
5-6-2024

Exploring the Use of Diary Entries for Qualitative Researchers: Mitigating Challenges When Investigating Sensitive Topics on Indian Women

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Recommended APA Citation

Mishra, P., & Gupta, A. (2024). Exploring the Use of Diary Entries for Qualitative Researchers: Mitigating Challenges When Investigating Sensitive Topics on Indian Women. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(5), 1279-1298. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6330>

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the challenges encountered by qualitative researchers while investigating sensitive topics. We make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on researcher well-being and the mitigation of potential adverse incidents during data collection in studies on sensitive topics. The researchers maintained a comprehensive diary while conducting a study on the sensitive topic of work-family conflict among Indian working women. The analysis of these diary entries revealed three primary categories of challenges: (a) emotional challenges encompassing emotional sustenance, self-awareness, the element of care, building rapport, reciprocity, breaking the connection, preparing for exit, and researcher exhaustion; (b) methodological challenges, including data recording and interview location; (c) ethical challenges, such as confidentiality and guilt; and (d) other challenges, such as establishing credibility as a mainstream researcher in academics. This study aims to raise awareness about the challenges that qualitative researchers face, offering insights into potential dilemmas and explaining how reflexivity, self-disclosure, reciprocity, and a well-planned exit strategy can assist in navigating and addressing researcher biases.

Keywords

diary entries, ethical challenges, methodological challenges, emotional challenges, reflexivity, self-disclosure

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Exploring the Use of Diary Entries for Qualitative Researchers: Mitigating Challenges When Investigating Sensitive Topics on Indian Women

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This study seeks to understand the challenges encountered by qualitative researchers while investigating sensitive topics. We make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on researcher well-being and the mitigation of potential adverse incidents during data collection in studies on sensitive topics. The researchers maintained a comprehensive diary while conducting a study on the sensitive topic of work-family conflict among Indian working women. The analysis of these diary entries revealed three primary categories of challenges: (a) emotional challenges encompassing emotional sustenance, self-awareness, the element of care, building rapport, reciprocity, breaking the connection, preparing for exit, and researcher exhaustion; (b) methodological challenges, including data recording and interview location; (c) ethical challenges, such as confidentiality and guilt; and (d) other challenges, such as establishing credibility as a mainstream researcher in academics. This study aims to raise awareness about the challenges that qualitative researchers face, offering insights into potential dilemmas and explaining how reflexivity, self-disclosure, reciprocity, and a well-planned exit strategy can assist in navigating and addressing researcher biases.

Keywords: diary entries, ethical challenges, methodological challenges, emotional challenges, reflexivity, self-disclosure

Undertaking research on sensitive subjects can prove emotionally demanding and distressing for researchers, potentially impacting their personal and professional lives (McGarry, 2010). Qualitative exploration of sensitive issues delves into the real-life experiences of interviewees, prioritizing the emic perspective over the etic (Brodsky & Faryal, 2006). Novice researchers might find these challenges particularly difficult to handle (Johnson, 2008). A primary data collection method involves conducting interviews with subjects who provide their insights on the research topic. Investigating unpleasant incidents intensify the challenges of the interview process as participants must revisit traumatic and emotional experiences they may be attempting to move past. However, sharing these experiences can also facilitate a sense of catharsis (Birch & Miller, 2000; Kleinman & Copp, 1993). This process takes a toll not only on the interviewee but also on the researcher (Bashir, 2020; Bloor et al., 2010). As Morse and Field (1995) observed, “Data collection can be an intense experience, particularly when the chosen topic revolves around illness or other distressing human experiences. The stories obtained by the qualitative researcher in interviews often recount intense suffering, social injustices, or other profoundly moving narratives” (p. 78).

The primary role of researcher while investigating sensitive topics is to ensure that the data are collected and analyzed from their participant’s perspective while acknowledging and mitigating their own potential biases. This approach allows for a faithful replication of the

participant's views, experiences, structure, and meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Furthermore, researchers must navigate the challenges of dealing with narratives of stressful human experiences, considering the impact on their psychological, emotional, and physical well-being while upholding the ethical standards inherent in researching sensitive, traumatic, and confidential human experiences (Dickson-Swift, 2017). At every stage of engagement with participants, researchers are likely to encounter challenges, including initiating contact and obtaining consent, selecting interview locations (workplace vs. neutral setting), establishing rapport and trust, ensuring sensitivity in recording interviews, posing delicate questions, managing emotions during interviews, maintaining clear boundaries between their role as a researcher and the potential roles of friend or counselor, and finally, ending the relationship and departure from the field (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2006; Etherington, 1996; Finch, 1984).

While studies frequently center on the experiences of those under investigation (Andriessen et al., 2018), there is a noticeable gap in research addressing the challenges encountered by the researchers themselves. Our study seeks to offer insight into "the personal experiences behind the scenes of research" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741) by describing the authors' experiences, challenges, and strategies. The aim of sharing this "behind-the-scenes" perspective is to better prepare qualitative researchers for the challenges they may encounter in their own work.

The first author conducted a study on work-family conflicts among Indian working women. She recorded her experiences during the study in a physical diary. She analyzed the diary entries to write a first draft of the paper. The second author contributed by refining the paper such that it could be submitted for a journal review process. The study is narrated in the first person singular, using "I," "me," "she," and "her," as opposed to plural expressions such as "we" and "us." To safeguard privacy and confidentiality, all interviewee names have been changed.

