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Challenges to conducting sensitive research: purity culture in British Christianity as case study[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some challenges to conducting sensitive research, taking my PhD on purity culture in British Christianity as a case study. I first discuss methodological challenges faced during the course of this research: generating data in a sensitive area of research, and managing ideologically diverse participants. I then discuss the impact of emotionally demanding research on the researcher themselves. Finally, I conclude by discussing the inequity in support for emotionally demanding research in religious studies and offering recommendations in response. This article is primarily aimed at researchers in religious studies – however, it may be of use to those in other subjects across the social sciences, and indeed in any discipline, conducting research on topics which are contentious, sensitive or emotionally demanding in nature. It is my intention that this article will be of use to researchers facing similar challenges to those presented here, regardless of disciplinary location.

KEYWORDS

Sensitivity research; Emotionally demanding research; Purity culture; Evangelicalism; British Christianity; Gender; Sexuality; Researcher wellbeing

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Introduction

In this article I discuss challenges to conducting sensitive research in religious studies, taking my own PhD in sociology of religion as a case study. This research explores the impact of Christian 'purity culture' on women in Britain. In this article, I outline some challenges I have encountered during the course of this research and how I responded. I first discuss methodological challenges: generating data in a sensitive area of research, and managing ideologically diverse participants. I then discuss the impact of emotionally demanding research on the researcher themselves, particularly when this takes places within the context of sensitive research. Finally, I conclude by discussing the inequity in support for emotionally demanding research in religious studies, and offering recommendations in response which could be used to alleviate some of the challenges of sensitive research.

Researching purity culture

Purity culture is a recent movement in Christianity which emphasised the concept of sexual purity. It was prominent in American evangelical Christianity during the 1990s and early 2000s. The ultimate goal of purity culture was to encourage (predominantly young) people to practise sexual abstinence until marriage. This ethic is not novel; it is often found in other iterations of Christianity outside evangelicalism, and in other religions as well. In evangelical purity culture, however, we see advancement beyond this sexual ethic of abstinence, to a more holistic expectation of purity. This sexual ethic became the groundwork for a broad set of expectations, behaviours, and values, and eventually a whole industry, all of which were intended to maintain sexual purity. Purity culture became a recognisable subculture in the US, with its own particularities and practices – such as purity rings, abstinence pledge cards, organisations, events, speakers, books, and abstinence-themed Bibles and merchandise. Now, purity culture is the focus of a bourgeoning area of research. Since 2010, studies on purity culture and rhetoric (Gardner, 2011), American evangelicalism (Moslener, 2015a; Klein, 2018), American nationalism (Moslener, 2015b), trauma (Cross, 2020), rape culture (Owens et al., 2020; Blyth, 2021), sexuality (Gaddini, 2021), race (Natarajan et al., 2022), domestic violence (Oritz et al., 2023) and in New Zealand (Stanley, 2020) have begun to form an emerging interdisciplinary field.

Purity culture is distinctive in the overwhelming centrality of, and intense focus on, staying sexually pure – and it seems this appeared in British evangelicalism too. One of my interviewees describes this intensity of growing up in English evangelical churches highly focused on preventing sexual sin: "the whole way it was depicted was, it was *so* exceptionalized that actually, I had a fixation on it". Purity culture has had a public reappraisal in recent years. As well as the aforementioned academic literature, this has included a "recent backlash" from current and former Christians (such as on popular media and public online platforms, like Twitter/X and online blogs) who have reassessed and rejected aspects of purity culture, though to varying degrees depending on their current religious position (Oritz et al., 2023: 538). Purity culture also had an international reach, despite its American roots and prevalence, but the differences and impacts across the world are yet to be fully explored. My PhD research begins to fill this absence by investigating its presence and impact on women in Britain.

Defining 'sensitive research'

The last four decades have seen increased discussion about the notion of sensitive research. Various definitions have been proposed, though there is currently no agreed consensus. A frequently cited earlier definition is that of Sieber and Stanley, who see 'socially sensitive research' as 'studies in which there are potential consequences or implications' for either participants or the group they represent (Sieber and Stanley, 1988: 49). Following this, Lee defined sensitive research as 'research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993: 4). Lee and Lee's 2012 review of sensitive research from the previous decade demonstrated a need to develop the concept. The authors modify Lee's previous 1993 definition by suggesting 'risk' instead of 'threat', as this is 'more flexible and conceptually rich' (Lee and Lee, 2012: 46). Additionally, McCosker et al. defined things as 'sensitive' if 'they are private, stressful or sacred, and discussion tends to generate an emotional response, for example death and sex' (McCosker et al., 2001: 1) – this description is less helpful for the purposes of this study, though, as this definition focuses specifically on sensitive 'phenomena' rather than sensitive *research* more broadly.

