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Methodological challenges of sensitive topic research with adolescents

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on the methodological challenges in the design and implementation of an emotionally sensitive topic involving research with adolescents based on a study evaluating the experiences of adolescents and families facing a diagnosis of maternal cancer.

Design/methodology/approach. This conceptual paper builds an argument based on experiences from the field of qualitative data collection with adolescents and builds on arguments that were identified in the literature to provide with a detailed argument on the methodological challenges that researchers can face while undertaking sensitive research with young people.

Findings – Carrying research on sensitive topics is challenging because rigour can be affected by real people experiencing pain, sorrow and other emotions linked to sensitive and difficult moments in their lives. Researchers need to decide how they will deal with the emotional impact that these topics can have on them as people but also continue to carry out high quality research.

Originality/value – This paper adds to the current body of knowledge by describing the challenges faced in the field carrying out data on sensitive issues with adolescents but it also provides alternatives and solutions on how

these limitations can be overcome from early stages of the research design until the dissemination of results.

Keywords Adolescents, Qualitative methodology, Sensitive topic

This is a conceptual paper on the methodological challenges encountered in the design and implementation of an emotionally sensitive topic involving research with adolescents and families experiencing a diagnosis of maternal cancer (Author, 2016). Carrying out research on sensitive topics is challenging because the rigour of the study can be affected by real people experiencing pain, sorrow and other emotions linked to sensitive and difficult moments in their lives. Researchers need to decide how they will deal with the emotional impact that these topics can have on them as people, but also continue to carry out high quality research.

One of the first challenges faced when approaching sensitive research topics is the absence of a single and comprehensive definition which in turn restricts the advice available on how to best approach them. The term “sensitive topic” has been used to describe a wide range of issues across disciplines, settings and methods (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; McGarry, 2010). The degree of sensitivity seems to also be determined by contextual cultural norms and values (McCosker *et al.*, 2001) and this can lead to further variations in definitions and conceptualizations.

Sensitive topic research transcends the specific subject matter. Researchers need to be aware of the implications of their findings, the dissemination of

results and the effect these can have for an individual or group in different areas of their lives such as their financial standing, employability, reputation, stigmatisation or discrimination (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Albaum *et al.*, 2013). Research on sensitive topics requires researchers to be able to anticipate the impact of their research and how it is interpreted (Brannen, 1988).

The language and conclusions used in data reporting can impact on the reader, but this is not normally an issue of scholarly concern (McCosker *et al.*, 2001). Scholarly merit should not be the sole priority of sensitive topic research, as researchers need to be aware that their work can impact on themselves, participants, transcribers, analysts and readers (Rager, 2005a). McCosker *et al.* (2001) for example, explained that transcription is not just verbatim copying as the transcriber must also interpret aspects of the research, thus engaging in the process as a human participant too. The impact of sensitive topic research on transcribers is usually unacknowledged (McCosker *et al.*, 2001), resulting in a lack of mechanisms for briefing or debriefing.

Although there is no consensus, research seems to agree on a few reactions common to sensitive topics. Such topics are usually associated with strong emotions, such as sadness and social stigma (Goodrum and Keys, 2007) taboo, illegal or socially sanctioned attitudes and opinions (Krumpal, 2013). Sensitive topics also have the potential to lead to physical, emotional or psychological distress both for researchers and participants (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Schmied *et al.*, 2011). Taking part in a research study can impact both

positively and negatively on participants' relationships with partners and family (McCosker *et al.*, 2001). The potential distressing impact of sensitive research needs to be accounted for and reduced insofar as possible.

Sensitive topics have ethical implications specifically related to a duty of care towards researchers, participants, analyst, transcribers and readers. This should be a paramount component of any research design and proposal and several examples of this ethical implication are available in the literature (Decker *et al.*, 2011). This paper however, is focussed on the methodological aspects of designing studies for sensitive topic research. The author wants to acknowledge that both ethical and methodological implications are equally relevant and should be given careful and thorough consideration.

Research designs

The design of a sensitive topic study is a crucial part of the research process as different designs can be more suitable than others for sensitive topics. Researchers need to consider whether the study objectives and the theme of interest are more suitable for qualitative or quantitative research, online or face to face data collection and selecting a safe research environment for data collection.

