Violent Research: the Ethics and Emotions of Doing Research with Women in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The twin concepts of ethics and emotions are used in this paper to examine experiences of doing research on the topic of violence. Ethical questions are of significance when carrying out research which is potentially distressing to the research participant. Through field experiences in South Africa the author argues, however, that despite the growing concern among geographers over the ethical dimensions of their work, the implementation of ethically guided research practice is often less simple in reality. The concept of emotions is used to explore the less well examined issue of the impact of distressing research on the researcher and research assistants. The paper concludes that it is often difficult to separate out ethics from emotions.

Introduction

On 1 December 2001 I found myself in KwaMashu township in Durban, South Africa urging a young man to take my car, and then to take my bag. I was doing what I had been told by friends to do—do not argue if you get hijacked, just hand over your keys and your property—if you argue you are quite likely to be killed. Funnily enough I was experiencing exactly what I had been interviewing five women about half an hour before. About 8 hours later I found myself at a friend’s annual company Christmas bash in central middle class Durban, dancing to Soweto band Mandoza’s ‘Inkalakatha’[2] and revelling in the localness of it all.

This paper examines my recent empirical experience in South Africa whilst carrying out research about women, violence and domestic violence. The research project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out between November 2001 and January 2002. In this paper I point to a number of tensions involved in carrying out research which is both distressing and dangerous, by focusing on the twin concepts of ethics and emotions.
In trying to reflect on the immediate experiences on return to the UK, now that the primary research component has been conducted, this paper examines three key themes. These are: first, exploring the ethics of carrying out distressing research; second, examining the possibility of research as a form of support for the researched; and third, analysing the emotions of carrying out research which is personally endangering and distressing for the researchers. The paper concludes with a suggestion that the process of academic writing (and reading) about these particular issues can also serve as cathartic for the researchers.

The research project is outlined first, examining the methods used and the aims of the project. This establishes the context within which questions of ethics and emotions are posed.

The Research Project

The research formed the second part of a larger research project that I began in 2000 focusing on women and their fear of violence and domestic violence in urban South Africa, using Durban as a case study. The first part of the work was a pilot study. The second part—a larger research project—aimed to examine the links between gender, fear of violence and violent contexts. In particular, I worked to explore the links between domestic violence and general civil violence, as well as examining where women locate their fear in urban areas.

Initially, I planned to conduct 10 focus group interviews between November and January 2002. By the end of the project, I had carried out eight focus group interviews and 50 questionnaires and handed out 39 blank diaries (38 of which were returned). These three different methods were selected because of their varying capacity to gather both quantitative and qualitative material. They also complement each other (see Meth (2003) for a fuller discussion). Below, I briefly outline these three different methods and their aims and objectives.

The focus group interviews were initially planned for three distinct geographical areas in Durban. These were: KwaMashu, a formal black township; Cato Manor, an inner city area with a mixture of housing (I focused on residents in squatter settlements); and, finally, Warwick Junction, a city centre trading and transport node, which is also ‘home’ to many traders. These three distinct geographical locations were selected because part of my work examines the links between space and violence, and these locations provide contrasting cases. Focus groups in KwaMashu were suspended after one of my interpreters, Sibongile Maimane, and I were involved in an attempted hijacking. I will return to this incident later in the paper. The purpose of these group interviews was to generate discussion about fear and experience of violence and domestic violence, and furthermore to link these experiences to the environments within which these women existed. Interviewees were contacted through local recruiters whom I made contact with through local researchers. Focus groups were conducted in Zulu (the first language of all the participants) with the assistance of researchers Khethiwe Malaza and Sibongile Maimane, and I was involved in an attempted hijacking. I will return to this incident later in the paper. The purpose of these group interviews was to generate discussion about fear and experience of violence and domestic violence, and furthermore to link these experiences to the environments within which these women existed. Interviewees were contacted through local recruiters whom I made contact with through local researchers. Focus groups were conducted in Zulu (the first language of all the participants) with the assistance of researchers Khethiwe Malaza and Sibongile Maimane, and I was involved in an attempted hijacking. I will return to this incident later in the paper.

Fifty questionnaires were carried out in three locations: Pinetown Magistrates Court (a suburban district of Durban, serving a wide peri-urban, rural and urban black area); Durban Magistrates Court (the main inner city court); and Thokoza Women’s Hostel (an inner city hostel for homeless black women). The court-based questionnaires were carried out usually in Zulu by Khethiwe Malaza. I was present at the first two locations,
and the Thokoza questionnaires were carried out by Khethiwe alone. The purpose of the questionnaires was to obtain information from women regarding domestic violence, linking this domestic violence to their housing circumstances. The questionnaires included a mixture of closed and open-ended questions.

The blank diaries were given to all the women involved in the focus groups. Women were asked to write in Zulu about their experiences of fear of violence over a period of a month, after which the diaries were collected. The women were paid R100 for their time and the diaries were then translated into English by Khethiwe Malaza and Sibongile Maimane. The purpose of the diaries was to gain insight into women’s fear of violence over a period of time, as well as to encourage women to produce their own knowledge and interpretation of their experiences of violence. A set of guidelines, written in Zulu, was pasted into the front of each diary. Several diaries were filled from cover to cover despite assurances from me that they would be paid the R100 for whatever they had written.

