What Happens When Researchers Inquire Into Difficult Emotions?: Reflections on Studying Women’s Anger Through Qualitative Interviews

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Qualitative research methods have the potential to elicit rich descriptions of emotional experiences, particularly if the research is about a topic that is important to the participants in the study. The open-ended nature of these methods makes possible the emotional involvement of both participants and researchers. This article considers the utility of interview approaches and, specifically, phenomenological interviewing in studies of emotions. Drawing from a study of teachers’ anger experiences, the emotional implications of using this type of method for research participants and researchers is explicated. The article concludes with implications for qualitative researchers studying difficult emotions or topics in which participants are likely to experience and express difficult emotions within the context of the research.

Researcher: And do you feel like the anger was different, too, because of the different incidents?
Christie: Good question. Let me think … I feel they [several incidents of anger in a classroom setting] were close to the same but the root cause was slightly different. Pride was still in evidence but in the latter cases there was provocation, which would … [pause], which necessitated my responding in some way and it needed a response from a position of authority. I just took issue, I took personal issue with my tone of my voice. In the first case there was no provocation, there was no reason, that anger stemmed solely from me and not from … [crying, catching breath] goodness gracious, I need to stop.

When interviewing teachers such as Christie about their experiences of anger in school, we see, hear, and feel the connections between emotions and the personal, political, and social contexts of education. These links may seem commonsensical in contemporary educational thought, which often celebrates the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and his followers (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985, 1991; Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984). Historically in Western thought, however, emotions conceptually were pushed far from the realms of the rational, schooled mind and relegated to the visceral components of human existence. Although philosophers throughout the Enlightenment (e.g., Bacon, 1620/1995; Descartes, 1637/1999) polarized the concepts of rationality and emotion, emotion has been resurrected more recently as an accomplice of rationality, and, thus is of interest to educational researchers. The rethinking of emotions as connected to cognition is evident, for example, in theories of emotional regulation (e.g., P. A. Schutz & Davis, 2000) and cognitive apprenticeships (e.g., Rogoff, 1990), which conceptualize emotional responses and involvement as elements of human thinking processes (see also Solomon, 1976/1983, for a discussion of emotions as rational). Previously theorized as wholly personal and pathological disturbances (e.g., Freud, 1923/1986, 1930/1961), emotions are now often theorized as social, cultural, political, and historical entities (Clark, 1990; Denzin, 1984, 1990; Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b; Hochschild, 1983) and as sites for resistance and revolution (Boaler, 1999). It is, for some educational researchers, philosophically unsound to separate human expe-
experiences of phenomena such as emotions from the worlds that structure and produce those human experiences.

The changes in the frameworks educational researchers use to understand emotions in education have precipitated a quest to find methods for studying emotions that are sensitive to the contexts in which emotions are produced, structured, and experienced. Drawing from the rich traditions within sociology and anthropology for naturalistic inquiry (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Eisner, 1991; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), researchers in education have found that qualitative methodologies and methods open up modes of inquiry into emotions that meet the requirements of being sensitive to contextual factors. Although qualitative methodologies and methods are employed variously within studies oriented toward constructionist, critical, and postfoundational philosophies, the researchers who make use of these naturalistic rationales and techniques share an interest in considering emotions in social contexts. These naturalistic techniques, which often promote closer relationships between the researcher and participants than are possible in experimental research, have the potential for creating circumstances in which the participants’ and researchers’ emotions are involved in upsetting, uplifting, and unexpected ways. We have found this emotional involvement to be particularly entangling in our study of emotions.

In this article, we reflect on a research project in which we studied the difficult emotion of anger using phenomenological interviews, a method that afforded us an understanding of some of the contextual elements that teachers used to make sense of their anger experiences. Our purpose in sharing this reflection is to describe a research method we have found fruitful for obtaining rich data about emotions and to explicate the emotional implications of using this type of method for the research participants and the researcher. We use the term difficult rather than the more common descriptor negative (Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Lazarus, 1991; Turner, 2000) to refer to anger because, although we do not necessarily see anger as negative, it is an emotion that we often find difficult to both understand and handle, particularly in Western cultural contexts.

