

Article

# Who else Needs Protection? Reflecting on Researcher Vulnerability in Sensitive Research

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**Abstract:** Ethnographic research characterised by immersion, reflexivity, and rapport can be unpredictable and uncontrollable, producing a wide range of emotional responses. Much of the literature on sensitive research focuses on ethical requirements and strategies for protecting participants while less attention has been given to the need for researcher protection. In this paper, we share some of the concealed and/or overlooked aspects of researcher vulnerability that are commonly disregarded or under-explored. Based on our fieldwork experiences with a vulnerable population, it considers some of the different ways doing sensitive research with people experiencing homelessness has had an impact on our research team and wider. Specifically, we analyze the emotional impact of distressing and painful research experiences on those directly and not directly involved with the collection of research data (i.e., transcribers and coders). The themes that are discussed include: i) blurring of roles in the field; ii) dealing with heart-rending life stories; and iii) handling emotionally charged experiences. By reflecting on our fieldwork experiences and emotions, we also explore the ways in which emotional impacts can be managed in practice. Strategies for emotion management that have helped us deal with the unique challenges of this research are outlined.

**Keywords:** researcher vulnerability; sensitive research; emotional labor; homeless people

## 1. Introduction

The impetus for this article came from first-hand fieldwork experiences revealing vulnerabilities and the need for researcher protection during our research with homeless people.<sup>1</sup> This recognition of researcher vulnerability raised a number of methodological and ethical issues that were not initially foreseen in the approved and funded research proposal.<sup>2</sup> Given the open-ended and long-term nature of fieldwork with a vulnerable group such as homeless people, the research proposal for this study primarily focussed on the protection of research participants. In other words, from the design and planning of all research phases to dissemination, this exploratory study was primarily concerned about the effects of our involvement with and consequences of our work with research participants. However, it became quite apparent in the early stages of this study that it should also responsibly consider consequences for researchers. In sum, although there was a predominant focus in the research design upon managing and protecting the well-being and emotions of research participants, researcher risks were neglected at the outset. This is not uncommon as Kumar and Cavallaro [1] contend that much

<sup>1</sup> Although the first author is the Principal Investigator of the Croatian team, she is actively involved in ethnographic fieldwork for this project.

<sup>2</sup> This is an ongoing joint research project entitled: *Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities* that is a part of the Croatian–Swiss Research Program.

of the literature on sensitive research focuses on ethical requirements and strategies for protecting participants while less attention has been given to the need for researcher protection [2–5]. Nonetheless, although our research proposal had sufficiently met the requirements of international and institutional review boards as well as funding bodies, we further felt the need to responsibly address researcher vulnerability in our research.

The reasons for addressing researcher vulnerability are twofold: to protect the research team, especially younger and less experienced members, and to foreground the importance of considering researcher vulnerability issues throughout the research process, particularly in sensitive research. As a feature of the research process, threats and risks to the researcher that make them vulnerable need not be negative but can be methodologically and theoretically productive [6]. Appropriately, these authors argue that researcher and participant dangers are often interconnected and difficult to disentangle. It has also been acknowledged that some dangers are more visible and acceptable than others; serious physical risk has often been the only form acknowledged in accounts of qualitative research [6] compared to researchers' mental, emotional, and psychological safety [7]. Namely, the practical concerns and constraints of field researchers doing sensitive research with vulnerable populations as well as the emotional impact on the research team remains largely invisible in research publications. Rowling [8] notes that nothing had prepared her for the emotionality of the research process e.g., the impact of listening to people talk about their grief, their fears and anxieties, sometimes being expressed for the first time and in times of crisis. Chronic interpersonal stressors such as these can lead to burnout<sup>3</sup> that has been recognised in various people-oriented professions, such as human services, education, and health care [9]. Although acknowledged as an occupational hazard in therapeutic or service professions, this risk also needs to be understood and recognized in research professions. In particular, qualitative researchers engaged in intense contact with people in emotional distress may also be susceptible to burnout. Based on our fieldwork experiences, we would like to share some of the concealed and/or overlooked aspects of researcher vulnerability that are commonly disregarded or under-explored in the literature. Hence, we will draw attention to the ways in which we become emotionally threatened and vulnerable in our research with homeless people. Importantly, we do not negate participant risk in this study<sup>4</sup> but argue that researcher vulnerability and protection should not be ignored.

