

The role of self and emotion within qualitative sensitive research: a reflective account

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Abstract

There are many reasons why researchers decide to undertake research projects, for example: interest in the area, contract work, a gap in the literature and/or service provision and personal experience. The latter of these, personal experience, and the role of the researcher's experiences and emotions in research, has been an area viewed in both positive and negative contexts. This paper will attempt to provide insight into a novice Ph.D. researcher's journey within an area of health and illness research in which she could fit the profile of both researcher and participant. It will outline some of the central decisions made around the appropriateness of researcher experience, the benefits and difficulties experienced, as well as ways to manage researcher risk. Ultimately, it will conclude that the emotions and experiences of the researcher can have a positive role to play in qualitative sensitive research and can provide valuable knowledge and worthy insight into a topic.

Background

The study and my personal experience

This paper is based on the research project undertaken for my Ph.D. candidature which explores what it means to young, non-metropolitan women to experience familial breast cancer. It is a qualitative phenomenological study in which participants were identified using purposive sampling and data was collected using a semi-structured in-depth interview approach. Interview data was then analysed using the Hermeneutic circle of interpretation.

I was one of the fortunate people who was able to come into my doctorate with a fairly good idea of what I wanted to explore for my research. I had been told, and read, many times that it is important to choose a topic in which you have a keen interest, one that can hold your attention for the full span of your candidature, a topic driven by curiosity, rather than method

(Callejo Perez, 2006; Polit and Tatano Beck, 2004; Ross and Morrison, 1992). I knew that this topic could derive from many sources: interest, relevance to work, gaps in literature and personal experience (Roberts, 2007). At the outset of my Ph.D., I was concerned that it may be perceived as inappropriate for the starting point of my research to be my personal interest and experience of the topic; however, the more I read, the more I realised that this was not the case, and that it was an acceptable place to begin (Etherington, 2005; Gilbert, 2001; Lowe, 2007; Roberts, 2007).

I am exploring a topic in which I am not only the researcher, but could also be one of the participants. I grew up within the context of breast cancer; I have had family members diagnosed with the disease, but none more significant than my mother. At a very early age I was introduced to the idea of serious illness and the possible loss of my mother. Unfortunately, this possible loss, and my worst fear, became a reality for me five years later at the age of fifteen. As such, I knew that doing research in this area would be physically, emotionally and psychologically challenging and draining. Nevertheless, I had a strong belief that this research was important, that it needed to be done, and that my experience could provide a valuable perspective and fill gaps in the literature about the experiences of those in this situation.

Within this paper I present a brief theoretical overview of qualitative and phenomenological research in order to provide a backdrop for the research, within which I demonstrate the significance of emotions within this context. I then provide an exploration of the broader use of emotions in research, which provides the basis for the more detailed examination of the benefits and challenges I experienced whilst conducting sensitive and emotionally-laden health and illness research. This is then followed by a brief discussion of the techniques I utilised in order to reduce the impact the research had on me.

Purpose of qualitative research

Undertaking qualitative sensitive research is necessary if we are to enhance our understanding of the many and varying issues that affect people in today's society (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). Such research often involves researchers being placed quite closely to the raw words and real life of the participants and focussing on the emic, rather than etic, perspective (Brodsky and Faryal, 2006). Qualitative research represents the broad view that 'to understand human affairs it is insufficient to rely on quantitative surveys and statistics, and necessary instead, to delve deep into the subjective qualities that govern behaviour' (Holliday 2002, p. 7), with the common goal being to understand the meaning people make of their lives from their own perspective

(Darlington and Scott, 2002).

This focus on understanding the lived experiences of people who share time, space and culture is often seen to be in direct contrast to quantitative research (Johnson and Waterfield, 2004), which generally focuses on controlling and predicting phenomena, usually through experimental designs and statistical analysis (Frankel and Devers, 2000). This difference can be linked back to the grounding of quantitative research in positivism where researcher and participant are viewed as being entirely independent entities, with emphasis placed on the researcher studying the object (i.e. the social actor) without influencing it, or being influenced by it. Within this paradigm, research takes place as if through a one way mirror where values and biases are prevented from influencing research outcomes. In addition, replicable findings are considered to be possible, desirable, and worthy.