The extent of diary writing astounded me in terms of its generosity, depth and frankness. Indeed, this turned out to be the most insightful and interesting aspect of the whole research project. Issues raised by this exercise included those of literacy (several women could not write, and had to ask their daughters or younger relatives to write for them), and one woman had medical problems with her eyes and could not see or write for any sustained length of time. As a method it thus excludes or marginalises those who are illiterate, but this is in part tempered by their writing in their first language, Zulu, since most could not speak much English at all. Diaries also obviously raise questions of what is revealed and what is hidden, an issue I would argue one faces during interviews of any kind and I suspect it is only through extended participant observation that this might be minimised (see Meth, 2003).

**Doing Research on Violence: Causing Distress**

Robson (2001) provides an interesting account of interviewing young carers in Zimbabwe, where she reflects on the ethics of carrying out distressing research. My reading of this paper helped me to think through some of the ethical issues that had been gnawing at me in relation to my own research. Researching women’s fear of violence (including sexual violence), their fear of domestic violence and their experiences of both is hugely personal, invasive, upsetting and demanding.

Cloke *et al.* (2000) outline five key ethical issues in relation to the research relationship, namely informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and sensitivity to cultural difference and gender (Cloke *et al.*, 2000, p. 135, after Hammersely and Atkinson, 1995). They then systematically question the ‘simple interpretations’ of these issues by providing examples from their own research experiences. Their key argument is that in the growing context of reflexive and dialogic research, evidenced by the ethnographic turn, standard ethical practices (such as the five above) are a whole lot more ‘turbulent and problematic’ in the actual practice of research (Cloke *et al.*, 2000, p. 151).

In the context of this research project, focusing on violence, all of the five issues distinguished by Cloke *et al.* (2000) were pertinent and hence as a researcher I employed what Hay (1998) describes as ‘moral imaginations’ about a range of issues (Cloke *et al.*, 2000, p. 136, after Hay, 1998). However, employing moral imaginations does not mean that the process of ethical engagement was at all straightforward. Of the five issues, I would argue that the question of harm was particularly complex and at times unresolved during my research project. Cloke *et al.* (2000) define the issue of harm...
as follows: “the researcher should avoid negative consequences both for the people studied and for others” (Cloke et al., 2000, p. 135, after Hammersely and Atkinson, 1995). I would add to this definition the category of researchers as a set of ‘others’ that may be harmed by particular forms of research. Conducting research that is distressing (for participants and researchers) disrupts the seemingly unquestionable ethical objective of ‘avoiding harm’. It also raises the question of what we might mean by ‘harm’ and how one evaluates just how much harm is acceptable, for whom and in which contexts.

Robson (2001, p. 140), in pondering a similar question, suggests that it is possible that the ‘collective needs [of a particular group] justify costs to individual members in efforts to raise awareness of those needs’. This ties directly into the ethical question of ‘exploitation’ and the complex debate over giving something in return for what researchers have gained from participants. These particular ethical issues are considered now.

Each of the different research methods I used raised different ethical issues. Experience from the 2000 pilot project showed that using focus groups proved beneficial in that women used the groups to generate new knowledges and understandings of processes which they had largely experienced as individuals. Farquhar and Das (1999) argue that focus groups can facilitate productive discussions about sensitive topics. In this regard the focus groups, although covering very sensitive issues, felt supportive and less distressing. These are Khethiwe’s observations of this method:

Conducting focus groups was much better compared to court interviews and the interviews at Thokoza hostel. The focus groups consisted of a group of women together talking about the issue of violence and crime. Many people were involved. Sometimes it became so tense that I cannot respond to the woman who is speaking at a time and somebody else would add on what has been said. That somehow brought relief to the tension. Sometimes they would laugh at it, which also eased the situation. No one cried during the focus group interviews yet some of the stories were quite sad. Furthermore, they knew each other and were from the same place and somewhat knew each other’s problems (Malaza, 2002–03).

It was in the delivery of the questionnaires that I felt most distress was being caused and was experienced by both Khethiwe and myself. In carrying out questionnaires at the Durban and Pinetown magistrates courts we were ‘capturing’ women who were very recently abused and who were in the process of trying to do something about it (mainly through the application for protection orders against their partners or abusive family members). The immediacy of their abuse arguably added to their heightened distress. It was both the conducting of the questionnaires and their substantive content that potentially caused distress.

In terms of conducting the research, two issues were particularly relevant. First, questioning took place whilst women were waiting on benches outside the offices of court officers and social workers who were to give the women advice. Privacy then was a major problem. Although we did try to coax women away from the queue to a quiet table around the corner, this was often difficult, as women had been queuing for hours and were anxious not to lose their place. Also in several instances the abusive partners were present too (at the courts) so that protection orders could be handed to them directly, and keeping them away from the female interviewees was very tricky and compromising (as well as dangerous: a point returned to later in the paper). The ability and desire to provide privacy during research were compromised in these situations. Furthermore, the participants were also a little rushed, were very often deeply distressed and were desperately hoping to find answers and solutions to their problems.

