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### Exploring Researcher Vulnerability

Contexts, complications and conceptualisation

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**Exploring Researcher Vulnerability: contexts, complications and conceptualisation**

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## Exploring Researcher Vulnerability: Contexts, Complications and Conceptualisation

### Abstract

Research involving vulnerable consumer populations is on the increase and understanding the social consequences of consumption within different marketing contexts has become a common theme across Consumer Culture Theory, Transformative Consumer Research and Critical Marketing. Yet the diverse difficulties faced by researchers who investigate consumer vulnerability have not been sufficiently addressed. In line with the need for greater reflexivity in research, this paper reflects on our own research experiences and highlights the complexities associated with conducting research on sensitive topics in challenging contexts. With reference to such experiences, we illustrate the phenomenon of researcher vulnerability and discuss its implications for knowledge generation within the marketing domain.

**Keywords:** researcher vulnerability, vulnerable consumers, interpretivist research, knowledge generation

## Introduction

Research involving vulnerable consumer populations is on the increase and understanding the social consequences of consumption within different marketing contexts has become a common theme across Consumer Culture Theory, Transformative Consumer Research and Critical Marketing (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Mick, 2006; Tadajewski, 2010). Yet the diverse difficulties faced by researchers who investigate consumer vulnerability have not been sufficiently addressed. We have all conducted independent studies involving vulnerable consumers. Through discussion it became apparent that our four studies converged, not simply in our interpretivist theoretical lens, but also in terms of the vulnerabilities we encountered. In line with the need for greater reflexivity in research (Miller et al., 1998; Thompson, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Brown, 2004; Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008, 2009), this paper reflects on our own research experiences in order to highlight the complexities associated with conducting research on sensitive topics in challenging contexts.

Such challenges, as the extant literature reveals, have been explored by the wider disciplines of psychology (Sieber and Stanley, 1988; Banyard and Flanagan, 2006), education (Tillman, 2002; Seidman, 2006), sociology (Miller et al., 1998; Brackenridge, 1999; Birenbaum-Carmeli et al., 2008), public health (Alty and Rodham, 1998; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008, 2009), and social research (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). By joining this conversation we seek to highlight its relevance to contemporary marketing research and offer insights into the ways researchers construct knowledge about vulnerable consumers. Our key contributions are twofold: 1) through reflecting on our research experiences, we discuss the challenges we confronted. By doing so, we outline the often

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2  
3 overlooked concept of 'researcher vulnerability'. 2) We explore the impact of such  
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5 vulnerability on the construction of knowledge.  
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10 Our paper is organised as follows. We begin with a discussion of the importance of  
11  
12 researching vulnerable consumers to the development of theory and practice in marketing.  
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14 Next, in light of literature on sensitive research, we discuss some of the key challenges of  
15  
16 investigating sensitive topics and their impact on knowledge production. The method section  
17  
18 outlines our research contexts and provides a brief account of the research approach  
19  
20 employed for this paper. We then present data from our individual narratives to illustrate  
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22 themes of 'emotion and disempowerment', 'shifting power dynamics', and 'personal safety'.  
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24 Before concluding the paper, we discuss the implications of our study for a variety of  
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26 stakeholders whose institutional practices influence knowledge generation in the field of  
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28 marketing.  
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### 32 33 34 **Vulnerable consumers**

35  
36 Vulnerable consumers experience powerlessness and a dependence on external factors (i.e.,  
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38 marketers) to participate in marketplace activities (Baker et al., 2005; Andreasen and  
39  
40 Manning, 1990). Vulnerability can occur across diverse consumption contexts due to the  
41  
42 interaction between individual and environmental factors – 'when barriers prohibit control  
43  
44 and prevent freedom of choice' (Baker et al., 2005, p. 135). It is recognised that not all  
45  
46 consumers have equal access to marketplace resources. For instance, low-income consumers  
47  
48 encounter exchange restrictions that constrain participation in mainstream consumption  
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50 culture (Alwitt and Donley, 1996, Hill, 2001; Hamilton and Catterall, 2006). There are also  
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52 those whose everyday life consumption experiences are regulated by institutional forces  
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54 (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Jafari and Goulding, 2008, 2012). Similarly, research  
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3 involving disabled consumers (Mason and Pavia, 2006a and b; Downey and Catterall, 2007),  
4 those suffering from serious illness (Hunter-Jones, 2010) and those experiencing  
5 bereavement (Canning and Szmigin, 2010) paint a picture of lives overshadowed by  
6 uncertainty, immobility and social exclusions. Researchers investigating vulnerable  
7 consumers tend to move away from a market-centred world view to a more society-centred  
8 focus (Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006), a focus which can liberate marketing from its micro  
9 environment (i.e., simply managerial implications) and re-establish society as its macro  
10 habitat; this macro-perspective is more suited to addressing individuals' life challenges (Firat  
11 and Dholakia, 1997; Tadajewski, 2010). This stream of research does not aim to simply  
12 arouse feelings of sympathy in its audiences; rather, it seeks to instigate action. It offers a  
13 deeper insight into how vulnerable consumers feel about their lives, consumption practices,  
14 and multiple interactions with markets, marketing, and other market-influencing institutions  
15 (e.g., governments, regulatory bodies, NGOs, media). This body of research questions taken-  
16 for-granted assumptions about the nature of markets and the operationalisation of marketing  
17 practices (Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006). It offers policy implications and enables marketers  
18 to recognise, understand, and respond, in a humanistic way, to the diverse needs of  
19 consumers (for example, Hill, 2005). Therefore, identifying the difficulties of researching in  
20 these contexts should be regarded as a decisive step towards future knowledge construction.  
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### 47 **Research in a sensitive context**