In contrast, qualitative research has its base in constructivism, which emphasises meaning as existing in its own right, not as something we just 'find'; rather, it is constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretation (O'Leary, 2004; Schwandt, 1994). Constructivists argue that 'to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118) and that reality is captured in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, which are socially and experientially based. Therefore, the researcher and participant are interactively linked and generate research findings together (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), which encompasses 'gaining an understanding of the action, belief and values of others, from within the participants' frame of reference' (Grbich 1999, p. 16) and uncovering the thoughts, perceptions and feelings experienced by the informants (Grbich, 1999). As a result, qualitative research is considered suitable when the researcher seeks to uncover a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences (Grbich, 1999; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Qualitative research generally requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the topic within which they are studying (familial breast cancer in the case of this research) and to undertake personal interaction with participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). As a consequence, it is argued that the outcome of these studies is 'not the generalisation of results but a deeper understanding of experiences from the perspectives of the participants selected for the study' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, p. 44).

Purpose of Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been defined as 'the study of phenomena as they present themselves in direct experiences' (O'Leary 2004, p. 122) and as a qualitative method which seeks to uncover the meaning of given phenomena

(Higginbottom, 2004). The main emphasis of phenomenological work is the viewpoint of the experiencing person in regards to specific situations occurring in their everyday world. It is through this 'inside' approach that we can gain insight from within the world of the person experiencing the phenomenon, and as such, understand what that experience is like. Researchers take a serious interest in not only their informants' experiences, but also their own experiences. This focus on everyday lived experience allows phenomenology to be applied to a vast array of topics; anything that can be experienced, felt and described can be explored using a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology aims to reveal the object or phenomenon to which meaning is being attached (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). It requires the researcher, as well as the participant, to explore and acknowledge their own 'being-in-the-world', and as such, acknowledge the researcher as an intricate part of the research (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). In contrast to Husserlian phenomenology, Heideggerian phenomenology does not require the researcher to bracket out their past experiences, knowledge and emotions. Instead, through a process of self-reflection, knowledge and experience are embedded in the research process and are seen as essential to the interpretive process. At regular intervals, the researcher is called to give considerable thought to their own experiences and emotions and to explicitly reflect upon the ways in which their position, experiences and/or emotions relate to the issues being researched.

Role of emotion and researcher experience

As human beings, studying a social world of which they are a part, researchers are inevitably emotionally involved with their subject of study (Van Krieken 1998 cited in Perry et al., 2004). Although this is the case, a significant lack of discussion of the emotional dimension or impact of research within scholarly writing has occurred (Bourne, 1998; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Rager, 2005). Positivist social science researchers argued that research had to be conducted objectively and that emotions were seen as irrational and/or a contamination of the research project (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001; Holland, 2007). Within contemporary social science research, it is now more common to find acceptance of the researcher's emotions and experiences within the research context, particularly in health and illness research (Hubbard et al., 2001; Rabbitt, 2003). Researcher's emotions have gained recognition as unique sources of insight to be valued, examined and featured within research (Bourne, 1998; Hubbard et al., 2001; Mitchell, 2008; Sword, 1999; Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001; van

Heughten, 2004). Arguably, researchers who do not draw upon and/or discuss their own personal experiences and emotions, at least to some extent, within the telling of the research story are in some ways being dishonest (Watts, 2008).

Emotional reactions to experiences to which we are exposed are inevitable. Emotions play a role in all dimensions of life and influence how we make sense of the world and our interactions with others, including throughout the research process (Hubbard et al., 2001; Warr, 2004; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Rowling, 1999). Researchers within qualitative research are not distant, disembodied and objective scientists or dispassionate observers (Gould and Nelson, 2005), but instead, a human researcher attempting to make sense of, and cope with, the research experience. As such, it is argued that it is not possible to bracket or eliminate researchers own thoughts and emotions, nor is it desirable (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2000; Gould and Nelson, 2005; Perry et al., 2004; Sword, 1999).

Researchers can experience a kaleidoscope of feelings: of euphoria where they feel jubilant and happy that they are doing something important and worthwhile, as well as guilt, anger and frustration in response to participant's stories or when they feel they may be exposing their participants to emotional distress (Bourne, 1998; Hubbard et al., 2001). For researchers, managing these sorts of emotions can involve allowing, acknowledging and integrating them into the research (Mitchell and Irvine, 2008), which can result in a greater, and more unique, understanding of the research topic that enriches the research project and enhances interpretation and understanding (Bourne, 1998; Rager, 2005; Beale et al., 2004; Tang, 2007; Wilkes, 1999; Clingerman, 2006; Howarth, 1998; Watts, 2008).