Writing the Diary

Twenty-eight participants were interviewed for a qualitative study focusing on work-family and family-work conflicts experienced by Indian working women, particularly concerning workplace harassment, bullying, patriarchal culture, and related factors. Participants were briefed on the study's objective, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their identity, after obtaining permission from our institute to carry out the study. The participants provided consent to participate, with the assurance that all collected data would be used for research purposes without disclosing anyone's identity. Given the personal nature of the interviews, they naturally contained a high emotional content. Several interviewees were profoundly affected by their work-family situations, making the discussions quite sensitive.

To better manage my emotions, feelings, dilemmas, biases, and challenges as a researcher during this study, I decided to keep a physical diary. The decision to maintain a diary as a research strategy stemmed from recognizing the emotional content in the interviews and understanding its potential impact on both the interviewees and myself. While composing the diary entries, I posed questions to myself, including (a) how the emotional content of these interviews personally affected me, (b) what feelings and emotions I experienced during the interviews, and (c) how to uphold objectivity and professionalism when engaging with emotionally charged narratives.

The diary served as a self-reflecting tool, helping me record and refine my approach for future interviews (Clarke, 2009), and record field notes and memos to contemplate experiences and pinpoint critical issues for upcoming interviews (Melville & Hincks, 2016). This facilitated a more nuanced analysis of the overall study and helped maintain my emotional well-being.

My diary entries followed a structured four-step process:

Pure Description of the Experience

In this initial step, I recorded assumptions, emotions, and feelings during each interview experience, providing a clear understanding of my perspective and emotional state. During interviews, specific thoughts, feelings, and emotions permeated my mind. To capture these, I promptly recorded diary entries upon returning home after completing each interview. This process differed from the objectivity of filling out a questionnaire; instead, it was a subjective flow inherent in the experience.

Thoughts Arising from the Experience

I captured thoughts, insights, or dilemmas that emerged from interview experiences, adding depth and meaning to recorded observations of the work-family conflict study. The entries encompassed a range of elements, incorporating words, emoticons, metaphors, and diagrams, all aimed at fostering self-expression and delving into conscious thoughts.

Checking My Awareness

The third step involved critical analysis to determine whether my emotions and assumptions influenced data analysis, addressing potential self-bias in interpretation, and ensuring well-supported inferences based on data.

The act of composing diary entries assisted me in setting aside my biases. It enabled subsequent reflection on the other facets of data collection, fostering understanding and learning from the entire process, whether it pertained to methodological insights, emotional learning, or other aspects. Therefore, the purpose of maintaining diary entries was to ensure that I kept my biases under control to the greatest extent possible, if not entirely, while simultaneously providing a platform for retrospective reflection on specific aspects.

Relating My Reflections to Existing Literature

Finally, I delved into relevant research to justify my findings of the work-family conflict study, seeking similarities or disparities in existing literature, and considering the influence of cultural and societal factors on new insights.

Analysis of Diary Entries

For this study, diary entries were treated as data points, and the analysis process resembled that used for interview transcripts (Richards, 2006; Silverman, 2005). Several recent studies explored the use of diary entries in qualitative research, such as McCloughen et al. (2020) in a phenomenological study of nursing students' experiences during clinical placements and Hoppler et al. (2022) in a study of closeness in social relationships.

I analyzed diary entries using self-reflexivity to gain insights into thoughts, experiences, assumptions, and emotions, aiding in managing subjectivity (Band-Winterstein et al., 2014). Reflexivity entails fostering transparency in researcher's decision-making across various dimensions within the research process, including personal, methodological, theoretical, epistemological, ethical, and political levels, thus increasing robustness in research practices (Lincoln et al., 2011). The first step in data analysis was to use a conceptual framework which would form the basis of analyzing the diary entries. I used the Alvesson and

Skoldberg (2009) model for this purpose. This model offers practical guidance for implementing reflexivity in qualitative research. It outlines four levels of reflexivity that enhance the research process by prompting consideration of various elements, ensuring transparency and rigor in the research process.

The first level focuses on how the “data” were generated and the influence that the researcher may have in the data gathering process. The main question that I addressed at this level was “How did my emotions, feelings, and dilemmas impact me as a researcher during the data collection process?”

The second level deals with the data analysis process addressing how the researcher is analyzing data and recognizing potential personal and a priori perspectives that may impact on the data analysis. Some important questions at this level were (a) “What challenges did I face during different stages in the research process?” and (b) “Which one of these challenges had the potential to influence the analysis of the data?”

The third level sought to understand the how the political-ideological issues embedded in the societal and cultural context in India may impact the data. An essential question at this level was “What were the societal and cultural norms that impacted me as a researcher during the research process?”

The final fourth level considers the impact of representation and authority, language, and communication on the research process. Some crucial questions that I asked myself were (a) “How did I engage with the participants during the research process?” and (b) “How did my communication impact the research process?”

Keeping the above questions in mind, I started reading my diaries. As I read the diaries, I realized that in the initial recordings of the diaries, a notable absence of precision was evident. However, as the diary entries progressed, there was a discernible evolution towards greater specificity regarding emotions, feelings, dilemmas, biases, and challenges encountered throughout the study. Initially, the entries lacked the depth and detail necessary to fully encapsulate the nuances of my research experiences. Subsequently, a more refined and focused approach emerged, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of my internal landscape and the complexities inherent in navigating the study’s emotional terrain. This evolution underscores the iterative nature of the diary-writing process, wherein initial shortcomings provide opportunities for growth and refinement over time. Such precision in diary entries facilitated a richer understanding of my subjective experience and contributed to the depth and validity of the academic inquiry.

