DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE, HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Edited by
Fiona McSweeney and Dave Williams
This book presents a novel and accessible way to learn about designing and conducting social research. Unlike traditional social research methods books, it provides a ‘real world’ account of social researchers’ experiences and learning achieved through conducting research in a variety of fields.

It contains an eclectic collection of research and advice for conducting research from social researchers with varying backgrounds. Suggestions are made in relation to gaining access to research sites, conducting research on sensitive topics such as suicide, child sexual abuse and homelessness, ensuring the inclusive participation of participants with intellectual disabilities and children. Also included are discussions of conducting practitioner research, conducting research on individual change, psychoanalytically informed research, documentary research and post qualitative research. Other chapters focus on criticality in research on topics that have become politicised and moralised, ensuring that research conducted is credible and how knowledge in research is constructed through both the theoretical framework used and how it is conducted.

Bringing together a diverse collection of social research projects, Designing and Conducting Research in Social Science, Health and Social Care will be of interest to students, educators and researchers in the social sciences and professionals in related areas.

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This book is dedicated to the social researchers of the future, Senan, Sé, Barra and Féile, for their unique ways of ensuring that their dad never missed an early morning meeting to prepare the manuscript.

It is also dedicated to Rhiannon, Adam, Feabhra, Ann, Neil and Ultan for listening to the editors!
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The aim of this book is to provide an accessible way to learn about the realities of conducting social research. By bringing together a diverse collection of topics it exposes the reader to a variety of social research involving different participant groups and designs. It will provide valuable insights into overcoming problems and making decisions that are faced throughout the whole research process, from the conception of an idea to analysing data.

The initial idea for this book came from a research methods seminar series arranged by the first editor in which social researchers presented their research to undergraduate students. Observing the students question the presenters about the decisions they made during the research process led to the realisation that while students do need the lectures about methodologies, methods of data collection, ethics and analysis, this learning is cemented and expanded on by their exposure to and questioning the reasoning behind decisions that are made ‘in the field’. This is best captured through hearing the stories of those who have conducted research and what they have learned. Hearing or reading about researchers discussing their mistakes, their choices and the implications of them, their moments of inspiration, or indeed perspiration, is where learning about conducting social research occurs.

This book presents a collection of research conducted by authors who self-identify as social workers, social educators, social care workers, child and youth care workers, sociologists, criminologists, educators, psychotherapists and researchers, so it is quite an eclectic collection. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of all research methodologies, methods and issues but instead provides a ‘real world’ account of aspects of designing and conducting social research as well as collecting and analysing data. Learning for the reader comes from ‘hearing’ how others negotiated issues and of the challenges they encountered when conducting research. The reader will therefore understand that conducting research is not a linear process but in reality can be indirect and interrupted. Therefore this book is designed to complement more directive research methods texts that explain methodological and design issues as well as methods for data collection and analysis and ethical guidelines.
book, by allowing researchers to dip in and out of chapters, provides guidance in resolving some of the practical problems faced in conducting their own research.

Each chapter is organised in a similar way, with the author(s) providing an overview of the piece of research conducted, thus a second purpose of the book is to provide for readers a selection of social research studies. Topics covered vary from incarcerated young people’s experiences and future aspirations (Chapter 1); young people’s views on community supervision orders (Chapter 16); the experience of being suicidal and strategies to manage suicidal ideation (Chapter 2); people’s experience of their friends’ suicide (Chapter 7); unconscious aspects of relationships in a mental health setting (Chapter 10); the transition to adulthood as experienced by young people with an intellectual disability (Chapter 3); the transition from homelessness for Canadian young people (Chapter 6); children’s representations of poverty and social exclusion (Chapter 4); the experiences of Irish Traveller women (Chapter 5); how children disclose child sexual abuse (Chapter 9); investigating allegations of child sexual abuse (Chapter 11); how birth children of foster carers actively manage their situation (Chapter 14); examining conceptualisations of ‘love’ in professional child and youth care work in the USA (Chapter 12); investigating representations of childhood over time in the primary school system in Ireland (Chapter 13); the use of dynamic assessment for children ‘not flourishing’ in the current educational system (Chapter 8) and how practice teachers conceptualise their role and interaction with students in social care education (Chapter 15).

