

# Researcher's Dilemmas and Emotional Labour Challenges in Qualitative Research

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This article examines the challenges that researchers encounter in relation to power dynamics and emotional labour at various stages of research. Drawing on the personal experience of conducting qualitative interviews with self-help teachers in Lithuania, the article reveals that the unpredictability of power dynamics between researchers and participants can lead to ethical dilemmas and threaten researchers' emotional security. It argues that researchers' emotional exhaustion can stem not only from empathy with participants' vulnerability, but also from direct challenges to their own beliefs and values, inducing internal dissonance. It highlights the important role of academic communities and institutional support in ensuring the emotional safety of researchers and asserts that self-reflection practices contribute not only to research quality but also help researchers to navigate the internal emotional tensions that arise during the research process.

**Keywords:** emotional labour, researcher vulnerability, power relations, qualitative research, research ethics

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## INTRODUCTION

Codes of ethics in the social sciences are defined to prevent potential emotional and physical harm to research participants, and researchers therefore have a duty to ensure their safety and well-being (Lune, Berg 2017). This relates to researcher-participant roles power asymmetry in research (Sterie et al. 2023). It is assumed that the researcher is usually in a dominant position, as she defines the research questions, controls the interview process, and then analyses and interprets the results, deciding how and what information will be used to analyse the data. For this reason, the researcher's most important task is to create a reciprocal and power-sharing relationship so as not to cause additional harm to participants (Sterie et al. 2023).

However, the question is increasingly being asked whether the researcher is always in a privilege position according to the definition of the research process and whether she is immune from the vulnerability. While traditionally the researcher has been seen as having more power in the research process, there is a growing debate about the dynamic nature of this relationship in qualitative social research because of its spontaneity and unpredictability (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008). As a result, the researcher may find herself in situations that are beyond her control or predictability. In such situations, changes in preconceived power relations can make the researcher vulnerable. The context of the research, such as a hazardous occupational environment or gender identity (e.g. being a female researcher in a male environment), may put the researcher's physical health or safety at risk (Sterie et al. 2023).

While for a long time, researchers' emotional labour has been underestimated and ignored (Quinn et al. 2024; Hanna 2019), more recently, the emotional vulnerability of the researcher has been increasingly highlighted, especially in studies requiring an intense emotional involvement. Researchers discussing autobiographical experiences highlight their emotional labour and its associated challenges and consequences. It is noted that emotional labour is not limited to the data collection phase but extends throughout the research process (Hanna 2019; Capurro 2021; Sterie et al. 2023), and its challenges are faced by both young (McGarrol 2017; Bundhoo, Lynch 2021) and experienced researchers (Emerald, Carpenter 2015). To date, much attention has focused on the emotional vulnerability of the researcher that arises when researching sensitive topics (Komaromy 2020; Carroll 2013) or vulnerable social groups (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008; Quinn et al. 2024). However, researchers may also face emotional challenges when the research does not have an explicit vulnerability dimension. The need to explore the researchers related emotions connects also to the increasing need for the reflexive approach in qualitative research.

Scholars emphasise that researcher reflexivity is a primary quality assurance strategy in qualitative research (Berger 2013). Reflexivity not only enables the monitoring of the researcher's values, beliefs, knowledge and biases on the study, but also facilitates the generation of knowledge during the research process (ibid.). For example, keeping self-reflective journals can help researchers understand their own knowledge and thought processes. By looking back at their entries, they can identify personal biases, emotions and ideas, and see how these might be affecting their work (Watt 2015). Research journals can also have effect on the research process and enable its transparency (Ortlipp 2008). Journal entries can highlight researcher's unease or challenges concerning their position during the research, including their role as a researcher, their relationships with participants, and the management of personal biases or experiences (Ortlipp 2008). Furthermore, a research journal can offer 'emotional security' and assist in coping with the inherent complexity and stress of research (Watt 2007). In regard to this, the present paper deals with emotional reflexivity as one of the specific forms of researcher reflexivity that allows researchers to analyse how their emotional responses affect data collection, analysis, and relationships with participants (Siouti, Ruokonen-Engler 2025).

