Regular Article

Blurring Boundaries: Balancing between Distance and Proximity in Qualitative Research Studies With Vulnerable Participants

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers who conduct in-depth interviews with vulnerable participants may experience certain challenges related to the vulnerability of their research subjects. Obtaining upsetting personal narratives may be emotionally taxing for the researcher, yet little knowledge is available as to how researchers are affected by this and which support could benefit them. This article explores how qualitative researchers from diverse research fields experience and deal with their encounters with research participants in vulnerable life situations. Information about this topic may inform research institutes how they can support the emotional wellbeing of researchers. Moreover, students and junior researchers who are getting acquainted with qualitative research may find it useful to learn about some challenges that may occur when doing research on vulnerable groups. For this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine researchers from various research fields within social sciences who had extensive experience in doing research with diverse vulnerable groups. We used thematic content analysis to analyze the interview data.

Findings from this study illustrate how conducting interviews with vulnerable research subjects may affect researchers emotionally. Several participants described negative experiences of emotional instability, powerlessness, and lasting impressions that made it difficult to "let go" of the research subjects. Some participants also highlighted positive effects of such encounters, such as personal growth. For all researchers, boundaries of the researcher role were a point of discussion, as these boundaries may seem less clear in practice than in theory. Research institutes could safeguard research ethics and enhance the psychological wellbeing of the researcher by providing researchers with adequate support systems.

Introduction

Qualitative research with in-depth interviews is an important source of information and knowledge about the lived experience of vulnerable groups. When members of vulnerable groups are invited to participate in research, the need for special protection arises, and researchers need to take measures to prevent harm and to monitor the well-being and integrity of participants during the research process. However, researchers themselves may also be needing support during sensitive research studies with vulnerable participants, as the exposure to distressing life stories may affect them in several ways. Previous studies have mostly explored the experiences of researchers within singular topics where participant vulnerability is a concern, such as housing for underprivileged people (Bashir, 2018), or adult mental health (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021). This study contributes to the existing

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knowledge base by analyzing the experiences from researchers within several of the major branches of the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. With this broader perspective, our study renders deeper insight in experiences across research fields.

Theoretical Background

Vulnerability is generally understood as a fluid and multi-faceted concept that is both socially constructed, context-dependent, and relational (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017). While any research participant may be vulnerable to some degree depending on the sensitivity of the research topic (Horowitz et al., 2002), some people have certain individual characteristics that put them at a higher risk for adverse effects than others, both in life in general and when participating in research. Vulnerable groups have been defined as "categories of people [who] are presumed to be more likely than others to be misled, mistreated, or otherwise taken advantage of as participants in research" (Levine et al., 2004, p.44). The Council for International Organizations of Medical Science (2002) describes vulnerable groups as those with limited power, intelligence, resources, or other necessary attributes to protect their own interests. Typically, vulnerable groups include the following: people who are unable to give informed consent; children; the elderly; residents of retirement and nursing homes; people receiving welfare benefits or social assistance; poor people; people who are unemployed; certain ethnic minorities; refugees; prisoners; homeless people; people with serious, life-threatening or disabling diseases; junior or subordinate members of a hierarchical group; and politically powerless individuals (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, 2002).

Exploring personal accounts of vulnerable individuals brings a relatively new perspective into research, and before the year 2000, studies that mapped vulnerable individuals' experiences of participating in research were non-existent (Alexander et al., 2018). Hence, the current focus on how to enhance the benefits and reduce the risks of participating in research for vulnerable groups is both timely and necessary. Researchers' efforts to empower vulnerable participants, by increasing their control and participation during the research process and by putting their well-being at the forefront, are important measures to protect their emotions and to safeguard the integrity and reputation of the research field (Bashir, 2020).

However, researchers themselves may also be vulnerable when doing research with vulnerable research participants. This vulnerability may become particularly prominent when researchers conduct qualitative interviews in which they are exposed to emotionally taxing or shocking life stories. Bashir (2020) describes how researchers' vulnerability may manifest itself especially when researchers are unable to predict or prepare for such emotionally distressing research encounters. Yet, the emotional risk to the qualitative researcher remains underexplored, and so far, little attention has been given to researchers' need for protection (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). The emotional impact of doing research on sensitive topics is also under-reported, as very few research publications report on how researchers were affected psychologically during the research study (Micanovic et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the emotional toll and the cumulative psychological impact on the researcher caused by years of indirect exposure to upsetting life stories may pose a threat to researchers' health and well-being (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018), and therefore requires more attention.

