CHAPTER 5

‘YOU JUST GET ON WITH IT’: NEGOTIATING THE TELLING AND SILENCING OF TRAUMA AND ITS EMOTIONAL IMPACTS IN INTERVIEWS WITH MARGINALISED MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter explores the relational and emotional lifeworlds of qualitative interviews. The chapter documents the ways in which I have negotiated the sharing of traumatic accounts without being able to fix or repair their causes, and how I struggled to listen to recollections without trying to appropriate, accentuate or ameliorate their affective resonances.

Methodology/Approach – The chapter focuses on one case from a four-year study with mothers and their daughters in a marginalised area of South Wales, UK. The study drew on visual and creative methods of data production, including mapping, collage, photoelicitation and timelines, which were accompanied by in-depth elicitation interviews.
Findings – The chapter illustrates the usefulness of reflecting on emotions to understand the communication of trauma, and its emotional impacts on research relationships both within and beyond the field.

Originality/Value – The chapter builds on earlier work that has attempted to consider in detail the nature of the interaction between researchers and participants. It argues that psychoanalytically informed frames of analysis can engender a more nuanced understanding of the relationality and emotionality of qualitative research; particularly when topics are hard to speak of and hard to bear.

Keywords: Emotion; defended subject; helplessness; psychoanalytically informed approaches; qualitative research; relationality

INTRODUCTION

As Gabb (2008) argues, in empirical qualitative studies of family life, the researcher inevitably becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being researched. These worlds are emotional, embodied and affective, and they deny the premise of the objective, detached social researcher. Accordingly, fieldwork is not simply an exercise in data collection but an active process of production, which shapes and constructs identities, intimate relations, an emotional self and a physical self (Coffey, 1999), for both researchers and participants. Arguably, then, psychoanalytically informed approaches can be useful in exploring the affective elements of research relationships and the value of emotion in the activities of research. However, it is important to note that there have been strong objections to taking psychoanalysis outside the clinical situation of the ‘consulting room’ (Frosh, 2010; Frosh & Emerson, 2005; Midgley, 2006). In these critiques, psychoanalysis is positioned as an undemocratic dialogue in which taking a psychoanalytical style of inquiry outside the clinic to the research setting imports power inequalities.

Yet psychoanalytically informed work can, and often does, take a democratising and dialogical stance (see Hoggett, Beedell, Jimenez, Mayo, & Miller, 2010; Morgan, 2015). Utilising this approach, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) contend that traditional interviews based on the question-answer method are thin, rationally driven accounts that omit more than they reveal of human subjects. In their own psychoanalytically informed work, employing free association narrative interviews, they emphasise the importance of biography and the usefulness of open-ended questions which are
understood through participants’ meaning-frames and not predetermined by the researcher. This approach engenders:

a largely uninterrupted flow of talk with an attentive listener whose role it is to try and understand what is being said; opening up opportunities to gain a more nuanced understanding of participants’ lived subjectivities. (Mannay, 2016, p. 111)

Two key concepts in psychoanalytically informed approaches are ‘transference’ and ‘counter-transference’. In a clinical setting, transference is understood as unconscious images from the patient’s past being imposed on the analyst, while counter-transference represents the analyst’s unconscious response to the patient or the patient’s transference itself (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). Within social research, these concepts have been utilised to deepen understandings of the research relationship and engender the reflexivity to appreciate the researcher’s somatic responses to the participant as affective ways of knowing (Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2003). In this way, the relational aspect of the qualitative research parallels the experience of psychotherapists in reacting to their clients’ concerns and narrations.

For example, Walkerdine et al. (2001) developed a psychosocial research method of engagement that considered the psychoanalytic concepts of desire, anxiety and defences to think through the effects of unconscious processes and social constraints in the lives of working-class girls. Working with emotions, they cautiously used their own subjectivity as a tool and explored their own defences as researchers in relation to the interview encounter and data produced. In one case, they noted how ‘too close a correspondence’ between interviewees (the working-class parents who could not envisage their daughter moving away), and the researcher (the working-class daughter who would have felt trapped if she had stayed), impacted on the understandings produced about the data (see Lucey et al., 2003). Accordingly, the boundaries of objective researcher and researched were breached to consider issues of affect, which provided insights into complex negotiations and emotional struggles and illuminated the role that these play in both creating and analysing data (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

