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# 'If you didn't laugh, you'd cry': Emotional labour, reflexivity and ethics-as-practice in a qualitative fieldwork context

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## Abstract

This article takes Guillemin and Gillam's distinction between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' as a point of departure and return for reflecting critically on a recently completed doctoral research project about political violence and terrorism. It provides an overview of the study before offering some instructive vignettes to show how ethical decision-making processes engaged with 'in the field' were an extension of more everyday and mundane reasoning than we may typically associate with such quintessentially 'sensitive research'. As the final section of this article argues, it is this everyday and mundane quality to ethical reasoning which is sometimes obscured in formal accounts of 'reflexivity'. It is hoped that this article is useful for scholars interested in the ethics and emotional practices of qualitative inquiry, as well as those researching serious violence and bereavement.

## Keywords

Emotional labour, reflexivity, ethics, political violence and terrorism, sensitive research

## Introduction

Researching political violence and terrorism is a controversial and emotive endeavour. Conducting qualitative fieldwork with survivors of political violence and terror attacks would be rightly considered a quintessentially 'sensitive research topic' (Renzetti and Lee, 1993) by ethical review boards. The mental and psychosomatic well-being of participants with distressing experiences of violence is a crucial consideration, as is the welfare of the researcher. Doing justice to such considerations, including securing ethical approval in the first place, necessarily engages a range of practical, interactive and presentational registers variously typical of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 2012; Ward and McMurray, 2016). This article explores the somewhat grey areas between 'told' and 'untold' aspects of such a project and its ethical processes.

Ethical discussions concerning death and bereavement abound within eponymous research fields (see, inter alia, Briller et al., 2008; Carmack and Degroot, 2014; Williams et al., 2008). Many, however, occupy a somewhat 'specialised' or technical space divorced from broader methodological controversies which should concern us all. Cognisant of

Denzin's (2017: 8) call for a renewed and critical exploration into what counts as legitimate and ethical inquiry, this article takes Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) distinction between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' as a point of departure and return for reflecting on a doctoral research project exploring the trauma and harms faced by survivors of political violence and terrorism.

Fifteen years since their work first appeared, it is not hard to connect Guillemin and Gillam's concern to unpack the often-contradictory relationship between the theory and practice of ethical social science research with Denzin's (2017) more contemporaneous rallying cry. As I will make clear, their work encourages us to think carefully about 'the standpoint of the inquirer' and certainly rebuts the idea of 'a God's eye view that guarantees absolute methodological certainty' (Denzin,

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2017: 12). In the spirit of 'self-learning' and 'self-criticism' encouraged among the international qualitative inquiry community (Denzin, 2017: 14), this article subjects the methodological rationale of their original work – particularly the faith they ultimately place in reflexivity – to comparative empirical scrutiny against the backcloth of this doctoral work.

Research ethics are often divorced into approval processes at the institutional level and ethical practices of researchers at an individual or interactional level – a dichotomy which often ignores the relationship between the two. In many ways, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) provide a valuable and welcome corrective to such reductive either/or accounts of 'doing ethical research'. They begin with a moving vignette, encouraging readers to picture a scenario in which they are interviewing Sonia, a woman in her late 40s, living with diagnosed heart disease. The interview is part of a study examining women's experiences of living with the condition. Sonia is married and lives with her husband and their teenage daughter in a rural region on a remote farming property. The interview is taking place in the kitchen over a cup of tea and is progressing well, until you ask Sonia about the general impact of heart disease on her life. At this point, she stops responding and tears begin welling up in her eyes. She has not been coping well, though not because of her heart disease. Sonia discloses that her husband has been sexually abusing their daughter since she was a child. It is this revelation, rather than living with heart disease, which Sonia is clearly anguished by most and which the interview, for a whole host of potential and unknown reasons, provides a space and time to disclose.

As Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 261) rightly state, 'This kind of scenario is not unusual when conducting qualitative research'. They argue that while institutional ethics cannot possibly observe (much less actually regulate) such 'micro-ethics', or 'ethically important moments', which may arise while conducting social research (see also Haggerty, 2004; Hammersley, 2009), such institutional requirements *do* serve to reiterate the importance of good ethical practice. They argue that this can be achieved more fruitfully, however, if researchers embrace 'reflexivity', not just to produce rigorous but responsive research, attuned to fieldwork contingencies including unexpected and sometimes distressing scenarios for participants and researchers.

Aided and inspired by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), this article is written in three parts, each of which engages different aspects of their work in some way. The first provides an overview of my doctoral research exploring survivors' experiences of political violence and terrorism, for which institutional ethical approval was sought and secured. While this section contextualises the research setting and requisites associated with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) 'procedural ethics', it points to the always-already-contradictory logics at play as I manoeuvred myself into a position of ethical legitimacy. The second section explores challenging fieldwork experiences or periods of particularly fatiguing 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 2012; Ward and McMurray, 2016). It

considers how neatly this 'fits' into Hochschild's oft-cited study of emotions and labour processes, highlighting some of the everyday methods employed to negotiate these challenges. This included spontaneous and deliberate forms of humour among both researcher and participants, occurring against a normalised backdrop of humour among gatekeepers, and routine interactions with people beyond designated mentors and supervisors. Finally, this article returns to the distinction between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' to reflect on the extent to which this separation, if only heuristic, is warranted or useful for thinking about the proclaimed importance of 'reflexivity'.

