

What a performance! Exploring the reflexive roles of the researcher and the researched within health and illness narratives

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Kayleigh Garthwaite

Department of Geography, Wolfson Research Institute

Durham University

Abstract

This paper draws on data gathered for a qualitative study exploring recurrent poverty in Teesside, North East England, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Using an holistic approach to the investigation of recurrent poverty, this study situates the labour market experiences of persons experiencing recurrent poverty within a broader understanding of their lives, thus allowing a wider set of factors to be considered, for example health, education and skills. Detailed, biographical interviews with 60 men and women (aged 30-55 years) who had experienced recurrent poverty provided the basis for this discussion. The association between social class, poverty and ill health is widely recognised; therefore, although health was not the primary focus of the study, health narratives emerged as an integral element of people's employment trajectories and experiences. This paper reflects upon how the researcher-researched relationship can take on various guises and reflexively asks how this impacts upon the research process, from generating a sample to data collection. Employing the theoretical framing of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective first explored in his seminal work 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959) it is argued that in carrying out qualitative health research, the researcher and research participants each enact roles in a 'performance' that is inherent throughout the research process from sampling to data collection and beyond. This paper concludes that both the researcher and the researched each play an integral role in shaping and constructing the experiences of those involved in health and illness research.

Introduction

The role of the researcher and the issue of researcher reflexivity have been much debated in the realm of qualitative health research. As a result, it is widely recognised that complex relationships exist between the researcher and the researched, and the challenges associated with supporting and

sustaining these relationships are well articulated. Commentators have focused on the dynamics of power (Hammersley, 1995; Crozier, 2003), gaining access (Sixsmith et al., 2003; Emmel et al., 2007), building rapport and trust (Miller and Bell, 2002), ethics (Goodwin et al., 2003; Mason, 2004; Hewitt, 2007) and identity (Finch, 1984; Letherby, 2000). Furthermore, it is often expressed that the researcher must comply with a specific set of ethical tenets and guidelines to ensure the safety of not only the research participants, but of themselves. However, this article seeks to illustrate the reflexive performances that both the researcher and the researched enact in negotiating complex biographical narratives of health and illness, from the very beginning of the research process until disengaging from the field.

Drawing on qualitative data collected for a project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation exploring recurrent poverty in Teesside, which hosts some of the most deprived wards in Britain, this article expounds the researcher-researched relationship and seeks to highlight the intricate performances that take place throughout the research process. Although the project is primarily focused upon people's experiences of 'poor work' and the 'low pay, no pay cycle', the project aims to examine how multiple hardships and cumulative disadvantage, such as poor skills and ill health, impact upon people's experiences in the labour market. The term 'recurrent poverty', as outlined by Smith and Middleton (2007), recognises the need for a consideration of poverty as a dynamic process rather than a static point in time measurement. The concept of recurrent poverty is based upon the notion that some people move marginally out of official definitions of poverty but never move far enough or long enough away from the poverty line to 'escape' and thus make a real difference to their lives. As individuals often face multiple barriers to employment and may have a range of complex, overlapping needs, strategies to tackle recurrent poverty are likely to require a consideration of a broad, multifaceted approach.

The relationship between fragmented employment patterns and economic inactivity are often associated with poor health outcomes, social isolation and relative poverty (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001; 2005; Webster et al., 2004; Bartley, 1994). Commentators suggest that employment is important for a wealth of reasons; firstly, it can help shape and construct an individual's identity, secondly, it can provide a purpose and structure to an individual's life, and thirdly, it can promote a sense of well being (Ritchie, Casebourne and Rick, 2005). Hence, the relationship between unemployment and ill health is a multifaceted one that is a central concern when exploring recurrent poverty.

This article argues that accessing and negotiating narratives pertaining

to how recurrent poverty impacts upon health and illness is underpinned by a dual 'performance' enacted by both the researcher and the researched, resulting in a complex set of interactions that are inherent throughout the research process. This paper seeks to expound this debate by delving into the various guises and roles employed by both the researcher and the researched, that are experienced from sampling generation to data collection, and beyond.