## 2. Researcher Vulnerability and Sensitive Research

A number of studies and reports have examined the dangers (i.e., physical and emotional risks) researchers can encounter in the field [5,6,14–17]. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [6] discuss four main types of danger (physical, emotional, ethical, and professional) that relate to 'the experience of threat or risk with serious negative consequences' faced by researchers engaged in qualitative research. Dickson-Swift et al. [15] found that researchers do confront a number of physical and emotional risks and that training, preparation, and supervision must be taken into account so that risk to researchers can be minimised. An earlier study by Lee explains that a researcher may suffer from isolation, anxiety,

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<sup>3</sup> This is defined as a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three key dimensions include overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment [9]. A recent systematic review that investigated burnout and its possible consequences in working populations provides relevant evidence of the physical (e.g., cardiovascular diseases and pain), psychological (depressive symptoms) and occupational consequences (job satisfaction and absenteeism) of this syndrome [10].

<sup>4</sup> In line with more critical engagement in the research process and ethics, one of the aims of this study is to conduct dignified research with homeless people that is non-exploitative and considers ethical complexities and dilemmas at all stages of the research process [11,12]. As homeless people are generally positioned as vulnerable, we acknowledged a need to transform research from a 'top-down' researcher-led encounter to a 'bottom-up' participant-led encounter [13]. In this study, particular attention and effort are given to issues of informed consent, gaining access and trust, reciprocity, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as engaging some research participants as co-researchers in an attempt to create less hierarchical relationships between researchers and research participants.

stress and depression [16], even in relatively straightforward fieldwork. Beyond doubt, doing research on a sensitive topic such as homelessness and social exclusion with a population undergoing stress and fatigue is not straightforward. For instance, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [6] warn that serious threats to a researcher's emotional stability and sense of self are often involved when undertaking qualitative research with participants undergoing stressful life events. Likewise, it has been suggested that researchers may be viewed as particularly vulnerable when working with marginalised people because they will be exposed to emotional encounters that are upsetting and difficult to deal with [18]. Predictably, risks and vulnerabilities for researchers are amplified in sensitive research which is defined by Lee [19] as 'research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it'. Research with homeless people in this study could also be defined as "emotionally demanding research," which is research that demands a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy, and potentially affects or depletes the researcher's health or well-being [1].

### 3. Emotional Vulnerability among Researchers and Other Team Members

In their edited collection, *Danger in the field: Risk and ethics in social research*, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [6] define emotional danger as the experience of severe threat due to negative 'feeling states' induced by the research process. They elaborate that this does not just mean feeling uncomfortable, but real distress, which can spill over into other areas of the researcher's life, such as their family and personal relationships or connections with colleagues at work. Researchers have shown that there is potential for distress and trauma among researchers when investigating topics which are, in themselves, inherently sensitive and emotional [4,20–24]. According to Morse and Field [25] the stories that the qualitative researcher obtains in interviews will be stories of intense suffering, social injustices, or other things that will shock the researcher. Shaw [26] notes that when participants retell their story the researcher invariably becomes an actor in the tale and is at risk of emotional distress. Etherington [27] recalls that as a researcher she felt powerless and like a passive bystander after hearing graphic descriptions of violence, neglect, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse day after day. She explains that as a counsellor she would have been able to use her skills and understanding to respond actively. The emotional drain from listening to research participants' stories and distress for a long period was so great that Brannen believed that 'no psychiatrist or psychotherapist would work (or be allowed to work) under these conditions' [17].

The face-to-face proximity of researchers to people whose stories are heavy with sorrow, loss, disappointment, or grief make it easy to understand that there will be an emotional cost to undertaking these kinds of studies [20]. Campbell [28] reminds us that although researchers are not service professionals they do deal with people on a face-to-face basis and their involvement with research participants involves a considerable amount of personal interaction. Significantly, doing ethnographic fieldwork is an intense embodied experience [29] and it is realistic to expect that researchers may be emotionally affected by the work that they do. From listening to painful narratives or seeing destitution and poverty close-up, these first-hand experiences resonate more powerful and intense meanings.