## An overview of the study and its 'procedural ethics'

My research focused on the work of a small charity, the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace (abbreviated hereafter to 'FfP'), based in Warrington, a large town in the North West of England. FfP's origins began on 20 March 1993, when two Irish Republican Army (IRA[1]) bombs exploded in Warrington town centre, killing 12-year-old Tim Parry and 3-year-old Johnathan Ball. Bronwen Vickers, a 32-year-old mother of two, was severely injured and died a year later from skin cancer which medical experts believed could have been aggravated by this event. The FfP was later founded by Tim Parry's parents, Colin and Wendy. A detailed history of the FfP is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to briefly consider their contemporary work to situate the discussion that follows. The charity operates several strands. Participants and activities described here form part of the Survivors Assistance Network (SAN). SAN encompasses a diverse time and place-range of incidents and conflicts including both state and non-state violence, primarily in England and Northern Ireland, but also more recent terror attacks in parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. Despite this breadth, the premise of SAN activities is, in essence, deceptively modest. This includes free practical and emotional support to individuals and families affected by political violence and terrorism, in order to 'facilitate the sharing of experiences and dialogue where appropriate to the needs of survivors' (The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, 2017).

The charity runs weekend-long residential events, which are often the first-time new participants to the FfP talk about their experiences to fellow survivors, providing a catalyst for friendships, networks and short/long-term relationships to flourish. The organisation's core tenet revolves around conflict resolution and peace, providing both survivors and former combatants a safe space in which they can interact. These aims, and their operationalisation, change continuously in a rapidly moving landscape. As a small charity increasingly dependent upon commission rather than grant-based funding (see Simmonds, 2016) to design and implement 'innovative' (i.e. partly, politically attractive), or 'good projects' (see Krause, 2014), its practical organisational work rarely sits

still for long. The trajectory of the FfP, however, from its genesis to the present, continues to be told and retold by beneficiaries and staff – a powerful and emotive form of organisational storytelling (Gabriel, 2000), fortifying its identity among new, existing and potential future audiences.

I made regular fieldwork visits from the beginning of the project to familiarise myself with these activities and, by extension, the FfP's participants, some of whom would go on to be interviewed. Institutional approval by an ethics committee to conduct in-depth, audio recorded interviews were submitted, and granted approval, just less than 12 months after the start of the project. Between 16 and 24 months since the start of the project, these interviews were used to explore individual narratives in more detail. Ongoing fieldwork visits to the Foundation eventually allowed prospective participants to be approached; most showed great interest in the project without being directly solicited and some had already made enquiries about taking part. This elongated phase of 'gaining access' was an immersive, yet informal, process where casual conversations could play out. I avoided a purely instrumental approach to 'data collection'; people expressed themselves 'off the record' before committing to recorded interviews. Without the full immersion required to constitute ethnography as 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1998), this approach was akin to Forsey's (2010) 'ethnography as participant listening'. Although more solid, structured participant recruitment became a realistic necessity, it was not a primary consideration for at least the first 14–18 months of the fieldwork.

Although interviews took place after an independent review board had granted full ethical approval, this does not mean that I did not 'enter the field' until then. My ability to faithfully promise close supervision of the data collection process within my formal institutional ethics application – including transparent information sharing between staff and myself around when and where subsequent interviews took place; arranging post-interview debriefing between staff and survivors; and sharing important up-to-date information about unfolding dynamics within and between different groups attending the charity – rested precisely on these periods of preliminary meetings, visits, observations and invitations to attend events and talks. During this time, I was able to get to know staff, discuss our respective expectations and establish working boundaries. One might think this kind of opportune preliminary involvement within a research field common, even ubiquitous, to the point of being unworthy of attention. Researchers, supervisors and ethical review boards often convey a linear process of 'gaining access' to research fields as something assuming a particular form, articulated in a particular style. That form and style, within locally and disciplinarily bound conventions, is a product of an order immediately recognisable by the professionals involved (the researchers, supervisors, members of ethical review boards, etc.). The ethical review procedure 'is a product of some order of relationships where the combination of persons and what they're doing is something seeable as "their business"' (Sacks, 1992: 91). 'Arrangements', such as those above aimed at enhancing safeguarding practice and rigour, simply appear; they are not so much 'put in place' as just 'are in place' at the point of application. The not inconsiderable amounts of (emotional) labour that have gone into producing these arrangements are typically airbrushed from view, or else stylised, ready for a clean and robust ethics application to be reviewed and subsequently deemed acceptable or unacceptable.