48 For the sake of our discussion, we define sensitive research as 'research which potentially  
49 poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993, p.4). There  
50 is a general consensus (Lee, 1993; Lee and Renzetti, 1993; Miller et al., 1998; Lee-Treweek  
51 and Linkogle, 2000; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) that sensitive research covers a wide range of  
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3 topics such as poverty, sexual behaviours, death, illness, gender power relations, religion,  
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5 ethnicity, migration, drug and alcohol addiction, bullying, domestic violence, disability, and  
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7 political intolerance. These topics incorporate elements of emotional, psychological, or  
8  
9 physical anxiety as they represent some of the most pressing human problems (Lee and  
10  
11 Renzetti, 1993). As a result, those involved in conducting sensitive research can experience  
12  
13 differing measures of vulnerability which can in turn influence both the researcher and the  
14  
15 research process (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2007; Downey et al., 2007). Although not all  
16  
17 researchers experience (the same type and degree of) vulnerability, we must appreciate the  
18  
19 potential impact of undertaking such projects on researchers (Liamputtong, 2007). Depending  
20  
21 on the research context (see, Hill, 1995), vulnerabilities may influence researchers in their  
22  
23 engagement with, and understanding of, the research phenomena and in their production and  
24  
25 dissemination of knowledge. It is therefore imperative that the impact of these challenges be  
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27 understood from the perspective of the researcher.  
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34 As we contend, researchers investigating sensitive topics are exposed to the highly emotive  
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36 situations and sometimes life-threatening conditions of their participants; and as a result are  
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38 susceptible to experiencing participant-like emotions (Alty and Rodham, 1998). As such  
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40 research becomes 'emotion[al] labour', where the sustained engagement/immersion in the  
41  
42 research context can be instrumental in the researcher experiencing emotional and  
43  
44 psychological distress (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009 after Hochschild 1983). These experiences  
45  
46 can be short lived or may endure well beyond the research process (Dunn, 1991; Stone,  
47  
48 2009). In addition, researchers may suffer from feelings of 'guilt' or 'betrayal' (Lofland and  
49  
50 Lofland, 1995; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) upon leaving participants at the end of the field  
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52 work period. However, in doing so, and in order to get work published, focus falls on  
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54 research rigour at the expense of reflecting on emotional well-being (Dickson-Swift et al.,  
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2009). These difficulties affect researchers' decisions on whether or not to engage in such challenging contexts. While some researchers embrace risk to study sensitive topics, others avoid such controversial research topics simply because they are problematic. This avoidance, Sieber and Stanley (1988) contend, evades a responsibility to address sensitive topics. As such, some authors (i.e., Sieber and Stanley, 1988; Lee and Renzetti, 1993 and Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) advise that knowledge can only be extended/enhanced through documenting challenges particular to the sensitive research domain. Our reflections form part of this documentation as they bring to the fore the barriers and vulnerabilities we encountered throughout our studies. Traditionally, institutional forces (e.g., publishers, research committees, journal editors, and funding bodies) disregard the role played by emotion in knowledge production (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). This traditional ideology is questioned by the current upsurge in interest in unseen aspects of the research process suggesting that a shift in institutional thinking is required to accommodate new perspectives (see Hogg and Maclaren, 2008; Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009).

### **The interpretive lens and knowledge generation**

Interpretive research offers an appropriate means by which to address sensitive topics (Liamputtong, 2007). Interpretivism translates into research approaches that support a close researcher-researched relationship. The initiation of such rapport is considered a key factor in the elucidation of knowledge (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). As such, immersion in the context of the research is vital; Ger and Sandıkçı (2006, p.513) emphasise this point: 'in the case of researching sensitive topics, theoretical reflection and available knowledge can be limited' mainly because 'people tend to conceal their identities and activities.' This immersion can also encourage participants to reveal narratives of self, or as (Hill, 1995, p. 147) indicates,



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3 becoming 'willing partners and equals', in a 'collective enterprise of knowledge production.'  
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5 MacInnis (2011, p. 152) also argues that immersion is pivotal to generating new insights as it  
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7 is through such an approach that we come to understand our participants' everyday realities  
8  
9 and 'identify what others have not yet discovered.' MacInnis further contends that  
10  
11 'immersion is rarely encouraged, except among scholars who adhere to the consumer culture  
12  
13 theory paradigm' (p.152). In light of such thinking, marketing scholars have started to reflect  
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15 on and critique the discipline's decline in new knowledge production (Palmer and Ponsonby,  
16  
17 2002).  
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22 Our studies employed different interpretive methodological approaches (grounded theory,  
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24 social constructionism, radical constructivism and phenomenology), yet we held the common  
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26 desire to get close to and capture the lived experiences of our participants. Knowledge  
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28 construction based on immersion seeks to encourage marketing researchers to move beyond  
29  
30 the protective shells of scientific approaches (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) and political  
31  
32 neutrality (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009) and adopt a 'self-reflexive' position.  
33  
34 Reflexive practices encourage us to confront the manner in which we consider the world  
35  
36 around us and the knowledge we attempt to generate (Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006). We are  
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38 required to consider the research process from new angles and transgress the hierarchical  
39  
40 relationships between us (researchers) and them (the researched) (Buttle, 1998). The act of  
41  
42 reflexivity highlights 'the knowledge-making practices of researchers as participating in the  
43  
44 context under study, actively producing and being produced by that context, not merely  
45  
46 documenting and observing' (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009, p.663). Such practices  
47  
48 allow researchers to critically monitor their own roles and ways of thinking at different stages  
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50 of their inquiry (i.e., pre, during and post) (Hertz, 1997). The following discussion depicts  
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3 such a critical reflection from a retrospective perspective – looking back to reflect on  
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5 experiences of vulnerability encountered in completed research projects on sensitive topics.  
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## 8 9 10 **Method**