The importance of recognising unconscious feelings has also been explored by Gemignani (2011) in a study with refugees. The tension between involvement and detachment has important implications for qualitative fieldwork, and in this study, the researcher took an autoethnographic approach to understand the emotional life of the interview. For Gemignani, the distance between forced and chosen emigration, and the closeness invoked in the everyday inevitable difficulties of the migratory experience, were key factors in unpicking the liminal spaces between the subjectivities of the researcher and participants in
both fieldwork and data analysis. Importantly, this approach not only positions the participant as a defended subject, but also accepts that as researchers we habitually defend ourselves from threats to the self which create anxiety both consciously and unconsciously (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

These relational aspects of the research process have also been explored in the field of oral history. In relation to transference, here authors have explored how narrators position the researcher in a relationship familiar to them, whilst counter-transference represents the ways in which the interviewee provokes particular emotions in the researcher (see Mahoney, 2018 [this volume]). The idea of ‘familiar to them’ is also central in discourses of appropriation, and Rose (2010) has documented the ways in which the audiencing of traumatic accounts often creates a deceitful form of empathy, where the capacity to care exists only where the viewer can see the subject as ‘like them’. This chapter builds on these and earlier works to illustrate how researchers’ emotional reactions become an important source of reflexivity in negotiating the telling and silencing of trauma.

**THE STUDY**

The data discussed here were drawn from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded study that focused on the everyday lives of mothers and daughters residing in a marginalised area in urban South Wales, UK. The research was interested in the stigma of place, barriers to education, gendered inequalities and the role of social class (Mannay, 2013a, 2014). Visual images are widely recognised as having the potential to evoke empathetic understandings of the ways in which other people experience their worlds (Belin, 2005; Fink, 2012; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Liveng et al., 2017; Rose, 2001). The experiential accounts of participants were facilitated by creative visual and narrative activities (Mannay, 2010, 2016) and repeat elicitation interviews, which allowed participants to reflect in detail on the micro-interactions of their lives in the past, present and their imagined futures. Therefore, although the study did not adopt a classic psychosocial interview approach, introducing visual and creative aspects moved beyond the sanitised form of accounts that are often associated with standard interview-based research (Hollway, 2015).

It is important to note that this research was indigenous, in that I had a high level of familiarity with the research site, and to differing extents, the participants. The notion of being an insider or an outsider is inadequate in an absolute sense, and the complex and multifaceted nature of lived experiences positions researchers as neither total ‘insiders’ nor ‘outsiders’ in relation to
the individuals they interview (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Mannay & Creaghan, 2015; Song & Parker, 1995; see also Latchem-Hastings, 2018; Roberts, 2018; Sheppard, 2018; van den Scott, 2018 [this volume]). However, the overlap in our geographies, histories and experiences built emotional connections with participants and engendered a high level of affinity and empathetic understanding. We have agency over our own interpretations of events and are not victims of our own biographies (Iantaffi, 2011), yet the ‘specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody’s life, and their use of their own past’ (Steedman, 1986, p. 6). Therefore, reflecting on the emotional lifeworld of the research encounter can be particularly useful for exploring the intricacies of shared meanings and moving beyond the narrowness of what we might expect to know or find.

Reflecting further on place, the research site was a marginalised locale, and discourses of shame often form a symbolic nexus from which working-class women struggle to disassociate (Aaron, 1994; Davidoff, 1976; Evans, 2007; Skeggs, 2009; Tyler, 2008). Consequently, investments in working-class respectable femininity have been built as a resistance to stories of working-class lack (Gillies, 2007; Walkerdine, 1997). In presenting data from this study with working-class women, I do not want to further stigmatise the participants or situate their home as a ‘spatial folk devil’ (Mannay, 2014, p.19), but neither do I want to represent them as ‘working-class heroes’. This is not simply because I share classed and spatial biographies, and this attaches some form of solidarity or familiarity, but because it needs to be acknowledged that trauma is not a working-class phenomenon. Trauma exists across class. Those without access to capital may find it harder to negotiate liveable lives, but the women I worked with were individuals, with their own agency, biographies and subjective realities. They were not simply research ‘subjects’; rather they entered into relational conversations that produced the interview accounts. The following section focuses on one such relational encounter, reflecting on the sharing of trauma, appropriation, amelioration, silencing and helplessness.

