



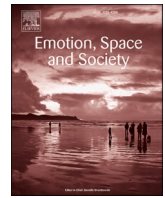
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Shifting consciousness: Challenges to ontological assumptions in feminist research

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author contributes to the ongoing debates within feminist methodology about emotional encounters when reflexivity and critical reflection are operationalised. More specifically, drawing on narrative accounts, this study examines how situated emotions influence consciousness-raising activities, thereby challenging the ontological assumptions held by both the researcher and the researched. Drawing on a broader study about domestic violence and help seeking, the researcher shows how emotions in specific situations can trigger a shift in consciousness, challenging perceptions of reality. Such emotive challenges that researchers face in the field raises questions about the unpredictability of intersubjectivity, ontological positioning, and the depth of situated emotion that can emerge during interviews. The author critically contemplates the dilemmas arising from such fieldwork interactions, questioning the ethical considerations within our institutions to safeguard overall wellbeing.

1. Introduction

There are ongoing discussions within feminist methodology that highlight the influence of emotionality on both researchers and their subjects during fieldwork (see [Blakely, 2007](#); [Holland, 2007](#); [Holmes, 2010](#); [Yeun, 2011](#)). Researchers not only experience emotions in the field but also throughout the stages of transcription, analysis, write up and beyond (see [Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015](#); [Berger, 2015](#); [Blakely, 2007](#); [Emerald and Carpenter, 2015](#); [Holmes, 2010](#); [Meloni, 2020](#); [Qhogwana, 2022](#)). Increasingly, these situated emotions are recognised as essential for gaining a deeper understanding, particularly when researching human suffering ([Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015](#); [Meloni, 2020](#); [Yeun, 2011](#)). Feminist methodologies require researchers to immerse themselves in the fieldwork process ([Harding, 1991, 2004](#)) making them vulnerable to any emotional dynamics as they unfold ([Bhatia, 2014](#); [Wilcock and Quaid, 2018](#)). In positioning researchers both physically and emotionally, it arguably imbues them with epistemological and ontological significance ([Bhatia, 2014](#); [Hubbard et al., 2001](#)).

I draw on feminist standpoint epistemology, a unique philosophical approach that begins with the lived experiences of women ([Harding, 2004](#)). It aims to provide 'subjective understandings of how women see the world around them' ([Wilcock, 2021:111](#)). In this context, 'consciousness-raising activities' ([Hughes, 2002:153](#)) open doors to new theoretical possibilities, including the emergence of resistance ([Skeggs,](#)

[1997](#)). Engaging in critical reflection within the field has the potential to alter consciousness, prompting those involved to question the world around them. The paper focuses on this aspect. I contribute to the discourse on the impact of emotionality in the field by drawing on narrative accounts shared by women, especially when reflexivity and critical reflection come into play. Specifically, I examine how consciousness-raising activities in the field can challenge the ontological assumptions of not only the participants, but also those of the researcher. I draw on examples from empirical research about domestic violence and pathways to help-seeking to demonstrate how emotions in specific contexts can prompt a shift in consciousness, which challenges existing understandings of lived realities and results in ontological transformations.

2. Epistemological and conceptual backdrop

Standpoint epistemology offers a framework for gathering knowledge about the histories and ideologies of women's everyday lives ([Harding, 2004](#)). At its core, standpoint requires researchers to grasp the individual social realities of women then use that knowledge to foster change through awareness raising ([Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007](#); [Wilcock, 2015](#)). The approach suggests that 'feminist methodology cannot be independent of the ontology, epistemology, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social situation of the researcher' ([Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002:16](#)). Researchers thus become integral to the theorising process. Consequently, as feminist researchers we must acknowledge, embrace

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and appropriately manage these concepts in our methodological accounts. Positionality assumes a pivotal role, particularly when aided through inter-subjective dialogue, as demonstrated in this paper. Inter-subjectivity is defined as 'knowledge because of the on-going interaction between the researcher and the researched' (Stapele, 2013:14), enabling a 'dialogue of common experiences to emerge' (Wilcock and Quaid, 2018:9). It is this process that allows us, as researchers, to recognise commonalities in our experiences with others (Harding, 2004) facilitating 'insider status' (Bourke, 2014) on both physical and emotional levels. However, this visibility does necessitate a reflexive awareness (Qhogwana, 2022).

