# The courtesy of time – ethical practice and the management of relationships in longitudinal qualitative research: An interview with Dr Georgia Philip and Dr Peter Jordan

## Part 2 – Practical realities

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*This feature continues the discussion between Cassian Rawcliffe, Dr Georgia Philip and Dr Peter Jordan from Part 1 – Guiding principles*

**As well as the crucial importance of the consent process discussed in the first half of this interview, within a lot of qualitative research we touch upon some deeply personal and upsetting episodes in people's lives. What are the ethical issues and duties towards participants around safeguarding and protection from the distress of such interviews?**

Peter **–** Firstly, it is still about consent. People should be able to decide for themselves whether they've had enough. But it is important to note that distress in itself isn't necessarily pathological. It's not necessarily harmful. Some people might experience distress as a cathartic beneficial experience within the research interview. We haven't talked so far about what interviewees get out of the relationship, but that would be one of the implied benefits. They may get to talk about something that has bothered or upset them, and talk about it in a way that allows them to be heard maybe for the first time, and have that experience become part of something useful. Parts of new knowledge maybe, in terms of the research process. So, it's not necessarily a bad thing that people get distressed. It's not necessarily wounding a participant all over again. That's not to say interviews can't wound people if they're badly managed. If we think about the care ethic paradigm, the four principles that Georgia outlined earlier[1] are really important to good practice in interviews. You should be competent. You shouldn't be going into interviews without being good at recognising when people are getting very upset. You should be attentive and responsive to that. I think we have to be careful about what's going on within the process, but not be shy of the fact that it's not inherently bad if what people are talking about is distressing. Life can be distressing, and if their voice hasn't been heard before it makes it all the more important, if they are willing and they are not harmed by it, for them to share their experience.

Georgia **–** In both our studies[2] we were working with fathers who were often marginalised in terms of their social or family situations, and certainly in terms of their encounters with children's services. So, we were conscious that their voices were rarely heard, particularly within debates around social work practice. They perceived participation as an opportunity to be heard and it was quite common for them to say as such to us.

With regard to responding with care to topics that are personal or potentially distressing, we did a combination of things. Importantly, we would prepare the ground through explaining the types of questions we would be asking. Our methods entailed one long in-depth interview at the beginning and then keeping in touch with different aspects of their lives through a phone call each month. Then we did another in-depth interview at the end. So, a task for each stage was to prepare the ground for the next stage. As Peter explained, we must credit them with the autonomy to decide what they are prepared to say. To some degree we are all, always, managing what we are willing to share. What the longer-term relationship enabled, as it built in terms of familiarity and perhaps becoming more relaxed, was for the fathers to return to topics and expand on them over time.

[1] See Part 1 of the interview, this issue.
[2] Brandon et al. (2017); Brandon et al. (2020)

The other side of that, for the researcher, in coming to understand the participants' reality, was that I began to notice where fathers would return to certain issues, events, or themes in their story and that began to tell me something about the things that were particularly important to them.

When things do come up such as losing a child to adoption or being part of care proceedings, personal and potentially shaming things in their lives, I felt it was really important to hold some space in which I could say 'why wouldn't you be upset about that?' Holding that space and not being unsettled if the men cried or got upset. The classic thing is you say to them 'do you want to take a break?' But sometimes it was just about holding that space and just being quiet with somebody while they regain their composure, or while they have a bit of a cry, or tell you deeply personal and distressing things such as feeling suicidal. Be able to just hear that. There are different ways in which you might respond in that moment alongside some of the perhaps more standard things that are part of a procedural ethics approach, where you think about what you are going to do if someone gets upset, or safeguarding issues, and the process of explaining the limits of confidentiality. Such processes are important, but alongside them, particularly in longitudinal work, where you are talking to somebody over time, through different methods such as phone and text, there are different ways of responding or demonstrating your responsiveness.

**So you're saying that the longitudinal relationship gives the participant more control over what they say and when, enabling them to come back to things and explore them as and when they are ready. Correspondingly, it also gives the researcher the flexibility to allow that time, to be responsive and choose their moments, and to be there when the participant is ready to talk more about difficult subjects.**

Georgia – Yes, and different methods such as text messages and phone calls enable you to manage and engage with that process, sometimes providing a little space to consider and respond in a way that is appropriate. One example was when a father once sent me a text on a Friday evening. He was obviously very angry and was talking about going to protest outside his local council offices, and I had to think how to respond. But the medium of text gave me the space to do so. I had a quick conversation with my research supervisor, and we thought about what to say and I responded by text. He replied and we arranged to have a phone call on the Monday. But the actual technologies of it, the different ways of communicating, were useful in terms of maintaining that relationship and sometimes allowing a bit of time to think about how best to respond in a fair way, and also an opportunity to remind the participant about my role as a researcher. For instance, in text I would always say: 'Hi, its Georgia the researcher'. They knew who I was, but it was a helpful way to say we're back in this space. Or if later I had to say something I could say: 'as a researcher I am a bit worried about that…'

**There is a really important aspect there that you have both touched on. Peter, when you were talking earlier about the potential cathartic effect of talking about things within a research setting, and Georgia when you are talking about the different roles you may be drawn into. When that participant contacted you on a Friday night, you were drawn into putting another hat on, so to speak, in trying to provide what might be considered guidance or advice, rather than just leave the text hanging. Is there a danger, especially in longitudinal studies, of setting ourselves up as almost a therapeutic partner in that relationship?**

