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Is It Really (All) About Empathy?—A Strong Reflexivity Approach to Emotionally Charged Research Experiences

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Abstract: In this article, we seek to deepen the understanding and reflexive analysis of emotionally charged situations in the research process. Through a nuanced and critically evaluative approach, we explore the complex meanings of empathy as presented in the qualitative methods discourse. We argue that empathy is an overstretched concept that can be more profoundly defined when situationally contextualized. For instance, empathy may refer to solidarity in political aspirations, humanity and compassion in research ethics, or affective resonance in methodological contexts. Focusing on the latter, we examine instances of seemingly "unsuccessful "or "failed" empathy in two of our projects. Utilizing the framework of "strong reflexivity" (KUEHNER, PLODER & LANGER, 2016), we discuss methodological strategies for analyzing and interpreting emotionally challenging research encounters. We argue that situational "failures" can yield invaluable insights for critical knowledge production when examined and communicated through a reflexive lens.

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1. Introduction

As a social practice, affects and emotions play a significant role in any kind of research, regardless of whether scholars acknowledge it or not. This holds especially true for qualitative social research, which strongly involves researcher subjectivity, intensive interactions, and relationship dynamics, often leading to ethical dilemmas. As qualitative scholars, we are familiar with the emotional responses elicited by personal life stories characterized by great joy or profound suffering. However, there are times when we have felt that we did not respond appropriately and failed to do justice to the participants; this has made us aware of moral or methodological shortcomings. Was there a lack of empathy? What exactly happened? This reflection prompted us to examine moments in our individual and shared research experiences where empathy was expected but failed to manifest. We have encountered such moments of failed empathy in several of our projects involving young right-wing extremists (BEHRINGER et al., 2024), former ISIS child soldiers (LANGER & AHMAD, 2024), youths in Afghanistan (LANGER, AHMAD, AUGE & MAJIDI, 2021), survivors of the Shoah (BREHM, 2021), and HIV-positive gay and bisexual men (LANGER, 2009). In this article, we focus on the exploration of the latter two because the struggles of (and with) empathy are particularly clear in them: We were each biographically identified with the topics in a special way and carried out the projects as individual researchers outside of larger team constellations. [1]

Our reflection was embedded in the observation of a remarkable hype around empathy in scientific, political, and media discourses in the last two decades. In Ngram[1] as an indicator of the discursive use of terms, an increase of references to "empathy" has been shown between 2000 and 2019 by a factor of 2.6. Likely one of the best-known expressions of empathy was delivered by then U.S. President Barack OBAMA in a speech, in which he pointed out that the

> "biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes" (CONROY, 2017, n.p.). [2]

OBAMA's understanding of empathy largely corresponds to widely used social science definitions which conceptually place empathy close to perspective taking and sympathy. BLOOM, for example, defined empathy as "putting yourself in other people's shoes, feeling what you think they are feeling" (2017, p.24) and "the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does" (BLOOM, 2016, p.16). OBAMA's sociocritical impulse was anticipated in HOCHSCHILD's (2016) diagnosis of the polarization of U.S. society, which she unfolded in her ethnographic work "Strangers in Their Own Land" in terms of an "empathy wall" (p.5). And if we follow PINKER (2011) and RIFKIN (2009), it is empathy that makes the world a better place, helping to decrease violence in modern societies and leading the way out of the climate catastrophe by means of

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1 The Google Books Ngram Viewer is a search engine that determines the change in the frequency of certain words over time in a collection of currently more than eight million digitalized texts.

global empathy. The dominant mainstream understanding in politics and academia alike follows an essentially positive understanding of empathy, relating it to prosocial behavior (DAVIS, 2015; STEVENS & TABER, 2021), happy relationships (ALLSOP et al., 2021; ANDREYCHIK, 2019; FINCHAM, PALEARI & REGALIA, 2002), and sexual satisfaction (HANING et al., 2008), as well as good working alliances between physicians and patients (KELM, WOMER, WALTER & FEUDTNER, 2014; KIM, KAPLOWITZ & JOHNSTON, 2004) and psychotherapists and clients (BUCHHOLZ, 2017; ELLIOTT, BOHART, WALTSON & GREENBERG, 2011). [3]

In recent years, however, critical scholars have drawn attention to ambivalences surrounding empathy, with BLOOM (2016) and BREITHAUPT (2019) making influential contributions along these lines. "The Dark Sides of Empathy," as BREITHAUPT (2019) programmatically named his book, included the notion of empathy as morally neutral and biased, which contradicts the assumed relationship to prosocial behavior. There is a sadistic empathy where one is able to empathize not only with the victim's suffering but also with the perpetrator's lust for violence—an "Empathy for the Devil," to quote MORTON's (2011) trenchant article title (see also HAUBL, 2021). And being too empathetic—feeling too much of the (imagined) pain of the other(s)—can also be overwhelming and lead to burnout and the inability to act. Along these lines, BLOOM (2017, p.30) pointed to "reasons to believe that, when it comes to making the world a better place, we are better off without it." [4]

The starting point of our article is the observation that there is also a far-reaching and dominantly affirmative reference to empathy in the discourse of qualitative research, which has so far hardly considered the problematic aspects just mentioned. Therefore, we aim to contribute with this article to a differentiated and thoroughly critical discussion of the meaning(s) of empathy in research discourses and closely related practice. In Section 2, we first reconstruct how empathy is referred to in research discourse, what functions are assigned to it, and what experiences are thematized with it. We use contributions that have been published in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (*FQS*) as examples. In Section 3, we trace the ambivalences of reference to empathy in research by critically reflecting on our projects on HIV-related risk behavior (LANGER, 2009) and the emotional aftermath of National Socialism and the Shoah in Germany (BREHM, 2021). We analyze significant moments of empathetic reference to show which breaking points are associated with the strengthening of empathy as an instrument and goal of qualitative research. Section 4 is dedicated to outlining methodological strategies for reflecting on and analyzing emotionally challenging research experiences. We employ the framework of "strong reflexivity" (KÜHNER, PLODER & LANGER, 2016), in which the critical role of subjectivity in research is emphasized. This framework, informed by ethnopsychoanalysis (DEVEREUX, 1967), is closely connected to the critical-ideological tradition in qualitative research with which we aim "to unmask and disrupt privilege, power, and oppression for the sake of liberation, transformation, and social change" (LEVITT, MOTULSKY, WERTZ, MORROW & PONTEROTTO, 2011, p.7). In the concluding Section 5, we

essentially advocate for a departure from empathy as a normative concept in qualitative research and discuss alternatives, showing that moments of "failed empathy," with which many of us may be familiar, are not a failure to meet the requirements and expectations of "good" qualitative research. They can instead provide indispensable insights into the process of critical knowledge production, if considered and communicated in a reflexive manner. [5]