Through multiple readings of the diaries, I engaged in a thorough examination of my recorded experiences. Employing highlighters to color-code entries reflecting emotions, feelings, dilemmas, biases, and challenges encountered during the study, I systematically dissected the intricacies of my subjective journey. This meticulous process unveiled a deeper understanding of my own influence and subjectivity in the data collection process. Reading and reflecting on my experiences not only illuminated the range of emotions experienced but also facilitated a nuanced comprehension of my biases and their potential impact on both the data collection and subsequent analysis. This introspective exploration underscores the significance of reflexivity in qualitative research, highlighting the researcher’s ongoing interrogation of their role and positioning within the research context. Self-reflexivity played a crucial role in validating constructed knowledge by recognizing the researcher’s position as a witness to others’ experiences (Pillow, 2003; Ropers-Huilman, 1999).

As a next step, I began by identifying related ideas and proceeded to group them. Subsequently, I organized these themes into larger categories, iteratively refining the process until I arrived at three overarching themes and one minor theme, each with multiple subthemes nested within. Additionally, I conducted cross-checks of my interpretations of the diary entries

with a co-researcher to ensure that my biases were not impacting the interpretation of data and themes emerging from the diary entries.

In terms of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) model of reflexivity, some important themes that emerged at the first level of analysis related to the emotional challenges that I encountered like emotional sustenance, self-awareness and vulnerability, the element of care, researcher exhaustion, and guilt. Some prominent themes that emerged at the second level of analysis related to handling extensive data, multitasking and balancing work-family issues, breaking the connection, and managing participant expectations. The key themes at the third level of analysis focused on issues related to confidentiality, rapport building, reciprocity and self-disclosure, and preparing for the exit. Some noteworthy themes at the fourth level of analysis related to recording of interviews, interview location, and establishing credibility as a mainstream researcher.

Elaborating on Emergent Themes from Diary Entries

Analysis of diary entries resulted in three main themes and one residual theme. I categorized these themes as emotional, methodological, ethical, and other. Figure 1 (see below) illustrates the identified themes.

Emotional Challenges

The first theme that emerged from an analysis of diary entries was emotional challenges. I identified a number of sub-themes under the category of emotional challenges. Some of the sub-themes are inter-related, for example, caring, rapport building, and reciprocity.

Emotional Sustenance

Researchers often encounter a range of emotions while conducting sensitive research, including both positive and negative feelings. Kleiman and Copp (1993) acknowledge that emotions can play a dual role in research, being both potentially disruptive and essential for producing high-quality work. The key is to channel these emotions constructively rather than allowing them to hinder the research process. An excerpt from my diary reads,

Ignoring my emotions made me feel heavy. It is certainly not possible to conduct an empirical analysis with a feeling of heaviness in the heart. Let the emotions flow, but ensure that I am conscious of my state and let them not affect my analysis.

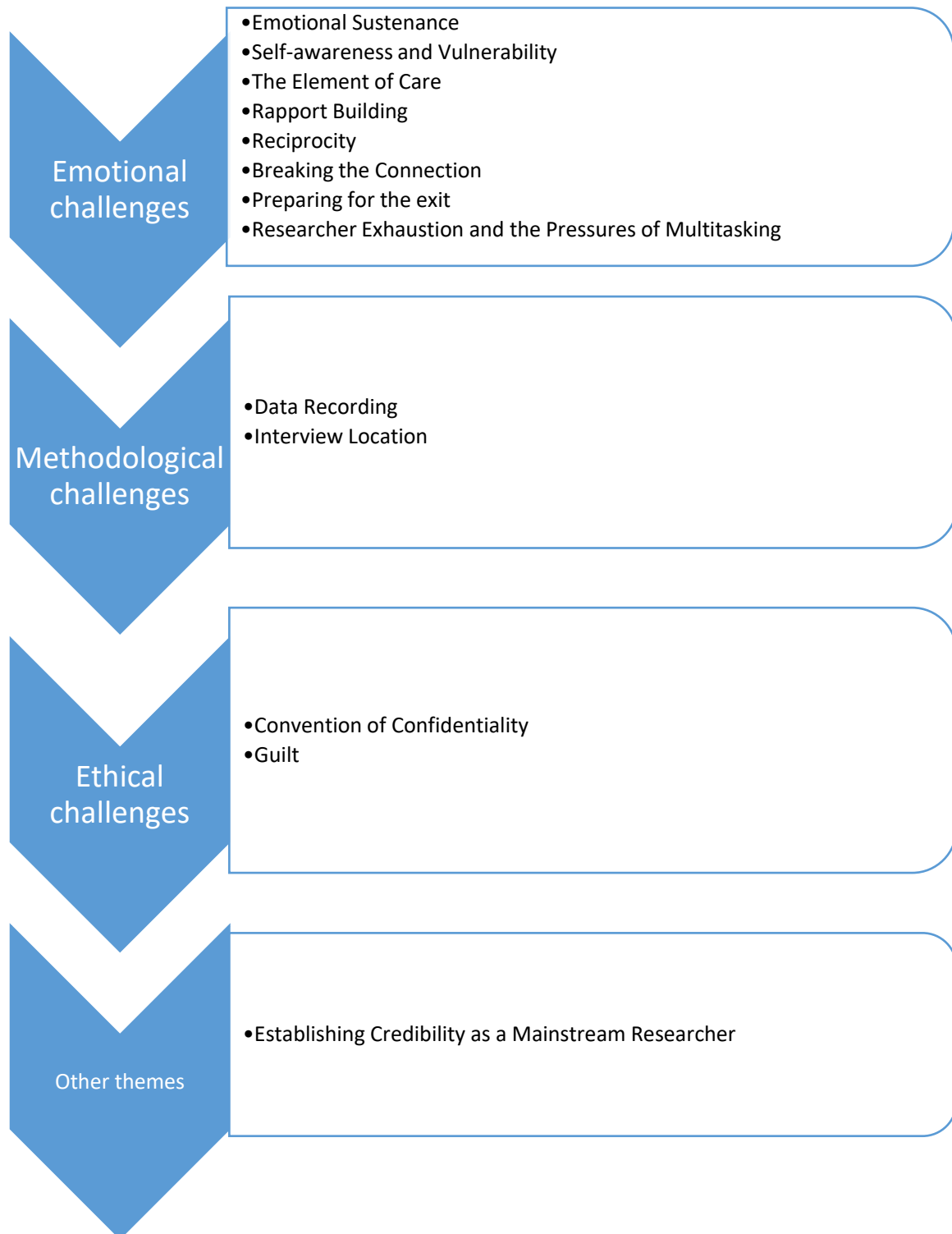
Debate surrounds the question of whether a researcher's emotions can impact their research and whether monitoring these emotions is necessary. In my view, a researcher's emotional state can indeed influence their work, but suppressing emotions is not the answer. The most effective approach to manage emotions without letting them interfere with one's work is to consciously acknowledge their presence. I firmly believe that emotions are an integral part of who I am, and attempting to separate them from my work is neither feasible nor desirable. However, being aware of my emotions has enabled me to think rationally (Nutov, 2017). As I noted in another diary entry,