11 Each of us have conducted sensitive research with vulnerable populations and experienced  
12  
13 particular forms of vulnerability. In this section, we briefly explain the way we constructed  
14  
15 themes to reflect these dimensions of vulnerability. However, given the importance of context  
16  
17 to knowledge generation (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), we would like to briefly elaborate on  
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19 the contextual perspective of each author's research.  
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25 Author 1's research involved investigating Iranian young adults' lifestyle choices and identity  
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27 construction in the context of cultural globalisation. Due to the political dynamics of the  
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29 country, issues of identity in Iran are regarded as politically sensitive (Jafari and Goulding,  
30  
31 2008, 2012). In the eyes of Iranian authorities, the 'Imperialist West' attempts to weaken the  
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33 Islamic society's cultural integrity by promoting 'decadent' Western lifestyles and ideologies.  
34  
35 It is also believed that the West's project of 'cultural invasion' rests upon intelligentsia to  
36  
37 promote the ideas of liberalism and secularism amongst the young population of the country.  
38  
39 On this basis, Iranian authorities have created an ideological divide between '*khodi*' (those  
40  
41 who are one of us) and '*gheir-e-khodi*' (those who are not one of us) (Khosravi, 2008). This  
42  
43 means that if someone (e.g., a researcher or author) is categorised as '*gheir-e-khodi*', that  
44  
45 person could be accused of helping the enemy's (the West) project of 'cultural invasion', and  
46  
47 consequently be detained. It was in such a context that he conducted 28 depth interviews and  
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52 4 focus groups with young adults aged 18-33.  
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3 Author 2's project employed a phenomenological approach to explore the collective  
4 experience of illness (Thompson et al., 1989). The context for this investigation was the US  
5 Myeloma community; particularly a network of 3 patient-led, community-based support  
6 groups in the Mid-west, accessed through a group leader who acted as gatekeeper. Myeloma  
7 is an incurable form of bone marrow cancer. Patients may have the disease for several years  
8 and it is characterised by cycles of active disease and remission (Durie, 2003). A period of  
9 contextualisation, drawing on informal interviews with community members and community-  
10 produced secondary data, was followed by non-participant observation at support group  
11 meetings over a period of 4 months. Subsequently 20 face-to-face depth interviews were  
12 carried out with 15 Myeloma patients and their spouses or family members - "carers", as they  
13 are known. Through this study attention was drawn to the under-explored phenomenon of  
14 collective enablement of self-identity. The personal movement revealed by participants is  
15 from a position of passivity, fear and objectification to one of perceived control,  
16 understanding and skilled navigation of the healthcare market.  
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36 Author 3's research involved in-depth interviews with low-income families to explore the  
37 coping strategies they employed in response to experiences of relative poverty in consumer  
38 culture. The study was based on visiting 30 families in their homes, talking to parents and  
39 children over the age of 11. The majority of the families were headed by single mothers and  
40 all clearly fell below the poverty line with an average weekly income of £150. Key themes  
41 arising from data collection were experiences and impact of stigmatisation, social exclusion,  
42 children's well-being, consumer agency and coping responses to material and social  
43 deprivation. This research was conducted in urban areas of Northern Ireland and many of the  
44 participants lived in areas associated with high crime levels and anti-social activity.  
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3 Author 4's research involved three individual cases of homebound consumers that were  
4 explored over a two-year period by means of ongoing conversational style interviews. The  
5 lived consumption experiences that these homebound consumers employed to retain an  
6 identity in absence of direct marketplace interaction, was the focus of the study. Far from  
7 being the powerless, weak, and feeble consumers generally depicted in literature (Hanson,  
8 2002; Murphy, 1990; Phillips, 1990), the homebound consumers in this study overcame  
9 many challenges to remain active, powerful, independent agents of change. This shift in  
10 perspective from a purely 'architectural' form of consumption to one of understanding the  
11 micro-level of lived consumption experiences serves to extend knowledge of vulnerable  
12 populations. The research was conducted in Northern Ireland, a context in which 'ethno-  
13 religious identity' (Todd et al., 2009) had particular significance for the researched and the  
14 researcher.