Peter – I think there is a risk of mistaken identities and I think a lot of how you manage that depends on the skill of the researcher and the strength of the researcher's own support. Georgia mentioned having a supervisor in her research to go back and talk to, and that's extremely valuable in helping you reflect and reset your position in relation to the participant. Because sometimes you may have a mistaken identity about yourself and what you're doing there. If you are building up a relationship over time that's intimate, discussing intimate and personal things, whether in their front room, or over the phone, having techniques to make sure there aren't mistaken identities on both sides is really important. It avoids that idea that you have crossed a boundary and become a therapist. I think the skill of the researcher is also shown in the other things that Georgia said about those little micro interactions, that you say just the right thing at the right time, or you avoid saying anything, and you avoid showing a strong emotional response as a way of allowing them to feel comfortable and accepted in what they are saying. Those things don't ever go on ethics forms because ethics forms are just the starting point. The things we don't talk about enough are the skills of the researcher in doing that and those skills can be hard won over time.

**It strikes me that there are two elements to that. Not only do we have an obligation to participants that we, as a research organisation, don't send out researchers who are unable to contain those emotional and difficult situations, but we also have an obligation to researchers that we don't sign off their proposals and release them into situations they are unprepared for.**

Peter - Absolutely, they need both the skills and the support. One thing I realised quite early on was that in some ways when we approve research proposals ethically, what we are approving is the character of the person who is carrying out the research. So we've had Kant[3], we've had Gilligan[4] and now we have virtue ethics[5]. We're saying that we trust that person to go out and do the research in a way that we think is ethical. Because actually we cannot know from the form exactly what they are going to do. We cannot see into the future and we can't know what they are going to encounter.

There might be situations where you just have to do something because you're a human being, and it's no longer anything to do with the research relationship, but something of an emergency occurs and you have to act, or you feel that you have to take action on behalf of the person.

Georgia – We had situations when we felt we had to respond. For instance, I had arranged to contact one of the dads at a certain time. When I rang him, he didn't have anywhere to sleep that night. So, it was a bit of quick thinking, making suggestions, signposting and texting numbers for services, and that felt entirely appropriate. We felt that signposting to other appropriate services was a way of offering useful guidance without taking on the total responsibility yourself.

As Peter highlighted, part of managing that relationship is down to the skill of the researcher, but what I have learned from these projects is a respect for the level of understanding that our participants had about what I was as a researcher, as long as I was clear and transparent about that and declared that this was me as a researcher. That worked really well as a way of both reminding each of us about the type of relationship that we were in, but also it was a mechanism for fairness. If there were moments where one of the dads asked for my help with something, saying 'as a researcher I can do this, but I can't do that', was a way of responding that felt fair. They were perfectly able to appreciate that. It didn't interfere with a sense of friendliness that might have built over time, or an ease of conversation, or the way we might use humour and other ways of speaking.

As well as this, being transparent about my role as a researcher helped give them a sense that they were part of a larger project, and there was an end goal to it. A lot of them became very interested in how the research was going and what stage we were at.

**So lastly then, focusing on that, if you have built up a relationship with somebody and they've become quite invested in that, how do you manage the ending? Do you have an obligation beyond the end of the research project to provide support or stay in touch?**

Peter – I think on the face of it your obligation ends at the point that you agreed with the participant that the discussions and your data collection has come to an end. And I think being transparent and being able to give an account of what you are doing and why, and how the research process works and where your boundaries are, is key. I think there are responsibilities to make sure that people know directions to go in if they need support, but if you start taking responsibility beyond that then you are doing what we've just been saying you must not do, which is create obligations for yourself that go beyond your role as a researcher, or blur the boundaries of that role for the participant.

Georgia – Within a longitudinal study, the fact that you've had time to prepare the ground for the difficult questions and the personal stuff also allows you to prepare the ground for the ending. So, we had opportunities to say, for example, when planning next points of contact, "so the next time I see you will be the last time" and make reference to that. We consciously planned the last interview to have a reflective element. We asked questions such as, what has it been like taking part? What did you like about it, or what was difficult? We had a symbolic element for the final interview; we gave a thank you card with gift vouchers acknowledging their time. It was important to mark symbolically as well as in research terms. Beyond that we agreed that we would send a short summary of the research to each participant.

[3] Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) asserted that there are fundamental ethical principles he termed 'categorical imperatives' which make some actions inherently good, irrespective of their outcome (Kant, 2011) – referred to in Part 1, this issue.

[4] Carol Gilligan proposed an ethic of care that perceived ethical dilemmas as questions of relationship and conflicting responsibilities to others, as opposed to a conception of competing rights and rules of fairness (Gilligan, 1993). Also referred to as care ethics, or feminist care ethics, this was built upon by Tronto (2005) in proposing the four principles referred to by Dr Philip – see also Part 1, this issue.

[5] Virtue ethics endeavours to better understand ethical behaviour by focusing upon an individual's moral character and predispositions to concepts such as charity or honesty, rather than the duties and consequences of their actions. Although such an approach can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, there has been a revived interest through the work of authors such as Hursthouse (1999).

So it's about preparing the ground, being transparent about it, making some level of acknowledgment of what you've achieved, and being grateful. Again, it's back to that courtesy aspect. Be grateful. That is a small but powerful thing.

## References


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