More recent research has demonstrated that sensitive research is not just about the *topic* of research but can encompass the whole research process (Mallon et al., 2021; this edited journal special edition was also published as a book: Borgstrom et al., 2022). Mallon and Elliott argue here that 'the 'sensitivity' of a sensitive topic [of] research is not just connected to the actual topic under investigation'; rather, 'sensitivity' is 'multi-layered', and is connected to the researchers' own context(s), their motivation(s) to study the topics in question, the research environment, and the reactions of supervisors (Mallon and Elliott, 2021: 533). Mallon and Elliott also effectively centre the emotional demands on, and embodied experiences of, the researcher (2021; cf. Mallon et al., 2021: 518). The broadening of the term 'sensitive research' by Mallon et al. is helpful for the conceptual development of the label. The editors do not, however, offer a 'unifying definition', nor do they intend to – aiming instead to 'enable researchers from all sectors to critically engage with what it means to do 'sensitive research'' (Mallon et al., 2021: 518). This reflects, perhaps, a broadening understanding of the term in more recent years which seeks to account for the complexity and variety underlying what could be categorised under this label – the 'complex mix of emotions, experiences and ethical dilemmas which lie at the heart of many 'sensitive' research encounters' (Mallon et al., 2021: 517).

However, this article requires a workable definition of sensitive research – one which matches the sensitivity of my own research, but could equally be drawn on to reflect other research too. In an effort to acknowledge the aforementioned complexity and variety – but avoiding a definition so broad it is almost absent of meaning – I here follow Lee and Lee's (2012) revision of Lee (1993). I thus define sensitive research as follows: research which potentially poses a substantial risk to those involved in, or engaged with, it.[3] Ultimately, this emphasises the conceivable negative impact to *people* – this could include participants, the researcher themselves, or any other person or group who is (or has been) involved in the research. *Risk* implies possible (there is an element of uncertainty here) undesirable consequences to those connected to the research.

[3] Note that risks may change throughout the course of the research process.

Methodological challenges

As the first substantial piece of research into purity culture in Britain,[4] my PhD necessitated the generation of new data. This meant reaching a lot of people, across many geographical locations and multiple Christian denominations, in order to ascertain purity culture's reach, reception, impact, and how it manifested in specifically British contexts and related to the British socio-religious landscape. When designing this study, I therefore had to consider what methods were best suited to building up a body of information that mapped this current state of affairs. As a result, I conducted an online survey. This received over 1300 views, and over 600 completed responses, of which 580 were considered eligible and included in my study. Equally, however, I was eager not to compromise on the depth of personal experiences and stories, which I felt would personalise this research and bring nuance to a complex phenomenon. The survey was therefore supplemented with a small number of one-to-one interviews (5) with British cis women who felt that they had experienced purity culture.

Generating data in sensitive areas of research: unexpected resonance

When designing these data collection methods, it was important to consider how best to generate data within a sensitive area of research. This research was sensitive, in this instance, because of the possible substantial risk to participants of emotional distress.[5] The survey covered topics relating to religious belief and religious teaching about gender, sex and sexuality. There was a possibility that these could prompt unwelcome recollection or emotional upset. It was also possible that respondents could have experienced things like sexual abuse, sexual harassment, upsetting or traumatic events, which could be brought to the fore by the content of the survey. For example, participants are asked if they have encountered virginity metaphors like a broken teacup or used chewing gum, and they are invited to share their experiences of purity culture in an (optional) free text question. Later in the survey they are presented with a list of statements (such as "You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new" [Q26.9]) and asked how much they agree and if this is something they encountered in Christian settings. Further to this, demographic characteristics such as sex, sexual orientation, and religion and belief (characteristics that this survey recorded) are all protected characteristics under UK legislation (Equality Act, 2010), demonstrating their private and protected nature.

Rather unexpectedly, the survey garnered a large response – both in terms of the number of responses (so much so that it was closed early, having rapidly reached a 300% response rate), but also in their quality. Open-ended text questions (which

[4] I should clarify that the phenomenon of purity culture has been studied in relation to Britain before, but not exclusively. For her article on the trauma of purity culture, Katie Cross interviewed 10 participants of which 2 were British (2020). Similarly, Katie Gaddini's recent monograph on single women and the evangelical church features on chapter on purity culture, but again combines the experiences of American and British participants (2022). In contrast, I explore the nuance and particularities of purity culture in its British iteration, and therefore refer to my own work as the first *substantial* piece of research in this area.

