming problematic and his financial situation was worrying. I felt an immediate affinity with Joey and identified with his situation from personal experience.

We had struck up an instant rapport. Joey was comfortable at our first meeting offering me a drink immediately when I arrived. He talked freely and openly and I did not have to invest heavily at establishing a relationship or encouraging him to share his experiences. Joey was keen to take part in the research and as the interview progressed he began to share some of his inner most feelings and anxiety. On leaving the first interview with Joey I was stuck by the extent to which I felt sorry for his situation knowing that I was unable to offer any assistance. The interview had raised a number of potential worries that Joey had discussed at length and I had just listened and left the interview. This raised a number of questions about my positionality. Had I used my outwardly friendly nature to build rapport to persuade Joey to provide 'data' (Dunscombe & Jessop, 2002) or had I just been friendly? My research diary revealed that I felt guilty and ashamed that I had taken so much from his interview but left him with open emotional wounds. I felt very much the 'outsider' and felt I had managed to maintain a degree of professional integrity, but on the inside I was feeling anxious and worried for him. On subsequent visits (visits two and three), we seemed to slip into the same easy and relaxed relationship; Joey was welcoming and expressed his pleasure at meeting up again. We shared coffee and biscuits and chatted about life in general, as friends might do on catching up with each other, before entering into the formal interview at which Joey began to share much more of his past with me totally unprompted. Knowing about his past enabled me to understand a lot more about him as a person and I began to identify with some of his past experiences and understand how they were impacting on his current situation.

By the third visit I was conscious that I had become more than a researcher; as Watson et al., 1991 suggest I was a researcher - friend. I felt a growing closeness between us; I was definitely viewing Joey as a friend (although I did not articulate this to him) and during the interview he verbally expressed similar feelings. Over the course of the three visits the relationship had definitely blurred, leaving me with a number of unanswered questions. Was I just a researcher, was I a friend, should I be having these thoughts and feelings?

By my fourth and last visit Joey's circumstances had changed dramatically; he had moved in with his partner who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and he had become her main carer, as well as caring for her child. I was already aware of his partner's illness as we had discussed it on the phone when I contacted Joey to participate in the last interview. On arriving at the family home for the last interview, we spent some time discussing his partner's illness, which I wanted to do as a friend. It was clear from my research diary that

on sitting down together I sensed Joey just wanted to talk to someone and I felt I had to give him the space and time to do this. He seemed to have been waiting for me to visit and began straight away to tell me all about his feelings and how he might cope if anything happened to his partner.

 I eventually asked Joey if he was still willing to participate in the interview and he assured me he wanted to. We continued with the research questions and it was clear that the financial impact on Joey and his partner were indeed more acute than previous visits and this was an additional worry for him. He expressed deep emotion during the interview and we stopped several times for cups of tea, which resulted in more informal conversation about various interests, such as Joey's love of fishing and the peace he felt in walking along the river with his dog. Despite being asked on several occasions if he wanted to end the interview he assured me he wanted to continue.

The final interview was also proving very troubling for me and during our frequent tea breaks I began to wonder how I would end the interview and say goodbye for the last time. On concluding the visit, we were both distressed; it had been a difficult final interview: diary extracts reveal that *"Joey was visibly upset and had asked for a number of breaks in the interview, where he composed himself".* I too had welcomed the breaks but struggled to frame an exit strategy that would not be too distressing for both of us. The final transcript revealed that at the end of the interview we chatted about the research and how Joey had enjoyed talking and admitted *"once you get me started that's me ".* But on actually leaving there was a short pause after we said goodbye at which we were both unsure of what to do. We eventually settled on a hug and said goodbye. Joey then said he would be sorry not to see me again as he had enjoyed the company and talking to someone who was willing to listen to his "troubles". On leaving Joey's home I managed to remain composed but on turning the corner of the street, being out of sight, I found myself breaking down and crying, letting out my pent up emotions (Campbell, 2002). The amount of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) I had used during the interview was immeasurable and I was completely exhausted. I felt a sense of loss and an overwhelming feeling of guilt.

Having thought I had dealt with the immediate effects of concluding this interview and 'put my feelings to one side' I began to worry about Joey's situation. It was at this point that my dilemma began. As a human being I felt I should keep in touch and ask about the health of his partner, and indeed himself. Had I become a true insider, part of the family? I knew so much about the family and their concerns.