In qualitative research, researchers are considered to be "research tools", where they use themselves actively in order to build rapport and gain access to participants' personal accounts. Rapport has been described by Spradley (1979) as the harmonious relationship between the researcher and the informant in which the free flow of information becomes possible. Spradley emphasizes the basic sense of trust that characterizes rapport between researcher and informant, and sometimes (although not necessarily) a sense of friendship, fondness, or affection may occur in the relationship. To build rapport, Spradley proposes certain communication techniques for the researcher, such as active and attentive listening, showing interest, and responding in a nonjudgmental fashion. These techniques are also used in counseling situations, as they are considered core elements for establishing therapeutic relationships (Rogers, 2012). Thus, while the purpose of the research interview is entirely different from the purpose of a therapeutic conversation, some of the conditions may be relatively similar. It should come as no surprise that for some research participants, the experience of participating in a qualitative interview may have certain therapeutic qualities. Indeed, the establishing of rapport between the researcher and the research participant may invite participants to open up for the first time about a sensitive topic, and, with the building of trust, participants may disclose intimate and personal experiences (Bashir, 2018). Vulnerable people may be especially willing to discuss sensitive topics, and they may welcome the opportunity to relate their personal stories that few others are willing to talk about (Alexander et al., 2018). As Bashir (2020) states, vulnerable research participants may consider the researcher as a helper, thereby changing the nature of the research interview. With vulnerable research participants, the risk that both participant and researcher slip into a quasi-therapeutic relationship increases (Bloor et al., 2008). So, while therapeutic benefit is not the intention of the interview situation, it may nonetheless occur, and research participants have described benefits such as meeting an interested listener, experience healing and joy, or even reaching catharsis (Alexander et al., 2018; Asante et al., 2021). Thus, for research participants, the experience of the qualitative research interview is most often positive and could even result in unintended positive side effects.

For researchers, the picture may be more nuanced. Some may experience the research situation as rewarding and as a

possibility to show genuine interest in other people who are facing hardship. For others, dealing with sensitive topics over time and the continuous handling of emotionally charged experiences may have an emotional toll. Especially research that requires rapport between the researcher and research participants may pose a heightened threat to the psychological well-being of the researcher (Nilan, 2002), as roles may become blurred. For instance, researchers who experience that research participants treat them as close confidants, may feel a genuine desire to help them in difficult life matters. However, acting upon this desire would mean a blurring of researcher and therapist roles.

Listening to participants' descriptions of intense suffering, social injustice, or other distressing issues may pose a serious threat to the researcher's emotional stability and well-being (Micanovic et al., 2019). While the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue is recognized as an occupational hazard in therapeutic professions where different support systems are in place, this is seldom the case for qualitative researchers, despite their often-prolonged exposure to people in emotional distress (Micanovic et al., 2019). Hence, professional help for researchers who are at risk of emotional overload is rarely available at an institutional level. Moreover, researchers are often less well equipped to deal with difficult and traumatic life-stories that they may obtain during interviews, as they, unlike practitioners, usually receive no training on how to establish borders or how to react to participants' sometimes heart-rending stories (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017; Micanovic et al., 2019). Since the researcher role is, in principle, clearly distinguished from the professional helper role, researchers may feel powerless and like passive bystanders, which may result in feelings of guilt, helplessness, and anger (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). In addition, therapists generally have a more established culture of supervision, giving them the opportunity to reflect upon their meetings with clients with other professionals. This culture of supervision is, to our knowledge, not typically embedded in research fields.

Aim of the Article

This article sheds light on researchers' experiences when conducting qualitative interviews with vulnerable research participants across different research fields. The interview situation, with its asymmetrical relationship between researcher and participant, may be especially challenging for the researcher when the participant is in a vulnerable life situation or when the research topic is sensitive. From the researchers' perspective, we expect a certain distance to the informant in order to maintain an objective research perspective. However, researchers at the same time need to build rapport and establish a confidential relationship with participants to gain access to their personal thoughts and experiences. This balancing act between distance and proximity may be particularly difficult for researchers who conduct research on vulnerable groups. Therefore, this article aims to explore how researchers

experience and deal with these contradicting demands. The research question guiding this study is the following:

> What are researchers' experiences of balancing distance and proximity to vulnerable research participants when conducting qualitative interviews?