Probably, the best way is to acknowledge one's state of mind, take a break, and then restart with a fresh mind. It is easier to deal with such challenges if one is aware and mentally prepared. Reflexivity is a good strategy to apply here.

I successfully established a boundary between my emotions and the research process. Employing reflexivity to understand my emotions and attitudes toward the participants facilitated the development of an empathetic relationship with them and allowed for a logical analysis of my actions (Vásquez et al., 2012).

Figure 1

Challenges of a Qualitative Researcher



Self-awareness and Vulnerability

Qualitative researchers may experience vulnerability when listening to participants' experiences and emotions during interviews. This process can contribute to self-awareness, impacting the researcher's personal, professional, or psychological life. Researchers can also gain insights from others' stories and assess their own life histories. Previous studies by Bluvstein et al. (2021) and Rosenblatt (2000) have indicated that conducting qualitative research can bring significant changes to a researcher's life. The following diary entry exemplifies an enlightening experience.

Before, I was indifferent to some of the family support I received while raising my son, especially from my mother-in-law. But after hearing a few other stories, I feel blessed. Oops, does it mean I was ignorant until now? Have I done something wrong? Did I take things for granted? [...] Probably, I could have handled a few things better.

This passage illustrates my awareness of shifts in my thought patterns that influenced my subsequent actions. Reflexivity enabled a rational analysis of my interactions with close relatives, prompting changes in my attitude and behavior towards them. It transformed me from ignorance to gratitude. Moreover, reflexivity maintained my awareness of the evolving changes in my beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and perspectives.

The Element of Care

Morse and Field (1995) articulate caring as “an innate human trait, the human mode of being, a part of human nature, and essential to human existence” (p. 4). This quality is integral to qualitative research, which is profoundly centered on human interactions and relationships between researchers and participants (Ceglowski, 2000). The strength of these relationships often hinges on the depth of care displayed. For instance, Leininger (1981) elaborates on behaviors associated with care, including “comfort, compassion, concern, coping behavior, empathy, enabling, facilitating, interest, involvement, sharing, support, tenderness, touching, and trust” (p. 13). Researchers exploring sensitive topics must embody some of these behaviors. Several quotes underscore the significance of care in qualitative research:

Many participants mentioned that the interview provided an opportunity to talk about things that they usually would not open up about[...] it was relieving for them, and I felt good about it[...]. A few even thanked me for listening to them.

As a researcher, I prioritized the participant's story and invested additional time in discussions. These interactions differ significantly from survey questionnaires as they involve empathy towards the interviewee's feelings, while still maintaining a certain level of detachment.

It is worth noting that when a researcher crosses their boundaries and resembles more of a friend, counselor, or therapist, it can lead to participant confusion (Chamacho, 2016). As I previously shared,

My heartbeat bounces [...] it was an intense moment, she needed some time to recover. I am glad I supported her [...] a hug and a pat just worked fine. Maybe

I crossed the boundaries of a researcher and was more like a friend, but sometimes it is required, especially while studying human lives.

Such “caring” behaviors can blur the lines for participants, making it challenging to distinguish between a professional and personal relationship. It is crucial to discern and respect this delicate boundary and this boundary is best determined by the researcher on a case-by-case basis.

Rapport Building

Establishing rapport with participants is vital in qualitative research as it encourages participant disclosure and enhances data quality (Brooks et al., 2018; Dempsey et al. 2016). Participants are more likely to share personal information with a researcher they view as trustworthy, friendly, and approachable. One diary entry emphasized this:

These women had limited opportunities to discuss their experiences and issues. After building rapport, I may be seen as a trustworthy source where they feel safe to open up and vent their frustrations.