**RESEARCH REFLECTIONS – GRACE**

As de Beauvoir (1949) argues, for women, the future is often haunted by phantoms of the past, which impact upon the present, and my interviews with mothers and their daughters were permeated with biographical reflections. Violence was not the initial research focus; nonetheless, as Rock (2007, p. 30) contends, there is a ‘need to remain open to the features that cannot be listed in advance of the study’, and family troubles were an invasive element
in the accounts (see Mannay, 2013b). Male violence was often central in participants’ biographies and traumatic events were normalised and naturalised. This was the case for Grace, who, at the time of the research, was a single mother to two children, who had previously experienced both familial and domestic abuse and was living on a low income, as a full-time mother in a marginalised and stigmatised housing estate.

In Grace’s extract below the 12 years of physical, mental and, later, sexual abuse from her stepfather were centralised in recollections of her past, as well as in her present-day relationship with her mother.

Grace: As I got older it got worse anyway you know really he should have been (pause) me and there’s a… a… a…, another female on his side that would be, I suppose a cousin, and we should have gone to court and got him done.

Dawn: Mmm.

Grace: Years ago for the stuff that he done (pause) cause he changed (pause) it wasn’t just physical abuse in the end with him you know it really wasn’t, so we should of (pause) both of us a long time ago gone.

Dawn: Mmm.

Grace: But I just didn’t have the strength to face him in court cause they were very clever so there was never a lot of evidence, and because when social services come round as well, ah, they interviewed me with them right next door, but it wasn’t a solid wall it was a door.

Dawn: So they knew they were listening.

Grace: Yeah, but there was no way I was goanna say nothing, so because of that social services just didn’t take it any further, like I mean I never got a visit ever again (pause) you know (pause) and that was because the school obviously reported him, cause I can remember one day crying and they seen the marks and that, and I said to them ’no I fell’ (laughs).

Dawn: Ahh.

Grace: And back then they accepted it (laughs) you know (laughs) but you know he just, and she just, I think that was the worse thing knowing that your own mother did nothing you know, even now question her and she’ll go I wasn’t aware of nothing.

Dawn: And did he used to hit her an all then.

Grace: No he never touched my mother (pause) it’s the one thing he didn’t do, I got it all, he never touched my mother, never touched her at all.

Dawn: But d’you think she was scared of him psychologically then.

Grace: I don’t know, I don’t know because he never threatened her, he never hit her (pause) and years ago she actually left him for two weeks and she’s the one that went back (pause) he never harassed her or hounded her once you know.

Dawn: Mmm.
Grace: There was nothing, he didn’t chase her at all (pause) she was going to the pay-phone-boxes and ringing him and getting him to come down and all stuff like that so you know, I was, I would say she would have to accept the responsibility as well there (pause) she just don’t (laughs) (both laugh).

In everyday interactions, including qualitative research, emotions constantly pass between people; and when projection is used as a defence to get rid of painful feelings by putting them into someone else, they can be experienced by the other through empathy (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In this interaction, I was confronted with an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. This emotion, which I initially interpreted as belonging to me, was provoked in me through my discussion with Grace. I understood it in relation to a ‘hangover from beliefs about scientific objectivity’ (Hollway, 2001, p. 16); as a rationalisation of the limitations of the research project and its inability to make anything right in relation to the reflexive account of an adult, which cannot be attended to in the same way as safeguarding issues raised by children.

Across our two interviews, Grace appeared strong and capable. Her creative activities and the related interview accounts described how she has negotiated both a childhood characterised by abuse and an early adulthood fraught with further violence, trauma and insecurity. Now, as a mother to her own children, despite her lack of nurturing she demonstrates her own capacity to care (Hollway, 2006). In this way, any sense of a ‘spoiled identity’ (May, 2008, p. 470) is challenged by a narrative of resilience rather than one that centralises feelings of helplessness. As Richardson (1997, p.1) argues, researchers routinely turn their gaze to the lives of others, but ‘they are less prone to see themselves as social and cultural products, producing social and cultural products’. It is important then to explore the origins of this overwhelming helplessness that I experienced.