Methodology

Accessing respondents in areas characterised by multiple deprivation can raise difficulties that must be negotiated in order to access people who are situated in perceived hard-to-reach, marginalised groups (Merton, 1998). In-depth biographical interviews with 60 predominantly white British working class individuals who have experienced, or are experiencing, recurrent poverty form the basis of the sample. The ethnicity and socio-economic status of the participants is atypical of the population of the locales studied. Of the 60 participants in the study, the first half (30) are new participants drawn from the research sites who have experienced or are experiencing recurrent poverty and the latter half (30) are gathered from previous qualitative longitudinal studies in Teesside (Johnston et al., 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, 2005; Webster et al., 2004).

As expected, generating the new sample (the first half) proved to be challenging. A purposive, theoretical sampling frame was employed encompassing a range of sampling techniques, including accessing participants through stakeholders, 'hanging around' in community settings, advertising and snowballing. As Sixsmith et al. (2003) remark, the primary aim of theoretical sampling is to 'recruit participants into the research as long as each person's thoughts and experiences add to theoretical or conceptual insight' (p. 582), which continues until a saturation point is reached. This method ensures that a varied sample is gained rather than a representative sample, as it must be recognised that through qualitative inquiry the importance of individual's experiences, rather than generalisable claims, is paramount. Furthermore, participants were aware that all information gathered would be treated with strict confidence ensuring anonymity (with both participants' details and place names being anonymised) and they gave their informed consent to this.

With regards to the latter half of the sample, this form of longitudinal exploration of poverty and life experiences is rare and provides a valuable insight into how lived experiences and multiple hardships are acted out over time. Generation of this part of the sample included tracking down these

previous interviewees through a combination of following-up known contact details and snowball sampling (a method of sampling which can be one of the few ways of accessing a vulnerable or inaccessible sample) as Lee (1993) suggests. Prior to the beginning of the fieldwork, it was expected that although accessing this second group in the sample would be challenging and time-consuming, it was conceivable that the nature of the local networks present in the neighbourhoods in which the participants were situated could facilitate this process. For example, networks and ties within the neighbourhoods did lead to accessing participants, even if they had since left the area. Gaining access as an 'outsider' to a perceived hard-to-reach population and the rituals a researcher encounters is a central concern of this paper; hence, sampling will be discussed in greater depth in the following section.

Let the performance begin: constructing the identity of the researcher and the researched

To enter a world in which one is not naturally a part, a researcher needs to present an identity that permits relationships to develop.

(Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p. 202).

This citation illustrates the starting point from which I approached the fieldwork; Finlay (2002) agrees with this and further remarks that 'the process of reflection and reflexive analysis should start from the moment the research is conceived' (p. 536). A range of concerns were identified that needed to be considered when embarking upon any research endeavour, ranging from initial contact and negotiating the field to the setting of the interview and questioning one's identity. All of these concerns shape the performance of the researcher and the researched throughout the research process.

The beginning of the researcher-researched relationship commences when the researcher enters the sampling stage. At this juncture, the researcher wields the power to decide who they recruit as participants, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) observe. The researcher makes the decision who to 'cast' as respondents for the research, thus they are effectively in control of who they decide to include in the research experience. In attempts to recruit a suitable sample, reluctantly and with little optimism, posters advertising our research and encouraging participants were placed in the shops and public places in and around the research areas. Sixsmith et al. (2003) remark that in their research in a socially deprived area their advertising generated no response, and they attribute this low response to the

fact that the area was socially deprived. Conversely for us, advertising proved to be a hugely successful way of generating a sample, with emails, phone calls and text messages following the posters and newsletter adverts; of the 30 new participants, eight were recruited via advertising techniques. This process signifies a balancing act between the researcher and the researched. Although the researcher decides who to recruit, above all the researcher is dependent upon people coming forward and providing their informed consent to participate, an issue which will be discussed in greater detail when considering how a researcher can negotiate the field.