2. The Role of Empathy in Qualitative Research Discourse

Empathy holds considerable significance within the discourse of qualitative methodology. In textbooks, studies, field reports, and reflexive and systematizing papers, the role of empathy is pointed out in various ways, from data production to interpretation, from the presentation of findings to research ethics considerations. It is often implicitly, but also repeatedly and explicitly, regarded as one of the key competencies of good qualitative researchers, as illustrated by many articles published in *FQS*. A keyword search for "empathy" yields exactly 150 hits up to the end of 2023. These include articles that contain the word only once or twice in passing, or in which empathy appears as a thematic aspect of the research subject. For example, STAMER, SCHMACKE and RICHTER (2013) showed the importance of empathy on the part of doctors for compliance in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, and MORGAN and HENNING (2013, §27) discussed "learning empathy" as a central dimension in dealing with history textbooks. Apart from these topics, which are less relevant for the purpose of this article, there are 74 texts published in *FQS* that include more detailed references to empathy in qualitative research. In the following, we address dominant—both affirmative and critical—themes in *FQS* (Sections 2.1 and 2.2), providing selected examples, before recontextualizing the findings within the broader qualitative methodological discourse (Section 2.3). [6]

2.1 Affirmative references to empathy in *FQS* contributions

Empathy plays a crucial role across various research methods, including interviews and group discussions. LEVITAN, MAHFOUZ and SCHUSSLER (2018, §26), for example, emphasized the need for "care, openness, and empathy" in interviews, while LESTER and ANDERS (2018) highlighted empathy-building workshops in postcritical ethnography. In autoethnographic work, as noted by MANOLAS, HOCKEY and LITTLEDYKE (2013), readers are invited to empathize with personal experiences, and PITARD and KELLY (2020, §13) stated that it enhances our ability to "empathize with people who are different from us." In arts-based research, JOHNSON and MONNEY (2021) and FENGE, HODGES and CUTTS (2016) viewed art as promoting and fostering empathy. Empathy is also significant in visual and videographic research, with NIELSEN (2012) and others having noted its potential to increase understanding and reduce stigma. Participatory research approaches, such as photovoice (BUTSCHI & HEDDERICH, 2021) and peer research (McCARTAN, SCHUBOTZ & MURPHY, 2012), also underscore the importance of empathy. [7]

Even though empathy as an essential feature of qualitative research refers to all thematic fields, it is particularly strongly and extensively addressed when it comes to "sensitive" topics and vulnerable and marginalized groups, for example in the context of extremely traumatic experiences (FERRÁNDIZ & BAER, 2008), people with mental illness (WOODGATE, ZURBA & TENNENT, 2017), migrants (RYAN, 2015), research with refugees (AKESSON, HOFFMAN, EL JOUEIDI & BADAWI, 2018) as well as research with genocide survivors and families of the missing (HALILOVICH, 2022). [8]

The perceived importance of empathy permeates the entire research process, from methodological training (e.g., OLSON, 2008; VOGL, SCHMIDT & KAPELLA, 2023) to data production (e.g., BLODGETT, BOYER & TURK, 2005), analysis and interpretation (e.g., KELLY, DE VRIES-ERICH, HELMICH, DORNAN & KING, 2017; WEBER, 2012), and to aspects of writing and scientific communication (JOHNSON, CARSON-APSTEIN, BANDEROB & MACAULAY-RETTINO, 2017). [9]

Empathy is associated with various functions in research discourse, which can be broadly divided into practical, methodological, ethical, and impact-related aspects. In a practical sense, empathy helps establish trust and openness, enhancing rapport and response (DALY, 2022; KRAUS, 2000). Methodologically, empathy is seen as a tool for understanding—bridging experiential gaps between researchers and subjects (e.g., CONE, 2007; NGUYEN, 2018; SULLIVAN, 2002). VAN DER VAART, VAN HOVEN and HUIGEN (2018, §14) discussed the "empathic power" of the arts to create broader perspectives and deeper awareness of the "other." Empathy is conceptualized as " sensuous knowing" (O'NEILL, 2008, §23), "empathic understanding" (ANDERSEN, 2003, §27; WEBER, 2012, §11), and "kinaesthetic empathy" (ENGEL, 2008, §15). The benefits of FINLAY's (2005) model of "reflexive embodied empathy" was detailed in KELLY et al.'s (2017, §18-35) study on selfies, describing three layers of embodied reflexivity. [10]

Ethically, empathy in *FQS* articles spans recognition and respect for others' experiences (DENTITH, MEASOR & O'MALLEY, 2012; FERRÁNDIZ & BAER, 2008) of care and healing (CORDISCO TSAI, LIM & NHANH, 2020; JOHNSON et al., 2017). Empathy has been seen as an ethical concern (AKESSON et al., 2018), a duty of care (HALILOVICH, 2022), and a means of giving a voice (MOROŞANU, 2015). [11]

Regarding research impact, studies suggest that empathy enhances communal understanding and has transformative potential (HEMMINGSON, 2009; JOHNSON & MONNEY, 2021). Many studies present empathy generation as a key research goal (e.g., ABERASTURI-APRAIZ, CORREA GOROSPE & MARTÍNEZ-ARBELAIZ, 2020; LaMARRE & RICE, 2016). In summary, empathy is frequently described as a central emotional competence for qualitative researchers, often affirmatively and without critical examination of its meanings and implications. [12]

2.2 Critical reflections on empathy in *FQS* contributions

Critical reflections on the use of empathy in qualitative research are also present in *FQS* contributions, though they are in the minority. From a methodological perspective, the illusion of understanding across differences associated with the empathetic approach has encountered criticism. EMDIN (2006), for example, wrote from a psychoanalytic perspective:

> "I wanted to say that empathy and a willingness to engage in dialogue, as noble as they may be, do not make one immune to ethnocentrism [...]. For methodological reasons, it seems advisable to start from the pessimistic assumption that constructions of the Other are usually self-projections that need to be deconstructed" (§27). [13]

Another issue discussed is the danger that excessive empathy can blur the boundaries between closeness and distance in research relationships. FINK (2000) referred to a felt relationship and paternalistic behavior from the researcher's side, LOHMEIER (2020, §7) highlighted the challenge of balancing "empathy with the need to steer away from counseling or advice giving," and FRIEND (2010, §33) noted, in connection with research on immigration detainees: "I often felt immense empathy with the individuals I met, but from the start, I had to make clear to interviewees the boundaries and limits of my project." An associated risk of boundary diffusion is possible emotional distress from empathetic resonance with others' suffering (OTTEREN & GYNNILD, 2021), which ties into the debate surrounding the ethics of care. [14]

What does the imperative of being empathetic mean for research with violent offenders or racist individuals? In the general literature on empathy, the moral neutrality of empathy and the challenges of empathizing with perpetrators are significant concerns in qualitative research. In their research with child soldiers in Uganda, BOGNER and ROSENTHAL (2014) noted the difficulties and ambivalences in empathizing with veterans as perpetrators and with their victims. In MARKOM's (2012) study on research with racists, she reflected on the ethically challenging empathy for a "sad racist" (§18) and her "feminist empathy in the struggle with racist sexism" (§29). [15]

