

# The emotional labour of researching sensitive topics online: considerations and implications

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## Abstract

Utilising online data within qualitative research is becoming increasingly common, particularly as it offers a useful means for engaging with sensitive topics and accessing social actors in more 'naturalistic' settings. However, researching sensitive topics online can expose researchers to a range of emotional narratives, yet researcher emotion remains an area which is relatively underexplored in relation to online qualitative research. This article then reflects on the emotional implications of qualitative research online through the case study of online infertility research. Three themes are highlighted: what happened next?; empathy from afar, and emotional detachment and these reflect on how emotion can be manifest and utilised, and the strategies that can be adopted to facilitate the negotiation of researching emotive and sensitive topics in online settings. Drawing on Campbell's (2001) ideas, the article then sets out what the notion of what 'emotionally engaged online research' may look like.

## Keywords

Emotional work, male infertility, online research, reflexivity, researchers

## Introduction

Online settings, such as forums, discussion boards and social media sites, are increasingly popular within social sciences research, particularly for researching sensitive topics (Langer and Beckman, 2005). Sensitive topics are regarded as 'those which deal with very private and emotionally charged issues' (Legard et al., 2003: 161), relate to intimacy and/or which require careful presentation in safe settings so that interpersonal relationships are not compromised (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). Thus, the type of social spheres that

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could potentially be described as ‘sensitive’ are plentiful, and perhaps never more so in relation to reproduction (Carroll, 2012) where the disclosure of infertility may be viewed as a site of potential vulnerability.

The link between virility-fertility (Lloyd, 1996) is often seen to be a potential source of stigma around disclosure of fertility problems by men (Hanna and Gough, 2015). Given the paucity of research that exists around how and if men experience stigma around infertility (ibid) the level of sensitivity that exists for men around fertility and conception issues is relatively un-quantified. However, the challenges that appear to exist in terms of gaining access to men’s experiences beyond clinic settings, and the small sample sizes of studies which have engaged with men’s experiences (*c.f.* Webb and Daniluk, 1999), goes some way to demonstrate that infertility remains a deeply personal issue for many men. Using online resources can then offer a means to ‘meet’ informants for such topics where they already are’ (Langer and Beckman, 2005: 191) and this was central to the rationale for our researching infertility online.

It is suggested that ‘The searchable nature of online discussion archives allows the researcher to capture conversations by ordinary people pertaining to specific issues without the researcher directing the conversation’ (Jowett, 2015: 288), and this context was vital in our use of online material for understanding male infertility. This article does not seek to further discuss the value in conducting online research in a generalised sense, or engage with the wider ethical issues, as these topics have been discussed extensively and eloquently elsewhere (*c.f.* Morison et al., 2015; Roberts, 2015; Whitehead, 2007; Rodham and Gavin, 2006; Eysenbach and Till, 2001), but rather this article seeks to offer an insight into the emotional work and impact of conducting sensitive research online from the researcher’s perspective.

Emotion is viewed as a central feature of social lives, something which helps navigate as well as understand (Williams, 2000), and the current trend towards ‘affect’ demonstrates how emotion, ‘texture’, and embodiment has been revitalised within social research (Clough and Halley, 2007; Wetherell, 2013, 2015; Ahmed, 2004; Lather and St Pierre, 2013). However, it has been suggested that researchers have not always been viewed as conducting ‘emotional work’ during research activities, and discourses of ‘affect’ have perhaps been less concerned with ‘affect’ in relation to the researcher and ‘in the course of the very proper concern of researchers to protect research participants from harm, researchers have neglected to protect themselves’ (Bloor et al., 2008: 3). Given that cultural texts can incite emotion in recipients (Ahmed, 2004) emotion therefore has the potential to be a source of distress for researchers and *could* be a source of ‘harm’ in terms of negative impacts on researcher wellbeing.

The idea then of ‘researching the researcher’ (Campbell, 2001) has until recently, been resisted. Not least due to persistent arguments around the inappropriateness of emotions within research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Researching (including of topics described as sensitive<sup>1</sup>) has the potential to be emotive for all involved, including researchers, yet it has routinely been suggested that when conducting face-to-face fieldwork, researchers should ‘not display their own emotions during the interview but deal with them later’ (Legard et al., 2003: 163).