[5] The scale of response perhaps also indirectly indicates that this is a sensitive topic in the way McCosker describes – i.e., because it seems to 'generate an emotional response' (2001:1) – and that participants sought both an outlet to testify to their experiences, and reassurance that these were shared experiences.

were largely intended to help identify potential interview participants) were filled with rich qualitative data, and lots of it. Survey respondents shared their stories, their emotions, their experiences, and how purity culture had shaped these. The risk of emotional distress came into play, as survey respondents discussed things like identity, negative emotional experiences (e.g. shame, guilt, hurt), sexual harassment, occasionally sexual abuse, transitioning out of religion, and sexuality in a heteronormative religious subculture. This raised an unexpected conundrum. As this was a new area of research, I was not able to fully anticipate its reception to a public audience when advertising the call for participants – and as this was a new *sensitive* area of research, I then felt, therefore, a concern for the wellbeing of these near-600 participants who had 'gifted' me their time and their stories (Oakley, 2015: 208). The survey required informed consent of all participants who were made aware of voluntary participation, risks, confidentiality, and right to withdraw. Yet, separate to my fulfilled obligations as a researcher, the unexpected quantity and depth of personal disclosures prompted something in me. Reading experiences of pain, trauma and abuse which were ascribed to, or exacerbated by, purity culture, I couldn't help but think 'are these people okay?'. The same possibility of risk (emotional distress to participants) also applied to interviews. The risks associated with these were, however, easier to manage. In comparison to a survey, interviews would be expected to be more risky – they therefore demand significant risk mitigation to be in place beforehand, and I devoted more attention to this during my application to my university's ethical review committee, as this felt appropriate.[6] However, as I anticipated survey data to be predominantly quantitative, the emotionally-laden and lengthy qualitative data it produced took me by surprise.

The resolution I decided on was to sign-post survey participants to resources for further reading and support services (particularly organisations which specialise in church-related or religious abuse) by email. But this experience nonetheless raised the broader question: what do you do when you encounter unexpected challenges in new areas of sensitive research which have little (if any) precedent? It felt appropriate to direct participants to potentially relevant support services – but this decision could have been much better supported; for example, by academic literature which documented similar research processes and/or how researchers responded when sensitive studies had particularly large reach and resonance. It was also a decision that troubled me: in the face of participants' experiences, I felt a human instinct to alleviate the suffering but which, at least in that moment, I wasn't able to fulfil. I sought to 'locate the boundaries of [my] own responsibility' (Lee and Lee, 2012: 45) not necessarily as a researcher, but as a human being privy to difficult experiences and emotions.

Ideologically diverse participants

The second methodological challenge that arose during this study came from the need to reach a diverse array of participants. When constructing the online survey, I was aware that I was aiming to appeal to women who were currently or formerly

[6] This included, for example: an information sheet outlining potential risks and advising against participation if this runs the possibility of significant emotional upset; a consent form; intervention from myself if necessary (such as pausing to check in, ask how they are feeling, suspending the interview). Upon feedback from the University of Leeds' ethical review board, I also prepared a 'Participant Aftercare' document with information on support services. This was intended to safeguard the welfare of interview participants in the case of disclosure of serious abuse, by providing details of specialised counselling and resources.

Christian (especially, but not exclusively, current or former evangelicals). This meant gathering information from some conservative Christians, some progressive Christians, and some now non-religious people (who also tended to lean more towards progressive stands on social issues, such as LGBTQ+ affirmation).

The challenge presented here was thus how to construct a survey – and in particular, what language to use in it – in a way that did not unduly prejudice participants. This is tricky: even the phrase *purity culture* is 'generally sufficient to indicate at least a critical perspective' (Cross, 2020: 37). Using this phrase in the call for participants could predispose, for example, conservative Christians against the study and potentially discourage them from participating, as it could generate suspicion about an academic piece of research which might be perceived as inherently critical of their own religious background or beliefs. This is compounded further when the research is sensitive, and there is a risk of being emotionally drained by taking part in it. Though as I researcher I wanted to gather and take seriously both progressive and traditional viewpoints, I could appreciate the possible hesitancy.

This challenge became particularly clear when designing survey questions on sex and gender. For the purposes of this study I needed to know both sex (male/female) and gender (man/women/non-binary/other). This was important for this project, as purity culture is heavily gendered; the experience of growing up within purity culture is shaped in large part by how people are *perceived* within that culture. Evangelicalism tends to be 'gender essentialist', meaning sex and gender are considered one and the same. Someone's biological sex would therefore shape the cultural messages they receive in their community from a young age.