Nonetheless, one challenge in establishing rapport lies in maintaining professional boundaries and avoiding excessive familiarity with participants. There was an instance in which I might have inadvertently crossed this boundary by providing comfort and support to a distressed participant. While these empathetic behaviors can contribute to rapport-building, they also have the potential to cause confusion for participants, blurring the distinction between a professional and personal relationship. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers to be vigilant about this potential pitfall and uphold a clear boundary when engaging in rapport-building activities.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity, the exchange of information and experiences, plays a fundamental role in building trust. When interviewers engage in self-disclosure by sharing personal details and experiences, it promotes reciprocity, as interviewees tend to respond in kind (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Self-disclosure is seen as a means to “level the playing field” between the interviewer and interviewee (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and can foster trust by demonstrating openness and honesty as the basis for forming trusting relationships. In essence, reciprocity and self-disclosure serve as foundational elements of trust, shaping the dynamics of interpersonal relationships between two individuals.

However, the researcher should be mindful of the extent of self-disclosure, as it can leave them in a vulnerable position. As Stanley and Wise (2002) observed, “Part of vulnerability relates to an attempt by researchers to ‘even up’ the relationship between researcher and participant because if the participants are vulnerable, then we too must be prepared to show our vulnerabilities” (p. 177)

Self-disclosure can help participants realize that their experiences are not unique, alleviating feelings of shame and guilt (Owens, 2006). This practice also strengthens rapport, conveys the participant’s value, and diminishes the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee. As I noted in a diary entry:

At times, it was crucial to exchange information. I realized that a strong connection was established as soon as I opened up about my life experiences. It made them feel that I respected and understood their feelings.

Excessive reciprocity carries the risk of unduly influencing interviewees' views and thought processes, potentially leading them to say what the interviewer desires. Reciprocity should not render the researcher vulnerable or affect interviewees' thought processes, yet it should facilitate the retrieval of desired information. However, I also encountered a dilemma in my diary entries regarding whether to strictly adhere to my data collection objectives or to empathize with interviewees regarding their perspectives.

Should it be a conventional research interview or is flexibility okay [...] I need to continuously remind myself that it is about them, not about me [...] let them speak about their experiences and views in length.

My concern revolved around interviewees developing the expectation of constant support when sharing their stories. Since I was studying people's lives, often intertwined with emotions, it was crucial to establish a comfortable and open dialogue. However, striking this balance could be challenging if the researcher appeared overly pragmatic, straightforward, and professional. As I recorded in my diary,

Today I shared a personal life experience, not that I planned it, but it happened. Was it right [...] My core objective is to get data in its purest form. This requires a good relationship, trust, and a sense of identification by the interviewee [...], so at times, the situation demands it.

A balance between professionalism and personal connection is essential. The key is to limit personal sharing to avoid excessive reciprocity and agreement, which could influence the interviewees' thought processes, and consequently, the data collected. As stated in a diary entry:

Maybe share as little as possible to keep the flow moving and then try to get away with it.

As I reflect on my experiences, I have come to realize the importance of carefully considering how much I am willing to reciprocate and disclose about myself to build trust and gather information from participants. This decision is not taken lightly; it requires me to weigh ethical considerations, establish rapport, and maintain transparency throughout the research process. I have found it essential to constantly examine my own decision-making regarding disclosure, regularly reflecting on how it may affect both participants and the interview process. Seeking guidance from colleagues or mentors who have expertise in qualitative research has been invaluable in ensuring that my disclosure strategies are appropriate. I have learned that disclosure is not a one-time event; it is an ongoing process that may evolve depending on the unique circumstances of each study. Ultimately, I have found that transparency, respect, and open communication are key to effectively navigating the disclosure process in qualitative research.

Breaking the Connection

Researchers studying sensitive topics encounter challenges after fieldwork (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Data collection involves reaching out to the ideal sample, convincing people to participate, and gathering the required information. Building an empathetic relationship during data collection can lead to discomfort later. In the study, I encountered a participant who mistook our professional relationship for a personal one, calling me repeatedly throughout the day to discuss her personal problems and seek advice. Despite my subtle hints, she persisted in prolonging the relationship established for data collection purposes. As explained in the following excerpt:

Sara has been behaving strangely. She is calling me 3-4 times daily. I feel bad for avoiding her calls, but it is difficult for me to answer so many calls. She needs to understand that I am not a counselor, but a researcher. I guess it is time to explain this to her, or it could become a serious issue. I feel bad because she was so polite and friendly, but it is tough to spend 45-60 minutes on calls during weekdays and weekends when there are so many pending tasks at work and home. It is becoming too intrusive... How do I manage this?

The participant and I connected over our shared cultural and societal background as working women with similar family structures. While acknowledging the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities, I tried to maintain clear objectives and professional boundaries in my relationship.

As the researcher, I encountered two primary issues after the interviews. Firstly, I felt a sense of responsibility to reciprocate to the participant who had shared details of her private life. This feeling is referred to as “being privileged” in qualitative research (Rosenblatt, 2000). I thanked each participant individually for their support and kept them informed of my research progress. However, Sara’s case was different and more challenging, demanding a more intimate and emotional involvement. It was difficult for me to renegotiate my relationship with her. While Sara’s behavior was becoming intrusive, I also felt guilty and selfish for wanting to cut ties with her. I struggled with the moral duty to help her while also recognizing the need to maintain professional boundaries. In my diary, I noted,

When I required her time, she shared all, and some of it was too personal, but still, she did [...] Now when she is asking for my time, how can I just leave her alone?