A few days later I was unable to stop thinking about Joey's partner and the outcome of her hospital visit so I texted Joey to check on his partner's progress. I had become attached to Joey and empathised with his circumstances. During the course of the interviews we had shared long conversations about his life both past and present. I afforded him the same respect as I would a friend. We remained in contact by text for a couple of weeks but slowly messages became infrequent and stopped altogether. I felt that perhaps this was a natural ending, not to a friendship, but an acquaintance who was deeply cared about. Nonetheless, years after this event, I still look back on this encounter with fondness, if not tinged with sorrow. Thinking about it still evokes deep emotion and I still wonder about Joey's current circumstances.

On the brink...researcher or therapist?

In this example I draw on the theme of 'research or therapy' (Mauthner et al, 2002; Dickson-Swift, 2006). I met with Monty three times over a three year period. Monty who had been a prolific offender had just completed a drug recovery programme when I first met with him. He had been in contact with various support organisations and had tried over several years to maintain a tenancy, stay clean and find employment. Diary extracts revealed at the beginning of the interview *"Monty was tense and nervous pacing the floor, after a few minutes of chatting he visibly relaxed and came and sat next to me".* As the interview progressed we settled into a comfortable flow of conversation and established a good rapport. Monty was personable and really wanted to tell his story. He revealed a number of distressing circumstances during the first interview, but also revealed that he was 'a bit of a lad' (as he put it) and was still breaking the law from time to time. At the end of the first interview we discussed future aspirations and for Monty this focussed on desisting from crime and finding employment. I left the interview feeling positive for him and hoping he would manage to fulfil his aspirations.

Prior to re-engagement with him at round two of the research, I began to worry about making contact and wondering if he was in a stable situation; in prison or in employment. On making contact I was apprehensive but relieved when Monty picked up the phone and agreed to meet with me. He remembered me straight away and said he looked forward to our meeting. Monty had had a year of mixed fortunes but had managed to remain fairly stable and had

acquired a dog for company. During this interview Monty revealed a number of emotional issues and talked at length about his regrets, his family, his partners and how he was unable to maintain a relationship with anyone. I felt unable to curtail his enthusiasm for 'off-loading' his feelings and struggled to stick to the research in question. As the interview progressed Monty revealed more and more about his most intimate feelings and thoughts concerning his past and current circumstances. Although I felt comfortable listening I thought that perhaps we had both crossed the line into what seemed like counselling or therapy. Had I enabled him somehow to see me as a counsellor or therapist? Perhaps my friendly nature had been misinterpreted and had encouraged Monty to reveal his concerns? Indeed, at the end of the interview Monty expressed how therapeutic he had found the opportunity to talk to me (a "neutral" as he called it), and thanked me for the opportunity the interview gave him to tell his story, particularly to someone who was willing to listen and be genuinely interested in what he had to say.

> *Do you know what, actually, you've been the best; it's someone to talk to that doesn't know you as well. It's a good thing because sometimes people just want to get you out of the way. With someone that doesn't know you or doesn't know where you're coming from or your background, really, I feel quite nice having this chat to be quite truthful. It's de-stressing me.*

> Taken from the interview in year 2

As can be seen from the quote above, Monty was at complete ease with our discussion, however, it left me feeling drained and questioning myself and my empathic skills as a researcher. Had I displayed too much understanding? Had I allowed the discussion to continue without interjecting to ensure Monty would agree to speak to me in 12 months? (Stebbins, 1991).

As our last interview drew near, I began to wonder how I would approach Monty and keep the interview from inadvertently drifting into a therapy session. Moreover, if it did, how would I conclude the interview and say goodbye? At our last interview we inevitably talked at length (outside the research parameters) about his future aspirations, his love of animals and his dog and about his desire to stay clean and capitalise on his new skills and confidence. Once again the interview felt to me much like a counselling session where Monty felt able to unburden himself of pent up emotions and feelings. He once again reiterated that he welcomed the opportunity to talk to me.

I must say, though, this has been really stress relieving [laughter]. Thank you, Elaine[1]. Oh, that's been great.

