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"I'm crying too ... help, what do I do?" – Unexpected encounters experienced by a first time researcher

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Abstract
Being a first time researcher conducting semi-structured conversational interviews for a PhD, I thought I was prepared for any story or discussion that would occur. My participants were adults who have dyslexia and I was asking them to recall their educational experiences, and how they perceive them to have impacted on their life choices. Having already established a relationship with the selected participants in a previous context as their lecturer, nobody had prepared me for the emotional roller coaster I was about to ride during the interview process as an ‘insider’. I have identified five unexpected types of encounters that occurred in the course of the interviews that made me more of an active participant than an observer in their life stories and made me question my role in the research process. These encounters I have identified as (1) The Sad encounter; (2) The Unexpected Proximity encounter; (3) The Language Processing encounter; (4) The Empathetic encounter; and (5) The Boy Scout – Be Prepared Encounter. On reflection and analysis of the interviews these encounters have shaped the responses not only of the participants but also of myself. How has this occurred and how have the encounters influenced and shaped the responses of the participants? More importantly, as the researcher, whose story is really in my head during the interviews? Will my personal interactions and stories influence the final outcome in terms of the representations of their stories?

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"I'm crying too ... help, what do I do?" – Unexpected encounters experienced by a first time researcher.

Kathleen Tanner
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Abstract *Being a first time researcher conducting semi-structured conversational interviews for a PhD, I thought I was prepared for any story or discussion that would occur. My participants were adults who have dyslexia and I was asking them to recall their educational experiences, and how they perceive them to have impacted on their life choices. Having already established a relationship with the selected participants in a previous context as their lecturer, nobody had prepared me for the emotional roller coaster I was about to ride during the interview process as an 'insider'. I have identified five unexpected types of encounters that occurred in the course of the interviews that made me more of an active participant than an observer in their life stories and made me question my role in the research process. These encounters I have identified as (1) The Sad encounter; (2) The Unexpected Proximity encounter; (3) The Language Processing encounter; (4) The Empathetic encounter; and (5) The Boy Scout – Be Prepared Encounter. On reflection and analysis of the interviews these encounters have shaped the responses not only of the participants but also of myself. How has this occurred and how have the encounters influenced and shaped the responses of the participants? More importantly, as the researcher, whose story is really in my head during the interviews? Will my personal interactions and stories influence the final outcome in terms of the representations of their stories?*

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on unexpected encounters that occurred during the data collection phase for my PhD research. Its purpose is not as an academic analysis or discussion of 'the politics of space within the process of interviewing' (Puwar 1997: 1), but to provide a personal dialogue as a way of sharing with other new researchers the unplanned emotional and physical rollercoaster you may ride during the interview process. It also highlights the powerlessness and emotional vulnerability one may experience as a participant observer and difficulties disengaging with highly emotive content as well as unplanned ethical issues. It can be viewed as a confession of my experiences as a first-time researcher and therefore I open myself up and give voice not only to my vulnerabilities, but also provide an insight into my personal constructs and ways of thinking.

Having chosen to conduct semi-structured conversations, I became immersed in the life stories of my interviewees and found I was more of an active participant than simply an observer. As a result of the conversations, four types of encounters were identified that I had not anticipated when framing my research: (1) The Sad encounter; (2) The Unexpected Proximity Encounter; (3) The Language Processing Encounter; and (4) The Empathetic Encounter. I am also including a fifth encounter which I am calling the "Boy Scout – Be Prepared" encounter that made me reassess my physical, as opposed to intellectual and emotional, fitness. These five encounters enabled me to realise that 'listening to a story means acting not just as a scholar but also as a human being, with a heart as well as a head' (Leith, 2005: 129).