As researchers we may want to feel to understand, but do not want to feel to the point of distress (Moncur, 2013) or for emotions to become ‘noisy affectivity’ (Lather, 2013).

Where understanding denotes accessing experience, distress perhaps implies a loss of objectivity. Similarly, reflexivity within the research process has often been viewed as being about ‘standing back’, implying a rational knowledge-based process, but this too can invoke ideas around being unemotional (Burkitt, 2012). Whilst feminist research has been at the forefront of opening up discourses around researcher emotions (Carroll, 2012; Blakeley, 2007), particularly as female researchers are suggested to be more likely to engage in sensitive and emotionally harmful research (Carroll, 2012), there is however still some resistance across qualitative work about research work as involving emotion work at all. Although recent work such as Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) usefully argues for the centrality of emotions to be considered in the ‘doing’ of all qualitative research.

Whilst engaging in qualitative fieldwork may then involve emotions writ large, in that there will be emotional processes occurring, which may in turn generate emotions for researchers, how then does emotion manifest itself for the researcher who is removed, whose topic is mediated through the internet? Starting from a position that the emotions of both participants and researchers provide insights that are pertinent to the experience and qualitative research, thus understanding the emotive landscape of the field, regardless of whether the field is on- or offline, should be located more centrally in the work of qualitative researchers, this article will then explore how online research involves ‘emotional work’. Such labour remains similar but different to that experienced in ‘offline’ research, and as such the article examines how such emotion may be manifest, handled and examines the implications for the practice of online qualitative research.

## **Background of the research**

This article draws on a qualitative research project examining forum posts on a site aimed at men experiencing infertility within their intimate partner relationships. Using online sources for exploring men’s experiences of infertility remains an underexplored area within reproductive research (Hanna and Gough, 2016a, 2016b), and this research was a qualitative investigation of how men use men only forums to share and seek help from their peers. The forum used was a UK site aimed at men only and hosted within a wider infertility website; the volume of posts was reflective of the men only nature of the forum and of sample sizes for qualitative online research of this kind (Hanna and Gough, 2016a, 2016b). The analysis of the forum was conducted retrospectively in the manner of reading ‘archivally’ (see Paetchter, 2013) through posts which already existed on the site. The forum was an open one with a high volume of traffic. The ethical approach adopted followed the best practice detailed in the British Psychological Society guidance for online research<sup>2</sup> and the researchers made no contact with the posters during the research, although the forum administration was contacted after the research was completed and informed of the research and publications. Further can be found in publications from the research (Hanna and Gough, 2016a, 2016b).

In the manner of ‘rendering explicit hidden agendas and half-formed intentions’ (Gough, 2003: 25), positioning the research is perhaps useful at this juncture. The research was conducted by a female researcher, was not rooted in a lived experience of infertility by the researcher and the work is underpinned by feminist principles and a strong commitment to gender equality. There is always a tension as a feminist researcher

that gendered discourses of power can be reproduced through focusing on men's narratives around areas of social life in which women have historically been subjugated (McFadden and McCamley, 2003). However, the interest within this research and the authors' broader areas of research relate to the wider benefits that can occur within society if men are supported within areas which are often perceived as feminised, such as reproduction and parenting. Thus, by allowing men to be viewed differently within certain domains, the burden of some aspects of social life being viewed as the preserve of women alone can perhaps be a means for enabling greater gender equity.

Whilst 'the emotionality of researching difficult and sensitive topics is a private issue for most researchers' (Blakeley, 2007: 61), I argue that particularly for emerging and evolving qualitative research approaches, such as online methods, making the private public appears methodological advantageous, and it is in this spirit that I share my reflections. The consideration of the emotions involved for myself as the researcher during the research was an ongoing and evolving process. I consciously noted the emotional responses I was feeling in relation to the data during the early phases of the research, and whilst all qualitative research involves emotions, I personally had not been prepared for the depth of feeling and extent of the emotional labour during the research. I had (perhaps naively) assumed that the doing of such research 'online' may in fact be 'less' rather than 'more' emotive.

I kept notes on my feelings and reflections during the research and analysis primarily in an attempt to understand the experience for myself. I de-briefed with colleagues about the experience, discussing the value and relevance of such emotions to the research. I also presented an early version of this article to an audience of primarily reproduction researchers, the questions and comments from this helped further to shape my analysis of the experiences and process of the emotions of researching online.