Investigations of emotions such as anger in interview contexts may lead to emotional responses in researchers and also in the participants. In addition, the method of interviewing itself, which often involves participants sharing personal aspects of their lives with researchers, can elicit emotional responses whether or not the interview focuses on a topic of emotions. What are these emotional responses? What should researchers do during interviews and data interpretation and when representing these results? To address these questions, we begin with differing perspectives on the definition of an interview, provide a brief introduction to interviews used in qualitative research, and discuss our use of phenomenological interviewing for this particular study. We then turn to an exploration of ways the emotional lives of both researcher and participant were engaged through the process of our interview project. We conclude the article with implications for qualitative researchers who choose to study difficult emotions such as anger or who are concerned about emotional aspects of qualitative research.

**What Is an Interview?**

An interview is a process in which a researcher asks questions and a participant (or participants) responds with thoughts, perspectives, and narratives usually based on his or her experiences. Merriam (1998) described an interview as a conversation with a purpose, a “person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (p. 71). Lofland and Lofland (1994) described the unstructured interview as a “guided conversation whose goal is to elicit from the interviewee rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis” (p.18). Although researchers may envision the qualitative interview as a conversation between two people, this notion neglects to accurately describe the roles of the researcher and the participant. Usually the researcher has a greater stake in seeing that the interview is accomplished. The researcher has a research purpose in mind, has designed the study and selected the participants, and intends to implement the project. The participant has his or her own purposes for being involved in the research, which are not necessarily discussed between the pair. Although a good interview may seem like a conversation between two people, it is a different form of communication.

Using sociolinguistic perspectives, Mishler (1986) used notions of “speech events” from Hymes (1967) and “speech activities” from Gumperz (1982) to describe the nature of interviews. He used Gumperz’s definition of a speech activity as “a set of social relationships enacted about a set of schemata in relation to some communicative goal” (Mishler, 1986, p. 35). For Mishler, interviews were not simply exchanges of questions and answers by researchers and participants but are a form of discourse in which the coconstruction of meaning takes place within a particular type of social relationship. Mishler (1986) argued “even questions that are apparently simple in both structure and topic leave much room for alternative interpretations by both interviewer and respondent” (p. 45). For Mishler, the interviewer and participants engage in construction of meaning throughout the interview process in which both are working toward shared meanings. Mishler (1986) elaborated on this researcher—participant relationship:

Although I have been focusing on the complexity and ambiguity of the questions themselves, it is particularly important to recognize that question form is not the determining factor in the process through which ambiguity is manifested and re-
solved. This is done through the way that interviewers and respondents attempt to “fit” their questions and responses to each other and to the developing discourse. Presumably “simple” questions are as open and sensitive to this process as are complex ones. Ambiguities are resolved through the discourse itself and not by efforts to give a more precise statement to questions in the interview schedule. (pp. 46–47)

Mishler’s (1986) notion of the interview as a unique form of speech event or activity with the focus on the social construction of meaning has enabled researchers to enrich more limited notions of the interview process. The researcher’s as well as the participant’s discourse becomes data within the written transcript of the interview. Researchers can examine how both participated in the interview to construct the data. Educational researchers might think of an interview as a unique form of discourse between two people in which one is an informed learner who is there to learn more about the other’s experiences, perceptions, and reactions to a particular phenomenon, event, experience, or series of experiences. Clearly, what researchers bring to the interview by way of subjectivities—an individual’s cultural background, gender, age, physical appearance, educational background, academic discipline, life experiences, and other biographical factors—influences the ways in which researchers attend to the conversation and construct meaning within that conversation. In other words, researchers filter each interview experience through their own unique set of autobiographical experiences.