Method

The Researchers' Pre-Understanding of the Research Topic

When conducting qualitative research studies that aim to grasp the personal experiences of research participants, Maxwell et al. (2020) encourage researchers to make explicit and reflect upon their pre-understanding of the research topic, as this may elucidate a deeper understanding of the topic and create transparency in the data analysis. All three authors have substantial prior experience with conducting qualitative interviews with vulnerable groups. The first author has primarily done research studies with people with intellectual disability; the second author has long experience from interviewing school staff who have been exposed to violence in the workplace; the third author has comprehensive practice of interviewing adolescents from low socio-economic backgrounds who were at risk of dropping out or had dropped out of school or apprenticeship training. Prior to starting the current research study, we met several times to discuss how our contacts with vulnerable research participants had affected us in different ways. While none of us had suffered any serious impact on our psychological well-being, we all had experienced feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and sincere and profound empathy during our research with vulnerable participants. These personal experiences undoubtedly colored our interview questions and data analysis.

Procedure

This study used a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews with nine participants. The authors worked together to develop a semi-structured interview guide that covered the following topics: the emotional encounter with the research participants; role definition; and professional support. A pilot interview was conducted to test the interview questions. The interview questions we asked to illustrate this article's research question were open-ended, such as: Which thoughts and feelings did the participants' vulnerability raise in you? How did this affect you afterwards? Which support did you receive during the research process? How do you prepare yourself before meeting vulnerable participants?

Each author conducted three individual interviews with three participants, giving us a total of nine interviews. Interviews took place between August and November 2021. The mean duration of the interviews was 65 minutes (range 45 – 90

Table 1. Collating Subthemes into Main Themes.

Subtheme	Main theme
Long-term impact of exposure to vulnerable participants' life stories	Evidence of emotional impact on the researcher
Emotional instability during and after the interview	
Personal growth	
Managing participants' expectations	Building rapport within (and outside) the confinements of the researcher role
Finding the right empathy level	
Limitations of the researcher role	
Practitioner identity as a complicating factor	
Colleague support	Practicing self-care
Workplace culture	
Work-life balance	

minutes). Eight of the interviews were conducted live, and one interview was conducted via an online platform. Each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed "intelligent verbatim" by a specialized company.

Sampling Procedure and Sampling Description

Participants were recruited via searches on randomly chosen websites of Norwegian university and research institutes. We identified them by scrolling through staff lists looking for researchers who had recent publications (no older than 5 years) on qualitative research studies with vulnerable participants. In order to gain diverse perspectives, we used purposive sampling and chose participants from nine different fields who conducted sensitive research with a diversity of vulnerable groups. We collaborated to select participants whom we deemed able to contribute to our study and whom we thought would provide us with valuable expertise and experience on our research question.

Ten potential participants were contacted via e-mail to inform them about our project, with a request to participate in the study. Nine of the contacted participants agreed to participate, and time and place for the interviews were agreed upon.

Our sample consisted of nine participants (four men and five women) from the main research fields within social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, disability studies, criminal justice, child protective services, and psychology. All participants had a doctoral degree within their field. Some of our participants had started their working career as practitioners and then changed to the field of research, whereas others had worked (almost) solely as researchers throughout their entire career. All participants were well established in their field of expertise.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze our data, we used the six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and colleagues (2019). In the first phase of this approach, all three authors familiarized themselves with the dataset individually by reading the transcribed interviews multiple times. During this phase, the authors manually highlighted all meaningful quotations in the interviews. In the second phase of the data analysis, the authors used a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding, also known as an abductive approach, to extract chunks of meaning that contained information about the researcher-informant relationship. Thus, our methodological approach combined both data-driven coding and theory-driven coding based on our own pre-understanding and the existing knowledge base. Each text fragment received a code, i.e., a key word or a phrase, that described its content.

During the third phase, the authors compared their individual coding, and themes were constructed based on the selected interview fragments. Similar codes were categorized into themes that could shed light on the research question of the study. At this point, ten subthemes were identified (see Table 1). In the fourth phase of the data analysis, the themes were further collated and pruned, so that we obtained a workable number of themes that could render insight into our participants' experiences of the relationship between researchers and vulnerable research participants.

During the fifth phase, each constructed theme was more clearly defined and named, so that its essence was adequately conveyed by its name. At this point, the following themes were defined: (i) evidence of emotional impact on the researcher; (ii) building rapport within (and outside) the confinements of the researcher role; and (iii) practicing self-care. An example of the analysis procedure is provided in Table 2.