Quantitative or qualitative designs

The choice between quantitative or qualitative study designs depends on the type of research question being asked (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011), as previous research has shown that the method of data collection utilised,

impacts on the answers obtained (Tournageau and Smith, 1996).

Quantitative designs can be unsuitable for sensitive issues as data collection can be affected by nonresponse levels, as people with sensitive information to communicate may be less inclined to do so (Tournageau and Smith, 1996). Self-report questionnaires increase the level of sharing of sensitive issues but when these are administered by an interviewer this may reduce participant's willingness to answer, as people may be more reluctant to admit sensitive issues face to face (Krumpal, 2013). Research has suggested that people tend to avoid surveys perceived to contain either embarrassing or high-burden questions. (Krumpal, 2013). The limitations of quantitative research can be helped by using computer assisted programmes to reduce the level of error as participants may not be able to skip questions, but there may be difficulties for participants with literacy problems and increases in participant willingness to communicate about sensitive issues when they are not being asked face to face about them (Tournageau and Smith, 1996) and this may also increase participant willingness to respond and the honesty of their responses.

Previous research has suggested that qualitative methods are more suitable for researching sensitive topics as knowledge and reality can only be understood by those who experience it (Elam and Fenton, 2003). Qualitative research is often more suitable as it is focused on gaining insight into people's lived experiences (East *et al.*, 2010a, b). Qualitative research can have limitations, one being it does not provide generalisable results (East *et al.*, 2010a, b) and another being that certain methodologies, such as observations,

can be time consuming (Pearce, 2012). Qualitative researchers may need to gain legitimisation in the community with participants to achieve reasonable response rates, but this can provide rich contextualisation of the data being collected (Pearce, 2012).

The study being discussed in this paper had a mixed methods design. Mixed methods research is defined by Muncey (2009) as a type of research which “[...] combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches [...] for the broad purpose of breadth of understanding and corroboration” (p. 123). Mixed methods are suitable to provide answers for complex research questions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Research on the potential use of mixed methods to study sensitive topics is limited. In this study, mixed methods were very effective as participants were given the choice of taking part in either the qualitative interviews or the quantitative online data collection, or both. This approach improved the recruitment and retention of participants as it allowed for different levels of participation.

Another advantage of the use of mixed methods in sensitive topic research is the validation process. Krumpal (2013) described validation studies as those where researchers can compare individual survey responses with the true status of a participant. Combining sources of information can help validate the data collected and increase research validity. In this study, for example, cross comparisons could have been made between the level of distress described in the qualitative interviews with the level reported by adolescents on the quantitative scales they completed.

Face to face or online data collection

Face to face interviews involve human interaction, which allows researchers to obtain information that might be hard to access otherwise (Schmied *et al.*, 2011). This type of data collection can provide an opportunity for supportive participant-researcher relationships (Schmied *et al.*, 2011), particularly when participants feel upset or distressed during the research process. Carrying out interviews in person was important for this study as adolescent and maternal interviews allowed the author to understand participant experiences further, through observation of body language and expressions used to convey emotions such as sadness. Online data collection is suitable to facilitate long distance communication, but human contact is limited. Providing empathetic support for participants online is more limited than in person as there is no physical or tangible support possible.

One of the disadvantages of face to face interviews on sensitive topics is that they may lead to stigmatisation, shame, judgement and the possibility of appearing “socially deviant” (East *et al.*, 2008) as face to face methodologies offer the lowest level of anonymity (Reddy *et al.*, 2006). Online communication and telephone interviews can instead provide an opportunity for participants to disclose more freely intimate and personal experiences that they perceive as embarrassing, humiliating or awkward (Jones, 2014). These methods have been described as “ideal” to collect data on sensitive topics as they can provide a sense of privacy and anonymity (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2006). Jones (2014) explained that virtual space allows emotional distance as there is a lack of visual cues which removes

potential judgement between the researcher and the participant. This could also mean that participants' may be more willing to take part in a research study which does not require a face to face exchange of sensitive issues (Schmied *et al.*, 2011). Rosenbaum *et al.* (2006) included the example of specific participants such as women experiencing domestic violence or substance abusers who may deny to take part in a study, as other family members or people may be present at the contact time. The use of telephone and online research may be more suitable and reduce the loss of potential and actual participants recruited with traditional data collection methods.

