
Methodological Research on “Sensitive” Topics: A Decade Review

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Yeon-Ok Lee

Raymond M. Lee

Royal Holloway University of London

Résumé

Recherche méthodologique sur des questions « sensibles » - Un bilan décennaire : En s'appuyant sur l'étude de van Meter (2000), où il a examiné la littérature méthodologique relative à la recherche sur les sujets « sensibles », nous analysons le corpus correspondant d'articles de revues publiés au cours de la décennie suivante. Nous présentons ici des données sur les tendances des auteurs à la co-publication, identifications des continuités et des discontinuités thématiques, et attirons l'attention sur les lacunes dans la littérature existante.

Abstract

Drawing on van Meter's (2000) article examining the methodological literature relating to research on “sensitive” topics, we analyse the corresponding journal literature in the decade following. We present data on authorship patterns, identify thematic continuities and discontinuities, and draw attention to gaps in the existing literature.

Mots clés

Questions sensibles, Tendances méthodologiques, Littérature méthodologique

Keywords

Sensitive Topics, Methodological Trends, Methods Literature

In an article in *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique* (BMS) published in 2000, Karl van Meter examined the then existing literature on “sensitive topics” and the

Corresponding Author:

R. M. Lee, Centre for Criminology and Sociology, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, TW20 0EX, UK

Email : r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk

related literature on asking “sensitive questions” on surveys. In the present paper, we further this endeavour by looking at the methodological literature dealing with sensitive topics written over the last ten years. Although, due to differences in sampling and approach, our findings are not directly comparable with van Meter’s, hopefully they provide an overview of recent trends and patterns in the literature on “sensitivity” in research.

Having examined both the 1999 edition of the database produced by the Social Research Methods (SRM) Documentation Centre at the University of Rotterdam and the 1999 edition of Sociofile, van Meter found, for the period from 1972 to 1999, two books, two book chapters, one report and 64 journal articles dealing with sensitive topics and questions (van Meter, 2000: 62). The articles retrieved were in English, Dutch, German and Polish. He next organised the items he found into 13 categories. Broadly speaking, these categories related to: (a) work that provides a general framework for dealing with sensitive topics; (b) AIDS; (c) comparisons between methods; (d) drug use; (e) ethics; (f) family; (g) feminism; (h) focus groups; (i) studies dealing with interviews and/or interviewees; (j) discussions of Lee’s (1993) book on sensitive topics; (k) methods, a category mostly focusing on issues in survey research such as response effects and response bias; (l) politics; and (m) the randomised response technique.

Ideally, it would have been useful to derive our data from the same sources used by van Meter. This would have had the benefit of allowing us to make direct comparisons with the situation a decade ago. However, since van Meter analysed the literature, the SRM data base has ceased to operate. Given its unfortunate demise, we took a different approach to identifying relevant articles. In addition, we chose only to deal with the literature on the more general issue of sensitive topics, and did not, as van Meter did, also differentiate it from the literature dealing with how “sensitive questions” might be asked. We have also looked only at material appearing in English¹. As a result, caution should be used in making comparisons between our findings and van Meter’s earlier findings.

Sophisticated Web resources have been developed to our advantage over the past decade. To derive our data set, we utilised the lists of methodological journals appearing on the Methodspace Web site: <http://www.methodspace.com/page/journals-1>. Methodspace, a Web resource devoted to research methods in the social sciences, is produced by Sage Publications. The journal lists provided on the site are not restricted to Sage journals and, when aggregated, proved to be quite comprehensive. Nevertheless, there were some very obvious omissions. Consequently, we extended our search to a number of additional journals, such as *Public Opinion Quarterly*, that clearly have a methodological remit and were missing from the Methodspace lists (these additional journals are denoted by an asterisk in Table 1). Given our sampling strategy, it follows that our findings refer only to the journal literature. Unlike van Meter, we have not in our examination looked at possibly relevant books or edited collections (see for example the important text by Virginia Dickson-Swift and her colleagues, 2008a and 2008b, and Liamputtong 2007), nor have we examined book reviews.