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the challenges related to role power dynamics and the emotional labour of the researcher in qualitative research that does not necessarily have a vulnerability dimension. Although international research communities are increasingly acknowledging the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by researchers, these discussions are less prevalent in Lithuania. Thus, this paper also seeks to stimulate greater dialogue among Lithuanian researchers regarding the obstacles they encounter in their work. Firstly, drawing on Hochschild's concept, I will discuss the specificity of the researcher's emotional labour, and then, based on my personal experience of conducting a study with self-help teachers in Lithuania, I will illustrate the challenges that role power relationship dynamics and emotional labour can pose during a study.

## **EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

According to Arlie Hochschild, emotional labour is the management of feelings to create a publicly visible facial and bodily expression, i.e. displaying acceptable emotions in a given situation or role (Hochschild 2012; Fisher, Monahan 2023). Emotional labour usually involves a dissonance between emotions that are felt internally and those that need to be expressed externally (Quinn et al. 2024). It can manifest itself on two levels. 'Surface acting' occurs

when only the outward display of the desirable emotions in a given context is displayed, but this does not replace the emotions that are felt internally (Hochschild 2012). According to Hochschild, the emotional expectations at work can be contradictory to the employee's inner world, creating a dissonance between what is felt and what is expected. When 'surface acting' occurs, employees may feel guilty for not being sincere (Hochschild 2012) or experience other negative emotions such as tension, disengagement and burnout (Fisher, Monahan 2023). One way of overcoming emotional dissonance is through 'deep acting'. This process involves consciously changing one's feelings so that they correspond to a socially desirable behaviour in a given situation (Hochschild 2012).

Hochschild uses the term *emotional labour* to define the management of feeling 'that is sold for a wage and therefore has an *exchange value*' (Hochschild 2012: 7). She distinguishes the term emotional labour from the terms *emotional work* or *emotional management* which refer to the same actions but performed in a private context, where they have only *use value* (ibid.). For workers in certain fields (e.g. customer service and the health sector), displaying emotions is part of their daily work and inherent to their employee functions (Sterie et al. 2023). One may ask the following: To what extent is the researcher's relationship with the research participants determined by the common human empathy and attentiveness that characterises communication between people in private life in general, and to what extent can it be characterised as emotional labour for which a wage is received?

## THE SPECIFICS OF RESEARCHERS' EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Emotional labour is often discussed in the context of the client–service provider relationship. Although the participants of the research are not the 'clients', the reciprocal 'exchange' of relationships is also important in research, where emotional labour enables richer data (Fisher, Monahan 2023). The signing of an informed consent declaration at the beginning of the study formalises the researcher–participant relationship, which is reminiscent of the collaboration between clients and service providers. Finally, conducting research is an integral part of the professional work of the researcher, for which payment is received (Hoffmann 2007). Therefore, researcher's emotional management in the context of her work should also be considered as emotional labour rather than emotional work.

Three dimensions of the researcher's emotional labour can be distinguished. Firstly, there is strategic emotional labour to get the researcher to 'enter' the research field and to build the trust with the participant. Second, emotional reflexivity is an active act that the researcher has to employ throughout the research. Finally, emotional work to deal with the emotional dissonance between the researcher's personality and the 'authentic' self (Bergman Blix, Wettergren 2015). It has been noted that the emotional labour of the researcher differs from other professions that require emotional labour (e.g. medical, service workers, teachers and others) because it is not always predictable (Hoffmann 2007). The researcher cannot know in advance what she might encounter. This is partly because the role power positions of the researcher and the participant may change at different stages of the research. For example, when inviting a participant to take part in a study, the researcher initially assumes a dominant position, but the informant's right to refuse may reverse this relationship. In addition, the researcher can/should perform multiple different roles to build a relationship with the participants or obtain as much information as possible. For example, the role of 'student' can/should be assumed by the researcher when seeking a more detailed explanation, by acting as a 'confidant', the interviewer creates a safe environment for the interviewees to express themselves (Hoffmann

2007). A number of researchers have pointed out the role of a 'therapist' during the interview (Fisher, Monahan 2023). According to Hochschild, each role requires certain 'feeling rules', which specify how we should behave in each role and which displays of emotion are expected in a particular role (Hoffmann 2007). Therefore, as roles change, the emotions displayed must also change. The emotional labour of the researcher can play a positive role in forming a bond with the informants, allowing for a better understanding of the participants' world and a more profound knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. However, emotional labour can lead to internal tension and negatively affect the researcher's well-being.