Another advantage of online research over face to face data collection is that computer mediated communication is not subject to a specific time and location (East *et al.*, 2008). Online methods allow interaction with hard to reach populations or distant populations. Increasing the potential for participant recruitment may be particularly useful for sensitive topics research where many people may be discouraged from taking part. internet surveys can also provide data and feedback faster, with reduced costs and with few data errors (Albaum *et al.*, 2013). It is convenient and can increase ease of participation (Reddy *et al.*, 2006). Research has identified that sensitive questions can be asked online with no impact on reporting honesty levels and social desirability (Uriell and Dudley, 2009; Reddy *et al.*, 2006). However, greater privacy and anonymity can instead make it easier for participant to exaggerate or provide random answers (Reddy *et al.*, 2006).

Lamb, Puskar and Tusaie-Mumford (2001) emphasised the need to consider creativity, flexibility, organisational skills and expertise with the population when carrying out research with adolescents. Recruiting young

people that were experiencing maternal cancer proved very challenging and initially they were only recruited locally. The advantage of having an online study was that this method attracted young people but also allowed an expansion of the catchment area. Participants were recruited internationally and the study was translated into Spanish which resulted in a big improvement in the recruitment of participants.

Limitations of computer mediated communication is that participants may perceive it as impersonal; however, such communication can be made personal using language that conveys empathy and sensitivity (East *et al.*, 2008). Another important issue is that the internet is a public domain and this can be a threat to anonymity and confidentiality. All efforts need to be in place to encrypt or protect data with passwords effectively or for data to be downloaded to private computers and removed from the public domain where it could be accessed. Ethical considerations are relevant when carrying out research with young people sharing difficult experiences, groups should be small and their identity protected (Wettergren *et al.*, 2016).

The research environment

Another aspect to consider when designing research studies for sensitive topics is the context in which data collection takes place (East *et al.*, 2010a, b). Participants and researchers need to feel and be safe (McCosker *et al.*, 2001). Per Schmied *et al.* (2011), therefore research should be carried out at a time and place convenient for both groups. Researchers also need to ensure participant privacy and protection in the data collection

process. Jones (2014) suggested that doors should be closed and signs should be placed on the doors to indicate that the interviews are taking place to avoid interruptions and protect participant privacy. In this study, additional care to protect participant privacy was taken as these were young people, some of which were not above 18 years of age. The blinds in the interview room were only partially open. This was a way of protecting young people and to reassure them that I had no intention of causing any harm to them. This also helped to build a sense of trust so that they would feel more comfortable and more willing to communicate. Storage of data in the research environment is another relevant aspect (Jones, 2014), as the identity of participants needs to be protected if they are told it will be. Information should be carefully locked, encrypted and password protected at all times and at all stages of the research. However, structural arrangements need to be available and in place to be able to carry out data storage in a safe way, for example locked cabinets or data storage rooms need to be available for researchers to have access to. Computers need to have encryption software installed and researchers need to be competent on how to use the software properly.

Research implementation

Locating and retaining research participants for sensitive topic studies can be challenging, as the sharing of personal and difficult experiences with another person may be trying.

Recruitment obstacles

One of the main challenges regarding access to the populations that are experiencing sensitive issues is approaching gate-keepers. Before having access to the cohort of interest, researchers need to build the trust of other adults (such as parents in this case) or professionals that oversee the welfare and well-being of the families and particularly of young people and children.

Gate-keepers are the first point of contact for participant recruitment. Gate-keepers, particularly professionals and practitioners are very concerned with methodological and ethical aspects of any study and the impact it could have on participants. They are interested in the benefits that taking part in the research can have for participant. Some of these benefits may be tangible, for example a token. These benefits can also be less tangible such as, providing an opportunity to express their opinions about a service received. Goodrum and Keys (2007), for example, facilitated participants to donate to a charity of their choice. Providing information on counselling and support services for participants can also be a way of compensating them for taking part in the research. Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007) defined “reciprocity” as the exchange between researcher and participant, which involved a reciprocal sharing process of their stories with each other. This contributed to the depth and quality of the data and reduced the potential difference of power between researcher and participant. This exchange was verbal but could also involve community service or errands such as having dinner together. Literature, however, is not agreeing on what best practice is, some writers are very much against reciprocity and others strongly advocate towards it (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007) described the phenomenon of “participant guilt” in researchers who believed they were only “using” their

participants as a “means to an end”. Reciprocity can reduce “participant guilt” and therefore the burden between researcher and participant.