Reflexivity compels us as researchers to scrutinise our own social context, biases, and preconceptions, while acknowledging how they might impact the research process (Berger, 2015; Holmes, 2010; Meloni, 2020; Qhogwana, 2022). Essentially this process allows researchers to comprehend the significance of their role (see Berger, 2015; Holmes, 2010; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), and their pro-active involvement in shaping knowledge (Meloni, 2020; Yuen, 2011). Consequently, this necessitates critical self-reflection which should encompass an exploration of epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher. Meloni (2020) contends that the emotional dimension of reflexive practice is often overlooked, despite being an integral part of a researcher's life history that deserves more attention. While emotional dilemmas are well documented in research methodology, and given ethical consideration, there is limited exploration of the distressing experiences faced by researchers (Drozdewski and Dominey Howes, 2015; Meloni, 2020). Reflexivity serves as a crucial tool for acknowledging and managing situated emotions in fieldwork (Qhogwana, 2022) facilitating reflection on positionality. Thus, allowing researchers to recognise and capture how their standpoint may evolve, and consequently how their ontological assumptions might adapt to reflect this transformation.

Reflective thinking by participants in the field serves as a source of knowledge as they share their personal histories (Finlay, 2002), this personal knowledge transforms into accountable knowledge (Bager-Charleson, 2010). Consequently, this requires continuous reflexive awareness by researchers, and as noted by Holmes (2010) it goes beyond mere reflection on the researcher's lived experiences, beliefs and assumptions. Researchers must fully immerse themselves in the research context, both physically and emotionally, rather than attempting to detach from, or disregard their position (Wilcock, 2015). As a result, this highlights the need for several reflective thinking concepts. These include ongoing self-awareness, critical reflection, and the scrutiny and assessment of evolving experiences that encompass emotions linked to lived experiences, whether joyful or sorrowful applying to both the researcher and the researched (Berger, 2015; Klocker, 2015; Qhogwana, 2022). As researchers, it is imperative to acknowledge and integrate our personal and emotional biographies into the research process (see Klocker, 2015; Meloni, 2020; Qhogwana, 2022). Meloni (2020) contends that situated emotional dilemmas in the fieldwork demand attention as they continuously influence knowledge production, particularly when researching sensitive topics. However, it remains challenging for researchers to fully anticipate and prepare for all emotional moments in the field, as I discovered through the dynamics of inter-subjectivity, position, and the depth of emotion that could not be predicted and planned for (Hubbard et al., 2001).

Feminists have long since argued that 'the experience of women is ontologically fractured and complex because we do not share the same material reality' (Stanley, 1990:22). Nor do women reflect and/or recognise the same experiences and understandings of harm and abuse, as highlighted in this study (see Wilcock, 2015). It is through consciousness-raising activities (Hughes, 2002), such as fieldwork interactions that a changing state of awareness can challenge current understandings of existence. Hughes (2002) asserts that this influence stems from establishing a connection between ontologies, involving the diverse beliefs, ideals, values, and thoughts held by both the researcher and the researched. Women have an individual and unique perspective

on their world, shaped by diverse lived realities with consciousness specific to each individual, any alteration to that consciousness may challenge an individual's 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991) thereby transforming their understanding. Hence, researchers must comprehend the process of constructing theoretical frameworks to provide explanations of the world. Although this may initially appear straightforward, navigating 'the swamp of self-analysis and disclosure' (Finlay, 2002:209) and considering the perspectives of others adds complexity to the endeavour.

Inter-subjective dialogue and ontological assumptions inter-link as it is possible to recognise ourselves in others through similarities (see Stanley, 1990). Though, how we experience and understand those similarities will differ emotionally and physically supporting the notion of women being ontologically fractured (see Stanley and Wise, 2002). However, when we subjectively place the 'self' in an inter-subjective context there is no detachment from the emotional aspects; as we researchers become integral to that process (Meloni, 2020). Thus, researchers gain greater insight having immersed themselves in the participant's world (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Rightly, the ethical considerations surrounding the situatedness of participants in sensitive research, like domestic violence, are carefully addressed by our institutions to ensure wellbeing, and I will revisit this point. Another aspect to consider is the potential impact on the researcher as an ethical issue, as this inevitably exposes the researcher as both 'being and knower' to the sensitivity of the situational dynamics amplifying vulnerability (Bhatia 2014; Yeun, 2011). Again, I will return to this point.