Using the Web sites of the journals on our list and Google Scholar, where necessary, we conducted a search for the term “sensitive topic(s)” for the period 2000–2010. (It is, of course, possible that we missed some relevant articles in which “sensitivity” was discussed but in which our search term did not appear *per se*.) In all, we identified a total of

Table 1. Journals searched

Journal Name	Publisher	Hits
Qualitative Health Research	Sage	22
International Journal of Qualitative Methods	Online	14
International Journal of Social Research Methodology	Taylor and Francis	11
Qualitative Research	Sage	8
Qualitative Inquiry	Sage	5
Qualitative Social Work	Sage	5
The Qualitative Report	Online	5
International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education	Taylor and Francis	3
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography	Sage	3
Journal of Research in Nursing	Sage	3
Quality and Quantity: International Journal of Methodology	Springer	3
Social Science Research*	Elsevier	3
Sociological Research Online*	Online	3
American Journal of Evaluation	Sage	2
Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique	Sage	2
Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research	Online	2
Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics	Sage	2
Journal of Teacher Education	Sage	2
Methodology: European Journal of Research Methods for the Behavioral and Social Sciences	Online	2
Sociological Methods & Research	Sage	2

The following journals had only one hit: Applied Psychological Measurement (Sage); Behavior Research Methods* (Psychonomic Society); Educational and Psychological Measurement (Sage); Educational Researcher (Sage); Ethnography (Sage); Evaluation & the Health Professions (Sage); Evaluation Review (Sage); Field Methods (Sage); Journal of Research Practice (Online); Methodological Innovations Online (Online); Public Opinion Quarterly* (Oxford University Press); Qualitative Market Research (Emerald); Qualitative Sociology (Springer); Survey Methodology Statistics (Canada).

The following journals had no hits: Action Research (Sage); Action Research International (Online); Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies (Sage); Discourse Analysis Online (Online); Educational Action Research (Taylor and Francis); Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods (Online); Evaluation (Sage); Evaluation Journal of Australia (Australasian Evaluation Society); International Journal of Mixed Methods in Applied Business & Policy Research (Online); International Journal of Public Opinion Research (Oxford University Press); International Journal of Market Research (Market Research Society); Journal of Business Research (Elsevier); Journal of Consumer Research (Chicago); Journal of Economic and Social Measurement (IOS Press); Journal of Mixed Methods Research (Sage); Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation (Online); Journal of Official Statistics (Statistics Sweden); Journal of the Market Research Society (MRS); Narrative Inquiry (Benjamins); Organizational Research Methods (Sage); Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation (Online); Qualitative Sociology Review (Online); Resources for Feminist Research / Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe (Online); Social Research Update (University of Surrey); Social Science Computer Review (Springer); Sociological Methodology* (American Sociological Association); Statistical Methods in Medical Research (Sage); Statistical Modelling (Sage); Survey Practice (American Association for Public Opinion Research); Survey Research Methods (Online); Systemic Practice and Action Research (Springer); The Evaluation Exchange (Online); The Grounded Theory Review (Sociology Press). This gives a total of 116 hits for all journals taken into consideration.

116 articles as a result of this search. Of the 67 journals searched, 34 contained at least one relevant article. Seven of the 34 were online journals, the remainder print journals. Three journals – *Qualitative Health Research* (22), *International Journal of Qualitative*

Table 2. Articles on 'Sensitive Topic(s)' by Year

Year	Number of Articles
2000	7
2001	5
2002	7
2003	8
2004	10
2005	12
2006	14
2007	15
2008	16
2009	12
2010	10
Total	116

Table 3. Number of Authors per Article

Authors	Original Sample		Nearest-Neighbour	
	Number	%	Number	%
1	41	35	60	52
2	32	28	25	21
3	20	17	15	13
4	15	13	11	9
5	3	2	2	2
6	2	2	1	1
7	2	2	1	1
9	1	1	1	1
Total	116	100	116	100

Methods (14), and the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (11) – accounted for around two-fifths of the articles inspected.

Van Meter identified a rise in the number of sources dealing with sensitive topics in the 1990s. Table 2 shows the number of articles in our data set by the year of publication. As the decade went on, the number of articles rose to a peak in 2008, before dropping back somewhat.