Background

My research focuses on the lived experience of adults with dyslexia and the impact of their educational experiences on their life choices. This paper is based on the first conversation with each of the eleven participants that lasted between 1.5 – 2.5 hours each. Participants included five males and six females with ages ranging from 25 - 69. All shared the commonality of being dyslexic but also of having participated in a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) course designed specifically for people with dyslexia. All had completed the unit *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* that was designed to empower participants with knowledge and understanding of their dyslexia. Throughout these classes participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences, including how they manage their dyslexia. It is within this context that I had previously developed a relationship with my participants and a personal connection to the research topic, as I was the co-ordinator and principal lecturer of the course. So as a researcher, on one hand I was 'an outsider' as a non-dyslexic yet, on the other hand, 'an insider', having been their lecturer. Within this role, respect and trust was gained and they felt comfortable disclosing sensitive issues within classes. They had first-hand knowledge that their responses were viewed in a non-judgemental way. Polkinghorne (2007) believes that 'participants will be more open to sharing their experienced meanings if they trust that the interviewer is open to accept their felt meanings without judgement' (481). Two years after the class this willingness to share was still evident in the individual "conversations" conducted for my research. Previously undisclosed personal and emotional events were shared, many of which were requested as being "off the record". Using a timeline as a visual prop, each participant (identified by a pseudonym), shared his or her story of their dyslexia.

The Sad encounter

A number of recurring themes evoked a sense of sadness in nine of the eleven participants and myself, to the point of each of us openly crying or being visibly moved. On their part, revealing and reliving difficult memories and, on mine, viewing their experiences through my life-world through a multi-perspective variety of lenses influenced by personal experiences. They shared their sense of actual being and I shared my perceived sense of knowing. We both experienced a sense of reality but the way in which we perceived it, or gave meaning to it, enveloped us according to our personal experiences. The two most emotive themes shared in this encounter revolved around (a) verbal and physical bullying by adults and children and (b) participants, who had children themselves, and their desire to protect their own children.

(a) Verbal and physical bullying and humiliation

Sections of Christine's* story are particularly powerful and emotional and during the transcription phase I was surprised by the difficulty I had controlling my own emotions and by finding myself with tears in my eyes. When writing her narrative I left it until last because of the emotional effect it had on me. I have found it hard to step back as an objective observer. Even though thematic analysis has deconstructed parts of it, it is still difficult to view Christine's story in parts. During our first conversation she revealed a particularly 'dark childhood' in which she dwelt on the constant bullying and humiliation she experienced from both teachers and peers. The cumulation of trauma, which she described in depth, reached a peak when, on her 17th birthday, she cooked a cake during Home Economics and took it outside without a lid on it. 'All the boys threw spit balls on it and I remember going home that day miserable, and I scratched the crap out of my legs with my fingernails, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you'.

She continued with a dialogue of negative self-talk and resultant parasuicidal attempts. She continued to openly share events that she asked not be published. During this time I found myself crying openly with her and struggling to find the right words – in the end I said nothing and nodded during the periods of silence.

The story of a different participant, Kim, tells of her sense of isolation and feeling ostracised from both family and society. She visibly struggled to express the following statements and in doing so I found myself becoming upset. 'I felt like I didn't belong and I felt like that for many, many years – I don't know where I belong'. Her mother made the following comments in relation to Kim: 'You can't teach stupid people things because they're too stupid to learn' and, with regard to her job opportunities, 'she can't do that, she'll fail, she's too stupid, you can't give jobs to stupid people' and when her siblings were given things such as a watch, 'stupid people don't have watches, they can't tell the time'.

The intensity of the emotions expressed by Christine and Kim, yet the willingness in which they shared their thoughts and experiences, was quite overwhelming for me as a listener.

(b) Protective of own children

Three of the participants who had school-aged children found it difficult to control their emotions when speaking about their own children who also had dyslexia. The following comments, whilst taken out of context, encapsulate strong emotional ties as well as personal turmoil.

