

Emotions in the Qualitative Research Process: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract: Emotions play an important role in the qualitative research process. They can both hinder and facilitate scientific inquiry. Scholars rooted in different traditions of qualitative interpretative methods have emphasized the need to reflect on researchers' subjectivity. Thus, we argue that reflexive approaches can offer a starting point for exploring emotions in the qualitative research process. In this article, we introduce the special issue on "Emotions in the Qualitative Research Process." We provide a brief insight into the topic and discuss different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. By focusing on the qualitative interview methods, we underline the importance of considering emotional reflexivity as a central element of interactive field research.

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1. Emotions as an Integral Part of Qualitative Research

The topic of emotions and affects as a subject of sociological inquiry has gained international scholarly interest for years. There are not only a vast number of theories (BARBALET, 1998; NECKEL, 1991; for an overview see FLAM, 2002; VON SCHEVE, 2009), but also many empirical studies (HOCHSCHILD, 1983; ILLOUZ, 2006; KATZ, 1999; SCHEFF, 1994)¹ and different methodological approaches (BREUER, MRUCK & ROTH, 2002; FLAM & KLERES, 2015; KAHL, 2019). Especially in recent times, scholars have rediscovered the issue in the context of qualitative research (BREUER, 2024; BRILL & VON STETTEN, 2024; GOTTSCHALK & STAMANN, 2023; GOTTSCHALK, KRÄMER & TEPELI, 2024a, 2024b; VON STETTEN & BRILL, 2022). However, debates on the role of emotions in research practice have been conducted more or less on the margins of mainstream sociology (PLODER, KÜHNER & LANGER, 2024). [1]

In the field of empirical qualitative research, emotions play a crucial role both as a *subject of study* and as a *factor influencing the fieldwork* (FLAM & KLERES, 2015). They are not just byproducts of human experience but are considered significant data that reveal deep insights into people's life worlds (KLERES, 2010). Whether expressed through words, tone, body language or silence, they

1 For an overview of recent empirical studies, see BEYER (2022).

can signal the meaning of events, relationships, and societal norms. However, emotions affect not only the participants but also the researchers themselves (LUSTICK, YANG & HAKOUZ, 2024). [2]

In this introduction to the special issue on "emotions in the qualitative research process," we provide a brief insight into the topic and argue that reflexive research approaches offer a starting point for exploring emotions in qualitative research. We consider emotions as socially constructed cultural phenomena shaped by the interactions and relationships between individuals within a society (NECKEL & PRITZ, 2016, p.5).² In the following pages, we discuss different perspectives on emotions in qualitative interpretative social research, with a focus on various approaches to reflexivity (Section 2). Then we shortly explain the story behind the special issue (Section 3) and introduce the contributions of the invited scholars (Section 4). [3]

2. Emotions, Reflexivity and Qualitative Interpretative Methods

In qualitative inquiry, emotions are crucial in all stages: Starting with the development of the research question, creating access to the field, collecting the data, and in the analysis and writing. In the methodological discussions, rooted in the interpretative paradigm (KELLER, 2012; ROSENTHAL, 2018), emotions are mentioned, more or less implicitly. According to GOTTSCHALK and STAMANN (2023, p.68), they are mediated via the level of subjectivity and (self-)reflexivity (BREUER et al., 2002; REICHERTZ, 2015; ROTH & BREUER, 2003). [4]

In the historical development of qualitative research, scholars from different psychoanalytical approaches (for an overview see SALLING OLESEN, 2012), have emphasized since the end of the 1960s that emotions are always activated and significantly affect and influence the research situation and its results (DEVEREUX, 1984 [1967]; GÜNTHER & KERSCHGENS, 2016; LORENZER, 1986). Another important theoretical reference point for reflecting on one's own actions and emotional entanglements is provided by feminist scholars who have underlined methodological positions, such as the situatedness and positionality of knowledge (HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1993; HARTSOCK, 1983). Also, the qualitative inquiry done on silences, neglected feelings, and blind-spots (DAVIS & IRVINE, 2022) is particularly interesting as feminist scholars addressed the problems that arise when these are left aside. [5]

Within the reflexive turn and influenced by various theoretical perspectives such as feminist, social constructivist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and decolonial, the demand for a consistent critical questioning of research practice has prevailed (HILSCHER, ROSSMEISSL & SIOUTI, 2022). Accordingly, this has led to further development of research methodologies and methods. [6]