In all, there were 263 authors for the 116 papers. Seven out of the 263 authors had multiple contributions: Eli Buchbinder (2), Virginia Dickson- Swift (3), Guy Enosh (2), Jean-Paul Fox (2), Erica L. James (3), Sandra Kippen (3), and Pranee Liamputtong (4). Single-authored papers made up one-third of the articles, while 28 percent had two authors and a similar number had three or four authors. Seven percent had five or more authors, with the maximum number of authors being nine (Table 3). There appear to be no obvious commonalities between the articles having a large number of authors. In terms of gender balance (Table 4), 69 percent of authors (182) were female; there were 81 male authors. About a half of the total number of articles had only female authors,

Table 4. Gender Balance in Articles

Gender	Original Sample		Nearest-Neighbour	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Only Female Authors	57	49	55	47
Only Male Authors	21	18	38	33
More Female Authors	17	15	9	8
Equal Numbers	14	12	7	6
More Male Authors	7	6	7	6
Total	116	100	116	100

while one-fifth had only male authors. Twelve percent of articles had an equal number of male and female authors. Those with more male than female authors amounted to 6 percent. Some 15 percent had more female than male authors.

To see how far these patterns were typical of methodological writing more widely, we compared our sensitive topics sample against a nearest-neighbour sample (for a similar approach in a different context, see Furman and Stern, 2006.) To generate the nearest-neighbour sample, we randomly chose the article that appeared in the journal before or after each of our sensitive topics articles (where it was the first article in a journal issue, we took the second article as the nearest neighbour - where it was the last article, we took as the nearest neighbour the penultimate article). In the nearest neighbour sample, there were 231 authors, of whom 101 were male (44 %) and 129 (56 %) were female. Single-authored papers make up slightly over a half of the articles, while one-fifth had two authors, and a further fifth, approximately, had three or four authors. Some 5 percent had five or more authors. In terms of gender balance, 33 percent of articles had only male authors, while 47 percent had only female authors. Six percent had male and female authors in equal numbers, with a similar number having more male than female authors. Articles having more female than male authors amounted to 8 percent.

The tendency for sensitive topic articles to be more likely to be multi-authored, and to have female authors², we suspect, reflects two factors. One is that many topics deemed to be sensitive are of a problem-focused and an applied kind that attracts team research. The other is a pervasive interest in vulnerable and marginalised groups among feminist researchers.

When it comes to categorisation, we made two considerable modifications to van Meter's system. First, he placed each literature item he identified in one and only one category, but as his 13 categories are not mutually exclusive, we instead allowed each entry in our data set to appear in multiple categories when necessary. We then refined our classification scheme by introducing a hierarchical organisation of meta-categories and subcategories. Second, some entries did not fit well into van Meter's classification and we therefore created new categories in such cases. Below we summarise our categorisation.

AIDS

- (i) the article is concerned with HIV/AIDS patients and/or people related to the patients in some way;

Children/Adolescents

- (i) the article is concerned with minors;

Comparison

- (i) the article compares two or more methods,
- (ii) the article compares two or more groups of research subjects;

Drug Use

- (i) the article is concerned with substance abuse;

Ethics

- (i) the article is about ethical considerations;

Family

- (i) the study discusses family dynamics such as domestic violence, parent-children relations, etc.;

Feminist

- (i) the study employs a feminist methodology,
- (ii) the article touches upon feminist issues;

Focus Group

- (i) the study employed focus group discussions as a method of data collection,
- (ii) the article is about aspects of using focus group discussions in research;

General Framework

- (i) the article generally discusses how to handle sensitive populations/topics/questions,
- (ii) the article offers findings for further application to sensitive research,
- (iii) the article is dedicated to (the development of) a particular theory;

Interview

- (i) the study employed interviewing as a method of data collection,
- (ii) the article is about aspects of interviewing;

Lee's Book (1993)

- (i) the article is predominantly about this particular book;

Methods

- (i) the article is predominantly about methodological considerations,
- (ii) the study employed methods other than interviews or focus group discussions;