> I need to understand and my son won't have to go through the shit again. And he'll be proud of what other people have possibly died from … he's teaching me a lot – he's always saying that he loves me … that drives me (David)

> I don't want him to have the experiences I had growing up and thinking I was dumb ... a mother will do anything to protect their child (Kerrie)

> I made sure that they were OK so they didn't have to suffer like I suffered (Riley)

It was throughout these conversations that I reflected on my current role as a mother with a teenage daughter and her sensitivities and social difficulties in first year high school and a young son in his first year of schooling. I reflected on my role as an educator, and on current educational paradigms, and tried to rationalise what could have been done to provide appropriate support within a school environment. I reflected on my strong sense of social justice, continually thinking 'what right do people have to treat children or adults in a manner which involves verbal put downs, emotional blackmail, physical abuse' (Journal entry). But the most difficult reflection was on my own childhood. Many of the descriptions of schoolyard bullying created a sense of anxiety as I remembered incidents I had instigated or been involved in and the sudden realisation of the impact my actions may have had on others. I found I was internalising many of my own experiences and sensing a great deal of sadness. I found myself passing judgement – 'what right do I have to listen when I myself have been involved in similar bullying – I feel like a hypocrite' (Journal entry). As Elbaz-Luwisch (1997: 82) recognized 'stories are most instructive when they are most personal' however, this is also the time 'when the owners of the stories are most vulnerable' (McCormack 2004: 233)". It needs to be acknowledged that not only are the owners of the stories vulnerable, but so too is the researcher as a participant observer. To what extent is this 'risk factor' taken into account for those conducting research? Perhaps this vulnerability on the part of the researcher in reconstructing or sharing lived experiences can be used in a positive personal and emancipatory manner or lead to an increased sense of 'knowing'.

The Unexpected proximity encounter

During each conversation the question was asked about transition or turning points that had directly impacted on participants' life choices. I was completely thrown by encounters surrounding these questions and didn't know how to respond to comments as they involved direct references to my influence on the life choices participants reported they made. At the time I felt a sense of embarrassment coupled with humility that my role as a lecturer could be so influential, yet fulfilment and a sense of empowerment that I felt I had helped people to understand themselves or change their lives in a positive way.

In conversation, David repeatedly made mention of my influence with statements such as:

> That's really, really changed my life … you Kath … to the extent that it's close to saving my life I would say … if it wasn't for you … I wouldn't be here.

Kim stated:

> You and what you said and did in the course had a big impact on my life … you gave me proof … the proof there that I wasn't dumb I was I had dyslexia and I am quite intelligent.

Another participant Sam said:

> I thought people with dyslexia never got anywhere in life like myself and it was you that made me realise … even if you are dyslexic you can do it ... I would now stand up and tell everybody that I am dyslexic and I need help
>
> Kath: At what stage in your life did you decide 'blow this, I'm going to tell everyone?
>
> Sam: Meeting you. You gave me the confidence because all through my life I was being told 'you're thick, you're stupid, you can't do anything right' so you believe it.

Riley claimed:

> You've helped me a lot … you've helped me a real lot … you made me know I'm not stupid … you made me know that nobody has the right to make me feel stupid … I know I'm not stupid now.

In these encounters my quandary was how you respond when you are the subject of the conversation. And in what role do you respond: as a researcher, teacher, or simply a person?

The Language Processing Encounter

'Language is central to the analysis of an interview transcript' (McCormack 2004: 225). However, more importantly it is central to the development of a conversation and the gathering of a participant's story. When language processing difficulties are evident it makes it difficult to interpret and comprehend what is said. Two of my participants had noticeable language difficulties that influenced the flow of their stories and provided challenges when responding and interpreting their stories and comments. In order to process questions or comments they required time, and periods of silence ensued. Riley, in particular, repeated the question over again and would focus on key words. She would give a response and end it with 'you know' or 'is that what you want' or simply say 'my mind's gone blank' or 'I've lost it'. Her receptive and expressive processing ability, as well as her memory, impacted on the cohesion of her story. She would begin to say something and then talk about something else she had remembered from a previous point. She openly revealed that when she talks 'all of a sudden I'll lose the conversation; I go blank' and if she can't retrieve a word, instead of using a different word, she 'change[s] the whole sentence ... format the whole thing just to get out of it'. Later in the conversation she says 'the words don't come out – my words don't come out in the right context - I can't use big words cause I don't understand big words – I got to use little words cause I know I understand the little words'. Robert on the other hand tended to respond with simple not complex sentences and it was difficult to get him to expand on his comments. He also experienced word retrieval difficulties throughout and openly admitted 'can't find the word'.

