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# Infertile? The emotional labour of sensitive and feminist research methodologies

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## Abstract

A researcher's emotional labour is inextricably linked to the methodological and ethical underpinnings of 'doing' sensitive and some feminist research. However, a key component of the emotional labour theory does not fit with the emotional labour enacted by some researchers. This article sets out to extend the theory of emotional labour in order to make it more applicable to sensitive and feminist methodologies, and in doing so, it reveals the importance of incorporating emotion in the refinement of theory. Drawing on 20 interviews with female in vitro fertilisation patients, and extracts from a systematically recorded reflexive diary of the researcher, this article contests a key aspect of Hochschild's theory of emotional labour in its application to sensitive and feminist qualitative researchers. Instead of estrangement from the emotional self as a result of enacting emotional labour, this article suggests that the emotional and biological selves of the researcher can be foregrounded, sometimes unwillingly. The investment of emotional labour must be acknowledged by institutions, managers and methodologists, and further theorising is required to incorporate the critical presence of emotional labour in social science research.

## Keywords

emotional labour, feminist methodology, in vitro fertilisation, infertility, reflexivity, sensitive research

## Introduction

A sharing of stories between the researcher and participants is often fundamental to interviewing women about their in vitro fertilisation (IVF) experiences. This interaction invariably covers the most personal and private topics: hope for children, infertility, miscarriage, reproductive health, the genetic testing of embryos and divorce. These topics are not deliberately raised by the researcher, but are introduced throughout the interview by women as necessary ground to be covered when talking about their experiences while

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undergoing IVF treatment. The interviews undertaken for an Australian research project examining women's perceptions of egg donation for stem cell research revealed months and often years of trying to achieve a pregnancy, and this history forms part of the woman's biography as she arrives at the door of an IVF clinic.

It is not surprising therefore that 'sensitive research methods' are necessary for qualitative research with IVF patients. Such methods are diverse (Lee, 1993: 109), and what constitutes sensitive research is hotly debated (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). The multiple methods available to sensitive research are unified by an approach that 'makes private experience a focus of study', and which asks participants to confront issues that are deep, personal and possibly confronting (Lee, 1993: 109). This occurs within an ethical praxis that includes establishing non-hierarchical forms of relating, placing a high concern for the rights of individuals and groups affected by research, sharing the control over the flow of information during data collection, analysis and publication, and ensuring the appropriate levels of privacy and anonymity throughout the disclosure of sensitive information (Dickson-Swift, 2008; Lee, 1993). These concerns act as fundamental ethical principles of trust building, rather than as instrumental strategies to gather 'better' data (Lee, 1993).

Definitions of what constitutes sensitive research have broadened beyond merely considering the impact of discussing 'taboo' topics with participants and are now more encompassing, for example, considering 'that which may be intrusive' (Sampson et al., 2008: 922), and that 'which potentially imposes a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 2). In these more recent definitions, sensitive research is inclusive of everybody in the research process: participants, interviewers, researchers and transcribers (Malacrida, 2007). This opens the door of inquiry into how researchers themselves experience research.

Feminist research approaches align well with and are often used in projects on sensitive topics<sup>1</sup> (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 4–5). Indeed, feminist research is considered a founding contributor to the development of a research praxis for sensitive topics (Lee, 1993). Although the body of feminist research methodology contains epistemological differences (Stanley and Wise, 1990), systematic reviews of the multitude of feminist research approaches reveal convergence around research that seeks to understand the meanings of women's private lives while maintaining concern for participant welfare and emancipation, not only during research, but as a result of it (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 1990). Furthermore, feminist methodologies situate the autobiography and emotions of the researcher and participants as data and as an inextricable part of the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1983, 1990). Recent sociological studies have focused on emotion and reflexivity (Holmes, 2010; Lumsden, 2009) and the cost of doing feminist and sensitive research<sup>2</sup> (Sampson et al., 2008). Yet, little research on the sociology of emotions incorporates emotion itself (Holmes, 2010), and furthermore, there is little empirical investigation into researchers' investment of emotions throughout their research practice (Lankshear, 2000; Lumsden, 2009).