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32 While conducting research in such contexts, we experienced many challenges. Yet, it was  
33 only on reflection after completing our research projects that we realised the value in sharing  
34 our experiences with peers; recognising that such challenges can influence the nature and  
35 direction of knowledge generation and diffusion. Our 'research journeys' (Gadon, 2006) were  
36 individual, yet in order to systematically theorise our experiences we move beyond our  
37 individual perspectives and attempt to find convergence. Our initial step was to deconstruct  
38 and understand our research experiences through compiling individual narrative reflections.  
39 These narratives were constructed as "our stories" and then shared with one another; they  
40 comprise the data presented here. Manual data analysis was then conducted with part to  
41 whole analysis procedures identifying key themes, experiences and emotions across the  
42 transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To achieve this, we worked as an interpretive

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3 community (Thompson, 2002), agreeing as a group on emergent themes and triangulating  
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5 these with the extant literature.  
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### 8 9 **Emergent themes**

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11 Having contextualised the study, we now draw key themes from the data to enable us to  
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13 extend understanding of the concept of researcher vulnerability. We offer the following set of  
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15 themes as an 'illustration' of the lived experience of researcher vulnerability. We use the term  
16  
17 'illustration' deliberately as what follows is not intended to offer a definitive account of  
18  
19 researcher vulnerability, to do so would risk being consumed by 'the vortex of narcissism,  
20  
21 pretentiousness and infinite regress' which Finlay and Gough (2003, in Bettany and  
22  
23 Woodruffe-Burton, 2009, p.675) identify as a key danger of poor reflexive practice.  
24  
25 Therefore we acknowledge the subjectivity of researcher vulnerability - the type and degree  
26  
27 of vulnerability depends on many factors including the researchers' experience and skills,  
28  
29 their level of immersion in their research contexts, and the characteristics and circumstances  
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31 of their participants.  
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### 38 39 ***Emotion, disempowerment and vulnerability***

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41 The first theme we draw on relates to the emotional impact of our research work with  
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43 vulnerable consumers, an issue that is routinely 'undervalued within the university culture'  
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45 (Dickson-Swift et al 2008, p 345.). Emotional challenges and responses can be seen across  
46  
47 the various stages of the research process from the first attempts to gain fieldwork access to  
48  
49 data analysis and presentation of findings. Across our narratives we depict a variety of  
50  
51 emotional responses to aspects of the research process; among them are fear, anxiety,  
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53 sadness, frustration, grief and guilt. We highlight that such emotional responses are a source  
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55 of researcher vulnerability, negatively affecting researcher well-being. Some emotional  
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3 challenges are short-lived while others, such as the sadness at a participant's passing, remain  
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5 with us and colour our research projects, in terms of knowledge construction and  
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7 dissemination.  
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10  
11 "When you begin to unpick the discourse of those considered  
12 vulnerable, it is expected that some of the emotional turmoil will  
13 'cling' to you." (Researcher 4)  
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18 This recalls Warr's (2004) notion of 'emotional weight' of the stories we encounter in the  
19 field. Warr describes how particular stories stay with us and are 'carried around' by the  
20 researcher. A key source of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983 ) came from our responses to  
21 interview content, stories of hardship, loneliness, pain and powerlessness. For example,  
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23 Researcher 3 describes the complex realities of participants' lives and the sometimes  
24 shocking narratives that emerged during interviews:  
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33 "I talked to a father and his 16 year old daughter who were grieving  
34 after the death of their wife and mother respectively, a single mother  
35 whose sister committed suicide 3 weeks before I met her, women who  
36 had separated from their partners and a young mother who had an  
37 unhappy and unstable childhood. I heard stories of loneliness,  
38 depression, illicit income and fears for the future. Poverty was only  
39 one part of their lives and I went into interviews never quite knowing  
40 what direction the conversation would take and what would be  
41 revealed."  
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48 As this reveals, another aspect of our experiences of vulnerability was the unexpected nature  
49 of it and, in some cases, our lack of preparedness to deal with the emotional impact of our  
50 work. Sometimes emotions are provoked by a specific incident or particular participant or  
51 sometimes it is the cumulative effect of hearing multiple stories of participant vulnerability  
52 that can overwhelm us. We entered participants' lived environments and often it was the  
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3 “situated” and “embodied” nature of our data collection (Warr, 2004) that intensified such  
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5 emotional responses:  
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9 “While both the media and previous literature had warned me about  
10 the negative consequences associated with poverty, I was now  
11 encountering these stories face-to-face. Rather than reading about the  
12 number of people living in poverty in the newspapers I was meeting  
13 real people, and putting names to stories which undoubtedly  
14 intensified emotional reactions.” (Researcher 3)  
15  
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17  
18 Our narratives reveal that empathy is central to both the collection of good quality data and to  
19 the experiencing of vulnerability. Hoffman (2000, p.30) recognises that empathy can, ‘make a  
20 person have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with his own.’ The  
21 ability to create empathetic connections is a key skill when working with vulnerable  
22 populations (Woodby et al., 2011); yet, empathy can expose the researcher to episodes of  
23 emotional stress and powerlessness (Watts, 2008):  
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33 “Difficult situations experienced by the homebound consumers leave emotional scars.  
34 What would be experienced as fleeting moments of sadness in the course of  
35 conducting interviews very easily escalated into particular dark episodes of empathy.”  
36 (Researcher 4)  
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41 The emotional impact of the research encounter is central to the level and intensity of  
42 vulnerability experienced by researchers. Our narratives tell of the dual role of empathy.  
43 Clearly, empathetic responses aid the researcher in creating a rapport with participants and in  
44 building an understanding of their lived experiences. However, such bonds can leave the  
45 researcher emotionally vulnerable:  
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53 “Through attempts to empathise with informants I feel I assimilated  
54 the threats and risks recounted – the fear of illness, concerns about  
55 relapse from remission, the inevitability of death and dying.”  
56 (Researcher 2)  
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5 Researcher 2 describes how her fear of illness was amplified during the fieldwork period and  
6  
7 extended beyond those involved in her research to her wider community of family and  
8  
9 friends. The research process not only exposes researchers to the difficult lived experiences  
10  
11 of participants but can also be the catalyst to an exploration of our own fears and insecurities.  
12  
13 Qualitative research can be viewed as a 'life-changing' process which provides the researcher  
14  
15 with 'opportunities to assess certain aspects of their lives' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, p.342).  
16  
17 Similarly, Researcher 3 recalls that interaction with vulnerable consumers encouraged  
18  
19 'personal reflection' contrasting her own 'position, choices and abilities' with that of her  
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21 informants.  
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28 It is important to recognise that vulnerability and emotional impact can extend well beyond  
29  
30 the fieldwork period as the researcher moves through data analysis and presentation of  
31  
32 findings:  
33