Taken from the interview in year 3

Ending the interview was uncomfortable. After thanking him for his time I didn't know what else to say and there was a short period where we just sat together while I was packing away my things. Monty seemed reluctant to leave. Notes in my research diary captured this hiatus:

I didn't know what to do. I knew we should leave the room but it felt as if we were leaving something unfinished. Monty was still chatting and then asked if I would be going straight home from the interview. I confirmed I was and he looked disappointed. We eventually walked to the tube together chatting about life in general before we parted to go our separate ways.

Having said our final goodbyes, I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt that Monty had trusted me enough to reveal many personal things and I would not be able to support him directly. The only hope I could offer him was that his shared experiences might help to shape future support services. This did not ease the conflict I felt as a researcher; we had both invested heavily in the research process and I had just taken what was needed and left Monty with little in return. These dilemmas did not sit comfortably with my conscience. I needed time to reflect on some of these issues as well as time to disengage from Monty and his life. I had indeed become an 'insider'. Not in the sense of absorbed into his life, but I had been given a very privileged window into his internal narrative. Was this the same as a therapist? I didn't know.

Do you hide or say hello?

Martha presented a different type of disengagement dilemma. This quandary included physical disengagement as well as emotional disengagement. Whereas the previous two case studies lived in different cities, Martha lived in my workplace city. She was part of a three year study exploring the impact of welfare conditionality. Martha was mostly homeless during the three years of the study, and struggled with alcohol and drug misuse. Her past had been chaotic and a number of her children had been fostered or adopted. She had been supported through a homeless project and had made some progress although relapses were

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[1] Since the Researcher in the quote is the Author of this paper names have not been changed.

common. She had sustained a tenancy for some months and had had another child. She was determined to stay *'on the straight and narrow '* as she put it for the sake of her child.

Conducting all three interviews with Martha was distressing. Sometimes she cried, sometimes she projected an air of apathy, sometimes she just didn't care about her situation, sometimes she was under the influence of alcohol. Despite her mood, Martha always attended the interviews and was always forthcoming talking about herself and her situation. Reflecting back at diary notes, I think Martha just wanted to talk to someone about her experiences both good and bad.

My notes from interview one described the interviews:

She talked a lot and very quickly. She seemed to want to tell me so many things but at speed. I felt she might be trying to conclude the interview as fast as possible but yet was willing to answer my questions at length. She was also forthcoming about very private things in her life such as her problems, her children and her hopes and fears for the future, (some of which were outside of the research remit). They all came out in a long quickly delivered monologue interspersed with tears and anger. I felt exhausted trying to keep up with her.

 At the second interview, she just got up and left after a phone call with no explanation. I was left wondering what might have happened. This experience made me very cautious when I had to contact her for our third and last interview. I was apprehensive at making contact given her chaotic lifestyle and had to ring several times before I made contact. I was worried about perhaps being viewed as pestering her but on making contact Martha was happy to speak to me again. We had an amicable final interview despite the fact that Martha had returned to alcohol as a coping mechanism and had lost her young baby to foster care, she was willing to talk to me at length about her current situation. Her circumstances were tragic and I found myself emotionally upset during the interview listening to her circumstances, although I did not visibly show this. I noted in my research diary that during the interview I had been imagining what I would have done in Martha's circumstances and how I might have felt. On ending the interview, it was apparent that, Martha just wanted to leave and she did so quickly. She felt no emotional attachment towards me. I was taken aback. I clearly had feelings of empathy and sympathy towards Martha and had invested a great deal of time and effort building and maintaining our relationship, particularly given her challenging circumstances. The feeling however, was not reciprocated. I was left feeling empty and rejected and angry (Cannon, 1992). Martha's story clearly exemplifies the fact that researchers do invest themselves in the research and begin to think of research participants as 'my participants' or 'favourites'. I was guilty of this and was shocked that Martha did not

show the same degree of attachment as I had. I had invested a lot of emotional resources in the relationship with Martha and was hurt at her lack of reciprocity.