3. Research design

The study was conducted in a city in the North East of England to explore women's perceptions of help-seeking in response to domestic violence (Wilcock, 2015). The study followed ethical approval procedures outlined by the University, which emphasised the importance of minimising harm to participants. In hindsight, the researcher should have been included in this process. The primary focus of the research was on women who are not visible to agencies responding to domestic violence, irrespective of whether they had personally experienced it. Much of the existing literature in this field predominantly concentrates on survivors who have interacted with domestic violence services. Given the relatively new focus of this research, a mixed method approach was taken to 'cast the net' (Reinharz, 1992:201) as widely as possible. The approach referred to by Morgan (1998) as 'quant followed by QUAL' was initiated as it enables the secondary approach to come first to inform the subsequent qualitative method (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2011). An important outcome of the statistical analysis revealed that socio-economic indicators suggested the inclusion of middle-class women, who 'are far less likely to be 'researched' by researchers in relation to domestic violence' (Hague and Malos, 2005:22). It is important to note that this article is based upon the emotionally charged encounters that emerged during the qualitative phase.

3.1. Qualitative phase

The data comprised of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, carried out over a six-month period commencing late 2013. Whilst the data was collated for my doctoral thesis ten years ago, as in the work of Drozdewski (2015), for me it has been work in progress while I grappled with the emotional turmoil and what I now acknowledge as researcher trauma (see Drozdewski and Dominey-Howes, 2015). The sample was selected from 50 women who participated in an initial on-line survey. Twenty participants were recruited with a diverse age distribution ranging from 18 to 65+ years. Additional demographic information includes educational attainment; with 3 holding MSc degrees, 7 having undergraduate degrees, 4 possessing GCSE's, 4 having NVQ certifications and 2 having no formal qualifications. Economic

status was categorised by income, with 3 participants earning up to £10,000, 3 earning up to £20,000, 4 earning up to £30,000, 5 earning up to £40,000, 2 earning up to £50,000, 2 earning up to £60,000 and 1 choosing not to disclose their income. Employment status varies among the participants, with 11 working full-time, 7 identifying as professionals, 1 working part-time, 3 unemployed, 2 students and 3 retired with 1 participant serving as a part-time magistrate. Class status was explored within the sample, with 7 participants identifying as middle-class, 12 identifying as working-class and 1 participant not ascribing to a specific class label. Among the 12 participants self-identifying as working-class, socio-economic indicators suggest 3 would be classified as middle-class.

The interview schedule was designed around key themes identified from the survey that included; demographics/background history, understandings of what domestic violence is, who would they reach out to if experiencing domestic violence, at what point would help be sought, what knowledge, if any of services in the city. The interviews were held in a confidential space, mutually appropriate to us both. However, it became evident that participants in the sample with direct experience of domestic violence opted to participate in the safety of their home, others their place of work or on campus. Thematic analysis was drawn upon to uncover and distinguish comparisons and variations within the narrative, which enabled key themes and sub themes to be pulled from the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was carried out manually as this enabled me to familiarise myself with the narrative, silent moments and emotive interactions that were encountered. Once this process was exhausted thematic mapping enabled the organising of the themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001), and importantly to situate the silent but powerful emotive moments, which led to a challenge of the ontological assumptions of some participants.

4. Fieldwork challenges

Domestic violence is a sensitive and emotive issue, one that I, as a researcher, initially believed I was adequately prepared to address in the field. Drawing upon my former professional experience in handling challenging and emotionally charged situations, I assumed that this experience would serve as a valuable buffer. However, I soon realised that as an academic researcher I found myself in a wholly different situation, one that was inter-subjective. In this context I was obliged to open up and share my own personal and professional experiences with participants. My inter-subjective positioning varied and evolved depending on the background of the participant. For instance, participants with personal experience of domestic violence questioned my motives and interests in the study. In response, I briefly shared some of my personal experiences of domestic violence. The disclosure seemed to ease the formality of the interview process, providing participants with a level of comfort in sharing their lived experiences, that for some, had never been disclosed before. Conversely, my positioning shifted towards my professional experiences with those who had no experience of domestic violence or worked in front line service provision. Those participants did not question the rationale behind the research but recognised its significance for women. They understood that knowledge and/or understanding could serve to raise awareness and enhance responses to domestic violence (see Wilcock, 2015).

Although I had initially approached my research with confidence, I soon found myself grappling with varied depths of emotion felt by participants, as they shared and questioned their histories. Such experiences prompted me to critically assess my fieldwork preparation and inter-subjective position. I questioned whether I was effectively negotiating and managing episodes of intense emotion, such as sobbing and anger, in a way that minimised harm to participants. I had implemented breaks at emotionally charged moments, but in certain cases, it became clear that a debriefing was essential due to the profound emotion and pain felt by some participants. At this point their well-being was paramount. As Thompson, (1988:211) recommends researchers should

‘remain a while after the interview is over to give a little of yourself’. In some instances, I remained for up to 2 h after the interviews had ended. During this debrief we engaged in conversation, drank tea, and I actively listened so I could make detailed notes afterwards in my journal to capture those post-interview moments. Upon reflection of these post interview alliances, I had made the following observations:

Should I have stayed longer? No, she was fine when I left. I must find out if it is ethical to revisit to ensure she is okay. This is not how it is supposed to end it is not about hurting women but helping them, I am an emotional wreck.