As Morison et al. (2015: 228) usefully note, 'some of the very attributes that make online research methods attractive and innovative can create particular challenges, many of which may be unique to the setting of a particular study'. This point resonates for this particular research; the emotional dimensions of exploring infertility may not be as highly evident in other topics online, and the particular experiences of researchers will be mediated through interrelationships and feedback between topic and researcher. However, the wider issue of broadening out the methodological dialogue about the researchers' experience of sensitive topics online will hopefully transcend the specific attributes and interpretations of the research topic examined here, contributing to methodological discussions of emotions in online research and qualitative research more broadly.

## **Emotional implications for researchers**

This methodological reflection draws upon three themes that were identified during the research project and emotional reflexivity described above. These themes are: what happened next?; empathy not sympathy; and detachment for whom? Each of these themes will be discussed in turn, drawing on examples before overarching conclusions around the methodological implications for researching sensitive and emotive topics online are explored.

## What happened next?

Researching online frequently involves engagement with narrative accounts of people's life experiences. The forum used in our research frequently involved threads in which posters would detail 'their infertility story', adopting a very narrative and biographical approach for engaging with others. Posters would often return to threads and provide updates as their journey (of diagnosis, tests, adaption to their fertility status, and possibly engaging with assisted reproduction treatment) progressed. However, as posters themselves noted on the forum, there was often a sense of stories ending abruptly when people had ceased to post any further. For example:

Hey [Posters name], What happened? I love to hear other [sic] peoples stories but they never seem to conclude! I hope it ended well for you (Forum Poster 1)

Whilst this can also occur in terms of qualitative fieldwork, the very nature of verbal conversation and interaction means that interviews are drawn to a close, and interviewer and participant navigate the ending of that encounter, together. Often research participants can be the one left wondering 'what happened' once they have participated in a project ([ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://ethicsguidebook.ac.uk)), but the closure of the research meeting generally makes that encounter discrete, i.e. a one-off occurrence in which the participant knows why they are participating and the benefits of doing so. However, with online data there is a sense that the encounter ends abruptly, in that the researcher has no volition over the participant remaining active on that forum or of eliciting any further information from that participant. Thus, my experience was that, as a researcher, you could be left wondering 'what happened next' in relation to posts such as the one above. Such wondering is double edged in relation to the emotions experienced, on the one hand as a researcher and in your 'professional hat' you are frustrated that the data source has 'run out', but as a human in your 'personal hat' you are left pondering the fate of the poster, hoping that they have found a positive conclusion.

In one thread a poster deleted a highly emotive post referring to feeling like it was 'Not worth carrying on' and seeing other posters counselling the original poster to 'contact your local Samaritans' or that 'there are many out there who are professionally compassionate and may be able to help you through the dark days' (FP17) was something I felt was challenging to deal with as a researcher. Black and white textual postings of the real and apparent distress that posters were experiencing, to the point of suicidal feelings, which were then removed/erased from threads create a real sense of worry; were they ok? Had they managed to get help if they needed it? Removed, remote and anonymous from the experience as a researcher you have to try and temper that worry or anxiety for other human beings with the knowledge that you cannot do anything about it and just sit with powerlessness in that context, trying to be aware that such feelings on the part of posters are of course part of the human condition and beyond your 'fixing' in an online research context (Paechter, 2013). The desire as a researcher to protect participants from 'harm' be it from the research or otherwise does not necessarily cease when a research encounter is mediated online and as others have discussed being powerless in the research encounter can itself be part of what is emotionally challenging (Etherington, 2007).

Reproduction and fertility is an important part of the life course, which has visible outcomes, i.e. conception, and for topics such as this (and other health issues where treatment is occurring for example) the sense of 'what happened' may be more apparent a question for the researcher to resolve. Men on the forum often discussed at length their desires to be parents and the challenges to reach that point, yet often would often cease posting without sharing what had happened,<sup>3</sup> or similarly if men announced that they had achieved conception on the forum, they often stopped posting (often for fear of upsetting other forum members who had not yet achieved the desired pregnancy) and thus left their story as one of fertility treatment success, but with no follow up. Some men (the minority, and often the most regular forum members) however did return to post updates on their pregnancies and the arrival of their children. As a researcher, this created a sense of closure in their stories (even if that was not applicable to the research questions) and often I read on to see the 'ending' of their narrative. Whereas for the men whose stories appeared for a while before disappearing from the forum space, there was a palpable sense of wondering; the question of what happened is an emotive one, and particularly in the context of the experiences some of the men presented. The feelings can perhaps be equated to the notion Etherington (2007) proposes around transcriber emotions, of being a 'bystander'; you find yourself wanting to know what happens in the end, but without wholly feeling like you are entitled to. Whilst, to use the question posed by Blakely (2007) of 'Do you still feel the same way?', with time the sense of wondering faded, but the dual frustration/uncertainty of what became of those posters was omnipresent during the analysis phase.