Finally, during the sixth phase of the data analysis, the themes were reported in this article, thereby reflecting upon the connections between the findings of our study and the existing knowledge base. At this point, the selected interview excerpts were translated from Norwegian into English by the first author.

Table 2. Example of Data Analysis Procedure.

Interview fragment	Code	Subtheme	Main theme
I would stop the recording and step out, and then I am freed, I almost feel freed from my role as a researcher. And I am there to comfort, to give advice, and I'm there.	Switching between roles	Limitations of the researcher role	Building rapport within (and outside) the confinements of the researcher role
We actually had a routine for debriefing in each other's office, where we told each other about the interviews that we'd done. Where we just got to talk through it all, kind of. And that felt incredibly important	Debriefing as part of the research process	Colleague support	Practicing self-care

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Norwegian center for research data. Participants received written information about the project, and they gave their informed consent to participate. They were informed that their participation was anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

In the presentation of this study, we safeguarded the anonymity of the participants by anonymizing background characteristics, such as gender and field of expertise. Moreover, all other information that could possibly lead to identification of the participants, such as workplace or more specific descriptions of their research, has either been changed or withheld. Hence, participants cannot be identified by the interview excerpts presented in this study.

Results

In relation to the research question of this study, i.e., how researchers balance proximity and distance in qualitative interviews with vulnerable research participants, we identified three main themes in our data set: (i) evidence of the emotional impact on the researcher; (ii) building rapport within (or outside) the confinements of the researcher role; and (iii) Practicing self-care. These themes are now presented and illustrated with excerpts from the interviews.

Evidence of the Emotional Impact on the Researcher

During the interviews, we asked our participants about any emotional impact that they might have experienced from doing research on participants in vulnerable life situations. From their responses, it became clear that this impact varied in level of severity, possibly influenced by the degree of vulnerability and the current life situation of the research subjects, and by the personality and life situation of the researcher. One participant, who conducted research on children who lived in particularly vulnerable circumstances, described how the impressions from the interviews affected her also afterwards, and how difficult it was to let go:

Informant 4: It's almost like having been on a boat and then you come home, and you're still "unsteady". […] That unsteady feeling has been with me all the time. […] And I always think "How are they doing now? Where are they now?" […] Yes, I think about them, and I almost, …, I can still hear their voices, right? Yes, you still *hear* the voices and you still *feel* the conversations that you had with them.

This fragment illustrates how the exposure to traumatic life stories may unsettle the researcher and cause emotional instability. Not only may the interview content be unbalancing to the researcher, it may also have an emotional aftermath that can be sensed physically and psychologically. When informants share upsetting accounts, the emotional imprint is not automatically erased when the researcher takes off his/her professional cloak and goes home. McGarrol (2017) uses the phrase "emotional hangover" to describe this feeling of being psychologically overwhelmed after emotionally disturbing interviews. With the presence of such strong feelings, there is a clear risk of spillover into the researcher's private life. Difficulties with letting go may even stretch over a very long period of time, especially when research subjects relate of extreme life situations, as was experienced by one of our informants:

Informant 8: That was a very special case, and I have thought a lot about how her life has turned out to be. And this is a very long time ago, it must be at least 30 years ago, I mean, they are grown up now, and it's a long time ago.

This experience of not being able to let go and wondering about research participants' situation has also been highlighted by Bashir (2018), and it is important to acknowledge the possible cumulative effect of being exposed to upsetting life stories over the years, as this may affect researchers' psychological well-being (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018).

Another participant also testified how some of the life stories of vulnerable participants left a lasting impression, and how this caused feelings of sadness and helplessness:

Informant 1: I found that maybe the hardest part was when I would meet people who clearly had extensive support needs. But their needs were not met at all, and maybe they would even turn down those who could help them. […] Things become so impossible when you see people who live on the fringes of society, maybe by their own free will.

This participant expressed a feeling of powerlessness, which may arise when researchers witness failing support systems for research subjects who experience little agency or empowerment. In other instances, powerlessness may occur when researchers witness poor life choices made by those who are unable to weigh the consequences of their actions. Either way, the researcher is in a powerless position – nothing more than a witness – and unable to offer help or resolve the difficult life situation of the research participant.

Yet, witnessing difficult life stories may also contain certain positive aspects. One of our participants described herself as more "detached" in the researcher role, and her analytical approach to the interview content helped her to avoid becoming emotionally affected:

Informant 5: I cannot say that I have felt a negative impact of listening to such stories… sometimes, and this may sound wrong, but I sometimes feel enriched by them, in a way that I get a broader understanding of what people can do to each other, and what people may be exposed to and actually live on. In a way, I feel that I become wiser.