This is characteristic of what Sacks (1992: 83) refers to as 'feigning ignorance'. To assume that ethical review boards, supervisors and fellow researchers are unaware of the extra (emotional) labour that goes into furnishing viable ethical research arrangements would be a mistake. They are. Of course, they may not all be fully aware of every stage of this labour process to the same extent as each other, and each may have particular interests and objectives. In my case, a working relationship had been garnered between my supervisory team and the FfP quite some time before I formally applied for ethical approval. Due to staff resignations, new relationships, new contacts, new forms of trust, and new expectations had to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated prior to 'doing research'. I was introduced and reintroduced to survivors, activists and practitioners whose stories I heard at various invitational events. Such instances were not instigated by me, nor were they audio recorded. They were, however, crucial preliminary periods of the research process which neither contravened nor were made readily and descriptively available to, the as-yet-to-be-completed ethical review application. As Sacks (1992: 83) demonstrates, this game of 'feigning ignorance' 'has to be learned as a special task' in its own right. This 'special task' is captured perfectly by Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 263–264):

> For many researchers, the completion of the research ethics committee's application form is a formality, a hurdle to surmount to get on and do the research. [. . .] we diligently answer the questions on the ethics application form, even though they may be irrelevant to our research. We have learned to write our responses to the questions in 'ethics-committee speak'. This involves using language that the committee will understand, is free of jargon, but will nonetheless reassure the committee that we are competent and experienced researchers who can be trusted. [. . .] Moreover, we have learned to gloss over some issues that we know may cause the committee concern, for example, giving a transcriber, who is external to the research team, access to interview tapes without seeking direct consent from the participants, or not to draw too much attention to potential, although unlikely, risks to the researchers [. . .]. The form asks what measures the researcher/s have put in place in the event of unexpected outcomes or adverse effects. As indicated in the opening scenario, there are many situations that are unexpected when doing research that can potentially have adverse consequences – how can you foresee and plan for all of these? Most researchers learn quickly that they need to be savvy in addressing the potential issues of concern of the committee: using the appropriate discourse to ensure that applications will be approved as quickly as possible with minimum changes and dispute, while remaining true to their research integrity.

Several contradictions often exist within such careful curations, many of which should, in principle, enhance rather than jeopardise a project's chances of approval. This is seldom the case when researchers are tasked with steering their project through a diverse and often unfamiliar committee. Genuinely, ethical practice, sensitive to the context and practices taking place within a research field, cannot be achieved without some familiarity of it. In theory, a diligent and discerning panel will want evidence of practical and emotional support strategies which mitigate (again, in theory) *future* risk to *prospective* participants or researchers. There is something of the work experience paradox at play here, when people seeking employment are told they need more work experience before they can get a job, except they cannot get that experience without first having a job.

In this project and many others involving professionals and their services' 'users', the most appropriate and effective means of developing relationships, including that textbook ideal of 'rapport' with potential gatekeepers and participants, proves to be the very same source of ideational risk for ethical review boards. Carving out truly sensitive contexts first in which to later think about approaching people for interviews could well contravene written parameters of ethical review. Conversely, nothing stops researchers who avoid such preliminary work until getting ethical approval from then clumsily and insensitively pursuing interview opportunities, irrespective of whether people seem ready or willing to recall harrowing events. Researchers with more time in the field prior to collecting recorded data are not automatically better placed to make these decisions. In a context such as this, however, data collection must surely be 'in-step' to some degree with the daily workings of the organisation facilitating access. When deciding who to interview, I sometimes felt uneasy about the terms used by staff to describe survivors' apparent strength or coping mechanisms. It was far easier to negotiate these conversations with familiar staff, however, than it would be to explain away serious distress among participants that I barely knew but decided to interview anyway simply because I had obtained ethical clearance to do so.

In sum, the project successfully outlined its 'procedural ethics' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) to an ethics review board, aided by a promise that all fieldwork and interviews would be arranged (not conducted) under the supervision and debriefing of FfP staff. Staff acted in a strict debriefing capacity without impacting interviews, encouraging and facilitating as open a conversation as possible by helping to ensure that thought and consideration had gone into who was approached for interviews and why in the first place. Fulfilling 'procedural ethics' was only possible through prior meetings with staff, visits to the organisation, invitational events and generally 'getting a feel' for the day-to-day workings of the charity. Such preliminary work is clearly not divorced from practical decision-making, reflecting several aspects of Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) 'ethics in practice'.

Withstanding this conceptual blur, however, crucial differences include the spaces in which such preliminary work took place (work places not private residences, for example), the transparency of such visits (always among groups of people at semi-public events rather than one-to-one meetings), and the ends to which such visits were directed (familiarity with the research setting and ITS participants, rather than seeking out members of that setting instrumentally as potential participants in my own study).

