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Abstract:	This report highlights the need for distinct approaches in qualitative research when working with the pain of marginalised and vulnerable communities. First, it argues for a need to incorporate 'emotionally engaged research' that acknowledges complicated entanglements between researchers and those we work with, particularly when conditions of pain are present; second, it traces work in sensitive contexts to highlight effective strategies that aim to 'do no harm' and may also become a catalyst for easing pain; third, it identifies barriers to emotionally engaged work including the need to rethink training and support for researchers.

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Qualitative research methods I:

emotionally engaged approaches to working with vulnerable participants

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Abstract

This report highlights the need for distinct approaches in qualitative research when working with the pain of marginalised and vulnerable communities. First, it argues for a need to incorporate 'emotionally engaged research' that acknowledges complicated entanglements between researchers and those we work with, particularly when conditions of pain are present; second, it traces work in sensitive contexts to highlight effective strategies that aim to 'do no harm' and may also become a catalyst for easing pain; third, it identifies barriers to emotionally engaged work including the need to rethink training and support for researchers.

Key words

emotion; fieldwork; pain; qualitative methods;

I Introduction

This series of reports will focus on qualitative approaches to researching the pain of others, with the first examining the challenges of working with vulnerable cohorts. The second (2023) will focus on research with those some would argue are the cause of pain; elites, those whose world view we do not share or those we simply

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3 don't like. The final report (2024) will delve into the ethics of research in times of
4 cultural rupture, co-production and the participatory turn.
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8 Human geography tends to research 'down the power hierarchy' working with those
9 who are experiencing a range of precarity (Dempsey 2018). This poses a series of
10 challenges for qualitative approaches, particularly when working with people in
11 psychological and physical pain, such as refugees, victims of sexual and racial
12 violence, those in the criminal justice system, those who grieve. Working with
13 vulnerable groups has been widely influenced by feminist and post-colonial
14 methodologies that attempt to flatten power relations between researcher and
15 participants, to 'empower' or give voice, and to acknowledge the impact of
16 researcher standpoint (Hagan 2021; Aroussi 2020; Daley 2020; Jordan and Moser
17 2020; Dempsey 2018; Wimark et al 2017; Sleijpen et al 2016).
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27 This work reinforces the ethos of 'do no harm' with the incorporation of creative
28 techniques of dialogue and listening that at times challenge qualitative
29 epistemologies in human geography in order to rethink how we frame 'lives lived
30 differently' (Daley 2020). The first section of this report will address the need for
31 attentiveness to emotionally engaged research in the context of intense interpersonal
32 encounter when working with pain, the second provides insight into methods utilised
33 to minimise harm, and the final section will address the need for new forms of
34 institutional scaffolding and research training to support work with vulnerable groups.
35 The work cited for this report also highlights the need for an interdisciplinary scope
36 when working with pain, including geography, sociology, gender, international
37 development, health and psychology studies.
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48 **II What to do about how we feel**

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51 Qualitative research, in which field sites become a set of social relations nurtured
52 over time, can be an intensely interpersonal process. In building rapport, there are
53 inevitable questions of trust and ethical encounter that can challenge insider/outsider
54 positions. There is an unavoidable entanglement of emotions that may draw us
55 towards particular topics, contribute to the understanding of context and
56 collaborators, and 'slip unbidden in and out of interviews, transcripts and analyses'
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3 get caught up in the emotions, despite being human, when participants share their
4 sensitive stories’.