Timing is another important aspect to consider when carrying out research on sensitive topics (Goodrum and Keys, 2007). Researchers can have an interest in the short-term effect of a sensitive issue and how people deal with them but people may not be ready or may be very overwhelmed to speak at that time. Researchers need to be careful to time their studies appropriately to be able to contribute to the body of knowledge but also respect people’s needs, privacy and unique coping abilities. Research findings seem to disagree on “perfect timing” to carry out research. For example, Schmied *et al.* (2011) have suggested that memory of traumatic events can become less detailed, less vivid and more distant over time; however, it may also be that people will be able to recall memories of their personal lives regardless of how much time has passed since the event (Schmied *et al.*, 2011).

It was the intention of this study to recruit participants within the first six months of maternal diagnosis, as there was paucity in the research. However, recruitment proved very challenging. This research lacked focus on people’s experiences between one and six months after a cancer diagnosis, the reason for this was that participants were not ready to talk about it. The evidence of this was identified in the time after diagnosis of participants that took part of the study. The adolescent who was closest to the time of diagnosis was seven months after maternal diagnosis.

Overall, although recruitment difficulties can be challenging, they can also

benefit research in ways that are not initially foreseen. In this case, the study ended up having an international sample which allowed comparisons of young people and families experiencing maternal cancer globally.

Participation attrition

Another challenge for sensitive topic research is the potential for participant attrition[1]. Research suggests that people will decline to take part or dropout of a study as a result of the burden being placed on them. This is particularly so in the case of those who are vulnerable. Wants (1992, as cited in Cantrell, 2012) suggested that potential participants from vulnerable populations, for example, those experiencing illness, may feel that the research protocol and all of the research requirements are too inconvenient or burdensome in addition to the demands that they are already experiencing because of their illness. In this study, parents made decisions about participation for their adolescents without consulting them. Some parents provided reasons for non-participation including; not wanting to upset the children or make them go through the experience again which suggests their concern for the burden that being involved in the study could lead to.

Sensitive research can be difficult for participants and remind them of the pain and distress experienced. As a researcher, this can make you feel upset as the intention of the study was to understand adolescent experiences to be able to better support them. Not only should participants be allowed to withdraw from the study but supports need to be in place. These participants did not avail of the services suggested. Follow up e-mail messages were sent to make sure that their involvement in the study did not harm them.

Emotional impact of sensitive issues research

Sensitive topics can have an emotional impact on the researcher, particularly if this topic is of personal or emotional significance. When designing and implementing a study on sensitive topics, an important consideration should include a self-reflection on the researcher's level of emotional preparedness to deal with the emotional impact that the research may have on them (Goodrum and Keys, 2007). Previous research has suggested that the emotional cost of engaging in sensitive research has been overlooked (McGarry, 2010) and it is fundamental that researchers carefully reflect on how their research will impact on them personally (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007).

Researching adolescents adjusting to maternal cancer was a challenging experience as a researcher and as a person. I had experienced cancer in my family but was unprepared for how the research would interact with this personal experience. Although challenging, this event allowed me to empathise with the research participants who shared some of their concerns, such as; their lack of information about cancer and their reactions of fear, sadness, confusion and disbelief at the time of diagnosis. Our starting point was practically the same and I learnt from their courage, compassion and kindness and this helped in coming to terms with the emotional impact their narratives had on me.

Researching sensitive topics can lead to emotional involvement of the researcher if the topic is of significance for them. Researchers should see

their work as an intellectual exercise but also as an emotional experience, exploring and discovering what is felt deeply Dickson-Swift *et al.* (1990). It is a challenge for researchers to find the balance between their objective role and respond with empathy, kindness and understanding towards participant's difficult experiences and narratives. The "appropriate way" of achieving this balance is unclear from the literature. Researchers and theorists use the term "rapport" to refer to the trusting relationship between researcher and participant which leads to an increased will to exchange personal and sensitive information (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007, 2009; Jones, 2014). Some authors have argued that warm approaches can encourage openness, but not all participants perceived it this way and it can instead have the opposite effect (Goodrum and Keys, 2007). Rager (2005a) explained that for qualitative research processes to be effective, researchers need to be cognitively and emotionally connected with participant's, as this allows researchers to enter participant's "meaning-making" worlds with empathy and can understand them.