Subsequently, this experience led to a realisation that the significance of post-interview briefing extends beyond ensuring the well-being of participants. It also served to address my own questions and concerns regarding the emotional impact of the research process on all involved. As Qhogwana (2022) aptly suggests, it highlights the significance of self-awareness in understanding the extent to which a researcher’s position can influence the fieldwork process. The emotional dilemmas persisted throughout the interviews as the participant’s narratives exposed their unique experiences and understandings of domestic violence. As noted, this ongoing dialogue raises ‘critical consciousness giving a person agency, opportunity and the capacity to recognise and change their lives’ (Wheeler-Brookes, 2009:132). As participants reconfigured their personal experiences, which had previously gone unchallenged, they began reevaluating their relationships. As one participant expressed:

Although we have a joint account, and I earn more than my husband now, as long as I tell him I can spend as much as I want. I have to tell him what I have spent though as he keeps the accounts.

As the dialogue and critical reflection unfolded, the participant began evaluating her husband’s financial monitoring, recognising it as a form of control (Wilcock, 2021). Her reflection led her to question the dynamics of her relationship and link certain behaviours to domestic violence, specifically the significance of financial monitoring. Furthermore, she began to articulate altruistic practices of ‘sex to keep the peace’ within her relationship, emphasising:

It keeps my husband very happy if he is having sex. I am nearing the menopause, and he can’t wait for it to really kick in when I am not going to have periods.

Through critical reflection of her intimate relationship, she began to examine the behaviours she had encountered from her husband. Behaviours attributed to ‘sex to keep the peace’ were now recognised as manipulative and coercive acts. Like other participants in the study, she confronted ontological assumptions that had shaped her understanding of her lived reality. Continuing to reflect and question her relationship, she acknowledged for the first time that these behaviours were domestic violence. Her tone and emotional expression conveyed her discomfort with these manipulative practices, that she had previously tolerated, ascribing them as biological factors and her ‘duty’ as a wife. Towards the end of the interview, after challenging her previously held beliefs of a harmonious relationship free from domestic violence, she uttered, ‘I am experiencing domestic violence aren’t I?’ (Wilcock, 2015; 2021). I was left momentarily speechless, and for once, I found myself unable to offer her any clarification as she had to acknowledge that for herself. It became an awkward moment of silence for us both. Undoubtedly, this moment significantly impacted her understanding of what she had previously considered her life to be. A newfound awareness challenged her ontological assumptions and sense of security, leading to a transformation in her perception of her relationship. With this transformation came a series of questions, such as ‘where do I go from here? As a researcher, I could not provide the answer. My situation generated considerable discomfort and all I could do was signpost her to support agencies that could assist her with whatever decision she chose to make. The participants contribution to the study continued to trouble me,

raising ethical and moral dilemmas regarding my role in the quest for knowledge. I often wonder if she was able to confront and change her situation, and I harbour a sense of remorse for my part in it. These feelings are the reason why it has taken me so long to openly acknowledge the detail of this research journey.

As I reflected on the entirety of the interviews, the emotional dilemmas and transcripts, it became evident that some women had formed a new standpoint, a newfound understanding of their own lives. Consequently, it prompted me to contemplate my contribution to these transformative shifts. Holmes (2010) points out that such experiences challenge researchers to scrutinise their own experiences, and ontological assumptions as 'being and knower'. Arguably, this process forms an integral part of ongoing reflexivity. Additionally, bringing to the fore questions about 'women researching women and the need to recognise the power relations in the close personal methods of data generation' (Holland, 2007:202). Upon reflection, this brought ongoing ethical and methodological struggles for me throughout the study. In search of answers, I turned to the published work of Stanley and Wise (1993, 2002) who introduced the concept of conscious raising within a feminist context. The concept extends beyond formal group settings, encompassing individual interactions between women when sharing life histories. Consequently, the interview process, when women engage in dialogue with one another is not exempt from this transformative activity. It fosters an awareness of women having an individual perspective on their lives and their understanding of them. Thus, this perspective cannot be generalised, as consciousness remains a personal and individual phenomenon. Any challenge to an individual's understanding of their own reality can lead to a shift in their ontological assumptions. Notably, this ontological shift became apparent as participants engaged in reflection, often critically and angrily during the interview process, as they progressively grasped how they had perceived and understood their lived experiences. For instance:

Thinking about it now, if I tried to initiate sex he would say 'no I cannot be bothered' but when he wanted it, it had to be done there and then. If I said no then I was just a prude, I was frigid or whatever. I never thought I was in a sexually abusive relationship, but I can acknowledge now that I was in a very controlling relationship, and I had no choices.