The second issue thus follows from the first, and concerns the benefits of the research
for the participants. At several times whilst conducting these questionnaires we were asked for advice, for legal guidance, for our phone numbers and for our opinions of the women’s predicaments. Renzetti (1997, p. 134), in an analysis of subjectivity and feminist methodology, promotes the idea of researchers sharing ‘information about themselves, their personal lives, and their opinions with those they are studying’. We tried to be as honest as possible about our own roles and resources. We were particularly careful about not presenting ourselves as experts, social workers or holders of any legal power. However, as an academic geographer I felt that we were unable to offer the women anything tangible. We could offer no counselling, no legal advice and no practical advice. At Durban Magistrates Court I did offer some women information on free legal aid and advice. The process of research is often cited as potentially exploitative in itself. The concern raised here is the extent of exploitation of research which is necessarily distressing, and when little tangible is offered in return. These are Khethiwe’s thoughts on this matter:

When they cried, we did not have much to say; actually we did not know what to do. In most cases we let them cry and used much of the time (as they cried) with me telling you (Paula) why one was crying. I am not sure what we should have done. Maybe we should have tried to get to know how the law clinic on campus works so that we can give some form of advice based on something we know. This is because I heard that the campus law clinic is much cheaper than other lawyers (i.e. poor women advised to go to cheaper lawyers). We could have advised where possible but we kind of rejected the law side, which is not our field of interest. One can interpret that as if we wanted them to help us with the information we needed, and did not give them any help in return. In that sense the relationship was not ethical and not mutual, too. On the other hand we gave some form of support to them; the money we gave them for speaking to us. The research targeted poor women and that money helped them deal with their problems for a while (Malaza, 2002–03).

On the whole I agree with Khethiwe’s observations. Despite offering a sympathetic ear, some money and occasionally telephone numbers of advice lines we did not provide much more for these women. As Khethiwe explains, the law side is not our field of interest, and it is this statement that should perhaps guide our future research to be more proactive or activist in nature: perhaps this would relieve some of the above tensions and be of more benefit.

The substantive content of the questionnaires is also likely to have caused distress. Questions were asked about the specific nature of the violence (psychological, physical, sexual, etc.) and participants were encouraged to ‘tell their story’ and expand on how they responded to this violence. Participant 4 told a story of her ex-boyfriend who beat her, her mother and her sisters. He called them prostitutes, broke windows in their home and beat her mother within the home. She feared being alone in the house because of the threat of rape from him. Participant 13 had been beaten by her boyfriend since 2000 and he had beaten her so badly whilst pregnant that she had lost the child. She felt unable to tell anyone about this at the time. She is a nurse and is afraid to go to work because he knows when she is on duty.

These are just two of 50 similar accounts that illustrate typical stories told. Several women cried during these questionnaires. Although emotions can be expressed in a variety of ways, this seems particularly acute evidence of distress being caused. Obviously, we did not press any of the participants to discuss issues that they did not
wish to reveal, and we encouraged participants to ignore questions they felt unhappy about. We also assured them of anonymity.

I argue above that it was in the delivery of the questionnaires that I felt that most distress was caused. This, however, reflects the distress that I witnessed personally, and not the distress caused by the research project that unfolded outside the researcher’s gaze. The task of diary writing was also potentially a significant site of stress for the participants. Ironically, Elliott (1997, p. 4) celebrates the fact that diaries can work as methods of research in places which researchers cannot access (such as participants’ homes). However, similarly, researchers cannot be there either to witness or to provide support when distressing accounts are being provided. This relieves the researcher of the burden of conducting distressing research and engaging with this research face to face. The diary transcripts were overflowing with very distressing stories. The first encounter we had with this material was in the form of Khethiwe translating it in South Africa, and then me reading it in the UK. It was in reading the material that I witnessed the writers’ distress, but as a researcher I was absent from the process of recording this. Cloke et al. (2000, p. 151) remind us that the process of research always has an impact, including on those people ‘with whom we have not had direct contact, but who belong to the social worlds of those we have talked to’. Indeed, we have no way of knowing how the process of diary writing impacted on other members of the household, friends or relatives.

The above discussion has raised questions about the ethics of causing distress during research. Various mechanisms were, however, put in place to reduce this risk. At the start of each of the focus groups, we made it very clear that the participants were free to leave the interview at any point. Furthermore, they were free to remain silent if the discussion proceeded along lines they felt uncomfortable with. They were also encouraged to interject and contribute to any discussion that took place, and not to feel that they had to ‘wait their turn’. We also warned participants that the types of questions we would be asking were of an intrusive and personal nature, and they were asked if they wished to proceed. Khethiwe and I felt that the atmosphere of the focus groups was largely supportive. At the start of the questionnaires, and in preparation for the diary writing process, similar cautionary points were made.

The first part of this paper has concentrated on analysing how the research process may have proved distressing for the participants. Underlying this has been the complex question of ‘providing support’ and the ethics around doing distressing research. The paper moves now to turning this issue around a little by examining the potential emotional benefits of certain forms of distressing research by questioning whether or not the process could be partially supportive for the participants.

**Research as Providing Support for the Researched?**

As discussed above, there was little potential during this research project for providing tangible benefits to participants in the way of advice and counselling. Upon completion of the project I now feel that ethically this aspect could have been more integrated into the process. However, I remain uncertain as to the extent to which this should have been so. I am not in a position to offer psychological, medical, legal or social advice to women who have experienced horrific violence and who struggle with feelings of fear and insecurity. Stanko (1997, p. 78) accurately observes the following, in considering this dilemma herself:

> After all, I am a lecturer, not a therapist, and it is imperative that we as social
scientists do not kid ourselves that we are collectively assuaging women’s anxieties ... by providing a safe place ‘to speak out’.