I managed the situation by using a minimal response technique, limiting the number of calls I answered per day, and gradually reducing my advice-giving to Sara. I explained that my schedule kept me busy and encouraged her to analyze her own dilemmas. I referred her to a marriage counselor and a lawyer whenever possible. It was a challenging and time-consuming process, but I eventually cut ties without disturbing Sara’s sentiments.

The connection formed during the Interview process was the underlying cause of this challenging situation. Building rapport between the interviewer and interviewee is critical for successful data collection (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007), but can raise ethical questions and lead to feelings of guilt due to its perceived artificiality (Rapley, 2001). Terminating the relationship built for data collection can be difficult for researchers as they try to balance building a trusting and empathetic connection with terminating it without causing distress to themselves or the participant.

To prevent such situations, researchers must set boundaries during data collection and clarify their role to participants. They should also be prepared to address any challenges that may arise post-data collection by seeking support from colleagues, supervisors, or mental health professionals.

Preparing for the Exit

A competent researcher is expected to establish a strong relationship with participants, be empathetic, but not become emotionally entangled. However, at times, it can be challenging to ignore emotions (Batty, 2020). Being human, it is inevitable that the researcher and the subject build a social and emotional connection with each other. In some situations, it was difficult to suppress my feelings, but being mindful of my state helped me navigate the data analysis process. Below is an example:

I am unable to articulate my anger and frustration. It is so intense that I feel compelled to write about it while traveling on the bus. I just finished interviewing a woman who shared with me how her boss was troubling her. It is unjust that to advance, one must endure someone's offensive jokes and bear extra workloads if they don't accept it. Why can't some people behave with basic decency? [...] I have great respect for this lady, who is handling it so strongly. All power to you.

The above excerpt was from an Interview with an extremely courteous woman who even treated me to lunch at her home. She was the sole breadwinner for her family, as her husband was unemployed. She spoke candidly and shared how there is much more to handle at work than just work pressure, such as verbal harassment and gender stereotypes. The stress from work, combined with her family responsibilities, was affecting her physical and mental health. Although she projected strength to the world, she felt hurt and insecure inside. Another diary entry:

I empathized with every word the interviewee said, listening to her shaky voice, seeing her teary eyes, and fidgeting fingers. It had a significant emotional impact on me, and even though I was on my way home, my mind was still with her. Throughout the journey, I replayed her statements in my mind. I was angry about what happened to her and sad that her lively personality was getting lost in handling all the pain. Simultaneously, I felt helpless for not being of any real help to her. Though I knew that I didn't have the resources or skills to assist her, this logic didn't help me overcome my mind's sadness. It happened because I crossed the boundary of being a researcher and attached myself to this lady's life experiences, making me stressed.

Below is another quote related to the same story, written after I reached home:

Today, I feel drained, but what do I do now? Have I crossed the line that textbooks mention? Is it practically possible to always maintain yourself within those imaginary lines? [...] Anyway, now, I must be very cautious while analyzing this interview. I cannot allow my emotions to intervene in my logic during the data analysis.

My learnings from various handbooks of qualitative research and training on research methodology were useful in warning me about the possible biases that could have impacted the analysis process. I also discussed this issue with my fellow researchers and faculty to ensure that my emotions did not influence the analysis of this case. However, I believe that no amount of training or guidebooks can prepare one to deal with these different contingencies. Ultimately, experiences, self-awareness, and maturity are keys to dealing with unexpected situations.

To avoid an emotionally draining situation, it is essential to establish a process for closing the researcher-participant relationship. Ending the relationship abruptly or without preparation can be overwhelming for the participant and may cause anxiety for the researcher. Therefore, to ensure the mental and emotional well-being of both parties, it is vital to create an exit plan as early as the study's design phase.

In my experience, setting the participants' expectations from the outset makes the closure process smoother. Establishing a process to initiate and conclude a researcher-participant relationship is a holistic approach that ensures neither party is left feeling incomplete. However, when it comes to sensitive and intimate discussions, a researcher may encounter outlier cases where it becomes their ethical duty to handle similar situations with great care.

Researcher Exhaustion and the Pressures of Multitasking

Qualitative research, especially on sensitive topics, can be a demanding experience. Patton (2005) warns that qualitative research is "time-consuming, intimate, and intense" (p. 35). Additionally, Glesne (2016) stated that "Qualitative researchers find their lives consumed by their work as they seek understanding and connections" (p. 173). The iterative nature of qualitative inquiry adds to the complexity of the task. As one diary entry stated,

Data collection, scheduling and rescheduling of interviews, data analysis, and personal life. Many things are happening simultaneously. Too much to handle! Even writing my thoughts feels taxing, which once I cherished.

Stress and workload during data analysis affected the diary-writing process. Another diary entry mentioned:

I feel exhausted. I am unable to relax, enjoy, or exercise. Stress is making me eat junk. I get irritated fast and almost at everything. I feel sorry for Sam [my husband] as he faces my upset mood. I know all this is bad and will eventually affect my health and family life. However, I cannot get over this.

The cause of stress was probably limited resources and the burden of managing massive amounts of data. It felt as if life had nothing left except collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. A researcher needs to balance work time with personal time as is illustrated by the following diary entry:

I am passionate about my work and committed to completing it, but I also recognize that my life extends beyond my professional pursuits. It is important for me to take time to relax and prioritize spending time with my family. Neglecting them would be unfair to them and to our relationship.