The emotional impact of distressing and painful research materials on those not directly involved with the collection of research data (i.e., transcribers and coders who may be students) has also been reported. Studies have shown that transcription [30–33], coding [34], and data analysis [32] can also be emotionally taxing. For instance, Kiyimba and O'Reilly [31] explain that transcribing is not merely a neutral and mechanical process, but is active and requires careful engagement with the qualitative data. They conclude that repetition has a cumulative effect on the transcriber and hearing narratives of a sensitive or distressing nature can have an emotional impact. In the words of Warr [33], transcribers are 'absorbing the voices and stories of research,' which may have an emotional impact on them. In a similar vein, Liamputtong [17] concludes it is probable that some transcribers will become emotionally distressed if they have to listen to and type powerful and often distressing stories of the researched participants.

#### 4. Ethnographic Fieldwork and Researcher Vulnerability

One of the difficulties faced by social researchers is that the consequences of lengthy, intense and dynamic fieldwork can be difficult to predict or control. Okely [35] claims that there are no blueprints in fieldwork; it depends on individual inclinations and potential. Fieldwork may range from endless waiting and everyday occurrences to moments and periods of great stress and fatigue. Immersion of this kind may yield the possibility of danger and risk for researchers because they often cannot anticipate anything in advance and may not be able to control what evolves. Linkogle [36] reminds us that 'the researcher must not become so immersed in the machinations of research and the social identity of their profession that they lose sight of their own physical and emotional vulnerabilities.' In a clarifying way, Nilan [5] shows how she struggled to reconcile the combination of two different approaches (i.e., 'formal' methods such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups compared to ethnographic methods) in qualitative social science research. She recognised that the major problem was effectively moving between the two subject positions of researcher in contrasting research paradigms; the first is constituted within a discourse of control, objectivity, even emotional detachment while the second is constituted within a discourse of immersion, reflexivity, and rapport. Nilan [5] concludes that the possibility of danger and risk most commonly arises in the second position of least control and enhanced emotional vulnerability. Referring to ethnographic fieldwork, Okely [35] aptly instructs us that the voices and material lead the researcher in uncontrollable directions; this is *not* a controlled experiment. Importantly, there is a need to reflect on the bearing of the researcher's identity on both the fieldwork and the data since the 'self' of the ethnographer has an effect on every aspect of the research process, especially the gendered aspect of the self [37]. Bloor et al. [20] maintain that women researchers are seen as more vulnerable to sexual harassment, for example, and to the emotional demands of fieldwork. They propose that women are often required to do considerable emotional labor and emotion management in the context of qualitative research and think that this is partly due to the gendered expectations of research participants, expecting female researchers to be sympathetic, interested, and concerned confidantes. Moreover, Bahn and Weatherill [14] suggest that researchers have different perceptions of risk in that differences between risk rankings can vary considerably from one person to another and may be the result of previous past experience or 'close calls'. Thus, the definition of what is distressing differs from person to person and may also change over time and life course events [6]. Although researchers do not experience sensitive research in the same way, the fact that immersion in this type of research can have a number of physical as well as mental, emotional, and psychological effects on researchers needs to be acknowledged.

#### 5. Method

This article draws on detailed field notes from reflexive research diaries kept by the authors of this article. These reflexive diaries were a good way of recapturing fieldwork (i.e., descriptions of people, places, situations, conversations, and events) as well as our reflection on and interpretations of these observations and experiences. In addition, we also recorded how we felt about what was going on during the research process; to capture the emotional impact of the fieldwork experience or interview that otherwise would not be evident in descriptive field notes or a transcript. Special attention was paid to these personal feelings and emotions to identify particular areas of vulnerability and anxiety. Mazzetti [38] reminds us that it is important that there is a safe outlet for these emotions and we found that a reflexive diary is an ideal space for unloading and reflection. Field notes are also helpful because they give us an opportunity to scrutinise our own prejudices and biases as well as positionalities during all stages of fieldwork. In sum, we attempted to include observational, theoretical, methodological, and personal notes in our reflexive research diaries to enhance the quality of our research and analysis. We also had regular de-briefing sessions and meetings as a team and in collaboration with the Swiss research team, which provided us with an opportunity to discuss fieldwork experiences and challenges. All materials were coded thematically, and the selection of quotes presented in this article were chosen to illustrate key themes and turning points during research.