As Lee (1993) has suggested, continually negotiating access with the community depends on the quality of interpersonal relationships between researchers and participants. In our research, being there and being seen as a familiar face helped me gain access to the community and its inhabitants. Further to this, snowball sampling (whereby participants recommended their friends or family) was also a useful technique; for instance, I was told by Robbie² that he would encourage his friends to partake in the research as after the interview he felt that he could tell them I was “alright”. This example illustrates the ways in which the researcher-researched relationship is a constantly evolving state, with power sometimes shifting away from the researcher, as the ways in which respondents evaluated me and my performance demonstrates. In his seminal work on performance and presentation of the self, Goffman (1959) remarks that

‘the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself [sic], and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him’

(1959, p. 2, my emphasis).

Hence, on this occasion, my performance was seen as ‘impressing’ Robbie and as a consequence Robbie was now willing to recommend his friends to take part in the research.

In some cases, interviewees seemed keen to tell me that they were private people, despite some of them, like Andrew, contacting me to find out about the project and volunteering to take part. Commonly people told me “I’m not a big talker” (Andrew) or in Lennie’s case he continually stated “I’m a private person”. Yet despite these admissions, I was struck by the ways in which all interviewees spoke freely about the way complex experiences of health and illness can manipulate their lives, despite the fact I was a relative stranger entering their homes for only a short period of time. Commentators (Yee and Andrews 2006; Goode 2000) observe how they, too, were surprised

²All names of participants are anonymised throughout.

by the way participants shared their stories with strangers. It was also recognised that there could be positive outcomes for participants as a result of taking part in the research. This was something our interviewees seemed to value, often telling me how much they had enjoyed sharing their stories and airing their grievances with respondents saying, for example "It was good to have you here". Similarly, in Goode's work (2000) on female drug users, the majority of respondents appeared to find being interviewed a pleasing rather than daunting experience, a finding echoed by Finch (1984) in her research.

As the information sought in our study was often of a sensitive and personal nature, it was imperative that respondents felt they were able to talk openly and honestly. I did not want people to perceive me as the supposed 'other', someone from the university entering their homes and asking personal questions; after all, Crozier (2003, p. 89) notes how 'wholly intrusive' researching sensitive topics can be. Nevertheless, I was also aware that there is a fine balance between reducing the extent of my 'otherness' and ensuring that I maintained both ethical and professional guidelines. Therefore, although I felt it was important to ensure respondents were aware of my professional status, I was also aware that this may result in me appearing an 'outsider'. For Goffman (1959) clothing and insignia of professional status are two elements deemed to determine 'personal front' (p. 35) in the performance of an individual. As a result, I tended to dress casually so as to appear less 'official' when visiting people in their homes in an attempt to blend in.

However, my desire to appear approachable and to integrate may have, at times, caused confusion, as my identity was sometimes mistaken with participants thinking I was a student rather than a research assistant. On a number of occasions it became clear that some people had mistaken my identity, despite me telling them from the outset that I was in fact a researcher employed to work on the project. Yee and Andrews (2006) note that in their research on children and education, their identities were sometimes confused with being teachers rather than researchers and to combat this, one researcher chose to wear her university identity card upon arrival at interviews. This is a strategy that I adopted after my identity was mistaken. I also felt that it was important to disassociate myself from places that we had met participants, such as Jobcentre Plus, so that the research participants did not feel that they were being 'investigated' in any way and did not feel obliged to give consent or provide different responses because of this perception.

Hence, it was stressed at length that all of the information yielded was to be rendered anonymous and confidential, and not associated with any

particular agency from which participants were recruited. An example of this can be found in an exchange regarding 'fiddly work' between Alfie and myself. 'Fiddly work' is defined by MacDonald (1994) as 'engagement in working 'undeclared' whilst in receipt of unemployment benefits' (p. 508). Initially, despite my reassurances Alfie seemed reticent to talk about his engagement in fiddly work. After further discussion and reassurance from me, he decided that he did indeed trust me enough to disclose his experiences. This exchange highlights the need to affirm that a research relationship is based on mutual trust; the researcher must trust that the participant will respond truthfully and the participant has to have confidence in the researcher and what they share with them.