Opposing this view, other literature advocates for an emotional separation between researcher and participants. Goodrum and Keys (2007) used the term "personal detachment" to refer to their strategy to preserve mental health and continue to be compassionate towards participants. An inability to create a distance from the research can have detrimental effects for the research study. Schmied *et al.* (2011) and Jones (2014) use the term "vicarious traumatisation" to refer to the phenomenon of a researcher developing feelings of fear, grief and intrusive thoughts in relation to the sensitive topic they are researching. Goodrum and Keys (2007) suggested that the expression of

emotion from a researcher led the participant to “sugar-coat” her answers. Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007) maintain that “courtesies” are important to build “rapport”. This includes having a cup of tea with the research participant. The risk would be that participants perceive the researcher as a “friend” instead. Lee (1993, as cited by Schmied *et al.*, 2011) argued that it was important to avoid confusion between the role of the researcher and a friend; particularly when data collection is carried out over a prolonged time.

Perhaps one of my main difficulties through the process of this study was trying to adapt to my “researcher” role, as I was concerned with research objectivity, but it was not always possible. The names and contact details of my research participants were contained in a spreadsheet and initially I did not meet any of my participants face to face as this approach was considered the least invasive method. Potential participants were sent letters which were followed up by a phone call to determine interest. I followed the same procedure every single time, some calls were successful but the majority were not. One day I spoke with a lovely lady on the phone, who explained to me that she had not seen my letter yet because she was in hospital but was interested in her son taking part in my research and she wanted me to send more information to her house. I hung up the phone thinking that she was one of the loveliest people I had spoken to and happily sent her the information package by post. I called her a few days after to find out if the information had reached her, her mobile phone was off so I left a message. The next Friday I had to visit the cancer centre that she attended and I asked her designated nurse about her...she went quiet for a moment and looked at me and told me that the “lovely lady” has passed away. I felt sad and shocked at the loss of a

“stranger” that I had only spoken to over the phone ... I had thought that my heart felt nothing for these “strangers” on a list ... but from that moment onwards I realized what I was dealing with: Cancer. Sooner rather than later I also realized that this “researcher” was only a defence mechanism of the person that was trying to do a research study but above and beyond I was just a person that cared.

Researchers also need to be prepared on how to respond to participant distress and this can happen in varying degrees. The simplest response would be having an awareness and openness to participant emotions, to be able to validate them and make them feel that they are in a safe environment where these can be expressed. A simple strategy could be just having a box of tissues; however, it is more challenging with online scenarios where these physical expressions of care are not possible. Examples of strategies used both online and offline can be for example stopping recording devices and asking participants if they would like to continue or not, as a way of offering support and care. Per Goodrum and Keys (2007) these are moments of visibly shifting roles from researcher to confidant. These are basic human emotions where we are no different to each other; however, I am aware that this could have implications from a research rigour perspective. Literature on sensitive issues has suggested additional mechanisms to support a participant in emotional distress, for example, having counselling information available (Goodrum and Keys, 2007). These supports need to be in place from the research design phase so that researchers can avail of them and provide support during difficult/distressful moments in the data collection process.

Research designs need to be tailored to reduce researcher fatigue, both

physical and emotional (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Literature is available on different methods which researchers can use to improve their self-care when dealing with sensitive topics including journal writing as a reflective tool, peer debriefing, personal counselling, stress management techniques (Rager, 2005b) and family and friend support (Rager, 2005a; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009). McCosker *et al.* (2001), suggest that researchers should determine the best number of interviews to take during a week to avoid emotional exhaustion. In the same way that they determine sample sizes. Self-care is an ethical component of research work as researchers need to maintain their ability to be responsive towards their participants in the study, particularly during data collection.

My personal experience as a researcher

Carrying out research on sensitive topics can have unexpected challenges for researchers. For example in in the community recruitment phase of this study, I met many people diagnosed with cancer that did not take part in my research but were part of the research through the impact they had on me. I travelled around the country delivering a talk on “How to talk with children about cancer”. In one of these sessions I met a young father. He was diagnosed with terminal cancer and he had an 18-month-old little girl and another three-month-old. He wanted to know how to explain to his little daughter that he was going to die. I was honestly shocked at that moment and I am sure I said something that I hope was of some use to him, I just can’t remember any of what I said ... but I will never forget him. I remember another father, who was also diagnosed with terminal cancer. He began to cry in one of the talks because he could not bear the idea that he did

not have enough time to make sure his son was a good man. The day before the session, his son had brought his first girlfriend home. This father knew that he had no time left to make sure that his son would love this girl and he also knew that he was not going to be there for any other significant milestones in his son's life. I walked towards him and tried to offer some useful words which I am sure were never enough to compensate for the pain he was feeling.