They mainly include: practical and emotional difficulties; fieldwork issues and challenges; research concerns and coping strategies; research relationships and changes; personal feelings, thoughts and emotions; as well as motives, ambiguities, and inconsistencies.

## 6. Findings

The following section considers some of the different ways doing sensitive research with homeless people has had an impact on our research team and wider. The themes that we would like to discuss include: i) blurring of roles in the field; ii) dealing with heart-rending life stories; and iii) handling emotionally charged experiences. By reflecting on our fieldwork experiences and emotions, we also explore the ways in which emotional impacts can be managed in practice. Hubbard et al. [3] reminds us that the research process is not an emotion-free experience: fieldwork can lead to a sense of euphoria where we feel jubilant and satisfied but it can also evoke feelings of guilt and anger, leaving us upset and miserable. To reiterate, research team members also react differently depending on their positionalities, understandings, empathies, and past experiences. The same research settings may produce diverse and dissimilar emotions in researchers, which are almost always contingent on interactions with research participants. Importantly, the authors of this paper have educational backgrounds in anthropology and sociology but not in social work. For instance, we have not been taught how to establish borders or how to protect our privacy as researchers or how to react if a person breaks down while describing a difficult life situation or how to resolve conflict situations. The following examples elucidate our learning experiences whilst in the field and the diverse ways we can safeguard our different selves.

## 7. Blurring of Roles in the Field

The younger authors of this paper participated as volunteers in an outreach group that prepares and distributes food to people living in poverty, including homeless persons twice a week in the centre of Zagreb. Although their roles as researchers in an ethnographic project involving homeless people was clearly presented to the organizers and others from the start, blurring of roles did occur. Namely, even though this voluntary role gave them ample opportunity to learn as participant-observers close-up on a regular basis and the chance to establish trusting relationships, there were some challenges. For example, some research participants had 'their own agenda' and only saw these researchers as a way of accessing resources that they needed. Apart from depleting their reserve supplies, financial resources and time, both Stephanie and Suzana began to feel concerned as this was drawing them away from their researcher role. Endless requests for different items of clothing as well as running errands and writing letters of complaint became overwhelming. Suzana's field diary note reveals her frustration and disappointment:

Although I try to help - Ivan asked me to search some ads for a room with a bathroom for Petar and I will have a look, he also asked me if I could buy some credit for Petar's cell phone and that he'll return this money in a few days . . . I didn't question, for a second, whether I should be doing this, but I feel like helping the two of them has become more mechanical and that a true sense of humanity that I feel when communicating with other rough sleepers has been lost. (15th October 2019).

Naturally, we can expect that a researcher may get caught up in their feelings during fieldwork or may feel constrained in their role as researchers because they want to help. Although these young, new researchers are more than willing to help, this did cause frustration and confusion on many occasions for both of them. In a project of this kind, it is only inevitable that we will meet people with different kinds of needs. This may range from simple things such as food, clothes, searching for jobs or a bed in a shelter to more complex, long-term kinds of help e.g., to exit homelessness. Obviously, we all have different boundaries and levels of comfort as well as resources and knowledge.