Researchers across disciplines have referred to qualitative interview studies using a variety of labels. In the methodological literature on qualitative interviews, the following labels, among others, have been used to describe qualitative approaches to interviewing: intensive interviewing (Lofland & Lofland, 1994); in-depth interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999); in-depth phenomenological interview (Seidman, 1991); standardized, semistructured, and unstructured interviews (Merriam, 1998); the long interview (McCracken, 1988); focused interview (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956); clinical interview, narrative interview, phenomenological interview (cf. Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; van Manen, 1990); feminist interview (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992); and biographical, oral history, and life history interview (cf. Dollard, 1935; Langness & Frank, 1986). Each of these labels has been used to describe differing aspects of the interview, including the purpose of the interview, the formal or informal style of the conversation, and the notion of intensity or depth.

Using a Phenomenological Interview to Study Difficult Emotions

In our work, centered on exploring women teachers’ experiences of anger, we found that a phenomenological interview approach enabled us to focus on the specific experience of anger as a way to look at this emotion in the context of these women’s work in schools. We begin with a brief summary of existential phenomenological philosophy and method to provide readers with a framework for the rest of this article. Pollio et al. (1997) argued that Heidegger (1927/1962) combined the existentialism of Kierkegaard (cf. 1844/1936, 1844/1980, 1846/1941) and the phenomenology of Husserl (1913/1931) into a single project—“that of describing everyday human existence in uniquely human ways” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5). Later Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) brought these existential phenomenological foundations to the psychological study of human existence. Giorgi (1970, 1975, 1983), Kvale (1996), and Pollio et al. (1997) offered thorough explorations into the methodology and method of phenomenological research in psychology. Kvale (1996) took as one of its central elements a focus on “lived experience.” Thompson et al. (1989) explained this central concept of the perspective:

Existential-phenomenology seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some context(s) or, to use phenomenological terms, as it is “lived.” The concept of Lebenswelt, or life-world, is one manifestation of existential-phenomenology’s focus on lived experience. The world of lived experience does not always correspond with the world of objective description because objectivity often implies trying to explain an event as separate from its contextual setting. … Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived. On this view, the meaning of an experience is always situated in the current experiential context and is coherently related to the ongoing project of the life-world. (pp.135–136)

Referring to Husserl (1970) and A. Schutz and Luckmann (1973), van Manen (1990) explained the concept of the lifeworld as the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, “What is this or that kind of experience like?” (p. 9)

Researchers engaged in phenomenological inquiry attempt to construct contexts in which participants are encouraged to reflect retrospectively on an experience they have already lived through (van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) explained that the aim of empirical phenomenological research is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

Thus, phenomenological inquiry attempts to get at the meaning people place on their lived experiences. These projects re-
sult in contextual, holistic, and thematic descriptions of particular experiences. 

Phenomenologists seek to learn about the nature or essence of particular, everyday experiences in people’s lives. The essence of an experience makes the experience what it is (Husserl, 1913/1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Van Manen (1990) described the essence of a phenomenon as a universal which can be described through a study of the structures that govern the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon. In other words, phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience. A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience. (p. 10)

The essence of an experience emerges from interview data as participants describe the particular aspects of the experience as they lived it. The researcher’s role is to discover the essence or structure of the experience through an interpretation of the rich, textual data provided by participants describing the particular experience being studied.

In our work, focused on women teachers’ anger, the notions of the coconstruction of meaning and the attempt to understand the essence of a specific experience of anger in everyday life were particularly salient as we explored ways in which participants described experiences of anger in their professional lives. Using a phenomenological interview to “attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138), we assumed the role of learners by carefully listening to participants who had experiences of anger and whom we considered the experts as they shared their experiences with the researchers. The interview process we utilized was a focused conversation in which the participant taking the lead in describing the particular experiences in whatever way she chose. The interviewer, as an active listener, was engaged in the construction of meaning with the participant. This phenomenological approach was particularly suited to the study of difficult emotions in that it allowed the participant to tell her story in a way that was most comfortable and suited to her interactive style.

