What is sensitive research?

Efforts to address these issues would be enhanced by more published accounts of investigators’ experiences in dealing with the effects on researchers of conducting studies on sensitive and emotionally laden topics: too little attention is given to documenting the process of carrying out research.

(Milling-Kinard, 1996:69)

In this introductory chapter we examine a range of different definitions of sensitive research. We discuss the historical developments of sensitive research and explore some of the sensitivities inherent in undertaking qualitative research on such topics. We outline the importance of researching sensitive topics and provide an overview of the remainder of the book.

Defining sensitive research

There are many definitions of sensitive research, ranging from those that refer to the topic of investigation to those that encompass the whole of the research activity, including its implications for practice and the wider research community. Joan Sieber and Liz Stanley (1988:49) define ‘socially sensitive’ research as, ‘studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research’. This definition of sensitive research is very general and by applying it, almost all social research could be defined as sensitive. All research has consequences of some kind. However, some consequences may be more directly harmful than others. Often discussions of what constitutes sensitive research focus too narrowly on only the ethical dimensions of sensitive research.

Raymond Lee (1993) argues that there are some advantages in defining sensitive research according to Sieber and Stanley’s definition as it enables a broad definition of sensitive research to include some research areas that may not have been previously thought to be sensitive. However, he goes on to criticize the definition proposed by Sieber and Stanley, stating that it focuses
Chapter 1: What is sensitive research?

on ‘the consequences of the research rather than the specific technical and methodological issues that are inherent in sensitive research’ (Lee, 1993:3). In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues in sensitive research it is important to examine more than just the consequences of undertaking the research. Raymond Lee (1993) agrees that it is important to investigate the methodological issues as well, and to examine them from the perspective of both researchers and participants.

Previously, research on sensitive topics has been equated with research on those topics that are taboo (Faberow, 1963). Taboo topics are defined as those ‘which are laden with emotion or which inspire feelings of awe or dread’ (Lee, 1993:6). Claire Renzetti and Raymond Lee in their edited book *Researching Sensitive Topics* (1993:ix) define a ‘sensitive’ research topic as one that is ‘intimate, discreditable or incriminating’. Health and social science researchers are involved in research being undertaken on a wide variety of topics that fit easily into either one of these definitions; for example, research exploring birth, death, cancer, grief, sexual abuse, violence, drug use or homelessness (Burr, 1995; Higgins, 1998; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; Liamputtong, 2000; Ridge, Hee & Aroni, 1999; Sque, 2000).

Lee (1993:4) puts forward another definition of sensitive research that encompasses the topic, the consequences, the situation and any number of other issues that may arise by saying that sensitive research is ‘research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it’. This definition is our preferred definition and the one that has been adopted for this book, as it suggests that sensitive research has the potential to impact on all of the people who are involved in it. This definition encourages us to examine the potential for harm to the researchers conducting the research as well as to the research participants taking part.

Lee (1993) proposes that sensitive research can be seen as threatening in three broad areas. The first of these areas is ‘intrusive threat’, which deals with areas that are ‘private, stressful or sacred’ (Lee, 1993:4). Examples might include sexual or religious practices. The second type of threat is ‘threat of sanction’, which relates to studies of deviance and involves the possibility that research may reveal information that is stigmatizing or incriminating in some way. An example of the threat of sanction might be conducting interviews with people with a drug addiction who may reveal illegal behaviours as part of the interview. The third type of threat that may be imposed by sensitive research is a ‘political threat’. This refers to the ‘vested interests’ of the powerful in society and in these situations researchers may trespass into areas that involve some sort of social conflict. An example of political threat can be seen in the work done by John Brewer investigating routine policing in Northern Ireland (Brewer, 1993). Raymond Lee and Claire Renzetti (1993:6) specify a number of areas in which some research is more likely to be threatening than others and these are summarized in Box 1.1.

Lee (1993:22) highlights that defining research that intrudes into the personal sphere as sensitive is not necessarily helpful because each person has a
different ‘private sphere’. This is well demonstrated in the published literature when we see that the topics and activities defined as sensitive vary widely across cultures and situations.