As my research focused on how girls and women were perceived and treated within this socio-religious context, I made the decision to research cis women's (and also including assigned female at birth non-binary people's) experiences, because these people would have been *treated as* women and girls within the subculture in question. This felt like the most appropriate way to research purity culture in the first initial study in Britain (though it is my hope that further studies, for example on race, sexuality, heteronormativity, will follow). I therefore had to ask participants about *both* their sex and their gender, to determine those who were eligible (cis women, AFAB non-binary people) and ineligible (cis men, AMAB non-binary people, trans men).[7] This raised the question of how to collect data on a gender essentialist culture, when not employing gender essentialist language (due to the data I needed), but equally without deterring more traditional Christians who do subscribe to gender essentialism themselves?

[7] I felt that cis men and assigned male at birth (AMAB) non-binary people would be *perceived as* boys and men within the majority of evangelical communities, and therefore were ineligible for this study. However, it took me a while to decide whether to include trans men in the data. It is likely they would have been considered girls/women within evangelicalism due to being assigned female sex at birth (regardless of their own gender identity). This could provide very useful data. But the eligibility of this group could be difficult to decipher, depending on at what age they transitioned, and with what support (or discrimination). Additionally, I felt that I couldn't do justice to the experiences of this group of people. I anticipated (correctly) that the majority of my participants would be cis women, and it didn't feel right to include trans and non-binary people as an auxiliary to cis women's experiences. I therefore ultimately chose (through a rather pain-staking decision making process) to exclude trans men, as well as cis men and AMAB non-binary people. I recommend further studies on purity culture and/or evangelicalism in Britain which specifically explore the experiences of gender diverse people. It is my sincere hope that my own research will lay the groundwork for such studies.

I ultimately designed these survey questions as follows. Question 3 asked participants their gender, with the options of 'man', 'woman', 'non-binary', and 'prefer to self-describe'. Anyone selecting 'man' would be deemed ineligible and automatically sent to a landing page (as both cis and trans men were ineligible). Anyone selecting 'non-binary' were asked a further question (Q3b): what sex they were assigned at birth (male or female). Question 4 asked participants whether their gender identity matched their sex registered at birth, which allowed me to establish whether or not the women were cisgender. The overall make-up of the final 580 survey participants was 573 cis women, and 7 non-binary people who were assigned female at birth.

Two factors shaped these questions: guidance from the Office of National Statistics, and the language used by American purity culture researcher Linda Kay Klein. ONS guidance ahead of the 2021 census suggests the following questions: 'What is your sex? ... Response options: Female; Male' and 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?' (ONS, 2021). Though worded slightly differently to my own questions, these demonstrate that it is normal practice to ask about both sex and gender when gathering demographic information. As the census is a national-scale survey, and took place (in 2021) before my data collection (in 2022), I felt confident that participants would have at least some familiarity with these questions. Secondly, I follow Klein in seeking to research the experiences of people who were 'raised as girls' (2020: 51) within purity culture. Klein employs this phrase throughout her book *Pure*, and uses it to indicate who is being represented in her work on evangelical purity culture in the US. Likewise, this phrase encapsulates my own participants in Britain: people who were perceived to be, and thus raised and treated as, girls and women.

The wording of these questions ultimately did prompt some disagreement. Two participants chose 'prefer to self-describe' for question 3 (on gender) in order to state that they disagree with the question. One responded "I am a woman. This is my sex, not a self-declared gender identity", and the other stated "I don't subscribe to gender theory, my sex is female, I am a woman". Meanwhile, another participant expressed frustration that the survey was not inclusive enough to trans people, due to the fact that they would have to divulge their trans status. They argued that including these questions "reveals a cissexist mindset". This was frustrating feedback for myself as the researcher, especially given that these comments came from vastly different ideological stances (the former two not 'subscribing' to gender theory, the latter pushing for better inclusion). By utilising both ONS guidance and precedent set by Klein, I felt that I had appropriately balanced the reduction of these risks alongside the data required for the project and the need for rigorous data collection. But they nonetheless forced me to consider whether I really *had* done this to the best of my ability. I was troubled by the suggestion that I was not inclusive, particularly as this seemed to be levelled at me as a *person* rather than the study I designed. This raises the challenge of emotional reactions to, and engagement with, the research by the researcher themselves, which I discuss below.