My reflective account

The use of emotions throughout my sensitive research experience

Based on the theoretical underpinnings of the study and my choice of method I feel strongly that a range of benefits to both the participants and the study as a whole arose as a result of choosing to not eliminate my experiences and emotions; in fact, I did not feel it would have been possible to eliminate my past experiences or emotional ties to this topic even if I'd tried. I feel that it is important to understand how these benefits came about and as such, have provided an overview of my experiences and the use of emotions throughout my research journey.

I made the decision to utilise my experiences and emotions throughout the research process: in the identification and framing of the research issue,

when collecting data, in discussions, and when analysing and writing up results (as other researchers have done (Clingerman, 2006; Warr, 2004)). It is through these experiences and emotions that researchers gain insight and give meaning to their interpretations of the topic they are exploring, are alerted to the meanings and behaviours of those being interviewed and enable the researcher to gain intuitive insight (Holland, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2001; Perry et al., 2004; Rager, 2005). 'Knowledge is not something objective and removed from our bodies, experiences and emotions but is created through our experiences of the world as a sensuous and affective activity' (Hubbard et al., 2001: 126), as it is through our emotions that we make sense of, and relate to, our physical, natural and social worlds (Hubbard et al., 2001).

The knowledge that I had developed about the appropriateness of experiences and emotions in research sat well with the theoretical perspectives adopted for the research. I was aware that my knowledge, experiences and emotions were informing my choice of topic and approach to the research. A need to be objective and/or distanced from the research topic was neither possible nor desired. We all have knowledge and experience of different social networks and systems within our lives, and by reflecting on these experiences, and reframing it as theoretical knowledge, we can draw on our closeness and knowledge of the topic in our research process (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Simmons, 2007), and that is what I decided I wanted to do.

I felt strongly that my experiences could play a significant and beneficial role within my research and be used to enhance my understanding. Although I knew that there were multiple options available through which I could undertake this research, I felt that this approach would enable me to more fully immerse myself in the world of my participants and as a result experience more fully, and gain a greater insight into their lives. I found that this preference, this perspective, was strongly enmeshed within the Heideggarian phenomenological approach. By using phenomenology, I was aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of meaningful and significant events in my participants' lives. Within this approach, if understanding is reduced to an objective opinion, bracketing out all prior experiences and emotion, then ultimately the meaningfulness of the experience we are trying to explore is bracketed out, as we de-experience our experiences and de-world the world we encounter (Safranski, 1998; Frede, 1998). Misinterpretation is seen to be inevitable when you step back and try to get an impartial, objective view of things due to the world losing this meaningfulness. Heidegger's argument is that there is no pure, external vantage point from which to get a presuppositionless, disinterested angle on things (Guignon, 1998), and this

was something I believed to be true for me too. Heidegger further emphasises this in the statement:

I cannot look at the world objectively because the world is not, and cannot possibly be, outside me, since I am – and always have been since birth – in the world existing as part of it. I am inextricably linked to all other entities in the world-wide web of significance (

Heidegger cited in Watts, 2001, p. 12).

This is further emphasised and supported within the qualitative constructivist paradigm:

The observer cannot (and should not) be neatly disentangled from the observed in the activity of inquiring into construction. Hence, the findings or outcomes of an inquiry are themselves a literal creation or construction or the inquiry process. Constructions, in turn, are resident in the minds of individuals: they do not exist outside of the persons who create and hold them; they are not part of some objective world that exists apart from their constructors'

(Guba and Lincoln cited in Schwandt, 1994 p. 128).

Furthermore, Heidegger's emphasis on the importance of being-with also resonated, and by utilising my experiences and emotions it was possible for me to achieve this and ultimately, I believe, obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of these young women. I feel that I was able to counteract the power role between researcher and participant and create an atmosphere where participants felt like they were on even ground with me, and as such, felt they could openly express their opinions without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Benefits of emotion during data collection

After the initial decision was made to incorporate my experiences and emotions rather than eliminating them I then found that they played a significant role within the data collection phase of my research. One of the main areas within which this occurred was the interview process and the development of rapport with participants. I knew that within the field of qualitative and phenomenological research it was perceived to be essential for the researcher to develop a research relationship that would allow them to actively work with participants to construct their stories (Dickson-Swift et al.,

2006; Sword, 1999) and that by making the participant feel relaxed, showing empathy, understanding and interest in what the participant had to say the participant would feel more comfortable in opening up and talking about their experiences, as well as offering the benefit of allowing participants to feel heard and validated (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Hubbard et al., 2001; Rowling, 1999). Being of similar age and having, in many cases, similar characteristics to my participants was something that I thought would be beneficial in fostering this relationship, as it allowed participants to feel less threatened by me and perceive me as being like them (i.e. being a member of their community).