Some areas of personal life that researchers wish to investigate may not be so much private as emotional. For example, research regarding death and dying may not be private but may be emotionally taxing on those taking part in the research. Taking part in research of this nature may be a stressful experience for both the researcher and the researched and is therefore likely to be considered sensitive.

The threat of sanction can also be a problem for some participants in sensitive research as the participants may fear ‘exploitation or derogation’ by taking part in the study (Lee 1993:33). This is an important consideration for researchers studying sensitive topics who do not wish to exploit the community, for example, migrants, ethnic minority groups or low-income groups. Lee (1993:74) also states that ‘research which might bring to light that which was formerly hidden’ can be problematic for those taking part. The participants may face some sort of discrimination or stigma if a hidden part of their lives is revealed, for example problem gamblers or those with drug or alcohol addictions. When designing research on sensitive topics it is important to weigh the potential risks against the benefits by giving careful consideration to whether the research findings might further stigmatize or marginalize the population under study (Flaskerud & Winslow, 1998). There is a range of different methodological textbooks available to qualitative researchers undertaking research on sensitive topics and many of them document the issues faced by research participants (see for example Grbich, 1999; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Morse & Field, 1995). However, the issues faced by researchers have received little empirical attention.

**Historical developments of sensitive research**

The Chicagoans really were the first to carry out social research on sensitive topics and to give it some credibility. Many of the topics that were studied by

---

**Box 1.1 Areas in which research is likely to be threatening**

(a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience;
(b) where the study is concerned with deviance or social control;
(c) where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or
(d) where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.

(Lee & Renzetti, 1993:6)
the early Chicago sociologists would today be regarded as sensitive (Lee, 1993:11). Much of their research revolved around the family, friendships and communities and often involved gaining access to the private lives of the people taking part. Martin Bulmer (1984:90) points out, ‘the Chicagoans were relatively unselfconscious about their methods, something which in part may have allowed them to sidestep the methodological and ethical issues raised by the study of sensitive topics’.

Social transformations of the 1960s and 1970s saw many changes taking place in social research across the world (Lee, 1993). Research programmes began to widen to include topics that had been previously paid little attention due to what has been termed ‘perceived sensitivity’ (Lee, 1993:13) for example, safe sex practices, domestic violence, alcoholism. There were other developments in social research, which included what has been described by Alvin Gouldner (1968, in Lee, 1993:14) as ‘underdog sociology’. This type of research was associated with writers like Howard Becker (1963) who began to focus on researching the field of deviance.

Contemporary feminism has its roots in the political Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s, which included campaigns against the objectification of women as sexual objects for male consumption and violence against women. Feminist research also emerged in the 1960s as a type of research, with arguments about whether or not there is a ‘feminist methodology’ (Stanley & Wise, 1993:176). Raymond Lee (1993) acknowledges that feminist researchers do tend to share a commitment to certain ways of researching women and their positions in society. There are some specific methodological traits of feminist research, which include the establishment of non-hierarchical relationships between the researcher and the researched (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981) and an acknowledgement of the subjective nature of research (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Stanley, 1990). Much feminist research seeks to understand the experiences of women in relation to such things as power, domination and disadvantage in gender relationships. In order to research and explain these types of issues much of the research focuses on the private experiences of the women. Some of the authors writing about sensitive research advocate for the adoption of some of the principles of feminist research to enhance research on sensitive topics (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Jansen & Davis, 1998; Lee & Renzetti, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007; Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). An examination of qualitative research based on feminist principles uncovers a range of topics that are particularly sensitive, including rape (Bergen, 1993; Campbell, 2002), domestic violence (Ellsberg, Heise, Pena et al., 2001; Grossman & Kruger, 1999; O’Neill, 1996; Stanko, 1997; Taylor, Magnussen & Amundson, 2001), eating disorders (Kiesinger, 1998) and miscarriage (Swanson, 1999).

In order to undertake sensitive research it is often necessary to develop a relationship with those whom we are hoping to research. Sometimes this
may involve the development of a personal relationship. This orientation of research is often emphasized by feminist researchers (Oakley, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1991) who highlight the need to develop a special type of relationship with research participants in sensitive research. This type of particularly human relationship is a key element of researching sensitive topics and needs to be acknowledged. As Ann Oakley (1981:58) states, ‘personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives’. This personal involvement is paramount in researching sensitive issues because of the often intimate nature of the research topics and the resulting subjectivity of the research process.