Interviewer: You don't get emotionally involved?

Informant 5: No. But I can imagine that, for instance, if I were to interview children, and they would tell me about violence that they have experienced, that would be a situation where I could react differently. But that's because I'm a parent myself.

Thus, the researcher may also experience a sense of personal growth by listening to participants' life stories, even if these are traumatic. However, it seems that the researcher's own life situation may influence the ability to remain detached, and listening to children's distressing life stories may be especially upsetting.

Furthermore, the researcher's personal characteristics and motivation for doing research may also play a role for how emotionally involved or affected one becomes when being exposed to distressing life situations. One participant described himself as "cynical" and clearly distanced from his research subjects, stating that his main drive for conducting research was to satisfy his personal curiosity, rather than "saving the world". As such, he explained that he rarely got emotionally affected by the narratives of his research participants:

Informant 6: I don't get very personally touched. I think that "it's worse for them than it is for me", and to mix my own … that I would whine about how horrible it is to listen to other people's misery, I find that a bit too self-absorbed.

This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of one of our other participants, who claimed that her main motivation for doing research was to improve the life situation for the vulnerable people in question. She stated: "I doubt that I will be finished with this group before I see the statistics move into the right direction" (participant 4). While such an ambition may mobilize commitment, it may also lead to a stronger emotional impact when being confronted with the participants' hardship.

Hence, the emotional impact that some researchers experience from frequent exposure to distressing personal accounts may vary from researcher to researcher. Some researchers struggle with letting go of upsetting life stories, and they carry these with them for a very long time, frequently revisiting the research subjects in their mind. Some also experience feelings of powerlessness and frustration, whereas others highlight more positive consequences, such as personal growth. Still others remain unaffected altogether when listening to the emotional accounts of their research participants. Possibly, the researchers' own life situation and personal characteristics may influence the extent to which listening to distressing life stories becomes an emotional burden. Furthermore, it could be hypothesized that the life stories of particularly vulnerable groups, such as children, may affect researchers to a larger extent than stories from other groups of informants.

Building Rapport Within (or Outside) the Confinements of the Researcher Role

Building rapport, where the researcher works to establish a warm and trusting relationship with the informant, is an important fundament of the qualitative research interview. At the same time, the researcher-informant relationship is relatively one-sided, and when the researcher has gained the necessary data, this usually means the end of the relationship; there is nothing more in it for the research subject. Yet, research participants who are unfamiliar with social research and who are in a vulnerable life situation may sometimes grow expectations for help that exceed the researcher's room for maneuver. In fact, some research participants may have their

own agenda and see researchers as a way of accessing resources that they need (Micanovic et al., 2019). This may make it even more important for researchers to mark the boundaries of their role, and to clarify that there are no external benefits for the research subject, as one of our informants emphasized repeatedly:

Informant 6: To be very clear that one cannot help in any way. That is very often one of the biggest ethical challenges, especially with people who have little knowledge of social research. And to make them understand that "There is nothing I can do to help you" or "I do not represent any government agency, NGO, or voluntary organization, so there's nothing you can get from me". […] To clearly state that "There is nothing whatsoever that I can do to help you", that's a very important part of the informed consent.

While such a clear statement about the limitations of the researcher role may be useful and sometimes necessary, the need to act with empathy towards the research subject in order to establish rapport was also clearly highlighted in our interviews, i.e., "being friendly without being friends":

Informant 9: I do believe that there should be clear boundaries, and I think that I manage to uphold these. However, I think that it can be, not a warm relationship, but that I can express warmth without it being a friendship in a way. But it can be empathetic, yes. […] Then I convey a sort of warm curiosity, which makes the informant feel important and taken care of.