Whilst other forum posters might wonder of the personal situation of those who once posted but have subsequently withdrawn, posters do hold the possibility and option of being able to contact other posters through the forum. However, for researchers if they are not 'engaging' directly with the forum in question, or they are not reading threads in 'real time' cannot do this. The ending of narratives for the researcher can then create a 'data void'. This can then be seen to create ambiguity and frustration for the researcher due to the inability to probe or seek further clarification from the posters as participants (Jowett, 2015) given the lack of relationship between researcher/researched, and potentially differentiating them from the posters who do have the possibility to continue further narrative with fellow posters. This connects to discussions around, how online research can be viewed as 'harvesting' data, and the associated challenges of this approach for social research (Morison et al., 2015). In working with a fixed and finite data set, which online forum information could be perceived as (if it is being explored retrospectively or in an archival fashion as this data was), the experience becomes more akin to secondary analysis, whereby the researcher is further removed from the context and temporal moment in which the online posts as data are made. This point echoes with Hammersley's (2009) notion that

in the process of data collection researchers generate not only what are written down as data but also implicit understandings and memories of what [primary researchers] have seen, heard, and felt, during the data collection process . . . it will often be drawn on tacitly and perhaps sometimes consciously, in the course of analysis, perhaps playing an important role in making sense of the data that *have* been recorded (Hammersley, 2009: 3)

This is not to say that online research is thus void of meaning, depth or usefulness in theorising the social world, and it is of course possible to see and feel in relation to online accounts. For researchers, the issue of the sharp juncture between posting/not posting can be felt tangibly as a challenge, requiring you to work out how to circumnavigate it, which itself requires emotional work to piece together what you know, balancing objective feelings about data, with subjective feelings about the topic or posters personal experiences and stories. This can perhaps be particularly true for qualitative data sets drawn from online sources, where the researcher can feel ‘embedded’ in the community in which they are researching (Paechter, 2013), and where outcomes are linked to topic, such as in the case of reproduction.

## **Distanced empathy**

In conducting qualitative analysis of online forums, emotional distress is often starkly foregrounded. From our research, when discussing infertility, participants talked of feeling low, reaching rock bottom, and of feeling defeated by the process of infertility diagnoses and treatment within their personal lives;

I just feel useless but can't show that to anyone . . . It's just such a long emotional road and the inability to do anything can get me down. It's harder to put on the expected happy face (Forum Poster 9)

The particular way in which many of the posters on the forum we investigated ‘updated’ their narratives involved the charting of highs, but also of lows (Hanna and Gough, 2016b). For the researcher, these highs and lows are being tracked temporally by virtue of the presentation of forum posts in oldest to newest date format. The researcher is then travelling alongside the poster, yet also in a highly transient, compressed and distanced encounter, not dissimilar to the notion of the transcribers as ‘witness’ experience that Etherington (2007) describes. There were frequent posts similar to the example quoted above, in which men were detailing feelings of powerlessness and low mood. Given knowledge that men are less likely to describe depression or low mood using those words I felt concerned that perhaps those men were tempering the strength of the distress they were feeling.

The emotional management of the ‘lows’ men on the forum presented introduced some challenges for me as a researcher. Men shared their distress in a multitude of forms including,

Every inch of positivity has been drained from my body, I am at my lowest ebb, lower than I have ever been (Forum Poster 3)

I can't tell you how sad I feel right now . . . So very, very sad (Forum Poster 4)

Therefore, the strength of the distress men were presenting was real and palpable, I felt drained by the process of analysis, often feeling unable to ‘shake off’ the moods of the posters, as if I had been underwater and was now trying to resurface back into reality and my own life and disentangle posters descriptions from my own feelings.