Regardless of how much support we are willing to offer, we learned<sup>5</sup> that it is important to balance our personal contributions and give ‘small’ things to avoid dependency, especially since these research relationships are relatively short-lived. It became quite clear that we should always foreground our roles as researchers and never promise anything that we could not fulfil. In the researcher role, we can provide different types of information but should not assume responsibility for these tasks e.g., we can inform homeless people about the locations of different soup kitchens rather than obtaining food for them. On a continual basis, meeting their everyday needs would just lead to learned helplessness. Crucially, we learned that we should not make these ‘our responsibilities’ because this effectively negates a vulnerable person’s agency. Based on this experience, we also learned it is better to suggest the available options but not to propose which one would be the best option. It is not our responsibility to make any final decision for them. We have also learned not to become frustrated if they choose an option that we would not recommend. Moreover, we were mindful that we can provide support (that suits our capacities and possibilities) and motivation for change but that we do not need to feel disappointed if we do not help our research participants or are unable to help.

The second example is also related to blurring of roles and the threat of physical as well as emotional danger. As the need for a business cell number was not foreseen in the research proposal, the younger researchers initially provided their personal cell phone numbers to some rough sleepers. However, as young women they felt quite vulnerable when a couple of men repetitively called them at all hours, day and night. In all probability, these callers were lonely but the timing of these calls also shows that they did not respect their privacy and need for leisure as many of these calls were made outside working hours. Although this problem was promptly rectified before it developed into serious harassment, it did cause some discomfort and stress. Through these experiences, we learned that it is important to establish boundaries to mitigate frustration and ensure safety as well as privacy to researchers. This is essential because a lack of and/or undefined boundaries would have had a profound effect on our future involvement in this research project in the long run. We also learned that it is important to keep channels of communication between research team members open while in the field (e.g., cell phone call-in before and after interviews or walk-alongs) to ensure our safety.<sup>6</sup>

## 8. Dealing with Heart-Rending Life Stories

Being a detached observer is often not realistically possible when working with vulnerable people experiencing stressful life events such as homelessness. On the contrary, doing fieldwork and interviews with homeless people requires more personal interaction and emotion work to establish rapport, trust, and a close relationship.<sup>7</sup> It has been noted that this emotional labor is widely recognized as an important part of the qualitative interviewer’s role and effectively encourages research participants to ‘open up’ and talk about their experiences [3]. Emotional labor has also been defined as “the labor involved in dealing with other people’s feelings” [40]. Incontestably, qualitative research yields rich and complex data but absorbing and processing these research materials can be emotionally draining for any engaged researcher. For instance, fieldwork in this project has been dynamic and intense involving countless embodied experiences. Accordingly, many different types of emotions have been recorded by the researchers directly involved (as well as others indirectly involved). Those that can have an emotional toll on the researcher include: sympathy, distress, sadness, anger, shock, horror, worry,

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<sup>5</sup> Owing to the unpredictable nature of fieldwork and not always feeling prepared in fieldwork situations with persons experiencing homelessness, we recognized the need for professional guidance in the early stages of this project. A social worker, Adrijana Hadžić who works closely with vulnerable groups conducted a workshop for all the members of the Croatian research team. Some of the themes that were covered included: expectations, roles and boundaries; recognizing and overcoming stressful situations; as well as developing and strengthening resistance to stress.

<sup>6</sup> Although we give our research participants the freedom to choose interview locations (that are not hostile or under surveillance) and interview times we as a team also evaluate the dangers of some locations and times.

<sup>7</sup> Studies have shown that homeless people withdraw into themselves and withhold personal information if they lack a space of their own [39] or if they feel they have nothing to gain [12].

pain, and disappointment. An open-ended interview format has definitely given us an opportunity to listen to people tell their life stories but many of these journeys have been heart-rending. Listening to descriptions of homelessness pathways and trajectories with disclosures of painful experiences as witnesses or victims of sexual and/or physical abuse is emotionally demanding. For logical reasons, we have also learned to regulate our emotional responses and to suppress others such as shock, despair, and anger; otherwise this would have had significant effects on our research if not properly acknowledged and managed. Dickson-Swift et al. [41] explain that this active management of feelings is central to research on sensitive topics as researchers often change the way they would normally act while engaged in research. They elaborate that many researchers in their study placed an importance on being professional which may include having to mask a felt emotion in order to manage how they display their emotion to the participant. Typically, these accounts describe a series of traumatic events that evoke distressing images that do not disappear when the interview is over. One concern is that the more vulnerable the research subject, the more likely it is that both subjects and researchers slip into quasi-therapeutic relationships [20]. Although these heart-rending experiences made us highly aware that homeless people generally lack support we also realised that any serious and meaningful commitment would more than likely draw us away from our research work. The other is that we are not trained in counselling or managing other people's distress and not acknowledging these challenges could also affect the quality of our research work.