I now turn to some of the challenges that arose once I had begun interviewing survivors and reflect, retrospectively of course, on perhaps why some of these periods of fieldwork became emotionally fraught affairs. Again, just as this section has drawn connections with the practical work in the field which makes its 'procedural ethics' seem more feasible to a review board, so too are the project's unexpected practical and emotional challenges never fully divorced from its ethical safeguarding on paper.

## An affective account of the study's 'ethics in practice'

One of the difficulties researchers face as they stumble into 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; see also Subramani, 2019) is that they are often emotionally fraught affairs. While the well-being, safety and protection of research participants is rightly prioritised in professional guidelines, our ability to fulfil these promises remains partly contingent on our own emotional command of the situation. This does not mean being emotionally stoic or purposefully detached, far from it. In most, if not all, interactions involving disclosures of violence it would be bizarre to respond in an entirely predetermined manner. Responding compassionately, or reverently, or angrily, or cheerily, or sadly, or whatever way the situation and its interaction demands – based on the things demanding it in the there-and-then of the situation – require that we remain alert, attentive, and prepared to perform emotionally as the situation requires. No shortlist of structural-sociological characteristics, nor an extensive theoretical knowledge of them, readily prepares us for how to act here. At the very least, hearing harrowing testimony requires that we engage in sure and emphatic ways/practices with people, whatever those ways/practices look like, whether those ways/practices are positively dialogical or contemplatively silent encounters. In striving to meet the precedents outlined within procedural ethics, some of the most sensitively conducted research is often the most emotionally difficult for researchers.

An uncharacteristically 'immersive' regime of interviewing that took place towards the end of 2016 in Northern Ireland stands out here. I interviewed several people throughout the week with the help of 'Louise', a gatekeeper who kindly contacted mutual contacts. Despite securing accommodation for the week and having contact details and agreements from all interviewees, Louise generously insisted on

doing as much as she could to ensure things ran smoothly. Without her help, I would not have completed half as much research as I did that trip. It was a busy week and I managed to interview many people I had been hoping to speak with for several months. It was also good to spend time with Louise, who I had come to know well but only at the FfP. Much of the week was spent at her home with her partner and son who went about their daily routines. Despite being an unusually condensed window of quite intensive fieldwork, I was enjoying the company of Louise and her family and, careful not to make a nuisance of myself, felt glad they had welcomed me into their home.

Despite feeling relaxed between daily fieldtrips, when I would often be conducting recorded interviews about particularly harrowing events, I underestimated the degree of emotional labour I was constantly investing while participating in more ordinary interactions with Louise. Although acting initially as a gatekeeper, she and I chatted openly about all sorts of things both within and beyond the confines of my research. Two important facets of Hochschild's (2012: 147) conceptualisation of emotional labour are worth noting here, however. First, it requires face-to-face contact as opposed to communication at a distance. In this instance, although I was invited to spend time among Louise and her family, I was still something of an 'outsider' and certainly would not have entirely lost my status as someone visiting for work purposes given the extensively planned nature of the trip. Perhaps more telling then, given this palpable connection to work of a particular kind, is Hochschild's (2012: 147) second point about emotional labour – that it requires 'the worker to produce an emotional state in another person – gratitude or fear, for example'. Research ethics *describe* a process of garnering rapport, making participants and gatekeepers feel comfortable. What if we surpass these rather rudimentary and minimal requisites and develop a much fuller and diverse set of emotional exchanges with people, as happens all the time in other relational contexts? Despite feeling relaxed and spontaneous around Louise, I was still investing considerable energy in the ongoing emotional work of impression management (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). Qualitative researchers surely know how mentally and even physically tiring this can be, which made the final part of the trip all the more difficult.

Louise and I spent the final couple of days of my trip walking around the city together. She knew it was a city close to my heart having grown up listening to stories my father would tell me about when he lived here many years earlier. Indeed, I had shared stories with her about my late half-brother who also shared an inextricable connection with the place we now walked around. These visits to the city had come to feel significant for me, even cathartic. On the penultimate day of my stay, I sat down and interviewed Louise about her experiences of everyday life during conflict in Northern Ireland. Some of what she told me I already knew well, but some were new and struck fresh emotional chords.

Hearing yet another woman disclose her experiences of historic domestic and sexual abuse engendered inner-feelings I had felt before upon listening to disclosures by numerous female family members, friends and partners. The similarity, on some level, of Louise's story made it even more difficult to hear. It created a sort of emotional liminality in which neither empathetic spontaneity based on personal experience nor procedural responses based on professional research ethics seemed able to engage and lurch into action in any satisfactory way.