There were, however, two possible avenues of support that participants may have gained from this research, namely participation as a form of emotional support and payment as financial support.

From comments both made in focus group interviews and written in diaries, I can conclude that for some women, the act of participating in the research process provided some form of emotional support. At the end of several focus group interviews the participants expressed their thanks to us, in terms of having had a chance to express their opinions and the fact that we listened and cared. A single post-project evaluation interview was carried out by Khethiwe with one of the participants from Cato Manor. Although clearly not representative, it is obvious that she found the process supportive and positive:

Writing the diary made me feel good because I had an opportunity to revise and cough out everything that was haunting me all my life. I felt really good; in some instances I even laughed (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002).

In two cases women specified that the diaries were the first places and times in which they had told particular stories:

Respondent 34 commented: ‘I couldn’t talk about this problem to my family; I kept it within me. I’m the only one that knows about it’, and Respondent 11 explained ‘I never told anyone about this is the first time I’m talking about it’.

These are Khethiwe’s perceptions of how we might have provided support to participants:

On the other hand some of these women had no one to talk to. Someone mentioned in one of the diaries that she never told somebody about something that happened to her. In a way they were able to talk about secrets to us through the diaries. Telling us their stories was some kind of substantial relief to them. They told us their stories and we listened to them. Bearing in mind that we were hearing only one side of the story, so they were somewhat convinced (I assume) that we believed what they said and we sympathised with them. With us they had people to talk to; unlike in the court of law where they will have to argue depending on the judgement of the court of law. They wouldn’t know if they were believed and understood.

Despite the explicit feminist aims evident in the exploration of women and violence, I do not conclude that this research necessarily empowered the women we worked with, nor did it necessarily contribute to their consciousness raising. At the very most, I can conclude that some women felt pleased that they were being listened to, that they were able to share their experiences and that their experiences were being taken seriously. Suggesting an impact above and beyond this is unrealistic as well as problematic. As Ansell (2001) argues (citing Gibson-Graham (1994), the Women and Geography Study Group (1997) and McDowell (1997)), the notion of using the research process as a consciousness-raising event can carry ‘colonialist overtones’ and also embody misguided assumptions. Assuming that a (Western) feminist agenda and the process of empowerment are a shared aim is inappropriate and often interviewees’ ability to act upon gendered empowerment, for example, may be very limited, even if parts of this agenda are shared by them.
A second, equally problematic, component of support for the participants came in the form of financial support. I paid questionnaire participants R15 per questionnaire, focus group participants R50 per interview and R100 for the return of each diary. This issue of payment is constantly up for debate. Khethiwe observes the following about the issue of payment:

The research targeted poor women and that money helped them deal with their problems for a while, e.g. Lindeni to pay her school fees. We could not help much we need to accept that. I assume they expected a lot from us other than the R150 we paid them. All I am trying to say here is that we could not give them any support other than sympathising with them. I always wonder if they were not given the money were they going to talk or write diaries? In a way, the money seems to have not only given them some form of support; it also stimulated the responses (Malaza, 2002–03).

In my opinion, Khethiwe’s observations about the significance of payment are very accurate. We cannot know if women would have completed diaries if no payment had been offered; neither can we correctly judge the impact the payment had on what was shared during the research process. McDowell (2001, p. 90) argues that she ‘strongly believe[s] that it is important to be able to recompense the individuals who are prepared to answer what must often seem like intrusive questions from social scientists’. She supports this further by highlighting the interviewees’ low-income background as well as the use of financial compensation to encourage future participation. I strongly concur with this position.

My decision to pay participants in South Africa was shaped by a number of issues. The most significant was that the women I worked with had to take time from their daily schedule to share their experiences with me. Their time must, I believe, be paid for. If it is not, researchers are in danger of exploiting interviewees, particularly when the research outcome may have little immediate benefit to them. A second issue was that I was the bearer of a generous grant paid in pounds and I was interviewing women who were often in chronic situations of poverty. Offering financial support (small as it was) is often the most tangible, or at least immediate, benefit of small-scale social science research.

Ansell (2001) challenges the payment of financial or material rewards in return for ‘data mining’. She states that such payments ‘cannot be removed from the unequal economic power relations that enable them’ (Ansell, 2001, p. 103). I agree; however, I believe that to deny the very real power relations is more problematic. I had several women offering to return the money. However, I assured them that I was well positioned to afford the payment and they accepted this. The unequal ‘power relation’ was explicitly acknowledged and I believe it generated a more honest interaction.

The paper has thus far examined the issues of causing distress and providing support to the research participants. What is increasingly apparent in this discussion is the intimate involvement of the researcher and research assistants in this process, not only as the ‘creators’ of situations of distress, but also as active participants who are also distressed through the research process. The second part of this paper explores the latter issue.

**The Two-way Process of Research**

Recent work on the geography of emotion (Widdowfield, 2000) opens up a space for geographers to reflect on the emotions embodied in the research process. Above, I have
started to outline the ethics and politics of participant ‘emotion’. Widdowfield’s paper points to the need for researchers to engage with and reflect on their own emotions embodied in the research process. She states that we as geographers have been remiss in understanding the two-way process of research whereby ‘not only does the researcher affect the research process but they are themselves affected by this process’ (Widdowfield, 2000, p. 200).