At times both Riley and Robert misinterpreted my questions or comments and our previous relationship enabled me to say 'no that's not quite what I mean'. On one occasion when I rephrased a question Robert said, 'Why didn't you bloody well say that in the first place without the big words?' My challenge was therefore simplifying the structure and word use of a question or comment without appearing condescending or over-simplifying.

Riley tended to use words out of context, incorrectly or she mispronounced them. For example: 'My tonsils had a lot of **refect** in my life': '**gift** of what that sentence means'; 'my inferior **complexion**'. Sometimes the intent was obvious but other comments needed to be analysed in the context in which they were said and therefore, it wasn't until I transcribed our interviews that I found I missed some important cues for further discussion.

This encounter added to my role confusion as a researcher and my knowledge as a teacher. It made me focus on the process, structuring and comprehension of the stories being shared and in doing so I failed to recognise opportunities to encourage the participants to develop their stories in greater depth. I expected my techniques to provide rich descriptions but they didn't. My encounter suggested that many qualitative techniques don't work with some people who have language difficulties, highlighting the necessity to change techniques so that participants aren't denied a voice. Smith and Sparkes (2008) suggest that one needs to 'develop… an enhanced tolerance for incoherence as part of a life story, honouring incoherent stories' (23). They suggest a technique that involves jointly constructing the narrative.

The Empathetic encounter:
My research journal reveals the following reflection after my first group of interviews:

> In doing these interviews I find myself analysing and recalling my own experiences – particularly family-based even to the point of revealing to participants knowledge of my difficult times – why? I don't know. Perhaps to let them know that although I don't live 24/7 with dyslexia that I am empathetic with them on other levels?
> But then why do I feel a sense of guilt – does my sharing actually detract from their sharing? My thoughts are going everywhere – surely it couldn't be a sense of one-upmanship? No …. No! I've never disclosed to anyone my personal inner thoughts about my mother, especially what I told David. He seemed Ok with it. Why suddenly this need of a shared reality – the reciprocity of sharing similar experiences and inner feelings? I've suddenly had another thought – what if it changes his perspective of me? Why should that be important? Hang on this isn't about me – "stop right now!" thank goodness the Spice Girls are back together again! (Research Journal, June 2007)

A particular instance was with David. Whenever he made mention of his father he became visibly upset and emotional. As we spoke he displayed obvious signs of anxiety with his hands to his face, chewing, stuttering and pausing:

> David: I wasn't a loony I guess because it was pretty close almost the way my father portrayed it … he got a lovely lass out from mental health and so he could get me off the farm and she came out and said "all he needs is love" ... it was just struggle, struggle, struggle and no one understood and I didn't understand and at the same time my back, and my father – he had two sisters, one who died in a mental home and I always felt that was what dyslexia was, what I was ...
> Kath: I'm going to share something here that I've never told anyone knowing there's someone in your family that has something not quite right – my mum's schizophrenic

> and I live with the fear that that's where I'm heading and there's some days when I think and it's an absolute fear of mine and my memory is packing it in at the minute and I wonder whether it is just stress and then I start thinking all sorts of things and then I have that fear constantly in the back of my head but I know I'd know by now – you know what I mean?
> David: The fear that is imposed on you, that's the thing that gets you – it's the fear of not knowing.