Further to this, I had decided at the outset of my research that if it came up, if participants wanted to know about my experience with breast cancer, then I would be open and honest with them about my experiences. I felt that participants may feel more comfortable knowing that I might comprehend what they had been through and thus feel more at ease throughout the interview. In some instances this didn't occur, as participants did not enquire about my interest or experience with the topic; however, on other occasions it appeared important for my participants to know that I understood what they were going through and that I had been there. In these cases, it was beneficial for me to interact with participants in accordance with my experiences and emotions, as by doing this it allowed them to feel like I could empathise and that I was able to understand the topic and their 'being-in-the-world'. This in turn enabled them to perceive our relationship as one of being-with and alleviated the difficulty of me being perceived as an outsider: as de-worlded.

Other researchers have reinforced this approach and mindset by stating that they felt being detached or objective would not get them the data they needed (i.e. the emotional responses of participants) (Bourne, 1998; Rowling, 1999). Feminist methodologies often echo this and, therefore, I chose to incorporate these ideals into my approach, as I wanted to develop an interactive research relationship based on principles of trust and rapport and of shortening the distance between the researcher and the researched. I felt that it was important to communicate a feeling of genuine empathy for informants, to soften people's defences, and to have people open up about their feelings (Im, 2006; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Oakley, 1981), if I was to gain a detailed insight into their lives.

Within this research context, although I often had similar demographic characteristics to my participants, and this may have been beneficial, I believe that the main benefit came from the decision to self disclose my experience. This has been noted as a method that researchers choose to utilise (Gair, 2002) and one that facilitates openness and trust between the

researcher and participant (Lee, 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993), as well as allowing the researcher to tap into a rich vein that may provide valuable insights (Bourne, 1998). One of the main arguments I find convincing is that it is unfair of a researcher to expect their participant to be open and honest if they themselves are not willing to do the same (Dowling, 2006). Based on this premise, I felt that talking to my participants about my own experience, as well as doing a self-interview was a commitment that I had to make; after all, if I was not willing to do what I was asking of my participants then how could I proceed to expect that of them?

I myself, as well as other researchers (cited below), believe that self disclosure can be a beneficial activity, especially within sensitive research, as it allows the participants to know that the researcher already has a sense of what they are talking about, and in some cases has been there too, as well as showing respect, openness, honesty, empathy and validating participants' stories (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Hubbard et al., 2001; Rager, 2005). Participants can feel more comfortable and may be more willing to talk about their experiences if they feel that the researcher is familiar with, and sympathetic to, their world, and as a result, they may choose to disclose more detailed information (Darra, 2008; Perry et al., 2004; Goodrum and Keys, 2007). It is also seen as a process by which the researcher can become humanised to the participant, and as such, present the opportunity for establishing or improving rapport (Bourne, 1998) and to lessen the hierarchical nature of the research encounter (Sword, 1999).

I believe that this is particularly applicable within the context of this research as participants commonly talked about how they couldn't talk to anyone their own age and that no one understood, or wanted to understand, what they were going through. This was particularly emphasised in one interview within which a participant talked about how sick she was of people coming in to 'help' her but who didn't know the first thing about what it is like to be in that situation; she then challenged me about whether I was, in fact, doing that same thing. I observed a distinct change in her approach to me, and the research, when she realised I was coming from a similar background, and was not what she and others had referred to as: 'an outsider looking in'. Other research participants seemed to find comfort in the knowledge that they were not alone in their experiences and that someone else had been through what they had been through. In some instances, this led to participants expressing interest in having an informal chat once the interview had been completed. In other instances, simple changes in body language could be witnessed, as participants appeared to relax and feel more comfortable with me. Some participants, who previously appeared to be quite guarded in their responses, seemed more willing to elaborate and talk in more detail about

their experiences.