I want to briefly outline four experiences of violence and intimidation during my research trip (I have included Khethiwe’s own observations where provided). The purpose of this is to place in context our examination of carrying out primary research in unsafe environments. These emotions had an impact on the research process. Furthermore, our expression here of our emotions shapes our current feelings of safety, acceptance and resolution, all of which are essential to any future research we might carry out.

**Four Examples of ‘Doing/Being’ Dangerous Research**

The first experience of violence and intimidation was the hijacking mentioned earlier. This took place on 1 December 2001 around lunchtime in the reputedly dangerous township of KwaMashu. A single male attempted to take the car I was driving, but after being unable to start the car, he took my research bag instead. Neither Sibongile, who was with me at the time, nor myself were physically hurt, although this was Sibongile’s third experience of a theft or mugging. Furthermore, she commented that her mother was very concerned about her working in that particular part of KwaMashu. The man had sworn fairly abusively at me, but I only ‘heard’ this a few days later. This event was hardly surprising. The night before I was due to go into KwaMashu I wrote in my nightly diary: ‘I feel quite scared about going into KwaMashu tomorrow, I’m just relieved it’s the last time’ (30 November 2001). This event was minor compared to the criminal experiences many South Africans suffer; it was not physically aggressive and it was very speedy. I wrote in my diary the day after the event: ‘I have a tense and painful feeling in my stomach which I guess is understandable but still unpleasant. I’m not looking forward to sleep but at least I can identify my nameless dread today’ (2 December 2001).

The biggest impact of the attempted hijacking, aside from the loss of valuable research work and tapes, was the shroud of fear I was cloaked in for the remainder of the trip: this affected all the future research I carried out. I was also acutely aware of what a lucky escape we had had. Fear, I was to discover, was hugely undermining.

A second event was related to an in-depth questionnaire I had conducted with a woman at a shelter for abused women. The discussion concerned her experiences of domestic violence at the hands of her husband. The defining moment of the interview was finding out that her husband was a senior and well-known captain in the Durban police force. He had tried to kill her on several occasions (as well as rape and brutally beat her) and according to her was also doing a very good job of getting rid of evidence and witnesses. Stunned at the implications of her experience I left the interview feeling hollow about the seriousness of her allegations and the state of the police force. A week later Khethiwe and I were at Durban Magistrates Court and there she was again, attending the hearing against her husband, which she believed she was going to lose. As she approached us in the domestic violence waiting room to say hello and catch up, she pointed to a man a metre away from us and said it was her husband. We had been sitting with the man for the past half-hour wondering who he was: now we knew. Our association with his wife gave him cause to stare at us intently. This I knew was an extremely powerful man. He was not likely to offend us in any way publicly but I did
not want him knowing who we were or what we were doing. I had in my possession an entire detailed and damning interview about him. I wrote that night: ‘the court was its usual mindfuck today, seeing the captain was frightening and I have to resist getting emotionally involved’ (13 December 2001).

A third event was back at Durban Magistrates Court. Khethiwe and I were interviewing a young woman who was there to obtain a protection order against her abusive neighbour. During the interview she lifted her blouse to show us a five-inch stab wound across her chest and stomach, and then she pulled out photographs of herself and her mother shortly after they had been attacked. The photographs revealed scenes of blood and violence. About ten minutes into the interview she told us that the man who carried out these attacks was in fact in the room, ‘indeed’, she says, ‘that’s him there in the black shirt’: we looked up to see an angry face staring back at us. Our interview continued but with each question he moved closer and closer to our table; he could hear every word and the woman we were interviewing made no effort to speak quietly. Khethiwe and I were practically whispering at this point. By the end of the interview he had moved across the room and was sitting a foot away from us, staring at us and the transcript and generally intimidating us. Although we had hardly done any work that day, and had certainly not achieved our questionnaire quota, I turned to Khethiwe and said ‘Pack everything up now, we are getting out of here’. We stormed out of the building and I told her how close he was to her: she had her back to him and did not see his final approach. I felt horribly responsible for her safety at that point, as there was no security in sight at the court, and we had made ourselves totally vulnerable. Khethiwe’s thoughts about this experience reveal her fear very clearly:

… the other man who ‘opened’ that lady’s stomach while she was pregnant (Durban Court). To me (as we couldn’t speak to him) that generated fear and I thought he might meet me along any busy street in Durban and kill me because if he was able to do that to her neighbour whom he had known for very long he might do the worst to me. Basically, this means that people saw us as taking sides, which made me feel uncomfortable, as they didn’t know what we were talking about. I thought that my life was also in danger. I spoke to some of my friends about this and they convinced me that he wouldn’t be able to identify me among other people. Others said that he saw that I wore a badge, which indicated that I was a researcher who had nothing to do with their case. I didn’t have much to do and I had to be convinced (Malaza, 2002–03).

A final experience was at Cato Manor, where Khethiwe and I were due on a Saturday morning to pay 15 women for their completed diaries. This meant that I would have R1500 on me, a sizeable amount of money. Several of these women had abusive partners and it would have just taken one of the women to mention it to someone less pleasant for the whole event to turn horribly wrong. I had lost a lot of cash in the hijacking: the whole process of payment became something around which I stressed over very badly. I wrote the night before: ‘very much looking forward to going home (England that is), far more looking forward to finishing work and surviving paying out money at Cato Manor, aargh!’ Because of my anxiety I arranged with a friend who worked at Cato Manor Development Association to have in place three armed security guards to supervise the payment of the women. I divided up the cash into four different pockets in my cargo trousers. It all went embarrassingly smoothly and there was not a hint of danger. But the fear had shaped my capacity to work and relax during the days prior to this.

