



'We're Over-Researched Here!' Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements

Author(s): Tom Clark

Source: *Sociology*, Vol. 42, No. 5, Special Issue on The Future of the Research Relationship (OCTOBER 2008), pp. 953-970

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42857198>

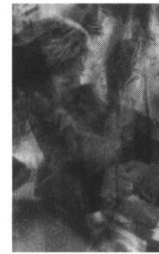
Accessed: 29-10-2016 07:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Sage Publications, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sociology*



‘We’re Over-Researched Here!’

Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements

■ **Tom Clark**

University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT

Despite a number of references to research fatigue and over-researching in the literature, the concepts have yet to be empirically investigated within qualitative contexts. This article, therefore, seeks to explore how researchers understand and account for research fatigue and over-researching. Using the results generated from a grounded analysis, a number of precursors are identified and discussed. These include lack of perceptible change attributable to engagement, increasing apathy and indifference toward engagement, and practical causes such as cost, time, and organization. It is suggested that marked levels of research fatigue are likely to occur where the mechanisms that challenge research engagement increase and the supporting mechanisms decrease. Furthermore, claims of over-researching are likely to be reported in contexts where repeated engagements do not lead to any experience of change or where the engagement comes into conflict with the primary aims and interests of the research group.

KEY WORDS

costs and benefits / non-engagement / over-researching / refusal / research fatigue / withdrawal

Introduction

Qualitative research that seeks to explore, understand, and explain the social world inevitably brings researchers into contact with people. Indeed, much of this work would be impossible without the assistance of those who are

prepared to provide the information that is needed to do research. Therefore, developing and sustaining research relationships is at the heart of the qualitative research enterprise.

Of course, much methodological and reflexive work implicitly recognizes the complex relationships that exist between researchers and researched and the challenges associated with supporting and sustaining these relationships are well articulated. Whilst much of this work is written from the perspective of the researcher (see Smyth and Williamson, 2004, for further discussion), issues such as power (Hammersley, 1995), access (Emmel et al., 2007), trust (Miller and Bell, 2002), representation (Denzin, 2000), identity (Finch, 1984), and the role of ethics in the management of risk (Mauthner et al., 2002) are all frequently highlighted.

However, one challenge to engagement that is increasingly cited by qualitative researchers but has yet to be critically discussed within the literature is the issue of research fatigue and the associated claim of being over-researched. In these cases, previous experiences of being involved with research are used by those researched as a reason not to engage any further with the research process. Given the familiarity of the justification to many researchers, the paucity of discussion concerning the issue is somewhat surprising. Indeed, a more systematic exploration of the issue is likely to be crucial to the future of the research relationship as the relationships that researchers form in the present will shape the relationships that they are able to develop in the future. With research activity now at unprecedentedly high levels, research relationships that are supportive of future engagements are, therefore, increasingly important to the development of any present and future knowledge fields. This article attempts to explore these explanations of non-engagement by examining how researchers understand and account for research fatigue and over-researching.

Research Fatigue: How to Become 'Over-Researched'

Engagement with non-covert qualitative research is not something that is passively experienced by those who are researched. Indeed, those who choose to participate are not simple information providers who idly comply with the requests of researchers. As Hammersley (1995: 112) highlights:

research has material effects ... People's lives may be affected by being researched, and by being in a context that is affected by research findings. And these effects may be for good or for ill, and can run through the whole gamut of more complex combinations and possibilities that lies between those two extremes.

Qualitative engagements are actively experienced by those who engage and they continually make decisions concerning their involvement by reflecting upon their experiences. For instance, Bosworth et al. (2005) have recently attempted to document empirically how prisoners experience research participation and they highlight how research relationships are a process of negotiation for both

researcher and researched. Moreover, they demonstrate that the experiences of those researched are not necessarily the same as might be envisioned by the researcher. Peel et al. (2006) have also explicitly examined the motivations and expectations that participants offer as reasons for taking part in a longitudinal health study. Mechanisms that support their decisions to engage include favourable recommendations from trusted professionals; altruism and a desire to help others and the researcher; having 'nothing to lose'; and the therapeutic aspects of interviewing.

In contrast, some researchers have sought to highlight the more direct challenges to engagement by exploring the particular reasons potential research participants offer as explanations for non-engagement. Van Maanen (1991), for instance, reports how certain patrolmen rejected his efforts to engage them, citing unwanted intrusion, lack of interest, lack of a perceived useful outcome, and questions concerning the research problem being investigated. Baxter et al. (2001) also discuss a number of issues that can act as barriers to engagement in health research. These include exclusion; lack of previous experience; difficulties with language; power differentials between researchers and researched; lack of relevance; and fear of consequences of involvement. Moreover, they also highlight that engagement takes time and the associated costs can often be deemed too high to make engagement worthwhile. For instance, a failure to provide crèche facilities, a lack of transport, and recovery of expenses, could all contribute to the disengagement of young single mothers. Similarly, if engagements are perceived to be particularly lengthy, then problems can also arise with attrition (see Thomson and Holland, 2003). Research encounters are not just negotiated and managed by researchers, but are also actively negotiated, managed, and experienced by those who agree to be involved and who have their own perceptions of engagement.