The need to adopt a reflexive approach and consider the role of the researcher's subjectivity and positionality has been emphasized by scholars who have

² There are several different definitions of emotions and affects, depending on theoretical positions. For an overview see, e.g., SLABY and VON SCHEVE (2019).

developed different methodological styles in this regard, such as reflexive grounded theory (BREUER, MUCKEL & DIERIS, 2019; MRUCK & MEY, 2019), transnational biographical research (RUOKONEN-ENGLER & SIOUTI, 2013), and postcolonial ethnography (THOMPSON, 2020). [7]

Various approaches to reflexivity have been used to explore research-related emotions and positionalities (SIOUTI, 2022). Three specific forms are, among others, "strong reflexivity" (KÜHNER, PLODER & LANGER, 2016), "doing biographical reflexivity" (RUOKONEN-ENGLER & SIOUTI, 2013), and "emotional reflexivity" (HOLMES, 2015). According to PLODER et al. (2024, p.547), researchers who adopt the "strong reflexivity" approach use their own experiences, emotions, and biases as integral data sources, recognizing that their subjectivity co-constructs the findings. This perspective is closely related to feminist epistemologies that emphasize situated knowledge and the researcher's unique standpoint. RUOKONEN-ENGLER and SIOUTI (2016, p.746) underlined that "doing biographical reflexivity" requires researchers to consider how their personal life histories, experiences, and social identities influence their interests and interpretations. By reflecting on their own biographies, they can identify potential biases and understand how their perspectives shape their fields of study. Such introspection should lead to more nuanced and contextualized analyses and reflexive knowledge production. HOLMES (2015, pp.61ff.) argued that "emotional reflexivity" allows researchers to analyze how their emotional responses affect data collection, analysis, and relationships with participants. This process ensures that emotions are considered as a legitimate and informative part of the field interaction (BEYER & KÜSTER, 2022). All three forms emphasize the importance of self-awareness and critical reflection on how the investigator's identity, emotions, and positionality shape the process of inquiry. Incorporating these forms of reflexivity allows scholars to produce more transparent, ethical, and insightful studies by critically engaging with their positions in the field. Despite the different methodological foundations of the concepts, the authors emphasized that the researcher's personal experiences play a crucial role in knowledge production. [8]

3. The Story of the Special Issue

Internationally, research on emotions and affects has led to the development of institutionalized forums and networks: The [Sociology of Emotions Research Network](#) in the European Sociological Association (ESA) and the [Working Group Society and Emotions](#) in the International Sociological Association (ISA). As members of the latter, we organized a panel on "Emotions in the Research Process: Methodological Challenges and Theoretical Reflections" at the XXth ISA World Congress of Sociology in Melbourne, Australia in 2023. In an international scholarly environment, many questions were raised: How can we recognize, conceptualize, and deal constructively with emotional dynamics in field research? What role does the research setting play in evoking emotions? What methodological tools can we use to analyze them? How can we write about emotional encounters and present data with highly sensitive content? [9]

To address these questions and to explore the role of emotions in the qualitative research process, we invited scholars from different theoretical and methodological traditions who share (self-)reflexivity as a core principle of their work. With this special issue, we want to bring different perspectives into the conversation and explore the emotional and affective underpinnings of reflexive research approaches. In doing so, we want to examine how these strategies can help scholars to consider emotions in their fieldwork. [10]

The authors of this issue address the challenges of dealing with emotions from a variety of methodological perspectives. They use interpretative and reconstructive methods (ROSENTHAL, 2018) and argue that, among other perspectives, psychoanalytically oriented social research, (auto)ethnography, biographical research and oral history are particularly relevant in providing methodological tools for analyzing emotions in research settings. They emphasize different aspects of "emotional reflexivity" (HOLMES, 2015) in the qualitative research process. [11]