The interviewer\(^1\) began with a short, clear, open-ended phenomenological question designed to elicit detailed descriptions of women’s experiences of anger. Specifically, the researcher asked, “Think about a time when you experienced anger in a classroom or school setting and tell me about it.” This question served to focus the participant on a single experience of anger and enabled the participant to take the interview in the direction she wanted as it related to the experience. The interviewer used follow-up questions using the participant’s own words in the probe saying, for example, “You mentioned you were livid on the playground. Tell me more about that” or “What was being livid like for you?” The goal of the researcher was to keep the conversation focused on concrete descriptions of the particular experience rather than on abstract discussions about the experience. Each participant described in great detail what she experienced, how she felt, and how she acted within the experience (Kvale, 1996).

The purpose of the interview was to obtain rich descriptions of an experience. As suggested by Thompson et al. (1989), the researcher assumed the role of a nondirective listener who asked short, descriptive questions that led participants to respond in long, detailed descriptions of the experience of anger. The researcher attempted to establish equality between researcher and participant by privileging the knowledge shared by the participant and by sharing interview transcripts and researcher interpretations.

We used the structure of a research group to analyze and interpret the transcripts constructed from audiotaped interviews. We began our interpretive work consistent with the phenomenological perspective described previously in attempts to fully understand the essence of the experience of anger for each of the teachers in the study. However, because our research group consisted of researchers situated within different theoretical traditions, we found that differing perspectives on the same data set enriched our interpretive work. Although the purpose of this article is not to review our analytic process or the findings of the study, suffice it to say that the use of phenomenological interviews that led to rich, detailed narrative descriptions of experiences within specific contexts enabled us to use multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret these data.

Through weekly research group sessions, we began to notice and explore ways in which the emotional lives of both the participants and the researchers were engaged in the process of the interview; furthermore, the emotions of the researchers continued to be engaged through the interpretive group process. We turn to an examination of this emotional engagement.

\(^{1}\)There were several researchers involved in the interview process during this study. We refer to the “interviewer” or “researcher” when the text applies to any of us. We refer to the specific researcher by name if the point in the text or quote applies to a specific researcher in the group.

We found that in most of our interviews the troubling emotions of anger, frustration, and anxiety were relieved by the participants during the process of describing the anger incident. This reliving was expressed by participants in a variety of ways including direct references to “feeling or experiencing the anger again” as well as physical exhibitions in the form of flushed face and neck, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, and facial expressions indicating discomfort, frustration, or anger. Some participants stopped the conversation in order to control their emotional expressions during the interview. The more the participant described herself into the

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context once again, the more elements she remembered, including the emotions experienced during that event. In the following transcript excerpt, Zoë explained how she had blocked out much of an incident. The more she described the scene, however, the more emotional she became, such that at points during the interview she cried in much the same way she described following:

Kathleen: I wonder if you could walk me through that conversation with the four of you in the room.

Zoë: Okay, I’ll do my best, but it’s one of those things that I’ve really blocked out and just remember the feeling. Well, I can remember the physical space probably better than anything because I was sitting at the end of a long table and then the most confrontational assistant principal was sitting at the other end of the table and the Spanish teacher was sitting on one side and the other assistant principal was sitting on the other side. … And, I don’t remember what it was that I felt very attached about but it’s when I started crying and she was telling me to stop crying. “Don’t cry. You don’t need to cry.” Then she said that there is no place for emotions at work. And that just shocked me, but then after that meeting they would come by my room, this one particular one, would come by my room and say things like, “You may not even have a job here next year. You need to be careful. You may not have a job here next year.”

