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Title:

How did I feel? Research participant experiences of sharing their emotional reflexivity for the purpose of data collection.

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to examine research participant experiences of sharing their emotional reflexivity as part of a research process. This research process involved encouraging twelve doctoral students to regularly share their thoughts and feelings regarding their studies and related issues over a period of eighteen months. This paper offers an alternative insight into the study of reflexivity within research from that relating to researcher experience of researching. We contribute to this area by uncovering participants' perspectives of being encouraged to share their emotionally reflexive offerings, for the purpose of data collection and analysis. With this in mind, our paper provides a valuable insight into the potential for this approach to benefit research participants with the opportunity to learn from their emotionally reflexive deliberations. However, we also offer caution with regard to the sensitivity associated with encouraging research participants to regularly reflect upon their feelings in this way.

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to examine research participant experiences of sharing their emotional reflexivity as part of a research process. The paper focuses on participants involved in the data collection process undertaken by the lead researcher as part of her own PhD research. This research process involved encouraging twelve doctoral students to regularly share their thoughts and feelings regarding their studies and related issues over a period of eighteen months. We believe our paper offers an alternative insight into the study of reflexivity within research from that relating to researcher experience of researching. We contribute to this area by uncovering participants' perspectives of being encouraged to share their emotionally reflexive offerings, for the purpose of data collection and analysis. With this in mind, our paper provides a valuable insight into the potential for this approach to data collection to benefit research participants with the opportunity to learn from their emotionally reflexive deliberations. However, we also offer caution with regard to the sensitivity associated with encouraging research participants to regularly reflect upon their feelings in this way.

Participant reflexivity in research

Major reflexivity discourse tends to particularly focus on researcher reflexivity and its importance in conducting worthwhile qualitative research (Anteby, 2013; Hibbert et al., 2014; Gilmore, S. and Kenny, K., 2015; Langlely and Klag, 2017). Whereas, participant reflexivity has received much less attention. The reflexivity of participants has been identified by some (see for example, Mason, 2004; Riach, 2009; Yang, 2015) as valuable to qualitative enquiry, in terms of participant involvement as co-researchers or knowledge producers (Yang, 2015). However, this interest in participant involvement in research is often restricted to the research process and relationships between researcher and participant. Our paper aims to contribute to reflexivity research by paying closer attention to participant experiences of being encouraged to share their emotional reflexivity as a source of data collection and analysis.

Emotional reflexivity

The involvement of emotion as integrative to reflexivity has gained increased attention over recent years (Holmes, 2010, 2015; Burkitt, 2012; Hibbert et al. 2014, 2017). Holmes identifies reflexivity as '*an emotional, embodied and cognitive process in which social actors*

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have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others' (2010:140). Similarly, Burkitt (2012) argues that *'emotion colours reflexivity and infuses our perception of others, the world around us and our own selves'* (2012:458). However, Holmes (2015) observes a current lack of research that focuses particularly on how emotional reflexivity can be researched. We suggest the methods utilised in the research forming the context for this paper offer an insight into a particular approach to data collection and analysis that goes some way to addressing this dearth.

We welcome Holmes' (2015) contribution to this area involving participant reflexivity and the joint interview - the interview of two participants who are known to each other - as a means of data collection and analysis that uncovers emotional reflexivity between participants and researcher. Holmes claims the relational interaction between participants and researcher within the joint interview encourages the emotional exploration of participant experiences. We argue that an important characteristic of Holmes' joint interview stimulates *between participant and participant - researcher* interactions and responses that will inevitably and overtly direct this emotional reflexivity. We argue that our methods differ from this in as much as we encouraged participants to engage in a form of self-talk or internal conversation, as described by Mead (1967) in his proposition of reflexivity involving an individual's dialogue with 'the generalised other'. We therefore claim that our participants' emotional reflexivity was not as directly or overtly influenced by the researcher as the participants involved in Holmes' study.