However, when rapport is established between the researcher and the research subject, it is not always evident for the researcher to maintain these rigid boundaries, especially in situations where the researcher feels capable of providing some level of emotional support. One informant, who stated clearly that she would not take a therapist position during her interviews, struggled nonetheless with upholding distance to some of her vulnerable informants when they revealed some of their deeper concerns:

Informant 8: It often occurs right after the interview. I switch off the recorder, and then it happens. They will often say something like "By the way…" or "It's like this…". And then you cannot really say that they should call the school nurse or something, but instead I've several times given out my private phone number. "If you need to talk…"

This fragment clearly illustrates the gap that sometimes exists between a theoretical understanding of the limitations of the researcher role, and what may happen when the researcher and research subject meet in an encounter characterized by proximity, trust, and warm interest. While there may be clear guidelines for what constitutes "good research practice", the reality of the research interview may conflict with such a theoretical approach. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) distinguish here between "procedural ethics", i.e., ethical issues that can be planned and anticipated, and "ethics in practice", i.e., everyday issues that may arise, often unexpectedly. Thus, despite a clear perception of the nature of the researcher role, researchers may still find themselves in practical situations where boundaries are being challenged.

When research subjects open up their inner worlds to the researcher, it may feel both natural and right for the researcher to provide some sort of support or assistance. As one participant explained about her encounters with research subjects who are willing to share their very private life stories: "You may feel that you want to return the favor" (informant 7). This sense of obligation has previously also been identified by Barbour (2010), who described how researchers could feel the need to be grateful for gaining access to the field. When researchers feel obliged towards their research subjects, the desire to "give back" may contribute to a distortion of the boundaries of the researcher role.

Research participants who show strong feelings during the interview may also challenge the confinements of the researcher role. One participant explained how she sometimes would stop the interview when the situation became too difficult for the research subject, thereby emphasizing that she was "not only a researcher in such a situation, but also a fellow human being", and she appeared to switch consciously between these two roles:

Informant 4: I would stop the recording and step out, and then I am freed, I almost feel freed from my role as a researcher. And I am there to comfort, to give advice, and I'm there. And then, when the child is ready, we return to the interview. […] Maybe this is not entirely standard procedure, but I feel that the children are the most important in this situation. And as far as the rules in research, yeah, I don't know…

The inability to switch off the "fellow human being" part of oneself was also highlighted by another participant, as she explained how that could lead to a blurring of roles:

Informant 3: When you are at work, you are there as a whole person, not just the work part of who you are, but the full person. And when you do research on people, then you may get

some sort of connection with these people, and that may make it difficult to get out of the situation.

These interview excerpts show how researchers try to balance the need for distance and proximity during their research interviews with vulnerable participants. Even though researchers are aware of the boundaries of their role, they must take specific action to build rapport and create an atmosphere that invites the research subject to disclose sometimes very personal accounts (Bashir, 2018). The deep connection and emotions that may occur as a consequence of this rapport-building may affect how the researcher responds to the research subject's revelations. In qualitative research, researchers are often considered to be "research tools" for knowledge production (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018), and the blurred boundaries may simply be a result of researchers taking responsibility for the emotional well-being of their vulnerable participants during the study. As such, the well-being of the research participants and that of the researcher may to a certain extent be interrelated. As Sharkey and colleagues (2011) state, vulnerable research subjects may require a heightened level of monitoring by the researcher, as their participation in research may put them at an increased risk of adverse reactions. Along this line of interpretation, the blurring of boundaries between the roles of researcher and empathetic fellow human being is not something that should be frowned upon. Instead, it could be acknowledged as an authentic part of ethical research with vulnerable research participants.

Our interviews indicate that professional background may influence how well the researcher manages to maintain an emotional distance towards the research subjects. Our data suggest that researchers with a practitioner background find it harder to adhere to the confinements of the researcher role than researchers who do not have "in field" experience. As Fenge (2010) states, there is usually no sudden change in identity when moving from a practitioner role to a researcher role. Whereas practitioner-thinking is directed towards improving a certain situation, researcher-thinking is about investigating a particular condition (Whalley, 2016). Hence, the researcher takes in the position of an outsider who aims to affect the daily life of the research participant as little as possible, while the practitioner functions as an insider who is expected to make a difference (Nikkanen, 2019). The motivation to help as well as the knowledge of how to help, may be difficult to set aside when practitioners become researchers, and the practitioner identity may be considered as an integral part of the self, as expressed by one of our participants:

Informant 9:   I'm educated as a social worker, so I have some sort of helping gene. And I don't think that there are very clear boundaries in a way. It [research] is not therapy, but it has certain elements of it, right?