Later in the interview, Zoë volunteered that she continued to be angry about an incident in which she believed a principal did not support her as she attempted to supervise a group of students in a student government group. This was one in a series of experiences that led to her decision to leave the school. She felt the issue was never resolved to her satisfaction, and she expressed her continuing frustration during the interview. The following transcript excerpt is not a response to a question but part of Zoë’s narrative:

Zoë: Yeah, I’m still angry about that, I mean to the point where I can just uh … grrrrrrrr … [she grimaces in frustration]. And, you know, for weeks it really caused an imbalance of power in very strong, intelligent young people. I refused to let them walk over me. What I ended up doing was becoming harsher with them as far as discipline goes. (p. 12)

In the research group, once we began to see a pattern in which the emotions of the participants were again triggered within the interview, we began to include within future interviews a closing discussion or debriefing about the emotional aspects of the interview. During a follow-up interview with Cleo, Kathleen asked her if she found she relived the anger during the interview.

Cleo: Sure. My palms are clammy, behind my knees are clammy, my feet are clammy—sure I feel it again. That’s just real simple reactions to it. Does that mean that they are not resolved? I don’t know. That instant rage—I felt no remorse or regret that I should have dealt with it in a different way. I should have done that, rather than what I did. I don’t think those things. But in the situation [of the interview] I get those same kinds of feelings.

Part of planning for researching difficult emotions or topics in which participants might experience difficult emotions includes a recognition of the researcher’s culpability in asking the participants to relive the difficult emotion (see, e.g., Rosenblatt, 1995; Smith, 1998). As researchers using a phenomenological interview approach in which we ask participants to describe the experience of anger, we are creating an emotional space where they can relive these experiences. The structure, length, and intimacy of the interview itself all encourage the participant to relive the experience. The topic of the research is emotions, the space is private, and the interviewer establishes trust and rapport with the participant. In this context, the participant often perceives the expression of emotions as safe and confidential. The researcher’s ethics are challenged as he or she attempt to limit the emotional risks to the participants. The recognition that there is increased likelihood of reliving difficult emotions within this context requires researchers to carefully plan for these experiences.

The researcher’s plan for dealing with difficult emotions relived during the interview is part of obtaining permission to do the research through an Institutional Review Board. As the research may have risks of discomfort or distress because of emotional experiences, informed consent requires that the participant is aware of this risk. To hold this risk to a minimum, researchers will want to consider multiple ways to respond to participants who may relive emotions within interviews. A few of many possibilities available to the researcher include the following: (a) The researcher may simply wait while the participant collects herself or himself and are able to continue; (b) the researcher may ask if the participant would prefer to stop; (c) the researcher may redirect the interview back to a previously discussed and less emotionally laden topic; or (d) the researcher may want to refer the participant to a professional counselor. The key point here is to carefully consider all the possibilities that may arise in the study of difficult emotions and to plan strategies accordingly. For example, in her next research project that entails interviewing emotionally disturbed adolescents, Kit Tisdale has planned for the distress the participants may experience. She will interview the participants at a treatment facility where trained counselors will always be present to attend to the adolescents should their emotional responses in the interview warrant such attention.

When the emotional lives of participants are aroused during the course of the research, researchers, too, are likely to feel the power of the experience. In the following transcript excerpt, the researcher concluded the interview with her own feelings in response to the experience:

Researcher: Well, this has been a very powerful experience, even to listen to.

Margaret: It’s been therapeutic for me.
Researcher: Well, as I said before, you are so demonstrative in so many ways. You were just living this again, and I’m feeling some things myself, so it’s powerful, Margaret.
Margaret: Emotions are powerful.
Researcher: Thank you.

Although we were not surprised to observe that participants relive some of their difficult emotions during the telling of their stories, we were not always ready to deal with our own emotions as we engaged in the interview and as we worked through the interpretations of the data. In the next section we describe how the researchers’ emotions were engaged during the research process.