However, one potential challenge to engagement that has received relatively little attention within this literature, despite being all too familiar to many researchers, is that of research fatigue and the associated claim of being over-researched.¹ Indeed, despite a relative paucity of research that directly addresses the issue there is some evidence to suggest that research fatigue is increasingly being mobilized as a reason to decline or withdraw from qualitative research. Instances of research fatigue can be found within mental health (Peterson, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2006); community research (Moore, 1996); education (McGlynn et al., 2004; Pickerden, 2002); older people (Seymour et al., 2002; Warren et al., 2003); lesbian groups (McLean and O'Connor, 2003); the homeless (Quilgars and Pleace, 2003); BME groups (Afshar et al., 2002; Butt and O'Neil, 2004; Manderson et al., 1998); online groups (Stewart and Williams, 2005); impaired and disabled groups (Iacano, 2006; Kitchin, 2000); social care departments (Clark and Sinclair, 2008; Murray, 2005); and some sensitive areas of research (Coy, 2006).

Within these examples, research fatigue can be said to occur when individuals and groups become tired of engaging with research and it can be identified by a demonstration of reluctance toward continuing engagement with an existing

project, or a refusal to engage with any further research. This reluctance is then attributed to their previous or continuing involvement with research. In effect, the experience of an earlier engagement begins to act as a barrier to future involvement. This typically occurs in two contexts: firstly, in projects that require participation over time – for example, in projects that have longitudinal aspects to them (see Thomson and Holland, 2003); and secondly, with research groups where requests for participation are common – for example, in areas where research groups are limited or ‘hard to reach’ (see Clark and Sinclair, 2008; and Emmel et al., 2007, respectively).

For instance, Moore (1996, 6.8–6.10) notes that:

there is evidence to be gathered in a wide range of social situations that in Liverpool people are becoming weary of being the objects of research by academics, local authorities and consultants ... research fatigue has set in in well studied zones as the local residents are only too willing to tell the field-worker.

Ongoing experiences of research participation were constraining the willingness of the community to engage any further. Similarly, Ashfar et al. (2004: 9) document how ‘a group of black women complained that they were asked the same questions over and over again but never saw any outcomes or feedback’. The group were not apathetic to research in the first instance, but instead developed a reluctance to engage after repeated experiences. Their values, expectations, and motivations that had facilitated engagement in the first instance did not sustain later engagement.

If similar experiences are repeated across a range of individuals and projects, research fatigue may also lead to the suggestion that particular groups of interest are being ‘over-researched’. Indeed, such claims are an overt expression from communities that they are tired of participating and no longer value the experience or any of the associated outcomes. Warren et al. (2003: 25), for example, describe this type of challenge:

A plethora of recent and on-going projects within the city raised the issue of the over-researching of some minority groups. Contacts advised us not to attempt to recruit from certain communities ... In another, our visits were welcome but the older women did not want to participate in any more studies.

Engaging particular groups with research was perceived to be increasingly difficult as a direct result of a continued exposure to research engagement. The groups had become tired and fatigued by their involvement with research and were disengaging with the process. This research fatigue is embodied by the claims of being ‘over-researched’.

In light of these increasing levels of fatigue, some researchers have offered suggestions concerning fatigue in order to address declining engagement rates. Peterson (1999: 8), for example, argues that over-researching is less likely to occur if the purpose of the research is clear, the need for the work is firmly established, there are identifiable benefits to the participants, and the same people are not being asked the same questions repeatedly. Similarly, a handbook produced by Communities Scotland for use within research concerning housing

suggests that uninteresting topics, over-familiar data collection methods, repeating similar questions, lack of feedback, and a perceived lack of change in experience are frequently cited causes of fatigue and should be avoided if possible (Sharp and Murdoch, 2006).

However, although such recommendations are welcome, there remains a relative paucity of empirical research that directly addresses the issue of research fatigue and no study has empirically explored the precursors of research fatigue. This omission is surprising given the necessity of positive research relationships in facilitating research engagement. If qualitative sociological research is to continue at present levels then engagement rates need to be maintained. Therefore further empirical investigation is necessary in order to understand the mechanisms that produce fatigue. A better understanding of these mechanisms should help to reveal how research engagement can be better supported. Indeed, the development of this work is important in order to articulate how people become experienced in research and how this impacts on their future involvement. This article aims to contribute to the literature on the challenges to research engagement by examining the precursors of research fatigue. Using interview data gained from a range of researchers who were reflecting on their research experiences, the article presents the results of an empirical study that explored how researchers understand and account for research fatigue.