This sharing of experience 'can be used as a resource to facilitate closeness and rapport if both the interviewer and interviewee are willing' (Puwar 1997: 10) but in this context it could serve two purposes: (a) a reciprocal sharing of empathy of similar experiences and (b) a cathartic release for the interviewer – an opportunity to share a personal feeling never articulated before. I have since questioned my intent without coming to any conclusions. Anderson cites Murphy (1987: 126) and Schwalbe (1996: 58) who both spoke of becoming more aware of themselves and how they perceive their own experiences interviewing participants. They highlight the benefits of reflexive 'social analysis and self-analysis' (2006: 383). Reflexive dyadic interviews are also cited as a technique in which 'the researcher's disclosures are more than tactics to encourage the respondent to open up; rather, the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to disclose, given the intimacy of the details being shared by the interviewee' (Ellis and Berger 2001: 854). Where the topic is expected this technique may be pre-planned. However, in the context of my research, it was totally unplanned and unexpected.

'There is a vulnerability in not just the listening but also the telling – risks professional and personal' (Wesely, 2006: 161). In taking that risk and sharing have I crossed the ethical line or is it a blurred line? However, this also highlights the ethical nature of the narrative and research in general, in that its impact should 'do no harm' to both the participant and the researcher. Considering this in the context of academic research and ethics procedures, focus is at all times on the participant and little importance, if any, is given to the researcher.

The "Boy Scout – Be Prepared" Encounter

At the beginning of our conversations the majority of the eleven participants appeared prepared to begin our conversation, however, with one participant I found myself totally unprepared-physically in both body and attire, and powerless as to how he took control and guided our first meeting. David and I chose to meet outside the local library. He said he had been up since four o'clock in the morning so that he wouldn't be late. Before I had a chance to guide him to the place where I was to conduct his interview he insisted on showing me an important landmark within the town. On walking around the corner I realised I was being taken to his favourite football team's home training ground. After banter about our opposing views on which football team was the best, the next minute he encouraged me to jump the cyclone fence and I found myself being led to the centre of the hallowed turf. A Sherrin football magically emerged from his bag and I was challenged to have a kick. I briefly considered mentioning the inappropriateness of my footwear and non-stretch clothing but when I saw David remove his thongs to kick the leather ball, I realised I had no option but to take up the challenge. I had no doubts about my ability to perform but

I did wonder whether my clothes would remain sewn up. We then proceeded to kick the football for about 30 minutes at which time I realised I had passed my 'Rite of Passage'. David grabbed the ball, stuffed it back in his bag and announced 'You would've been a mean footy player if you were a bloke!' Satisfied with my acknowledged 'skill', we then moved on to coffee and our first conversation.

Reissman (2003) refers to the 'unspoken, inferred, shown and performed in gesture, association, and action. What narrators show, without language, constitutes ways of making claims about the self' (6). On reflection, this was not a Rite of Passage for me but rather a way for David to share an identity of which I was unaware. This was a side of David that did not involve his dyslexia and at the same time shifted our respective preconceived relational positions. In this context he controlled our encounter and shifted our meeting from a professional to a friendship base – the kicking of a football between mates. It also allowed him to express his identity and how he perceived our relationship in a bodily narrative that also served as a compensatory device for the difficulties he encountered at times with his expressive language skills.

Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of key areas which need to be considered by first-time researchers that impact not only upon individual participants but also the research process and outcomes. These key areas include the role and reaction of the observer, the ethics of care, and the importance of keeping a reflective journal.

Role and reaction of the participant observer

It is recognised that within the field of qualitative research 'to speak of the 'observer's' own emotions and feelings and how these connect up (or don't connect up) with the 'observed' is still highly suspect' (Luttrell 2003 161). The role of the observer's emotional reactions and perceptions needs to be taken into account as surely this will influence the manner in which the research is conducted and documented. Readers may argue that my responses within each of these encounters could be seen as a form of manipulation to elicit further previously unspoken events and feelings, however at the time my responses were genuine and totally unexpected – and I was also perhaps protective of my 'emotional' control. 'To not display some emotion – such as compassionate expressions, gestures of comfort or empathetic tears – would seem either disconcertingly obtuse or cold-heartedly indifferent' (Hoffman 2007: 341). First-time researchers need to be aware that they are the first audience for the narrative and therefore their emotional responses can act as cues to potential audience reaction. Their responses may impact on the depth of story shared and the perceived reality of the lived experience.