The impact of emotionally demanding research

There has been increasing recognition in academic literature over the past few decades of the possible risks for researchers – and not just participants. The 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences has emphasised the concept of reflexivity, an 'explicit self-analysis of one's own role in research' (Borgstrom and Ellis, 2020: 592).

This has helped centre the emotions and experiences of researchers, and how their multi-layered situatedness can shape knowledge production. Within this context, attention has also begun to be drawn to the reverse: how the research can influence the researcher. Dickson-Swift et al. noted in the early 2000s that alongside the established exercise of 'outlining the importance of protecting participants', the impact on the researcher has also received increasing recognition (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008: 327-328). This is especially important for those conducting sensitive research. While there are many difficulties 'unique to qualitative research' – such as managing the relationship with participant(s), reflexivity, managing emotional responses and 'leaving the field' – these are 'often compounded when researching sensitive or difficult topics' (Dickson Swift et al, 2007: 328).

Since then, there has been growing attention to the impact of *sensitive research* specifically on the researcher – this has been relatively limited to date but, promisingly, this is starting to change. As Fenge et al. recently noted, 'there is currently limited research exploring the impact of undertaking sensitive or challenging research on the researcher' (Fenge et al., 2019: 1). They also emphasise that though risks to both researcher and participant are both now generally acknowledged, 'in practice, the ethics approval process rarely considers the impact of the proposed research on the researcher' (Fenge et al., 2019: 1). At my own university, researchers are required to have ethical approval, to ensure that any ethics implications have been considered and addressed. The ethical review form includes possible risks, such as discussion of sensitive issues, and potential harm to participants or others (which does also include researchers). Off-campus fieldwork is also required to be risk assessed, however as my survey was online this did not apply. As online methodologies have been embraced further during and post-covid pandemic, perhaps it is worth reconsidering this – lest we run the risk of implying that there are no (or minimal) risks if the research is done remotely, though this is not necessarily always the case.

More recently, the phrase 'emotionally demanding research' (EDR) has emerged as a descriptor of 'research with participants, data or environments that has the potential to impact upon the wellbeing of the researcher' (Smilie and Riddell, 2023: 77; cf. Burrell et al., 2023; Calabria et al., 2023). Kumar and Cavallaro offer a broadly similar description of EDR: 'research that demands a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy and potentially affects or depletes the researcher's health or well-being' (2018: 649). Emotionally demanding research is 'not limited to research on sensitive issues' (Burrell et al., 2023: 1) – there could be other circumstances that lead research to take an emotional toll on the researcher (cf. Kumar and Cavallaro who outline some examples [2018: 648]). EDR is, however, especially likely to co-exist with sensitive research, as 'risks and vulnerabilities for researchers are amplified in sensitive research' (Micanovic et al., 2020: 3).

My own research into purity culture in Britain has constituted emotionally demanding research. This is due both to the nature of the topic in question, and my own positionality. The nature of qualitative research on purity culture requires the 'emotional labour' (cf. Micanovic et al, 2020: 6) of hearing, absorbing, and processing sometimes painful life experiences. Meanwhile, my background in evangelicalism – mostly in the charismatic evangelical side of the Church of England in which I was raised – meant this research had personal resonance with me. Indeed, the research was not only personally resonant but personally motivated.

Mallon and Elliott discuss how researchers can be 'motivated to study sensitive topics because of personal, ideological and political motivations' (2021: 533). This personal motivation was true for my own research on purity culture; I had observed the lives of those around me and wanted to make a difference by drawing attention to such experiences. But, as Mallon and Elliott have pointed out, it wasn't necessarily always a 'straightforwardly ... positive feature' shaping this research (2021: 533). Participants' stories sounded familiar to those of my friends. The survey was filled out by many people I know (a result of using snowball sampling which began, in large part, with my own wide-ranging connections). On multiple occasions when reading through survey responses, I realised the respondent was someone I knew.[8] On at least one occasion (there may have been more; accurate memory fails me), one of these known people disclosed sexual assault. Meanwhile, a case of historic sexual abuse was disclosed during one of my interviews. This was someone previously unknown to me, but who was nonetheless sitting next to me, speaking and thinking and living and recollecting pain, while I listened and sympathised and absorbed.