To contribute to the theoretical exploration of researchers' emotional work in sensitive and feminist research, I use and then extend Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, a theory originally devised from researching the work of flight attendants (Hochschild, 2003). In this article, I show that 'estrangement', a key component of

Hochschild's emotional labour theory, may not exactly fit with the emotional work required of sensitive and some feminist qualitative researchers. In order to examine this, I interweave two sources of data: verbatim interview extracts from ex-IVF patients that assist in conveying the emotional richness and sensitivity of the interview context (Smart, 2009), and extracts from my reflexive diary, which show that emotion is not simply bracketed off while doing sensitive research. In doing so, this article situates emotional reflexivity and emotional labour as integral to one another in the process of researching sensitive topics. It also acts as a test bed for the exploration of emotional labour in other types of social research<sup>3</sup> and thus potentially offers a generalisable account of the emotional labour involved in other qualitative social science research.

## Emotional labour in sensitive and feminist research

Methodological literature directly or indirectly encourages researchers partaking in sensitive and some feminist researchers to use their physical, emotional, professional and embodied selves as a research tool to attend to and analyse emotion, interpret data and build rapport and a sense of common understanding with the participant during fieldwork (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Lee, 1993; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1990). This is an interactive process and may involve self-disclosure, acts of reciprocity and caring, engaging active listening and showing emotion and empathy or being supportive (Dickson-Swift, 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Oakley, 1981; Sampson et al., 2008). For example, a common technique used by researchers to improve rapport is to disclose narratives about one's own personal life experiences (Oakley, 1981; Roberts and Sanders, 2005: 306). Therefore, doing sensitive and feminist interviewing clearly requires the researcher to be emotionally attuned and sensitive to her own emotions and the needs of the participants (Holmes, 2010).

In her book *The Managed Heart* (2003), Hochschild coined the term 'emotional labour' as a result of her research on the work of flight attendants. Hochschild (2003) defines emotional labour as that which 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (p. 7) and explains that there are three characteristics of jobs that require emotional labour (p. 147). First, there needs to be direct contact between the worker and the public. Second, the worker is required to produce an emotional state in another person, and third, the employer, through training or supervision, exercises some control over emotional activities of employees. The work of academics is generally not classified as being part of the service industry. Moreover, academics experience greater professional autonomy than flight attendants. Despite this, many teaching and research academics, particularly qualitative and sensitive researchers, employ extensive emotional labour in their work as a result of close, face-to-face engagement and considerable personal interaction with research participants or students (Bellas, 1999; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

Bellas (1999) examined the emotional labour involved in the variety of works undertaken by professors and highlights the gendered trend associated with the greater amount of emotional labour expended by women. Importantly, Bellas' study points to the under-recognition of the skill associated with emotional labour, particular in the form of institutional reward or recognition. The extent to which emotional labour sits at the foundation

of doing good sensitive and feminist qualitative research has only recently been recognised in the literature (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Holmes, 2010; Malacrida, 2007; Sampson et al., 2008). For instance, two empirical studies show that fundamental research behaviours such as rapport building, self-disclosure, suppressing emotional responses perceived 'unprofessional', or creating 'appropriate' ones during fieldwork all require a form of emotional labour by the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 2008). Dickson-Swift et al.'s research into qualitative health researchers' experiences draws explicitly on Hochschild's notion of emotional labour. They argue that as a result of examining research study through the theory of emotional labour, a descriptive picture of what emotional labour may look like, its sources and consequences for the research can be developed and examined.

Emotional labour will often require 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'. Surface acting 'involves simulating emotions that are not actually felt, which is accomplished by careful presentation of verbal and nonverbal cues' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 92). Hochschild (2003) explains that daily life requires a certain amount of surface acting: 'the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh' (p. 35). Emotional labour also involves deep acting. Deep acting is where feelings are 'actively induced, suppressed, or shaped' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 93) to the degree where feelings are pushed down and made increasingly inaccessible to the agent themselves or the public (Hochschild, 2003). For flight attendants, this may include banishing fatigue and irritation instead of merely disguising it (Hochschild, 2003: 8), and for the researcher, it may mean presenting with an absence of emotion despite intense emotion being felt during highly distressing situations (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 93; Sampson et al., 2008).