The ethics of care

From an ethical perspective it can also be argued that my previous role as their lecturer may have impacted upon the interviews and the shift from that role to one as a student researcher that brings with it a different ethical role. With this in mind how many roles can we have as a researcher? As Luttrell (2003: 163) argues how can we keep our 'analytical distance' whilst the situation may demand 'emotional participation'? Consider also if a number of researchers had engaged in the same narrative – would they have responded or

encapsulated it differently dependent upon their gender, age, family and cultural experiences? Would I have responded differently if I wasn't a mother? A teacher? A bully? It may also be argued that my reactions may affect the validity of the evidence gathered, however, Kleinman and Copp (1993: 33) wrote, '[i]gnoring or suppressing feelings are emotional work strategies that divert our attention from the cues that ultimately help us understand those we study ... when we omit our analytical material and our feelings, we probably also leave out details of the events that provoked strong emotional reactions in us (4)' (Hoffman 2007 324). Researchers are ethically deemed to 'do no harm' to their participants however, what are the implications for the researcher whose personal responses to the narratives are so intense that they impact on their own wellbeing? The conscious or even sub-conscious ignoring or suppressing of feeling may be a way of protecting one's personal wellbeing. Therefore researchers need to be aware of the need to self-monitor their emotional involvement in a positive and productive way.

The implication for researchers is how one can truly represent participants' stories with the raw emotions individuals share without being overly influenced by personal emotions and reflections. Luttrell (2003) speaks of being 'split at the root' and embracing not only the 'detachment and analysis' side of ethnographic knowing but also allowing yourself to be an emotional participant. 'This is what makes ethnographic knowing an exemplary kind of knowing; it takes personal subjectivity into account in making and assessing knowledge claims of any complexity' (Luttrell 2003: 162).

Research outcomes and reorientation

The encounters during the interview process, alongside annotations made in a reflective journal that identified not only what was happening in the research process but also on a personal basis, led to an awareness of what narrative offered as a research tool and the added depth it provided to the analysis of participants' responses as well as that of the researcher. As a result of this, particularly the annotations in the journal, a reorientation of my thesis has occurred. A shift from a purely thematic ecological framework analysis to the inclusion of a narrative of each participant has resulted from the realisation that their individual stories were important to give face and depth to the themes encountered within the thesis, as well as the people themselves. Part of an ecological perspective is focussing on environmental and individual characteristics – without a narrative they would be faceless and almost quantitative in a statistical perspective. The reflective journal also enabled an analysis of the presentation of self as the researcher. It is therefore my recommendation that researchers using narrative as a research tool keep a reflective journal not simply as an audit trail but also to assist in uncovering and documenting personal emotional responses.

In conclusion, my advice to first time researchers conducting their first interviews is to be prepared. Expect the unexpected. Be prepared physically, emotionally and intellectually. No matter how controlled, organised or determined you can endeavour to be objective, in the least you may find yourself 'naval gazing' and evaluating your own life experiences and the multiplicity of roles as a researcher as well as how you perceive your. This may occur during and/or well after the interview has occurred. You may also find yourself sharing

your own life experiences or even discovering your direct involvement in a participant's life story. Be prepared!

> Know the music' but don't simply memorize your solo in advance and then repeat it mechanically in the session. Before, during and after the interview stay open. You never know what the universe will send you (Perlich 2003: 27).

And finally, always wear a sensible pair of shoes and clothes you can kick a footy in!

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[**] all participants are identified by a pseudonym