Another benefit that I feel arose during this project, and throughout the process of interviewing, was cathartic benefit. Recent studies (e.g. Dickson³⁴ Swift et al., 2006; Johnson and Macleod Clarke, 2003; Wilkes, 1999) have suggested that research participants can find it beneficial, valuable, and therapeutic to be involved in sensitive research, and that participants often reported a sense of catharsis and thanked researchers for the involvement opportunity (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Gair, 2002). It was also noted that participants often spoke in interviews about things that they had never had a chance to talk about before, to reflect on what may have been a taboo subject, or a topic that had never gained recognition before as an important experience (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Rowling, 1999; Bourne, 1998; Johnson and Macleod Clarke, 2003), as well as giving them the opportunity for self awareness and to gain a clearer understanding of the reality of their situation (Bourne, 1998; Rager, 2005; Orb et al., 2000; Simmons, 2007). Arguably, cathartic benefit can occur when participants experience comfort, validation, empowerment and a unique opportunity to confide in someone knowledgeable, interested and caring, alongside the opportunity to work through and express their emotions (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001; Orb et al., 2000; Howarth, 1998; Darra, 2008). Participants have noted that it was beneficial to them to not only have the opportunity to talk openly about their experience, but also to feel like it had the possibility of helping others in a similar situation (Rowling, 1999).

I found that, in many cases, this was expressed by participants in this study and they often made a point of making contact with me to ensure I knew that, although some of what they talked about had been difficult or emotionally draining, they felt that overall it had been a positive experience and that they had received many gains from involvement. Participants thanked me for giving them the opportunity to think about and talk about their experience. Many participants felt that they had never been given the opportunity to talk honestly and openly about what it was like to experience breast cancer and how it affected them. Several participants also expressed appreciation that someone was giving recognition to their situation, to their lives, and trying to do something about it. For them, having this experience (i.e. acting as research participants) allowed them to feel acknowledged and worlded and that there were other women going through similar experiences, and as such, they were not alone. Many participants had spent so long trying to fit into what Heidegger refers to as 'the they world', that is, trying to appear normal and fit in with those in their world, that they never had the chance to authentically 'be' and reveal their genuine experiences.

It was apparent to me towards the end of the interviewing process that not only had there been cathartic benefit for some of my participants, but that I had also experienced some benefit as well; this was unexpected. I had not been aware until recently that it was possible for the researcher to experience a degree of catharsis during the researcher process, or that by undertaking research in an area that I had personal experience I would be provided with the opportunity to find and access resources and stories that related to my own experience, and thus helped me reflect upon and more fully understand my experiences. Via accessing stories of others' struggles it is possible for researchers to think more carefully, and feel more deeply, about their own struggles, deepening and expanding not only their comprehension of their participants' stories, but also their own (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001; Clingerman, 2006). This was something that I felt hesitation about when planning this research. I could not feel certain about whether this was likely to bring back painful memories, and as such, re-open old wounds, or if it was likely to bring benefit as I was able to listen to others who had been there, to share stories and similarities, and to receive the benefit of feeling like I was not alone in my experiences and fears. Evidently, having the opportunity to talk to women who had been through the same thing was beneficial and made it feel less isolating and abnormal for me. It also gave me the opportunity to reflect more deeply upon my experiences via the similarities and differences to participants' experiences.

As already noted, there can be benefits and insight gained from undertaking emotionally-laden and sensitive research. Part of the commitment to taking on this type of research is the realisation that with these benefits come possible burdens and challenges, and that these are things that researchers need to plan for and be willing to take on board. It was my decision coming into this research that my experiences and emotional ties to this topic would, ultimately, be of benefit; but, I was also aware that it could also have a negative impact on me. This was something that I was willing to accept and as such, I have provided an overview below concerning how the difficulties impacted on me, and the ways in which they can be managed.

Some challenging moments

One of the first challenges that I was faced with was the issue of fatigue or burnout; this was something that supervisors and other academics had forewarned me about due to the personal nature of my research. As a result, I was well aware that researchers can, and do, experience both physical and emotional exhaustion during the research venture. For some researchers, this is due to the sheer number of interviews they have need to conduct within a

short period of time, for others, it's as a result of the content of the interviews, and the stories and emotions that they are being exposed to on a regular basis (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Wilkes, 1999); for me, it was both. Doing successive interviews on such an emotional topic was something that started to take its toll on me, even though I was aware that might happen. This was not something that happened initially; it was cumulative.. There were times where I would feel completely exhausted, and come home and sleep after interviews, and times where I just needed to be able to distance myself from my work and think about other things.