On one level it felt reminiscent of Wakeman's (2014) description of a biography-emotion intersection in conducting fieldwork, where experiences as researchers tread familiar emotional paths to those experienced elsewhere at other times and places, except the tacit and intuitive ability of knowing how to respond most surely which he portrays failed me. Nothing happened, much like it probably had not many times before when Louise disclosed her abuse to people. Nothing bad and nothing good, as far as I could discern. When it came time for me to leave the following day, Louise and I both expressed how much we had enjoyed the week. She said how well she thought I had gotten on with her teenage son who suffers from Tourette's syndrome. We had spoken lots during my stay and she felt it was good for his confidence that he had enjoyed the chance to talk with someone new. I left for home after saying our goodbyes. It was an odd feeling reflecting on the trip in the following days and weeks. I was mentally and physically exhausted, feeling a mixture of upset, anger, sadness at stories I had heard, and an even bigger range of positive feelings too. This maelstrom of affect stayed with me for weeks and I really struggled, despite meetings with professional mentors and supervisors, to focus on my everyday tasks or to really make any sense of how I felt about the trip.

Around a month or so later, I travelled to the home of a man called 'George'. George had asked during our first meeting if I wanted to interview him for my research and 12 months later I was pursuing his offer. Perhaps due to a combination of the previous fieldtrip and the fact that I felt George's story to be a particularly harrowing one, my approach to this visit and interview was entirely different.[2] In contrast with my interviews the previous month, I felt like I knew what the focus of George's discussions would be and, rightly or wrongly, I felt mentally braced. Knowing my participants for some time prior to interviews meant, I would often have observed them telling and retelling stories in different settings. While I still invested an emotional labour into our time together and interview, I felt that I had exposed my emotions and those of my participants during the previous, schedule-filled period of fieldwork. I remember calling my sister on my way to George's home and recounting how difficult this had been. I always felt a tension between ignoring the potential for vicarious impacts on me as a researcher and selfishly embellishing other people's experiences. Ironically, spending so much time familiarising myself with prospective

participants in as 'slow' a way as possible resulted in some relatively intensive periods of interviewing towards the end of the project's 'data collection' timeframe. I spent time at George's home, conducted our interview, and similarly spent lots of time chatting over dinner just as I had with Louise. I left for home with a totally different experience again. I felt I had conducted myself empathetically and naturally as before, but I also seemed to have instinctively opened up less, not in how much I contributed or shared, but more in how much I allowed George's words to move me. As I reflected in the days afterwards, I felt much more stable and even sanguine, but consequently somewhat detached – not a feeling I had experienced before following such a quintessentially sensitive and harrowing interview.

Many scholars, particularly from qualitative health and social work research, counselling therapies and 'psy' disciplines (Rose, 1998), recognise the potential toll of emotional fieldwork on researchers and participants alike (see, inter alia, Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, 2009; Hubbard et al., 2001). This has not always been matched by proactive efforts on the part of university ethics committees to protect researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). In line with Dickson-Swift et al.'s (2008) findings from interviewing public health researchers, I drew upon a mixture of formal/informal, structured/unstructured, and regular/infrequent supervision and debriefing throughout the project with a range of different people (FfP contacts, supervisors, partner, friends, family) in an attempt to avoid both emotional distress and 'researcher burnout' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008: 136). But some attempts were more successful than others, and theory seldom helps one to forecast disclosures of violence – its content, its affect, nor what we do with that affect. Some sad, sombre, angry or other emotions were better anticipated than others. They assumed both private (emotions I felt 'quietly' on my own) and co-constructed (emotions that were produced collectively between participants and myself) forms (Riessman, 2008: 40). It was largely prior 'expectancy' or 'preparedness' before undertaking interviews or fieldwork that dictated my inner composure, rather than the incredibly important debriefs with FfP staff and my supervisors. Being relaxed and assuming of my own well-being around participants I had come to know was often jolted upon hearing new information or more emotive iterations of their stories, whereas I was mentally 'braced' for certain interviews I knew would be particularly difficult to conduct. Difficult interviews seemed to 'harden' me somewhat ahead of subsequent interviews where I would not forsake being empathetic but would not allow myself to feel perhaps as involved as I previously had (Waters et al., 2020 – in this Special Issue).

I definitely experienced a period of 'researcher burnout' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008: 136) towards the end of 2016, caused by a combination of difficult substantive discussions, tiredness and pushing myself to do fieldwork in a more condensed window of time to keep the thesis 'on track'. The main way participants and I traversed such instances or periods was through humour. Humour appeared repeatedly throughout the fieldwork and data analysis as a coping motif. It featured as both an aspect of our interview interactions and in participants' reflections of how they had coped with difficult periods in the past. Louise, for example, recalled several stories from her childhood in Northern Ireland during The Troubles that still, to this day, really make her laugh. She, and others, would sometimes reflect fondly on these times, highlighting the fact that 'normal', everyday life continues amid otherwise seemingly chaotic conflicts. Siapno (2009: 58) notes the occurrence of so-called 'post-trauma humour' as a form of resilience among displaced women in East Timor; humour is similarly highlighted by Heath-Kelly and Jarvis (2016: 243) as offering some the ability to cope and come to terms with both specific or risk of future terror attacks. I would sometimes make light of the fact that I was researching such a 'cheery topic' when people asked me about what my PhD research was about, rather than engage in a direct conversation about how challenging it was at times. I pondered whether this constituted some form of 'researcher resilience', but dwelling on this felt irrelevant, narcissistic and uncomfortable. Similar forms of stoicism were evident among staff too and seem to represent a widespread occupational response among the victim support sector. As a gatekeeper reflecting on their job once uttered to me, 'If you didn't laugh, you'd cry'.