34 "The complex emotions I experienced while collecting the data were  
35 re-lived and recounted through the passing months and years when I  
36 conducted manual data analysis. On reflection I realise that during  
37 both the data collection and analysis phases I engaged in an amount of  
38 emotional management. Storing away sadness and fear during the  
39 exhilarating fieldwork phase only to be unexpectedly revisited by it  
40 during the long and lonely phases of data analysis." (Researcher 2)  
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46 The act of replaying recordings and transcribing participants' words can elicit new emotional  
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48 responses or recall past negative episodes (Stone, 2009). Woodby et al. (2011) describe how,  
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50 what they term 'researcher distress', can be heightened by the cumulative process of coding  
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52 sensitive material. Researchers are 'exposed' to distressing material repeatedly as the iterative  
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54 and repetitive process of qualitative analysis is undertaken. Such emotional 'exposure' can  
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3 lead to exhaustion, stress, isolation and increased vulnerability (Woodby et al., 2011, p. 833)  
4  
5 limiting the researcher's ability to analyse data (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).  
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10  
11 Researcher 2 describes feeling 'disempowered' by 'strong emotions' linked to the fear and  
12 grief she experienced. This sense of powerlessness extended to coping strategies. The notion  
13 of disempowerment is important, here we see that the emotions encountered in the field and  
14  
15 beyond create a barrier to reflexive practice:  
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19  
20 "During the entire PhD. process I felt unable to reflect on the grief I  
21 felt at learning of the death of another informant. My need for  
22 emotional management made any sort of reflexivity incredibly  
23 difficult; though of course this practice should have been central to my  
24 methodology."  
25  
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28  
29 Researcher 2's reluctance or inability to meet strong emotions such as grief and fear head-on  
30 rendered her reflexive practice impossible. There is acknowledgement (e.g., Warr, 2004;  
31 Woodthorpe, 2007) that reflecting on these emotional responses would have deepened and  
32 enriched the study's findings yet this aspect of the research encounter is left unreported.  
33  
34 Through this narrative we can see that grief and loss have affected this researcher's emotional  
35 well-being and her ability to put into words her reflective thoughts. She describes how her  
36 attempts at emotional management – what we might, in the vernacular, term as "bottling up"  
37  
38 – impeded the research process:  
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48 "My lead informant and gate-keeper died on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2009, one  
49 month before the PhD was to be handed in. I knew he had gone but  
50 couldn't bring myself to open the email that would confirm it. I didn't  
51 want to see the words - I feared they may paralyse me; that my grief  
52 would suck away my ability to complete the thesis."  
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3 For researcher 4, such “bottling up” of emotions was also evident, albeit for a different  
4  
5 reason. She found particular episodes of vulnerability she encountered with her most  
6  
7 physically disabled participant, a continuous and often heart-wrenching struggle. Trying to  
8  
9 ‘keep a lid’ on everything was important for the well-being of that participant and she had to  
10  
11 suppress and disguise her emotions whilst in his company:  
12

13  
14  
15 “In the safety of my car I would cry and rage against the inadequacies  
16  
17 of the care system. Knowing the intimate details, the people involved,  
18  
19 the realities left me completely speechless and powerless.”  
20

21  
22 Watts (2008, p.11) talks of the need for ‘emotional protection’ and describes the sensitive  
23  
24 research process as one of balance between becoming too close to the research participant  
25  
26 and being too distant. Too much distance may mean that the lived experience of participants  
27  
28 becomes obscured yet becoming too close can lead to undesired emotional involvement, or  
29  
30 the converse – desensitisation (see for example, Scott, 1998). Dickson-Swift et al. (2009,  
31  
32 p.62) remind us that emotions have both a ‘feeling’ and a ‘thinking’ element. Similarly, we  
33  
34 argue that emotions can be seen as resources that are good to think with. Our humanness  
35  
36 shines through in the extracts above and we suggest that the experiencing of these emotions  
37  
38 was an important element of the research process – an element which has allowed us to move  
39  
40 closer to our participants’ lived experiences and ultimately enrich the contribution of our  
41  
42 studies.  
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### 49 *Shifting Power Dynamics and Vulnerability*