As the participant deeply reflected on her intimate relationship, the process unearthed charged emotions of anger, pain and sobbing. These emotions were still raw as she spoke for the first time about horrendous sexual and physical violence (Wilcock, 2015). The depth of emotion troubled me deeply, and I found it necessary to stop the interview on several occasions to ensure her wellbeing. During these breaks we shared a cup of tea through laughter and tears. Surprisingly, she was eager to carry on, describing the process as cathartic. Internally, I grappled with conflicting emotions as a part of me wished she had chosen to end the interview during one of the numerous breaks, as I too was deeply affected. I struggled to hold back tears and maintain a professional demeanor as a researcher, all the while acknowledging that I was also a woman who had experienced domestic violence. Reading through my journal I recognised that the interviews had resurfaced personal triggers for me. As Meloni (2020:1) notes, I had in a way opened 'Pandora's box of feelings' that I, at that time, did not feel comfortable discussing or writing about. As an early academic I had assumed it was not deemed acceptable to position my emotions. In my notes I had written, 'I need to keep it together; I am a professional and I can do this, it is not about me. I do admire her strength and tenacity'. In hindsight, I question whether I had sufficiently engaged in reflexive analysis to truly understand my inter-subjective positioning and the potential triggers that could emerge. The interview proved to be exceptionally challenging and emotionally draining, and the lingering emotional trauma persisted throughout transcription, analysis and beyond.

Emotionally charged encounters persisted when another participant disclosed the emotional and sexual abuse she had endured, shedding

light on how she had been compelled to mould herself into the person her abusive husband wanted her to be:

Depending on what's happened, and what has been part and parcel of the sexual aspect of it, it's not something you want to recognise you have done. Because they bring you down to such a level you just have no self-respect, no confidence, and you believe you are that person until someone talks to you and you realise.

The narrative describes a 'distortion of her subjective reality' (Kirkwood, 1993) wherein she came to believe she was 'that person'. Consequently, this belief hindered her challenging or changing her situation. A similar pattern of distortion emerged in other interviews where individuals acknowledged violent, sexual and abusive behaviours as their personal fault or a source of shame. It was also regarded as an inherent part of their role that normalised such behaviours in their relationship (see Wilcock, 2015). For participants with personal experience of domestic violence it was often only after they had left the abusive relationship that they could recognise profound changes in themselves. Consequently, many participants bore deep emotional and psychological scars. As a woman, and researcher positioned inter-subjectively in the field, I felt a depth of empathy as feelings of shame were narrated:

I am thoroughly ashamed, I am ashamed of him, ashamed of myself for being in a relationship with him, I am ashamed for my children, and I am ashamed most of all that I did nothing about it. I am ashamed I have compassion for this guy, and I am ashamed that I fell in love with him.

She wholly blames herself for the failure of her relationship, convinced she allowed it to happen. I can deeply relate to this narrative both on a personal and professional level. Similarly, others who had comparable experiences recounted that it took years of heinous abuse before a shift in consciousness enabled them to confront, and ultimately break free from the oppression they had endured. Once again, I felt a strong emotional connection to these experiences reinforcing the passion that was driving my commitment to the study. Through the process of women talking to women, conscious-raising activity enabled some to challenge the trajectory their lives had taken. For instance:

It is hard to relate certain things until you are deep into it then something might click with you, or you hear or see something else and that is when the penny starts to drop. Or, as in my case, if you have children they start displaying symptoms. It becomes normalised until somebody actually talks to you about it.