EMOTIONAL LIFE OF THE RESEARCHER IS ENGAGED

The concept of researcher subjectivity (cf. Patton, 1990; Peshkin, 1988) is used to alert the researcher and to inform the consumers of the researcher’s report of the experiential, historical, and emotional attachments the researcher has to the content or participants of the study. Researcher subjectivity is a conscious attempt on the part of qualitative researchers to distance themselves from the positivistic, objectivist orientations of traditional research and, in effect, is recognition of the engagement of the emotional life of the researcher with the research. This engagement becomes particularly salient during the researching of difficult emotions, which are not only difficult for the participant to discuss, but also are difficult for the researcher to hear, elicit, and analyze. For example, one member of our research team who uses feminist theory to inform her work and is sensitive to the oppression of women recently admitted that she had difficulty transcribing the final 40 min of an interview because of her aversion to the data. The “offensive data” recounted a participant’s acceptance of blame for anger experiences that our colleague felt were gendered incidents in which the participant should have been furious. The researcher felt that the participant was not interested in talking about the experience of anger but that she focused more on the guilt she had experienced as a result of this anger. This researcher described her confusion about her performance as an interviewer and her feelings about handling the participant’s difficult emotions in the following reflection:

I do not feel I was very much in control. And so the question is, what do I do when this happens? What can I probe when it was the reaction afterwards and the guilt that was the important thing here and not the anger? Can I even say that the first incident is about anger? I am not sure when I should have strayed away [moved the interview back to the experience of anger] because I want to be sensitive to my participant, too, and not completely run everything myself. I think this was even harder because she cried and was so clearly upset. That actually put me in an awkward position because I felt I had to comfort and try to help her (thinking of the feminist interview here, too, and the importance of sharing and caring and giving things back to participants), but that was not the issue because she didn’t really want help here but rather to be in control of what was being said and not said, I think. What do you do with a participant who has a very different agenda? A very different framework? I think the most useful thing was to realize how hard it is to interview people who have very different values from myself. And I also had a hard time with the emotionality of the story. (This is a researcher’s written reflections following the interview.)

In the preceding quote, it is clear that the participant’s display of emotions immediately triggered considerations around an ethic of care within this researcher. Emotions shown within the interview itself can be a signal to researchers to examine their practices as researchers and attend to the human needs of the participants. This researcher was, in fact, angry and frustrated with the participant’s stories of anger, a situation that was limiting because of our colleague’s difficulty in completing the interview transcription. It is also important to point out that emotional engagement has the capacity to expand research; in this colleague’s situation, the emotional connection to work-related and gender-related oppression gave her the passion, energy, and interest needed to work on this project.

It has been important for us as a research team to continually examine our attitudes about anger. Sometimes we are surprised by our individual reactions to data, which indicate our variable beliefs that anger is justified in some situations but not in others, can be enjoyable or debilitating and is controllable or transformative. Beliefs about the emotion being researched are part of researcher subjectivity and influence the research in a myriad of ways, implicating themselves in the data collection and data analysis. Therefore it is imperative to interrogate the researcher’s beliefs about emotions. Because of the emotional nature of researcher engagement, we have found it helpful to work collaboratively so that we can help each other recognize the limitations imposed on and possibilities afforded by our emotional responses to the research and by our personal beliefs about the emotion being investigated. We strongly encourage researchers conducting studies with emotionally difficult topics to work within the context of a research group. However, for those researchers who choose to work alone, it is beneficial to utilize peer reviews, writing groups, or research support groups in similar ways.

Knowing that researchers have emotional responses to research, it is vital that researchers plan their inquiry accordingly. Some topics and participants will necessarily be off-limits to researchers who would be unable to do justice to research because of their emotional engagement, which may be aversive or pleasurable. For example, we both know that it is beyond our abilities to do good work with convicted adult pedophiles or with our best friends—our emotions would im-
pede us at every stage of the research. Our emotional engagement with teachers’ anger, however, is such that we are passionate enough to undertake the research and compassionate during the sometimes wrenching interviews without being so emotionally involved that we find ourselves stymied in writing our reports or in analyzing the data. Explicating researcher subjectivity through writing or through discussions with fellow researchers can be useful for identifying the content of inquiries and the types of participants one can research. It is important that the researcher not just think of these issues in relation to data collection, for the researcher must live with the implications of the entire research process. We have learned much from colleagues who collected data from participants about whom they could not then write—our colleagues struggled with their own emotions of guilt and betrayal when faced with publicizing the research.