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8 Feminist geographers, therefore, have called for ‘emotionally engaged research’ to
9 recognise, manage, and work with the ‘emotional turbulence’ that can arise in the
10 field (Akehurst and Scott 2021: 12; see also Brankamp 2021; Aroussi 2020;
11 McGarrol 2017). The importance of taking emotions seriously is highlighted in
12 Brankamp's (2021) work with refugees in Kenya, arguing that despite their often
13 fleeting nature, emotions and affect are key to understanding the complex fabric of
14 refugee camps. In such painful contexts, ‘we are inevitably touching nerves, stirring
15 anxieties, and are drawn into emotional force fields with unpredictable effects’
16 (Brankamp 2021: 6). Emotionally engaged research can weave together ‘personal
17 accounts of violence within wider analyses of power and privilege’ (Zonjić 2021:
18 543), taking note of the systemic ways in which histories are inscribed in institutions
19 that generate pain, be they refugee camps (Hagen 2021), adoption agencies
20 (Collings et al 2021), mission boarding schools (Charbonneau-Dahlen et al 2016), or
21 criminal justice systems (Henriksen and Schliehe 2020). It can allow space for
22 reflection on ‘nuances of care’ (Hammoud-Beckett 2021) and how emotions impact
23 on the capacity to develop trusting and ethical encounters in these institutions and
24 within the research process itself. The following section will outline recent examples
25 of methodological approaches utilising an emotionally engaged approach when
26 working with vulnerable communities and those in pain.

27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 **III Managing Pain: Strategies for Emotionally Engaged Research**

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46 Speech is a primary data source in qualitative research, with an expectation that the
47 subject must have a voice. Interviews can be framed as both confessional as well as
48 a point of co-production. However, in the context of pain, Elaine Scarry’s (1985)
49 seminal work highlights a key methodological challenge for qualitative research
50 bound to the problem of pain’s incommunicability, that is, how to articulate and
51 interpret that which is only experienced internally, physically and/or psychologically.
52 The difficulty in communicating pain as subjective experience can be exacerbated
53 by, as Tarr et al (2018: 577) argue, ‘value-laden binaries such as real/unreal,
54 visible/invisible, and psychological/ physical’.