The narratives shared by each participant were deeply personal, evoking individual depths of emotion and pain depending on their experience of domestic violence. One participant, sobbing, recounted her harrowing attempt to save her pregnancy after her husband kicked her down the stairs. Despite her efforts to stop the bleeding, she is still burdened by the belief that she did not do enough to save her baby (see Wilcock, 2015). As a mother, I found this account heart-wrenching and struggled to be emotionally detached from her story as I was deeply immersed in it. As detailed by Drozdowski (2015), the narrative remains etched in my subconscious. Her anguish and pain resurface whenever her voice echoes in my mind, or when I read her written narrative such as now, or when I use excerpts in my teaching. It was a deeply emotional experience for me, to the extent that I still refrain from reading these excerpts out loud as I know it will stir strong emotions. With time I have come to recognise and understand this emotional toil as a form of 'researcher trauma' (see Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015). At the time of the interviews, my personal experiences were still raw intensifying my emotional reactions to the fieldwork dynamics. During the interviews, I had to continually pull back, listen and initiate professional composure as I was constantly reacting to these emotive interactions experienced by the participants. It was only later, when alone in my car or at home, that I could fully express my emotions by bursting into tears, releasing the sadness and anger I felt towards the

suffering endured by these women at the hands of the men they loved. I was initially unaware of the emotional trauma I was experiencing, and it continued to affect me long after the project concluded. Even now, every time I think, write, or discuss the study, I can vividly hear the voices of the participants recounting their stories. While this was undoubtedly challenging, I actively sought support and advice from colleagues. As a feminist researcher, I understand as do others like Meloni (2020), that emotive encounters are an inevitable aspect of our role as we continually strive to raise awareness of violence and abuse against women through interactive fieldwork.

5. Dealing with and managing situated emotion for the 'self' and the 'other'

The fieldwork, as discussed was occasionally a discomfiting process for me. Reflexively, I now understand the other selves I took to the field. On one hand, there was the eager researcher focused on collating in-depth narratives about domestic violence, and on the other, there was my personal and professional identities intricately tied to experiences such as being an ex-wife, mother and having worked in front-line service provision with the most vulnerable (see Qhogwana, 2022). Similarly, participants brought and opened up about their 'other selves' (Renzetti and Lee, 1993), encompassing roles such as being a mother, wife/-partner, daughter, friend, colleague, and for some, experiences of domestic violence. Researching personal lives is undeniably a sensitive topic embroiled in the inescapable presence of emotionality. As Meloni (2020) contends, emotions should not be dismissed in research but embraced as part of knowledge production. Thus, the situatedness of the researcher, placing the 'self', necessitates ongoing critical reflection (Berger, 2015) as we actively contribute to the production of knowledge (Drozdowski, 2015; Meloni, 2020; Qhogwana, 2022).

In the field, prioritising the management of emotions was crucial to ensure that any impact on me was contained out of concern for the participants. Despite my efforts to maintain a professional barrier, I discovered that the depths of participants pain and anguish broke through the barrier after leaving the field. Inter-subjectively I struggled, having opened and immersed myself in the dynamics of the moment. It led me to realise that the skills gained through professional practice, although effective in navigating participants emotive moments, did not shield me from the trauma. As I was not fully an outsider; my position was that of an 'insider' attempting to maintain an 'outsider' perspective to manage the emotional dynamics. I have noted, earlier in the paper, that we should not attempt to detach from, or disregard our position, and I acknowledge that attempts to be an 'outsider' might emphasise detachment from those experiences. However, feminist research is grounded in consciousness (Stanley and Wise, 1993) so I would argue, that we can never fully disembodify from fieldwork processes, and more so when embodied inter-subjectively (Finlay, 2005). However, this discomfort reached a point where I began to question my capabilities as a researcher, considering the emotional toll on myself and the participants involved in providing in-depth narrative for my study. As my feminist consciousness expanded in the field, my researcher self was challenged (Hughes, 2002), prompting me to reflect on how I had formed what could be seen as a 'fake friendship' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002) to achieve my research objectives. These challenges emerged from the juxtaposition of my researcher and personal self as I grappled with feelings of sadness, personal fault, emotional turmoil and anxiety triggered by personal ordeals, broadening my level of consciousness. Reflexivity enabled me to recognise the impact of my own lived reality and experiences, both professionally and personally in the fieldwork process (Holmes, 2010). It extends beyond recognising our position within research processes; true reflexivity encompasses other people, their emotions, experiences, and the embodied researcher who attempts to foresee any inevitable consequences. Effectively navigating this multifaceted task in the field is challenging but essential.