**Sensitivities**

As mentioned above, sensitive research encompasses research on a wide range of topics, undertaken in a range of different locations, using a variety of methods. There is no generic way to describe what sensitive research is. However, it can be characterized by examining some of the topics that may have been perceived as sensitive. Some examples of sensitive topics are sexual behaviours, deviance, drug abuse, death and other topics sometimes labelled as taboo subjects (Lee, 1993; Lee & Renzetti, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007). Many areas of research have the potential to be threatening to those taking part. Although there are some topics that are more obviously sensitive (such as those mentioned above), any topic could potentially be seen to be sensitive depending on the people being researched and their feelings about the topic. For example, the level of sensitivity of the topic may vary according to culture, age, gender or a number of other factors.

Topics that invade what has been termed the ‘private sphere’ (Lee 1993:5) are thought to be sensitive; however, there is a large variation in what people perceive to be private, and this varies across different ages, cultures and situations. The topic may also be sensitive because of the emotions evoked by participating. Joan Sieber (1993:18) refers to the ‘perception of risk’, highlighting that different groups of people will have different perceptions of risk. The gatekeepers, ethics committees, researchers and participants may all perceive the risk differently as this perception is highly subjective.

Other topics typically considered to be sensitive include those such as abuse, death and violence. It has been noted that there is the likelihood for research on these types of topics to evoke strong memories in the participants. Claire Draucker (1999) articulates her concerns when researching sexual violence. She argues, ‘Of particular concern to violence researchers are the ethical implications of using procedures such as in-depth interviews and detailed questionnaires that may unleash painful emotions and memories in participants’ (Draucker, 1999:162). The possibility that participating in
research may ‘unleash painful memories’ has also been cited by Michelle Ramos (1989:59), who refers to this as the ‘Pandora’s box’ phenomenon. It has been argued that often researchers do not adequately address the potential psychological harm that may result from research that evokes intense emotional reactions (Lee & Renzetti, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007; Ramos, 1989; Renzetti & Lee, 1993).

The importance of sensitive research

Whatever the definition, researchers need to undertake research on so-called sensitive topics to enhance the understanding of many of the issues that affect people in today’s society. The decision to avoid research on sensitive topics could be seen by some researchers as evasion of responsibility. As Joan Sieber and Liz Stanley (1988:55) convincingly argue:

Sensitive research addresses some of society’s most pressing social issues and policy questions. Although ignoring the ethical issues in sensitive research is not a responsible approach to science, shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is also an avoidance of responsibility.

This point has also been made by Raymond Lee and Claire Renzetti (1993:10) who add that, in order to ensure that social scientists do not shy away from undertaking research on sensitive topics, they ‘must confront seriously and thoroughly the problems and issues that these topics pose’. In order to confront the problems that research on sensitive topics may pose it is important to document the issues that this type of research can raise. While a small number of writers (Campbell, 2002; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Lee, 1993; Lee & Renzetti, 1993) have attempted to document some of the challenges associated with this type of research, very few have focused directly on the issues that this type of research raises for the researchers. Much of the discussion in other researchers’ accounts of sensitive research, focus mainly on ethical issues such as informed consent and the issue of harm. Kathleen Cowles (1988:163) highlights one of the dangers of focusing on ethics alone:

When the qualitative researcher delves into the private worlds and experiences of subjects, sometimes evoking strong emotional responses and sometimes pursuing thoughts that might otherwise never be revealed, consideration of the common ethical issues may not be enough.

There is a danger in focusing too narrowly on the ethical issues (although they are important). By narrowing the focus, the other issues inherent in sensitive research may not be given the consideration that they deserve.