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5 Yet even when the communication of pain is mediated this does not mean that it
6 cannot be expressed or comprehended as studies noted in this report highlight.
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8 Those in pain continue to attempt to create a language for it, often generating
9 narratives brought into being through embodied and/or creative processes as much
10 as voice (Hammoud-Beckett 2021). These methods tend to take an holistic
11 approach, often incorporating a degree of participation, decentring the researcher,
12 taking into account the emotional, psychological, and physical experience
13 represented 'in the survivor's whole sense of being' (Collings et al 2021: 25; see also
14 Federman et al., 2016). There is a focus on listening, metaphors and dreams,
15 utilising imagination in creative processes, allowing for painful experience to be
16 represented and expressed through alternative vocabularies and material outputs
17 that expand debates of what is 'valid' knowledge (McKittrick 2021; Watson 2021;
18 Awan & Musmar 2020; Baker et al 2020; Hui 2020; Motsa and Morojele 2017).
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29 For example, working with victims of sexual violence, Aroussi (2020) used
30 storytelling methods that avoided questions except for clarification, and focused
31 instead on listening. Participants were given control of the storytelling process: they
32 could say what they wanted to talk about and how much to disclose, limiting the
33 potential for distress. Similarly, Esala and Taing (2017) used storytelling, as a form of
34 'testimony therapy', to reduce mental health symptoms among Khmer Rouge torture
35 survivors. They combined narrative, later compiled into a book for each participant,
36 with Buddhist ritual, including a truth-telling event with community and NGO
37 representatives, and an offering to ancestors to help them find peace. Charbonneau-
38 Dahlen et al. (2016), also highlighted the benefits of culturally specific methods,
39 developing a Dream Catcher-Medicine Wheel (DCMW) model and grounding
40 ceremonies in order to document the experiences of indigenous survivors of
41 American Indian mission boarding schools.
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53 While storytelling still centres speech, Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018) highlight in their
54 work with young risk-takers and drink drivers, that silence must also be taken into
55 account, as what is not said may be as, or even more important than what is
56 particularly under conditions of vulnerability (Arias Lopez et al 2021). Silence has
57 been neglected in qualitative research, or often regarded as problematic, a stoppage
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3 in the flow of data when considered within realist epistemologies. However,
4 Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018) took silences in their recordings as data telling them
5 something about how participants were responding to their questions: with
6 avoidance and resistance to their use of participant categorisations such as 'deviant'.
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11 Also critical of the categorisation of pain, Tarr et al (2018) found that researchers and
12 medical practitioners using questionnaires or interviews were producing a version of
13 pain often to be measured numerically: useful for a clinician but not satisfactory to
14 the person in pain. Instead, Tarr et al (2018) used creative practices including
15 drawing, digital photography, sound and physical theatre to explore pain
16 communication. The use of art materials made pain tangible, allowing participants to
17 consider an alternative relationship with it, and shifted the emphasis of pain
18 communication from recording sensations to also including emotional responses.
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27 Creative interventions, from photography to 'sandboxing', can be seen in increasing
28 numbers of studies with vulnerable groups, or in specific contexts such as illiteracy
29 (Kamlongera, 2021; Mannay and Turney 2020). Body mapping, for example, as a
30 form of non-verbal storytelling, originates in arts-based research and community
31 development (Collings et al 2021: 1). It is predicated on theories that the emotional
32 narrative of painful experiences lies in the body (Collings et al 2021). Such embodied
33 approaches are particularly important 'when words fail', when pain is too much to talk
34 about it or even consciously experience (Arias Lopez et al 2021). Utilising this
35 approach with women who had given up children for adoption, Collings et al (2021),
36 conducted an in-depth open interview with minimal guidance as participants
37 simultaneously traced a life-size body outline, decorating it with material, images,
38 and text to symbolise their emotional experience. Drawing provided a safe distance
39 to memories infused with loss and systemic violence, containing the difficult feelings
40 that threatened to overwhelm participants, but also enabling them to visualise their
41 identity as a mother in the context of the loss of a child.
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54 This study highlights how subjectivities fractured by painful experience can be woven
55 together by creative practices, also seen in Baker et al's (2020) use of life narratives
56 and soundscapes when working with South African migrants in Australia, recalling
57 Apartheid and racialised inequalities. Central to the use of sound were 'processes of
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3 deep listening, reflexivity and dialogue' (Baker et al's 2020: 893). As their study
4 highlights, despite caveats of the incommunicability of pain, noted above, there is still
5 space for speech, even interviews when situated within mixed methods. But in order
6 to negotiate the power and performativity of interviews (Whitaker and Atkinson
7 2019), Dempsey (2018), in her work with refugees, created space for participants to
8 interview her as well, about her personal life as well as national perceptions and
9 media discourse surrounding the migrant crisis, resulting in what Dempsey felt were
10 higher levels of participation and richer conversations.
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18 Material objects also create a space for emotionally engaged research, deflecting
19 direct attention from the source of pain and allowing participants to reflect on
20 'experiences and opinions without the direction of a research voice, as in entirely
21 verbal approaches' (Peterson 2020: 13). Peterson's (2020) use of material objects in
22 her focus groups exploring multicultural encounter, was serendipitous, as labels,
23 pens, maps, and photos, originally there for technical reasons, became the focus of
24 exchanges and sharing of personal experiences, encouraging discussion, and
25 bringing a playful quality to the research. Similarly, Hagen (2021) managed the
26 painful experiences of life in refugee camps without directly interviewing those forced
27 to reside there, by shifting focus to the material (camp detritus, destroyed tents etc)
28 in order to understand the precarity of lives and the extent of violence (see also
29 Fuller and Weizman 2021, for their work on the materiality of forensic architecture in
30 conflict zones).
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42 Reflexivity, as a process of introspection, is widely used in these studies primarily to
43 elicit researcher positionality in relation to field sites, but also as a way of invoking
44 emotional engagement. As Adeagbo (2021: 190) argues, research into sensitive
45 topics and vulnerable participants necessitates 'continuous and critical reflexivity'.
46 Insider/outsider positions need to be navigated, the power of interpretation and the
47 contingency of qualitative research, particularly when capturing messy lives, need to
48 be acknowledged (Hagen 2021; Henriksen and Schliehe 2020). According to Hagen
49 (2021: 4), adopting a reflexive approach in refugee camps, enabled 'the work of feeling
50 through the racial, gendered, and geopolitical dynamics that govern them'. However, as
51 Johnsen and Fitzpatrick (2021) have argued, the rigour of reflexive processes can
52 vary: from tick lists of benign identifiers to privileged, 'positional piety', to 'self-
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3 indulgent discussion about ethnographers between ethnographers' (Townsend and
4 Cushion 2021: 251-2; Kamlongera 2021; Henriksen and Schliehe 2020). This
5 tendency can be seen in some of the work cited in this report ('white, male,
6 heterosexual, able-bodied, European'; 'young, middle-class, white, educated';
7 'young, mixed race, female'). There is little reflection on what lists of privilege mean
8 in terms of emotions associated with those privileges, nor discussion of past
9 trajectories and dispositions that inform them. To embed reflexivity within emotionally
10 engaged research still requires recognition of the 'social and cultural scaffolding'
11 within which subjectivities are embedded (Akehurst and Scott 2021: 12), while Hui
12 (2020: 760) contends that geographers need to ensure critical reflexivity is placed
13 within the context of 'the suffering, contradictions and ironies of human lives' (Hui
14 2020: 760).