The Research Study

The results presented here are part of a broader empirical study that sought to explore how researchers negotiate and manage qualitative research relationships. The project involved collecting primary data from experienced researchers ($n = 13$), which were analysed in accordance with the grounded theory method proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Interviewees and their respective projects were, as far as possible, selected with theoretical sampling in mind (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967), although practical determinants such as ease of access, location, and obtaining researcher agreement were also factors. A range of potential researchers was initially acquired by electronically and manually searching a number of the available databases for completed projects. These included those available through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Research Findings Electronic Register (REFER), and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). More general research-based websites were also utilized, such as the electronic library of social care (eLSC) and CSA Illumina. The outputs of special interest research organizations were also manually examined. These included Barnardos and the Nuffield foundation, as well as pre-existing lists of recent research studies, such as those available at Research in Practice (RiP) and Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA). Personal contacts known to have conducted work in relevant areas were also exploited in order to identify potential studies.

These results were then collated and judged for relevance and practicality. In order to be judged to be relevant, researchers and their respective studies had to satisfy three basic criteria. These were to be qualitative in nature, but not action orientated; to be concerned with children and families in some respect; and to have been conducted between 2000 and 2005. In order to establish a theoretical base, the initial sample aimed to include researchers in the fields of education, ethnicity, health research, disability studies, social care, and community studies. The range of studies were also required to incorporate a broad range of qualitative approaches, including visual techniques, longitudinal analysis, life-history methods, diaries, ethnography, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. Twenty-one researchers were initially selected and approached by letter and follow-up emails. Whilst only one researcher declined to engage, and another was initially positive but could not commit to an interview due to work pressures, 14 did not respond. This resulted in an initial sample of seven interviews with researchers who satisfied the criteria.

A prior review of the literature concerning how researchers negotiate and manage qualitative research relationships revealed a broad body of literature on the challenges to engagement and the reasons why some people decline involvement. This 'theoretical sensitivity' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was then pursued in the interviews. This established a theoretical framework concerning the challenges to engagement. One such challenge that emerged from this analysis, but was not covered by the initial literature review, was research fatigue. In line with the constant comparative method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), these issues were then pursued in a further six interviews where researchers were partly selected in order to articulate further the analysis of research fatigue. Although the sample size is small, the practical limitations of gaining access and limited funding prevented further interviews. As a result, theoretical saturation was not achieved and cannot be assumed. Therefore, the study is considered to be intensive rather than extensive and further investigation may be necessary to articulate more fully other factors that may account for fatigue.

Three areas of analytical interest were discovered by this process: the lack of change that results from engagement; issues of research apathy and a diminishing interest in research engagement; and the practical barriers to engagement such as cost, time, and organization. The remainder of this article discusses these areas. Each issue is dealt with in turn. In accordance with conventional ethical procedure, all interview excerpts have been made anonymous where possible and the researchers provided with pseudonyms.

'Is It Worth It?' Research Outcomes and Perceptions of 'Change'

A frequently cited explanation that was mobilized by researchers to account for research fatigue and subsequent claims of over-researching is the lack of change that is attributable to previous engagements. The research groups did not perceive

that their involvement had had any impact on their circumstances or the wider population. Consequently, any further involvement with research is perceived to have limited function or value. As this researcher highlighted:

... people had been giving their views with the view that services could improve and our problem ... was that people give you their best views with their best interest and nothing happens: that disillusions people from participating in research. (SG, 2005)

There was no perception of change in the circumstances of those who had engaged and this became a challenge to any future involvement. As a result, they had become disillusioned with research participation.

This disillusionment can challenge the research process at both gatekeeping and research group levels. In the following example, the researcher describes how access doors were closed due to a perceived lack of change from engagement with earlier projects:

... [a second] report done by someone in social services had referred to [the original report] and said 'I'm a bit worried that nothing has happened four years on'. And then in 2001, another piece of research was done on very similar things. So one of the first questions my colleague was asked when she went to the [department] was 'is this yet another piece of research that is worth it? What will be different about this work this time because there have been studies before and from where we are we can't see that anything different has happened in the community.' (NN, 2005)

The lack of change experienced after three previous research engagements challenged the potential engagement with a fourth. For the service department who was acting as the gatekeeper, and would provide invaluable assistance with recruitment, there was no perceptible difference attributable to their previous involvement and therefore there was no reason to commit any energy to further engagement. Effectively, research engagement had little use for them and served little practical purpose.

Similarly, a lack of change can also have effects at the level of the research group, in this case a group of service users:

The point is that sometimes some of those same people may well be the ones you go back to and ask the same questions. So my colleague and I had to convince them that it was worth it ... people want to know that this isn't just going to sit on the shelf and that there is going to be some difference. (SG, 2005)

The service users disengaged with the research process as there was no perceived difference in their circumstances after their involvement and the other supporting functions of research could not compensate for this lack of change. This produced research fatigue. This was particularly acute as those who had engaged continued to experience directly the effects of that policy after their research involvement. Essentially, people had given their voice with an expectation of impact, only to be disappointed or even alienated by the process when no discernable change was experienced. Engagement was, therefore, not perceived to be a worthwhile exercise.