Intense involvement in work and data analysis often results in difficulty in distinguishing professional responsibilities from personal and family life. This blurred boundary can lead to a continuous stream of work-related thoughts and worries, hindering one's ability to fully engage in personal and family activities. To tackle this issue, it becomes essential to compartmentalize various life facets, enabling more efficient time management and a clearer differentiation between work-related duties and personal/family time. Through this process of mental separation, individuals can relish the rewards of their hard work without the constant burden of work-related concerns.

Methodological Challenges

Data Recording

One of the challenges I encountered centered on the delicate balance between my essential need for data collection and the concerns expressed by the respondents regarding recording. Shaffir and Stebbins (1990) identified the “dual problems” associated with collecting the most robust data while also respecting the preferences of participants. As a matter of protocol, I consistently followed the practice of recording interviews only after obtaining explicit permission from the participant involved. Nonetheless, I did face a few perplexing situations. The following excerpt provides insight into one of these encounters:

Today was a strange encounter; the woman stared at my recorder as if it were a bomb. I told her that I was recording for my reference and would not share it, but something kept her uneasy. If she was so uncomfortable, why did she permit me to record?

In some cases, a respondent might agree to recording as a gesture of politeness, but this could unintentionally hinder their willingness to open up. It is my responsibility as a researcher to carefully assess whether the act of recording is obstructing the data collection process in any manner. In situations where recording could make the participant uncomfortable and detract from the essence of the interview, it may be more advantageous to rely on thorough note-taking.

Interview Location

The setting in which an interview takes place can significantly influence the quality of the data collected. In the subsequent diary entry, I expound on this point:

At first, I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to discuss a personal or emotional topic in a work setting. I preferred to conduct interviews in a café or a park, but I had no choice when interviewing a salesperson who was preparing for a business trip. I was glad I went to her workplace to conduct the interview because I could feel what she goes through—phone calls, people barging into her office, answering mobile and WhatsApp messages from her son. She appeared to be a multitasking queen. However, I can understand how tiring and frustrating it can be. Her pain was well reflected when she said, “In my life, only one person is missing, and that is ME.” I probably could understand her better because I could see what she was talking about.

In this particular case, I not only collected data through the interview but also had the opportunity to observe the participant's actions. As indicated in the excerpt, my ability to

visually grasp the participant's context made it easier to empathize and understand her perspective. This approach receives support from other researchers, as Prus (1996) notes, "When researchers can gather observational, participant-observation, and interview data on a more or less simultaneous basis, this leads to a complete understanding of the other" (p. 21). Engaging in an activity while being situated within a natural context can facilitate participants' expression (Del Piccolo et al., 2017). Therefore, the interview's context can have a significant influence on the data collection process.

It is important to note that some participants felt more at ease in specific locations, such as a park or a coffee shop, where they could engage in lengthy discussions. They were fully involved in the conversation and had set aside dedicated time for the interview. However, researchers should be cautious to ensure that these extended conversations align with their intended objectives. As I noted in my diary,

I hope my time is not wasted... sometimes discussions veer off course, but there are instances when the nature of the conversation demands such detours.

Ethical Challenges

Convention of Confidentiality

Another critical aspect that requires careful consideration by a qualitative researcher is the need to obtain the participant's consent and maintain the confidentiality of the information they provide. In this reciprocal relationship, where participants contribute data, they rely on the researcher to adhere to ethical principles in the use and presentation of that data. The foundation for a successful rapport is established when these mutual dependencies are harmoniously balanced, with participants depending on confidentiality and researchers depending on the acquisition of high-quality information.

Based on my own experiences, I have come to believe that there is no exact formula that can be prescribed to build trust in this relationship. Instead, researchers should genuinely understand the importance of these ethical principles, establish their own guidelines, and apply them naturally (Sanjari et al., 2014). Researchers must hold in high regard the principles of relational ethics and advocate fundamental moral values, which involve "acting from our hearts and minds, acknowledging our interpersonal bond with others, and taking responsibility for our actions and their consequences" (Ellis, 2007, p. 3). From my perspective, placing too much emphasis on ethical and confidentiality matters through a formal negotiation between the researcher and the participant can sometimes lead the conversation astray. I conveyed this in an excerpt from my diary:

Sometimes bragging too much on ethics and confidentiality off-tracks the participants. Remember, my purpose is not to perturb them or overwhelm them by demonstrating my knowledge of all these terms. It is better to talk in layman terms.

Therefore, engaging in a nuanced discussion about the broader research objectives, potential practical and theoretical contributions, and ensuring that the collected information will be kept confidential and exclusively used for research purposes can yield positive results. Nevertheless, preserving confidentiality, despite its apparent simplicity, can sometimes present a daunting challenge. The following incident from my diary emphasizes this difficulty:

[...] It was so unexpected. Today, while discussing data analysis with Ana [a good friend and a fellow qualitative researcher], she directly asked me if the subject we were discussing was Marie. I was afraid of mistakenly disclosing the participant's name. I went blank. Later, I realized that it was not my mistake as the participant was a distant relative of Ana. Ana connected dots and took a guess. [...] I wonder why she broke the norm and asked the participant's name. We are good friends, but she is also a good researcher and understands that it's unethical.

Researchers often engage in discussions with peers who can relate to their work, exchanging interpretations and insights to enhance the qualitative research process (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Nevertheless, it is crucial to strike a balance between these discussions and maintaining academic integrity while protecting the interests of research participants (Denzin et al., 2006).