Some researchers have described this as feeling like participants were living inside their heads and that finishing an interview did not mean the end of their thoughts and emotional reactions to the story they had just heard (Goodrum and Keys, 2007; Warr, 2004). Researchers experiencing anxiety and/or dread concerning forthcoming interviews and how physically and emotionally draining they may be can occur as a result (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Once again, I came to empathise with researchers who had experienced this, as towards the end of my data collection phase, and particularly when conducting multiple interviews with women whose stories were very similar to my own, I found that the voices of my participants went around and around my head and kept me awake at night. I anticipated the difficulty that I may experience, but at times, it had more of an impact on me than I initially imagined. Although this constant reflecting on the stories of my participants was emotionally draining it wasn't wholly negative, as it offered a good opportunity for me to immerse myself in the data, and have moments of clarity and/or inspiration where the significance of aspects of the interviews become clear. Part of the reason for this I feel can be expressed in the quote below:

One of the dangers of undertaking research which is fuelled by a desire to achieve answers to personal issues, anxieties and frustrations is that once undertaken you are exposed on a day to day basis to situations which trigger painful memories' (Sampson et al., 2008, p. 926).

What I was experiencing was not something new or unique to me, it was something that many researchers before me and many to come after me would experience. Researchers are always susceptible to the emotional pressures of research (Howarth, 1998). The research process can evoke highly emotional responses in not only the participants, but also in members of the research team (Lalor et al., 2006). The impact, or emotional distress experienced, can vary from researcher to researcher, but also varies by research topic. Arguably, some areas and topics are more likely to elicit

strong responses than others, such as cancer, HIV/AIDS and death, as they all have implications for the researcher's personal life as they are commonly feared illnesses or experiences (Johnson and Macleod Clarke, 2003). Research topics can cause researchers to examine their own life more closely and reflect on the positive and negatives that lie in their past, as well as possibilities for the future, and that this can cause feelings such as guilt, fear and embarrassment (Howarth, 1998).

For those such as myself, who research the experiences and emotions of others, who experience the privilege and the pain, the journey can be one that is more intense and difficult than first imagined (Bourne, 1998). 'The effect of being involved in, and in a sense, sharing the private world of people in despair, can be a psychologically and emotionally wrenching experience' (Burr 1996 cited in Sampson et al., 2008, p. 923). In some cases, researchers have reported feeling burdened by the painful stories that they have heard (Sampson, 2008) and this is something that needs to be considered carefully prior to the commencement of sensitive research. There was no denying that my Ph.D. candidature was going to be an emotional journey for me, although I believed that it would be one that I could cope with. I knew that it was likely that my own experiences would resonate with the stories that I was hearing from my participants. For the most part, my first interviews involved women that were slightly different to me, as the outcomes, experiences, reactions and emotions were disparate to my own. Although these interviews still had an impact on me, and I could empathise with what participants discussed, it was not until I started interviewing women with the same experience as my own that the full impact hit. In some cases, I found myself fighting back tears during interviews, or finding it harder to focus and follow up on important aspects of what was being said. I had to fight the urge to be distracted by similarities and to share my own experiences, possibly making the participants feel like I was taking the focus off them, and/or of going home and just crying. Several interviews felt like I was interviewing myself and were so 'close to home' that it was uncanny. Through my participants' reflections on their experiences I started to reflect on my own, and painful aspects from my past.

Based on this, I argue strongly that researchers (in addition to the researched) often experience emotions too and that they are not merely a data collection instrument. Social scientists can, and do, react to the stories that their participants tell (Hubbard et al., 2001). It is these stories that can have a resonance within our own lives and which, as a result, can bring to the fore memories and experiences from our past (Hubbard et al., 2001; Mitchell and Irvine, 2008; Rowling, 1999; Lalor et al., 2006); this is the point at which the personal and private emotional world of the researcher meets the public

world of research (Bourne, 1998; Gould and Nelson, 2005). It has been likened to reflections in mirrors, as by confronting the reality of other's experiences, we are also confronted with the truth of our own experiences. It can be via participants that we perceive our various selves: professional, personal, public, private (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001). This is especially the case in research such as my own, when researcher biographies influence the choice of research topic, and as such, cause researchers to reflect back on their own lives, experiences and past events (Sampson, 2008), and to involve themselves in self examination and reflection, and significant personal learning and change (Grafanaki, 1996). Listening to participants' stories may evoke upsetting images either because it reminds the researcher of their own experiences or because they empathise strongly with the participants' stories (Hubbard, 2001; Gould and Nelson, 2005; Perry et al., 2004). Researchers can be exposed, in an embodied way, to the pain and suffering of their participants which can give them a heightened sense of their own mortality and vulnerability (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

I find that I liken my experience to Heidegger's notion of temporality and thrownness: 'I have a past that I always carry with me, that must serve as a foundation for my current existence, and which defines and limits my future possibilities' (Heidegger cited in Watts, 2001, p. 34); my history and emotions with and around breast cancer were inescapable, influenced all aspects of my life, and shaped the way I perceived and thought about my experience and the experience of others. In some instances, this would occur because participants' experiences were so similar to mine that I couldn't help but compare our reactions and to analyse why they occurred. In other cases, participants' experiences or reactions (such as level of fear surrounding breast cancer) would differ significantly from my own and I would find myself thinking in more detail about why I felt the way I did and what it would be like to live within the cancer experience from the alternate point of view.