Problematically, this precursor to research fatigue is not only limited to those studies that promote change as a direct purpose of the study. This is because change is often implicitly mobilized as a central mechanism that supports research engagement for those who engage. Indeed, whether such justification is explicitly used by researchers or not, there is some evidence here to suggest that engagement is often based on the perception that the research will help others, as this researcher highlighted:

... part of that altruism is born out of the notion of the sense of the moral responsibility that you have to the community, and believe you me, it's still there within the whole community. There is this feeling of community, a sense of solidarity, a sense that this is your diasporic responsibility to actually assist. And it's there, even within the young people, that you are obligated to do what you can. Not only in terms of your own situation, but to hopefully alleviate problems for individuals who may end up in the same situation. (DV, 2005)

Engagement was supported through the perceived positive contribution that their involvement could have to members of similar groups that are not known to them. There was an expectation of some wider benefit even though it was not an explicit commitment of the research (see also Crozier, 2003; Dyregrov, 2004).

In certain circumstances, however, the difficulties associated with a lack of change can be negotiated by researchers. Indeed, by engaging with the research group in question and demonstrating how engagement will be of benefit to them, and, perhaps more importantly, how the project differs from previous experiences, initial scepticism can sometimes be overcome. As this researcher highlighted:

[the community] said: 'we're over-researched here; people are always researching us but nothing changes' ... [So] the research associate and I went along one evening and talked about the project, and they challenged us and said 'why should we do this? Why should we help you academics?' and they engaged us and we engaged them in a debate and they gave us a lot of support in the end. (FC, 2005)

In the first instance, the community was unwilling to commit further energy to research engagement as they were unable to perceive any change in their circumstances that was attributable to involvement. However, after some negotiation they were willing to engage with the researchers who, in this instance, were able to demonstrate successfully the value of the project. They did this by distancing themselves from other research projects and highlighting the positive outcomes of the research, in this case the researchers' commitment to the project having an impact upon policy.

Unfortunately, as researchers are all too aware, 'change' is not an inevitable consequence of research engagement. Indeed, assessing whether any change has been achieved is often not well articulated once engagement is completed. Therefore, it is often difficult for researchers to say what has changed as a result of the research beyond contributing to their own careers or the abstracted body of knowledge.

Furthermore, not only is assessing change conceptually problematic, even where change is specifically being supported the ability of the researcher to achieve and drive it, change can also be compromised by the practical constraints that are placed upon the researcher:

You need a lot of time to set these things up and there wasn't the time... the time scale was incredibly short the money had to be spent by [date] and we couldn't carry it over. As often happens, these things take a long time and we had the first meeting in the August and we needed to spend the money by March and we were under pressure. (SG, 2005)

Further:

[the agency] hadn't built [the change element] into their planning. They thought that research was about people coming in and they could just hand it over and we would just produce the report that told them what the recommendations were and they could just do it. And so it was quite hard because they weren't geared up to do the work. (SG, 2005)

The realities of project funding, time, and mismatches in the perception of the outcomes of research between the researchers and the agency in question constrained research from having more impact.

In sum, change can be a useful support mechanism for research engagement but it is also a difficult outcome to achieve, even where the research is specifically designed to do so. Therefore, using change as a mechanism to support engagement is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by incorporating change in the remit of research projects there is a better prospect of engaging research groups who have perceptions of some aspect of practice or policy being altered for the better. On the other hand, a subsequent lack of change perceived by those that have engaged and expected change can result in a decreased likelihood of continuing engagement with research. This is especially acute where research samples are limited and revisited by different research projects. Whilst problems of fatigue can be overcome, it may be that it is exacerbated in contexts where the symptoms of fatigue are successfully negotiated, only to be confronted by another perceived lack of change after that further involvement.

'Why Are You Asking Me This?' Apathy, Indifference and Resistance to the Research Process

Although sampling methods within social research target people who are more likely to be interested in the subject of the project, research engagement is not necessarily interesting for everyone. Fatigue can occur because people are simply not interested in all of the elements of a research project. Indeed, where interest in some elements of the research is not high, any engagement that has been initiated can become difficult to maintain. This means that apathy towards particular parts of the research process may develop:

...if I was to say, 'right I'm holding a conference on this, I'm going to give a paper about your lives and you can come for free', I get the feeling they would say, 'I'm not coming' because it's just not their thing and you can forget that: that's often what research is about in the real world, there are people who kind of think it might be useful in academia but it's not relevant to them ... They just don't have that sort of interest. (SM, 2005)

Similarly, different methodological techniques will appeal differently to those who do engage, as this researcher highlighted:

I can think of a couple of fathers saying 'why are you asking me all these questions? Why didn't you just send out a questionnaire?' Some also said: 'why are you asking me this, I don't know'. (FC, 2005)

Research involves many different stages and processes if it is to be completed successfully. Research groups do not necessarily have an interest in being involved at every level or with every process: the more academically orientated the stage of any given research project is perceived to be, the less likely it is to be of interest to those engaged. Projects that require either more engagement than those who are involved expect, or those that have methodologies that are incongruent with their own interests can, therefore, threaten continuing engagement and result in fatigue. This is particularly threatening for qualitative projects that necessarily rely upon the depth and detail of material.