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17 Some researchers have extended the idea of reflexivity to incorporate participant
18 feedback into the research process, also revealing the role research can have in
19 acting as a catalyst for change or generating a sense of catharsis and healing for
20 participants in promoting self-esteem through the act of listening. Research can
21 create a supportive and safe space for the unveiling of stories that are denigrated or
22 unheard in other contexts. In Collings et al (2021: 16), the majority of mothers noted
23 that having space and time for 'reflection on their experiences had left them with a
24 sense of lightness and expressed surprise and pride in the beautiful images they had
25 created'. The study generated 'at the very least, momentary repair'. Aroussi (2019)
26 consciously included 'meta-research' in her design, noting its common use in studies
27 on gender-based violence. Participants were asked at the start why they were taking
28 part and their expectations of the researcher, and at the end, asked how they felt,
29 using a face chart to record responses. They appreciated being able to 'share their
30 pain with an empathetic listener' and used the research to create a platform to offer
31 solutions to each other. Charbonneau-Dahlen et al. (2016; see also Dempsey 2018)
32 had similar findings in their work with survivors of mission boarding schools, who
33 experienced release and healing in the telling of their stories. The research facilitated
34 a way for participants to move forward as the process brought the past into the
35 present in a way that was emotionally manageable.

IV Rethinking Support

While there are undoubtedly benefits of emotionally engaged research with vulnerable participants, there is a need to take care with the claims we make. Several studies note that their work has the potential to be 'transformative' (Baker et al 2020), 'empowering' (Akehurst and Scott 2021; Zonjić 2021), 'liberating' (Townsend & Cushion 2021), 'justice making' (Aroussi 2020; see also Hammoud-Beckett 2021). Yet there is little critique of the extent to which we can make such claims (Cuthbert 2021). Research is often transitory in nature and where participants note the benefits of their involvement within a cathartic or catalytic space, as noted above, more evidence is needed of long term impact (Zimmermann and Forstmeier 2020). Where appropriate, Mason (2021) argues for the benefits of 'staying' in community engaged scholarship, that is, extended connections with field sites beyond a designated research time frame. This practice moves beyond the oftentimes 'contractual bargains' we make with our participants, however, it requires rethinking funding and institutional support, particularly time constraints.