Online

- (i) the study employed computer-assisted and/or Web-based methods;

Politics

- (i) the study is about politically charged topics such as political activism, racism, etc.,
- (ii) the article discusses certain existing policies,
- (iii) the article discusses policy implications;

Random Response

- (i) the study employed a randomised response technique,
- (ii) the article is about aspects of using a randomised response technique in research;

Researcher's (emotional) Well-being

- (i) the article discusses the impact of sensitive research on researchers themselves;

Seniors

- (i) the article involves older adults as research subjects;

Sexuality/sex-related

- (i) the article discusses lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues,
- (ii) the article discusses sex-related topics such as sexual assaults, sexual preference/conditions, etc.

Among the methodological techniques, interviewing remained the one receiving most attention in the context of sensitive research, adopted in 46 articles. It was followed by focus group discussions, covered in 20 articles. Various groups are identified as research subjects requiring sensitive approaches, including children and adolescents, senior citizens, AIDS patients and their families, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, the LGBT community, victims of sexual assault or domestic violence, women post-abortion, and those with issues related to body image.

Two new themes also emerged. One was the growing role of computers and the Internet in data collection and analysis. The other theme was a shift in attention towards the “safety” and “emotional well-being” of the researcher working on sensitive topics.

Table 5 shows the distribution of topic areas across our sample of articles. As might be expected from a set of articles devoted to methodological matters, discussion of methods and general methodological frameworks are well represented, as are discussions of interviewing and focus groups.

With van Meter's work in mind, it is interesting to note that research relating to AIDS now receives much less attention than was true of the period van Meter described. One assumes this reflects the extent to which social scientists in fact rose to the research challenges posed by the AIDS epidemic. One can also note that discussion of Lee's (1993) work has faded away since van Meter reviewed the literature in 2000. This presumably reflects the well-known pattern in which citation to particular works declines as time passes.

Discussion

It would obviously be futile for us to attempt a detailed, systematic account of the variety of themes and issues found across the range of articles we have identified. Shaped partly by our

Table 5. Categorisation

Category	
AIDS	5
Children/Adolescents	15
Comparison	14
Drug Use	1
Ethics	12
Family	11
Feminist	10
Focus Group	20
General Framework	44
Interview	46
Lee's Book (1993)	0
Methods	92
Online	13
Politics	9
Random response	5
Researcher's (Emotional) Well-Being	9
Seniors	5
Sexuality/sex-related	11
Total	322

own interests and concerns, we look instead at a number of salient areas that seem to us to point towards a number of interesting trends within the literature. These include, in no particular order: the continuing development of randomised response methods, online methods, trends in ethical governance, and the emotional demands of research on sensitive topics.

Randomised Response

Lee (1993) introduced a distinction between “desensitizing” and “dejeopardizing” techniques for asking survey questions about sensitive topics. The former helps to foster disclosure by an interview respondent by creating a climate within the interview conducive to frankness. The latter typically attempts to minimize potential risks from disclosure by breaking the link between a respondent’s identity and the specific response(s) made by that respondent. Relevant techniques include the use of anonymisation strategies and the insertion of random noise into the data collected. While this insertion might occur during data post-processing, an important class of techniques seeks to inject indeterminacy directly at the point of data collection. A specific, and well-favoured, technique is that of “randomized response” (Warner, 1965). Although there are a variety of randomised response models of greater or lesser complexity, the procedure typically involves a respondent choosing to answer a sensitive or an innocuous question that has been assigned with a known probability. The response is given, however, without it being divulged to the interviewer which specific question is being answered.

A technique that perhaps owes some of its popularity to its intriguing and counter-intuitive character (you get the answer to a question without knowing what has

been asked), randomised response and its variants attained small but noticeable representation in van Meter's original review, and continues to attract interest.