My initial reflections focused on the inability of the researcher to change the past or put things right. There was also the possibility that I was evoking a passive ideal of empathy, constructed from caring based on similarity (Rose, 2010). Through transference, Grace may have positioned me in a relationship familiar to her, and I also understood and felt a sense of familiarity, which was evoked affectively as an aspect of counter-transference. Although our childhood biographies are different, Grace and I shared similar geographies and have experienced poverty, motherhood and housing instability. There are similarities in the present, but arguably my emotional responses were resonant of a crude empathy, which comes ‘dangerously close to the appropriation of someone else’s experience because we feel for another only insofar as we are positioned as being like that other’ (Rose, 2010, p. 113).
These inherently selfish responses to the accounts of this unliveable, yet lived, life might have contributed to the emotions experienced, but they are insufficient to explain the weight of these emotions.

In considering the associated concepts of projection and denial, there are different ways to understand the emotionality of helplessness. The dynamic unconscious defends against anxiety, and although the account was presented as matter of fact, a straightforward recollection of the past, arguably these memories were not simply processes of factual recall but evidence of an emotional lifeworld. In psychoanalytic theory, threats to the self create anxiety. Defences against such anxiety are mobilised at a largely unconscious level so that when ‘memories of events are too anxiety-provoking, they will be either forgotten or recalled in a modified, more acceptable fashion’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2009, p. 300). Positioning Grace as a defended subject requires an understanding of how pain needs to be projected to guard against anxiety. The performed denial of the helplessness experienced by the child Grace perhaps allows Grace to access to a ‘dimension through which human beings create themselves anew’ (Elliott, 1992, p. 4).

The adult Grace appears contained and confident. The affective life of the interview, even in her paralanguage, did not communicate any distress. The accompanying laughter, to things that are not humorous, acted as a denial of the pain associated with recollection. However, my reaction to Grace’s talk was a palpable feeling of helplessness, which stayed with me long after the interview. This helplessness was only a faint trace of the helplessness of the child Grace, but it helped me to look at the data again and explore the weight of the everyday negotiation of abuse, where the usual agents of help—mother, teachers and social workers—did not assist.

The account is situated in childhood but as Berger (1972, p. 370) contends:

The present tense of the verb to be refers only to the present: but nevertheless with the first person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past, which is inseparable from it. ‘I am’ includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already biographical.

Grace, at least outwardly, has been able to produce a liveable sense of self, an ‘I am’ that has not just survived but thrived; a maternal self that has created a successful family unit. However, in rationalising the childhood past in a present adulthood, Grace was still confronted by what she calls the ‘worse thing’, ‘knowing that your own mother did nothing, you know, even now question her and she’ll go I wasn’t aware of nothing’. Grace, as a mother, and as a woman aware of wider discourses of what mothers can and should be (Aaron & Rees, 1994; Gillies, 2007; May, 2008), was still confronted
by complete denial from her mother. This denial may be the only liveable option for Grace’s mother, and maternal subjects can adopt the defences of repression, denial and splitting as a protection of ‘self as mother’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001), but this means that for Grace there is a denial of recognition, legitimisation and responsibility.

In a psychosocial qualitative approach, it is important that the researcher attempts to contain the pain communicated in the interview so that it can be returned detoxified and faced as an aspect of reality (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). When the experience is too painful, this pain can be returned too quickly, acting to deny painfulness and offering reassurance and rationalisation. In my own responses to the interview as a whole, initially there was a sense of containment (Winnicott, 1965). Later, there were attempts to make excuses and to provide justifications, which could make the account easier to bear – easier for the researcher, because for the participant it is already biographical. I offered the inadequate, ‘did he used to hit her’ and ‘d’you think she was scared of him’.