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51 While it may be perceived that researchers occupy a dominant position in relation to the  
52  
53 research process, each of us experienced shifting power dynamics during our studies.  
54  
55 Drawing on Reay (1996, p. 443), the ‘difficult differences’ of the power relations between the  
56  
57 researcher and the researched need to be acknowledged. However, acknowledging difference  
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3 is not simply about recognising diversity but 'exposing privilege' (Strickland, 1994, p. 271)  
4  
5 and understanding how this impacts on knowledge construction. The concept of power in  
6  
7 these studies manifested itself in various ways; the power of a male researcher engaging with  
8  
9 female participants in a Muslim society, material power when engaging with those living in  
10  
11 poverty and power of the able-bodied when engaging with those who are considered disabled  
12  
13 or terminally ill. Equally, we acknowledge an academic power in terms of our ability to  
14  
15 produce/not produce certain knowledge about participants' lives.  
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20  
21 It is widely recognised that much of the endeavour of qualitative fieldwork centres on issues  
22  
23 of access, rapport and relationship building (Van Mannen, 2011). Researcher 1, for example,  
24  
25 discusses how his fieldwork depended on his participants' trust in him:  
26  
27

28  
29 "In my research I was interested in those less visible aspects of my  
30  
31 participants' lives, things that have been either overlooked or  
32  
33 misunderstood simply because their voices are not heard. In order to  
34  
35 achieve this, I needed to be seen as an 'insider', someone they could  
36  
37 trust and share their true experiences with."  
38

39  
40 Our narratives highlight that these issues are more than mere practical considerations but  
41  
42 rather can be a significant source of researcher vulnerability. We had the power to decide  
43  
44 what questions to ask during data collection, the power to select what data to use and how it  
45  
46 should be interpreted and the power to decide how and to whom our findings were presented.  
47  
48 Such power is the privilege of the researcher but it can also foster feelings of guilt and  
49  
50 uncertainty:  
51

52  
53 "I had very mixed feelings about accessing this level of detail about  
54  
55 my respondents' lives. On the one hand I was grateful and  
56  
57 overwhelmed by how much they were willing to share with me and  
58  
59 enthusiastic that their stories were generating good quality and  
60  
valuable data for my PhD. On the other hand, I sometimes worried

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3 that I was encouraging respondents to reveal too much about  
4 themselves by talking about such sensitive issues. I was clearly  
5 benefiting significantly from them but what were they getting from  
6 me?" (Researcher 3)  
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10  
11 "Often interviews would emotionally deplete me. I felt keenly the  
12 guilt of the well, taking something from the ill." (Researcher 2)  
13  
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15  
16 We continue to feel a responsibility to our participants in terms of accurately representing  
17 their lives. As Researcher 2 reflected, "taking on the weight of re-telling their stories of  
18 struggle and hope was, and is, a daunting responsibility." Further, despite recognising it was  
19 not the researcher's role, we describe feeling powerless to resolve or ameliorate the  
20 difficulties in participant lives:  
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27  
28 "I was only too aware of the emotional roller coaster I would be  
29 riding, immersed in such a research context. But I found myself quite  
30 at sea early on in the research process; my inability to realise anything  
31 positive for Jay [research participant], called my sense of moral  
32 judgement into question." (Researcher 4)  
33  
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37  
38 "My participants' trust in me deserves my honestly returning their  
39 favour. The question that I still ponder is: what can I do for them?"  
40 (Researcher 1)  
41  
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44 The frustrated desire for reciprocity is expressed here in the powerlessness to affect positive  
45 change for informants - similar to vulnerable consumers, vulnerable researchers experience  
46 powerlessness depending on the dynamics of the research context (Baker et al 2005).  
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### 51 52 *Personal safety and vulnerability* 53

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55 Our desire to get close to participants meant that each of us carried out data collection in the  
56 field, that is, in participants' homes or a preferred location in their lived environments. As  
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3 such, researching vulnerable consumers can take researchers to unfamiliar places, areas of  
4  
5 high crime and regions of political or religious conflict (Miller et al., 1998). This can result in  
6  
7 both risks to personal safety and feelings of dislocation (Liamputtong, 2007):  
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10  
11 “I was going to areas of the city that I had never visited before. In  
12 many cases these neighbourhoods were associated with high levels of  
13 crime which made me anxious and nervous about the journey to  
14 participants’ homes. I mainly travelled to interviews by bus and  
15 walked the remainder of the way having memorised the route from the  
16 bus stop to the house using my A-Z street map. Sometimes talking to  
17 participants only heightened my anxiety for the return journey as they  
18 told me about divided communities, joyriding, crowds of youths and  
19 petrol bombs.” (Researcher 3)  
20  
21