Understanding sadness, anger, or other ostensibly difficult emotions as various forms of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012; Ward and McMurray, 2016), emotion work (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and participant/researcher co-construction (Riessman, 2008: 40) aided in making sense of them. That such experiences are increasingly acknowledged within qualitative literatures did genuinely help me to keep a sense of perspective on them. However, it is important to recognise the peculiarity of the labour process for doctoral research students. Face-to-face interaction and production of emotional states in others are two pertinent factors in Hochschild's (2012: 147) work, but whether the exercising of control by employers over the emotional activity of employees necessarily captures the self-directed dynamic of impression management among lone researchers remains a moot point. That humour surfaces as a natural, automatic, spontaneous and often protective response to violence, either in research/teaching contexts (see for example, Brina, 2003; Moran et al., 2002 respectively) or occupational settings beyond the university (see, inter alia, Rowe and Regehr, 2010; Scott, 2007), is rightly recognised as important sociological phenomena capable of 'smoothing difficulties and creating "mutuality"' (Watson, 2015: 135). That greater attention should be paid to these 'little things' we do to steady ourselves during our research comes second to the fact that we will surely do them anyway.

That is not to say we cannot learn from them. Situating our emotional labour as qualitative researchers among a range of extraneous but distinctly everyday and routine

factors in our lives maintains the always-relational nature of research ethics and guards against the charge of narcissism often levelled at autoethnographic research accounts (see Ellis, 2009 for a rebuttal). The distinction between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' offered in Guillemin and Gillam's account should thus be thought of as both mutually inclusive and contingent on our existing relationships, prior research experience and ongoing logistical factors such as health, work-life balance and mental well-being, independent of (but potentially affected by) the research topic at hand, no matter how harrowing that may be. It is in light of these observations that the article now returns to their account.

## Emotive research and reflexivity: procedural and field ethics-as-practice

Returning to Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) account, précised in the introduction and used as a comparative device for structuring this article, prompts a series of critical and appreciative rejoinders. Both the 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' aspects of this research project involved the negotiation of what Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 265) refer to as dilemmas, or 'ethically important moments'. These are not always dilemmas of the spectacular or 'red-letter' variety where we necessarily find ourselves stuck 'on the horns of a dilemma' as it were (often quite the opposite) – rather a much more every day, mundane and unending sort of decision-making but which nonetheless requires decisiveness (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 265). Indeed, that ongoing ethical reasoning exhibits this low-key, every day, mundane and routine form is one of two central claims made by Guillemin and Gillam. The second is their assertion that while having an awareness of ethically significant, often unexpected, and sometimes risky or challenging moments in our research practice (most of which are not necessarily forecast let alone realistically guarded against through research ethics committees) is important, this awareness alone 'is not helpful in addressing and dealing with these issues when they arise' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 273). 'Reflexivity', they argue however, is. It is primarily this latter claim, but particularly their separation, if chiefly heuristic, between the two which is worth mulling over: ethics and its 'everydayness'; 'reflexivity' as the solution to negotiating it.

While Guillemin and Gillam's article is now 15 years old, their two related concerns – 'reflexivity' and 'the everyday' – remain at the heart of social science research methodology and ethics debates, even said to represent distinct 'turns' contemporarily (see Brownlie, 2018). The extent to which claims of such 'turns' are warranted, useful or accurate remains a moot point and is not my concern here. It is nonetheless an important debate to return to, so seemingly ubiquitous has their suggestion become in the intervening years; namely, that 'reflexivity encourages researchers to develop the skills to respond appropriately [to "ethically important moments"]' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 277). I would argue, however, based

on experiences described earlier that their separation (albeit heuristic) of ethical practice as 'procedural'/'practical' is a little too reductive and that their advocation of reflexivity demands a somewhat unrealistically prescriptive separation, or lag, between practical action, meaning-making and mutual understanding (see Mair and Sharrock, forthcoming), including in the way we 'see' situations unfolding (see Nishizaka, 2000).