I began to question these thoughts a few weeks later when I saw Martha in the city. I was overcome by emotions: should I hide, should I speak to her, should I ask about her circumstances? This was taken out of my hands when she approached me and began to chat. She brought me up to date on all her news, which was depressing. I chatted to her for a short while but tried to keep a degree of emotional distance between us. After our encounter I found myself very sad and emotionally drained. Had I misread the situation at our last interview? I will never know. The dilemma for me still remains. I have seen Martha a few times since that encounter and have tried to avoid her as much as possible for my own emotional well-being. I still think about her and her life struggles and when I see her, I wonder about her current circumstances.

Discussion

It seems that investing in a trusting and comfortable relationship with participants, or blurring the boundaries (Dickson- Swift et al., 2006), we create emotional dilemmas for ourselves as researchers when trying to end or 'let go' of a research relationship.

Saying goodbye

When we think of disengagement we have a picture of saying goodbye at the door. However, the process is much more elongated, particularly when undertaking longitudinal research. If we think of disengagement as a process it has several elements; re-contact, conducting the final interview, saying goodbye and emotionally disengaging sometime afterwards or not at all! All these elements can have emotional implications for the researcher.

Drawing on my own experiences, concerns began to manifest themselves when I realised that the final interviews were imminent. For those in vulnerable circumstances, it was always with anxiety and stress that I approached the final contact with the participant. I was worried about their circumstances; would their circumstances have deteriorated, would they be in prison and in extreme cases, would the participant still be alive. I was always filled with relief when I had spoken to them by phone and then met them for the last time.

During the final interview however, there was always a lingering feeling that I would never see this person again and I was acutely aware that I would have to open a dialogue of closure. In some interviews I found myself letting the participant talk for longer than planned to avoid ending the interview. This was particularly acute in Joey and Monty's case where I felt they just needed space to continue talking about their problems.

I was acutely aware I had invested greatly in the participant - researcher relationship, and as can be demonstrated from the case studies, blurred boundaries myself by seeing my relationship with Joey in particular as friendship; I had become researcher-friend (Watson et al, 1991). Moreover, my relationship with the participants in the case studies was bordering on therapeutic, enabling them to talk to someone who willing to listen and where they felt comfortable in revealing their personal experiences. As highlighted by Dunscombe & Jessop, *"Even skilled researchers may find it difficult to draw neat boundaries around 'rapport', 'friendship', and 'intimacy' in order to avoid the depths of 'counselling' and 'therapy'"* (Dunscombe & Jessop, 2002:112). I agree with these sentiments and found myself compromised and unsure of my own positionality. Despite having developed a strong relationship with many of the participants throughout the study, at the final interview I felt I had to switch roles and reinstate the boundaries of professionalism and emotional distance on closing the interview. This, in part, was to protect myself from letting my emotional feelings dominate the closure by showing distress or concern. I was conscious this might cause discomfort for the participant and trigger their emotional feelings. It was not unusual for participants to express the desire for the meetings to continue post - research (Gregory, 1994). Several times during the interview, many participants referred to the fact that they would not see me again and would miss my visits and *'chats'* that they found cathartic. Many participants had revealed harrowing experiences, not ever disclosed before." *I have never told that to anyone before"* were statements I have heard many times. Hearing participants express how they felt about our *'chats'* coupled with knowing so much about their lives made saying goodbye difficult. I felt a sense of obligation to maintain our relationship but knowing I was unable to do so due to the ethics and legal parameters of the research.

Drawing on diary excerpts and memory, it is clear that I found it very stressful to close many of the final interviews as one diary extract highlights

It was difficult to say goodbye. On leaving I felt overwhelmed and stressed and burnt out. I was relieved to be out of the home and away from Sandra and her family because I felt guilty. I had enjoyed their hospitality and invaded their life to collect data which they had willingly shared with me. All the way through the last interview I didn't know how to end it and worried about both our reactions.

Clearly in many of my interviews there were moments of discomfort, silence, and a hiatus where neither of us knew what to do. On leaving many interviews I felt an acute sense of sadness and relief as well as conflicting emotions of anger, hopelessness, and exhaustion. In the case studies for example, I felt an immediate need to switch from being an 'insider' to an 'outsider', more for my own emotional protection than anything else. Being an outsider

helped me to maintain a degree of professionalism during the actual act of closure despite experiencing mixed emotions. These feelings highlight a degree of emotional and ethical conflict. I had drifted into becoming a friend or therapist in order to garner information (Cotterill, 1992). There had been a degree of genuine familiarity built during the series of interviews which I didn't feel I could just leave behind.