Throughout the fieldwork I continually grappled with various

emotional challenges - anger, sadness, shame, bouts of sobbing and profound questions about their lives. While exchanging common experiences with most participants there was a presumption that I truly understood their depth of pain and emotion. However, such generalisations are unfounded as we all process and feel emotions differently, shaped by our diverse experiences and individual standpoints. Feminist standpoint epistemology positions women at the centre of academic thinking, emphasising women talking to women about their lives. Despite this focus, there is a noticeable lack of a clear outline regarding how researchers respond to, cope with, and subsequently utilise emotion as a source of knowledge in academic discourse. Unexpectedly, the emotional encounters continued to impact me during the transcription and analysis, further contributing to the trauma as I relived each moment. A vital lesson learned from this experience is the importance of acknowledging and reflexively understanding all aspects of our lives. Beyond our roles as researchers, it is crucial to recognise how our entire selves may influence us during the fieldwork process and extend beyond. As researchers we are not just variables in the research process; we bring our own biographies into the field, a concept highlighted by Holmes (2010).

My inter-subjective position remained consistent throughout the field work with disclosure taking some women on an emotional rollercoaster, and generally viewed as a positive action. For those women, the act of offloading their burdens during disclosure seemed to bring a shift in their emotional state. Towards the end of the interviews, witnessing this transformation, where fault, pain, and anxiety were emotionally expressed and removed, brought me some solace. A positive shift became evident when I asked the participants why they had chosen to participate:

I think for me it is a way of reaching out to someone that could possibly help me to understand that it not just me, because I think it is not just my problem and there are other people out there who may be experiencing this.

Another participant stated:

I think part of it is to help me, I think it is part of your healing processes. You know you are getting there and getting over it, and you can actually talk about it. I couldn't have done this two years ago and it is part of finalising something, maybe wanting to help other women that's what it is.

Upon reflection, while I am still wrestling with the weight of what participants endured, it brings me a profound sense of peace knowing that they willingly participated not only for their own catharsis but also with the intention of assisting other women. By sharing their narratives, they had envisioned a journey of awareness raising as one participant expressed; 'if one person benefits from this then I think for me personally, it has helped me to move on and that is why I have done it'.

Critical reflection on each interview has significantly raised my awareness of the intricate processes involved in planning, negotiating and managing trigger moments. The research journal, although challenging to read, emerged as a crucial tool in capturing not only the details of each interview but also my emerging emotional states – both before and after. The documentation allowed for an examination of what might have been overlooked after recording had stopped. Embracing the concept of situated emotion was paramount, acknowledging that it can be a source of relief to some as they relived their experiences and unburdened themselves. Recognising this enabled me to respond appropriately to each situation, understanding when to embody the roles of both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' to safeguard the wellbeing of the participants. I attribute my ability to navigate these emotional encounters to the skills grounded in my professional background. The recognition of 'ontological transformations' eventually had a positive effect on me. As participants handed over their stories, a shift occurred, allowing them to move forward with a transformed perspective on their lives. In line with the work of Weitz (1982), consciousness-raising can empower women by broadening their knowledge instilling a sense of

control. Thus, this transformative process, facilitated through disclosure in research, arguably brings a transformation of the 'self' and contributes to ontological security.

As highlighted by [Bager-Charleson \(2010\)](#), critical reflection may induce vulnerability in researcher's confronting triggers from past experiences, as found in my own experience. Fieldwork, per [Emerald and Carpenter \(2015\)](#), can elicit various emotions such as frustration, loneliness, sadness, guilt and exhaustion, emphasising the need to address researcher's emotional wellbeing. It highlights ethical considerations beyond the researched subjects. Seeking guidance from the literature, I recognised the importance of taking a break to reflect on my position. A supportive team encouraged a six-month hiatus, and it has taken me a decade to understand and address the distress, as others have experienced too (see [Drozdowski, 2015](#)). [Holland \(2007\)](#) warns about the ethics of empathy in women researching women, while [Cotterill \(1992\)](#) identifies moral concerns regarding inter-subjective fieldwork friendships. Such relationships may deepen participant's disclosures ([Holland, 2007](#)). In feminist contexts, consciousness-raising aligned with consensual processes ([Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2011](#); [Wheeler-Brookes, 2009](#)), may yield nuanced understandings of experiences.

6. Ethical positioning

As researchers we adhere to ethical standards, obtaining informed consent ([Sin, 2005](#)) and ensuring participants comprehend our study's objectives. Ethical discussions emphasise protecting subjects from potential harm ([Shesterinina, 2019](#); [Sultana, 2007](#)); although greater consideration on how the research impacts researchers in the long-term is paramount ([Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015](#)). Emotions in sensitive research are acknowledged as an 'untapped resource of information' ([Blakely, 2007:3](#)). 'We all 'do' research but in 'doing' research we rarely spend time thinking about the outcome on our own emotional wellbeing' ([Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015:17](#)). Open dialogue is crucial to share and raise awareness of fieldwork dilemmas affecting emotional well-being. Despite carrying emotional burdens, sharing can enhance academic clarity ([Blakely, 2007](#)) and deepen understandings of ethical obligations ([Meloni, 2020](#)).

