

Qualitative fieldwork, harm mitigation & professional discretion

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This fieldwork episode unfolded as part of a community-based participatory study, exploring residents' experiences of neighbourhood family support and poverty alleviation services. The research setting was situated in a Local Authority, approximately 50 miles from the University, and accessed weekly over a 9-month timeframe. A series of initial visits allowed the researcher to meet and recruit a small group of five local co-researchers who, across a series of workshops, contributed to the research design and recruitment plans. Practically, the study consisted of (i) participant observation within a local foodbank (spanning a three-month timeframe), (ii) group interviews with local support workers representing the scope of neighbourhood provisions, and (iii) in-depth one-to-one interviews with a sample of 15 local residents.

One-to-one interviews were scheduled in advance and designed to take place in trusted community spaces, at respondents' convenience. Respondents were initially recruited via face-to-face researcher engagement at the local foodbank, public community activities, or over the telephone, following recommendations from one of the local co-researchers. Given the financial hardships all respondents endured, and the sensitive nature of conversations about support seeking and receipt, the study was deemed 'high risk' and relevant ethical clearance was obtained via the University's Research Ethics Procedure. Conducting face-to-face interviews also involved travelling to and from the research site by car, amounting to considerable time spent in transit per interview. This feature of the study created some pressure to make fieldwork visits productive given the associated time commitments.

Synchronising with participants is a routine challenge for qualitative researchers. Throughout this project interviews were confirmed with respondents one day in advance, over the telephone. Respondents were then contacted again on the day to confirm their attendance 30 minutes before the allotted interview time. On this occasion, and on answering the call 30 minutes before their scheduled interview, one respondent appeared distracted and upset. Having established that the respondent was crying, it was necessary for the researcher to respond sensitively, whilst making an ethical judgment about whether or not to pursue the interview they had travelled to conduct.

The first action undertaken in this instance was to check that the respondent was safe. Having confirmed the participant's safety, but discerned that they were experiencing substantial emotional discomfort, discretion was used to cancel the interview. Researcher contact details were shared with the respondent in case *they chose* to reschedule at a later date. The researcher then checked in with their Principal Investigator to explain the situation before travelling home safely without having collected any interview data.

Fieldwork can be unpredictable and it is certainly not uncommon to encounter situations where the ethics of pursuing planned activities are called into question. Recognising the potential for unanticipated harm is a prerequisite for harm mitigation in social research. This can require emotional sensitivity alongside the flexibility and willingness to cancel or postpone scheduled encounters, despite pressures to pursue research within given timeframes. Effective safeguarding, as such, can involve exercising professional discretion. In some instances, this may mean choosing not to do research. The availability of a *Principle Investigator (PI)* or *research supervisor* is also noteworthy here. Where researchers are practicing fieldwork, PIs or supervisors should be accessible and willing to discuss safeguarding issues or concerns. This connotes effective communication and synchronisation between researchers and their PIs/supervisors.