What a performance! Negotiating the field

Yee and Andrews suggest (2006) that when the location for the research encounter is changed from an institutional setting (e.g. university) to a more private and personal setting (e.g. a respondent's home) the researcher can be faced with unexpected ethical, emotional and methodological issues for which there can be little preparation and which cannot be covered by a professional code of conduct. One example of this can be found in Lennie's narrative of health and illness. Lennie had suffered from numerous difficult issues that had impacted upon his mental health, including the death of two grandchildren at an early age, his daughter's heroin addiction and the death of close friends. As I was interviewing Lennie in his home, we were interrupted by an event that I was unprepared for:

(Sound of helicopter can be heard outside)

LM: If I can just point out that this might go on for a while this noise because a body has been found just in the beck [river] here, it's only just been discovered so it might go on for a while... we've had a few bodies round here...err...nasty endings we'll call it like that

KG: Has it ever happened to anyone you know or...?

LM: Oh yeah...yeah yeah there's been a few but...I think we'd better move on if that's ok...it's not been directly to me or me family but you try and forget certain things like that so...

Interestingly, Lennie appeared to be almost resignedly accepting of the situation, as it was clearly something that had happened before in the area. Despite this event, later in the interview he described the area as "the best

estate" to live on. Had I interviewed Lennie at the university, I would not have gained this further insight into his life and how these "nasty endings" have impacted upon his health. This perceived resilience was also found in other narratives. For example, when Diane spoke of the multiple hardships she faces:

KG: So on the subject of health, is the rest of your family...do they have any illnesses or...?

DH: My husband has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of his injury during the Falklands and my son has cerebral palsy, ADHD, learning difficulties and he's partially sighted and that's due to him being born 15 weeks early. But the rest of you are as fit as fleas aren't you?

This extract depicts Diane's presentation of herself as being resilient and finding the positive in her situation. Later in the interview, when asked if she had anything to add Diane replied "I'm just acutely aware of how lucky I am". This exchange reinforces Diane's resistance to presenting herself to me the researcher as powerless and instead seeks to inform me that in fact she feels "lucky" and that there are people worse off than her and her family. This was a common response found in many of the interviews; poverty and hardship was often described as something that didn't happen to them, rather it happened to other people like the elderly, families with children and drug addicts. Diane and other interviewees were eager to present themselves to me not as victims of a multitude of hardships, but as having the choice and power to help themselves, despite their accounts being saturated with evidence of their cumulative and extensive disadvantage.

Goffman (1981) observes that the performance of the interview encounter is fraught with risk for both the interviewee's and the interviewer's identity. In entering people's homes and carrying out interviews, the researcher is bound to act and behave in a certain manner, as they are, after all, a guest in the person's home. As Yee and Andrews (2006) observe, there is a paradox between the role of the researcher as a 'good guest' (p. 407) and a professional researcher. They give the example of being offered refreshments and question whether 'accepting an offer of tea or coffee can demonstrate that the researcher feels relaxed with the family and can be part of establishing a relaxed atmosphere' (p. 407). At times, I also felt this was a choice I had to make. In some people's homes I visited, it was clear they were experiencing multiple hardship and I felt on the one hand, as Yee and Andrews (2006) describe, I wanted to accept the offer of a cup of tea as a good guest yet as a professional researcher I felt guilty at the thought of accepting this offer when it was clear my hosts did not have a great deal to

spare. For example, Janice told me her family didn't have enough money to fix their boiler, resulting in them being without heating or hot water for five weeks in winter. Yet when I arrived they offered to turn up their gas fire another level so I wouldn't feel cold, which I declined. This demonstrates two examples of performance; firstly, Janice felt she had to make me feel welcome and comfortable as a guest in her own home, and secondly, I felt that as a good guest I didn't want to make her feel somehow embarrassed by me agreeing to this, thus admitting her house was cold.