In addition, while emotionally engaged methods offer unique approaches to working with pain, they also have specific challenges and limitations, including requiring additional resources (e.g. space, art materials), and/or additional skills. Creative methods, while becoming more popular, cannot be assumed to inevitably 'democratise' research or generate co-production. As Cuthbert (2021) found, creative methods may reproduce power dynamics in reflecting particular middle-class ways of 'knowing' and expressing knowledge (including terms like 'reflexivity' and 'creativity'). 'Do no harm' requires that researchers have the ability to recognise our own limits, particularly if research slides into a therapeutic space, for example, understanding when participants are not ready to discuss painful experiences even after they have given consent (Aroussi 2020). There is a need to recognise when we don't have requisite skills and need training or additional support (Jordan and Moser 2020). Neal (2020: 414), for example, argues for the need to 'prioritise and cultivate multicultural research skills and competencies' in recognition of the increasingly diverse and socially differentiated world in which research is situated.

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3 These risks can be mitigated in collaborating with expertise, for example: Collings et
4 al (2021) worked with a professional parent advocate; Dempsey (2018) worked with
5 local social workers and NGOs; Butcher & Dickens (2016) incorporated youth arts
6 workers into the research team. Several studies also included specialist training, for
7 example, Esala and Taing's (2017) work in Cambodia: counsellors conducted
8 research interviews, receiving training in testimony therapy, as well as biweekly
9 supervision and onsite support from a psychologist. Charbonneau-Dahlen et al.
10 (2016) undertook training on how to conduct interviews using story theory to ensure
11 they could engage more meaningfully with their participants, then added the Dream
12 Catcher-Medicine Wheel model into their design. One of the research team was also
13 a mission boarding school survivor as it was felt that only an insider with similar life
14 experiences could establish the rapport 'to assist participants in the divulgence of
15 deeply buried and guarded traumatic experiences (602)'. This decision also
16 highlights that to ensure we do no harm at times there is a need to humbly recognise
17 there is some research we are not equipped to do.

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Nelson (2020), among others working with vulnerable communities, makes the case
that sensitive research requires further institutional support from universities,
including greater attention to the emotional labour that research requires (McGarrol
2017). This could involve additional research supervision, peer support, and time to
debrief experiences throughout the project, including transcription and writing up
phases (Keyel 2021; Lisiak and Krzyzowski 2018). Finally, these studies highlight the
importance of time, not only to build rapport with vulnerable communities (Hagen
2021), but also to experiment with research methods. As noted by Zweig (2021),
working with 'at risk' young men in informal settlements in South Africa, they were
encouraged to speak about their challenges through a suite of methods developed
'through trial and error', with the young men assisting in adapting tools ranging from
participatory interviews to diaries. Yet lack of time is perhaps the most unyielding of
challenges that academics face today.

IV: Conclusion

This report has highlighted the need for emotionally engaged approaches in
qualitative research when working with the pain of marginalised and vulnerable
communities. Emotionally engaged research acknowledges the complicated

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3 entanglements between researchers and those we work with. It highlights a suite of
4 practices underpinned by feminist and post-colonial epistemologies that emphasise a
5 holistic approach to understanding the personal and systemic ramifications of pain,
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7 for both participant and researcher.
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11 Given the challenge at times of pain's incommunicability, effective strategies that
12 emphasise the need to 'do no harm', to contain and/or manage emotions, have
13 focused on finding alternative forms of expression, including creative and embodied
14 methods, and the minimising of researcher input. These approaches trust
15 participants to articulate their own stories in their own way, generating spaces for
16 listening, empathy, connection and support for communities that may suffer isolation
17 and/or stigmatisation.
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26 Done well, research with vulnerable communities can become a catalyst for easing
27 pain, however, there are challenges. Emotionally engaged research includes the
28 need to rethink training and support for researchers, and most importantly, the need
29 to carve out time within the neo-liberal university. Using these approaches, there are
30 opportunities to re-position research within differentiated social worlds without
31 reproducing or exacerbating pain, and indeed perhaps to even mitigate against it.
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