Whilst it was very possible to empathise with the men and their experiences as they presented them in their forum posts, online mediated research offers no opportunity for the researcher to display this empathy or provide sympathy. Thus, for the qualitative researcher, the usual strategies of offering participants a break from recording, or offering more physical or verbal demonstrations of sympathy (offering tissues, articulating understanding and compassion) are not available. I felt as a researcher somewhat empty in that I was wanting to express my desire to understand the lived experiences of the posters, but being unable to due to the ethical parameters which rightly shapes the field of online research. You can readily feel that in such contexts you become a bystander or witness, rather an active agent (Etherington, 2007).

I found the distanced position particularly challenging in relation to the loneliness and powerlessness that men were articulating, for example;

Just needed to write down how I am feeling. I haven't really had the chance to talk with anyone about what I am going through...I was at work when my phone rang, it was my [spouse] who blurted down the phone that I had no sperm, well *you can imagine how I felt*, I just burst into tears in the middle of the office (Forum Poster 10, emphasis added)

I *could* imagine how the poster felt, I felt his distress and sense of isolation at having no one to share that story with. Yet could not offer words of comfort. As Paechter (2013) notes, when engaging with websites and forums in an archival fashion, i.e. researching back through existing posts, there is a form of compression that occurs, and this can then lead to more intensified sense of separation as researcher from events, or as in this experience, from the participants themselves. On a human level that presents a challenge in sensitive research online; researchers are not robots, and thus not immune from the suffering of others. I questioned during the analysis whether I was particularly 'emotional' given the feelings were not sparked by lived experience or 'insider knowledge' of infertility, which perhaps reflects those ingrained notions that as researchers we should swallow down our feelings and remain cool and impassive in the face of emotional testimonies. Yet as Carroll (2012) useful notes 'emotional labour and emotional reflexivity are but two examples of attunement to emotion in research that are centred on highly relational process guided by real and imagined dialogue with what others think, do and feel' (Carroll, 2012: 12). Even when distant from participants, relational process *are* at work (Wetherell, 2015), and the imagined dialogue of how I would as researcher have displayed empathy to those posters had I been in a face to face setting with them was part of the challenge of managing how I felt about the posts and my passive agency. That such emotional labour is being conducted within online research, supports the notion of Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) that doing qualitative research by its very nature requires emotion work and thus emotional labour is part of the job of researching regardless of whether you are face-to-face with the participants or not.

Given the nature of the visible distress that some men demonstrated on the forum, as a researcher I often felt I was left with the impact of that emotion, which was a wearing experience. A persistent feeling sadness for the emotional trauma that many couples may be experiencing in relation to infertility preoccupied my thinking during the data screening phase. During the initial analysis for the project, I then decided to ration how much

time I spent looking at the data because I knew I would find it hard to ‘snap out’ of the experience of ‘being’ with the data otherwise. By reflecting on my feelings during the screening phase I was then able to plan and strategize how best to manage and process the emotions during the subsequent analysis period.

Such feelings of emotion are not automatically negative, and processing them within the confines of an interview setting would not have necessarily made them more manageable. The strength of emotion, of feeling choked by the stories shared online, and empathy I felt but could not convey about the challenges that some men (and their partners) had and were facing, helped me to remain resolute about the value of the research. In many regards the presentation of such emotion was a tool for greater understanding, contributing to depth of appreciation about the lived experience of men experiencing infertility. In that regard, ‘the emotional factor is an indispensable tool to be used in the service of greater understanding’ (Miller et al., 1982: 2 cited in Holloway, 2010: 23), but may also involve intense emotional work on the part of the researcher. Whilst the strength of feeling, and the inability to demonstrate my empathy to the posters on the forum, was difficult, and the need to adopt strategies for dealing with such emotion was necessary, the emotions were themselves not inherently problematic. Even in the writing of this article, my reflecting on the process of the research can take me back to the feelings and thoughts I had at the time, providing a useful reminder that within research ‘Emotions are both sources of information and tools of interaction’ (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015: 701).