The critical reflections outlined here are significant, yet concrete strategies for addressing these challenges are less frequently discussed. Regarding emotional burden, for instance, there is a mention of the positive value received in return, suggesting it is worth bearing the emotional burden empathetically and compassionately. MARKOM (2012) noted that professional coaching seemed necessary to manage the emotionally challenging research situation with racists. Concerning the demarcation between closeness and distance, emphasis was placed on the importance of reflection; how this is supposed to work remained vague. [16]

2.3 The wider qualitative research discourse

The discussion of empathy in *FQS* reflects the broader international discourse on qualitative methods. Empathy may appear more prominently in *FQS* due to its focus on innovative approaches like autoethnography and participatory research which align closely with empathy as both a tool and goal of research. Examples from other methodological literatures further illustrate the affirmative importance of empathy in qualitative research. WATTS (2008) emphasized listening with concern and compassion in ethnographic work, PELIAS (2018) highlighted empathy as fundamental to creative scholarship, and LEONARD (2023) discussed its significance in autoethnographic writing for fostering responsible leadership. GAIR (2012) noted that empathy enriches research experiences and outcomes through deep listening and understanding participants' stories. [17]

In critical reflections on empathy, although less common, key issues similar to those in *FQS* can be identified, through which three strategies of criticism emerge. In the first strategy, scholars seek to salvage the concept despite its challenges. DE CONING (2021) proposed "critical empathy" to address the emotional complexities of researching "unsavory" populations, suggesting that researchers grapple with and make these tensions apparent. In the second strategy, a fundamental critique is offered, in which the argument is made that researchers' emphasis of empathy can stifle research and lead to unethical practices. WATSON (2009) cautioned against the easy assumption of empathy, arguing:

> "It is not that we cannot empathize, but that we do it all too easily, projecting our own understandings onto the unsuspecting other and in the process prematurely closing down research. We should subject our empathetic responses to a rigorous scrutiny, be suspicious of empathy, don't encourage it (it'll only make it worse). By contrast, acknowledgement of difference offers resistance to closure. This contest, between closure and non-closure, is the paradoxical tension which inhabits all research" (p.114). [18]

Feminist scholars like LATHER (2008) argued that empathy is epistemologically and ethically problematic, as it assumes sameness and understanding, thereby colonizing the other and negating essential differences (see also BRENNER, 2023). The third line of criticism refers to the empirical struggle between the imperative of empathy in literature and its actual expression in research. PRIOR's (2008) sequence analysis of interviews highlighted moments in which expected empathetic responses were absent, questioning the impact on the interview process. He asked what happens when interviewers fail to produce affiliative alignments or when empathetic responses are ignored or rejected.

> "Does the interviewee pursue a response [...] or does the potential empathic moment just vanish? When the interviewer does produce affiliative and empathic responses, what does the interviewee do with them? Are they always accepted—or might they be rejected or ignored?" (p.507) [19]

Considering these critical accounts, our aim is to analyze moments in our research in which empathy was expected but did not manifest and to understand the implications of that for the respective research processes and outcomes. [20]

3. Struggling with Empathy: Examples From Two Research Projects

In the following, we discuss examples from our research projects: An earlier study by Phil LANGER (2009) on HIV/Aids and a more recent one by Alina BREHM (2021) with Shoah survivors. In the projects, we used different qualitative interviews (ADAMS, HOLMAN JONES & ELLIS, 2015; HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1995; SCHÜTZE, 1983) for qualitative data production, employing a narrative and intersubjective approach (see Sections 3.1 and 3.2). The interviews were conducted in German, and we provide a tentative translation of the selected interview sequences, but we acknowledge that every translation is an interpretation, and that the linguistic and affective nuances important to the projects cannot be fully captured when translated. [21]

In both studies, we grappled with empathy in different ways. In the first example, Phil apparently reacted without empathy to the HIV-positive interviewee Klaus's[2] emotionally stressful experiences, abruptly changing the subject instead of sensitively following up. In the second example, Alina's insistence on addressing topics that Marie, a Shoah survivor, did not want to discuss further was marked as insensitive, nonempathetic behavior. [22]

Unlike PRIOR (2008), who used sequence analysis to look at what happened next, we aim to understand exactly what happened at that very moment and why, and what we can learn about the subject of research from these interactions. To gain a reflexive approach to interaction and relationship dynamics and focus on the affective moments in research, we used different methods. In the first example, the research vignette approach was applied with a close reading of the interview situation (LANGER, 2016). In the second study, depth-hermeneutic interpretation groups (ABD-AL-MAJEED et.al., 2020), ethnopsychoanalytic workshops (BONZ & EISCH-ANGUS, 2017), and accompanying autoethnography (ADAMS, ELLIS & HOLMAN JONES, 2017) were used to understand the interviewer's experience. In line with these methodological decisions, we now switch to the first-person perspective in the presentation of our studies. [23]

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2   The research partners introduced in this Section and quoted in the excerpts from the interview transcripts were given the pseudonyms Klaus and Marie when the empirical material was anonymized.

3.1 Empathetic Failure 1: Uncanny closeness in the interview with Klaus

In the "Positive Desire" project, I, Phil, investigated the psychosocial dynamics of sexual risk behavior among gay and bisexual men in Germany. The project gained relevance due to the rapidly increasing number of new HIV diagnoses in this group at the time (LANGER, 2009). As part of the study, I conducted 58 active interviews (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2012; HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1995) in 2006 and 2007 with men who self-identified as bisexual or gay and had either tested positive for HIV in recent years or were untested despite ongoing sexual practices with a risk of HIV infection. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using multiple methods, including thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006) and ethnopsychoanalytically informed research vignettes (LANGER, 2016) to address different knowledge foci. [24]

3.1.1 Peer research and self-disclosure

The interviews had a unique dynamic due to the specific interview constellation: I, as the interviewer and an HIV-positive gay man, engaged in active conversations on sexual issues with other HIV-positive or HIV-unclear gay or bisexual men. This peer research setup created highly intimate relationship dynamics, especially regarding discussions of sexuality and illness, and often resulted in strong empathetic resonance and great emotional openness from the interviewees (LANGER, 2014). By contrast, instances of extensive loss of empathetic connection in some interviews become particularly noteworthy. [25]

The interview with Klaus is a significant example. I conducted it in a counseling room at the local Aids service organization and it lasted 64 minutes, making it one of the shortest in the "Positive Desire" study. It stands out as a key interview in two respects. Firstly, the interview is marked by an almost complete lack of empathetic resonance from my side as an interviewer. While I often shared my own biography in other interviews—following the "active interview" method—and generated revealing "peer dialogues" (KÜHNER & LANGER, 2010), I shared very little about myself with Klaus. Despite the expected empathy due to the supposed closeness of experiences and my own experiences of stigmatization and suffering, I did not show any empathy in the interview situation. [26]

3.1.2 Two scenes of trouble

This becomes particularly clear in two sequences toward the end of the interview. In the first, Klaus struggled—with the emotional intensity clearly marked by his para-linguistic cues—to recall the title of a movie that touched him deeply a long time ago, symbolizing a different, better, and happier life:

> "Klaus: Yes, so for m-e a movie still turns me on, sounds stupid now, but it touches me and really, oh ... [WORDS SWALLOWED] [CLICKS TONGUE] (---) [EXHALES DEEPLY]. Oh, now I don't remember the name. (-) A TV movie with the uh (--) ... now I can't remember the names either. That's age. Real Guys? (---) I can't remember the names.