Managing the highs and lows

Throughout the process of undertaking emotionally-laden research, and experiencing the associated highs and lows, I utilised a range of methods to try and reduce the impact that the research had on me as the researcher, as well as strengthening my ability to be reflexive and give an honest voice to the women involved.

The first approach that I undertook was one that I had utilised in previous research and one that I found was commonly recommended by supervisors and academics alike: journaling. Although all aspects of the research venture, including the interpretation of participants' stories, may encompass the

emotionality of the topic (Hubbard et al., 2001), acknowledgment and reflection via a journal offers opportunities to gain greater insight. It was important for me to locate myself within the research process, and to acknowledge, and be aware of, the role I played within the research context, including the impacts the research had on me personally (not only for my own understanding, but to create a context in which others can appreciate the evolving process and final research product). Reflexivity can be a difficult, but vital, aspect of sensitive research. It is seen as an essential process if researchers are to explore emotional reactions and make genuine sense of participants' experiences, whilst also confirming/refuting current knowledge and elucidating new ideas (Rowling, 1999). What is researched, and how it is researched, is undoubtedly influenced by researcher's personal stories and experiences. As such, it is essential that the researcher's beliefs, experiences and skills are made explicit, not with the intention of uncovering bias, but instead, to be used as a resource to guide data gathering and interpretation (Rowling, 1999), and to increase researcher self-awareness of their own assumptions and the role these may play (Grafanaki, 1996). As such, researchers are encouraged to engage in continuous self-critique and self-appraisal and to look closely at how their experience shapes or influences the stages of the research process, and to place emphasis not on 'looking good', but on self-revelation (Dowling, 2006).

The most effective way for me to undertake this process was through keeping a research journal. It was important for me, at the outset of my Ph.D. candidature, to feel like I could justify my decisions regarding my personal experience with the topic, and to make it clear that this was something I had considered in-depth. I wanted to be explicit from the outset that my experience was a part of who I was, and as such, it was not possible for me to disregard it whilst conducting the research. I felt strongly that if it was something that I attempted to hide and conceal it may be perceived as, in some senses, biasing my work. By being overt and open about my past experience of breast cancer and how it shaped me I am more willing, as a result, to look more closely at the role my experience had to play within the research. I have maintained a research journal from the very start which outlines my thought processes and why I made certain decisions and the involvement of my emotional reactions. This journal keeping has allowed me a space to record my initial reactions and decisions and to be able to look back at them and analyse the factors behind those decision making processes, and to see how my thought processes changed throughout the course of the research.

This approach was supported through numerous pieces of literature which argue that personal journals or diaries can be a valuable and relatively

simple way for researchers to work through and acknowledge their emotions, and the roles that they play within the research context (Darra, 2008; Glaze, 2002; Goodrum and Keys, 2007; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Hubbard et al., 2001; Laverty, 2003; Smith, 1999), and as a way to manage distress, sadness and release emotions (Goodrum and Keys, 2007). Journals can also be viewed as an effective tool for reflexivity, as they can lead the researcher to a state of openness where prior assumptions, beliefs and attitudes are recognised and understood (Dowling, 2006). Journaling is also considered a method that enhances the credibility of the research through researcher's descriptions and interpretations of their experience as researchers, and via providing the ability to audit the research process (Glaze, 2002).

Alongside this, I found that my supervisors were also another resource that was beneficial throughout the research process. The likelihood of Ph.D. students making good progress with their research and developing good working relationships with supervisors is argued to be aided by shared research interests (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2007). Supervisors are seen to not only guide and assist their students, but to also offer a degree of support (Ives and Rowley 2005), as they focus not only on the academic achievement or progress, but also on the whole person via being sympathetic and supportive of academic and nonacademic aspects of the candidates' lives (Murphy et al., 2007). Supervision is viewed as an effective resource for researchers undertaking sensitive research, as it provides an opportunity to receive necessary support, as well as the development of skill bases (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). It has also been noted that there can be distinct benefits from having more than one supervisor, as they may complement each other and form a more comprehensive supervision team (Ives and Rowley, 2005). I was fortunate enough to be in a situation where I was allocated supervisors that provided the aforementioned sources of support and mentoring. It was important for me throughout the research journey to feel that I was supported and was able to approach my supervisors at any stage throughout the study to gain support and advice. My supervisors formed a team that I knew I could approach at any stage if I was experiencing difficulties, and that addressed a range of needs and concerns, whether personal, academic, or emotional. I feel that it was significantly beneficial to have three supervisors, as for me, this meant that I would usually be able to get in contact with one if I needed urgent advice. Similarly, they all had an interest or passion for the research topic which allowed many in-depth and passionate discussions to occur and provide me with motivation and different perspectives to consider.