Certainly, carrying out research in people's homes raises issues of power which can shift throughout the research process. Although the researcher exercises control in deciding who and where to recruit, the respondent holds power in respect of whether or not they consent to participate. Following consent, the researcher acquires data, evidencing a multifaceted balancing act between the researcher and the researched from the outset. This is echoed by Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) who remark:

'The researcher, who is in possession of the information about the study, and the participants, who own the knowledge and experience needed to perform the study, can use their respective powers to negotiate the level of information provided about the study'.(p. 282)

Yet, the power balance can shift over the course of the research process. I have been left outside on doorsteps ringing the doorbell, stood in freezing cold weather, pushing hastily scribbled notes through doors in the hope that participants have simply forgotten that I was coming rather than silently withdrawing their initial consent to be interviewed. Clark's (2008) work on research fatigue emphasises that research encounters are not just negotiated and managed by researchers, but are also actively negotiated, managed and experienced by those who agree to be involved and who have their own perceptions of engagement. This ambiguous power shift is woven throughout the entire research process and for me, reflecting upon this raises a plethora of dilemmas both at a personal and professional level, which I will now seek to address.

Questioning one's own identity in the research process

A researcher seeks to gain the trust and rapport of respondents in order to allow them to speak freely and openly about their experiences, however, I was keen not to appear to be 'faking friendship' (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, p. 107). Although I wanted to encourage participants to speak openly, I did not wish to lure them into divulging personal information that they might not

otherwise have discussed with me. This is reinforced by Karnieli- Miller et al. (2009) who observe that ethical problems can be raised if this occurs. In discussing sensitive issues relating to health and illness, this point has even greater salience as it is important that the researcher does not make respondents feel bound to share their most personal experiences. For example, in interviewing Chris, a former heroin addict, I did not want to pry too far into the health problems heroin addiction has left him with as it was clear he did not feel comfortable sharing his entire story:

I was injecting in my groin and I ended up getting deep vein thrombosis that was in 2002, 2001 and I was crippled for nearly six month, and...well I had to do some things that I don't wanna talk about

My role was to encourage Chris to share his story but only to the extent to which he felt comfortable, even if this meant that the data collected was less fulsome than it might have otherwise been. This exchange is indicative of what Goffman (1969) terms 'expression games' (p. 7), referring to the description, analysis and classification of the varying ways in which information ordinarily conveyed through speech (or often unconsciously through expressive behaviour) may be manipulated or distorted. Goffman states: 'when the subject does not reply negatively he may still reply with varying degrees of disclosure which he thinks might be relevant' (p. 7), as demonstrated in Chris' partial revelation. Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003) comment that in depth qualitative interviewing can encourage participants to 'develop a relationship founded on trust, which invariably involves them in a role relationship beyond that of the more conventional participant and interviewer role' (p. 422). Despite my efforts to not push Chris to reveal any experiences that make him feel uncomfortable, there is a genuine risk that participants may still feel obligated to respond in a certain manner (Johnson and Plant, 1996; Smith, 1992; Stacey, 1988). Inevitably, all accounts are necessarily partial thus sensitivity to the nature of respondent's stories is woven into the research process in complicated ways.

Key to some researchers' role is consideration of how the researcher may also become an educator or giver of advice and/or information. This is a delicate issue as, undoubtedly, I was not an expert on issues which might affect our interviewees. I quickly realised, however, that I needed to become more well-informed in issues around the benefit system and the correct places that respondents might be directed for appropriate help. For instance, at times, it became clear that respondents saw me in an advisory capacity and asked me for advice or guidance about certain issues, for which I felt an obligation to provide to the best of my knowledge. Similarly, on occasion, I

perhaps conformed to the role of advisor by offering recommendations. For example, upon hearing how ill health experiences had contributed to Lennie's problems with the benefits system I suggested he seek help from the Citizen's Advice Bureau or a similar organisation. Again, I was wary of blurring the boundary of professional researcher and that of a consolatory bystander as, after all, the ultimate reason for me interviewing Lennie was to gain information; yet, at the same time, feelings of empathy were evoked by his story and I felt compelled to try to offer him advice in some way, to the best of my knowledge.