## **Detachment for whom?**

It has been suggested that written testimonies can have the equivalent power of highly emotive congruent verbal testimonies (Kaufmann et al., 2003). Qualitative researchers often discuss feeling ‘touched’ by the stories of the participants with whom they engage, and this point can also, I would argue, be extended to online research. Whilst the experience will be highly subjective across topics and researchers, the power of written emotional accounts from online sources can prove as moving to the researcher as being in the presence of the participant. It is suggested that ‘Despite the emphasis on emotional detachment and neutrality, researchers can become deeply involved in their subjects’ lives, particularly when there is sustained contact between researchers and subjects’ (Bellas, 1999: 104). Researching online is an immersive experience for the researcher, and can, if the topic features, as was the case with our experiencing of researching male infertility online, a rollercoaster of emotions and a myriad of emotional displays. As the primary researcher for the project, the process often left me feeling emotionally ‘wrung out’ in a way not dissimilar to previous reports about emotional work in face-to-face qualitative research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). I would find myself wanting to discuss the stories of participants with colleagues as a way of processing and managing the data in a way I had not previously experienced in conducting qualitative interviews or other face-to-face research, and it was through discussions with my co-author that the initial ideas for this article emerged.

The suggestion of emotional work and investment by researchers online perhaps feels somewhat counterintuitive in relation to our wider perceptions of the internet. The internet is often viewed as a detached mode of communication, with ‘trolling’ behaviour on

internet forums often cited as evidence of people behaving in ways which would not occur so readily within face-to-face communication (Jowett, 2015; Herring et al., 2011). Whilst the internet can and does create communities, such as in online forums like the one examined, the detachment and anonymous nature that posters can adopt online can be seen to be a positive feature of the internet more broadly. However, for the researcher, that anonymous aspect does not necessarily serve to create detachment, and can as noted above be in some ways similar to the transcriber's experience of engaging with sensitive research data - being one step removed from the generation of data does not necessarily remove the emotions or the emotional labour required to handle such emotions (McCosker et al., 2001; Etherington, 2007; Gregory et al., 1997). Online forum data, particularly when it is presented in narrative format can evoke absorbing stories, drawing the researcher in and impacting at an emotional level. Over the course of threads which could contain upwards of 150 posts, I believe it is highly challenging to not become attuned to the feelings of participants.

Thus, for the researcher, the stories presented online around sensitive topics may involve emotional discourses, and 'gathering' data from such sources may encompass more emotional work, rather than less. In the forum examined, men often talked about the value of finding others who 'get it', likeminded individuals with lived experience of infertility, and many discussed how they shared more online than they ever would offline. To that end, forums may then, through being an interaction ritual (Collins, 1993), provide a space for emotive posts and greater emotional insights. The level of emotion may then be more than you may get when interviewing someone on the same topic- posters are perhaps more freely sharing their emotions online as they feel it is a safe and anonymous outlet to do so. The researcher may then be more likely to be exposed to such emotive expression. Given also that previous evidence suggests that researchers can feel impacted by secondary sources which relate to emotive or traumatic aspects, having conducted the research in the first instance, or having been involved in a face to face research encounter is not thus a prerequisite for feeling the impact of topics (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Whilst others have talked about emotional exhaustion from 'active listening' in researching infertility (Carroll, 2012), the online setting I would argue involves 'active reading and absorption' which can, to take the absorption metaphor forward, mean that you can also quickly reach emotional saturation point from online work.

When one regular poster on the forum, whose narrative (and responses) I had been coding announced that he and his wife had achieved conception, with a single word post that said 'TWINS'. I shouted 'Yes!' out loud, at my desk - I was visibly moved for him. Given that online research does not involve a direct contact with participants, there perhaps is no obvious need for 'deep acting' emotional labour (Ashford and Humphrey, 1993: 93) that includes suppression of researcher emotions during the research encounter. Yet there is still a need to manage the sense of professional self in relation to researcher emotions; is celebrating out loud over online data appropriate within the confines of the contemporary open plan institutional office space? Again, the ingrained idea about being 'too involved' in research arises and leads to questioning of the self around the 'professionalism' of emotions within the workplace is invoked (Carroll, 2012).

I was so moved by posters narratives of success, they were triumph over adversity tales, and having 'followed' the story though its lowest moments in my research journey,

to know that for that man the long-awaited pregnancy had occurred was deeply moving. Whilst I may have in the low points felt choked by the stories that men presented of unthinking family member's comments, or seemingly cold-hearted treatment at hospitals, or the despair of telling friends and family that they could no longer conceive, at the high point, of men beginning the journey to become fathers to their future children, I felt elated. There was also a deep sense of relief that their story had 'worked out' (and that they had shared it), that the loop has been closed and hope existed for other men using that forum whilst experiencing their own distress.