22  
23 For Researcher 3, prior knowledge about the field heightened fear and anxiety when entering  
24 potentially unsafe areas, a feeling that became all consuming prior to conducting evening  
25 interviews. Geographic location also presents challenges to data collection practices due to  
26  
27 constraints imposed by politicised research contexts:  
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32  
33 “I was aware of the potential risks imposed on my participants and  
34 myself. For example, in Iran it is not unusual that when a young man  
35 and a woman are sitting together in a café, the morality police may  
36 arrive to ask about their relationship. If the couple are not related  
37 through kinship or marriage, they may be taken to the police station to  
38 explain why they are together as, in the eyes of the authorities, this is  
39 regarded as un-Islamic...also, in a country where authorities are  
40 concerned with the theory of ‘cultural invasion’, I could be seen as the  
41 enemy, and by the time it was proved that I was a genuine academic  
42 simply collecting data for my own research, I could risk detainment.”  
43  
44 (Researcher 1)  
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50 Our feelings of vulnerability in relation to physical safety are partly explained by our outsider  
51 status in the research context, a central theme across our narratives and a common experience  
52  
53 of those working with the vulnerable (Allen, 2004):  
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3 “Most of all I felt conspicuous and aware that I was walking around  
4 areas where I could be perceived as an outsider because I was not a  
5 local resident; areas where outsiders are noticed and where people  
6 may be suspicious of strangers and their motives for being there.”  
7 (Researcher 3)  
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11  
12 “Local residents made it their business to find out who I was, what I  
13 was doing, where I came from and most importantly, did I represent a  
14 threat. Youths would congregate in the area at night; it was  
15 commonplace for community demonstrations to take place. Driving  
16 through crowds is an intimidating experience and it was difficult not  
17 to feel at risk in such areas.” (Researcher 4)  
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22  
23 Outsider status gives the researcher a vantage point for their observations yet it can also  
24 create an uneasy distance between the researcher and the researched (Merton, 1972). This can  
25 lead to feelings of conspicuousness and intimidation in the field, heightening both physical  
26 and emotional vulnerability. As Researcher 3 revealed, “I never failed to feel tense the day  
27 before an interview.” With reference to what Ergun and Erdemir (2010) contend about the  
28 importance of being seen as an insider by participants, Researcher 1 was in danger of being  
29 perceived as a threatening outsider despite being an Iranian conducting research in Iran. This  
30 reminds us of the socially constructed nature of relations in that ‘the categories with which  
31 we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions’ (Burr,  
32 2003, p.3). Nevertheless, participants’ perceptions of researcher difference can create a  
33 barrier to building mutual and empathetic understanding:  
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48 “A sense of trust was not easily built as I was essentially viewed as an  
49 ‘outsider’. Issues of ‘cultural affinity’ and speaking ‘the same  
50 language’ were indeed important, but they were not enough for  
51 inclusion. The socio-cultural atmosphere in Iran has influenced the  
52 wearing of masks and perpetuated the cutting off of self. Private lives  
53 and public projections can be a world apart. This makes understanding  
54 people very difficult. As a researcher you need to get close to  
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3 understand these complexities and paradoxes so that you can avoid  
4 clichés.” (Researcher 1)  
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8 Since participants can sometimes feel uncomfortable with disclosing their true identities and  
9 real-life stories to insiders, the researcher’s position as an outsider can sometimes be seen as  
10 an advantage to knowledge generation (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010). Yet, in our research  
11 contexts, this outsider status created multiple vulnerabilities, physical jeopardy being  
12 paramount but also feelings of frustration and fear. These feelings, as we have demonstrated,  
13 can be associated with the characteristics of the contexts in which we studied vulnerable  
14 consumers.  
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## 26 **Discussion and Implications**

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28 By way of summarising the emergent themes, we offer a conceptual overview of researcher  
29 vulnerability (see figure 1).  
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31

32  
33 Insert figure 1 about here  
34

35 Based on our findings, we map out the catalysts, features and potential outcomes of  
36 researcher vulnerability. We understand catalysts as conditions which may lead to researcher  
37 vulnerability. Catalysts are dependent on the research context and objectives guiding the  
38 study so a researcher need not encounter all of these to experience vulnerability. We  
39 catalogue the effects of researcher vulnerability which include threats to physical safety as  
40 well as emotional responses such as fear, guilt and isolation. Researcher vulnerability can  
41 occur at any stage of the research process, at times, unexpectedly and the emotional distress  
42 can endure beyond the research period. Researcher vulnerability manifests subjectively and  
43 potential outcomes vary in their severity from personal reflection to research burn-out where  
44 completion of the research project is in danger.  
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### *Knowledge generation*

In his exploration of reflexivity, Thompson (2002) outlines factors which shape researchers' representations of consumers – historical, social and institutional. To these broad and unseen forces we add emotional factors – specifically researcher vulnerability. In this paper, we provided evidence that researcher vulnerability is heightened by proximity to participants. In line with the interpretivist tradition, we endeavoured to fully immerse ourselves in our chosen contexts. As Warr (2004, 581) suggests, 'situating research in a lived environment generates powerful descriptive data, and this is intensified by the embodied interaction of actually sitting down and talking with someone.' Yet we contend that researcher vulnerability represents a complex "dark-side" to such immersion.

However we found a counterbalance to the negatives of emotional immersion in the rich empathetic understanding it affords. As Woodthorpe (2007, p.8) contends, we cannot disregard the issue of emotion in our consideration of the knowledge generation process as it 'informs the way we negotiate, interpret and communicate.' Indeed Woodthorpe (2007) argues that recognition of one's emotional state can add a new lens through which to understand data and the researchers' role in its production. In other words, as Palmer and Ponsonby (2002, p.183) highlight, 'our position determines what we see.' Researchers' emotional responses ultimately allow them to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lives. The experience of vulnerability – of openness - is in some way necessary because it ultimately allows better insight into the lived experiences of our participants. As Emerson et al. (1995, p.216) remind us, '[w]hen we self-consciously apply the reflexive lens to ourselves it can help us to see and appreciate how our renderings of others' worlds are not, and can never be, descriptions from outside those worlds.'