Following Lynch (2000: 26–27, emphasis added), reflexivity is not afforded an elevated status as an epistemological or moral elixir but rather taken to encompass 'an *unavoidable* feature of the way actions (including actions performed, and expressions written, by academic researchers) are performed, made sense of and incorporated into social settings'. 'Making sense' of the substantive topic under study and its various elements is particularly resonant with the methodological self-awareness, standpoint and hermeneutic elements outlined in Lynch's reflexivity inventory (Lynch, 2000: 29–32; see also Berger, 2015), which encompass much of Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) work. Like them, Lynch reminds us of the importance of acknowledging the wider context in which research practices take place. If we think in general terms about what reflexivity encompasses, it might appear that such accounts are similar. The major difference, however, lies in the promise placed on reflexivity as some sort of solution to an encountered set of 'field problems'.

Lynch points to the ethnomethodological reflexivity in the work of Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks. Within their unorthodox challenge to formal analytic sociology, no matter how flexible, adaptive, non-prescriptive and context-sensitive our efforts to 'taking reflexivity seriously' are, they should represent 'a property of "accounts" (verbal expressions, signifiers, texts and other formal devices) that is furnished by taken-for-granted usage in recurrent circumstances [. . .], not associated with any epistemic virtue, cognitive skill or emancipatory interest' (Lynch, 2000: 34). They point to the fact that sociology's methods and concepts for studying social life, including social structures, often assume familiar – 'but unstudied' – background understandings of ordinary life and its workings (Lynch, 2000: 34). That critique withstanding, researcher's attempts to depict the dilemmas we might run into during qualitative fieldwork, including the likes I have offered here, often only approximate an adequate and transparent account able to be studied by others. This is seldom intentional but underscores the importance of carefully cataloguing the exchanges and texts which made the gathering of subsequent information achievable. As my own examples show, when researchers retrospectively attempt to reconstruct an account of ethics-in-practice, the taxonomy or heuristic sorting of ethical 'types' becomes a necessary evil for (only partially) reconstructing accounts of practical action.

Guillemin and Gillam's work has proven undoubtedly useful, prompting me to think through my own situated and empirical research practices, including before, during, and after their completion. Utilising a feminist and science and technology studies-inspired approach to what they term

'microethics' (informed perhaps most notably by the work of Sandra Harding), they rightly stress that 'Reflexivity *in research* is not a single or universal entity but a process – an active, ongoing process that saturates every stage *of the research*' in which 'our social and political locations [as researchers] affect our research' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 274, emphases added). It is the special singling out of 'the research', italicised earlier, and the inevitable square bracketing '[of researchers]' which often accompanies accounts of reflexivity that Lynch (2000) would ultimately problematise (for different ethnomethodological approaches to this issue, see Kim, 1999). Guillemin and Gillam's (2004: 274) chosen subheading – 'Using Reflexivity in Research' – will undoubtedly peeve scholars, like Lynch (2000), whose sensitivities towards the overly virtuous status frequently attributed to reflexivity as an ethical-imperative-cum-silver-bullet solution to 'ethical dilemmas' are particularly heightened. That is, to suggest even implicitly that 'Reflexivity' (as theoretical scaffolding) is a boundaried resource to be 'Used' (deployed, utilised or added) 'in Research' (as distinct from any other activity) inevitably provokes criticism. As the deliberately and unfaithfully separated accounts of my 'procedural ethics' versus my 'ethics in practice' presented earlier show, such attempts at separation *must inevitably fail* if we are to faithfully recognise all aspects of research ethics as practical action, conducted at all times, whatever the stage of any research project, by and between immanently analytical social actors in always-already-recognisable context (see Sharrock and Button, 1991). The first section of this article suggests that practical ethics are typically integral to research projects long before institutional review boards even formally recognise them as such.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) offer a far more nuanced and practice-oriented account of reflexivity vis-à-vis research ethics than most which goes some way to guarding against opposing critique by offering an explicitly non-prescriptive account of reflexivity. They are astute to argue that the adoption of quintessentially proactive approaches to ensuring participant autonomy, such as those often found in participatory action research which transcend the minimalist confines of standalone informed consent, 'would not necessarily lead to ethical research practice' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 276) – to which we should add – any more than a 'minimalist notion of informed consent' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 275) is necessarily a reliable predictor for unethical research practice. Again, the study-by-study context is key, but even they risk inviting a reductionist reading of their nuanced discussion of practice with the invocation for 'more reflexivity' in the hope that it can act as a 'sensitising notion' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 278). Is it time we stopped lauding the virtues of reflexivity in qualitative research? Perhaps not. Surely, though, if we are to retain its constant connection with everyday practice in appraisals of our research ethics, then this must extend to all stages of our research, including field encounters which exist both on and off paper. Perhaps

then we might even start to think about the informed, instructive and practically useful role ethical review committees might be able to play in supportively shaping ethical practice in newly developing projects rather than simply rejecting them or signing them off.