A key characteristic of emotional labour is that it becomes 'part of the job' (Hochschild, 2003: 4–5). Hochschild (2003) found that the artificial emotional elevation produced by some flight attendants in order to meet satisfactory job performance in fact meant that they spoke of their smile 'being on them but not of them' (p. 8). Similarly, flight attendants' compulsory annual 'self-awareness' sessions provided training for *averting* emotion, particularly anger (p. 25). They were also advised to 'take your attention off yourself and your own frustration' in order to 'mentally detach' from feeling (p. 17) and not 'feel so angry' (p. 25). Subsequently, Hochschild argues that flight attendants' 'right to anger withered on the vine' (pp. 26–27). As a result of such emotional labour, Hochschild argues that the flight attendant becomes estranged and detached from her feeling and emotional self as a result of her study<sup>4</sup> (Hochschild, 2003: 17). Some researchers also use a deliberate strategy of psychological distancing from interview data as a form of self-protection (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Others experience emotional over-extension or exhaustion, a feeling of compulsion to reflect on aspects in their own lives or re-evaluate painful memories, while some have difficulties sleeping and gastro-intestinal upsets, and receive diagnoses of anxiety or depression (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 2008). However, this is not a distancing or estrangement from emotional aspects of our self in the way intended by Hochschild's theory of emotional labour. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) agree that alienation and estrangement from genuine feelings may occur as a result of the emotional labour performed by researchers. Yet, this article questions whether emotional labour results in something more than the researcher becoming estranged and desensitised from her emotional self during research study.

## Methods

This article stems from a larger team research project on the regulation of egg donation for stem cell research in Australia. This research explores scenarios of egg donation with participants in order to examine the preparedness to donate eggs among IVF patients and has made recommendations on the ethics of egg donation to policy makers in Australia (Author and others, 2011; Author and others, in press). Two methods have contributed to the focus of this article: interviews with IVF patients and my own reflexive researcher diary. This article positions the interviews with IVF participants and the researcher's own reflexivity as sites of interaction and coproduced meaning (Cassell, 2005; Holmes, 2010; Smart, 2009) and as a site of intense emotional labour (Malacrida, 2007). Like Wheatley (2005), in her ethnography of heart disease, I found that the impact of this emotional labour on the connection between my physiological, emotional and social selves stimulated me to write a reflexive diary, partly as a coping mechanism and partly as a way of developing my understanding of the significance of emotional labour for researchers conducting sensitive research. The two methods are now outlined in turn.

### Interviews

Interview participants were recruited<sup>5</sup> to be part of the research through a 'consent for contact' letter that invited women who had recently completed their IVF treatment to participate in a study on attitudes about egg donation for reproductive and research purposes. Participants' contact details were provided by the partner research organisation, a fertility clinic in Australia. The sample was limited to patients who received treatment between January 2008 and July 2009 in order to ensure that the IVF experience was no more than 2 years old, and that interviewees were not actively engaged in IVF treatment.<sup>6</sup> Before providing the patient details to the researcher, two clinicians from the fertility clinic screened the database for participants who were unsuitable to approach for participation due to the need for a language translator, because they were living in rural Australia or because they suffered severe trauma throughout the IVF treatment.<sup>7</sup> The majority of interviews were conducted in the homes of participants and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. These interviews could be classified as in-depth and semi-structured, with an interview schedule containing open-ended questions (Kvake, 1996: 129). Participants were asked to share their experiences of IVF treatment, and questions were asked to elicit participants' perceptions of egg donation for reproduction and stem cell research. All interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and checked by the researcher. Data analysis as for the whole project followed a thematic coding process (Boyatzis, 1998) using NVivo software. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### Reflexive diary

Feminist postmodern, post-structural and postcolonial influences have shaped the concept of reflexivity (Doucet, 2008). Being reflexive requires the researcher to situate her personal, political, intellectual, theoretical and autobiographical selves during all stages of research (Doucet, 2008), an interactional process of growing self-awareness that

occurs in relation to the environment and seeing the self from the perspective of others (Rosenberg, 1990; Turner and Stets, 2005). Through attending to our own feelings, we can begin to understand the world we are trying to study (Hochschild, 2003: 31). Moreover, emotional interpretation is a key source for analysis and sociological insight (Wilkins, 1993). This epistemological approach is reflected in recent theorising of *emotional reflexivity*. Emotional reflexivity incorporates both one's own and others' emotions and embodied experiences throughout the research process (Holmes, 2010), during which the researcher may observe, reflect upon, regulate and produce alterations in emotion (Rosenberg, 1990). Thus, emotional reflexivity displaces the notion of fixed personhood (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993) and, as a result, it becomes a source of understanding, analysis and creativity rather than being merely a 'confessional' of objective fact (Wilkins, 1993). This approach to reflexivity informs the second method and type of data that contribute to this article: selected extracts from my own reflexive diary written during the first period of data collection.