Other researchers have illustrated that there are a number of specific theoretical and methodological problems inherent in researching sensitive
topics (Brannen, 1988; Cannon, 1989; Lee, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007; Platzer & James, 1997; Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Robertson, 2000). What then, is the best way to approach a sensitive topic? Julia Brannen (1988:553) suggests that ‘allowing the research topic to emerge gradually on its own terms is a theoretical as well as a methodological strategy’. Brannen (1988) adds that in researching sensitive topics it is important not to prejudge the research problem by labelling or defining the boundaries too closely. She feels that it is better to allow the participants to define the problem in their own terms.

Planning a sensitive research project

Collecting data in sensitive research can sometimes be a very difficult task and is often fraught with problems (Brannen, 1988; Lee, 1993; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). A number of methodological innovations have facilitated the collection of data on sensitive topics over the past 20 years; however, they have tended to be of the technical kind (Lee, 1993). These technological advances have focused on facilitating the asking of sensitive questions on surveys or methods to enhance the protection of confidentiality. In more recent years, the ethical, legal and political aspects of research have become more important (Lee, 1993). This has been coupled with a need to extend the research boundaries in an attempt to understand the lives of the people. Research on a sensitive topic that truly examines the experiences of people is more likely to be undertaken using qualitative methodologies (Liamputtong, 2007; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). This type of methodology is based on the interpretivist paradigm, which provides the researchers with a holistic approach to those involved in the research. It sees individuals in their social contexts and allows the research agenda to be shaped by both the researcher and the researched. It seeks to develop an understanding of the ‘world view’ of the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Qualitative research is more suited to the study of sensitive topics as it does not assume prior knowledge of people’s experiences (Lee, 1993). Instead it allows people to develop and express their own reality.

Many researchers of sensitive topics choose a qualitative design using the in-depth interview as their preferred method of data collection (Lee, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007). There is a range of issues that arise when qualitative interviewing is used by researchers investigating sensitive topics. One of the main issues raised is that these interviews are often stressful for both the researcher and the interviewee (Alty & Rodham, 1998; Burr, 1995; Campbell, 2002; Dunn, 1991; Gilbert, 2001b). In-depth interviews can be done on a one-off basis or they can involve a more longitudinal design. Some authors feel that sensitive research should be characterized by a one-off nature (Brannen, 1988); others feel that this is inappropriate and that we should
first work at building rapport and a relationship with the potential participant through more than one interview (Oakley, 1981). Both approaches require the researcher to develop different kinds of relationships with the people they wish to involve in their research. There are a number of potential challenges associated with the types of relationships that researchers build with research participants. The intensity and duration of the relationship will vary with the different methodologies as well as the theoretical frameworks used to design the research.

Researchers choosing to conduct a one-off interview need to be aware that participants may be willing to disclose more to the researcher than they normally would due to the one-off nature of the encounter (Brannen, 1988). It has been found that building a relationship with a participant before beginning the research may also be problematic in that having an established relationship with a participant may impact on the types of information given to the researcher and may in fact be exploitative (Oakley, 1981) as participants may disclose more to a person whom they have established a relationship with. Sally Hutchinson, Margaret Wilson and Holly Skodol Wilson (1994) believe that people who cannot tolerate talking about a sensitive topic will not do so. However, as previously stated, if the researcher is able to build a relationship with the participant based on reciprocity and personal involvement then this may impact on their willingness to take part in the research and open a part of themselves that they ordinarily would keep closed. Some participants may not be aware of issues that taking part in research on a sensitive topic may evoke for them (Ramos, 1989). Research participants often do reveal highly personal aspects of their lives to researchers, which are beyond what people would normally disclose. While it is not possible to state whether a one-off encounter is better or worse than multiple-encounter research, it is important to note that the quality of the data collected may be dependent on the researcher’s ability to develop an intimate and ongoing relationship with the participant.

One of the most important aspects of data collection in an in-depth interview on a sensitive topic is that the researcher is able to develop rapport with the participant (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Lee, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As stated by Victor Minichiello, Rosalie Aroni, Eric Timewell and Lois Alexander (2000:179):

If we accept that in-depth interviewing necessitates establishing and maintaining good rapport with informants then it should also be recognised that such a process is never devoid of some form of emotional commitment from both sides of the fence.