As a self-care measure, we have been reflectively keeping tabs on and recording our emotional states in a diary. We also openly admit to other team members when we feel emotionally exhausted, without fear that this will be regarded as researcher incompetence. In the literature, this emotional exhaustion is known as compassion fatigue or the 'costs of caring'<sup>8</sup>. In more practical terms, Dickson-Swift et al. [43] also note that emotional labor can lead to physical and mental symptoms such as insomnia, nightmares, exhaustion, depression, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems. Although she initially negates the hardships of working with homeless people, Stephanie records the emotional toll of this work in her field diary:

When I explain to people what I do, people often say that this is a very difficult theme and they ask me how I manage. I have to admit that I was even amazed at how well I was coping – I'm not insensitive, quite the opposite, I feel empathy and I feel sorry for these people, but it also doesn't "throw me off balance" and doesn't overburden me. I would respond to them in this way. And then, even though I don't think I think about them that much during my free time, I started to dream about homeless people, the situations they are in and the ways I could help them. I dream about them all night – these are chaotic dreams through which one can sleep but cannot rest. (23rd July 2019).

As another precaution, we have also limited interviews to a maximum of two a week for each researcher followed by debriefing sessions with all team members. Apart from discussing the research materials from an analytical perspective at these meetings, this time and space allows us to exchange and compare feelings about our fieldwork experiences in a supportive way. This is an important exercise because we have also become acutely aware of spill over into other areas of our lives, such as family and personal relationships, which do not need to be unnecessarily traumatised and burdened.

Undisputedly, the intense nature and immediacy of fieldwork can be emotionally draining and requires a constant management of self during the research process, especially in situations where there is a high level of expressed emotion. However, this is also applicable beyond fieldwork. For example, transcribing a research interview on a sensitive topic can be an emotional experience for the transcriber who often listens to powerful stories in research on sensitive topics with vulnerable persons. Liamputtong [17] in her book *Researching the Vulnerable* refers to studies where transcribers

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<sup>8</sup> Compassion fatigue refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion that can affect helping professionals and caregivers over time [42].

experienced powerful emotions and high stress; they grieved and became angry as the lives of the participants unfolded. For these reasons, we also work closely with other members of the research team such as transcribers and coders by informing them about the interview beforehand if it contains sensitive materials as well as providing them with our ongoing support.

### 9. Handling Emotionally Charged Experiences

Researchers exploring sensitive topics with vulnerable persons are acutely aware that the interview has great potential to be an emotional experience depending on the research relationship, duration, and contexts. More generally, all fieldwork encounters between research participants and researchers can also be emotionally charged experiences involving traumatic events or moments. A death or a serious injury or illness can have a very strong emotional impact on the researcher and coping with such unpredictable events is often not part of the job description. Handling emotionally charged experiences may require considerable emotional labor, especially if the researcher feels that they lack control. It has been noted that researchers may be viewed as particularly vulnerable when working with marginalised people due to a perceived increased risk of erratic or irrational behaviour on the part of the participant [18]. In research on homelessness, especially involving rough sleepers, researchers need to be prepared for all sorts of unpredictable stressful situations. For example, suicide ideation and responding to this reality that someone might die during fieldwork was a very emotionally disturbing situation for one of the authors who experienced this for the first time. An appropriate response not only demanded her emotional labor but also involved physical or task-oriented labor. She was required to call the emergency health services as a response to this crisis situation even though she was not present 'doing research' at the time. Namely, she received a call from one of her informants who was experiencing high levels of psychological distress; he had already communicated to her that he wanted to commit suicide. As a legal requirement, she also had to inform the police and help determine his exact location. In cooperation with the police and medical staff, she agreed to accompany him to the hospital so that his physical injuries could be treated first. She stayed with him at the hospital all day and acted as a mediator in communications with the police and medical staff who behaved in a professionally correct way towards him in her presence. In the end, despite medical recommendations and all her efforts and support, he refused to be transferred to another hospital to see a psychiatrist. All in all, this was a very stressful experience for all team members, especially for the author directly involved who felt helpless and vulnerable during this ordeal. It was only after these events had passed that she was able to write about them: *"I tried earlier to write notes about this incident, but I had writer's block and I simply couldn't"* (25th August 2019). Through this experience, we learned that we cannot be disappointed if our efforts or suggestions are not accepted by our research participants. In other words, we cannot force or expect them to make decisions that we would make but need to understand the power dynamics at work and that they often cannot control the forces that restrict their opportunities.