The diary served to formalise 'researcher reflexivity' and assisted me to debrief about the emotionality of interviewing women about infertility and IVF. Inspired by the reflexive diarising method described by Malacrida (2007), I regularly diarised thoughts and emotions after the first 13 interviews and if required,<sup>8</sup> after reading interview transcripts. Although the reflexive diary recorded the process and experience of conducting interviews with women, I do not view it as an objective account that renders me, the researcher, completely knowable to either myself or others. Rather, this reflexive account is a constructed narrative of the self and malleable by experiences across time (Bishop and Shepherd, 2011). Nevertheless, the diary yields the hitherto scant systematically recorded empirical data of the emotions involved in what it is like for the researcher to do sensitive qualitative research<sup>9</sup> (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Holmes, 2010; Lumsden, 2009).

## **Emotional labour: constructing the sensitive environment for infertility tales**

Interviewing women who have undergone IVF meant visiting the homes of participants, being welcomed into the lounge room of women I had never met before and sitting on their couch or at their dining table and discussing the most intimate of matters. Although this interview experience may last for a lengthy 2 hours, the following opening interview extracts reveal that it is often less than a minute before emotionally sensitive talk begins:

Basically we tried for twelve months but couldn't have a baby. I found out that my husband had a sperm problem. (Rebecca, aged 31–35 years)

We've been married nine years. From the word 'go' we decided to have children. Um, pretty early on I've ... been diagnosed with endometriosis [and] polycystic ovaries syndrome. (Mira, aged 31–35 years)

I fell pregnant naturally about five years ago, and then miscarried at twelve weeks. Since then, I just haven't fallen pregnant. (Dominique, aged 36–40 years)

There are norms of behaviour in an interview, for example, the question–answer format with a specific purpose (Barnard, 2009), but introductions such as the extracts above sit in stark contrast to the typical interactions between strangers – even in an interview. Asking about the IVF experience and the willingness of women undergoing IVF to donate embryos or eggs involves hearing about the most intimate of concerns: tales of repeated failed attempts at pregnancy without IVF, then repeated failed IVF treatments, miscarriages, emotional distress, financial hardship and in some cases, even domestic violence, eviction and incarceration. The interview may also touch on career achievements and failed marriages, often at the cost of starting a family in fertile years. These stories are shared over a cup of tea, a glass of juice, while holding the baby, meeting the husband or engaging with the toddler.

- Phillipa: I can read it [information sheet on stem cell research]. Do you want a cup of tea?  
 Researcher: Oh, that'd be lovely!  
 Phillipa: I'll make a tea and read it.

Over a cup of tea, a tension rapidly emerges for the researcher. She must simultaneously manage emotional and sensitive disclosures with appropriate responses, facilitate ongoing dialogue, review the interview schedules and probe with questions that are in alignment with project aims and a particular participant's interest (Oakley, 1981). It is no wonder that the researcher may ask of herself during the interview, 'Am I a professional, objective and rational "neutral collector of data?"' (Cassell, 2005: 169), 'Am I more like a friend, or guest who facilitates the easiness of chat between women (Finch, 1984: 74)?' or 'Am I more akin to a counselor who employs empathetic listening and responds to personal stories by asking questions, and who provides an uninterrupted space to talk about personal stories?' (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 62). Somehow, as the interview progresses, the multiple roles embodied by the interviewer need to be mediated and enacted. My reflexive diary entry reflects this multidimensional talk space and emotional labour that stands behind creating an appropriate countenance for the sensitive research interview:

There was an unspoken expectation between the two people who are each strangers to the other as they sit facing that (after a brief chat about the weather, that the suburb is 'nice', and whether I had driven or arrived by taxi) the conversation would turn to the reason I was there: to talk about IVF and egg donation. Immediately I began to juggle the tension of presenting a professional friendly face, a researcher from university, a sociologist, the face for a project that is about social equity, and a woman who, like the participant also wants children ...