I have outlined four instances of fear and actual violence. In many respects these were
not the primary source of distress for me during this research trip. What overlay these four discrete experiences were the daily accounts of violence, rape, murder, harassment, intimidation and deceit outlined by the interviewees, and in particular outlined in the diary accounts. These daily accounts of violence and horror were not only given voice between November 1991 and January 2002. My engagement with them is ongoing.

The process of translating and transcribing the diary entries took until August 2002. Each time an e-mail came through from one of the interpreters in South Africa with an attachment, I dashed to the shared printer to remove the transcripts before my colleagues had a chance accidentally to read disturbing (and private) stories. This was not always successful and the first few lines of the transcripts penetrated the ‘safe space’ of my university printing room. So too were these transcripts littered around my home as I spent time coding and analysing them. Friends and family would move transcripts off the table and again the distressing content jumped ‘out’ of its place into another. These are the kinds of sentences that would have been seen: ‘Last Friday night two boys beat a girl. They took her to a particular place; they beat her severely and took her back where they found her’ (respondent 17); ‘I was hurt when I saw an Indian shooting a person to death. This really hurt me because it happened in front of me. After killing the person, the Indian just walked freely as if nothing happened’ (respondent 33); and ‘My husband always abuses me when it is holidays time, or end of the year festive season. On this day my husband had received a bonus’ (respondent 24). The act of receiving, reading and analysing material such as this is repeatedly upsetting. Indeed, using the material to write academic papers is upsetting. It is not simply in the act of listening that emotion is engaged; it is an ongoing process.

I suspect more than anything that these stories have violated my sense of humanity; of Durban as a place to live; of South Africa’s future; of hope for gendered equality and hope for justice. This violation is deep and I do not know where or how to begin to unpick it. Interestingly, the very process of writing this paper has helped me shape my personal politics about violence and research. Khethiwe’s impressions of how the research experience shaped her views of Durban as a place to live are a little different to mine, and reflect far more closely the reality of her life in South Africa. She states: ‘the research did not change much of the impressions I had about Durban. Most of the stories that we heard are not sort of “unique” to Durban. The society in which I grew up is as violent, if not worse’ (Malaza, 2002–03).

The specific experiences of violence I have outlined above are not horrendous and I know personally of geographers working in India and Ethiopia who have suffered frightening experiences whilst carrying out research. The point I am making here is to ask about the appropriateness and necessity of carrying out endangering research and in particular to think about what structures are available to help researchers cope with such events.

Acknowledging the Emotional Impact of Research

Widdowfield (2000) discusses the need to acknowledge the emotional impact of the research process on the researcher. She explains that ‘upsetting and/or unsettling experiences are as potentially paralysing as ethical dilemmas, with some researchers feeling unable to continue research which brings them into contact with aspects of the world and people’s lives which they feel (emotionally) ill equipped to cope with’ (Widdowfield, 2000, p. 201).

The attempted hijacking experience made me feel hugely fearful, angry, resentful, guilty, pathetic and, indeed, paralysed. This concoction of emotion made me change my
mind about interviewing in that particular township. I cancelled the third focus group session, due to take place in KwaMashu the same day. This obviously had repercussions for the five women who had been recruited for this interview. They were expecting me to arrive and to be paid. I was not able to explain to them what happened because I had never met them, and I did not know their names. The facilitator was elsewhere conducting her own research, and we asked her to relay the message back to the township, to explain our absence. I can only hope that this was achieved.

The hijacking experience also prevented me from carrying out interviews within the squatter settlement of the second case study area, Cato Manor. The primary reason for this was that I felt too scared to go there after the incident. I could not justify to myself the need to place myself and one of the interpreters in a position of danger. Indeed, Khethiwe commented: ‘I would not go to Cato Manor and interview people. I am very scared. There are more merciless criminals’ (Malaza, 2002–03). So instead of interviewing in Cato Manor, I insisted on a half-way meeting point on the imaginative boundary of what I then perceived to be safe and dangerous spaces. I was fortunate to have a personal contact at the Cato Manor Development Association, whose offices were located on the boundary between the settlement and ‘formal’ middle class Durban. I found the process of rethinking about the location of interviews very frustrating. I had ambitions to interview women in their homes (be they squatter settlements, townships or street areas, or at least in areas within their home environs, such as a church hall or a local communal area). After the hijacking, I chose to conduct research away from people’s own socio-spatial context, and this I perceive to be a compromise. Emotions can clearly shape the research process quite explicitly.