As Crozier (2003) suggests, 'in order to win trust one has to prove oneself in some ways hence the need for openness' (p. 87). As I was entering people's homes and asking respondents personal questions I aimed to ensure that respondents were aware of why we were conducting the research; that is, to uncover how people's experiences of recurrent poverty, and how this relates to wider circumstances in their lives, can be translated into policy recommendations thus hopefully providing information that may be considered by policy makers. Unfortunately, as researchers are all too aware, change is not an inevitable outcome of the research process, as suggested by Clark (2008). This sentiment is echoed by Fine et al. (2000) who noted that the respondents of their study who were welfare-dependent regarded the researchers as being in a position to take their stories and issues to policymakers in a way that they could not do themselves. Again, this elucidates a further strand of the power debate, as the respondents perceive themselves as powerless as opposed to the researchers who can use their powerful status to give the participants a voice. This was often found in the responses of those who were interviewed, as participants wanted others to know their stories and experiences so this could result in raising awareness. For example, Melvyn agreed to be interviewed as he expressed an urge to articulate his problems with negotiating the benefits system for his daughter with autism:

The reason I originally spoke to you was I just think that people walking into the situation we were in, the government needs to tighten up on this and do something

Through sharing his experiences, Melvyn felt like he may be helping others by pointing out the difficulties he has faced. At this point, I was perceived to be a vessel for conveying Melvyn's less-than-favourable experiences. In turn, this can evoke difficult emotions for the researcher, knowing that telling people's stories to those who might listen or even act upon them is no easy or straightforward process. Allowing the power relation to constantly evolve throughout not only the research process but also

throughout the interview is integral to the role of a researcher; Bravo-Moreno (2003) notes that allowing participant criticism of the research and of the method is essential to ensure the researcher does not assert power over the research. An example of this can be found in Robbie's narrative, who was sceptical that "these surveys" could have a positive impact: "nowt'll get done, I'm glad that you're trying to do summat but they're not bothered about the average person". Interestingly, Robbie self identifies as the "average person" a further example of impression management. Goffman (1959) explains that the emphasis on idealized, normative identity and conduct limits the ability of the 'discredited' (p. 47) individual to achieve full acceptance by the population that he or she is forced to be engaged in, hence Robbie's desire to ascribe himself the label of "the average person".

The difficulties of negotiating the field also serve to shape the role of the researcher's identity, a point supported by Malacrida's (2007) account of reflexive journalism. For Malacrida (2007) there is a paucity of research regarding the impact of emotional topics on researchers themselves, despite an abundance of literature focusing upon the potential emotional effects of qualitative research on research participants (Corbin and Morse, 2003; Grinyer, 2004). The following extract from 'Michelle' in Malacrida's work (2007) reinforces the importance of having 'some type of positive light at the end of the tunnel to look towards, to keep feeling like what I was doing was worth something, or would be helping someone' (p. 1337); this opinion was also reflected in my own personal feelings, as talking about and sometimes witnessing sensitive and distressing issues can cause the researcher to address difficult emotions within themselves. After all, the impact upon the researcher should not be underestimated, as discussing narratives of health and illness can be 'unchartered territory' (Johnson and Macleod Clarke, 2003, p. 425). Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003) remark that having to deal with the unexpected during the research process, such as in my experience of revelations of an interviewee revealing suicidal feelings, can generate feelings of anxiety and concern. These feelings can 'be experienced at a more intense level if the research topic is highly sensitive' (Johnson and Macleod Clarke, 2003, p. 425) as can be the case when a researcher delves into narratives concerning health and illness whose ultimate subject matter might be hidden from view.

Keeping up appearances? Performance management of the 'idealized self'

As the research process unfolds, issues of performance are constantly evolving for both the researcher and the researched and at certain times

become more integral and necessary than others. This is particularly pertinent when conducting research with people and communities that are often stigmatised by broader political and social structures. In the more intimate setting of the home, for example, if a participant asks about the researcher's own experiences, Crozier (2003) notes, 'the failure to answer could be seen as exploitative in the sense that the relationship would be based on taking without giving anything meaningful in return' (p. 87). Thus, in the interests of maintaining rapport and reciprocity the researcher may be required to reveal more of themselves than they are comfortable with. For example, in the following encounter with Robbie, upon revealing where I lived he made a judgment about the area I came from, and somewhat redefined the power balance in the interview:

RD: I don't class Primrose Avenue³ [in Kelby] as a deprived area no more but there's not many people working, I mean whereabouts you from?