Conversing with women during the interview about their own, or their partner's (in) fertility, was necessary in order to clarify responses about preparedness to donate eggs throughout IVF treatment. This was difficult at times, as it meant asking impromptu clarifying or probing questions that were sensitive and personal in nature. This, in turn, prompted deeper revelations or justifications that included failed fertility, miscarriages, disease and financial hardship. Clarifying the questions was made even harder when the



topic turned to partner infertility while partners were present within earshot of the interview. In one instance, the husband of a participant was sitting on the couch watching the evening news on television while his wife participated in the interview at the nearby dining table. This is how the interview began:

We all knew [about having IVF] – because my husband had to have it – [he has] a form of cystic fibrosis, so he doesn't ... his sperm doesn't come out – it's there, but it doesn't come out, so you have to inject it ... (Joanna, aged 26–30 years)

This disclosure was very matter-of-fact, and due to it being made in the presence of the husband, I felt embarrassed. I assumed he also felt discomfort being talked about, to me, a stranger, sitting in his living room. Through surface acting, my thoughts appeared collected, but inside my feelings had changed to awkwardness as my probing questioning regarding embryo donation had, through the response of the participant, inadvertently become related to the presence of the cystic fibrosis gene in the couple's embryo:

Researcher: And can you see any difference in how you think about embryo donation versus how you think about egg donation?

Joanna: Well, embryo, I guess, it's us two, do you know what I mean? I would have to discuss it with him ... And then actually, I just thought of – I've got to think of the genetic link to cystic fibrosis as well. So I don't know if I would now, just because of that reason. Would they [the recipients of the donated embryo] know all that stuff when they're [the baby] born, that that's what they've got? And if they [the baby] got married, they could have a child that has it, if someone else has got that gene. I don't know. God. I'm not sure ... [appears to have a realisation] Yeah. So now – ooh, I probably wouldn't [donate], then. For science, yes, but not for another couple ...

In this interview, the participant had a realisation – in the presence of her husband, the carrier of, and person with cystic fibrosis – that their embryos were not suitable for reproductive donation due to the embryo being a carrier of the cystic fibrosis gene.

I immediately felt a need to smoothly continue the interview by reconciling a number of emergent factors. I needed to appropriately acknowledge the burden of disease on husband and wife (in front of the husband) and then suitably respond to the participant who had newly realised that her embryos – although highly prized for her own treatment – may carry the cystic fibrosis gene that is likely to be highly undesirable for any recipients of her imagined embryo donation. This is just one typical example of many frank, deep and delicate issues I had to manage and negotiate with participants through the enactment of emotional labour.

## **Emotional labour and the foregrounding of the corporeal self**

Slowly, as the interview unfolds, the façade of being positioned singularly as a professional researcher recedes (Doucet, 2008). Taking its place are multiple identities that

enable conversation and mutual disclosures between two women (Finch, 1984). The participants were often curious about who I was, whether I had a partner, have children or at least whether I wanted them. Sometimes, this was raised by participants during the interview or at the end of the interview as the audio recorder was turned off. Either way, I saw the impact of my self-disclosure as I responded to their enquiries. Upon disclosing my wish for a family and the obstacles in the way of this, it seemed that I immediately became more human and more known to the participant.<sup>10</sup> Participants softened their body language, smiled and a gentleness in the air settled between us. The following example is typical of the interactive self-disclosure initiated by participants in the interviews:

- Mira (aged 31–35 years): Do you have any children?  
 Researcher: No, no; I just have a partner, that's it, but we both want to have children, so I'm sure it'll happen in the future.  
 Mira: Yeah, yep. You're only young though, aren't you?  
 Researcher: Thirty.  
 Mira: Oh, okay.  
 Researcher: Or almost thirty-one – in fact, doing these interviews is making me panic about my eggs!  
 Mira: (Laughs)  
 Researcher: And, you know, you hear about your own, you know, fertility problems, eggs, numbers, and all this; and then you hear it from women, like their husbands have no – their husbands' sperm have motility problems or – Well that's what we have – we have both. That's why it's just impossible for us.

As disclosed in this interview, I had become so deeply touched by the tales of infertility given by young women of similar age to my own that my own social and biological positioning with regard to my fertility came rushing to the fore of my awareness. Like other researchers of sensitive topics (e.g. Katz Rothman, 1986; Sampson et al., 2008), my diary reveals that I was not prepared for this confrontation of emotion.

I have begun to worry about my own fertility as I listened to participants' stories. Later when I left the lounge rooms of the participants I sensed an urgency to start a family. This carried over into days of post-interview exhaustion ... For the first time I had sensed biological limitation, and frustration at being temporally defined by the limits of my own fertility. From the boundlessness of the academic world, and freedom in life that having a recently obtained PhD gave, I came to clash with new knowledge of my now declining fertility. This decline was taught to me by the very real experiences and teachings of my participants. An unfair clash is emerging between the precious early-career researcher status that constitutes a substantial bank of publishable material ... and the desire for starting a family while I still could ... As a feminist, I am confronted by what were previously theoretical debates which are now located in my body.