Notions that researchers can and will be detached in the online setting requires further thinking through, having no contact with participants is ultimately qualitatively different from being emotionally removed from the research, and specifically then how best such emotional insights can be channelled for productive gain within online research could be further examined. When dealing with research topics which are life changing, deeply personal, or have involved such narratives of struggle, the poster may feel detached as they 'work it out' anonymously online with their community of practice, but for the researcher, the experience can be very much of attachment, the posts are themselves 'affecting objects' (Ahmed, 2004) which has the potential to engender emotive responses, which can of course be both positive and negative.

## Discussion

As Morison et al., (2015) note, the use of the internet to mediate research is likely to create new methodological and ethical issues. This article is therefore part of the contribution to the required 'scholarly dialogue around how to conduct ethical and methodologically sound research' online (Morison et al., 2015: 230) as well as contributing to further understandings of the centrality and relevance of emotions within qualitative research (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015).

Researching sensitive topics online, from the experience of researching male infertility, may provoke highly emotive experiences. Having conducted different types of qualitative interviews previously, around a variety of sensitive topics, approaching online research did not necessarily give me cause for concern in terms of the emotional implications that the work may have on me as a researcher. My empathy and emotional investment did not come from lived experience (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), or from being forced to confront my own biological position around fertility (Carroll, 2012) but rather from being moved, as a human, by accounts of isolation, powerlessness, crushed hopes and distressing low points that men were narrating online about infertility.

Whilst the nature of the topic may have facilitated such emotive responses, and the data too may have been particularly rich in that regard, there are wider issues which could be extended to other online research. Researchers should expect to be emotionally engaged and to do 'emotional work' in the investigation and analysis of online accounts. Ultimately 'subjects cannot be disentangled from objects or individuals from their situation' (Wetherell, 2015: 158) and thus emotions for researchers are part of the process and experience both in on and offline research. Such emotions I would argue are not however problematic, unless they are causing the researcher undue or unmanageable distress but do require consideration from the perspective of the researcher. We perhaps then could

usefully extend Campbell's (2001) idea of the 'emotionally engaged researcher' forward to consider what the notion of an 'emotionally engaged online researcher' would entail.

Emotional responses by researchers are suggested to have the possibility of fuelling determination around topics under investigation, of making academics keener for challenging stories to be told (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Particularly for under-researched topics, if emotional engagement encourages researchers to further their promotion of under-explored topics then 'feeling' can be beneficial. Through championing such topics researchers can contribute to changing attitudes and understandings as well as policy and practice over the longer term, thus 'channelling' the 'emotion of online data can be highly impactful.

However, reflection on the emotion experienced and reflexivity about how it is then utilised is important. Online research somehow feels like it should be 'cleaner' to conduct, with no 'messy' fieldwork relationships to negotiate, there is no 'getting in' or 'getting out' of the field; however, any in-depth qualitative examination has the potential to be emotive (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). If we take it, as William's (2000) suggests, that emotions are part of the human's capacity to be and to understand, then we have to be ready to think about, process and utilise emotions during researching, regardless of the research site being virtual.

There perhaps then needs to be a wider discussion that coming 'offline' in internet mediated research may also entail some of the process associated with coming in from the field; online research *is* relational, and thus there will be emotions to be worked out and through. Researchers having time and space to reflect on their experiences of emotive data is an important part of the process. Strategies around risk assessing researcher wellbeing at the outset of projects (Moncur, 2013), conducting reflexive discussion around emotions with the broader research team (Witty et al., 2014), or the keeping of diaries and using supervisor or mentor support (Walls et al., 2010) may be applicable to online research. More formalised or therapeutic support settings could also be considered (Moncur, 2013). The use of approaches such as counselling does offer a more 'externalised' means to support for researchers which may have benefits. Accessing a formalised therapeutic relationship may of course be more challenging in terms of time/resources and the availability of a counsellor when required. Furthermore, the professional identity question is called up once more in such contexts, would researchers feel judged for demonstrating need for external support for their emotions? Whilst I would argue that this should not be the case, for postgraduate students or new researchers, the power to enact self-care around research may feel more limited and needs investigating further.