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3 In our research, we could have employed disembodied approaches such as surveys or  
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In our research, we could have employed disembodied approaches such as surveys or netnography that avoid close contact with participants. Such approaches may have reduced discomfort for the researcher; however, they would not have produced the same level of insight into the everyday realities of our participants' lives. Knowledge gained from face-to-face contact allows us to experience a gambit of emotions which in turn could help us to better understand our data and our interpretations of such data. The empathetic road to understanding informs and ultimately improves our knowledge generation process.

This deep understanding is important, as Ozanne (2009, p.143) highlights, stressing the wider societal impact of marketing research. For Ozanne marketing researchers are "informed brokers" whose ability to engage with different stakeholder groups, including consumers, businesses, media, and policy makers, creates the potential for "sustainable change." As emphasised by a number of scholars (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Harrington, 2002), the production of knowledge (particularly in qualitative research) relies on the construction and positioning of 'convincing storylines' (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008; Shankar and Patterson, 2001). Acceptance of research depends on the 'amount of depth, detail, emotionality, nuance, and coherence' storylines provide for them (Denzin, 2003, p. 248). The depth of understanding garnered from research immersion significantly adds to credibility with relevant stakeholders (MacInnis, 2011), increasing the societal value of research projects while aiding the realisation of knowledge exchange and research impact. This role of go-between is an important one, bridging the gap between vulnerable populations and the institutions and market actors which affect them offers the opportunity to challenge commonly held assumptions that prevail about these groups.

### **Conclusion: The need for social support**

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3 We began this paper with the notion that research with vulnerable populations is increasing in  
4  
5 the field of marketing. At a time when funding bodies such as the UK Economic and Social  
6  
7 Research Council prioritise business research which has wider social implications; the  
8  
9 Transformative Consumer Research movement is promulgating its goal of societal change  
10  
11 (Mick, 2006); social marketing has become a powerful force for behavioural modification;  
12  
13 and the Research Excellence Framework increasingly looks for “impact” from our work we  
14  
15 ask the marketing discipline to recognise the impact such research has on the researcher.  
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21 As The Voice Group (2008) recognise, research in marketing has for too long adhered to the  
22  
23 “lone researcher” doctrine. PhD programmes, the academic apprenticeship, train members to  
24  
25 work individually or closely with one supervisor rather than collaboratively. Thus, the  
26  
27 socialisation of PhD students represents ‘an extreme example of isolation in the search of  
28  
29 knowledge’ (Wasser and Bresler, 1996, in The Voice Group, 2008, p. 148). This is a  
30  
31 dangerous paradigm for those conducting sensitive research. The isolation associated with  
32  
33 researcher vulnerability can jeopardise the completion of research projects, not least doctoral  
34  
35 studies (Stone, 2009; Woodthorpe, 2007). Dickson-Swift et al (2007) recognise this jeopardy  
36  
37 in their recognition of researcher ‘burn-out’.  
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43 In light of this, we ask that our academic institutions and commercial research organisations  
44  
45 recognise that researchers addressing sensitive topics need to receive ‘therapeutical support’  
46  
47 from their mentors, supervisors, and institutions (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Such a support  
48  
49 culture would allow researchers to carry out projects in a safe manner and to cope with  
50  
51 emotional exposure that may harm their psychological well-being and hamper their research  
52  
53 progress. As Kleinman and Copp (1993, p. 2) point out ‘researchers learn – through their  
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55 teachers, texts and colleagues – how to feel, think and act.’ Therefore we suggest that  
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3 particular training and support be given to those supervising sensitive projects that they may  
4  
5 in turn better support doctoral students and early career researchers. Such support and  
6  
7 training is a feature of research projects in the wider social sciences. A starting point for  
8  
9 marketing researchers may be organisations such as the Social Research Association (UK)  
10  
11 who offer guidelines which focus specifically on the emotional and physical well-being of the  
12  
13 researcher – their *Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers* focuses on researcher  
14  
15 well-being and describes how risk-reducing behaviours can be fed into the research design  
16  
17 process to provide a framework of support throughout the life of a project.  
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22 A further area of concern is that the majority of institutional regulations and ethical approval  
23  
24 processes focus on the well-being of ‘the researched’ with little opportunity for the, brief in  
25  
26 our experience, acknowledgement of researcher well-being, or the offer of a framework for  
27  
28 emotional support. In the nascent field of sensitive marketing research we are relying on the  
29  
30 research skills, emotional strength and inner resolve of willing but unsupported researchers –  
31  
32 both novice and experienced. While we applaud the self-care practices outlined by other  
33  
34 authors (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008, 2009; Dunn, 1991; Watts, 2008) we call for  
35  
36 consolidated institutional support to act as an ameliorative to the isolating effects of  
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38 researcher vulnerability.  
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Figure 1: Researcher Vulnerability, Catalysts and Potential Outcomes