### 10. Strategies for Emotion Management

It has been noted that being new to the field is personally and professionally challenging [44] and that novice researchers are particularly vulnerable to the emotional challenges of sensitive topic research [34]. As Suzana and Stephanie are young female newcomers to this project, the first author's role as supervisor has also been challenging and a source of concern. Inevitably, there is more possibility of danger and risk in ethnographic fieldwork that involves immersion, reflexivity, and rapport.

I have been keeping tabs on them over the months, watching them carefully, checking and re-checking, asking them if everything is all right ... over the phone or at work or whenever we meet. They are usually quite forthcoming about their field encounters with people experiencing homelessness and like to discuss this with me in detail. I know that they have each other but I'm still concerned about their safety and how much they can take and whether they can handle all this intense emotional engagement ... and whether they will be able to cope until the end (of the project). I certainly didn't explain these fieldwork



dangers and complications in explicit detail at the job interview. Being able to cope in all these situations (e.g., suicide ideation, heart-breaking testimony, manipulation, deception etc.) was not part of the job description! I was primarily interested in persons that had had some experience in working with a vulnerable social group and expected them to realise that engaged anthropology on sensitive issues would entail some dangers and risks. At the beginning, I learned that S's mother was quite concerned about her well-being when she started fieldwork with rough sleepers. To preserve's her mother's mental health, S told me that she has stopped sharing 'all' the details with her . . . I feel responsible because I took this for granted and a little bit guilty because I didn't warn them or prepare them properly. It was only when they started to have problems that I knew that I needed to concentrate on these issues more carefully . . . to find further ways of dealing with these unpredictable challenges and dilemmas (September 2019).

Inevitably, encounters with vulnerable people during fieldwork as well as open-ended interviews on sensitive topics can be emotionally draining, producing a wide range of emotional responses. It has been suggested that actually knowing that emotional distress is a natural part of the research experience lessens its impact [45]. Recognising this as an intrinsic feature of sensitive research, Hubbard et al. [3] advise that grant holders/project managers should address the potential impact of emotions on all members of the research team at every stage of the project. Importantly, they point out that the purpose of emotion management is not to learn how to avoid emotional experiences but to learn how to acknowledge and utilize them effectively throughout the duration of the project [3]. Key strategies for supporting researchers, which range from debriefing, writing notes, and to nurturing oneself have been identified in a number of studies [3,32,33,46,47]. To effectively manage emotions, diary keeping or writing field notes has been identified as a good self-debriefing strategy [32,45,47]. Sherry [32] notes that journaling was a key strategy that evolved during her research experience with street soccer participants who were all experiencing disadvantage: homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, and mental illness. She explains that it provided a timely and relatively effective process of self-debriefing during any difficult or challenging situations. Unquestionably, we can be touched and affected by the stories that we are told or by whatever our other senses collect in the field, regardless of the extent of our experience. Informal and formal debriefing needs to be planned and part of the research process; researcher-support or peer support groups to improve psychological well-being and morale is particularly important in helping researchers to work through difficult issues encountered in the field [3,45,47]. For this reason, in a supportive way we try to be available to discuss with each other any personal or emotional difficulties that evolve in this study. Working in pairs in the field was another strategy that was employed in this study to lessen the impact of such emotional labor. Outside the field, when not engaged as researchers, Kavanaugh and Campbell [46] support the use of self-care strategies that include exercise, relaxation therapies, socializing with other research team members and friends, and in general finding a balance in work and personal life. Overall, besides these stress management techniques the above-mentioned strategies have been useful for emotion management and have helped us deal with the unique challenges of this research with people experiencing homelessness.