However, the process of research engagement itself does offer some unique opportunities to research groups that can counteract such apathy and can motivate people to engage. The more individual mechanisms that support engagement, such as subjective interest, introspection, and social comparison, are particularly unusual within the social realm, and can be particularly facilitative of initial engagements (see e.g. Oakley, 1981; Thomson and Holland, 2003; Warwick, 1982). This is largely because their novel aspects are not typically available to people in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, the curiosity and expectation that initial research involvement invokes is significantly reduced with lengthening engagement as the research process and all it offers (or does not) is revealed and de-mystified. Repeated engagements also become more liable to fatigue due to a diminishing interest. In essence, research loses any novelty factor the second time around.

Moreover, whilst initially supportive, any legitimating effects of 'giving voice' are equally reduced in any repeated engagement. From the perspective of many outside the research world, epistemological positions or particular researchers are, in the normal course of engagement, unlikely to be easily distinguished: one research project is likely to look similar to another to those without an interest:

... they weren't academics so it's not as if I was kind of working or researching with other academics who are interested in the field, these are the sort of people, what we'd call lay people, who are just, well saw my advert and thought 'I might be able to give some information' and that was it. (SM, 2005)

Once someone has given an opinion and had it expressed through a research engagement, the need for another legitimating research experience diminishes. As these supporting functions diminish, the effects that result from the costs of the engagement are likely to become more apparent and subsequently mobilized as a challenge to engagement. In effect, research engagement with similar projects becomes less and less interesting.

Furthermore, in contexts where the research engagement does not help, or even prevents, the members of the research group achieving their primary goals and interests, research fatigue may be an outcome. As this researcher commented:

[the service department] have their own roles and obligation ... I suppose it's more work for them and they weren't getting anything in return, so it was more hassle than it was worth. (SM, 2005)

Where resource may be considered to be at a premium, the challenge of keeping groups engaged can also become something of a war of attrition, as the research engagement competes with the primary goals of that individual or group:

I think it would be fair to say that the vast majority of professionals were interested in it and were happy to help with it, but in many cases because they were so busy we'd have to ring them four or five times. (ID, 2005)

Of course, this does not only include the more formal professions or organizations, but more informal groups also. In these arenas interference with primary goals and interests can become even more important as it is the individual, who is essentially also acting as a form of research host, who has to absorb the interference that is incurred as a result of engagement. Informal carers, for instance, are likely to find engagement a threat to their primary aims and interests and this is likely to be a huge practical barrier to engagement, as the time needed to engage is in direct competition with their primary concerns. This can quickly result in forms of research fatigue and can, in the worst instances, effectively exclude them from the research world.

Practical Causes of Fatigue: Cost, Time, and Organization

Researchers also identified a number of more practical barriers that constrain any continuing or further engagement. These are finance, time, and organization. Each is dealt with in turn.

As Thompson (1996) highlights, payments are rarely considered in the design of social research and qualitative research engagement is not typically economically rewarding at individual or collective levels. The ESRC does not routinely support payment in qualitative social research contexts (see ESRC, 2002: 11) and any financial payments are usually token gestures rather than amounting to substantial compensation. This is despite the fact that engagement can incur financial costs. Failure to recognize such costs can potentially result in forms of exclusion, refusal, or withdrawal. To compensate for this, researchers

will often try to offset and cover expenses so they do not either prevent engagement or result in withdrawal.

We've recognised, as we've got older, that it might actually cost them money to be involved. So we've made efforts to pay expenses, if they have to take a day off work, things like that, then we try to pay for their time. (SS, 2005)

However, the costs of engagement are often much more nebulous than might first be assumed and can be difficult to calculate and compensate for. For instance, this research relationship failed due to the fatigue associated with the relative locations of the researcher and a member of the research group:

It was just practical things. One of the guys was living in Scotland, so it was a really long trek to go all the way to there. (SM, 2005)

Although the financial cost of the travel could have been covered, the time and effort was deemed to be too high for both parties and a continuing engagement was not sought by either party, as the supporting mechanisms of engagement could not compensate for the time and energy that needed to be invested.

Indeed, the time that research engagement will take is often more important than the financial cost:

He was a doctor so that's all he could give me in terms of time. So literally he'd come out and meet me in his lunch break and stuff. It was funny because that's when I was interviewing in Nottingham and I was having to go all the way up to Nottingham to speak to him for twenty minutes and then coming back, so it was a little bit of a hassle, but it was really good data so ... (SM, 2005)

Research engagement requires time on behalf of both the research group and the researcher: research is not temporally neutral for either. Where this effort is deemed too high, and the benefits of engagement cannot off-set those costs, research fatigue can occur.