My interruptions only served to accentuate, not ameliorate. Grace does not remember any forms of domestic abuse towards her mother. She has experienced, and had previously discussed, domestic violence and psychological attacks in her own adult life, which suggest that she can read these signs effectively. My attempts to provide reassurance and a rationale were not met with the possibilities of any rationalisation. They only accentuated a darker remembering. My own experience of being a mother, an experience shared by Grace, acted to raise further questions, silently to myself, about the absence of care, then and now. In the last line of the extract, the effects of the past in the present, and their lack of resolution, were restated: ‘I would say she would have to accept the responsibility as well there (pause) she just don’t (laughs) (both laugh)’. In this exchange, Grace laughed, and I also laughed, we both laughed. The laughter is resonant of the colloquial ‘don’t know whether to laugh or cry’, as we were laughing but nothing was funny. It was a response to the lived trauma Grace shared. I had given up on any attempts to contain the pain so that it can be faced as an aspect of reality (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Instead, I denied the pain and linked on to the release of laughing, choosing to laugh and not cry. The laughter normalised the situation and somehow it helped. Crying would, for me, have been a disrespectful appropriation of someone else’s experience (Rose, 2010).

In the research process, reflecting on emotions can provide a more nuanced understanding of what is said, and what is silenced. Emotions offer a way to move beyond a simple question–answer analysis, which can leave out more than it allows of human subjects (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Focusing on
what was felt enables an appreciation of the weight of Grace’s account, the lived trauma of the child Grace, as well as the continual psychosocial work that is needed to maintain a defended subject in respect to the ongoing relational maternal denial. It also opens up the shared social worlds of the interview and provides an opportunity to reflect on not just how, but why researchers interrupt and reassure – to deflect, deny and return difficult emotions too quickly.

Returning again to the overwhelming feeling of helplessness felt in the interview, importantly this did not disappear as I moved from the situatedness of the interview space. Liveng et al. (2017, p. 166) have reported how the emotional states that the images and talk of their research activities produced in them continued beyond the fieldwork in the form of ‘dreams and feelings’. Grace’s account, and others that featured relational trauma, stayed with me not simply because they were traumatic, moving and difficult to hear and bear (although claiming that simply listening to an account that someone else has lived is ‘difficult for me’ seems discourteous). The additional issue with these accounts was my indigenous connection with people and place.

Lisiak and Krzyżowski (2018 [this volume]) discuss being stripped of their right and duty to speak up, and this was also an inevitable aspect of my insider research, knowing others who were spoken about but remaining silent. I have explored the weight of knowing unconsenting others who are storied in participants’ accounts elsewhere (Mannay, 2011), but in returning to this account in particular, and reflecting on helplessness, its ownership, projection, defence and transference, it may well be that I was the defended subject, afraid of knowing and what this knowledge would mean for me. As a researcher, I can listen and I can speak, within the interview, but I cannot speak outside it, not to others in the participants’ accounts, the unknowing and the unconsenting, those positioned as abusers and abusive. These stories are not owned by me, the biographies are not my own and the decisions not to report or address are not mine. I keep quiet, and I maintain confidentiality. I have realised, eventually, that my own need, or want, to speak and challenge and seek justice, is insignificant, and that although silence may feel helpless, I should in fact be grateful that participants felt able to share the emotionality of their lived realities and the pathways they have negotiated to reach the present.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

‘Unsettling stories on emotional social worlds redefine our understandings of harm and distress and reconfigure ideas of responsible knowing’ (Gabb, 2010, p. 461); therefore, there is an important responsibility for researchers to
reflexively consider the emotional weight of relational encounters in the field. Women living on the margins are already pathologised, so to act as if we are objective researchers, ignoring our own subjectivities, emotions and their effects on and in the fieldwork is a disservice to our participants, othering them as research objects. Reflecting on interviews and drawing on their relationality and affect centralises the emotional life of interviewing, and the inherent value of recognising not only what is said but also what is felt. In the telling and silencing of trauma, the emotions that pass between researchers and participants are key mechanisms for analysing, questioning, exploring and achieving some forms of understanding.

As Froggett, Conroy, Manley, and Roy (2014) argue, it is difficult to relay multisensory experiences and their emotional content into words as this “thins-out” the experience, or abstracts those elements that can be verbalised giving an overtly discursive view, so that...emotional processes...become difficult to see’. However, despite these difficulties, it is important to attempt to communicate the emotionality and relationality of the research process, rather than hold on to the ideology of the objective, disconnected researcher, devoid of any feelings that could contaminate the integrity of the data. Emotions help to inform us about the research process itself and, in the example presented, they also enable insights into the complexities, defences and psychological work needed to negotiate trauma and enable spaces where ‘you just get on with it’.

REFERENCES