The hijacking experience, however, served as a point of connection in the later focus groups, where participants expressed empathy over the incident and offered me advice on how to remedy this situation. This process resembles Ansell’s (2001, p. 107) idea of ‘performing equality’ in the field with interviewees, in that expressing feelings of fear and describing events of violence indicated a shared vulnerability and process that I, my interpreters and the interviewees had experienced. In one particular focus group session, the women had been explaining their use of an Indian witch doctor to recover stolen property. They agreed that my contacting the witch doctor to recover the stolen property would be a useful point of action:

I went to the Indian at Shallcross; someone stole my chickens. That criminal came to me and told me that he is the one that stole my chickens. [The Indian gave me] Something that I should put at my door … it’s a paper written in the language of the Muslim. [The thief] apologized; I accepted his apology. [The Indian guy] has got the real stuff … I won’t mind accompanying [Paula]. It’s easy to get there. What did they take from her? [Her cell phone and money.] She can get those things. Lucky, they didn’t kill her. Yes, it’s true; she is lucky, they didn’t stab her … KwaMashu! KwaMashu! … What are those stupids going to do with her papers? They can’t even write (Focus group 2, Cato Manor, 2001).

They also advised me against the benefits of an advert I placed in the local Zulu-speaking paper offering a reward for the return of my non-valuable (very valuable) research papers. They explained that they would not be returned because the thief would worry about his fingerprints being on the items. This was something that had not occurred to me!

Asking Khethiwe to share her thoughts with me and to include them in this paper is about us acknowledging the emotional impacts of research together. Khethiwe’s experiences of the project were directly shaped by her race, age, gender and educational status,
namely a black woman in her mid-20s currently completing a master’s degree. She quite rightly identifies how different her experiences of the project were compared with mine as a result of her social characteristics:

I found it very stressful as people wrote about problems that are very personal. It was also hectic being of similar culture with the respondents. I could remember some of the respondents as I translated the diaries. It was worse; people were able to disclose information that they could not disclose during focus group interviews. Some couldn’t write properly and I knew that they were uneducated and unemployed because of apartheid or the belief in some black cultures that it is not necessary to educate a woman because they get married. That itself was causing pain to me because I’m a black woman too. Consequently, they are victims of violence. I knew exactly what they were talking about because I’m also from a society that abuses drugs especially the youth.

You were not there to share the stories with me. I was alone and had to talk to my friends about them. Some were not willing to listen because those things were affecting them. Some told me that they would not like to listen because they are living under those conditions with their mothers. The diaries were written in Zulu, a language that I understand. When they narrate the stories they gave me a clear picture of the whole scenario, e.g. someone wrote about how she was raped by her neighbour’s son. Before I could even finish reading her story, my body was already shivering. I could feel that she was raped. A friend of mine was raped by a group of boys, I saw her in a pool of blood, which was kind of similar to what she wrote about. I also grew up in a township, things there happen in a kind of similar way to Cato Manor or KwaMashu.

I would like to mention that someone very close to me (be it a sister, friend or neighbour) had experienced one or more of the problems they had. As a result a few of their stories were new to me. Also, it is one reason why I felt so bad about their issues because they reminded me of someone very close to me.

Khethiwe’s observations here are very moving and indeed upsetting for me. Being the primary researcher, they raise very important questions for me about how academics may neglect or overlook the emotional costs of research on assistants and interpreters. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of asking assistants about how they experienced the process and then providing support where possible.

**Research Writing as a Cathartic Process**

The final theme I want to raise in this paper is about the process of writing and making public what is largely a very private experience. Small-scale research is often done individually and without the benefit of colleague support. This characteristic makes it difficult to share one’s research experiences in any meaningful manner. Certainly, researchers are expected to share their ‘results and findings’, but there is little space to share their day-to-day feelings about the process. I suggest here that writing offers a wonderful vehicle for both sharing research experiences and contributing to a process of engaging with the frightening, intimidating and violent experiences that may be a part of the process called research.

Stanko (1997) justifies a revealing reflection of her own engagement with research and teaching about women and sexual violence by explaining: ‘The purpose of this brief chapter is to break my own silence about my experiences of harbouring anger, frustration, fear and pain during my own research experiences’ (Stanko, 1997, p. 75).
She later adds: ‘I have taken nearly 20 years to channel my emotion into writing. Somehow, I feel, there must be some way to demonstrate the emotionality of this subject matter’ (Stanko, 1997, p. 81).

Stanko (1997, p. 75) suggests that part of the reason we are silent about the emotional effects of our research experiences is because admitting to emotional engagement ‘arouses suspicion about one’s research findings and subsequently one’s claims’. She ties this also to critiques of feminism and feminist methodology, where calls by feminists to challenge masculinity are described as fundamentalist (Stanko, 1997, p. 79). Questions of credibility are also raised by Widdowfield (2000) in her analysis of research and emotions. She argues:

Alongside, and indeed related to, the apparent ascendancy within the academy of particular forms of knowledge/ways of knowing, the lack of explicit attention to emotions in accounts of the research process may also reflect researcher’s career concerns (Widdowfield, 2000, p. 200).

Widdowfield (2000) identifies two benefits of analysing the impacts of emotions on research. These are first, as I have outlined above, that the discussion of emotions may ‘fulfil a cathartic role’, and second, that it may provide wider support for other researchers (Widdowfield, 2000, p. 201). The first has already been discussed and I concur that writing it down has helped me to deal with my own experiences. The second is acutely relevant and made more significant by the fact that my very reading of Widdowfield’s (2000) paper provided me with support and the realisation that I am not alone in questioning the value of my research. Widdowfield (2000, p. 201) writes: ‘What is the point or value after all, of placing oneself in unpleasant situations in order to carry out research from which no (tangible) benefits are likely to be forthcoming?’. This for me is a monumental question, and it is an issue I grappled with and am still pondering. Khethiwe has outlined her thoughts on this large question:

A research is a research, is it not so? These things need to be revealed. The only way is through research. If they are not done, women will suffer even more. However, I felt the pain they were going through. It is really a very sad thing to listen to these stories. For some time after the research, these stories would come back into my mind and I will think about them and how I would react or respond should I find myself in similar situations. Usually I never had answers to all the questions I asked myself because I have no idea as to why people behave in that way. The justice system would only know of these things if researches are undertaken. The whole thing might not help them now but it is likely to help them in future. Therefore, be it painful and exhausting as it appears, we need to conduct researches. To change what appears ‘real’ to some people we need to touch people where it hurts most.