As my anxiety about my own fertility and the urgency to start my own family began to mount, my emotional labour during interviewing became increasingly important in order to create an appropriate research environment of calm and sensitivity. At its peak, my handle on emotional labour began to falter. I was simultaneously trying to create a safe space for participants while also trying to ensure my own anxieties would not surface in the interview. Upon hearing one participant talk of a hypothetical egg donation scenario in order to save her child, I was struck by the profound bond between this mother and her child and I felt the tears spring into my eyes:

- Researcher: Yeah – no, I’m ... I actually feel quite emotional! Having heard your answer, like it’s a really beautiful answer ...
- Mira: Oh! Oh! Don’t cry, because I’m hormonal, I’ll cry anyway! (Laughs)
- Researcher: I feel like, it feels really sort of – after hearing that response – it feels really silly for me to look at this sheet and go, ‘Okay, next question.’ It’s just like, wow! And I was taking a pause. Yeah.

Here, the anxiety and emotion that had culminated over the weeks of interviewing were too much to ‘control’, and I was no longer able to bury my emotions and present a friendly detached face. Some tears came.

Despite being emotionally exhausted I needed to continue to ‘show’ concern at appropriate moments of disclosure, for example, when told of repeated miscarriages throughout the IVF journey. Yet, I was also managing my own feelings. I felt sadness regarding the prevalence of male, female or unexplained infertility that women undergoing IVF had to bear, and anxiety about my own fertility. I also worked hard at preventing my mind from racing away to a variety of imagined ‘what if’ scenarios regarding my future that were akin to the experiences recounted by my participants. I needed to block these emotions as I interviewed, but the larger consequence of these emotions I reveal in my reflexive diary.

I became emotionally exhausted as I went from one lounge room and into another and I heard repeated tales of hardships and failed dreams. The emotional exhaustion was partly due to the emotional labour of doing sensitive research; from providing the appropriate emotional response after hearing of miscarriage, abortion, and infertility, and from conducting active empathic listening. The emotional exhaustion came also from controlling new worries about my own fertility in the ‘public’ space of the interview.

A researcher taking her own and the participants’ emotions into account as part of the data is fundamental to conducting sensitive and feminist research, and a commitment that is rarely acknowledged or documented (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 51). I enacted emotional labour while managing the intensification and foregrounding of my biological status, now redefined in terms of declining fertility. Rather than detaching from, or becoming estranged from these emotions, the reflexive diary and interview extracts reveal that my corporeality, social position and identity became (perhaps involuntarily)

foregrounded as a result of the reflexivity and emotional labour performed during encounters with women experiencing infertility. I now turn to explore in greater detail the finer workings of the inter-subjective interactional space that frames emotional labour and emotional reflexivity during sensitive and feminist research and the consequences for researchers who engage in it.

### **Intertwining emotional labour and emotional reflexivity: the gossamer wall**

This individual portrayal of the emotional labour and emotional reflexivity involved in the ‘everyday doing’ of research into sensitive topics is an example of what Smith (1987: 157) describes as a point of entry into social processes that affect a larger population of researchers who work within sensitive and feminist methodological paradigms. Emotions and emotionality have traditionally been kept at bay in social research for reasons such as the fear of contaminating data, the difficulty of translating emotion into textual accounts or because of the fear emotional disclosure may have on professional academic careers (Shaw, 2011; Stanley and Wise, 1990). Thus, emotional and rational ways of knowing were placed in opposition, with the former occupying a lesser standing. However, it is clear that embodied, experiential and emotional ways of knowing pre-empt, coexist with and inform what is labelled ‘objective’ knowledge (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

The increased concern in contemporary society regarding identity and image, specifically opening the self and identity for display and examination (Elliott, 2001), is evident in the rise of reflexivity in research methodology (Bishop and Shepherd, 2011). As this article has argued, feminist and sensitive researchers are encouraged to productively examine their own emotion in research. This sentiment is now echoed in interview-based social science research: ‘there is value in a bodily emotional reaction to such stories in that it can force the researcher to be more attentive to what is being said’ (Shaw, 2011: 65). This article takes Shaw’s examination of participant and researcher emotion in interview research further. It shows that in attending to bodily emotional reactions, we, as researchers, can also become more attentive to what we do and how we do it. For example, as has been reported in this article, the theory of emotional labour and its applicability to sensitive and feminist research in the social sciences have been developed as a result of the incorporation of emotion in the research process and analysis.