These are examples of situations where I felt challenged as a researcher because the experiences were having an emotional impact on me as a person and I was concerned about how this would impact on the rigour of the research. I consider that being aware of my own emotions helped me be a more honest and open researcher. This allowed me to understand participants' experiences in more depth, not only from a rational perspective but also an emotional one. I was aware that I had a responsibility as a researcher to communicate my participants' narratives, views and experiences as accurately as I could. I had self-care mechanisms in place too. I would talk to my friends and family when I felt overwhelmed emotionally and I also had an external advisor supporting my analytical process. Finding support from the raw data in my themes and arguments made in the study was another way of corroborating that my own emotional and intellectual processes were not having a negative impact on the research process, analysis and findings.

Conclusion

Carrying out research with adolescents whose mothers had cancer was

difficult and challenging for me. I had an interest in the topic and I believe that being honest and transparent about this initial motivation to carry out the study allowed me to be very mindful to design a study with academic and scientific rigour, so that my personal interest would not compromise the quality of the research

Meeting mothers and young people provided a sense of personal growth and closure for me as a person and researcher. Even though I did not share my personal experiences with my participants, I did tell them that I had experienced cancer in my family before and this allowed us to identify with each other at a human level. I believe this also allowed participants to feel that I was genuinely interested in understanding what their experiences were and they trusted me enough to share theirs. Some of my participants openly told me that they had never spoken to anyone about the topic before and adolescents suggested that they might benefit from being able to talk in a research environment where they felt safe and protected.

Carrying out research with young people experiencing sensitive issues was also challenging methodologically, as this was a population hard to reach but also hard to retain. A positive aspect of this research study is that young people were given the choice of how they wanted to be involved. Some adolescents chose to do their interview face to face but others chose the telephone option. Others decided to take part of the online feature of the study but not the interviews. This was a strategy that improved participant recruitment, retention and their engagement using an age sensitive methodology.

I must acknowledge that validating the emotional impact of the study on researchers may not be currently compatible with the standards of academic rigour. Research is currently appraised and evaluated against a set of standards to be qualified as of high or lower quality. These systematic evaluations protocols, such as CASP; focus on how the aims, methods, recruitment, data collection, ethical considerations, relationships, rigour and findings are appropriate to the research aims and the overall research but there is an exclusion of the human impact that a particular research topic can have on a researcher, a transcriber and even the audience; which basically suggests that these processes are not acceptable in a research process and yet they are real and I believe that they can also benefit the research. This generated a sense of confusion and even “research guilt” in me that I am still not fully aware of how to resolve successfully.

It is currently not clear from the literature where and how this balance between human emotions and research rigour is to be achieved. There is a discrepancy between the need for researchers to feel connected to the sensitive issues experienced by their participants to be able to accurately capture and communicate them but doing this can be considered as a threat to impartiality and rigour. This is an issue which will be difficult to resolve for researchers as we are usually motivated by some personal interest towards carrying out research on a specific topic.

In this study, having a rigorous research design was particularly important to ensure that the quality of the research was not compromised by the subjectivity

and emotions that were generated in the data collection process. I believe this is where self-reflection and advisory groups can become essential parts of the research process as well, as these can help identify when personal emotions could be detrimental to the research process and academic rigour.

Researchers dealing with sensitive topics need to focus on the research design but also be aware of the emotional implications this can have on them and the mechanisms they are going to have in place to guarantee to quality of their research. This is not only a practical commitment but an ethical one as well, since research participants deserve to take part in high quality and valuable research studies which they volunteered to be part of. Sensitive issues that researchers are connected to intellectually and/or emotionally will have an impact on their personal lives, dealing with this in a professional and rigorous manner is what will determine if this works towards increasing the quality and value of the research or instead become a threat to the quality of the research.

Note

1. Participant attrition refers to the reduction in the sample size due to participant dropout.

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