KG: Brantford Hills

RD: Brantford Hills right I mean up there...I'd say that's worse than Kelby

Robbie presents himself as from an area that he perceives to be no longer deprived, illustrating a desire to avoid a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). His presentation is an essential part of his performance as a respondent who does not wish to be stigmatised for living in a particular area. This resistance to being categorised as living in a 'discredited neighbourhood' (Warr, 2005, p. 285) has resulted in him labelling me as coming from what he classes as a "worse" area than him. In a sense, Robbie initially perceived me as the 'other' as I was a researcher from the university who did not live in a disadvantaged area. Yet upon my personal revelation of where I live, this perception altered and led Robbie to feel that the power imbalance was not so acute. This encounter might point to a 'face saving' (Goffman, 1981, p. 5) mechanism employed by Robbie in our interaction.

A difference in age between myself and participants (I was aged 23 when I conducted the interviews and the participants were aged 30 plus) appeared to lead to some respondents making judgements based on my age, and I heard comments such as "You're too young, you won't remember this..." or "You're young, you'll know about this Facebook⁴ stuff". Such an age difference may have exacerbated their feelings towards me, a perceivably

³All place names are anonymised

⁴Facebook is a social networking site

young, healthy researcher as the 'other'. Riach (2009) terms such encounters 'sticky moments' (p. 361) and refers to instances in her experience whereby respondents commented on her age and expressed their surprise at how young she was. These examples indicate that as a researcher, I myself am being scrutinised by the participants and my role as the professional researcher at what they perceive as a young age raises interesting considerations.

However, difference between researcher and participant is not necessarily negative and Vincent and Warren (2001) warn that too much researcher and respondent symmetry could lead to assumptions on either side and misunderstandings can arise from either party on the basis of shared assumptions. I chose to reveal as little as possible about myself so as not to influence participants' responses; however, it was difficult to remain detached when faced with the sometimes distressing, amusing or conflicting personal narratives of many of the interviewees. For example, some of the interviewees expressed racist opinions when discussing their experiences of health professionals, which conflicted with my own personal and professional views. Curtis et al. (2004) comment that little guidance is available to researchers in these situations, particularly about how non-judgemental researchers should be when confronted with behaviour they find offensive. Therefore, challenges related to presenting myself and creating relationships with respondents were made more complex by the diversity and uniqueness of the home setting.

Goffman (1959) suggests that 'first impressions' (p. 8) are a crucial part of the interaction process. An example of the significance of first impressions in the research encounter can be shown by the respondent putting on a 'show' of dressing in a certain way in an attempt to avoid potential stigma by conforming to what they believe the professional researcher may expect. For instance, I'd first met Roy at a local community meeting and he was casually dressed, yet upon arrival at his home for the interview he was dressed up in a suit jacket and tie awaiting my arrival. Another example would be Chrissie who appeared to have made an effort to put make-up on in anticipation of my visit, though when we had called round to arrange an interview with her she was more casually dressed and make-up free. This performance further hints at the dramaturgical notion suggested by Goffman (1959) of front and back regions:

'one of the most interesting times to observe impression management is the moment when a performer leaves the back region and enters the place where the audience is to be found...one can detect a wonderful putting on and

taking off of character' (p. 123).

In presenting themselves to me in this way, both Roy and Chrissie can be perceived as eager to generate a good first impression and to display an 'idealized self' (Goffman, 1959, p. 30) to me, the professional researcher. As Goffman (1959) explains, the notion of 'idealized self' occurs 'when the individual presents himself before others...to incorporate and exemplify the officially credited values of the society' (p. 45). Indeed, according to Goffman (1963), the pressure of idealized conduct is most clearly seen in marginalised people, who are viewed as 'discredited' (p. 42).

Similarly, Diane was keen to present herself as resistant to the negative connotations that she believes her mental illness can bring:

DH: I think if I wanted to go back to work but that said...having the stigma of a mental illness, a severe mental illness.

KG: So have you ever felt stigmatised at all?