Phil: What are some romantic ...

Klaus: Yes, no, where that often happens. Where then ... where then somehow even the so-called normal people start to have doubts. And-and ... and uh (-) not so this-this ... exactly. I had high expectations from Broke...

Phil: Brokeback Mountain. Yes.

Klaus: I thought it was stupid. I still think it's stupid. I don't know what's great about that movie.

Phil: Well, it's very sad, I think.

Klaus: Yes, but it-it didn't touch me.

Phil: Mhmh.

Klaus: And that there's such a fuss about it. There are so many TV shows or now in-in ... especially German films, that handle this topic so well or also-also funny or-or also with feeling. You know? I'm also not into the crude stuff. Where it's so ... Rather, I'd prefer, you know, something between the lines, where everything is ... but ... (---) Yes, but uh (--) maybe uh (-) if I were crazy now, I'd wish that I was born in America, where there's always sunshine, uhhh. I just want to say that you can't have everything. And I've somehow come to terms with that."[3] [27]

My subsequent question did not delve further into this, but instead awkwardly shifted the topic to "the last few years, which you have had a lot of..." and abruptly changed the subject. What happened in the quoted sequence? It appears that we both were talking past each other, resulting in no real resonant experience. I seemed unfamiliar with or uninterested in the movie *Echte Kerle* [Real Guys][4], which, however, cannot be reconstructed from the interview and the postscript. Engaging with the film, which is central to Klaus's experience, could have opened a meaningful dialogue on his wishes, hopes and ideas for a successful life. Thematically, I attempted to frame "Real Guys" as a connotation of homosexual romantic, an expression of strategic empathy to promote response, which Klaus rejected (PRIOR, 2008, p.507; WATSON, 2009, p.114). The well-known film *Brokeback Mountain*[5] received vastly different ratings from us, resulting in a lack of emotional understanding: One of the few personal disclosures I offered in the interview ("very sad") met with Klaus's outright rejection. This might have been because the social ostracism depicted in the film mirrored much of Klaus's life experiences. Klaus then became sentimental, briefly imagining another life, which the interviewer dismissed as an overkill of kitsch, trying to steer the conversation back to something "interesting" for the study. [28]

The second sequence begins with Klaus's pejorative self-positioning within the gay community. He felt "actually an outsider in the group [of homosexuals], not part of it, not a typical representative." He could not relate to Christopher Street Day (CSD, i.e., Gay Pride Day) "and all that silly nonsense":

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3 Notes on transcription: (-) / (--) / (---) micro-breaks 0.25 sec. / 0.5 sec. /0.75 sec.; paralinguistic expressions in [square brackets].

4 *Echte Kerle* (SILBER, 1996) is a well-received German film comedy, playing with social stereotypes of gender and sexual preference.

5 The neo-Western romantic drama *Brokeback Mountain* (LEE, 2005) depicts a tragic love story of two cowboy brothers in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s.

"Klaus: Th-at's not just Haha and Trallala and standing on the street and [CLAPS HANDS] the funny gays again. Oh, they're so funny, they're always so cheerful, going along. I-I ... I get a crisis from that. You know? And that's why I still think, especially because of these extremes, that I'm not willing to stand up and say, yes, I am like that. If someone ... because-because I disagree with so much of what's going on. You know?

Phil: Mhmh.

Klaus: And I don't have to like everything.

Phil: Fortunately.

Klaus: You know?

Phil: Yes. Yesss [SIGHS].

Klaus: And it was really ... in the-in the time when I was out, it was very rare, where-where people (-) uh (-) pffff, yeah, maybe I'm too strict, I don't know. But I-I ... [SNAPS FINGERS], that's who I am. [LAUGHS RESTRAINED]

Phil: In any case ...

Klaus: You know?

Phil: ... I want to thank you very, very much for so much personal sharing and for your participation in-in ...

Klaus: Yes, I'm a part of it.

Phil: Yes. No, but that's also an important part.

Klaus: Yes.

Phil: And, as I said, that often gets excluded, also because of everything with the CSD. So, I think an interview like this is very, very important.

Klaus: [CLICKS TONGUE] I'm also ... [MUMBLES] having fun. And w-as for exuberance, you know. But I always say, for this cause, for it to really become normal, I think it's the wrong way, it's not that. And because it's just extremes there too. Whether it's the leather scene or ultimately the-the drag queens or whatever, it's not just that. You know?

Phil: Yes. Thank you very much for now.

Klaus: You're welcome ...

Phil: No, really." [29]

The final sequence of the interview is fascinating. At this point, all the expected interviewing skills seemed to fail. I was not truly addressing Klaus's suffering regarding the gay scene, perceived as merely a party that did not do justice to his own experiences. My responses were inadequate: A meaningless "Mhmh," a hollow "fortunately," or a deliberate and almost tortured, resonant sigh "Yeahhh," followed by a linguistically forced conclusion with a half-hearted "Thank you." This revealed a profound helplessness, as I, stuttering, could not even articulate what exactly I was thanking Klaus for. [30]

3.1.3 Interpretive remarks

How do I understand this remarkable failure to show the expected empathy? In the following, I pick up a thread that emerged from a research vignette (LANGER, 2016), a method of ethnopsychoanalytically inspired reflexive and interpretative writing, by developing a first-person narrative, as indicated in the previous two sections. In the vignette a critical reflection of the relationship dynamic and the construction of one's subjectivity and identity related to it is narratively staged, in which an analysis of the manifest content of the interview and the contextualization of the findings within relevant theoretical approaches is woven into. Scholars using research vignettes also draw on ethnographic efforts toward a narrative "thick description" (GEERTZ, 1973) to make the interview situation livelier to the reader and to let the reader—as co-producer of meaning— participate in the successive and sometimes tentative progress of interpretation. This makes them particularly suitable for working with "difficult" research experiences. WEINER-LEVY and POPPER-GIVEON (2013) referred to the "dark matter of qualitative research" and noted: "We believe that transparency intensifies and enriches research rather than harming it. Fixed patterns of suppression and obscuration shape and reflect broader social and political realities" (p.2187). They hinted at the opportunities of "reflexive accounts" as "fairy tales of quests—designed to support the credibility of the research" (p.2181). The methodological proposal of the research vignette reflects this idea. [31]

Without reproducing the vignette in full, I will incorporate selected findings to interpretively explore the interaction dynamics mentioned above. In this respect, contextual data suggests that the inability to empathetically connect to Klaus's story did not simply represent a lack of interest: Shortly after the interview with Klaus, I fell ill and was unable to work or conduct research for almost two weeks. Even after resuming work, it took some time before I revisited the professionally transcribed interview. [32]