Upon going back to my journal notes, I now appreciate the significance of retrospective reflexivity (see [Drozdowski, 2015](#)). Reflecting, I realise that I was unprepared for the enduring personal and professional trauma long after the interviews had ended. Despite my years of professional experience and the nature of the study, help-seeking in response to domestic violence, I believed myself to be emotionally resilient. Ethical considerations primarily focused on participant risk, and there had only been questions about my physical safety neglecting my emotional well-being. I was further confronted with emotional distress during transcription, analysis and beyond, reliving each interview with voices and sobbing. Contrary to the expected emotional detachment, 'I was feeling the research instead of just thinking it' ([Blakely, 2007:2](#)). [Holmes \(2010\)](#) recognises the emotional processes leading to researcher exhaustion, a reality evident as I revisited the fieldwork.

I have recalled 'ethical moments' ([Burgess-Proctor, 2015:128](#)) triggered by participant disclosure, requiring pauses to consider the continuation of interviews. The participant's ethical decision making challenged me, echoing [Burgess-Proctor \(2015\)](#) struggle between their wellbeing and empowerment. I was torn over their wellbeing and enabling them to empower themselves by willingly continuing with the interview. Notably, [Meloni \(2020:36\)](#) contends that the 'literature tends to see emotions, at best, as subjective experiences that need to be acknowledged; or, at worst, as problems to be managed'. My experience leaned towards the latter, lacking guidance in the epistemological literature on becoming an 'insider'. Subsequently, this has heightened my interest in ethical processes and the lasting emotional wellbeing of researchers in sensitive studies. While acknowledging the uniqueness of my experiences, they have influenced how I supervise students, conduct

sensitive research, and engage in ethical discussions with fellow researchers.

From my 'standpoint', emotionality holds significance in human research emphasising the need to share how the 'situated' encounter' ([Finlay, 2002](#)) influences both the researcher and the researched during fieldwork. [Holmes \(2010:147\)](#) asserts that 'emotions are core to reflexive processes and critical reflexivity can be complex in that it moves researchers to reflect on their own lived relationships and experiences', as I have experienced, amongst others. Feminist researchers highlight the risk of emotional distress, feeling overwhelmed, or encountering flashbacks to personal associations of abuse during fieldwork (see [Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015](#); [Klocker, 2015](#); [Meloni, 2020](#); [Stanko et al., 1997](#); [Ratnam, 2019](#)). [Ramazanoglu and Holland \(2007:148\)](#) argue that 'all researchers, carry intellectual, emotional and political baggage with them', warranting ethical consideration. Emotion permeates every facet of sensitive/subjective research prompting us to question our humanity if we did not feel another's pain. Such methodological and ethical discomforts require continual unpacking and attention due to the demands of our research and the sensitivity of it. As academics delving into sensitive issues, it is crucial to reflect on our experiences, raising awareness of self-care, as emotions may linger long after projects conclude, as observed in my own journey and that of others.

7. Concluding thoughts

The findings foreground the significance of emotionality in feminist literature, emphasising the need for theoretical and ethical discussions that comprehensively address the dynamics of situated emotion in fieldwork processes ([Bhatia, 2014](#); [Drozdowski, 2015](#); [Meloni, 2020](#); [Ratnam, 2019](#); [Qhogwana, 2022](#)). It stresses the importance of an ongoing dialogue on how emotional trauma is negotiated and managed during and after interviews, considering the well-being of both the researcher and the researched. Additionally, the emotional consciousness of all involved can shift and should be acknowledged to avert any methodological problems ([Bhatia, 2014](#)). [Holmes \(2010\)](#) highlights the need for reflexivity definitions to encompass not just reflection but also the emotions inherent in reflexive practice, including the emotional experiences of the researcher. The findings illuminate the emotion experienced by participants in the study, influenced by the process of reinterpretation and reflection of their life experiences. A heightened self-awareness led to a reconfiguration of their understandings, challenging existing ontological assumptions and bringing about transformations, which, for some, were not positive. The process, facilitated through interaction with a researcher challenged participants perceptions of their relationships with others. Upon reflexive and critical examination of my position in the field, methodological and ethical challenges surfaced prompting the need to share these discomforts. Ethically, it is crucial to prioritise the emotional wellbeing of all involved, and as researchers, we must acknowledge our responsibility in shaping ontological transformations that impact those engaged in our quest for knowledge.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Angela Wilcock: Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

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