Emotions and emotional labour affect researchers in highly unpredictable and uncertain ways (Katz Rothman, 1986: 48; Lankshear, 2000; Malacrida, 2007; Sampson et al., 2008). This is mediated by individual experiences and identities (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 107; Gilbert, 2001a; Lankshear, 2000: 81) and whether a researcher chooses or is encouraged by research team leaders, to express or to suppress emotions. Moreover, the unpredictable context of emotional labour is produced within its inter-subjective context, that is, through the interactions between the flight attendant, passenger and the service requirements associated with the corporate image of the airline, or between the researcher, the participant and the ethical praxes and methodological suggestions provided by key

texts and research mentors. To explore the inter-subjective space of emotional labour, I now draw upon Doucet's (2008) application of the gossamer wall metaphor to the research context.

The metaphor of a gossamer wall combines the 'sheerness of gossamer' with the 'solidity of walls' to emphasise the relational aspects of reflexive processes during research (Doucet, 2008: 73). Precisely, because the gossamer wall is so sheer, the problems, identities or thoughts of others, or even our past ghostly selves may move across the wall to also become part of the foregrounded identity of the researcher (Doucet, 2008). In light of the reflexive narrative presented in this article, Doucet's metaphor reveals that the fertility problems recounted by the participants (many of whom were of similar age to me) crossed a sheer and tenuous separation between myself and the participant, to unite with my own deeply private emotions and desires relating to personal aspects of my identity. Thus, contrary to an estrangement from my emotions as a result of my study, the emotional labour of doing sensitive and feminist methodologies actually demanded me to confront, understand and integrate emotions, identities and corporeal limitations into data collection and analysis. As the gossamer wall metaphor emphasises, these emotions, identities and limitations do not only need to belong to research participants, but also can be stirred within the researcher as a result of the researcher's past, current and imagined future.

Thus, the metaphor of the gossamer wall unites the two conceptual strands of emotional labour and researcher reflexivity presented in this article. Like emotional labour, emotional reflexivity is interactive and inter-subjective, 'a process that includes the critical relationships with others, which in turn, informs how we know and write about others' (Doucet, 2008: 74). Therefore, an approach to fieldwork that calls on attunement to emotion becomes simultaneously biographical work and identity work for the researcher (Doucet, 2008). Emotional labour and emotional reflexivity are but two examples of attunement to emotion in research that are centred on a highly relational processes 'guided by real and imagined dialogue with what others think, do and feel' (Holmes, 2010: 147). Put simply, the foregrounding, not the estrangement, of the researcher's emotional self occurs as a result of the inter-subjective context of emotional labour and emotional reflexivity.

## Conclusion

This article makes two key contributions. The first is the distinction between the effects of emotional labour performed by Hochschild's flight attendants and that of some feminist and sensitive researchers. Rather than *estrangement* from emotion, the emotional labour involved in some sensitive, reflexive and feminist research can result in the *foregrounding* of a researcher's own biological, emotional and social identities. Second, this article has shown how the incorporation of emotions and their analysis into theoretical study on the sociology of emotions can be crucial to extending theory. In this case, their incorporation was the cornerstone of improving the applicability of the emotional labour theory to the work of some sensitive and feminist researchers.

These two findings have direct implications for the work of sensitive and feminist researchers. This article has highlighted that sensitive and feminist research studies

harbour a legitimate reflexive space that allows for the presence of adverse emotion in addition to multiple, ghostly past and imagined future selves.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the work of flight attendants, feminist and sensitive research methodologies ask researchers to draw on their own identity, emotions and experiences as part of their study, specifically as a tool for data collection, reflection and analysis (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Gilbert, 2001a, 2001b; Oakley, 1981; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 1990). Thus, emotions and reflexivity are depicted as finely tuned instruments optimal for conducting qualitative research on emotional topics (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). As such, this places a demand on researchers to, first, not become estranged from their mind, body and emotion, and second, to capitalise on emotional reflexivity and the process of enacting emotional labour. It is here that feminist and sensitive methods create a legitimate space for the foregrounding of self and the deliberate exploration of emotion, including those that may be deemed 'adverse' as part of doing this type of study.