DH: To a...a little bit but I haven't tried to go back to work cos I'm not stable enough, and I get annoyed when people say 'Incapacity benefits is an easy option' y'know 'People on incapacity are only on incapacity because they don't want to work' erm...I didn't ask to become this ill.

Indeed, Reutter et al. (2009) comment that participants experiencing poverty tend to have a 'strong sense of stigma consciousness - a belief that they are viewed negatively, as a burden to society, and essentially deserving of what they get' (p. 302). Here, Diane is displaying an urge to be dissociated from the 'undesired differentness' (Goffman, 1963, p.5) of the stigma she believes others can bestow upon her as a result of her mental health concerns.

The final act: disengaging from the field

Just as there is a protocol for embarking upon a research project, there is also a protocol for leaving the field. The intricacies of generating a sample and building trust and rapport as part of the performance inherent in the researcher-researched relationship have been articulated in this piece, yet disengaging from the field and knowing when to finalise the relations that have been created can be equally complex.

The process of disengaging from the research is a concern that ought to be reflected upon. Ortiz (2004) warns of the dangers of over rapport and makes the point that in the process of a researcher disengaging from the

field, the very skills and techniques that were important for gathering data made it difficult for him to know when and how to leave the field, referring to his subsequent 'guilt' (p. 480) at dissolving the relationships developed for fieldwork. Like Ortiz (2004), I realised it can be difficult to know when to end the personal relations created with respondents, as I would often see the same people again in the community and would often engage with them in conversation. Commentators have noted that the researcher should leave the field without having caused harm to any participant, thus leaving their lives the same as it was before they entered it. For instance, Stake (1995) advises that 'the researcher should leave the site having made no one less able to carry out their responsibilities' (p. 60).

Emmel et al. (2007) comment that while researchers have identified strategies to maintain trust during research, the potential for these trust relationships to break down when data collection is complete is recognised as a particular difficulty. Researchers translate and interpret the private lives of participants and produce public representation of their lives in academic work; Standing (1998) suggests that the researcher continues to hold power in the researcher participant relationship once the researcher leaves the field. Lofland and Lofland (1995) remark that a researcher may 'want to leave open the possibility of a return' [to the field] (p. 62), which could be especially significant in this study given that previous interviewees are being followed up longitudinally and may perhaps be sought again in the future.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how the researcher-researched relationship is a constantly evolving continuum in which the performance of both parties is crucial at each stage of the research process. Health and illness narratives are inherently complex and multifaceted, evoking both the researcher and participants to occupy certain roles and behave in certain ways at different points in the performance. Reflections upon ethical considerations (including power) throughout the research process provide the arguments put forward in this paper. The work of Goffman underpins the theoretical framework of the discussion and highlights the intrinsic complexities of the relationships evident at each stage of the research process, for both parties concerned. Throughout the researcher-researched relationship, 'expression games' accompany a shifting balance of power which can change in an instant, as shown by Robbie upon evaluating the area in which I live. Both myself and the research participants present idealized versions of ourselves to one another in an attempt to create a favourable impression, for varying reasons as discussed throughout this paper. The result is a continually evolving state

whereby power and performance shift, creating new dilemmas and considerations for the researcher. Indeed, as an early career researcher, these issues are particularly prevalent as I constantly reflect on both my own and others' performance at each stage of the research in an attempt to make sense of the complex interactions I have become embedded within. Evidently, there are many other avenues of exploration one could delve into that have not been discussed here. For example, for half of the respondents who are being re-interviewed, the issue of research fatigue (Clark, 2008) could be reflected upon, and would provide invaluable insights into how the researcher-researched relationship varies with repeated interactions over time.

Nonetheless, this paper has illustrated that reflexive contemplation at each stage of the research process is required in order to ensure that the intricate narratives and performances of the researched are analysed and represented in a considered manner, and do not simply represent only the researcher's voice. It is important to retain an awareness of power shifts and of performances by both the researcher and the researched whilst negotiating the difficulties of accessing respondents' lived experiences. In retaining such awareness a researcher can fulfil their ethical obligations to the respondent, and also remain accountable as researchers and as individuals exploring intricate health and illness narratives.

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