Following OTTEREN and GYNNILD (2021), the temporally associated illness can be interpreted as an expression of emotional distress due to empathetic resonance with the suffering of others. The intensity of Klaus's conveyed hopelessness, which could not be contained during the interview, manifested in psychosomatic symptoms. This highlights the other side of committed social science: The stories of others can be both enriching and burdensome. At the same time, another interpretive approach brings the relational dynamics within the interview into focus. By means of a psychoanalytically informed reading, scholars using research vignettes suggest an unsettling simultaneity of distance and traumatic closeness within the relationship dynamics. [33]

There are exactly four lines in the transcript containing explicit personal information about me. The questions were short, precise, and almost uninterested, contrasting with the usually narrative, contextualizing, and emotionally engaging questions: "How are you doing with that today?", "When was that?", "How long did that last?". Phrases were used to push the conversation toward an end immediately after essential questions were asked. In

a psychoanalytically informed perspective I enriched the interpretation by identifying the raw distancing and apparent lack of connection as forms of defense. FREUD (1999 [1919], p.267) wrote that the prefix "un" to "uncanny" marks repression. Something is uncanny because it is too close to the familiar. At the time of the project, I identified with the party life that Klaus criticized and felt part of the "happy gay community," despite (or, with or even because of) HIV. Klaus's embodiment of the possibility of a negative gay identity may have frightened me. "Brokeback Mountain" expressed my horror of a life of social isolation, which Klaus's experiences mirrored. I devalued Klaus in defense against this horror. In seeking unique belonging, I inadvertently reproduced Klaus's social outsider status, performatively reenacting the very exclusion the interview sought to examine. [34]

This forced an understanding of immense experiences of exclusion and their psychosocial consequences, especially for older homosexuals. The analysis led to a focus on structures of vulnerability in homosexual life contexts, which were not initially comprehended. Klaus, born in 1950 in post-war West Germany, grew up amid conservative views on sexuality and intensified police and judicial persecution of homosexual acts (HERZOG, 2005). His social background is evident in the interview. He rarely used the term "gay," associating it with trivialization and social exclusion. There are also only two references to "homosexuals" in the interview. In one, Klaus talks about someone trying to denounce him in the village: "It was horror. And then he came back, and I got a nasty letter that he had written saying I was the biggest homosexual in the world. He wanted to flatten me now. He probably thought someone would find the letter, someone else, right?" [35]

Homosexuality was equated with social ostracism and internalized as self-devaluation: "For God's sake, how is that supposed to work here in the village, and that doesn't work." Klaus found no safe space in the gay community, associating it with youth, beauty, and carefree partying. In the interview, one searches in vain for any positive aspect in his narrated life and current everyday life: "Sometimes I have the feeling that I have no heart at all. I've got calluses or something at this point. Nothing touches me anymore." His narrative culminated in a grim summary: "My life is over." [36]

The reflection and analytical understanding of this empathetic failure were pivotal. It emerged through analytical research supervision with colleagues not involved in conducting the interviews. The denial of social recognition, stigmatization, and exclusion within the gay scene were identified as factors linked to sexual risk behavior and identity damage. If the research interview offers no "safe space" or recognition of life stories and suffering, what does this imply for the "happy gay community"? Analyzing Klaus's interview highlighted biographical stigmatization and a lack of community as central dimensions in understanding sexual risk behavior. [37]

3.2 Empathetic Failure 2: No happy ending in the interview with Marie

The following excerpts are taken from an interview from my, Alina's, autoethnographic research on a café for Shoah survivors in a German city between 2016 and 2018, focusing on interactions, identity constructions, and affective atmospheres in the café (BREHM, 2021). I asked: How do people deal with the aftermath of their suffering? I described the presence of the Shoah in the lives of the survivors and reflected on my own affective participation as a non-Jewish German researcher in the café's atmosphere. I also discussed my confrontation with the Shoah as a continuous, conflictual process, examining individual and social dynamics of (German) guilt-defense. Methodologically, I employed autoethnography (ADAMS et al., 2015), biographical-narrative interviews (SCHÜTZE, 1983) combined with elements of dialogical/interactive interviews (ADAMS et al., 2015, p.86), depth hermeneutics (LORENZER, 1986), and ethnopsychoanalysis (BONZ & EISCH-ANGUS, 2017). [38]

3.2.1 Research on the Shoah and Jewish-German emotional legacies

As a non-Jewish German student at a conference on the Shoah in Germany in 2015, I witnessed scenes that can be described as epiphanic moments in terms of autoethnography. The dynamics of the discussions showed clear traces of German defenses of guilt, which left me both astonished and outraged. I documented my impressions in a conference report, which in turn provoked several emotionally charged—sometimes angry—reactions. One reader, who attended the conference, strongly agreed and invited me to participate in a newly founded café for Shoah survivors. When deciding to research the café, it was clear to me that examining emotional legacies of National Socialism on the German side was essential, including their impact on the researcher herself. This involved historical research into my own familial connections to National Socialism and questioning the common narrative that "Grandpa wasn't a Nazi" (WELZER, 2005). [39]

The interview discussed here was conducted in 2017 with 75-year-old Marie, a "hidden child survivor" of the Shoah in a Polish nunnery and a regular café visitor. Her father was murdered in Auschwitz; her mother survived and reunited with her after the liberation. Marie and I had met several times before with other visitors over coffee and cake in the café. [40]

The interview took place during café hours in an adjoining room and lasted just under an hour. I had previously connected with another survivor at the "men's table," where former teenage concentration camp survivors who later fought together in the Haganah[6] gathered. We bonded over our shared outrage against anti-Semitism. Marie, however, focused on building relationships and hope. In the interview, Marie recounted her life story from her birth to the time when she met her husband and they decided to move to Germany together, contrasting her

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6   Haganah was a Jewish paramilitary organization in British Mandate Palestine, active from 1920 to 1948, which played a key role in defending Jewish communities and later evolved into the core of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

wonderful time in Tel Aviv before their wedding with her subsequent life in Germany. When asked about her connection to the café, Marie revealed her initial reservations about whether she "really" belongs to the Shoah survivors. The opportunity to share experiences and memories motivated her regular visits to the café. At the end, when asked if Marie knew that I was not Jewish, Marie confirmed and then offered a lengthy defense of non-Jewish Germans before discussing her own experiences of anti-Semitism. The interview ended abruptly after I clearly positioned myself against anti-Semitism and asked about the connection between Israel-related anti-Semitism and the Shoah, influenced by my earlier conversation at the fierce "men's table." [41]

3.2.2 Two scenes about drawing boundaries and their potential transgression

Scene 1: Nah!