Letting go?

Letting go posed another type of emotional dilemma. Reflecting on my experiences, it was clear that I had an emotional attachment to the research participants. I had invested part of myself in them and dedicated an inordinate amount of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) during the course of contact with participants. I had a clear affinity with some participants more than others and although I tried to remain neutral, some of the participants had clearly become my 'favourites' (Sherry, 2013); emotional attachments were inevitable. When participants were elevated to 'favourite' status it presented me with an overwhelming sense of loss. Having built strong bonds with participants I found I had not even considered the possibility that I would be affected by the breaking of established bonds. Moreover, I did not have exit strategies in place to address my feelings and deal with them (Dickson- Swift, 2007). I felt alone trying to manage my 'withdrawal symptoms' and stress. I felt under pressure to 'pull myself together' but this was overlaid with feelings of sorrow that I could not dislodge.

Building rapport and connections, being friendly and empathetic enables a good relationship with participants to be developed but conversely presents emotional challenges when ending the study. I felt a sense of mixed emotions and I realised that I had become emotionally invested in the fieldwork (Atkins et al., 2003). Many participants particularly those in vulnerable circumstances, were grateful that someone was interested in their stories and wanted to spend time talking about them. This was extremely important to them and so it became important to me; participants' emotional investment was matched by own feelings. Thomson and Holland (2010) suggest that this type of research entails genuine familiarity with research participants and a high level of reflexivity on the part of both researchers and researched.

Emotional challenges do not discriminate and on reflection, I realised that there were a number of common threads associated with my emotional 'letting go'; feelings of loss, guilt (Russell, 2005), anger (Cannon, 1992), sadness (Watson et al., 1991), confusion, embarrassment and hopelessness. In Martha's case in particular I felt a sense of rejection and began to question my own research practices and what I might have done differently.

Mixed feelings do not just occur at the point of saying goodbye but continue into the days and weeks afterwards. These feelings inevitably resurfaced during the analysis stage of the research where I found myself reliving some of the emotions and having to find solace deep within myself to manage them.

Conclusion

This paper has afforded me the opportunity to be honest, sincere, direct and truthful about my emotional experiences. I have consciously revealed the hidden emotional 'secrets' (Wolf, 1996) I faced over the course of a number of longitudinal research studies when trying to end a research relationship; the effects of which can be fleeting, long lasting or can never leave you. I have revealed how investing in the interview relationship can have an unfavourable bearing on researcher emotions when ending a research study. In building rapport, strong emotional bonds are created particularly with 'favourites' and where the participant - researcher relationship is deep and long standing. These ties are not easily severed and disengagement both in the field and post research can leave the researcher with mixed emotions and conflicted roles; insider or outsider, professional, friend, therapist or researcher?

These roles can be in a state of flux throughout the research process creating emotional dilemmas, the need to constantly revisit boundaries and manage strong deep seated feelings. In undertaking in depth longitudinal qualitative research we as researchers constantly call into question our conflicted roles, we find it hard to separate our role as researcher and human being; emotions are inevitable.

Questioning and revisiting our roles are important parts of the research process and are rarely given significance by researchers or in the literature. We should devote more attention to embedding disengagement practices into research studies at the onset of the research to enable researchers to be better prepared for potential emotional dilemmas. This is particularly important in longitudinal research exploring difficult subject matters with vulnerable participants.

 I acknowledge the limitations of this data being based solely on my own experiences, but hope that these revelations and disclosures will provoke wider exploration and discussion on the topic. Guillemin and Gillam, (2006) suggest that being transparent about research dilemmas helps to create an invaluable pool of awareness and experience for researchers and I would echo these sentiments and encourage others to share their experiences.

In this paper I have opened the discussion on the less talked about but no less vital experiences of disengaging from longitudinal participants. It is hoped that sharing the 'secrets' of my experiences of fieldwork, others may learn and feel more prepared for future studies. Further debate is needed exploring the management of exit strategies and support for researchers experiencing emotional challenges. On reflection, in the words of Stebbins (1991) Do we ever leave the field?

Acknowledgements

Funding

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Author, (2018) Details withheld for peer review

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