Emotional reflexivity and the generalised other

We claim the lead researcher's involvement in participant reflexivity aligns with Holdsworth and Morgan's (2007) perspective of the interviewer's role as the generalised other, in their interpretation of Mead's (1967) internal conversation. However, we claim the lead researcher's involvement in the study providing the context for this paper extends this consideration further. Over the data collection period we observed participant engagement often in an almost imaginary virtual dialogue (reflective of Mead's generalised other) with the researcher. We argue this approach more firmly places ownership of emotionally reflexive deliberations with the individual participant, than would be possible through use of the joint interview. The outcomes of which appear to compel participants to reflexively tend to the focus of their reflections and to also take responsibility for resolving issues they had raised. This could point to participants engaging in an emotionalised form of epistemic

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reflexivity, in as much as their participation in the research process appeared to involve the 3 R Model of Lunn Brownlee and Schraw (2017) – reflection, reflexivity and resolved action.

Our study exposes apparent participant interest or reluctance to engage in a form of data collection that encourages them to share personal thoughts and reflections, which align with issues raised by Thanem and Knights (2019). It also highlights our observations relating to the potentially negative implications of encouraging participants to share their emotional reflexivity - stimulating fractured reflexivity (Archer 2012) and participant feelings of not being able to cope with concerns at the focus of their reflections. This is an area we consider has not yet received enough attention from those studying the research of emotional reflexivity.

Our approach to data collection

The overall data collection period of the lead researcher's doctoral study that forms the context for this paper spanned eighteen months. The research approach involved the longitudinal data collection of participant monthly written reflections, shared via email, in order to capture their emotionally reflexive deliberations. The lead researcher's study included encouraging twelve doctoral students to regularly share their thoughts and feelings in relation to their studies and related issues. Participants were asked to answer the following four questions in each reflection:

- (1) Please provide me with a reflective account of your PhD studies over the past month.*
- (2) Tell me about the feelings (if any) you experienced in relation to any events or activities detailed in this account.*
- (3) How do you feel about your PhD today?*
- (4) Now that you have finished writing this month's account, tell me about the feelings you experienced while writing this.*

This paper examines participants' answers particularly to the fourth question and their experiences of sharing these emotionally reflexive deliberations.

This online sharing of their reflections was combined with up to three face to face interviews with each participant – the first of which took place before reflective reporting commenced; the second, approximately half way through; and the third, after the twelve month reflective

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reporting period had been completed. Also, at the end of their final interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences of being part of this data collection process. We believe using interviews in this way prompted participants to regularly revisit and reassess their documented claims, understandings and frustrations. We argue our approach to gathering emotional reflexivity addresses Holmes' (2015) criticism of the traditional reliance upon textual sources in researching emotion, as we utilised our interviews as an opportunity to explore more deeply the issues raised by participants within their online documented reflections.

Preliminary findings

Our preliminary findings reveal that participants often considered the regular invitation to share their emotional reflexivity as an opportunity to take stock of the progress they had (or had not) made over the preceding weeks. They included expressions of negativity in relation to the lack of progress they had been able to make with their studies for reasons they largely perceived to be beyond their immediate control. In contrast, positivity was shared about the support they had received from doctoral supervisors and critical friends from within their research communities. Interestingly, when articulating how they felt about writing their reflections, participants regularly expressed a heightened sense of frustration in relation to the issues they perceived as hindering their doctoral research progress. Many also expressed that writing their reflections in this way had stimulated feelings of guilt connected with the parts of their lives they believed they had been neglecting as a result of competing pressures. A number of participant comments evidenced their intentions to resolve issues they had raised in writing their reflections – arguably revealing a productive and constructive outcome of engaging in this form of capturing emotional reflexivity – and potentially demonstrating a form of reflexive epistemology. In their final interviews, the majority of research participants expressed gratitude to the lead researcher for encouraging them to participate in this way to her research. Some identified the experience as providing them with the focus they needed to think about issues preventing them from moving forward and encouraging them to reflexively find ways to progress with their lives (and not stagnate). It is worth noting, however, the potential at this final stage in the data collection process for participants to express their positivity in relation to the process, regardless of the issues they might have experienced with it.

Paper development

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We argue this research has highlighted important opportunities and issues associated with the nature of this form of research data and the practical and ethical implications of encouraging participants to share their emotional reflexivity in this way.

In preparation for the conference, we plan to develop the paper to consider the implications for research of this approach to data collection as a source of rich and meaningful qualitative data. In response to one of the reviewer's comments, we also wish to explore further the potential for our study to contribute to research relating to epistemic reflexivity.

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