Earlier in the interview, Marie reported some incidents in her childhood in a Catholic region that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic. In this regard, however, she emphasized that she "did not *feel* the anti-Semitism"—not that it did not exist. In response to my follow-up question later in the interview as to whether she has had negative experiences with non-Jewish Germans in relation to anti-Semitism, Marie vehemently negated its virulence at this point:

> "Marie: But, I mean, let's put it this way, well, I actually grew up in [the city where she grew up] I felt very comfortable //mhm// and here in [the city of the café] too //mhm// that, and, well, so Tel Aviv was of course much, much more open to me //Yes//, because there, yes, of course. But, uh, uh, no, well, I have to say, I don't have any and so, I have a lot of friends, friends that I grew up with from work, from everywhere, so that I can, uh, so and if it's, if people, like I said, who don't necessarily want to be involved //mhm// or students like you //mhm// come here, I'm actually happy //mhm//. I'm actually //mhm// pleased. So, it's, it's, it's nice that young people like you people are also interested in the past //mhm//. When I'm starting to take an interest now, now that I'm not quite so young anymore maybe that's normal. But, yes. //mhm// So I think, I think it's very nice.
>
> Alina: You don't have any-
>
> Marie: (interrupts) Nah, quite the opposite!
>
> Alina: ... any concerns?
>
> Marie: Nah, not at all!
>
> Alina: Yes.
>
> Marie: Nah, nah.
>
> Alina: Because, that, um, so to speak, from the experience of, of other people with anti-Semitism or then-
>
> Marie: (interrupts) Nah-
>
> Alina: ... even older survivors or so-
>
> Marie: Nah.

> Alina: You know that and then I would somehow, so to speak, is always my thought I would perhaps be a bit distant or distant or suspicious, or would think, hhm-
>
> Marie: (interrupts) Nah, so I wouldn't anyway //Yes//, because I grew up here I grew up here and I don't have any concerns //Yes// And if someone really, uh, uh, doesn't like you for that reason //Yes//. reason //Yes// then he has to leave it, unfortunately there's nothing you can do you can't do anything about it, right (laughs) //mhm//."[7] [42]

By forcefully using "Nah" eight times and interrupting me several times in my attempts to ask questions, Marie emphasized that she had "no reservations" about non-Jewish Germans. I also experienced Marie's demonstrative open-mindedness and lack of reproach towards young Germans as recognition and an offer of a relationship with me, her non-Jewish German interlocutor, whom she willingly told about her life. However, Marie then talked about several more explicitly anti-Semitic situations that she and her mother experienced in Germany. For example, a man who wished for "a new Adolf" while dancing with her mother. Or the strange reaction of her colleagues when she mentioned that she had been on vacation in Israel, and the conversation abruptly fell silent. She was certain that it would have continued if she had talked about "Honolulu" instead. [43]

Scene 2: End of the interview

The second scene concerns the end of the interview, which was atypical and surprising for me. I first asked about Marie's assessment of a possible connection between current anti-Semitism and the Shoah:

> "Alina: Mhm, yes. //Yes// And do you think that also has something to do with anti-Semitism in itself or also the Shoah in particular?
>
> Marie: Well, I, well, there's more about Pa-, so, Israel, so there directly //mhm// but sometimes it's about Israel a bit of anti-Semitism can be felt.
>
> Alina: Yes, yes.
>
> Marie: So yes, unfortunately.
>
> Alina: And do you think that this is still linked to the Shoah, that there's a connection?
>
> Marie: Well, uh, so-
>
> Alina: (interrupts) So Israel in particular?
>
> Marie: Well, maybe not specifically.
>
> Alina: Ok.
>
> Marie: Yes. All right (cheerfully, bangs on the table, gets up)." [44]

In response to my last follow-up question about whether the Israel-related anti-Semitism she mentioned could be connected to the Shoah, Marie abruptly ended the conversation. Without verbally indicating her desire to stop talking, she banged the table, stood up, and walked out of the room. I remained puzzled, having not expected this reaction. Marie protected herself and knew her limits. In

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7   Notes on transcription: … breaks shorter than 2 seconds; paralinguistic expressions in (round brackets); words enclosed in //mhm // are used to denote paralinguistic cues, non-verbal utterances, or receptive interjections of the other speaker.

the first ethnopsychoanalytic group, she was perceived as admirably patient and resolute; the group was relieved that she was able to distance herself from my questions, which they perceived as intrusive, and "put a stop to it." Marie was powerful and effective, while I experienced feelings of helplessness, insecurity, powerlessness, and self-doubt, associated with a bad conscience and the question of whether it was my mistake that led Marie to leave. Did I pressure her? Discuss topics I hadn't announced? I noted the following thoughts in my research diary that day, which later became part of the chapter "(No) Microphone Expert" in the book on the café (BREHM 2021):

> "The mood from which I set off for the survivors' café is full of stress, anger, frustration, hectic, and uncertainty [...] The pressure to perform, the fear of making a mistake, seem to be enormous and lead me to the mistake of setting off an hour early, over-motivated. A microphone picks something up, passes it on to the sound systems, and makes it audible, which would otherwise be too quiet, would be overheard. It amplifies what is in the room, what is being said. This is not possible without noise, without accidental booming, without being too loud or too quiet at times; it is not always easy to control. And I don't really know how it works. As a non-Jewish German, am I even suitable for setting the microphone up for the survivors?" (p.162)[8] [45]

3.2.3 Interpretive remarks

On the day of the interview, I wrote a longer autoethnographic text linked to my research diary. ADAMS et al. (2017, p.1) described autoethnography as follows:

> "Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno"). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection —typically referred to as "reflexivity"—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life." [46]

According to DENZIN (2014), "epiphanies" are the central starting point for writing. An epiphany is a "meaningful biographical experience" (p.28) that, as a moment of revelation or crisis, shifts the gaze and determines the "focus of critical interpretative inquiry" (p.52). These epiphanic moments prompt us to pause and reflect, to examine aspects of others and ourselves that we previously lacked the courage or leisure to explore. "Autoethnographies begin with the thoughts, feelings, identities, and experiences that make us uncertain—knocking us for sensemaking loops—and that make us question, reconsider, and reorder our understandings of ourselves, others, and our worlds" (ADAMS et al., 2015, p.47). [47]

I introduced this text and an excerpt from the interview into an ethnopsychoanalytic interpretation group (Group 1) and a depth-hermeneutic

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8   All translations from non-English texts are ours.

group (Group 2). Both groups worked with participants' affective reactions and associations, theoretically linked to the psychoanalytic concept of countertransference (MORGENROTH, 2010). [48]

In ethnopsychoanalysis, elements of psychoanalysis are integrated into ethnology to address problems of understanding in encounters with the "foreign." PARIN, MORGENTHALER and PARIN-MATTHÈY (1963), as well as DEVEREUX (1967) were central to this development, which was further advanced by ERDHEIM (1984), NADIG (1986), and REICHMAYR (1995). Methodologically, ethnopsychoanalysis parallels autoethnography but with a more "classical" focus:

> "Ethnopsychoanalysis focuses [...] only secondarily on the researcher herself. Its primary focus is the research relationship, from which it hopes to gain insight into the latent structures of the relationships under investigation. [...] While ethnopsychoanalysis welcomes the focus on the research subject, it calls for an analytical distancing from and contextualization of the first-person perspective. From an ethnopsychoanalytical perspective, autoethnography is characterized by a sensual-affective immediacy that entails epistemological and research ethical problems" (PLODER & STADLBAUER 2017, p.431). [49]