Another unexpected incident related to confidentiality unfolded when I unexpectedly encountered Myra at a coffee shop, where she was accompanied by her spouse and children. I noticed tension on her face when our eyes met. Despite my racing heart, I maintained my composure. Later, during an interview with Myra, she clarified that her family was entirely unaware of her participation in the study. She disclosed that her family, particularly her conservative husband, would strongly disapprove of her discussing work-family issues with anyone. Even though my interview with Myra had taken place some time ago, my commitment to upholding confidentiality compelled me to refrain from any reaction when we crossed paths at the coffee shop. While it may be nearly impossible to prepare for every unpredictable circumstance, it remains imperative to uphold ethical standards to safeguard the interests of research participants.

Guilt

There are instances when researchers may wrestle with feelings of guilt, particularly when a participant's painful or distressing experience contributes to their dataset, and they derive satisfaction from it. One diary entry reflects this internal conflict:

This further strengthens my storytelling...what a hit. However, after about an hour, another comment, What have I become? [...] drawing pleasure from someone's painful experience. It is so cruel and sadistic [...]

Experiencing guilt over finding satisfaction in someone's distressing experience is a valid and empathetic response. However, it is essential to recognize that feeling content when obtaining information that advances the researcher toward their research objectives is not inherently wrong. In this case, the researcher's goal was to uncover the challenges faced by working women and explore ways to alleviate them, a noble intention for the greater good of society. Striking a balance between the need for data and ethical considerations is essential, while never losing sight of the human element involved.

Other Themes

Establishing Credibility as a Mainstream Researcher

As an Indian working woman, I was enthusiastic about delving into the "work-family challenges of Indian working women." Choosing a research topic that resonated with my

values, passions, and interests was a pivotal step (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Nevertheless, I was mindful that topics aligned with personal interest might not initially gain widespread acceptance within the broader research community, and I had to establish credibility as a mainstream researcher by delving into topics of academic significance. This sentiment is reflected in one of my diary entries:

A lot is said about women's empowerment and equality, but principles get lost when it comes to application, especially in a country like India where patriarchy is still prevalent. I hope my work is taken seriously and is impactful.

I was acutely aware of the sensitivity surrounding my research topic, as proposing changes to both organizations and families could invite scrutiny. I grappled with questions such as,

How should I present my work to effectively address questions about subjectivity? How can I manage confirmation bias?

Concerns regarding the authenticity and validity of my research weighed on my mind. To support the credibility of my research, I implemented widely accepted practices within the qualitative research community, including "constant comparison" (Strauss & Corbin, 2014), "theoretical sensitivity" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), and "reflexivity" (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Maxwell (2012) provided reassurance that there was no need for excessive concern about the subjective nature of qualitative research. Instead, researchers can harness subjectivity by bringing it into conscious awareness and integrating it into the research process. Furthermore, qualitative research permits both internal generalization (within the scope of the study and the specific context, group, or population it represents) and external generalization (to other contexts, groups, or populations), even though the methods and logic for these two types of generalization may differ (Maxwell, 2021).

Conclusion

This study pursued two primary objectives: (a) to illuminate the emotional, ethical, and methodological challenges encountered by the author as a qualitative researcher, along with strategies for managing these challenges, and (b) to underscore the significance of maintaining diary entries to remain attuned to the researcher's emotions, thoughts, biases, and well-being.

In conclusion, this article has delved into the complexities and nuances of conducting qualitative research on sensitive topics as a multifaceted journey replete with challenges, ethical dilemmas, and emotional encounters. Utilizing diary entries, proves to be a valuable tool for qualitative researchers to comprehend and address the challenges they might encounter. Throughout this article, I have shared various insights and reflections drawn from my own experience as a qualitative researcher, underscoring the significance of approaching these challenges with integrity and sensitivity.

It is worth noting that each research journey is unique, and as a result, experiences can vary among researchers. Nevertheless, the insights and strategies discussed in this article have broad applicability in the realm of qualitative research. The researcher's capacity to establish a personal and emotional connection with participants while maintaining professional boundaries is paramount for collecting high-quality data. Building rapport, reciprocity, and empathy with participants is essential for nurturing an environment of trust and openness. However, these must be executed thoughtfully to avoid boundary crossings or confusion regarding the nature of the researcher-participant relationship.

Engaging in this analysis of my diary entries has not only allowed me to bridge theory and practice but has also provided insights into the experience of being a qualitative researcher and solidifying my understanding. The process of writing this article and analyzing my diary entries has further facilitated my exploration and reinforcement of these insights. Diary entries, in particular, have emerged as a valuable tool for reflecting on my experiences and addressing potential emotional, methodological, and ethical challenges that may arise.

Ultimately, conducting qualitative research on sensitive topics is a deeply human experience that demands not only rigorous methodology but also emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and a commitment to ethical research practices. The ability to balance these complexities while staying true to the research's positive intent—to shed light on important societal issues and improve the lives of those being studied—is the true hallmark of a qualitative researcher.

The ethical obligations of qualitative researchers, obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and addressing unforeseen challenges with sensitivity, are paramount. Respecting the reliance of participants on the researcher's ethical conduct and ensuring that the data collection process upholds their privacy and vulnerability are foundational principles.

As I reflect on my own journey and the challenges I have encountered, I firmly believe that qualitative research can be a transformative and rewarding pursuit. By approaching these challenges thoughtfully and upholding ethical conduct, researchers can make meaningful contributions to the betterment of society and the advancement of knowledge in their chosen field.

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Acknowledgment: We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Article Citation

Mishra, P., & Gupta, A. (2024). Exploring the use of diary entries for qualitative researchers: Mitigating challenges when investigating sensitive topics on Indian women. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(5), 1279-1298. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6330>