These more practical explanations of fatigue may also vary by methodology, with particular techniques constraining engagement if they are thought to be too costly in terms of time:

[One interviewee] was a single mum and I think it was just a case of not having the time really. I mean it was a lot to ask, asking people to do interviews for nothing, you know it takes a few hours, when they're busy it's a lot to ask and I kind of appreciated that she was doing it anyway without having to say 'I know you're a single mum and I know you work full time but can you also fill in this diary for me?' (SM, 2005)

Continuing the methodology was not considered to be worthwhile by the researcher as it was too costly for some members of the research group. As a result, the method was abandoned in favour of techniques that were less likely to produce fatigue. Methodologies are not passively accepted by those who engage, but are actively experienced. Indeed, certain methodologies can also support engagement rather than causing fatigue (see e.g. Dyregrov, 2004).

Projects that are designed to engage research groups over a period of time also have the prospect of needing up-to-date details in order to facilitate continuing engagement. This can often be challenging to the research process and result in fatigue as initial members of the research group drift away from the project. This is particularly the case in research groups where the members are more fragmented and not connected to a central organization:

... one of the big things is time and they get busier and busier the problem of fitting us in, particularly for certain groups, there are different ones, different kinds of young people, but for certain ones time is at an absolute premium and that's the real hassle for them, fitting us in ... the majority of those people who've withdrawn have withdrawn because their lives are very chaotic and we lose track of them. (SS, 2005)

Researchers are not always the priority of the members of research groups, who have competing interests and values. Within contexts where the group is much more stable, contact management is often less of a problem as the networks are more permanent. However, in groups that are not centrally located, and where repeat engagements are required, the researcher is less likely to have a captive audience and issues of time, cost, and effort become much more important.

Conclusion

This article explores how researchers understand and account for cases of research fatigue within their research projects. Using data generated from a series of interviews with experienced researchers concerning how they negotiate and manage their research relationships, a number of contributory precursors to fatigue are outlined. These include a lack of perceptible change attributable to engagement; increasing apathy and indifference toward engagement; and practical barriers such as cost, time and organization. These experiences of fatigue and over-researching can often lead to difficulties in initially recruiting people to projects and retaining that participation, as well as having an impact on the type and variety of the data that are obtained. Further, whilst the most severe instances may result in complete withdrawal from the research process, fatigue can also threaten the type and the quality of data that are obtained from the field.

Inevitably, there are limitations to the discussion presented here. Due to issues of space and well-developed coverage elsewhere, the more ethically orientated causes of fatigue are not discussed. Non-positive outcomes of engagement such as the intra- and inter-personal risks associated with harm and intrusion are not explored and the realization of these risks is likely to be a significant precursor to fatigue. Similarly, disagreements concerning representation, lack of adequate feedback, unintentional and unexpected outcomes, and the non-fulfilment of specified goals with respect to those who engage are not pursued but are possible avenues for future investigation (see Adler et al., 1992; Clark and Sinclair, 2008; Morgan, 1972; Walter et al., 2004, for respective examples).

Moreover, whilst this is a useful starting point for further research, the account offered here is limited in other ways. The focus of the study centred on projects where fatigue was not hugely problematic. All the projects were, broadly speaking, successful in terms of their research relationships and their desired outcomes. Although this is likely to be representative of the wider body of research, cases where fatigue has been noticeably problematic and particularly detrimental may be revealing.

Despite these omissions, the article does have implications for qualitative projects where repeat engagements are necessary or repeated requests for involvement are likely. Indeed, these findings are particularly important for projects where there is any repeated contact between researchers and those researched as the findings demonstrate that people who engage with research do not experience it passively. Instead, research participants have their own experiences of engagement, which, in turn, guide and influence any further involvement.

Whilst some fatigue is, perhaps, a likely outcome of any engagement, the evidence presented here suggests that research fatigue is more likely to be identified as an issue in contexts where the mechanisms that challenge research engagement are perceived to have increased or the supporting mechanisms decreased. In effect, a reduction in the perceived utility of research involvement is likely to see a rise in fatigue. For instance, many individual supporting mechanisms of engagement, such as subjective interest, introspection, social comparison, and curiosity, rely on the novelty of engagement. Hence it is more difficult to support any repeat and lengthy engagements on these terms and the non-positive aspects of engagement are increasingly likely to be recognized by those who engage.

Furthermore, any legitimating effects of giving voice are much harder to achieve the second time around and repeated research engagements are, unsurprisingly, likely to lead to questions concerning the political utility of research. Indeed, problems associated with over-researching were most likely to be reported in this study where engagement did not directly lead to any experience of change or where involvement could not contribute to the primary aims and interests of the research group.

Of course, the relationship between research and 'change' is a complex one. As has been demonstrated, and as researchers are often all too aware, even where change is an explicit purpose of the research, it is often difficult to achieve. Research can often only be considered to be a part of the process of change; it does not inevitably produce change. However, if research fatigue can result from an engagement that is not perceived to produce any change, then the research community may need to be more mindful of the expectations of those who engage and the limits of qualitative research. Consequently, there may be a case for specific attempts to be made to improving the public understanding of the role of qualitative research in policy, practice and service delivery, and its critical role in the wider world. This may also involve specifically addressing how sociological work is different from the huge array of 'research' that is conducted more generally. Whilst the ways in which science and technology are understood

by the public have long been of interest (see Gregory and Miller, 1998), the literature in respect to more qualitatively based work, and more importantly how people experience research engagement, is less well developed.