Kumar and Cavallaro (2017) identified 'emotionally demanding research', which requires mental, emotional and physical energy and can potentially affect the emotional health and well-being of the researcher. Researchers who investigate sensitive topics such as death, disability, poverty, or other topics related to pain face greater emotional risks. Some researchers note that although the methodological literature encourages the researcher to keep a distance from the informants, this is not always possible, especially if the narrative relates to the researcher's own experiences or personal history of trauma. Experiencing traumatic life events and unexpected events occurring during the research, which were not previously perceived as sensitive, can also lead to a greater emotional vulnerability on the part of the researcher (Kumar, Cavallaro 2017).

The sensitivity of research topics is usually presented from the perspective of the participants. However, the research issues may be as sensitive to the researcher as they are to the participants. Researchers may face the same emotional challenges as their informants, especially when dealing with sensitive topics or acting in complex social contexts (e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic) (Nzinga et al. 2023). Emotional strain occurs not only during the data collection process but also throughout the project (Hanna 2019), and the consequences of emotional experiences can have long-lasting consequences (McGarrol 2017).

My personal experience in qualitative interviews with self-help teachers in Lithuania reveals that even in research that does not seem to have obvious elements of vulnerability, the researcher may be confronted with certain dilemmas that relates to the dynamics of role power relations and the challenges of emotional labour, and unforeseen societal events may lead to additional emotional vulnerability. In the following, after briefly introducing the context of my research, I will reveal the challenges I faced.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The main objective of my PhD project was to investigate how self-help teachers in Lithuania construct the concept of happiness and what strategies they offer to achieve it. The research involved 23 in-depth interviews with self-help teachers. These individuals, drawing upon their personal experiences, accumulated knowledge, and a diverse range of practical methods – including mindfulness techniques, coaching, yoga, meditation, and esoteric practices like soul escorting, astrological, or tarot card readings – offer services to others in the form of consultations, workshops, and group practices. These services aim to provide guidance on how to cultivate a happier life. For most of the informants, running self-help practices was their main activity at the time of the study. Most of the informants had their website or Facebook account and were actively involved in public discourse of happiness. Fifteen women and eight men were interviewed. The average age of the informants was 40 years (the oldest was a 59-year-old man and the youngest was a 26-year-old woman). They were first invited to participate via email or Facebook, stating the nature of the study, the approximate duration

of the interview, and guarantees of confidentiality. The entire PhD project took place between 2018 and 2022. During this period, two events occurred that affected the course of my research and influenced my emotional work throughout the project. The COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020, so only the first four interviews were conducted live. The rest were conducted online using the Zoom platform. On average, one interview lasted about 1 h and 50 min (the longest interview lasted 2 h 30 min and the shortest one 1 h). Before the interview, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and the principle of informed consent. The main drafting of the PhD text took place between July 2021 and May 2022. At this time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022.

Although I did not consciously plan to keep a reflective journal during my studies, I did make notes on my thoughts, impressions and general reflections when I encountered tensions, challenges or emerging issues. In the next section of this article, drawing upon my notes and a retrospective view of the accumulated research experience, I will highlight the dilemmas I encountered throughout the study. Partly, this experiential reflection aligns with an autoethnographic approach, which uses writing about the researcher's self in contact with others to show multilayer social, emotional and cultural practices, as well as draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher's insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, emotions, values, and cultural issues (Poulos 2021).

## **DILEMMAS FOR THE RESEARCHER BEFORE THE DATA COLLECTION**

The vulnerability of the researcher is more often related to the researcher's experience, the sensitive topics covered and the research on vulnerable social groups. My extensive experience in market research and university teaching has provided me with a broad range of expertise, solidifying my identity as an experienced researcher. The participants in my research group are often public figures who have shared their training and knowledge not only on social media but have written books, given media interviews, given practical training to others, and have experience in managing audiences. Because of their competencies and knowledge, I could not classify them as vulnerable. I was faced with a dilemma when considering the sensitivity of the topic I was researching. On the one hand, talking about happiness is easier than talking about death, pain and misery, but stories about overcoming pain to achieve happiness might have been, in my opinion, challenging or emotionally fragile. However, I did not think that I would be able to emotionally damage the participants deeply, as they talk about their coping mechanisms in public, and I would be giving them the opportunity to not answer difficult or unwanted questions. In summary, my study was not one that could pose many challenges for both the researcher and the informants. Nevertheless, even before the data collection, I faced other dilemmas related to my research topic and participants:

- 1) My own attitude towards self-help issues was quite critical. Therefore, before the interview, I was worried about my possible reactions. Would I show my dissatisfaction, criticism, or scepticism towards the informants during the interview and thereby violate the ethics of the research? So, I anticipated that I would have to do what Hochschild calls 'surface acting', and I felt anxious about how well I would be able to do it.
- 2) On the other hand, I was worried about whether the informants, because of their skills, would take the lead during the interviews and to what extent I would be able to control them. That is, the role power relations might change during the interviews.

- 3) The third fear was related to how much the informants would be willing to be honest, how much of the truth they would tell me, and how much I would become their 'audience' to whom they would be telling premeditated, learned public stories. I questioned to what extent my research data would be valid and reliable.

Thus, the researcher's internal dialogue with herself and the consideration of research ethics before the research may cause internal tensions, anxieties and doubts for the researcher.

### **ASYMMETRY IN ROLE POWER RELATIONS**

The participants' potential vulnerability is based on the asymmetry of role power relations during the interview. However, role power relations between the researcher and the research participants can change. In my case, the dynamics of the power relations were already evident when the participants were invited to participate in the study. I first wrote an email invitation to potential participants, which included my contact details (email address and telephone number). One person called me after receiving the email. During the conversation, he immediately switched to the informal way of addressing to me. However, I wanted to keep my distance from the participants and was therefore disturbed by this approach. In addition, the participant asked me to read his articles available on internet and listen to a recording of his meditation. In this way, he said, I could not only interpret his thoughts from my 'current' perspective but would be able to 'experience' more deeply what he was talking about. So even before the interview, the participant took on a privileged position.

The studies aim to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. It is assured that the recording of the interview will be securely stored and not made publicly available and that all information will be anonymised. In my research, I encountered the opposite situation. Some participants asked me to share the recording with them, arguing that they might say something interesting and valuable during the interview, which they could later use in their own work. My dilemma was how to handle this situation. I forwarded the recordings of their interviews to a few, arguing for myself on the principle of reciprocity. However, simultaneously, I felt my privacy and confidentiality were being threatened. I did not know what the participants will do with the recording, where it will be kept, what it will be used for and what it will be shown for. In addition, one participant in the study suggested that our conversation should be broadcast live, arguing that it might be of interest to the broader public. I had to explain that the study is not a public lecture and its purpose is different. In the end, he accepted my explanation, and we talked in person without an additional audience. Faced with these situations, I was left with the question of how to maintain the principle of reciprocity and ensure the safety of the researcher. Some researchers point out that there could be a greater involvement of institutions, ethics committees or other research funding bodies (Scott 2022), which could be concerned not only with the physical and emotional safety of participants but also with researchers.

### **EMOTIONAL LABOUR DURING INTERVIEWS**

Researchers note that emotional labour can take place during interviews when the participants can 'label' the researcher in a way that can emotionally affect them (McGarrol 2017). In my case, some participants saw me as part of 'their community'. They expressed satisfaction and approval that I was doing the research on happiness, that is the same thing as they do. I, on the other hand, felt I was on the other side of the 'barricades'. Thus, I did not know whether

I should express my true views or not. I decided not to reveal my personal views in order not to influence our conversation further. However, I felt that I was not completely honest and open during and after the interview.

Emotional work requires the ability to empathise with the emotions that need to be displayed as if to make them a natural part of your thinking. This is 'deep acting'. However, it may not be possible to fully identify emotionally with the participant because of differences in values or attitudes. In this case, 'surface acting' is carried out, which may evoke internal negative emotions such as anger, frustration or guilt. During interviews, I have had to do 'deep' and 'surface' acting. When the participants talked about childhood traumas (parental alcoholism, violence and peer rejection), it was easy to feel empathy and compassion and to identify with the participants' emotional experiences. This deep acting was facilitated by the fact that many of the participants were of a similar age to me, and their narratives of their experiences in Soviet time schools and marketing sphere resonated to a large extent with my own personal experiences. Therefore, I was able to show compassion and interest during the interviews, to understand their experiences and to respond to them.

During the interviews, we talked about different strategies for happiness, how much each person is responsible for his or her happiness, and how much others can influence or contribute to happiness. During some of the interviews, I felt that my attitudes and those of the participants diverged. Moreover, some of the informants' positions were not acceptable from a values perspective. For example, when talking about what determines a person's happiness or unhappiness, the interviewees invoked the concepts of 'reincarnation of the soul' or 'the laws of karma'. In the view of one informant, the 'soul chooses' a particular place in the world with its own challenges. In this way, any deviant behaviour – violence or abuse, social inequality, poverty – was justified as inevitable and, in some cases, necessary. When asked how she feels about children who live with abusive parents, she said the following:

*'And it is karma for children; they choose their parents to come to, and they need to learn their lessons. There are all kinds of stories. [...] and the illnesses are the same for the child. It seems, Jesus, so small, what is this illness for. And if he came to this Earth to experience what it means to have cancer, for example. And imagine how we will take that experience away from him. What nonsense, why? [...] They have come to experience what it is like to be the child of a mother who has been beaten. What it means to experience terror at night, what it means to experience fear, he learns his lessons in this way, he hardens himself. Just like us, well, here, violent, drinking, all about the same thing. There are many variations, for example, like a father raping his daughter. And for the daughter there is a task, for example, to feel what it is like to be raped by the father, maybe she raped him in her other life, nobody knows.'*

Hearing these thoughts during the interview shocked me and I did not know how to react. On the one hand, it was unbelievable that a person could explain abuse or violence in this way. Inside, I felt condemnation, rejection and resentment. However, I tried not to show it outwardly, and as a researcher, I tried to accept and understand these attitudes. Nevertheless, at the end of this interview, during the analysis of the data, and even in the preparation of this article, when I read the passage again, I felt emotionally frustrated. So, emotional labour is exhausting not only when you play a 'deep acting', accepting and identifying with the vulnerability of the informants, but also when you challenge the researcher's beliefs, values or attitudes.

The researchers point out that online interviews are potentially more anonymous than face-to-face surveys. Therefore, ensuring the anonymity and security of the participants is easier from an ethical perspective (Lune, Berg 2017). Based on my own experience, the internet can

also provide some protection for the researcher against potential vulnerability during the research. Most of my interviews on the COVID-19 pandemic took place online. This has become a kind of protection mechanism, providing security and allowing me to distance myself a little more from the participants. I conducted the interviews at home, so the distance and the safe environment reduced my fear of 'succumbing to the informant's influence' or my own possible reactions to the participants' answers.

When discussing the emotional labour of researchers, it is pointed out that the researcher is alone in the interview, which can lead to a lack of cooperation in controlling or changing one's emotions (Hoffmann 2007). The feeling of loneliness and the desire to share one's experience during the interview was also very important for me. Not only did I need guidance because of the unforeseen challenges that arose, but also because of the value dissonance that arose between personal attitudes and the expressed positions of the participants.

The scholars point out that it is important for a researcher not to be alone with her emotions, thoughts, reflections, successes, and even more so with failures. I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop where the professors' openness about their challenges and difficulties during the interviews made me feel less lonely and inspired me to share my doubts. Thus, it is important to have the support of colleagues to safely share one's experiences and doubts. Even more important seems the possibility or actual presence of an institutional support system that would provide professional personal, methodological and legal counselling for individual researchers. Alas, during my research, I primarily relied on support of my family members and colleagues, while never encountering anything like the organised support system in Lithuanian academia.

## **EMOTIONAL LABOUR AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

Finally, the emotional work is not just about data collection. Reading transcripts, coding text and analysing interviews, you have to rethink what you have heard over and over again, recovering the emotions you have experienced during the interview. Some scholars consider this process to act as 'a sequence of exposures' or 'cumulative distress' (Scott 2022). In my own analysis, I was again confronted with the value dissonance that I experienced when reading certain extracts from the interviews. Furthermore, I was faced with the dilemma of how to present my critical view of 'happiness industry' but not to lose trust with the participants.

In most cases, emotional experiences are inseparable from other pressures that researchers face, such as concerns about the quality and professionalism of their work, meeting deadlines, financial resources, pressure to publish, and participation in other academic activities (McGarrol 2017). The researcher's experience is multidimensional and relates to other aspects of the researcher's personal and professional life. Unexpected social, political and economic events occurring during the course of the research, although not directly related to the research or the researcher, may have a general impact on the well-being of society and the socio-political environment and thus may affect the emotional health of the researcher. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 presented me with new challenges in relation to my research. It raised internal questions: Is it not only meaningful but also ethical to study happiness and the pursuit of happiness under such conditions? The topic itself seemed irrelevant and even cynical. In the first weeks of the war, I could not bring myself to write the thesis, and I had the idea of not finishing it at all. I began document my struggles with the perceived pointlessness of the work and the irrelevance of my thesis in the diary. This reflective process, though marked by self-blame, scepticism and indifference, ultimately



enabled me to re-engage with and complete the writing. Thus, research diaries can also provide 'emotional security' and help manage the complexity and stress of the research process.

## CONCLUSIONS

While traditional views often position the researcher in a dominant role, the dynamic nature of qualitative research means that researchers can become vulnerable due to shifting power relations and unforeseen circumstances. Emotional labour is an integral, yet often underestimated aspect of the research process, extending beyond data collection to encompass the entire study. Emotional labour can exhaust a researcher not only when they empathise with the vulnerabilities of participants but also when their own beliefs, values, or attitudes are challenged during the research process. The researcher's experience is multidimensional and influenced by their personal and professional life, including unexpected external events. Unforeseen societal events can introduce additional emotional vulnerability and challenges for researchers, impacting their motivation and perception of their work's relevance. The isolation often experienced by researchers during emotionally demanding work necessitates stronger support systems, including peer support and institutional counselling, to ensure their emotional and professional well-being. Self-reflective practices, even informal notes not only ensure quality of the research but can also help researchers navigate internal biases, emotions and doubts, as well as cope with the inherent complexities and stresses of research.

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## Tyrėjo dilemos ir emocinio darbo iššūkiai kokybiniuose tyrimuose

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami tyrėjų iššūkiai, susiję su galios santykių dinamika ir emociniu darbu įvairiose tyrimo stadijose. Remiantis asmenine patirtimi, atliekant kokybinius interviu su savipagalbos mokytojais Lietuvoje, atskleidžiama, kad galios santykių tarp tyrėjo ir tiriamojo dinamikos nenuspėjamumas gali sukelti etinių dilemų ir iššūkių tyrėjo emociniam saugumui. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad tyrėjų emocinis išsekimas gali kilti ne tik dėl empatijos dalyvių pažeidžiamumui, bet ir dėl tiesioginių iššūkių jų pačių įsitikinimams ir vertybėms, kurie gali sukelti vidinį disonansą. Pabrėžiamas svarbus mokslinės bendruomenės ir institucinės paramos vaidmuo užtikrinant tyrėjų emocinį saugumą, o savirefleksijos praktika ne tik prisideda prie tyrimo kokybės užtikrinimo, bet gali padėti tyrėjams įveikti vidines emocines įtampas, kylančias tyrimo metu.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** emocinis darbas, tyrėjo pažeidžiamumas, galios santykiai, kokybiniai tyrimai, tyrimų etika