A third benefit I would like to add to Widdowfield’s, of the gains made in acknowledging the emotional impact of the research process, is the entrenchment or stimulation it serves for one’s own politics and identity. There is nothing quite like a hijacking to shake you out of your middle class bubble. This is ‘being’ research and not just ‘doing’ it and the emotions that accompany distressing research (such as anger and fear) can be channelled into greater political activism, greater awareness and a rejection of complacency.

This is supported by Stanko (1997, p. 83), who suggests that the recognition of emotions can contribute to the research process, and in particular that emotion can be regarded as a ‘research resource’ in that feelings such as anger can indeed inform
scholarship (Stanko, 1997, p. 84, after Cohen, 1994, p. 350). She concludes that ‘This is a very positive use of emotion, for we have every right to be angry (Stanko, 1997, p. 85). Kobayashi (2001) too explains how an upsetting research experience shaped, in part, her personal politics and academic inquiry. She describes this as being ‘nudged into feminist scholarship’ (Kobayashi, 2001, p. 60). Kobayashi’s discussion draws together the concepts of emotion and ethics as she explores the ethical questions raised around performing political activism as an academic (Kobayashi, 2001, pp. 60–63). The intimate connections between these concepts, and their significance for qualitative researchers, provide a suitable conclusion to this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the questions of ethics and emotions in relation to carrying out research on the topic of violence which is conducted in potentially violent contexts. The paper has probably raised more questions than answers, and as such it represents a reflective piece rather than a guide for action. The concepts of ethics and emotions are closely linked to each other and in the context of this research it is indeed difficult to discuss them separately. Doing emotional research necessitates an engagement with ethical considerations. Asking distressing questions undermines attempts to avoid harm, maintain privacy, avoid exploitation and ensure confidentiality. However, similarly, considering ethical questions enforces reflexivity and reflection, both of which are emotional processes. As Kobayashi (2001, p. 58) explains:

The excellent discussion of how to do ethical research, moreover, is concerned almost entirely with actions of the researcher towards the researched, rather than with questions of how the research connects with the life of the researcher.

There are also particular areas and issues that the paper has not had the space to cover. The issue of the dissemination of results in relation to the ethical principle of avoiding exploitation and giving something back to the researched in return is a particular example. Cloke et al.’s (2000) discussion of this issue is very useful as a pointer in the direction of different ways in which ‘results’ can be used and shared. In the context of research with participants who are unable to read or speak English, a whole range of questions about appropriate and accessible ‘results’ are raised. Young and Barrett (2001, pp. 132–133) cite several interesting alternatives to the written product, such as photo diaries and replaying recorded discussions in an effort to give something back to the street children they were interviewing.

Finally, I attempted in this paper to include the voice of one of the research assistants involved in the gathering of primary data. This was a significant decision because it represented an acknowledgement that the research process is complex, personal and certainly at the very least a two-way process. Indeed, I would describe it here as a triangular process with participants, assistants and researcher all shaping each other’s experiences of the process. Although Khethiwe has not been particularly involved in the interpretative and analytical aspects of this project, her presence was very strongly felt during the research process. Her presence provided me with support, feelings of safety and also anxieties about her safety whilst working with me.

Writing a reflective piece for a wider audience does at times feel self-indulgent. However, reading Stanko (1997), Robson (2001) and Widdowfield’s (2000) papers in particular certainly eased many of my doubts about the process of research, and made me feel less alone in analysing these doubts. It is probably more pertinent to question why it is that we as geographers so seldom share our emotions and experiences of fear
(or excitement) borne out of the research process, and also to reflect on where might the appropriate spaces be for such reflection.

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Notes

1. I have authored this paper as written ‘with’ Khethiwe Malaza (the primary research assistant on this project). This signifies the use within the paper of substantial quotations written by Khethiwe of her experiences of doing the research for this project. I found it impossible to write this paper without asking Khethiwe how she felt about the emotions and ethics of carrying out distressing research. Far more than myself, she was directly faced with the ‘horrors’ that were revealed during interviews and questionnaires and in the diaries. She is the Zulu speaker and most of what was transcribed, translated and presented to me was through her.
2. This song title was translated by Khethiwe as referring to ‘a powerful person, someone who has money (not through crime)’.
3. R100 is about £6.66, and represents about half a week’s earnings for some informal traders.
4. In pounds sterling these amounts are £1, £3 and £6.66, respectively.
5. Cloke et al. (2000) include researchers’ own diary entries in their paper in an effort to emphasise reflexivity. They argue: ‘the keeping of research diaries … represent[s] one effective channel for the inclusion of the selves of researchers in wider reflections about their research’ (Cloke et al., 2000, p. 150). The inclusion here of my diary entries aims to contribute towards my own reflexivity.

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