It should be apparent on even a moment's reflection that the method necessarily involves a number of trade-offs. The protection against self-incrimination given to the respondent is bought at the cost, for example, of decreased statistical efficiency, difficulties in assessing covariation with relevant variables, and operational complexity. Conceivably, too, there might also be psychological resistance to giving affirmative responses to whatever question is mandated by the randomisation procedure. Our sample indicates that over the last decade work has been devoted to ameliorating some of these difficulties through the development of randomised Fox response models that are more efficient and flexible than the models initially developed (Fox, 2005; Fox and Meijer, 2008; Lensvelt-Mulders et al., 2005; Ostapczuk et al., 2009). The comparison of randomised response to other strategies for eliciting sensitive information has also been apparent (see, for example, Lara et al., 2004).

Online Methods

Technological developments have often had profound, if not always anticipated, effects on research practice. One thinks, for example, of the impact of audio recording on the emergence, growth and popularity of in-depth interviewing methods (see Lee, 2004), or the way in which the development of telephone interviewing encouraged survey research on previously difficult-to-reach groups because it reduced considerably the costs of screening the wider population (Nathan, 2001). In recent years, it has been the Internet that has proved to be a major agent for the transformation of research methods. As Lee, Fielding and Blank put it (2008: 18):

The Internet provides psychologists with a space for experimentation that extends far beyond the walls of the conventional laboratory, and a traditional reliance on undergraduate research subjects. Survey researchers value the potential reach of the Internet and the level of control it gives them over cost and the particularities of data collection. Ethnographers of varying disciplinary hue, meanwhile, find in the Internet a plethora of virtual field sites ripe for the novel understanding of interaction, culture, community, and identity, and are attracted by "the apparent abilities of the Internet to sidestep, transform, highlight or reinvent some traditional political formations, identities and inequalities" (Hine, 2005: 242).

For those seeking to research topics that are deemed for whatever reason to be "sensitive", online methods present interesting opportunities and challenges. For some of the survey researchers represented in our sample, the use of Web-based techniques has provided access to hard-to-reach populations, helped to overcome at least some kinds of self-selection bias, and offered a degree of anonymity that can enhance reporting of even quite sensitive matters (Mangan and Reips, 2007). As Mangan and Reips point out, however, these benefits are partly offset by limits on the obtaining of detailed information and problems controlling bogus participation. Internet surveys can have advantages when time and resources are in short supply (Shields, 2003). Use of a Web-based survey enabled Shields to overcome resource constraints in her study in an ethnically mixed

school district in a large sparsely populated region of the United States. The protocol Shields developed included a substantial open-ended component that, in her judgement, provided qualitative data rich in detail and allowed pupils to disclose information about sensitive matters such as racial discrimination.

One important recent development is that the focus group has moved online. An advantage of this is that it creates the potential usually not possible with traditional methods to collect data from populations that are widely dispersed geographically (Oringerdoff, 2004). Reviewing the benefits and challenges of online focus group methods for children with chronic health conditions, Nicholas et al. (2010) noted a degree of respondent preference for face-to-face data collection but pointed to gains in efficiency and topic focus, and the fostering of participation in cases where face-to-face contact presented difficulties. While traditional focus group methods trade on the additional interpretive gains available from observation of non-verbal behaviours, text-based online focus groups forgo those gains. What such groups provide in relation to sensitive topics is anonymity, the ability to record and analyse virtual interactional dynamics, and, once again, the efficiency gains associated with access to machine-readable data (see Franklin and Lowry, 2001).

Finally, online methods potentially create possibilities for citizen participation in the design and execution of research that might encourage democratisation of the research process (Lee et al., 2008).

Ethical Governance

It has long been recognised that research on sensitive topics poses particular, sometimes intractable, ethical difficulties. Many of the issues involved, and discussions of their resolution, are represented in our sample. One broader contextual issue, however, that was of particular concern to a number of writers relates to the increasing problematics that now surround ethical governance. In many countries, systems of ethical review traditionally focused on biomedicine have increasingly been extended to the social sciences with requirements for mandatory prior ethical review by human subjects review boards, ethics committees, and the like. The extent to which this extension of bureaucratic surveillance improves the ethical practice of social scientists has been somewhat contested. The issue is particularly important in relation to putatively “sensitive” topics since the potential for the “chilling” of research which is “difficult” or controversial might be high. Herdman (2000) discusses in some detail a study in which researchers, research participants, and members of the ethics committee that had approved the study were all at loggerheads, a situation exacerbated by sensationalist media coverage of the research findings. The researchers regarded many of the strictures placed upon them by the ethics committee as unworkable, given the qualitative nature of their research. In addition, the committee itself, most of whose members were medical professionals, responded negatively to criticisms of their role directed at the absence of social science expertise among committee members. While it is not surprising that mutual incomprehension can come to characterise governance systems in which biomedical professionals make judgments about social science research of a qualitative kind, the work of Gerrish and Guillaume (2006) suggests that survey researchers, too, can face difficulties with ethical