With such a strong practitioner identity, maintaining clear boundaries towards research subjects may be difficult, and this participant related how she felt a strong responsibility towards her research subjects. In fact, this informant with her dual researcher-practitioner background does not seem to have resolved the question of professional boundaries, as she earlier in the interview stated that there "should be clear boundaries" but later questions these boundaries again. This illustrates how some researchers may struggle to combine different roles that they consider part of their professional identity. One participant described how it took time to grow into the role of researcher after having worked as a practitioner for a number of years first:

Informant 7:   I would say that I may have matured in that regard. And that I learned to know my own boundaries based on the role that I have. And I think that I learned quite a bit about that over the years. Like "What am I doing? Whom am I meeting? What is my role towards this person?", "Now I am meeting a research participant".

The excerpts above indicate that researchers sometimes struggle with the confinements of their researcher role, and the purposeful action that is taken to establish rapport with the research subject may make it harder to maintain clear boundaries between the roles of researcher and helper. Certain characteristics within the research subject and the researcher may blur these roles even further, such as the professional background and personality of the researcher, or the research subject's lack of understanding of the researcher role. As nearly all of our participants related about their challenges with managing the limitations of the researcher role, this may be an important aspect to acknowledge within the context of researcher well-being and work safety.

Practicing Self-Care

Even though our participants experienced different degrees of emotional involvement and psychological discomfort when conducting qualitative interviews with vulnerable research participants, all of them took steps for practicing self-care to deal with some of the challenges of the interview situations. Support from colleagues and supervisors was mentioned by several of our participants:

Informant 4:   I had many good conversations with my supervisor, who did research on the same vulnerable group earlier. And she's been an enormous support to me. [...] I didn't go into so much detail about my feelings and thoughts. However, she supported me by acknowledging that this was my reality.

Thus, the acknowledgment from colleagues that it is normal to get emotionally affected by listening to distressing life stories, appears valuable. Some participants told of a systematic approach to debriefing, in order to deal with the burdens of being indirectly exposed to traumatic events:

Informant 5: We actually had a routine for debriefing in each other's office, where we told each other about the interviews that we'd done. Where we just got to talk through it all, kind of. And that felt incredibly important, because the way these stories get to you, when they are so brutal... I remember that after the interviews, I really felt the need to be able to talk about them.

Informant 6: We have some kind of common understanding that, the harder the interviews you do or the more vulnerable the participants are, the more you should consider debriefing as part of the research process.

To establish a workplace culture where there is room for discussing demanding situations that one has encountered, may seem particularly important when doing research on vulnerable groups. Asante et al. (2021) describe how closeness with members of the research team resulted in a culture of proximity that was "of critical importance for coping with the emotion burden". Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) recommend this kind of institutionalized support for researchers who engage in sensitive research, and they suggest self-care strategies such as regular debriefing, support, and supervision.

While support at the workplace provides an important opportunity to discuss with colleagues who have personal knowledge of the challenges that may arise during interview situations, a supportive social network outside the workplace may be equally important, as one of our participants testified:

Informant 2: It is my opinion that researchers who seek out such minefields, they should have a well-functioning family life and some good friends. Otherwise, they should get themselves a dog.

In this fragment, the participant emphasizes the need for a healthy work-life balance and the importance of leisure time, especially when doing research on people who are in vulnerable life situations. A recent survey amongst Norwegian researchers shows that they on average work 46 hours per week, which is almost ten hours per week more than the typical work week for other professionals in Norway (Wendt et al., 2021). Hence, a sustainable work-life balance is not the number one priority for many researchers, but for those who conduct research on vulnerable groups, a consideration of the amount of time spent at work may be particularly wise and necessary to safeguard one's psychological well-being. Some of our participants made specific arrangements when planning their interviews, thereby reducing daily workload and emotional toll. Some mentioned limiting the number of interviews per day and allowing time for taking notes:

Informant 1: I needed to have a rough half hour between each of the interviews. Just to let the impressions sink in, basically, and to jot down some thoughts. Because I couldn't prepare for whom I would meet. So, each interview was some kind of surprise.

Informant 8: So, I have learned that I cannot have too many interviews in one day. Furthermore, I cannot have a very long day in the field, because I need to go home and write a log. [...] So, I have learned the hard way, that I should bear in mind that it is extremely exhausting. In addition, one needs time to compose oneself and to write a log, always.