## Conclusion

The research at the heart of this article revolved around a highly emotive topic associated with grief and loss. Practically, however, it also triggered a range of positive and adaptive emotional responses from participants and myself. There appeared to be a dialectic relationship between this very distressing and sombre topic and the production of camaraderie, survivor solidarity and coping mechanisms based on humour. This alone is unremarkable. That seemingly incongruous responses to grief and bereavement are so commonplace, however, hints towards the perfunctory tendencies of institutional ethical review boards. Their relationship with researchers seeking ethical approval is predominantly geared towards the avoidance and management of potential harm, yet they necessarily overlook the unseen 'preliminary' work undertaken by researchers as they manoeuvre themselves into positions of trust and legitimacy. Emotional labour and the relationships that develop through it become truly integral objects of reflection and analysis if we are to make continued sense of our research ethics. These findings must not be extrapolated to 'speak' for other researchers in similar fields, but it is hoped that they can contribute to this debate.

This article has shown, through an iterative dialogue with Guillemin and Gillam (2004) that the practicalities of qualitative research are a complex and variegated affair carrying different emotional demands and challenges at different periods during a project. Using a recently completed doctoral project as an illustrative touchstone, it is clear that manoeuvring oneself into a position of ethical legitimacy must sometimes be concomitantly pursued with prospective research participants *and* those ultimately responsible for granting institutional approval, prior to ethical approval being granted. This is not due to eagerness or cunningness on the part of the researcher but rather a practical demand which provides the opportunity of scoping out feasible ways in which a convincing and faithful story of ethical safeguarding on paper and ethical judgement in the field can be honed prior to submission for approval. Without this local knowledge, writing a robust application for ethical review would be both difficult and uninformed. Where the understandings and interests of the two groups diverge (prospective participants and those conducting ethical review), particularly around how trust, confidentiality, safety and harm are to be rendered intelligible, as they almost certainly will, researchers are automatically and unavoidably engaged in the production of local and accountable order, the kinds of which characterise a whole variety of everyday human phenomena (*qua* Garfinkel, 1967). As researchers, we cannot simply extradite these 'other'

kinds of decision-making processes under the auspices of reflexivity, as though they were phenomenologically unique in status, to special issues, eponymous textbooks, or chapter subsections in bad faith. 'Doing reflexivity' or 'Being reflexive' in this sense, then, is not a requisite exercise in methodological ground-clearing, after which we can get down to the 'real' task at hand (be that identifying, creating, entering, leaving, or analysing research fields), but an inherent and immanent feature of all practical activity that we engage in.

There is also an important political point to understanding reflexivity and research ethics in this way. First, it does not risk the often unreasonable expectation that formal debriefs with professional colleagues, variously including gatekeepers, counsellors, supervisors, or mentors, can engender. In the examples described here, these debriefs were not stressful or unpleasant but rather ineffectual, failing to account for existing relationships (e.g. family members) and mechanisms (such as humour) for negotiating what will always be moving and emotionally charged research. To insist on the importance of these more formal relationships and meetings at the expense of existing sources of support for researchers is to extend the bureaucratic reach of the review process without taking into account qualitative life. Second, by thinking of *ethics-as-practice* in this way, we might start to think more fruitfully about decentering research ethics around violence in all manner of ways. This includes 'researching the powerful', an area in desperate need of ethical reconstruction (Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte, 2018). We might encourage students and researchers of violence to engage more positively with conversations about 'ethics' as a living and breathing practice, riddled with uncertainties, unknowns, contradictions and questions. If we see 'clearing ethics' only as a mechanical and requisite practice, one of the many stepping stones on our way to completing a research project, we are in trouble – hurdles and challenges simply get airbrushed from view. But similarly, if we approach only with caution, then how well are we preparing ourselves and each other for those moments when the aftermath of violence confronts us in ways that would be impossible, and surely unethical, to turn away from?

Imagining an alternative form of 'procedural ethics' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), which not only allows but encourages prior engagement in the field, opens up possibilities for an ethical review process of a fundamentally different kind. This could focus less one-dimensionally on deficit thinking about risk, committing instead to more transparent, constructive and dialogical research practice. Research access forays frequently begin before ethical approval is granted at an institutional level; such institutional processes are frequently complained about for delaying the progress of projects. This surely represents a missed opportunity for institutions and committees of experienced researchers to play a more active, useful role in research-led support as sounding boards for developing projects during preliminary fieldwork. To be sure, this fieldwork should have parameters.

Examples suggested here include attendance at public or semi-public events rather than one-to-one meetings, in work places not private residences, and logistical familiarity with organisations or communities rather than singling out prospective participants.

Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) work continues to be a useful and nuanced guide to the practicalities of qualitative research ethics and an astute observation of how practice can quickly diverge from theory. We should not misread their account, nor our own frustrations at the somewhat mechanical nature of institutional review processes, as a justification or call for the deregulation of research safeguarding but rather a rallying cry for its ongoing improvement.

## Notes

1. The history of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) as a political movement, including contested understandings of its visions, causes, membership criteria, name and organisational ethos is a complex one beyond the scope of this article (though see, for example, Coogan, 2002, and English, 2003).
2. George's brother had been murdered in a hostage situation.

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