Extracts from the reflexive diary and interviews in this article are emblematic of the legitimate space given to explore many emotions and identities throughout sensitive and feminist research studies. The legitimate reflexive space may provide new understandings for some researchers about their own personal problems (Sampson et al., 2008). However, researchers are often unprepared for the degree to which emotionally taxing situations must and will arise as part of doing research on sensitive topics (Gilbert, 2001a; Sampson et al., 2008; Shaw, 2011). Thus, it is pertinent to the argument developed in this article that only recently have questions been asked at a macro methodological level about what demands emotional labour may place on the sensitive researcher (Malacrida, 2007; Sampson et al., 2008). Emotional labour is rarely recognised, honoured or taken into account by employers as a source of job stress (Hochschild, 2003: 153; Reay, 2004; Steinberg and Figart, 1999). This is particularly so for female researchers who enact an often invisible emotional labour (Reay, 2004) and who are exposed to greater emotional risk as a result of their high representation and propensity to engage in sensitive, reflexive and feminist research (Sampson et al., 2008). Given feminist concern regarding hidden, additional and unpaid labours that go unrecognised but are crucial to the performance of study, it is doubly important to attend to this gendered trend in the under-recognition of emotional labour in professional research study. It would be ironic if the high degree of emotional labour enacted predominantly by women in sensitive and feminist research remains under-recognised in the methodological debate surrounding these forms of sociological research.

Methodologists must begin to answer why it is that the research principles that focus on the care of the participants have, at times, resulted in a neglect of researchers' vulnerabilities (Sampson et al., 2008). To begin to redress this, methodologists need to position the proven support structures for researchers as integral to the enactment of sensitive and feminist methods.<sup>12</sup> For example, it has been suggested that courses in methodology, theory and professional development need to incorporate a sociology of participation, involvement and identification (Katz Rothman, 1986: 52), and a discussion of psychological and emotional well-being and coping strategies (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 122). Emotion is present in many instances of social science interviewing (Shaw, 2011), and the rationales of sensitive and feminist research methodologies are often described

and encouraged in general social science research (Oakley, 1981). Therefore, the arguments provided in this article and the implications for researchers, methodologists and institutions are equally important to all who are engaged in the social sciences at large.

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## Notes

1. Doing feminist research does not mean one is automatically doing sensitive research and vice versa.
2. Researcher reflexivity and attendance to emotions, as central components to both feminist and sensitive research methodologies, are bound together in this article for the much-needed purpose of exploring the emotional labour required of the researcher in undertaking such research.
3. It is arguable that the arguments made in this article can be generalised to the emotional labour performed in wider social research as social scientists grappling with the complexity of contemporary social problems increasingly have to conduct research into private worlds (Lee, 1993: 15–16). Many social scientists are caught by surprise by the degree of emotion present in interviews for instance (Shaw, 2011).
4. Despite explicitly examining notions of self from psychoanalytic and symbolic interactionist perspectives, Hochschild's theory of estrangement from the emotional self could still rest on the assumption of a coherent, knowable and singular self from which one can become estranged. Freud, Nietzsche and the postmodernist theorising of self has already challenged this position (Elliott, 2001).
5. Human Research Ethics Committee clearance: HREC2009/2/3.5(2919)
6. IVF can be a confusing and emotional time; therefore, the research team was advised to conduct interviews when participants were not actively engaged in treatment.
7. Further details on recruitment have been published elsewhere (Carroll and Walby, 2012).
8. The recruitment of participants occurred in two phases. After Phase 1, the reflexive diary had sufficiently served its purpose for the author as a tool for understanding her emotion in relation to the interviews. These insights informed the author's emotional labour in Phase 2.
9. The reflexive diarising used in this research does not claim to be an autoethnography. However, the researcher does borrow from autoethnography by placing herself as a participant observer of her own experience that includes emotions and embodied response as sources to be examined and displayed in texts (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001: 82). Like autoethnography itself, this requires a high degree of reflexivity (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger, 2001).
10. Finch (1984) suggests that this phenomenon of identification is particular to women-to-women interviewing about motherhood as a result of interviewees placing the researcher in 'crucial categories' about marriage and motherhood.
11. Hochschild suggests that emotional labour is not always a negative thing. In research and academia, emotional labour can lead to self-development, reflection and learning (Bellas, 1999; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Similarly, sensitive research can have therapeutic benefit or opportunities for personal growth for participant and researchers alike (Dickson-Swift, 2008: 65) and can even be labelled as 'emancipatory' (Malacrida, 2007).
12. For further details into how researchers can be provided with support, refer studies by Dickson-Swift et al. (2008), Gilbert (2001a) and Sampson et al. (2008).

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