Even though I had this supervisory support I found that it was also necessary for me, at times, to access a private counsellor, or to know that I

had made arrangements for them to be there if the situation arose where I did need to urgently talk to someone. Throughout the research process, it is thought that researchers may sometimes benefit from personal counselling (Howarth, 1998). This is seen as another method for dealing with the emotional burden of sensitive research, as it allows the researcher the opportunity to give a voice to what they are hearing, recognise why they may be feeling that way, and have the opportunity to receive support and advice (Goodrum and Keys, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008), and restoring a sense of psychological and emotional wellbeing (Howarth, 1998). As mentioned previously, I was aware of the fact that with sensitive and emotional research comes the possibility of emotional burden for the researcher. In preparation for this, I made arrangements to ensure that if I felt like it was becoming too overwhelming I would be able to see a counsellor. For the most part, I felt that I was coping with the emotional stress of the research relatively well but there were times where I made sure I utilised this option. The most pertinent for me was after completing interviews with women who had lost their mothers and/or who had almost identical experiences to my own. These instances were particularly difficult for me to cope with, as they hit very 'close to home', and it was important that shortly after I was able to speak to the counsellor and discuss the impact that it had, and why I thought that had occurred.

Alongside the utilisation of the aforementioned approaches, I also attempted to space my interviews so that I had time to process each individual story before attempting to move on to the next. By pacing interviews I was able to reflect on what I had been hearing and provide a place for validation of my emotional reactions to these stories (Beale, 2004; Hubbard, 2001). It is also a way for me to have enough time to be able to process and 'let go' of information that may be harmful (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Arguably, researchers should undertake no more than two interviews per day to ensure that burnout or exhaustion does not occur (Wilkes, 1999). I made a point of limiting the number of interviews that I did each week predominantly for the purpose of giving myself a rest period, as I knew that trying to push too many interviews into a day or a week would result in a greater emotional impact. It also allowed me the opportunity to keep up with my transcription so that I could work with my data while the interview was still fresh in my mind. Further to this, I also found it really important to make sure that I had some 'down time' where I could just relax and do mindless activities (e.g. one of the most beneficial things I found to deal with the emotional stories I had heard was taking up a boxing class; very therapeutic!). All of these things meant that I felt better equipped to handle the emotional aspects of this research project and reassured me that if I needed help, or someone to talk to, everything was organised and accessible.

Conclusion

Researcher emotions and experiences are invaluable tools when exploring sensitive research. They have played a large role in the way that this research project was undertaken: the interactions with participants and the understanding and analysis of the data. Although it may have been possible to undertake this research from a more distanced stand point, I feel that there would be very little gained, and in fact, believe it would reduce the depth of the findings.

Although at times it has been difficult, and there have been many challenges along the way, I feel that utilising my experiences and emotions was, ultimately, beneficial to this research project, to the participants, and to me. By grounding research within the qualitative, constructivist and Heideggerian phenomenological perspectives it is possible to explore these emotionally-laden experiences and gain an in-depth understanding of the lives of the participants. Further to this, it is possible to make the experience one of being-with, and to become immersed in the worlds of those involved. This involvement and being-with allows a depth of understanding and comprehension that would not be possible from a more detached standpoint. It is through this immersion that it is possible for a voice to be given to the experiences of these young women, and the importance and emotional nature of their stories to be told.

It was my hope, as an early career researcher, that I could provide some insight into what it is like to do research in a sensitive area, especially one that the researcher themselves has an emotional or experiential connection to. It was something I was very cautious of at the beginning; it was something I knew could be beneficial, but could also be detrimental if I didn't 'go in' prepared. It has, and continues to be, an emotional journey, but one that I feel has been important, not only for myself and the completion of my candidature, but also for the participants who had the opportunity to tell their stories. It is important for such journal articles to be written as they can alert other novice researchers and / or those new to sensitive research about the difficulties they may face and better prepare themselves for the journey ahead.

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