Some researchers have reported experiencing feelings of guilt when the relationship comes to an end (Burr, 1995; Cannon, 1989). Others have spoken about the difficulties faced by researchers when the participants in their studies die (Beaver, Luker & Woods, 1999; Cannon, 1989, 1992; De Raeve, 1994).
Researchers need to be able to prepare themselves to physically and emotionally disengage at the end of the research. Minichiello and colleagues (2000:174) report that very few researchers prepare themselves to exit the relationship ‘and even fewer report on the process when providing details of their project’. Some writers advocate for researchers to take into account the effects that exiting the research can have on both the researcher and the interviewee and the effect that this can have on the data (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000a; Ridge et al., 1999). Ann Oakley (1981:41), a feminist methodologist, highlights that:

in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.

Part of this investment of personal identity in the research relationship involves researchers taking their and their participant’s emotions into account in the collection and interpretation of the data. This emotion can take the form of verbal and non-verbal communication. For example pauses, silences and non-verbal emotional displays such as tears and embarrassment also need to be included in the data set and analysis. While there has been acknowledgement that there needs to be an emotional commitment made by researchers and participants, the impacts of making such a commitment have not been well documented.

Implications of researching a sensitive topic

Some researchers feel that undertaking research on a sensitive topic requires a thorough examination of the impacts that actually doing that research may have on both the researcher and the participant. For example, Kathleen Cowles (1988:164), in her research with a group of adult surviving relatives of murder victims carried out shortly after the murder, felt that:

Although aware of some of the potential problems related to the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the subjects, I was admittedly very naïve about the actual sensitivity and how the study activities would influence both the subjects and myself.

Researchers have often asked themselves questions about using vulnerable and disempowered people for their own research purposes (Liamputtong, 2007; Russell, 1999; Sque, 2000). The benefits of undertaking the research have to outweigh the risks of undertaking the research. This is a difficult problem as some of the issues surrounding sensitive research are not always apparent at the outset of the research. Researchers often cannot predict how they or the participants will be affected; they often do not know in advance what may come out of the research. Magi Sque (2000) raised this issue in her
work with bereaved relatives of organ donors. She had a sense that she was dragging up painful memories for the sake of research. When researchers do gain entry into the private worlds of others they have the potential to invade, distort or destroy parts of the private world. If participants in sensitive research open themselves to this type of research they are also opening themselves to the possibility that they may be somehow changed by the process.

This is also true for the researchers. Researchers also open up some of themselves to the participants and in doing so render themselves vulnerable to change. Erving Goffman (1973:178) terms this a ‘mortification of self’, referring to a remaking of a person by an invasive exposure, as the embodiments of self are violated. In this ‘mortification of self’ he highlights that in order for people to have control over their lives they need to also have control over what is known about the private areas of their lives by others. By examining what often are painful experiences, sensitive research has the potential to invade or destroy this private world of both the participants and researchers. When researchers disclose parts of themselves to the participant to help build a relationship based on reciprocity and trust, they may in fact be rendering their own ‘selves’ as vulnerable.

**Potential difficulties for the researcher**

Raymond Lee (1993) in his book *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* presents many of the threats and difficulties that may be faced by both the participants and the researchers. In the introduction he states that: ‘Sensitive research often also has potential effects on the personal life, and sometimes on the personal security, of the researcher’ (Lee, 1993:1). In this statement he alerts researchers that undertaking sensitive research can impact on aspects of their personal lives. Warnings like these are not new. Since the early 1970s researchers have been thinking and writing about the potential effects that social research can have on the researcher (Kellehear, 1989; Liamputtong, 2007; Perry, 1989; Sieber & Stanley, 1988; Wax, 1971). While these writings have focused on social research in general, Lee (1993) was the first author to concentrate specifically on the issues for researchers of sensitive research topics. In presenting the issues for these researchers, Raymond Lee (1993:16) highlights that researchers need to find ways of dealing with the problems and issues raised by research on sensitive topics. The threats which the research poses to research participants, to the researcher and to others need to minimized, managed or mitigated.

Researchers have become particularly adept at assessing and mitigating any threats or harms to the participants that may be inherent in the research. However, doing the same for the researchers is yet to be fully developed and accepted by the research community.