INTRODUCTION

Emotional Aspects of Conducting Qualitative Research on Psychological Topics

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In this special section, 5 experienced qualitative researchers who study emotion laden topics (health care professionals who treat cancer, women at end of life, sexual assault victims’ experiences with the criminal justice system, the mental health of sexual minority parents, and African American women suffering from infertility) explore the ways in which their own emotional responses to their research topics and participants affected them personally and professionally. This exploration is dual and bidirectional in that we examine both the ways in which our participants and topics elicit emotional responses in us and the ways in which our own emotional and personal development affected the way we conducted research, and responded to our participants. Together these 5 papers challenge the reader to think critically about a vast array of subjects, lives, and realities. These include the qualitative research trajectory and the role of emotions and the body in our projects, about how, why, and whether we choose to document these emotional and bodily processes in our final publications, and finally, about what an inclusive, embodied, emotional, and integrated field of psychology might look like if we demanded a more holistic approach to doing and documenting the messy realities of our research in our academic journals.

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Within the qualitative and feminist research canon, acknowledging the researcher’s emotional responses in the qualitative research trajectory is not a new idea and has been discussed widely in the literature (Cotterill, 1992; Gilbert, 2001; Granek, 2012, 2013; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Within the psychological disciplines, however, the uptake of this approach to conducting research has been more contentious. The discipline of psychology has historically taken its epistemological cue from the Western philosophical tradition that has not looked kindly upon the emotional aspects of the research trajectory.

On this, Jagger (1992) has noted that “western epistemology has tended to view emotion with suspicion and even hostility” (p. 154). This approach to emotion is evidenced in the way that it is avoided in research as a way of “knowing” or as a potential source of information, and further, in the way it has been systematically removed from the reporting of our research to academic audiences (Granek, 2012). Researchers are encouraged to control and suppress emotions, yet, as Gilbert (2001) noted, “this does not mean that emotions are not present, nor does it guarantee that the hidden emotions do not affect the research process” (p.10).

In this special section of Qualitative Psychology, based on a panel of the same name presented at the American Psychological Association’s annual convention in August 2015, five experienced qualitative researchers who study emotion laden topics (health care professionals who treat cancer, women at end of life, sexual assault victims’ experiences with the criminal justice system, the mental health of sexual minority parents, and African American women suffering from infertility) explore the ways in which their own emotional responses to their
research topics and participants affected them personally and professionally. This exploration is dual and bidirectional in that we examine both the ways in which our participants and topics elicit emotional responses in us and the ways in which our own emotional and personal development affected the way we conducted research, and responded to our participants.

Before delving into the content of the articles themselves, it is worth taking a moment to situate this project and its epistemological goals in the history and context of emotions within the discipline of psychology, particularly when it comes to conducting our research and reporting our findings.

A Short History of the Disavowal of Emotions and the Body in Psychological Science

Based on the Cartesian dissociative split between mind and body, the Western intellectual tradition has considered the body irrelevant and thus dismissible. “The processes of theorizing and theory itself have proceeded as though the body itself is of no account, and that the thinking subject is in effect disembodied, able to operate in terms of pure mind alone” (Shildrick & Price, 1999, p. 1). The assumption in this ontology, which has dominated the patriarchal academic tradition, is that knowledge cannot come from or through the body.

Jagger (1992) noted that within the western philosophical tradition, the rational has been contrasted with the emotional as acceptable modes of acquiring knowledge, and this dichotomy has been linked with other dichotomies connecting reason, mind, and objectivity with masculinity, and emotion, body, and subjectivity with femininity. Jagger (1992) traced the history of emotion from the Greeks of the classical era, who viewed emotions as necessary for reason (but argued that they needed to be harnessed and directed in order to be productive), to the rise of modern science, in which the realms of nature and value were separated. In the process of reconceptualizing reason as separate from human values, “the validity of logical inferences was thought independent of human attitudes and preferences; this was now the sense in which reason was taken to be objective and universal” (p. 146).

For reason to be considered objective and universal, it was necessary to also reconceptualize emotion. Whereas it was once the case that emotion simply needed to be directed, it was now necessary to conceptualize emotion as being out of control and irrational to justify their eradication from scientific inquiry. On this, Jagger (1992) pointed out that the modern reconceptualization of rationality portrayed emotions as:

Nonrational and often irrational urges that regularly swept the body, rather as a storm sweeps the land. The common way of referring to the emotions as ‘passions’ emphasized that emotions happened to or were imposed on an individual, something she suffered rather than something she did. (p. 146)

Within this process of reconceptualizing rationality in modern science, the body and emotions become inexorably linked and both were seen as being out of conscious control, and thus, untrustworthy as sources of knowledge; fear of both, is what characterizes the ontology of positivism that has subsequently ensued. This epistemology, which is the basis for modern psychological inquiry, is rooted in empirical testability and emphasizes that true scientific knowledge must be able to be verified and thus should be free from emotional/embodied contamination. The only way to achieve this kind of objectivity was to establish scientific methods that neutralized and eradicated all values and emotions of the scientist, effectively disembodying them from their own subjectivity (Jagger, 1992).

As such, within the Western philosophical tradition, disembodied reason is preferred to embodied emotion and those who are deemed the most reasonable and the least emotional are also those that hold the most political, social and cultural power. The relationship between this dichotomy and our modern ontology has a profound influence on the way in which we are taught to act in day-to-day life. On this Jagger (1992) noted, “In these circumstances, where there is a differential assignment of reason and emotion, it is easy to see the ideological function of the myth of the dispassionate investigator” (p. 158).

Qualitative Methodology and the Challenge to Positivist Approaches to Psychological Science

From the outset, qualitative methodology has challenged the dispassionate, disembodied approach to psychological science described above. To work qualitatively, at least in theory,
demands that the researcher actively engage with their own emotions and the emotions of their participants. The relational and emotional aspects of the method are built into the tools we aim to incorporate in our work. These include using memos or analytic notes meant to engage the researcher in a deep process of reflection about the process of interacting with our participants and with the study findings. Qualitative researchers are also supposed to be engaged in a process of reflexivity, or what Rennie (2000) has called a public acknowledgment of our “horizons of understanding.” A horizon of understanding includes the researcher’s own implicit and explicit biases that evolve from cultural, historical, and geographical contexts and they are supposed to be part of the final report we present for publication. Through these methodological processes, including memoing (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), acknowledging, and reflexively making one’s self-understanding available in our reports (Berger, 2015; Shaw, 2010; Watt, 2007), and by explicitly acknowledging emotion and relationships in our research processes (e.g., Campbell, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Gilbert, 2001; Glesne & Peshkin, 1999; Maxwell, 1996), we acknowledge and document the emotional and relational aspects of conducting qualitative research.

Although qualitative methodology is theoretically oriented toward the incorporation of emotions and relationships throughout the research trajectory, in practice, the publication of qualitative studies is often stripped of the relational and emotional context when it comes to the final report. In recent years, some qualitative researchers have begun to document the gap between the demands of qualitative research methodology when it comes to reporting research findings (i.e., including a “horizon of understanding,” publishing memos, etc.) and the restrictions of many psychological journals to include these aspects of the research in the final report (see, e.g., Granek, 2012; Newton, Rothlingova, Gutteridge, LeMarchand, & Raphael, 2012; Rennie, 2015). This special section specifically set out to address these gaps between body and mind and between theory and practice by taking an integrated stance toward these domains in each of the five articles in the section.

The “Dispassionate Investigator” and the Gendered Split

This special section did not start out being about gender. The authors invited to contribute articles were given only one instruction for the special section: Speak/write about whatever you want, but focus on the emotional aspects of conducting the research rather than the research findings themselves. Interestingly, almost without exception, the articles ended up being primarily about women’s embodied experiences. The topics covered include African American women’s experiences of infertility (Ceballo); women with metastatic breast cancer dying from their disease and struggling with body image issues at end of life (McClelland); bisexual women’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth (Ross); and police interactions with women who have been raped and the subsequent rape kits that go untested (Campbell). Finally, even Granek’s article, the only article that is not specifically about issues related to women’s bodies, draws on several emotional examples that have to do with women’s experiences, including being patronized by physicians and women asking for reproductive surgery for which they cannot access funding.

That a special section on emotional engagement in qualitative research in the discipline of psychology focuses so heavily on women’s bodies is not coincidental. The onus on the researcher to be a dispassionate investigator is not neutral and affects women in different ways than it does men. When emotions are given room to breathe, the body spontaneously materializes, and this is especially true for women’s embodied experiences, which historically have not been included in the scientific cannon. Mairs (1997), for example, eloquently pointed out that in the West, formative embodied experiences are said to be very significant in the development of our psychology, yet, it is only (the White, straight, abled) male experiences that are counted as meaningful. She ironically noted,

I’ve never fought in a war, or even in a schoolyard free-for-all. I’ve never tried to see who could piss farthest up the barn wall. I’ve never even been to a whorehouse. All the important formative experiences have passed me by. I was raped once. I’ve borne two children. Milk trickling out of my breasts, blood trick-
ling from between my legs. You do not want to hear about it. (Mairs, 1997, p. 304)

When provided space, only some embodied and emotional experiences are deemed worthy of recording. We do not want to hear the rest. Which stories are told and how they are told, as Mairs pointed out, is deeply gendered (and raced and classed and so on). The articles in this special section complicate, challenge, and provoke this gendered mind/body split. They also remind us in subtle and not so subtle ways that the knowledge produced within the discipline of psychology is extremely limited. When emotions and women’s embodied narratives are given adequate space, the knowledge may produce radical changes to our perception of what it means and what it feels like to live within a patriarchal, racist, and sexist society. Moreover, by making room for emotions in the research trajectory, all five articles demand that the knowledge we produce be situated within the social, political and cultural context in which we are doing our work. As noted in the opening paragraph, although these are not new ideas and have been taken up by feminists and qualitative researchers in the past, these are radical premises when understood within the historical context of the discipline of psychology whose foundation rests on the very splits that are interrogated and integrated in this special section.

Five Articles, Five Topics

The unifying and radical thread in all five articles is the focus on the emotional aspects of conducting qualitative research on psychological topics. In addition, all five authors glide freely between their research findings, their emotional experiences of doing the research, and the political, social and cultural context in which the researcher lives, and where the research took place. Unlike the vast majority of articles published in psychology journals, these articles are deeply integrated in weaving together subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the local, national, and international context of the researcher and the research participants. I outline each article below in more detail to give the reader a taste of what is to come.

Granek’s (2017) article begins with what at first appears to be a simple question. Do the emotional experiences of the researcher change when conducting research in different geographical contexts? Using her own experiences as a bicultural citizen, she explores how her emotional experiences conducting an identical qualitative study on oncologists’ experiences of patient death were affected by the cultural and geographical contexts in Israel and in Canada. Using examples that range from the different research findings to intensely emotional interactions with research participants during the interviews, Granek produces a new theory she calls the Transnational Affective Kaleidoscope that takes into account power, politics, culture, history, gender, ethnicity, and geography as contributing factors to our understanding as researchers. Granek concludes her article with practical tips for qualitative researchers working in international settings.

Ceballo’s (2017) article focuses on the emotional (and political) journey of conducting research on African American women’s experiences of infertility. Infertility, in and of itself, is an emotionally intense experience for women but becomes even more so when situated within the political context of racial inequalities in access to health services in the United States where this research took place. Ceballo’s emotional responses included anger, heartbreak, agony, feeling overwhelmed, and a sense of empowerment at breaking silences around a topic that has unjustly received almost no attention in the research literature. Each step on the research journey is accompanied by the emotional reactions of Ceballo and her research participants and is situated and reported within the political context of racial inequalities when it comes to access, attention to, and needs of African American women. Ceballo also challenges the reader to think about the publication process and peer review when it comes to publishing on women’s topics by describing her experiences with inappropriate and at times, dismissive peer reviewers during the publication process for her research articles.

Campbell’s (2017) article drops the reader into the heart of the ongoing controversy about untested rape kits in the United States with her research focusing on Detroit as a case study. Campbell reviewed archival police records, interviewed police officers, and conducted ethnographic observations with stakeholders invested in this topic over four years. The emotional range of responses toward the participants in...
this article is dizzying in its complexity, including empathic engagement with the rape victims, the police officers, and even toward the unwieldy systems that produce the injustices Campbell has set out to correct with her ambitious and compassionate research project. Out of the five articles, this article in particular challenges the reader to think about what it means to be emotionally engaged with our research and our participants, even in instances when we abhor what they may be saying or what they represent.

In her article on insider positionality, Ross (2017) explores how her emotional investment in the researcher–participant relationship affected her role as a research instrument during her qualitative study on the mental health of sexual minority women transitioning into parenthood. Ross, who identifies as bisexual, was pregnant and then parenting an infant at the time of her longitudinal study. During the course of the study, she interviewed other pregnant women or women who had just given birth about their experiences. The pregnancy and/or the infant of both the researcher and the participant were literally in the room during data collection, challenging the personal and professional boundaries of the researcher, the participant, and the ‘accepted’ way of doing research. Although all the articles in the special section challenge the mind/body split, Ross’s article in particular challenges this binary because the pregnant woman’s body and the care of a nursing infant break Cartesian boundaries that split mind and body apart. Much like pregnancy challenges the notion of bodily and emotional boundaries, Ross’s reflections cause the reader to pause and think about what knowledge might be produced if women’s bodies and women’s theorizing were allowed more articulation in the research literature.

Finally, McClelland (2017) moves us away from birth into impending death of women with metastatic stage IV breast cancer. Using examples from her in-depth interviews with these women, she reflects on her anxieties, her grief, and her rage in response to the women’s narratives about sexual pain and body hatred associated with body fat and not being thin enough. As with Ross, McClelland also writes about the role of her (healthy) body in the room when interviewing women with breast cancer, reflecting on the emotional responses in herself, and in her participants in sensing and reflecting on each other’s physical presence. McClelland starts and ends her article by proposing the idea of vulnerable listening as essential to the qualitative research endeavor and concludes her article by offering a set of strategies other researchers might use in their own work.

Together, these five articles challenge the reader to think critically about a vast array of subjects, lives, and realities. These include the qualitative research trajectory and the role of emotions and the body in our projects, about how, why and whether we choose to document these emotional and bodily processes in our final publications, and finally, about what an inclusive, embodied, emotional, and integrated field of psychology might look like if we demanded a more holistic approach to doing and documenting the messy realities of our research in our academic journals.

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