In addition, all contributors have in common that they work with qualitative interview methods. This field is very diverse in terms of forms, constellations, and media (SCHIEK, 2024). There exists a wide variety of formats, including narrative interviews (ROSENTHAL, 1993; SCHÜTZE, 1983), online interviews (NICKLICH, RÖBENACK, SAUER, SCHREYER & TIHLARIK, 2023; OLTMANN, 2016; SCHIEK, 2022), group interviews such as focus groups (MORGAN, 1997), and specific forms of semi-structured interviews (HELFFERICH, 2010). Qualitative interviewing can be considered as an important research method for understanding human experiences in interactive research settings. We can observe how a wide range of emotions such as fear, shame, anger, sadness, empathy, and happiness can emerge during the interview process and analysis and must be managed by the researcher's "emotional labor" (HOCHSCHILD, 1983, p.153; see also ROGERS-SHAW, CHOI & CARR-CHELLMAN, 2021) or by being an emotionally reflexive actor in one's own research process (HOLMES, 2010; 2015). [12]

4. Overview of the Contributions

In their article, Alina BREHM and Phil C. LANGER (2025) seek to deepen the understanding and reflexive analysis of emotionally charged situations in the research process. Through a nuanced and critically evaluative approach, they explore the complex meanings of empathy as presented in the discourse of qualitative methods. They argue that empathy is an overstretched concept that can be defined more profoundly when situationally contextualized, and examined instances of seemingly unsuccessful or failed empathy in two of their projects, one by LANGER (2009) on HIV/AIDS and a more recent one by BREHM (2021) with Shoah survivors in Germany. They used different qualitative interviews (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1995; SCHÜTZE, 1983) and autoethnography (ADAMS, HOLMAN JONES & ELLIS, 2015), employing a narrative and intersubjective approach. For the analysis of their data, multiple methods, including thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006), ethnopsychanalytically

informed research vignettes (LANGER, 2016), depth hermeneutics (LORENZER, 1986), and ethnopschoanalysis (BONZ & EISCH-ANGUS, 2017) were used. Applying the concept of "strong reflexivity" (KUEHNER et al., 2016; PLODER et al., 2024), they discuss methodological strategies for analyzing and interpreting emotionally challenging research encounters, and argue that situational failures can yield invaluable insights into critical knowledge production when examined and communicated through a reflexive lens. [13]

Minna Kristiina RUOKONEN-ENGLER (2025) takes a self-reflexive, autoethnographic look at her own research process and explores the challenges she faced while conducting biographical-narrative interviews (SCHÜTZE, 1983) both on-site and in digital online settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. She focuses on the analysis of the affective and emotional dimensions of the interaction. Drawing on concepts coming from affect theory and the sociology of emotions, she recommends a conceptualization of interview settings as "situated affective encounters" (AYATA, HARDERS, ÖZKAYA & WAHBA, 2019), in which the participants are entangled with each other, however, in different ways. In order to cope with the situation, RUOKONEN-ENGLER suggests that scholars need to reflect on the interactional dynamics, and she proposes the use of the concept of "emotional reflexivity" (HOLMES, 2015), advocating a further inquiry of affective and emotional underpinnings of digital interviewing. [14]

Ashley BARNWELL (2025) proposes the use of listening as one of the key methods in reconstructing the constitutive role of emotions and atmospheres in qualitative research. In her article, she provides inspiration from oral history for engaging with interviews as audible data in the field (e.g., THOMSON, 2019). She examines the practical, ethical, and conceptual aspects of analyzing recordings while tracing the reasons behind scholars' reliance on transcripts and highlighting the potential limitations of this approach. The author contends that by focusing solely on transcripts, researchers overlook the valuable layers of sensory, atmospheric, emotional, and embodied information. Instead, she advocates for a more holistic approach to working with interview data. [15]

Zacharoula KASSERI and Giorgos TSIOLIS (2025) discuss different dimensions of emotional labor (HOCHSCHILD, 1983) in the field of addiction. They present the findings on an exploratory qualitative study conducted in Greece with addiction researchers. In the project, the focus group method (MORGAN, 1997), thematic analysis, and the six-step framework proposed by BRAUN and CLARKE (2006) were used. The analysis of the data revealed that emotion management is crucial at every stage. Emotional labor (HOCHSCHILD, 1983) is required to manage researcher-interviewee boundaries, the risk of retraumatizing the narrator through the recall of traumatic memories, and the disclosure of information that the investigator is not prepared to hear. The authors advocate integrating emotional awareness into qualitative research practices as a key part of reflexivity. [16]

We hope that these inspiring articles will be followed by further discussion on the topic of emotions. There is still a lot of work to be done as the issue has not been

exhausted. We would like to suggest that the reflection and analysis of emotions in the research process should be seen as a central part of academic practice and ethical reasoning in qualitative research. [17]

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