Ethnopsychoanalytic interpretation workshops typically have data collectors listening for an hour while others interpret (BONZ & EISCH-ANGUS, 2017, p.30). The goal is to better understand the research relationship and produce new data through the group's affective resonance. In depth hermeneutics, like in ethnopsychoanalysis, one systematically reflects on countertransference events in the research relationship/interview dynamics (BERESWILL, MORGENROTH & REDMAN, 2010), reactions to the material as impact analysis (BERG, BREHM, JENTSCH, MONECKE & WITZEL, 2017; BREHM & GIES, 2019), and dynamics within the research or interpretation group (ABD-AL-MAJEED et al., 2020). LORENZER (1972, 1986) developed depth hermeneutics as an impact analysis based on his materialistic theory of socialization. Depth-hermeneutic interpretation groups involve all participants from the beginning. The text (usually a transcribed interview) is read aloud with distributed roles, and group members allow themselves to be affectively "captured," articulating their experiences and understanding of the text. Conflicts and mutually exclusive interpretations arise, highlighting the fragility of manifest meanings. A conflict-laden "scene" in the material is restaged in the group, becoming visible and identifiable when the group reflects on its actions. Depth-hermeneutic interpretation groups oscillate between co-acting and reflection. [50]

In the ethnopsychoanalytic group, the supervisory factor is more prominent, and the case presenter listens without expressing herself for the first hour. In the depth-hermeneutic group, she participates in the discussion, aiming to later arrive at theoretical considerations based on reactions to the material. The first interpretation group reacted angrily and dismissively, criticizing my autoethnographic text as extremely poorly written—especially for drawing readers too much into the scene. I was both astonished and relieved, as being drawn in indicated quality from my methodological perspective. However, this also generated aggression,

as experiencing the research situation was unpleasant. The group's greater indignation was directed at the interview, particularly Marie's accounts of anti-Semitism. Despite Marie denying its existence, she provided compelling examples. My follow-up questions in the face of Marie's reluctance as well as the interview's abrupt end were seen as unempathetic and potentially traumatizing. Some even suggested stopping the research to avoid further harm. [51]

The questions about anti-Semitism concerned emotional legacies of Jewish-German history and (German) guilt-defense, which make the situation between Marie and me particularly noteworthy. The first group's anger and non-empathetic response toward me suggested deeper issues. The second interpretation group helped reflect on these reactions, integrating critical peer feedback and methodological countertransference analysis to theoretically contextualize the events. [52]

Marie abruptly ending the interview is a pervasive disturbance. She did not accept the words I offered to express her experience, which restaged relationship breakdowns she had repeatedly experienced throughout her life. This failure of intersubjectivity in the German-Jewish negative symbiosis (DINER, 1990) forced me to confront my own motives. Why did I push Marie? Did I hold the microphone too actively, seeking a specific response? Marie's intention was not to discuss anti-Semitism, but mine was. The painful self-reflections suggest that my project also served my narcissistic need for clarity, ignoring the survivors' complex experiences. [53]

In Marie's narration, a positive picture of her processing of the Shoah and German-Jewish relations, however fragile, was painted. Although she initially denied experiencing anti-Semitism, she listed many examples affecting her. The contradiction was hurtful and disappointing for both, and I felt guilty for not supporting Marie's belief that there was no more anti-Semitism. My questions disrupted Marie's attempts to maintain a "healthy" narrative, aggressively leading her to break open the topic, resulting in guilt and helplessness within me after Marie ended the interview. Marie gave me a "mission of relief," which I failed by not alleviating her fears, confirming her hopes, or reassuring her about German attitudes. Instead, I radiated mistrust. This allowed Marie to discuss the persistence of anti-Semitism; however, linking the Shoah and current Israel-related anti-Semitism became too much for Marie, and she ended the conversation. [54]

Was I unempathetic or overly empathetic? Did I project my own feelings onto Marie, as EMDIN (2006) suggested, citing KAUFMAN (1990, p.161), when elaborating that "constructions of the Other are usually self-projections that need to be deconstructed" (EMDIN, 2006, §27)? Or did I produce an affiliative response that Marie rejected, as PRIOR (2008, p.507) has discussed? My clear demarcation against "the anti-Semites" enabled Marie to name anti-Semitic experiences but also served my guilt-repelling function—*the others are anti-Semitic, not me!* Both interpretation groups portrayed a burdening atmosphere when discussing the interview. Failing the mission of relief was difficult to

experience, as the interview was read as an attempt to overcome Jewish-non-Jewish tension. The exchange seemed to succeed, but then—according to one of the participants in the second depth-hermeneutics group—"all of a sudden, boom, something comes in again at the end that somehow throws you back into this whole uncertainty. All the insecurity that was there before is then completely back." There is no happy ending; I inadvertently reduced the Jewish woman to her anti-Semitic experiences. Another survivor from the men's table had given me the task of fighting anti-Semitism, but that was not Marie, and the conversations from the men's table should not have characterized the conversation with Marie so strongly. [55]

The complex and disturbing aspects of the German-Jewish relationship are difficult to bear, as naming the negative without offering a solution is unendurable. There is no certainty in action, only attempts at "better" or "less bad," which constantly demand painful self-reflection. The researching gaze can never be completely clear; aspects will always elude it, only later becoming apparent. Unsuccessful or unpleasant research relationships should motivate closer examination, not discourage further attempts. [56]

4. Methodological Implications: A Strong Reflexivity Approach to "Empathy"

In both examples, we, Phil and Alina, failed to meet the expectations of competent empathetic interviewers, and both situations show the influence of our respective involvement in the research topic and the research relationship. On closer inspection, the examples are not just about "empathetic failures" in the research encounter. Both examples demonstrate that the problem in the "failed" interview situations was not the absence of empathy at the emotional level, but rather insensitive behavior influenced by resonant (co-)feeling. In Phil's case, this leads to a noticeable disinterest and isolation from the other person, avoiding seeing himself reflected in that person's descriptions. This behavior reproduces the very dynamic of stigmatization and social exclusion that Klaus addressed in his story. Alina, on the other hand, actively engages in the interaction and, driven by a mixture of research-led interest and underlying needs related to emotional legacies, ruthlessly insists on topics her interviewee does not wish to explore further. [57]

Both "failures" were crucial to gaining important insights into the research objects. The question of what we want (and do not want) to research and how we want to do it is deeply connected to the ambivalences surrounding empathy. In the discourse on researching traumatic experiences, the possibility of retraumatization—as suggested by the first interpretation group for Alina's interview—can also be understood as a fear of hearing unbearable truths in the interviews. But isn't it also about the fear of being empathetically seduced and overwhelmed by the stories? [58]

How can scholars handle the idea that empathy is a key to good research and its inevitable failure? Is this truly about "empathy" or a more complex emotional

mixture, something that needs to be brought into the open and reflexively dealt with in the context of research encounters? In both examples, fear played a role. Fear may lead to blindness regarding things investigators do not dare to know about themselves, their society, or their research subject. However, fear is an inherent aspect of the research process when dealing with the unknown and when having epistemologically relevant experiences. To manage that fear productively, courage is required, and that involves the willingness and ability to face and endure unpleasant or frightening situations throughout the research process. [59]

KÜHNER (2018, p.116) described courage and fear as key elements of epistemically strong reflection processes. She wrote:

> "It is introspection together with reflection and the theoretically founded idea that research is to be understood as relationship building that leads to deeper knowledge. This includes recognizing that we as researchers are not always in control but rather hand ourselves over to a process that can necessarily trigger anxiety at all stages. This, in turn, implies the need for courage—the much-cited courage to experience fear and uncertainty, and to face the crisis that one inevitably encounters if one does not always want to rediscover what one already knows, is familiar with, or wants to prove with the help of research." [60]

The introspection mentioned here could be associated with empathy. But is empathy truly the right term for taking relationship building and our emotional reactions into account? We, Alina and Phil, tend to reject the term "empathy" in this context because of its connection to moral standards or positions in the general discourse. To us, speaking of "getting involved" in multiple ways is more appropriate. So, what does it mean for a researcher "to get involved" and use this involvement insightfully? What kind of reflexivity is necessary for this? [61]

Broadly speaking, different approaches to dealing with the subjectivity of the researcher can be divided into three types (BREHM & KUHLMANN, 2018; LANGER, KÜHNER & SCHWEDER, 2013). In the first, it is tried to eliminate the researcher's influence by using a specific method. The second is aimed to control the influence of the researcher through self-reflection. In the third, which we are focusing on, the influence or subjectivity of the researcher as relevant data is utilized. [62]

In 2016, KÜHNER et al. coined the term "strong reflexivity" for this approach and described it as follows:

> "*Epistemically strong reflexivity*, however, appreciates the perspective of the researcher and her relationship to the field as a decisive source of data and interpretation. Sympathies, prejudices, fears, emotional, mental, and physical reactions of the researcher are not conceived of as inescapable problems, but as a highly valuable epistemic resource. In this perspective, the active involvement of the researcher in the research process is not problematic, but a constitutive and valuable

part of it. Her subjectivity is a legitimate source of knowledge and has a central epistemic function" (p.700). [63]

The term "strong" was used to describe the inclusion of this subjectivity, marking the difference between this and reflexive approaches where the subjective factor is controlled by reflection but not systematically included in the process of critical knowledge production. In 2018, BREHM and KUHLMANN addressed the question of how to manage this core idea from different disciplinary perspectives. They pointed out that the aim of including the researcher's subjectivity in the strong reflexive approach is not only to prevent the object from becoming mentally overwhelmed but to also become aware of one's own dependence, vulnerability, and affectation by the object, as well as the indissoluble entanglement with each other. [64]

Strong reflexivity must not be confused with unbroken identificatory "empathy" (for criticism of this "empathy" approach in Nazi perpetrator research see, e.g., BROCKHAUS, 1997, p.163; POHL, 2002, p.79; WINTER, 2024). Instead, oscillating between (co-) experiencing and distanced reflection is necessary. But what does that mean for the research process? How can scholars achieve that, and what is needed? Our suggestion is that radical epistemological openness is a necessity, and a striving for intersubjective comprehensibility and transparency. In her autoethnography on Shoah survivors, BREHM (2021, p.37) wrote: "I need to make my thinking and feeling visible [...] in order to [...] stay vulnerable and attackable." [65]

Strong reflexivity also means taking a close look at interview dynamics and the relationships formed in the field, as hinted at in the examples. What methods could be helpful for this? It is important to find multiple ways to methodologically control subjectivity by incorporating the affective resonance of the researcher. We suggest combining group interpretation methods (such as ethnopsychoanalysis or depth hermeneutics) with first-person narrative approaches (e.g., research vignettes or autoethnographic writing) to insightfully use the researchers' subjectivity, and to create reflexive accounts of critical social science research by means of "crystallization." [66]

As DENZIN (2012, p.84) wrote, it

> "[...] combines multiple forms of analysis and genres of representation into a coherent text. Crystallization seeks to produce thick, complex interpretation. It uses more than one writing genre. It deploys multiple forms of analysis, reflexively embeds the researcher's self in the inquiry process and eschews positivist claims to objectivity." [67]

When it comes to the question of whether and how the methods we have presented very briefly are combined, modified or complemented by other strong-reflexive approaches, we advocate an undogmatic openness, as this can ultimately only be decided in relation to the research object and the specific situation of the researcher in the field. [68]

5. Concluding Remarks

We have illustrated in this article how systematic reflection on one's own affects, thoughts, and reactions and their connection with the research relationship and topic is an insightful endeavor. What is most important in the approaches we have briefly outlined is that they each can be understood as calls for research as a joint social practice. Interpretation groups, collegial counseling and peer feedback are beneficial. As KÜHNER (2018) argued, professional research supervision should be planned for particularly emotionally stressful topics. Depending on the aim of the project, specific ways to include research partners in participatory research can also be essential. [69]

Emotions in the research process are important but carry the risk of creating blind spots. However, given the courage to engage with uncertainties and fears, the courage to endure uncomfortable truths during reflection, and systematically questioning them with appropriate methods and others' help, may pave the way to layers of meaning in the material that might otherwise be lost. [70]

Following WATSON's (2009) perspective, we highlight the inevitable oscillation between closure and non-closure in any qualitative research encounter. WATSON cautioned against projecting our own understandings onto participants, as this can prematurely close down research. He argued that we should rigorously scrutinize our empathetic responses, remain suspicious of empathy, and avoid encouraging it, as it can exacerbate issues. Instead, acknowledging differences offers resistance to premature closure and maintains the integrity of the research process. [71]

Two things are particularly important for research practice, inspired by the empathy discourse: First, the researcher's ability to resonate and the willingness to reflect on countertransference dynamics, which is more than just "empathy." Secondly, a good reliveability in the presentation, perhaps also enabling something like "empathy" for the protagonists. Can you immerse yourself in what is described, affectively? This would mean more than mere empathy on the part of the reader. Additionally, it is crucial to take interviews seriously as relational events, meaning that orthodox restraint is not the only right way. Methods such as dialogical interviewing (WAY, KANAK ZWIER & TRACY, 2015) or the free association narrative interview (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2008) could be a promising addition or alternative to the repertoire of methods. [72]

In summary, the concept of "empathy" is frequently overextended and can be more precisely defined when situated within specific contexts. For example, as we have demonstrated, affective resonance is more appropriate at a methodological level. Political aspirations, such as giving voice to marginalized groups (MOROȘANU, 2015), are better captured by the concept of solidarity. From the perspective of research ethics (AKESSON et al., 2018), terms like humanity and compassion are more precise than "empathy" when referring to respect for others' experiences (DENTITH et al., 2012; FERRÁNDIZ & BAER,

2008) or to the dimensions of care and healing (CORDISCO TSAI et al., 2020; JOHNSON et al., 2017). [73]

In advocating for a critical reflexive approach to research, we incorporate these aspects as fundamental. Indeed, it is the ethical and political imperatives that underscore the necessity for a methodologically reflexive framework. The opportunities and challenges tied to this critical aim involve the subjectivity of the researcher and the management of complex emotions and affects experienced by both the researcher and participants. Acknowledging this complexity, rather than subsuming it under the vague term "empathy," would significantly enhance the discourse. [74]

Acknowledgments

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