As well as developing and improving the public understanding of qualitative research, it may also be beneficial at more local levels to discuss and articulate what research groups expect and require from research. This may involve recognizing that research outcomes that are designed to make more general contributions to the knowledge field are not, by themselves, necessarily enough to sustain positive research relationships. Indeed, avoiding research fatigue may not just involve better forms of consent in which the expectations and motivations of both researcher and researched are addressed, but also making sure that there are more opportunities for local needs to be catered for within larger projects. For instance, there may be a case for increasing the opportunities for involvement within the research process by giving people more active roles in the production and analysis of data, improving mechanisms of feedback and dissemination, or even developing the research skills of those engaged (see Warren et al., 2003, for example).

It may also be productive to explore further empirically contexts where fatigue has not been particularly problematic. This is likely to be a useful avenue of investigation for two reasons. Firstly, the experiences of those who engage are much more likely to be responsive to questions of re-engagement. As a result, those who engage with research are given increased representation within the research process, rather than having their experiences filtered exclusively through the reflexivity of researchers, which is a limitation of the present study.

Secondly, such an emphasis is likely to reveal good practice within qualitative contexts that are not specifically designed to be action-based. Why are some qualitative projects more successful at avoiding research fatigue than others? Whilst the literature on the research relationships formed in longitudinal studies is instructive in this respect (see Thompson and Holland, 2003), the supporting mechanisms of engagement within different research contexts are relatively under-discussed and are worth further empirical investigation.

To conclude, the evidence offered here suggests a number of precursors to research fatigue and the associated claims of over-researching. These include lack of perceptible change attributable to engagement, increasing apathy and indifference toward engagement, and practical barriers such as cost, time, and organization. Unless these non-positive mechanisms can be offset by the supporting mechanisms of engagement, research fatigue is likely. Given the unprecedented level of qualitatively based research activity, the recognition that previous research relationships affect future ones is likely to be an important one. Indeed, a failure to recognize the processes by which research fatigue is produced may threaten the development of future research relationships and undermine the wider benefits of research and research engagement.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Research in Practice (<http://www.rip.org.uk>) as part of their commitment to supporting evidence-informed practice with children and families. I would also like to thank all those who gave up their valuable time to discuss their experiences with me. Thanks also to four anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments regarding this article.

Note

- 1 Issues of non-response and respondent fatigue are also frequently encountered within more quantitative contexts (see Groves et al., 2001, for a review). However, such discussions are typically directed at a technical level and concern the effects of missing data rather than the impact of fatigue on the quality of the research relationship.

References

- Adler, P.A., P. Adler and J.M. Johnson (1992) 'Street Corner Society Revisited: New Questions about Old Issues', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 21(1): 3–10.
- Afshar, H., M. Franks, M. Maynard and S. Wray (2002) 'Issues of Ethnicity in Researching Older Women', *ESRC Growing Older Programme Newsletter* 4(Spring): 8–9.
- Baxter, L., L. Thorne and A. Mitchell (2001) *Small Voices Big Noises, Lay Involvement in Health Research: Lessons from other Fields*. Exeter: Washington Singer Press.
- Bosworth, M., D. Campbell, B. Demby, S.M. Ferranti and M. Santos (2005) 'Doing Prison Research: Views from Inside', *Qualitative Inquiry* 11(2): 249–64.
- Butt, J. and A. O'Neil (2004) *'Let's Move On'. Black and Minority Ethnic Older People's Views on Research Findings*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Clark, T. and R. Sinclair (2008) 'The Costs and Benefits of Acting as a Research Site', *Evidence and Policy* 4(1): 105–20.
- Coy, M. (2006) '"This Morning I'm a Researcher, This Afternoon I'm an Outreach Worker": Ethical Dilemmas in Practitioner Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 9(5): 419–31.
- Crozier, G. (2003) 'Researching Black Parents: Making Sense of the Role of Research and the Researcher', *Qualitative Research* 3(1): 79–94.
- Denzin, N.K. (2000) 'The Practices and Politics of Interpretation', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 897–922. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dyregrov, K. (2004) 'Bereaved Parents' Experience of Research Participation', *Social Science and Medicine* 58(2): 391–400.
- ESRC (2002) *ESRC Research Funding Guide*. ESRC: Swindon.
- Emmel, N., K. Hughes, J. Greenhalgh and A. Sales (2007) 'Accessing Socially Excluded People: Trust and the Gatekeeper in the Researcher–Participant