The data collection process thus had a profound impact on me, and also quickly troubled the assumption of researcher impartiality and detached observance. It also troubled the idea of researchers as 'mere instruments of data collection' (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015: 743-744). Feelings of anger, outrage, compassion, sorrow, injustice and disillusionment converged in my mind and lived in my body. These did not seem to dissipate with time; indeed, the analysis process drew me even closer to the depths of my data and accentuated the profundity of my unease. Alongside this, I also experienced what is termed *chilling*: 'when researchers defer or deliberate about dissemination of research ... because they await possible hostile reactions' (Borgstrom and Ellis, 2020: 596; cf. Lee, 1993: 34). This was based, not on abstract notions of possible hostility, but on the experience of sharing my research in a piece for *The Conversation* (Thwaites, 2022). This piece garnered a variety of online comments, including some which had to be removed by the editor. It was also shared on social media where it received crudely inaccurate and seemingly purposefully antagonistic summaries. This led me to question: was this the right research to be doing? Would people understand the nuance I'm seeking to achieve? If not, was it worth it?

Emotionally demanding research in religious studies

Lack of equity in researcher support

The impact of emotionally demanding research demonstrates a clear need for support mechanisms for those conducting this kind of research. I would argue, however, that there is a lack of equity in support for people conducting EDR in religious studies, due to the unique situatedness of the discipline. Theology and religious studies is relatively unusual in that it is often subsumed alongside other areas of study and – particularly in recent years – has been positioned as an auxiliary to other disciplines within the organisation of HEIs. The result of this is that religious studies researchers can find themselves in vastly different research environments, with access to different levels of support.

[8] The survey was anonymised. Participants were invited to share their email address if interested in an interview (optional) – it was therefore possible for participants to actively de-anonymise their response if they chose to provide an email address which included, for example, their full name.

Taking the case study for this article – my own research on purity culture – provides a useful example. I consider my PhD to be, principally, located within sociology of religion.[9] Though it is an interdisciplinary study (relating to, for example, religious studies, gender studies, and perhaps also practical theology), sociology is where the project feels most at 'home', and is also where I feel most represented as a researcher. Yet, my PhD is housed within the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science at the University of Leeds. This School is, in turn, housed in the broader Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures. This places me (and any other sociologists of religion in my department) at quite a distance from other sociologists at the university, who are not only within a different department (School of Sociology and Social Policy) but a different faculty (Faculty of Social Sciences). This seems to reflect a broader trend in which religious studies is located within arts and humanities, and in which sociology of religion has traditionally been located separately from mainstream sociology. For example, funding for religious studies research is often provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in England, as opposed to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The remit for religion research in the former is much broader: 'AHRC supports research into religions and belief systems of all kinds, in all periods of history and in all parts of the world', including 'their application in socio-economic...contexts' (AHRC and ESRC, 2023: 4).

This is not necessarily problematic; disciplinary and subject boundaries need to be drawn somewhere, and it is not uncommon for religion and philosophy (for example) to be grouped together. However, this institutional structuring of disciplines does seem to place sociologists of religion at something of a disadvantage: undertaking social research, housed within the arts and humanities, and therefore perhaps in environments lacking familiarity with sociological research. This is further compounded by the reality that some sociology of religion research *is* housed within the social or psychological sciences – which can lead to a lack of equity in support for researchers.

This inequity became clear to me during a workshop I co-organised with fellow Leeds PhD student Laura Wallace. In November 2022, we ran a two-day workshop for PGRs and ECRs researching religion and abuse, in collaboration with the AHRC-funded Abuse in Religious Contexts project. At this event, we were struck by the inconsistencies in support for people working in this area, particularly for PGRs.[10] As two PhD students conducting emotionally demanding research, and starting our PhDs in 2020 at the height of the covid pandemic, we had experienced our fair share of challenges. Hearing others' experiences, I realised that my own research environment seemed to be oriented towards the needs of philosophers, with empirical research such as my own feeling like an auxiliary to the abstract and conceptual (an important exception to this trend being my own supportive supervisors). The workshop was enlightening; not only did it become clear that attendees had varied levels of support for their emotionally demanding research in

[9] This has also changed during the course of the project, which intentionally moved from practical theology to sociology of religion.

[10] I must express my gratitude to those who attended and contributed fruitfully to our workshop, for developing my awareness on these structural discrepancies. In particular, I am very grateful to Laura Wallace, with whom this workshop was a joint endeavour, for our conversations afterwards which helped me process and solidify my thinking on these inequalities in support.

religious studies, this also appeared to be shaped (at least in large part) by which departments their research was housed in.

During the course of the workshop, I was surprised to learn that some PGRs had more formal mechanisms or structures in place at their institutions which sought to remedy the risks of emotionally demanding research. For example, one PGR who was based in psychology had access to clinical supervision. Access to this support appeared unsurprising to this PGR, but seemed unthinkable based on our own research environment. In contrast, I had access to 4 appointments with the university counselling service (the standard wellbeing provision for students across all degree programmes, including undergraduates).[11] Some universities seemed to have structures in place from the commencement of research; others took more of an ad-hoc approach. Some attendees reported having compassionate and emotionally intuitive supervisors; others reported a supervisory team that was more distant and 'hands off'.

Indeed, this inequality constituted inequity; despite researching similar topics in religious studies, and all being registered on PhD programmes, the experience seemed to be much more challenging for some than others due to different levels of access to, and quality of, appropriate support and resources. This could be, perhaps, a symptom of interdisciplinarity. Religious studies research is often interdisciplinary – it can cross paths with sociology, anthropology, philosophy, theology, ancient history, and languages, and many methodologies across these disciplines can be employed. The result of interdisciplinarity is that there may not be a clear 'home' discipline or department for research, causing it to occupy a strange liminal space between multiple disciplinary 'homes' but receiving the full benefits of neither.

Recommendations

In the absence of current parity in support, what can be done to improve the experience of undertaking emotionally demanding, sensitive research in religious studies, particularly for the neophyte researcher? Here I outline some recommendations, drawing together those previously offered by scholars and emphasising those which repeatedly appear. These recommendations combine institutional and individual responsibility for managing emotionally demanding research, following Kumar and Cavallaro who highlight the importance of both (2018: 655-656).

First, the aforementioned workshop demonstrated the need for further active and accessible conversation on the impact of emotionally demanding research on the researcher. As Calabria et al. highlight, 'relatively few scholars have investigated empirically the emotional impact on researchers of doing qualitative research on sensitive topics and marginalized groups from the researcher's perspective' (2023: 92) – exceptions to this are Fenge et al. (2019) and Mallon and Elliott (2021; though they had a very small sample of 12 researchers). There seems to be a clear demand for further research on the impact of emotionally demanding and/or sensitive research on the researcher. It would be particularly helpful for PGRs and ECRs undertaking sensitive research on religion to have access to such research, to develop awareness of the potential risks as researchers. This may go some way to

[11] Access to clinical supervision may not always be necessary, and indeed is not equivalent to counselling – but it does suggest anticipation of a need for support beyond what is ordinarily provided to all students.

reducing the inequality of experiences in emotionally demanding social research in religion. EDR may 'be even more challenging for a novice researcher because doctoral students have a lack of experiences ... and are typically not offered support to deal with the emotional demands of research' (Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018: 649). A greater awareness of these demands and of the disparity in support could, at least equip novice researchers to identify and advocate for their own support needs.

Second, multiple scholars have argued that HEIs have an obligation to review (and improve) their own provision for researchers undertaking emotionally demanding and/or sensitive research. Calabria et al. argue that there is 'a need to think about what care means and how it can be performed within the relations constituting HE environments at all levels, in research communities, research practices, supervision, ethics review processes, and university governance' (Calabria et al., 2023: 94). They also argue that the institutional responsibility for enacting such care is particularly important for novice researchers, given the context of extremely high rates of poor mental health among graduate students (Calabria et al., 2023: 94).[12]

What could this institutional provision look like? Many scholars have pointed towards the need for better attention to risks to researchers in the ethical review process. Fenge et al. argue that there is a need for 'more scholarly debate about the duty of care of HEIs', which includes 'consideration of the remit of ethics review' (2019: 2). There is – and rightly so – a clear concern for the safety of participants evident in most ethical review processes. But this has not been met with a concurrent and equal concern for the safety of researchers, at least in practice. Calabria et al. have noted, 'university ethics protocols ... remain primarily focused on the risk to participants' (2015: 743). Mallon and Elliott similarly point out that 'little consideration is given with the formal governance framework, to examine the suitability of researchers, or preparing and supporting them in the work they undertake' (Mallon and Elliott, 2021: 533). They suggest that 'more thought could be given to the impact of researcher experiences on their choice of research topic and the sensitive this may bring' (2021: 533). This would not be particularly out of place – outside of academia, 'many institutions already have separate systems for undertaking risks assessment for employees, and it would be logical that mental and emotional well-being, as well as physical well-being, should also be considered as part of this process' (Fenge et al., 2019: 2).