regulation. In particular, they suggest, there is a need for the level of scrutiny received by proposals to be proportional to the potential risk involved.

Following on from this, governance bodies often make rather commonsensical assumptions about “sensitivity” that do not match the experiences of researchers routinely dealing with sensitive topics. Buckle et al. (2010) note that a degree of incongruity exists between the perspectives of research ethics boards and research participants. Whereas ethical review committees assume that the bereaved are inevitably distressed by being interviewed about their experience of bereavement, research participants often find such interviews to be beneficial. Much of this work underlines the importance of feeding back to bodies concerned with ethical governance empirical work on the operation of the governance system.

Emotional Demands of Research on Sensitive Topics

We have noted the emergence over the last decade of work on the emotional well-being of researchers. Strongly influenced by the feminist tradition, this work rejects a model of the researcher as detached and objective. It does, though, see personal engagement in the research process as potentially having emotional consequences for the researcher. These consequences can be all the more difficult where sensitive topics are being studied. For example, speaking of her research on battered women, Chatzifotiou comments: “By talking about their painful experiences of violence the interviewees relived the violent events in their entirety, and by listening to their traumatic stories I felt inevitably overwhelmed” (2000: 9.1). Melrose (2002: 347) speaks of her “anger, guilt, powerlessness, and frustration,” when listening to accounts of juvenile prostitution, and notes that these feelings often persisted well beyond the interview itself. A somewhat broader overview is provided by the work of Dickson-Swift and her colleagues (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Drawing on interviews with a sample of public health researchers in Australia, Dickson-Swift et al. map out the emotional challenges that face researchers when confronted during the course of a study with difficult and sometimes harrowing topics. Feelings of vulnerability, guilt, and physical and emotional exhaustion were commonplace while researchers struggled with issues relating to feelings of desensitisation, transference and counter-transference, and sought to locate the boundaries of their own responsibility towards alleviating the suffering of those studied.³ Dickson-Swift et al. point to the importance of training, supervision, and support in helping researchers deal with the emotional consequences of researching sensitive topics. They also underline the importance of self-care; the need, for example, for careful scheduling of debriefing sessions and time away from the field as ways of avoiding emotional burnout. Work of this kind has been extended in interesting ways by Corden et al. (2005), who describe the exploratory use of professional therapeutic support by a team of researchers studying the financial implications for parents of the death of a child. The team availed themselves of the services of a psychotherapist who provided a support group for the researchers, as well as being available for consultation by individual researchers. In fact, it seems that the researchers drew in a fairly limited way on this resource, although they found it beneficial and enabling. As Corden et al. point out, the funding of such provision needs

to be factored into research proposals. This, of course, might limit availability, but the approach itself is one which is likely to repay further investigation.

Conclusion

We conclude with some brief comments on what appear to be gaps and lacunae in the field of methodological research on sensitive topics.

One aspect of the methodological literature on “sensitive” topics over the past decade that deserves comment is what seems like a continuing lack of interest in conceptual development. Much of the literature we have surveyed tends to take the notion of “sensitivity” as unproblematic or commonsensical, or relies on Lee’s definition of sensitive research as “research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it” (1993: 4). Lee’s original discussion makes it clear that this definition encompasses not just the collection but also the “holding and/or dissemination of research data” and sees “sensitivity” as an emergent rather than an inherent feature of the relationship between topic and research. Nevertheless, the notion of “threat” might be seen as overly mechanistic and psychologistic. It might be, for example, that substituting a more general concept of “risk” for that of “threat” would provide a more flexible and conceptually rich alternative to that of “threat” (see Dickson-Swift et al., 2008a). To date, though, work of this kind remains to be done.