## 11. Discussion

To reiterate, we have shared some of the concealed and/or overlooked aspects of researcher vulnerability in this article that are commonly disregarded or under-explored.<sup>9</sup> Based on our fieldwork experiences with a vulnerable population, we consider some of the different ways doing sensitive research with people experiencing homelessness has had an impact on our research team and wider.

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<sup>9</sup> It should be mentioned here that one possible limitation of this article is that it was written during the research process rather than following completion of the project. As this is a work in progress we have not been able to present the full array of experiences that we will encounter in the future within the framework of this project.

Given the open-ended nature of ethnographic research that is never straightforward, we have drawn attention to how experiences that are emotionally challenging in research may occur unpredictably and might not even be related to the planned or actual research theme. At the outset of this project, we were relatively unprepared for these challenges as no safety measures to protect field researchers and others such as transcribers and coders were envisaged in the design stage of this study. Likewise, institutional review boards and funding bodies that approved this study did not subsequently request strategies of emotion management or researcher risk assessment. Even though taking field notes and keeping a research diary throughout the research process was planned for all research team members involved in fieldwork, assessment and management of researcher risk were not envisaged. In other words, keeping a record of our anxieties, weaknesses, and uncertainties and how we overcame these challenges were not the original intended purposes of these self-reflexive accounts. Conversely, their main purpose was to document the ethical complexities and dilemmas involved in this sensitive research work and reveal when we need to ensure safety or protect our research participants. Despite this first and foremost sense of duty to our participants, we realized quite quickly that we also have a responsibility to ourselves.

Acknowledging and dealing with any difficult or emotionally challenging situation has become a very important aspect of this study especially in relation to the younger, less experienced team members. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [6] remind us that negative emotions can affect the researcher's sense of self and ultimately the quality of their research. They argue that a central concern is the need to manage the emotions of research participants and not leave them with painful baggage from the research experience but this also applies to the research team. In this paper, we have outlined the various strategies of emotion management that we successfully use to mitigate researcher risks that have been largely neglected in research publications. It is hoped that these strategies will be beneficial to researchers working in similar fields and contribute to what should become standard guidelines and practices in qualitative research.

As emotional challenges are very difficult to predict or eliminate from the field and hinge on researcher's positionalities and field contexts, research crucially needs to be risk-managed from the design stage to dissemination and perhaps even beyond these stages. Significantly, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [6] encourage us to look outwards to others around for help when it is needed and to be honest about our limits and capabilities when under stress. As Nilan [5] suggested there is more possibility of danger and risk in a discourse of immersion, reflexivity and rapport. For these reasons, we sought and will continue to seek help from professionals when needed. In the same vein, we also acknowledge that as researchers we are not qualified to provide professional services that vulnerable populations often require (i.e., we are not social workers or trained counsellors). Nevertheless, as researchers we need to embrace and acknowledge our emotions because this can lead to important new knowledge and understandings about our research topics, relationships, and processes.

By foregrounding researcher vulnerability issues in this paper we have drawn attention to the impact this can have on the quality of research and research outcomes. Aptly, Hubbard et al. [3] concluded that unless emotion in research is acknowledged, not only will researchers be left vulnerable, but also our understandings of the social world will remain impoverished. They elaborate that a researcher's own emotional response to a respondent's experiences can be used to interpret data and may indeed be a necessary part of the reflexive process. Undeniably, emotions experienced in reflexive research can be insightful and useful as they can potentially shape the analysis as well as understanding of the phenomenon that is being explored. As a final note, we also understand, as Ellis [48] explains: *that there is the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret your story*. Nevertheless, regardless of the broad insecurity that writing about researcher vulnerabilities creates, we hope that this article will inspire more discussion in this relatively new and growing field of research.

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