Third, many authors have emphasised the importance of researchers having their own strategies for practising self-care. Kumar and Cavallaro assert that this is 'essential ... to avoid researcher fatigue and negative impact on participants, themselves, and their research' (2018: 657). At the close of the workshop on religion and abuse, we discussed our own 'toolboxes' – what techniques we could use for looking after ourselves in undertaking this kind of research. Things that emerged included keeping a research journal, debriefing with supervisors, and taking breaks from research when possible. These are similar to suggestions for managing compassion fatigue: 'spacing the interviews ... collegial debriefing ... and journaling' (Sherry, 2013: 285). These can be tricky, as researchers may not have time to space interviews. Debriefing may also not be an option depending on others' availability, and there is no guarantee of collegiality in research. Sherry argues that debriefing is

[12] They note, for example, a recent study by Hazell et al. – the first explicit study on suicidality amongst doctoral researchers in the UK. Of the surveyed 1,263 doctoral researchers, they found that 40% met criteria for 'being at high risk of suicide' (Hazell. et al., 2021: 757).

a particular ‘oversight’, as ‘academia does not anticipate the need for researchers to debrief’ despite it being ‘a valuable locus in which to deepen understanding and further develop theory, in addition to providing an emotional release’ (Sherry, 2013: 285). Supervision may resolve this for PGRs, though the benefits of this could rest precariously on the empathy, availability, and capacity of the supervisor. Lee and Lee suggest that ‘professional therapeutic support’ could be beneficial - though ‘the funding of such provision needs to be factored into research proposals’ (Lee and Lee, 2012: page). Likewise, Kumar and Cavallaro suggest ‘free access to counselling services’ as one potential initiative ‘to address the current lacuna in institutional responsibility in researcher well-being’ (2018: 655). The inclusion of ‘free’ is also notable, emphasising that access to this should not be contingent on the financial situation of the researcher.

The concluding session of the workshop also involved discussion of taking a holistic approach to wellbeing – incorporating not only PhD-specific strategies, but actively engaging with wellbeing-boosting activities in general. There is, of course, no one-size-fits-all approach to self-care, especially in sensitive research. I therefore endorse Kumar and Cavallaro’s recommendation for researchers to ‘develop their own customized self-care practice’ (2018: 655). Reflexivity received attention in this discussion, as it does also in the academic literature. It is generally considered to be ‘an important research skill’ (Sherry, 2013: 283), especially for those conducting emotionally demanding and/or sensitive research. Reflexivity is significant not just for acknowledging the role of the researcher in shaping the research, but also for underlining the researcher as embodied. Social scientists in particular face the reality that ‘our tools are not only our voice or image recorders and then pen, but also our bodies’ (Mallon et al., 2021: 518). It is thus helpful to actively observe ‘the embodied experience of our emotions during the research process’ (Mallon et al., 2021: 518), as these can impact the participants, the results of the research, but also, of course, the researcher themselves. Developing emotional awareness is, therefore, an underacknowledged but important skill for social researchers.

I would argue, though – again following Kumar and Cavallaro who’s work I am indebted to here – that these individual strategies need to work in tandem with institutional duties of care. This is especially the case when facing unexpected challenges. While some risks can be anticipated and pre-emptively mitigated or diminished, others are difficult to predict (take, for example, the unexpected volume of emotive responses to my PhD survey). As such, ‘emotional challenges’ are ‘very difficult to predict or eliminate ... research crucially needs to be risk-managed from the design stage to dissemination’ (Micanovic et al, 2020: 10). It is an ongoing process which requires risk management from inception to conclusion, including having the necessary support to best place researchers to do this and to direct to relevant support when unexpected challenges occur.

Conclusion

By taking my own research into evangelical purity culture in Britain as a case study, I have highlighted some challenges that sensitive research can pose to researchers, with a focus on sociology of religion research. I began by outlining my own definition of sensitive research, which for the purposes of this article followed Lee and Lee (2012) and identified sensitive research as that which poses a substantial risk to people involved. I discussed two methodological challenges relating to my own

research: generating data in a sensitive area of research, which produced unprecedented and highly emotive responses, and seeking out ideologically diverse participants, which came to the fore in survey questions on sex and gender. I then considered the impact of emotionally demanding research on the researcher, and attested to the difficulty of this experience when conducting my own research on purity culture. Finally, I examined emotionally demanding research in religious studies specifically, identifying an inequality in support for EDR in religious studies (especially for novice researchers), and outlining some recommendations in light of this. These advocated for: further work on the impact of EDR to foreground this discussion in academia; an increase in religious studies researchers' awareness of risks and ability to advocate for their support needs; well-established institutional support, including attention from ethics committees on risks to the researcher; researcher self-care strategies as appropriate and achievable. It is my hope that this discussion will resonate with other social researchers – particularly, but not exclusively, those in sociology of religion – and further the conversation on acknowledging and addressing challenges in sensitive social research.

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