The need for further conceptual development is perhaps most noticeable in relation to the literature on the emotional demands of fieldwork-based research on sensitive topics. While surfacing an issue – the emotional challenges that researchers face when doing fieldwork in a way that now makes the issue difficult to ignore – this literature suffers from a number of obvious defects. Much of the relevant work depends on first-person accounts of the fieldwork process. This is both inevitable and desirable. In many cases, however, fieldwork accounts rely on a flat naturalism that sees the relationship between researching a sensitive topic and the stresses and strains experienced by the researcher as being direct, immediate and inevitable. How far, one might ask, are individual responses mediated by the “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) that, as Young and Lee (1996) point out, are embedded within different methodological traditions? For example, did the rather tough-minded “unemotional” fieldwork stance typical of post-war American sociology have a particular appeal to a generation of younger male researchers who had just missed the war (Lee, 2011)? How far are intrapsychic factors implicated in how fieldwork is experienced and, if so, how are such factors to be identified and explicated? Or to put this another way, how much psychoanalytic depth is needed to attain a satisfactory account of feelings, especially where they are confused and inchoate (see, for example, Devereux, 1967; Hunt, 1989)? Can the emotional impact of research on sensitive topics have medium and long-term effects, as well as those that occur during and immediately after fieldwork? Is there a simple relationship between “sensitivity” and stress such that the more sensitive the topic studied, the more likely there is to be emotional consequences? Or is it the case, perhaps, that sustained exposure to unpleasant but relatively mundane situations is more stressful than intermittent but highly threatening events of the kind found, for example, in situations of violent conflict (Lee, 1995)? Finally, one might note the emphasis in the literature on negative effects at the expense

of the (possibly compensating) rewards, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that often accompany the successful completion of a research study.

Much work on “sensitive topics” focuses on groups which are stigmatised, disadvantaged or socially disregarded in some way. Inevitably, the power relations and dynamics that attend the lives of those placed in such positions form an important topic for study. By the same token, however, work of this kind points out an important lacuna in existing research. We see little evidence of work on power elites, on topics such as corporate malfeasance, or on the power of the state, all areas of considerable “sensitivity” which pose a range of difficulties for researchers. The importance of studying “up” as well as “down” remains a longstanding challenge for researchers (Nader, 1972). We expect that in the next decade research on social movements and transformations of the kind seen recently in the Middle East will become an increasing focus of research and methodological discussion. Some guidance on the issues involved might come from work on negotiating the political complexities of societies such as Northern Ireland which are represented in our sample by writers like Knox (2001), or by Shahidian’s (2001) research on Iranian political dissidents in exile.

What we do not see in our sample, but could be anticipated to become increasingly important in the coming years, are researchers taking up the possibilities opened by newer forms of online social media. Traditionally, it was difficult to study transient social phenomena such as riots, fads and rumours, areas that increasingly become tractable when studied using real-time online data capture. At the same time, however, online social media add new dimensions to the notion of sensitive research. Above all, with the blurred boundaries between the public and the private in social media, the notion of privacy is contested. In other words, the vast amount of data that is available for researchers, and seems to be unobtrusive on the surface, might actually be sensitive and therefore ethically challenging (Boyd and Crawford, 2011). This redirects our attention back to the fact that what makes a piece of research or a set of data sensitive is highly contextual (Lee, 1993: 5).

Notes

1. Karl van Meter reminds us that there is an extensive literature in German dealing with, for example, how one deals with the issue of sensitivity in asking questions about income on surveys.
2. Since the shaping of research agendas is a complex matter involving, among other issues, patterns of research funding, we regard these findings as indicative rather than definitive and so did not test for significance. Nevertheless, we thank an anonymous referee for pointing out that while the relationship between gender and authorship of an article on sensitive topics is significant at the 5 percent level, the relationship between co-authorship and such writing is not.
3. Even in situations where researchers used secondary records rather than data collected face-to-face, working with accounts relating to traumatic events could still extract an emotional toll.

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