Using established strategies from qualitative fieldwork can perhaps assist in ensuring researchers 'protect' themselves in terms of wellbeing when engaging with difficult, personal and often distressing sensitive research topics online. Whilst 'Feminist and sensitive researchers are encouraged to productively examine their own emotion in research' (Carroll, 2012: 11) this does not as yet appear to have become part of online research, and I would argue that it should, using work by Wetherell (2015) around 'affective practice' which brings together feminist and sociological thought may be a useful tool within that. For, that there is no participant- researcher interaction does not necessarily negate that emotion will not follow for those doing qualitative research online. Reflexive practice for the researcher about the nature of their responses in the online research context and what

this may mean in terms of the topic remains important (Finlay, 2003), but so too does reflection on the emotional experience personally and how best to handle that within the profession of researching, including among online qualitative researchers. The need to be more active in relation to emotions and the process of emotional labour in research is then applicable to online research as much as face-to-face qualitative enquiry (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015).

## Conclusion

This article has then examined emotion in online research, and how this may impact on the researcher. This is a previously underexplored area, but one which is fruitful to consider broadly as an example of emotions in qualitative research but also more particularly given that online settings are becoming more widely utilised, including for topics identified as sensitive, therefore it is perhaps timely to consider emotions at this time in the development of practice in this area.

Emotion can be a double-edged sword within research. It offers the possibility of researchers being further embedded and engaged with their research topic, and if reflexive about this process, can prove to be a validating and driving force to further understanding or to help bring about social change; emotions contain the duality of information and interaction (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). However, it also has the potential to be a source of distress and trauma for researchers and can thus have the potential to impact adversely on their wellbeing. From the experience of researching male infertility online, emotional accounts can be highly visible within online data. When dealing with online sensitive data, researchers can experience; a foregrounding of emotion due to its stark presentation in 'black and white'; difficulty with how to manage the empathy you may feel for participants' stories; and the inability to resolve that with the participant. Coupled with a sense of the unknown about 'what happened next' in the lives of posters, researchers can 'feel' the experience of emotion in several ways.

The ideas discussed within this article therefore appear to chime with Burkitt's (2012) notion that,

Emotion is not just something that we reflect on in a disengaged way, it is central to the way people in social relations relate to one another: it is woven into the fabric of the interactions we are engaged in and it is therefore also central to the way we relate to ourselves as well as to others (Burkitt, 2012: 459)

If we assume that we cannot (and do not seek to want to) remove the emotion from interactions, then we perhaps need to more readily consider that this may apply to interactions, including those mediated through online settings; our relational approaches to online data are important ways of 'feeling' the gravity of topics and emotion can be a useful cue for researchers working 'online'- questioning why we respond with particular emotions to data can itself be part of being an 'emotional engaged online researcher'.

Acknowledging that emotions and emotional work are a feature of online qualitative research makes it appear more pressing then to consider how these emotions may impact researchers through taking a more active position in relation to emotions as part of the

labour of qualitative research (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015) and including emotions at the outset of project planning and risk assessment (Moncur, 2013) Research teams conducting sensitive research online should thus perhaps consider how they will deal with emotions, the practicalities of ‘rationing’ time on sensitive data as others have suggested (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007), of using informal ‘corridor talk’ (Witty et al., 2014) and more formalised mechanisms for emotional wellbeing are all useful suggestions. Thinking through ‘emotionally engaged online research’ therefore requires consideration of both the self-care of researchers but also of the value and insight that emotions can provide. With the growth of new ways of conducting qualitative research (Lather and St Pierre, 2013), we have the opportunity to see emotions as a real, useful and valid part of our encounters as researchers online.

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### Notes

1. Research does not have to be defined or described as sensitive in order for it to involve emotions or to be emotive- I would concur with the arguments of Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) that qualitative research by virtue of its engagements with social actors creates emotions and involves emotional labour for those involved- including the researchers; research is then ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell, 2015).
2. See: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/ethics-guidelines-internet-mediated-research-2017>.
3. As the research was conducted retrospectively on existing posts we were able to know that people had stopped posting or that the ‘conclusion’ to their story was not present- this would of course be more challenging to those doing such research in ‘real time’ on forums with live threads.

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