Once the researcher has committed to a research topic and to participants, the researcher must plan how to deal with emotions that arise during the research. For example, Kit Tisdale knew that she would be interviewing a participant who was angry about race-related issues in her school. She knew that she could become disgusted by the participant’s ways of discussing these racialized incidents, and to plan for the management of these emotions, she talked with others about how to frame questions and word probes such that her evaluation of the participant’s stories and her emotions would not be evident. At times, it seems that the emotional responses of the researcher can indicate the existence of an ethical dilemma, and we have found it useful to read the reflections of other researchers who have struggled with their emotional responses to research (e.g., Altork, 1998; Deyhle, 1998; Sleeter, 1998; Tunnell, 1998; Velazquez, 1998) and to imagine similar scenarios, ethical or otherwise, and come to resolutions for ourselves.

**CONCLUSION**

Using a phenomenological interview method opens up possibilities for obtaining rich data about the complexity and context of human experience. In addition, it has the potential for creating messy research that implicates the participants’ and researcher’s emotions in surprising, distressing, and satisfying ways. Although we have focused this article on difficult emotions, pleasant emotions are also often those that are implicated in research. For example, when asked about the research process, one of our participants, Cleo, said

*I feel very comfortable about it. … There are no judgments in here and that is something that is so important. It’s been very therapeutic. It’s good to get it out. I’m hungry now. It’s like part of my stomach is relieved and now I have to go fill it up.*

During the course of our work on women teachers’ anger, we have found that it is quite common for participants to re-live many of the emotions that were present during the initial incident they were describing. The participants in this study experienced and often expressed anger, guilt, sadness, confusion, and regret as they told their stories. Because we allowed the participants to define anger, we found that their ways of explaining anger were often clustered with guilt, sadness, rage, frustration, and disappointment. In the environment established by the researcher, participants felt comfortable in telling personal and intimate experiences that they had not previously shared with others. Some blinked away tears; others took some time during the interview to openly cry. Some saw this sharing as therapeutic, although that was not the purpose or goal of the interview. It is important to distinguish between a qualitative interview process focused on emotions and a therapeutic process. The goals for each experience are quite different. Often in therapy, a distressed client seeks a counselor who will provide interpretations of the client’s stories, which attempt to direct the client toward a healthier and more functional life. In qualitative research interviewing, it is the researcher who goes in search of participants who can provide data for the research project. The researcher listens intensely and provides a space for the participants to tell their stories but does not interpret the stories with the goal of ameliorating distress and, thus, is not there to provide therapy for the participants. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two goals becomes a bit blurred when the participant or the researcher both experience difficult emotions within the course of the interview—some researchers will feel sympathy and a desire to aid a crying or depressed participant. Researchers need to be ready for these emotions and think through the ways they can best attend to the human needs of participants without acting as untrained therapists.

The researchers, too, found that we were intimate emotionally with participants in both pleasant and unpleasant ways. It was common for researchers to feel a strong bond with participants as they were telling their stories, particularly when the researcher had had a similar experience in her own life. When the values of the researcher clashed with the values of the participant, the researchers felt confusion or irritation, and sometimes annoyance and anger. These emotional responses sometimes occurred within the course of the interview, but more commonly they emerged in reflections following the interview and through the interpretive group process.

It is important to recognize the likelihood that strong emotions may be experienced by both researchers and participants when difficult emotions are studied or when interview methods are utilized or both. Researchers need to plan strategies for dealing with their own and participants’ emotions in ways that are both ethical and caring. It may be necessary to recognize when to step back from the research as researchers reflect on their own feelings in relation to participants. Educational researchers undertake these research projects to understand the experiences of participants from their viewpoints, but sometimes researchers need to give themselves room to examine their own difficult emotions emerging within the project with
members of a research team before refocusing on the participants’ experiences. The necessity of this type of reflection becomes obvious when the researcher’s and participants’ emotions become entangled within a study of emotions.

REFERENCES