- Relationship', *Sociological Research Online*, 12(2), URL (consulted January 2008): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/2/emmel.html>
- Finch, J. (1984) 'It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to': The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women', in C. Bell and H. Roberts (eds) *Social Researching: Politics, Problems and Practice*, pp. 70–87. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Glaser, B.G. and A.L. Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gregory, J. and S. Miller (1998) *Science in Public: Communication, Culture, and Credibility*. New York: Plenum Trade.
- Groves, R.M., D.A. Dillman, J.L. Eltinge and R.J.A. Little (2001) *Survey Non-response*. New York: Wiley.
- Hammersley, M. (1995) *The Politics of Social Research*. London: SAGE.
- Iacano, T. (2006) 'Ethical Challenges and Complexities of Including People with Intellectual Disabilities in Research', *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 31(3): 173–9.
- Kitchin, R. (2000) 'The Researched Opinions on Research: Disabled People and Disability Research', *Disability and Society* 15(1): 25–47.
- McGlynn, C., U. Niens, E. Cairns and H. Miles (2004) 'Moving Out of Conflict: The Contribution of Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland to Identity, Attitudes, Forgiveness and Reconciliation', *Journal of Peace Education* 1: 147–63.
- McLean, C. and W. O'Connor (2003) *Sexual Orientation Research Phase 2: The Future of LGBT Research – Perspectives of Community Organisations*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- Manderson, L., K. Kelaher, C. Shannon and G. Williams (1998) 'The Politics of Community: Negotiation and Consultation in Research on Women's Health', *Human Organization* 57(2): 222–39.
- Mauthner, M., M. Birch, J. Jessop and T. Miller (2002) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Miller, T. and L. Bell (2002) 'Consenting to What? Issues of Access, Gate-Keeping and "Informed" Consent', in M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop and T. Miller (2002) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, pp. 53–69. London: SAGE.
- Moore, R. (1996) 'Crown Street Revisited', *Sociological Research Online*, 1(3), URL (consulted January 2008): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/1/3/2.html>
- Morgan, D.H.J. (1972) 'The British Association Scandal: The Effect of Publicity on a Sociological Investigation', *The Sociological Review* 20(2): 185–206.
- Murray, C. (2005) 'Children and Young People's Participation and Non-Participation in Research', *Adoption and Fostering* 29(1): 57–66.
- Oakley, A. (1981) 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms', in H. Roberts (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*, pp. 30–61. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Peel, E., O. Parry, M. Douglas and J. Lawton (2006) "'It's no Skin off my Nose": Why People Take Part in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Health Research* 16(10): 1335–49.
- Peterson, D. (1999) *Encouraging Ethical and Non-Discriminatory Research with Mental Health Consumers*. Mental Health Commission Occasional Publications No 1. Wellington: Mental Health Commission.
- Pickerden, A. (2002) 'Muslim Women in Higher Education: New Sites of Lifelong Learning', *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 21(1): 37–43.

- Quilgars, D. and N. Pleace (2003) *Delivering Health Care to Homeless People: An Effectiveness Review*. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland.
- Seymour, J., G. Bellamy, M. Gott, S.H. Ahmedzai and D. Clark (2002) 'Using Focus Groups to Explore Older People's Attitudes to End of Life Care', *Ageing and Society* 22(4): 517–26.
- Sharp, C. and S. Murdoch (2006) *How to Gather Views on Service Quality: Guidance for Social Landlords*. Edinburgh: Communities Scotland/Scottish Executive.
- Smyth, M. and W. Williamson (eds) (2004) *Researchers and their 'Subjects': Ethics, Power, Knowledge and Consent*. Bristol: Policy.
- Stewart, K. and M. Williams (2005) 'Researching Online Populations: The Use of Online Focus Groups for Social Research', *Qualitative Research* 5(4): 395–416.
- Strauss, A. and J. Corbin (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Thompson, S. (1996) 'Paying Respondents and Informants', *Social Research Update* 14, URL (consulted January 2008): <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU14.html>
- Thomson, R. and J. Holland (2003) 'Hindsight, Foresight and Insight: The Challenges of Longitudinal Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6(3): 233–44.
- Tomlinson, M., L. Swartz and M. Landman (2006) 'Insiders and Outsiders: Levels of Collaboration in Research Partnerships across Resource Divides', *Infant Mental Health Journal* 27(6): 532–43.
- Van Maanen, J. (1991) 'Playing back the Tape: Early Days in the Field', in W.B. Shaffir and R.A. Stebbins (eds) *Experiencing Fieldwork*, pp. 31–42. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Walter I., S. Nutley, J. Percy-Smith, D. McNeish and S. Frost (2004) *Improving the Use of Research in Social Care Practice*. Knowledge Review 7. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.
- Warren, L., J. Cook, N. Clarke, P. Hadfield, P. Haywood-Reed, L. Millen, M. Parkinson, J. Robinson and W. Winfield (2003) 'Working with Older Women in Research: Some Methods-Based Issues', *Quality in Ageing* 4(4): 24–31.
- Warwick, D. (1982) 'Tea Room Trade: Means and Ends in Social Research', in M. Bulmer (ed.) *Social Research Ethics*, pp. 38–58. London: Macmillan.

Tom Clark

Has worked on a variety of projects concerning the utility of social research and is currently completing PhD work on the impact that research has on those who are researched. He has wider interests in methodological innovation, research ethics, and the politics of social research.

Address: Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU, UK.

E-mail: t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk