

Series 1 Episode 5

Emotions in practice and research: A
Conversation with Angie Wilcock and
Sheila Quaid



[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

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Introduction to Episode 5

[00:00:20] **Sarah:** Hello everyone, and welcome to the Portal Podcast. I'm here today with Dr Lesley Deacon as usual and also really pleased to welcome Dr Angela Wilcock and Dr Sheila Quaid who are going to talk to us today about their CASS paper and their research looking at the role of emotions. I'll let everyone in the room introduce themselves before we get stuck into the conversation. So Angie, do you want to start off?

[00:00:54] **Angie:** Yes, I'm Dr Angela Wilcock. I'm a lecturer in Criminology at the University of Sunderland. Research interests are domestic violence, working with perpetrators as well as the victims, and also emotionality in research, which we're talking about today.

[00:01:10] **Sarah:** Thank you, and Sheila?

[00:01:12] **Sheila:** Hi, I'm Dr Sheila Quaid and I'm a sociologist. I've been a Senior Lecturer in Sociology here for quite a long time, nearly a century I think! And my research interests fall into two areas, specifically sociology of families, negotiating intimacies and personal lives; and the second area is critical pedagogies. So I've recently published in both and really pleased to say we're very excited that a book that Angie and I have both been involved in is coming out very soon on sociology of families.

[00:01:44] **Sarah:** That is exciting. Is that the title of the book?

[00:01:46] **Sheila:** No, the title of the book is *Negotiating Families, Personal Lives and Intimacies in the 21st Century*, and it's going to be published by Routledge. So we've just had a last meeting about that today, and we're just excited to get this out by December.

[00:02:01] **Sarah:** That is exciting. And we'll be looking out for that, definitely. And obviously Lesley is here too, so we'll just say hi.

[00:02:08] **Lesley:** I'm here as well. You don't need to hear it anymore.

[00:02:13] **Sarah:** Right, it's really, really great to have you both here and I'm looking forward to this conversation today because I think what your paper is about crosses over into so many different things and is really relevant for social workers and social work practice as well. So I thought, what would be really helpful, and the way we usually start off is just to ask our guests to explain any key terms and concepts in their paper, just so we've set the frame for the conversation to follow. And I think one of the really big things that you talk about in your paper, and that comes up quite a lot, is feminist standpoint epistemology. And I thought it'd be really helpful, because I think that will come up in the conversation, if we can start with a bit of an overview of what that is and what that means. And then we can carry on.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

[00:03:01] **Angie:** Right, do you want me to start? Well, feminist standpoint for me is important in terms of how we are positioned within the research when we're actually doing it, and for me it involves the inter-subjectivity, which is a term I suppose I need to explain as well, now that I've mentioned it. It's about having a common relationship with the participant. So if you're researching domestic violence with professionals, I can then link into my professional background in frontline service provision. So it gives some commonality in terms of where we're positioning. And this, for me, I suppose is about challenging that power imbalance. It never removes it, but it challenges that. And, for me, it also brings the voices of those people that we are researching to the fore. So they're giving the story of their lived realities. And I think that's important because it's their life histories that we want to know and get to the bottom of, for those who are more or less marginalised.

[00:03:58] **Sarah:** Yeah, thank you for explaining that. And I think straight away there's a real crossover in what you've just said with social work practice, because obviously that really is about working with people with different lived experiences and thinking about the power imbalance in practitioners' day-to-day roles and how they really support people to talk to them and share their experiences. So that was a really helpful start to the conversation.

[00:04:23] **Lesley:** Angie can I just ask you what was your practice experience?

[00:04:27] **Angie:** Yeah, I've worked within social housing, within not only the task force but in terms of homelessness with Sunderland City Council, then it went over to it's now known as Gentoo. For many years I worked as a housing manager in frontline around some of the most marginalised areas in the City of Sunderland. I've also worked within HMPPS [Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service], so obviously working with the most vulnerable people, and there's a lot of emotion involved within that. Because in terms of family liaison, you're working with the families who have what we call the hidden sentence, that they're running that sentence alongside the offender. And it's very hard for some, and so there's a lot of emotion, especially at visits and dealing with family issues within that system.

[00:05:14] **Lesley:** Yeah. Because that was what I connected to, I connected a lot with the paper, I really enjoyed it, I'd read it when it first came out, so nice to go back to it and have a read through and think about what questions I wanted to ask about it. One of the things I was thinking, because I think Angie you'd said about having that idea of being 'emotionally exhausted' from interviewing, from that process and you've mentioned there about practitioners. I just wonder how well do you think that we do support people with those kind of things?

[00:05:46] **Angie:** I think it's very difficult. I think in terms of our professional boundaries, we tend to deal with these situations in the field. And I think we tend not to show, as a practitioner or as a researcher obviously you don't show that emotion in the field because you're concerned with the person that you're actually working with. And I think it's very difficult and I think this is where we become reflexive and reflective, and I think there's an argument between the two in terms of how they sit. When you leave that and you're then sitting back to think about what you've just actually done, and I think in terms of the research I wasn't exploring people's experiences of domestic violence, I was wanting to understand what they *knew* about domestic violence, so what they

understood that to be. And I had a couple of women in the field who then said, "oh my God, I'm experiencing domestic violence". And their lived realities changed, their understandings of their relationship changed. And it was quite emotional. Some of them were very upset at realising that they needed to change their situation. And afterwards I came out and thought, "oh my God, it's my research I've provoked this". And we talk about being an 'insider', but we can choose when to be an 'outsider' as well. And I think that happens in practice. And when you are working with someone, yes you've got that insider status in terms of the subjectivity, but then you can choose to be an outsider to deal with that. Like shifting positions to get that and move away. But then, when you are reflecting on that process that you've just gone through, but then you're being reflexive of how you've positioned yourself within that. I think that's when the emotion, for me, and transcription is when that voice came through. And even now I talk about it, this one woman I can still hear, because I had to stay these two hours after the interview. She did find it she said quite cathartic because she hadn't spoke about any of this before. And I think that's, for practitioners dealing with that, I think we do take it home.

[00:07:55] **Lesley:** I find it interesting, Sheila you and I over the years have chatted about emotionality in research, because you can see with practice where it's there, it's in the everyday, but then when it comes to research, it's like there's a background idea of you must be rigorous, you must be independent and objective. And we've talked at times, haven't we, about that acknowledgement that actually research is personal and it is emotional.

[00:08:22] **Sheila:** And it is close to home for most of us. Can I just answer your question by coming back to feminist epistemology? I want to add something to what Angie's been saying about feminist epistemology. For me, the emphasis in that phrase is on the word *epistemology*, which is knowledge and where knowledge is produced from. And so I'm just really adding to what Angie said, and I embraced feminist epistemology many, many years ago because I've a history, before my job here, where I developed a women's studies degree in another university. And the whole ethos of developing a women's studies degree is to situate women's knowledge at the centre of the program. And so Donna Haraway's situated knowledges and Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology were things that I read very, very early on. And there's one phrase that stands out from Sandra Harding for me, which has guided both of us hasn't it Angie, in terms of the work that you've done on your PhD and on mine, which is, the one phrase from Sandra Harding, that the researcher, if feminist, and using this approach, you put yourself on the same

critical plane as the person you're speaking to. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that your life is going to be researched as well, or that your life and all your experiences become data as well. But it does mean that the relationship between the researcher and the researched has to be as open and as transparent to the reader and the audience as possible. And that's really, really important when it comes to who we can research. So for me, feminist epistemology has been an 'opening up' rather than a 'focusing down' on just one experience. Because, for example, on the power issue, there has for many years been a debate about whether men should interview women, whether white people should interview black people about racism, whether non-disabled people should interview disabled people about living with disabilities. But it would be unrealistic to think that we can only ever research ourselves. And this is where feminist epistemology has been a tool for me to really deal with these power issues. Because the furthest we can go is to say it allows us to put our positionality on the same critical plane as the researched. So in everything I write and present from the work from PhD onwards, if I present a conference or I write a paper, there's something about me in there. About who I am and how I am positioned in relation to the people that I'm interviewing. Does that make sense?

[00:10:58] **Lesley:** Yeah, so not just about the commonality of the subject matter, it's about the positioning of the two people and acknowledging that relationship.

[00:11:09] **Sheila:** Exactly. It's not about searching for commonalities, although that often does happen because of the things that we choose to, you'll see from reading the paper, that one of the things that prompted Angie and I to write this was a discussion like this one day, where we just realised in the middle of an interview, the people that we were interviewing were triggering *our* emotions about something. And so we were left with this question, where do we go with this, as researchers? Now I have friends who are trained psychotherapists and very skilled psychotherapists, and they have supervision and they have all sorts of things set up to look after their emotions and to train them to deal with emotionality. And I'm not suggesting, or we're not suggesting at all in our paper that this is the route we should go down, because that's not what we need as professional researchers, but I think we do need something, even if it starts with a recognition that you are going to be emotionally managing information. Now, this is a really interesting thing for me, because one of the phrases that I've quoted in the paper is the way we've all been trained in education. And the way we've been trained in education is,

well the quote is: 'There's been a historic polarity between knowledge and emotion. So in all our professions, we've been trained to think that you're only competent if you put your emotions at the door, if you leave your emotions to one side, don't be emotionally involved.' That's the way many of us are trained in education and professional practice. And I think what we've realised through the work that we've done is this is not right, because we *are* emotionally connected. We *are* emotionally affected. So we're really interested, aren't we, in talking to people, we're really interested for people to talk to us and with you, this is brilliant, to talk about what do we do as educators? And researchers? Because we think there should be something that recognises the emotional impact on us.

[00:13:08] **Lesley:** Yeah, because it does. I mean, it just does impact, it doesn't matter whether it's a case that you're working on, or working with individuals in practice, or whether it's a story. I didn't even do the interviews in a piece of research I did, the interviews had been done by community researchers and I was then analysing the transcriptions and doing a thematic analysis, and one of the participants, I just felt like my heart was breaking, it was about isolation and loneliness. And I felt, I didn't know who this person was, for me they were participant number whatever, I didn't even know their name or anything about them, but their *story* was so powerful that I felt emotionally involved and felt, you know, the fact that this person had shared it, what they'd gone through. But you kind of then just park it at the door almost because that's why you and I have chatted about it Sheila, because I definitely, as a social work lecturer, had gone down that road of don't do anything that's too close to home, don't do anything that's too emotional. And I remember the first time I think I sat in one of your sessions, I think I was doing peer review or something, and I sat in and I was listening, and that made me rethink about actually I had a student who wanted to do research into childhood bereavement, so a child losing a parent. And my first response, as the educator like you talk about, was no, that's too close to home for you. But I didn't, after I sat and thought about, okay, well how can we support you through this process? And as you said Angie, the cathartic nature of it for this student, they did exceptionally well as well with it, and it was about supporting that student *through* those emotions, because it was so important to her to learn about, to research that area. And yes they were part of that, but I think it's so important that it's almost like... Because we think that research and practice are such separate things, and that's part of what I like to look at and what we're doing Sarah, is research and practice are not separate at all. And I find it so interesting with this article that what you're trying to get us all to acknowledge is even if you don't have a

commonality with that individual, you have an emotional reaction because we're all people and we're human beings.

[00:15:39] **Angie:** No, I think what you've just said there about research and practice is very similar, practitioners are researchers, especially in terms of social work, they're going out to find out what's going on in people's lives. And I think coming back to the emotion, we are emotive beings and I think, as Mary Holmes recognises, you can't remove your emotions, you can't leave them at the door, because part of whether it's happy or sad, these emotions frame who we are, and it interlinks us with others as well. And yes, in terms of professional boundaries we deal with it, but when you leave that situation you've then got to manage those emotions and everything that you've taken on board. And I think that's where, I think in terms of practitioners and from experience in terms of practice, they're not looked upon is that they are actually researchers, that they are delving into people's lives, that they are dealing with a lot of really sensitive information regarding people's families that they then have to go and decompartmentalise, deal with that and think, right, where do I put this to be able to move forward?

[00:16:43] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think it just raises so many questions for practice, doesn't it? Because it is that impact and what you take home with you and how you manage it. And also I think what comes up a lot is that balance of when you are with someone, whether it's as a researcher or a practitioner, and you're feeling something that you're discussing with them, how much of that do you share? Do you share it? Don't you share it? There doesn't seem to be any kind of consensus around that. And actually, some research that I'm just writing up at the moment really touched on emotions quite a lot in that respect, and it was more focused around social work education and showing emotion in the classroom I'm talking about, difficult topics. And there was a lot of discussion about finding the 'balance', but what that balance is, no one was really that clear. And what was really interesting is one of the students had said, well I won't do it because I'm scared that I won't be viewed as a resilient practitioner, but the lecturers can do it because they've already established that they can do the job. So there's something about how you might be seen that can be a concern and whether you can legitimately do that.

Professional boundaries?

[00:17:52] **Angie:** I think in terms of practice, you do, you are trained to have those professional boundaries that you *don't* share, especially within an

offender management background, you don't share any detail whatsoever. And I think you go into that, even though you may hit triggers, and a lot of the places I've worked a lot of the offenses relate against women and there may be triggers, that you just don't show any, you can't show any type of emotion until you leave that room. And I think we spoke earlier about an incident that I'd experienced and I was more or less told was quite horrific, and then it was just said, go home, you'll be fine, take the afternoon off and come back in tomorrow. And it's like, I think for practitioners to deal with it, they need a manager who does, not enforce, but encourage good reflective practice, and does take on board the impact that that has had, emotionally, because I think we have to be selfish as practitioners, because we need to be well in ourselves to be able to help those that are vulnerable. So I think it's about looking after yourself to be able to look after others. So I think there's that argument. And when I'm teaching, especially in terms of domestic violence, I'm very aware with the students that I explain that it is an emotive subject, that they may recognise things that they've never thought about before, and it can raise triggers and make them aware that there is support out there. And I think we also need to be regularly doing that in practice as well. There's nothing wrong with walking away from some family and being emotional about it. I think we need to be more transparent around emotion.

[00:19:30] **Lesley:** I think it's hard though, isn't that? Because, well I was emotional yesterday, wasn't I Sarah? And all I said to Sarah is, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry". You were like, "you don't need to be sorry", but we don't have that comfort do we? In practice, in research and in our workplace environments. It's like emotionality seems to be connected with something to do with women that is not professional. It's not viewed in a positive way, it's not viewed as helpful, even though actually it's the expression of how you're feeling at that moment in time and we all feel like that. And it's like, we don't have a safe space anywhere, because Sheila would you say that's what you look into a lot as well?

[00:20:19] **Sheila:** Yeah, and I'm really thinking carefully about what you're all saying, because I'm going to give an example from the past. Twenty-six years ago I was a research assistant, around harm and abuse. And as a person who hadn't been involved in this area of work before I was suddenly having to deal with material that was incredibly upsetting. And I was a little bit slow with getting the work done, and I talked to the senior academic and she said, "can you do this work or not? Because if you can't, there are another ten researchers waiting for a part-time job." And I think that's illustrative of the

way you would be responded to in those days if you said "this is making me feel a little bit taken aback, I need a little bit more time to process what I'm seeing". And so that was a trigger for me as well, that's always been in my mind around this, as well as the experiences that Angie and I have had in our interview situation in research. But you see, for me, when that happened all those years ago, and when I was emotionally impacted by things that were being said in interviews, I was sitting in people's houses, interviewing them about their reproductive life choices, and I'm being personally impacted by what's being said. And that personal impact could be really positive, because I think I've said in the paper, one of the reasons I realised I was emotionally involved was because I was interviewing couples about having children. I've ended a PhD and I'm sitting in people's houses and I'm just looking around at this lovely, happy environment. And it's impacting me because I'm thinking to myself, I could have this. I could have this. Now that is not the respondent's concern. You see what I mean? So this is the way I think, and I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but I think it's not the respondent's concern for me to say that. So my practice that I've developed for myself is not necessarily around sharing, being really clear about what I'm there for to get information from them. But what I've done is develop this insider status approach with the groups that I'm working with. And obviously it's not possible with some, but what I did in the PhD was to establish insider status as far as I possibly could in the access to participants part of the process, where I would say something about myself, who I was, why I was interested in this research, and in researching sexual minorities it's well known that if you do that, there's a level of trust that's built around a shared experience. And that's as far as the sharing of my information went. But I wouldn't see it as appropriate for me to suddenly voice to a respondent what I'm feeling, because she's not there for that. She shouldn't have to look after my emotions. So what I want is for me to go somewhere after the process for a professional debrief about what I'm feeling.

[00:23:14] **Sarah:** That's really interesting what you're saying Sheila, because when you started to talk I was wondering about how that impacts on the development of rapport with your participants. I think the position is slightly different for social workers, but there is still an argument about what you share and how much you share and how that helps you to develop a relationship, or how that helps you to respond with empathy or show empathy. Because sometimes it is appropriate or it can help to say, actually I do know how you feel because I've experienced some of that. Sometimes that's not appropriate, and for me it's always an instinct or a gut reaction, but

I'm just wondering what you think about that. Because you said you've got quite a clear position on what you will and won't share and how you do that.

[00:24:01] **Sheila:** Yeah, I think it's in the setting up of, for me, a research interview, because I'm not in the same situation as many of you where I haven't had this practice experience. But in a research interview, I think it's in the setting up of the interview. And if they've had the information about me before they've invited me into their house, and they know who I am, and I'm talking *specifically* about being in a sexual minority and doing work with sexual minorities. So I'm not saying it's transferrable to other situations, but I think it is in the setting up of it. And once they've had that information about me, I then find it quite ordinary and reasonable to say, "oh yes, I know what you mean." Or, "oh yes, well, because I went through that route, but I didn't go through that route, so I know people who have." And then they will know that I'm talking about people in the community, but I think the key is in the setting up, and even then I'm quite minimalist in what I say about myself, because I feel as if I'm not there for them to deal with. I will gauge it and use my judgment because I don't want them to feel that there's anything that they have to deal with with, with what I'm saying. So I will only ever say it in order to achieve an empathetic reaction or a feeling of validity in what's being said. So it is a question of personal judgment, once I've set it up in that way.

[00:25:28] **Lesley:** It sounds like you're creating a comfort for them, by sending that information in advance you're giving them that about you, and then it's also about the power, isn't it? Like were saying about that,. So you're handing that information to them so that then when they have this stranger coming into their home, they already know something about you. And especially when you are talking about discussing things with people who might experience discrimination, that gives them a potential comfort that then will be understood. And so it sounds to me that it's almost like you are *responding* to them, so it's not about your sharing, it's that then in that interview process, they can say things to you and you can acknowledge that. So it gives them the power to connect with you then as a person and not just as the researcher who's sitting there.

[00:26:24] **Sheila:** And that becomes all important when you get a heightened moment of emotion. And in my experience, and I'm talking about a piece of work that was done many years ago now for this paper I reflected on a piece of work that was done many years ago, and the emotion that I had to deal with in many of those interviews was *anger*. And it was unexpected anger, but it was

anger at each other amongst the couple, because they interviewed couples. And to give you an example, one of my questions would be, "there is a common perception that two women who have a child want to be seen as two mothers, is that how you see yourselves?" And interestingly by the way, not all lesbian couples *do* want to be seen as two mothers, it's very clear that there's a demarcation between 'mum' and 'other parent', and those who want to be seen as two mums. It's not a given that a family wants to be seen as two mums. But it became clear in the interview that the couple hadn't actually negotiated this with each other, and it was not resolved. And it was a source of great pain to the person who wasn't the biological mother, that her partner wouldn't see her as mother, or wouldn't use the word 'mother' for her. And in the interview, I was left, as a relatively inexperienced interviewer, in a house 200 miles away from where I live with two people saying to each other that they wanted to end it, and did I have any advice about relationship counselling? So these experiences, and we shared these experiences through all our conversations, and talking to Angie this consciousness that this isn't just me, this happens to a lot of researchers, just led us to think we really have to do something about managing the emotions in what we do. But it relates to your work, Angie, because mine was about awkwardness, that I was left in a very awkward emotional situation and not knowing what to do. And it wasn't part of my supervision. And I felt at the time there was nowhere I could go with that because the supervisor just said, "well did you manage to get the interview?" And it was just about whether you got the interview and did you leave them some referral advice? Yes, and then that was it, move on to the next issue. And then chatting to you about it one day, you were telling me about a situation where there was a sudden moment of feeling not quite safe in an interview situation.

Managing risk

[00:28:57] **Angie:** Yeah, I was carrying out an interview at a home again, in a home, and this lady told me that she was experiencing domestic violence, but she started talking very quietly and I heard a noise upstairs. So I presumed that the perpetrator was in the house at the time, and all the doors I could hear the doors banging and closing. And then it was at that point that I thought, right, now I need to leave, but we need to see it through. Anyway, it came to be that at the time I think for me my professional training came into play, because you always recognise you sit with your back to the door, you always have an exit. And I think that had played out how I was positioned, whether I did that subconsciously I really don't know. And I asked the lady if there's anybody in the house and she said no, it was a son who was home from school, so he was

upstairs. And I asked if she wanted to carry on with the interview, obviously because there was a child in the property, and we arranged to do it another time at a later date because she was quite emotional as well. And I did get quite a bit of the data, but it's at that point that you realise the positions you're putting yourself in as well when you are interviewing people in their homes, and you are dealing with domestic violence where the thought of a perpetrator being around hadn't, as a researcher, crossed my mind, that there could have been somebody else in that property.

[00:30:19] **Lesley:** It's really interesting you were saying that because I've just been in a class teaching students around research, and we were talking about whistleblowing and things like that. And students were sharing about how, you know, if they work at a shop they're told don't approach someone if you just see that you think they're shoplifting, they're told don't approach them. And that started me thinking, that's really interesting, because I started thinking about all of the situations as a practitioner that I was in, where I really was at risk, and my safety was being challenged quite a lot. And I remember a situation where I was having to go and effectively, with police, to remove some children. And we were getting a protection order and we didn't know if the partner would be there, and there was domestic violence, and I was told, yes, it was a risk, so take the police. And then I was standing then about to go in and the police asked me, "are you expecting risk in this situation?" And I said, "yes", so they said, "I'll just get my stab vest". So off they went to get their stab vests and I stood there with pen and paper, and it's become my little anecdote that I share, but I literally looked, I had a notepad and a pen and I was like, okay, so what I've got is my voice. That's what I have to use in these situations. And that was just seen as an everyday occurrence at work. Just an everyday thing. I went in there, I did talk to her, it did go okay. But that comes up a lot for me that, and because when I became a researcher then, I went with that hat on and I was thinking, "is it safe?" I didn't like the idea of going into people's houses to interview them. And I was thinking, is it safe for me to be in there? I felt that the safety around me was very poor, and it concerns me a bit that we don't acknowledge, because with those emotions comes *fear*, and that discomfort you feel in these situations, and social workers are very much left with their wits.

[00:32:39] **Angie:** They're vulnerable aren't they?

[00:32:40] **Lesley:** They are. And in some situations where you know it's a risk it's just "take another social worker with you". And it's like, well okay, but

that's not going to necessarily help, you know? And we don't acknowledge these things.

[00:32:56] **Angie:** I probably should have been more aware of that, because from a housing background I constantly, and I've been taken hostage for a short while in the past, so in terms of my housing background, I probably should have had more awareness of that. Or I had probably become complacent in the fact that I've done this for a lot of years, going out of people's houses to speak to people and desensitising situations that you're in. And especially in terms of HMPPS you're desensitising constant situations that may be, and I think we talked about this didn't we, because Sheila was obviously one of my supervisors on my PhD, and I was in pieces after some of these interviews. And I think we just talked about how this was totally different to my professional background. You've got all those professional boundaries and they see you as this person who has got some type of authority in terms of that professional protection, I suppose. But going in as a researcher, it's totally different. And the university, obviously ours, Sheila and Catherine [Donovan] were very good, I always told them what day I was doing the interview, what house, where I was going, I had to message when I went in a message when I came out. So I had very good supervision. However, if I had not had that, the rest of the university, nobody knew where I was, at what day I was doing what interview. And there was no, for all we had to get the ethical clearance, I think in terms of ethics there was no clear guidance from that other than from the supervision.

[00:34:15] **Sheila:** Well that raises a whole other question about ethical procedures, I think, about where the risk lies and where the responsibility lies. But going back, that's an interesting and important point to make about how we produced this paper. It came out of Angie talking to me after difficult situations in research as a co-supervisor and the two of us chatting together, and then deciding to just talk about this more and then start to document what we were thinking and feeling about it. And out of that, we developed this work. So it's been very productive for us. But we're really interested, really happy to be here today, because we're really interested to talk to colleagues and just keep sharing discussions around some of these issues around emotionality.

[00:34:58] **Sarah:** I think it's an ongoing conversation, isn't it? So that's what I really like about your paper is that you present your experiences and you talk through them, and really what you're doing, or what I took from that, is that

you were trying to open up this conversation. Because it isn't talked about in research, in practice perhaps as well, as much as it could or should be. But I was really interested in what you said before Angie about becoming desensitised. And I think that was something I wanted to ask you both about as well, because we've talked about how we're human, we experience emotions, and that's okay, and actually the value of that. But obviously we also talked about the need to look after ourselves, and there's a lot in this about being self-aware isn't there, and knowing yourself and what you can manage. That there is a danger of going too far one way or the other, I suppose, like if you do become desensitised to people's positions and the experiences that they have, or if you've tried to shut yourself off from feeling that so much that you become almost hardened. So I just wondered if you had anything to say about that side of it,? Like feel it but don't feel it too much?

[00:36:08] **Angie:** I think it's really difficult. I don't think you ever can shut yourself off from it because I think there's some point where something happens within your life and you have a trigger and it takes me back to a point and I think, we had this in HMPPS, where I worked with a lot of different types of offenders, and sometimes it was really strange because we had an incident where there was a gentlemen brought into the prison who had actually harmed animals, and they were sentenced for that, and I found it very difficult to work with those people because I'm an animal lover, and we had this conversation and it was raised around emotion at the time, in the prison it was said to me, "I can't believe you, you'll work with these all other types of offenders, but you won't work with someone who's harmed an animal." And it made me realise that how much you work with these people open up and tell you their stories and take great pleasure sometimes in telling you some of the details that within that professional background I must've become so hardened to that, or acceptable that that does happen and we have so many people who do that, and it's very rare that you do get this different type of offender in. But it really touched me through loving dogs and being an animal lover. And that made me go away and think about it in terms of, and back to the work around violence and domestic violence and the work I can do with perpetrators, in looking at that, but know there is still those triggers because every now and again you hear something or somebody states something, things are brought out in class when you talking about it, it triggers that emotion and it takes you back to events or incidents that may have happened. And I talk about in my work, I've got personal experiences of domestic violence, so there's something in that trigger that can take you back to that point. So I think the professional boundaries we have, or whatever those skills, this emotional resilience we

build in terms of our work is there, but I think on a personal level there's always a chance even when you're out or, I remember I was once in a busy pub and there was a fight and I just went into mass panic because for me it was getting myself out of that situation. And I think we were sitting at a table minding our own business, but instant triggers of assault, and it was like the thoughts you hear, and it brings it back. So I don't think, given who we are, I don't think you can ever remove yourself totally from that. And people say I've become hardened to it but I don't believe that we actually can, not fully. I think we learn to deal with it much more, or we think, oh yeah, I've heard that. And I think we've had discussions about harm and violence with people that everybody, I think we had this conversation earlier, everybody looks at harm differently. Everybody understands certain levels of harm differently. Some people can be sworn at and be really hurt by that, emotively. Some people can just use it daily and not, and that's a natural occurrence for them.

[00:39:14] **Sheila:** Are you talking about swearing?

[00:39:15] **Angie:** Yeah, and in different types, but even certain types of abuse, you have this common couple violence where they're constantly hitting, and that might be a natural thing, or pushing, for them. But for somebody else, that could be a huge emotional harm. And I think we've all got different levels of resilience that we slowly build on over the years that probably does give us some type of barrier, but I don't think we can fully, because at some point we can be taken back at any point.

[00:39:44] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think that's so true.

Space to reflect

[00:39:46] **Lesley:** I was just thinking, because the other side to that though is where you've got that resilience where actually your'e adding experience after experience after experience, and one of the things that does happen in practice is around stress and burnout, and that's something where that trigger then is just that final case or that final situation that you encounter where it just knocks you over the edge, because actually, certainly in child protection social work, which is the environment I worked in, you can't maintain that. Because I was thinking about, with your article that you're talking about, for the research, the interviews are a finite piece that you're gathering. Although actually, obviously you're transcribing and you're going over and over it. But actually in practice, you're encountering those situations again and again and

again and again and again. And what concerns me, I suppose, is that we're really talking about opening up this conversation, getting people to think about it more, I'm thinking about supervisions and I'm thinking that's about case management and there might be a little check-in, but not to the extent of going through your cases, going through all of those home visits you've done. And it's once a month, how many visits do you do in a day? And this is something that's come through when Sarah and I have been doing these recordings and podcasts is about having the space and the time to reflect.

[00:41:23] **Sarah:** Yeah, it has come up in every single conversation. We need this!

[00:41:28] **Lesley:** We want some space.

[00:41:30] **Angie:** But I think in terms of practitioners, and more so social workers, their caseloads and case studies, how do you make that time? And I think this comes back to work I did with Nigel Malin in the past, around social workers, and I remember speaking to the management structure, who had a totally different attitude, or didn't have the understanding that the social workers had on the ground in terms of what they actually needed. And they'd said we literally move from one case to the next, we're so busy, we have no admin, we need somebody to do the admin to give us time to focus on our case studies. And I thought about in terms of my practice, they're right, because no matter where you work in practice there's never the resources that you actually need to give you that emotional support, but also to *alleviate*, to give you time to take time out. And if you've just dealt with a really difficult case, and you need to take some time away, then having that additional support, somebody who could step in who knows that ... or can remove some of the paperwork for you, have time with a line manager or a case manager to take that forward. In reality, it doesn't work.

[00:42:44] **Sarah:** It doesn't work, yeah. And you're right, because the day-to-day job is so busy, I think what ends up happening is that reflection either doesn't happen or it spills into what should be, not work time.

[00:42:56] **Angie:** You just take it home.

Reflexivity

[00:42:57] **Sarah:** You take it home, and in the car, when you get home, that's when you've got the space to actually think about, well, what happened today and how do I feel about that? And I think it was one of your questions Lesley, but I think it's a good time to ask. It was just one of the ones you'd jotted down before we came in about...

[00:43:17] **Lesley:** Reflexivity.

[00:43:19] **Sarah:** Reflexivity being such an important tool.

[00:43:23] **Lesley:** It is such an important tool, because I think that, for me, reflexivity is about what you're taking in, and the impact that that can have. And then it's like this cause and effect where there's this constant relationship going on, and I don't know necessarily that people fully understand that. So actually, Sheila can I connect you to that? Because if I connect it with what I was going to ask, you mentioned psychotherapists, they will have their counselling with each other afterwards to help them deal with stuff. So do you think that there's a space for this, for reflexivity, that we need to have in, not just social work practice, but across the board really?

[00:44:09] **Sheila:** I think that is one of our priorities going forward, which is an encouragement to let's build this into professional practice around research. I'm listening to you all talking about practice and you've all got lots more experience, well I haven't got much experience in the sort of practice you're talking about, but building it into what we do and building in spaces for that, but it's also linked to something you were asking me earlier Sarah about creating a dialogue here, because one of the things I've been interested in for years is how do you create spaces for dialogue? Because I think dialogue doesn't just happen, and it has to be carefully set up. And this has all changed my practice in a fundamental way around organising conferences, because for a few years I've run these Nature Nurture Future conferences with a local project in Gateshead. And one of the things that we've done is to create a space where the management of people's emotions is already built into the planning. So I have a psychotherapist there, because we know we're going to be talking about, well one of the first conferences I ran was called 'Mum's the Word'. And a fantastic former colleague of ours, Ros Crawley from Psychology, most of her work is around all matters maternal. And Ros Crawley's recent work has just been published about women's experiences of stillbirth. And she started talking in this conference and presenting her paper, and about five of the women just left the room because they were overcome with tears and

feelings of upset. And this really struck me because they left the event and they were the women who should have been able to really get something from that. And I thought about it the next time, and I approached somebody who said she would be happy to be a psychotherapist around at the event. And I'm not claiming to be qualified or skilled, I've just tried some things out around managing emotion. And so the next time we did it I had a psychotherapist there who says that she can do little 10 minute holding work with people. So if somebody is finding themselves to be upset about something that's been covered, or it's triggering something from the past, then she can do 10 minutes in the corridor, and she calls it 'holding work'. And it did happen the next time, and four or five women were very, very upset, and my external colleague did this holding work, and all five women came back in because a little bit of management of the emotions had just been put into place. Now what I've noticed, in my life professionally, is if you cry when you're in a professional space, you think you have to leave. If you cry, you think you have to leave the event because you're not a valid member of that group if you're crying. So I've tried to put things in place to say, if you cry, this is what we're going to do.

[00:47:13] **Lesley:** So like there's a strategy.

[00:47:15] **Sheila:** There's a strategy. And you will move through it and then be able to get something from the day. And that has worked really beautifully because, well, our good colleague Caroline Mitchell, who came to one of my events and said, "this is unbelievable", the way in which we got to a depth of conversation around very, very personal things amongst people who didn't know each other. And I remember her saying to me, "how did you do this?" And then she made a radio program of what we did down at Thought Foundation. So I've really thought through some of the ways of doing this, and I'm only trying things out, I haven't got any answers, but I have noticed that if you allow people to feel emotional, work through it for 10 minutes with somebody skilled and qualified, then they can still stay, they can still be professionally involved. Which leads me to the writer who really moved us on with all of this, wasn't it? And the landmark paper for both Angie and I was Mary Holmes' 2010 paper on Emotionalisation of Reflexivity. And we read that paper and that just sparked this work.

[00:48:27] **Lesley:** I'm going to have to read that one.

[00:48:28] **Sarah:** I'll have a look at that, because I read the paper we're talking about today a while ago, because I used it to support something else I was

writing and I'd seen that reference and it looked really good. We will link to it in the show notes so that everyone can find it.

[00:48:44] **Lesley:** I think what you were saying there Sheila is that, just listening to you talk there, I think that what's the biggest thing, yes you're saying, "look, I don't have the answers", but what it is is that you're acknowledging the presence of the emotions. And I think that's really what I'm getting from this, is that if we don't acknowledge they are there, so they are going to happen and they're going to happen somewhere, if we acknowledge them you're saying to people who were there, that it's okay. So their response is okay. And that creates a safety for them, that then what they don't have to feel is that, "oh my gosh, I'm losing it, I need to leave this place". And I think that that's something that I think we can learn a lot from across the board, to acknowledge and give space to this, because it *is* happening, whether people accept it or not, it is. And I think that your ideas about wanting to do future research, I think that'd be so interesting to look at the different ways in which emotions are managed within practice environments, and how much they're acknowledged and how much space is given to them as well.

Emotional knowledge

[00:50:03] **Angie:** I think it brings strength as well in terms of recognising emotion, because how we move on and manage those, I think the next time in terms of emotional resilience and especially in practice, when we're working in practice and we have that emotionality, I think it gives a certain amount of strength to a person to realise that they are dealing with vulnerable situations, that they are being *empathetic*, and there's nothing wrong with having that emotional feeling when you, when you're opening up, because I think it does give somebody that strength to say, well yes. People go into social work because they want to, they want to nurture they want to support, and showing that empathy I think we should be embracing rather than saying that this shouldn't be happening and you should be dealing with it much more sternly.

[00:50:49] **Sarah:** I completely agree. Oh, you've got your hand up Sheila! You may speak.

[00:50:57] **Sheila:** Underneath all of this, there is something really quite exciting about pushing this issue of emotionality, because it is deeply, deeply unsettling to very ancient and powerful ways of knowing things. Because historically we've been taught that true knowledge is objective knowledge,

rational, distant, got to be objective, can't be subjective. And all of this is deeply, deeply unsettling. And then I remember going back to our landmark paper that just really pushed us into taking this further, Mary Holmes, I just remember reading one sentence that she said one day, and it just stayed with me all the way through this, which was if we have emotionally engaged research practice then we produce emotionally embedded knowledge. And when we start producing emotionally embedded knowledge, we are unsettling the academy, because traditionally the only true knowledge is rational, distant, objectified.

[00:51:58] **Angie:** That's another argument in itself isn't it?

[00:52:01] **Sheila:** So when I have read that by Mary Holmes, I just thought this is where we need to be in terms of the future of how we produce knowledge, but also it's a feminist argument that's been around for a long time, but I've been able to think about it in a much clearer way since Angie and I have been working on this.

[00:52:21] **Sarah:** Yeah, I completely agree. I love that you've brought that up because there *are* different ways of knowing, and this is important, this is anti-oppressive as well as being a feminist perspective because it's acknowledging different ways of knowing and giving that sort of emotional way of knowing, or that embodied knowledge, a power and a status that it needs. But I think what struck me before as well was what you were talking about, for me, in the creation of those spaces for emotion and what you'd said, Sheila, about we will acknowledge this, we will not pretend even that we don't have emotions, because we're all professionals, or that if you do get upset, you have to leave and take it away because we don't want to see it. What you're doing there is creating a space where it's openly acknowledged and a space of safety, and for me that really linked into a kind of trauma-informed way of working as well, because what we're talking about is people bringing those previous potentially traumatic experiences that are triggered, as you were saying, and one of the key principles of that way of working is the creation of spaces of safety and a sense of safety, establishing trust, prioritising empowerment and enabling people to speak up, collaborating, all of those things that we're talking about fit within that trauma-informed approach as well. We're actually thinking about what people's experiences are and how they impact on how they deal with different situations and react to different things. And I think, for social work practice, it's so important because we do know as well that, anecdotally from interviewing social work students and from the literature, we know that a

lot of people come into social work practice because they've got their own lived experiences of lots of different things. So there are going to be emotions.

[00:54:12] **Sheila:** It's not an accident that most PhDs on lesbian and gay parenting are by lesbian and gay parents. It's not an accident that most PhDs on domestic violence are by women who've either been supporting or experiencing women experiencing domestic violence.

[00:54:33] **Angie:** But I also think recognising that emotion is important as well as being a practitioner, because words can't always say the depth of harm that person's felt. But if you're looking at an incident where there's people around and there's a lot of emotion in that person, you can recognise the depth of harm, and that's data in itself. That's rich, you're realising the harm that that woman has gone through, or that person's gone through, that they're willing to give you, or even as a practitioner, if that person's not saying anything, but you're looking at them as an emotional wreck, you can see that they've experienced a depth of harm that they can't talk about so you know there's something there that needs that support. And I think we need to be embracing that as well and not just saying, well, she never really said that, but we know there's something there that we need to look at further.

[00:55:20] **Lesley:** It's being allowed to go with that, isn't it? Because when you were talking just then I was thinking about my own PhD research, and I positioned myself as a social worker, and part of my interviews was with social worker, and I did present myself in that way to create that comfort that I was saying before. But what I found frustrating was that I also interviewed parents and carers about their experiences of supporting their child who had displayed harmful sexual behavior, and there was emotion there and there was stress there, massive stress, that it was almost like, well that's not part of it, let's put that to one side.

[00:55:59] **Angie:** But that's rich!

[00:56:00] **Lesley:** I know, and when I'm sitting there thinking about what you're discussing today, I'm thinking that was really important.

[00:56:08] **Angie:** That's raw data.

[00:56:09] **Lesley:** Yes, and it's gone, and it's not there. Go on Sheila.

[00:56:13] **Sheila:** It is really important, I feel strongly about this, but it is really important to draw distinctions between what we're doing as researchers and educators and what people are doing as emotional supporters, like therapists or counsellors. And one of my little practices has been, that I've developed, is to say to a student an academic piece of work is not therapy. To engage in a PhD is not therapy, and what I've developed, and I'd be interested to know what other people do, but if you have a student who comes along and says, I want to do, I mean we've got a student at the moment who wants to do something very closely related to experience. And we've all in the past had dissertation students who want to do something, like you said earlier. So what I get students to do quite often is two sides of A4 of 'what brought me to study this', and spend some time on the emotional drive to do this work. And I'm interested to work with colleagues to develop more practices around how do we handle the emotion, but do the clear distinction between the emotion and the work. And we know that that emotion is going to come through the work, but making it really clear that an academic piece of work is not your way to... there are other ways that are going to deal with the emotionality. So I just thought that was quite important to say really.

[00:57:38] **Lesley:** It is really important, I think it is, because it's about acknowledging it, yeah. Because you do, and I've used that approach with students, because it's like you can't then, when they're coming with an an emotional topic that they want to look at, you can't just dismiss that. And it's about, going back to what you were saying before, it's about acknowledging that it's there. So therefore in acknowledging it, you then get that person to express the emotional feelings about why they want to do that in order to then be able to put that just to one side, not pretend it's not there, but acknowledge that that is then not part of the research, per se, because like you were saying before Sheila, not only is it not your therapy, it's also not the participant's responsibility to manage your emotions. You are then, as the researcher, you're then the professional in that situation, so you don't take that in. And when you're thinking about sharing, it's done with a careful consideration for them, isn't it?

Just when I was thinking there, a final point to draw it together was just the fact that we've been discussing with other people about the fact that we don't quite know how to change things. You know, how do you raise these questions? How do you do it? And I feel like this has presented us with a potential way to actually start challenging and questioning.

[00:59:08] **Sheila:** We would be really interested if anybody hears anything in this, and it just makes them think about changing practice, it would be really interesting to hear how and why.

[00:59:20] **Sarah:** In fact we're looking at that specifically and we will be asking our listeners to share with us how listening impacts on their practice, if it does, we hope it does. But yeah, unfortunately I think we could talk about this all day, and I wish we had more time, but we do need to draw it to a close, and I just wanted to say thank you so much to both of you for coming in and talking about this, and I hope that the conversation continues.

[00:59:46] **Angie:** Thank you.

[00:59:47] **Sheila:** Thank you.

[00:59:48] **Lesley:** And come back at your next point and we can revisit.

[00:59:51] **Sarah:** Yeah, we can revisit and see where you get to with the work. Thank you so much. Bye!

[00:59:56] **Lesley:** Bye!

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[00:59:57] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[01:00:04] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[01:00:15] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

See you all next time.

[01:00:29] **Lesley:** Bye.