Limiting the number of interviews per week is in line with Micanovic and colleagues' (2019) suggestion for researcher self-care. Furthermore, as our participants indicate, writing down thoughts and emotions may be helpful for researchers during data collection with vulnerable research participants, as it may function as a form of private debriefing after emotionally taxing encounters. Thus, with a professional support system in the workplace, a good work-life balance, a careful planning of the workday, and by allowing time for dealing with emotions and thoughts that may occur, researchers may be better equipped to deal with demanding situations during interviews with vulnerable research participants.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of qualitative researchers who conduct in-depth interviews with research participants in vulnerable life situations. Findings illustrate how qualitative researchers were often faced with contradicting demands during the interview situation, and how they tried to seek a balance between proximity and distance during in-depth interviews with vulnerable research subjects. While proximity is essential for building rapport with the research participant, the researcher role is also characterized by limited room for action towards the participants. The researcher often shows a warm curiosity and genuine interest to establish an atmosphere of trust and openness towards the research subject. At the same time, the researcher is in no formal position to help research participants who may face difficult life situations. This balancing act may be emotionally taxing for some researchers. Some respondents expressed feelings of powerless in their desire to help, while others found difficulties with "letting go"

after the interviews. Indeed, several of our participants testified of the emotional impact that some of the encounters with vulnerable research participants had had upon them. While certainly not all researchers experience such interviews as psychologically demanding, it is important to acknowledge that some of them do, as this recognition may lessen the impact of emotional distress (Micanovic et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important that research institutes establish an atmosphere that allows researchers to communicate feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, etc. From the authors' own experience, academia is not known as a workplace where feelings are given a prominent place, and researchers may find themselves dealing with complex emotions on their own. Hence, there exists a need for more organized follow-up of the mental wellbeing of qualitative researchers. Moreover, it is important to establish a working environment that acknowledges and accepts emotional affect in researchers. Findings from this study suggest that institutionalized support may be useful for researchers within the different branches of social sciences.

In our study, several participants witnessed blurred boundaries relating to their role as a researcher. The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (2019) state that "Researchers are responsible for explaining to the participants the limitations, expectations and requirements associated with their role as researchers". However, in our study, several participants described how their researcher role could – unforeseen – extend into different directions, sometimes merely as a supportive fellow human being, but sometimes also as a provider of help and advice. While it can be argued that it is important for both researchers and research participants to have clearly defined boundaries of their roles, switching between different roles may in certain situations be a necessity to guarantee the wellbeing of the research subjects. Thus, the researcher's role and responsibilities may not always be as clearly outlined as ethical committees require. Simultaneously, it is important for researchers not to undermine the autonomy of the research subjects (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2019). Unclear boundaries may increase this risk, especially when researchers feel a need to "come to the rescue". As Micanovic et al. (2019) state, providing help or advice could make vulnerable research participants even more vulnerable, and well-intended support from the researcher may negate the agency of research subjects who are in a distressing life situation. Our findings emphasize that, while it may seem difficult to establish and maintain clearly defined boundaries for the role of the qualitative researcher, it is nonetheless important for researchers to reflect carefully upon their own position and their responsibilities towards the research subjects.

Finally, the narratives of the participants in our study highlight the need for psychological self-care for researchers when encountering research subjects in vulnerable life situations. Such self-care may, for instance, include designated time for reflection, nurturing relationships, or physical exercise (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). Designing a self-care plan as an integral part of the research project may be particularly valuable for novice researchers and those researchers who have little prior experience with interviewing vulnerable research participants. However, also more experienced researchers may benefit from such a plan, as they may run the risk of emotional overload due to long-term indirect exposure to traumatic life events. Based on the personal accounts of the participants in our study, we support Kumar and Cavallaro's (2018) recommendation to include self-care as a part of the required doctoral curriculum for qualitative researchers. When a plan for self-care is available, this may remind researchers to regularly check-in with themselves to make sure that they are dealing adequately with the information that their participants trust them with.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research studies, this study has some limitations to be considered. Firstly, we used a pragmatic approach to the data collection process, so that each of the authors conducted interviews with three of the participants. In terms of validity, this procedure can be considered a weakness of the study. In qualitative research studies, the interviewer is considered a co-creator of the data, and the interviewer's prior knowledge may play an important role in understanding and interpreting the interviewee's experiences (McGrath et al., 2019). With three different interviewers, the different knowledge backgrounds may have led the interviews into different directions than if all interviews had been conducted by one interviewer only. However, we tried to compensate for this by making sure that all of the interviewees answered each of the questions from our interview guide sufficiently.

Secondly, when conducting qualitative interviews, the researcher has the opportunity to fine-tune the research questions from one interview to the next (McGrath et al., 2019). Since the interviews were conducted by three different interviewers, there was little opportunity to do so in this study. To compensate for this, a pilot interview was conducted, and the researchers collaborated closely during development of the interview guide.

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