As negotiating access to a research site and participants is one of the challenges that occurs early in the process of conducting research, the first chapter in this collection, by Nicola Hughes, focusses on the issue of negotiating with and maintaining access to gatekeepers throughout the data collection process. Drawing examples from her research with males in a juvenile detention centre in Ireland she explains some of the issues she encountered and provides advice for the reader on strategies to gain and maintain access to research participants in a prison setting. In addition she emphasises the importance of considering alternatives and being adaptable when access is stopped.

The second chapter, by Evelyn Gordon and Maeve Kenny, considers how the researcher can demonstrate competency and the benefits of the research throughout the research process, particularly when researching a potentially sensitive topic such as suicide. They begin the chapter with deliberations on the nature of sensitivity and vulnerability and the impact of how these concepts are seen on research. The reluctance of some researchers to tackle sensitive subject matters, they argue, has led to an underrepresentation of groups who might be considered vulnerable in research. Drawing on examples from their research on suicide they emphasise the importance of researchers adopting a critical stance to challenge the myths about the subject matter that may have developed. Then they discuss the onus on researchers to demonstrate their competency, from gaining ethical approval, addressing risks through appropriate safety protocols
and highlighting the benefits to gatekeepers in order to promote social research that is risk aware rather than risk avoidant.

In Chapter 3 Judit Fullana and Maria Pallisera discuss the strategies they used to ensure that young adults with an intellectual disability participated fully in research on the transition to adulthood conducted in Catalonia, Spain. They explain how people with an intellectual disability became co-researchers in the study through training in research methods and participation on an advisory committee. These strategies were used to ensure that data was collected in an inclusive and accessible way. They also highlight how including people with disabilities as researchers allows them to become leaders of change. Judit and Maria discuss and illustrate how visual methods of data collection were used to gather the participants’ views on factors that inhibit and facilitate the transition to adulthood to enable the development of ways to improve the process of transition.

Also on the theme of inclusive research, Florbela M. Samagaio, in Chapter 4, describes the strategies used to conduct research with children living in social disadvantage in Porto, Portugal. She discusses the strategies used to ensure the children made their own choices about their participation, while adhering to issues of assent and consent. She explains how the families of child participants were included in the research in a respectful way and kept informed. Also outlined are how adaptations were made to data collection instruments and the approach to data collection to ensure that the views of children of varying ages were accurately collected.

Tamsin Cavaliero discusses her research with members of the Travelling Community in Ireland as an ethnographically informed practitioner researcher in Chapter 5. She explains how she managed her dual identities as home-school liaison officer and researcher. An important message comes from Tamsin’s discussion of her realisation that her experience as a practitioner and ways of working could usefully inform the way she conducted the research. Tamsin also describes how she embedded a culturally safe approach into the way of conducting the research as well as some of the ethical challenges she met and how she dealt with these. Recommendations for readers include the value of considering the impact of existing practitioner relationships on new researcher relationships, as well as drawing on supportive factors in managing challenges that may arise.

Ethical challenges while conducting research are also strongly featured in Jeff Karabanow and Ian Stewart’s chapter about a qualitative longitudinal study with homeless young people in Canada. Through an analysis of the Government of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPSS), Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, Jeff and Ian discuss the ethical decisions that have to be made in the field. They argue that ethical guidelines do not necessarily cover all potential ethical decisions that have to be made during the process of data collection. They explain the approach taken by the research team when faced with conflicts that challenge traditional boundaries in interviews, such as
managing a neutral and professional distance as researchers when realising they were impacting on the lives of participants; responding to negative viewpoints expressed by participants; reciprocal sharing of personal information; coping with the social distance between researchers and participants; mitigating risk; and ending the relationship with participants.

Developing a viable strategy when interviewing people about sensitive topics is covered by Sharon Mallon in her chapter, “Cream cakes, hungry cats and hugs: Developing a responsive strategy to asking sensitive questions and hearing the answers”. Using examples from her research involving interviewing young people who were friends of those who died by suicide, she discusses her own development as an interviewer and researcher. She explains her early naivety in asking people to tell their stories and coping with her own emotional responses and how she overcame challenges she faced. Sharon shares valuable lessons she learned from her experience about how to ‘find your feet’ when conducting fieldwork, adapting to a research field and developing strategies for coping and self-protection when researching an emotional topic.

In Chapter 8 an approach to assessing individual change over time is explained. The authors, Raegan Murphy and Emma Hurley, give an account of how they approached measuring change in how a young person saw himself and people in his world over a period of time. They outline how they used a method based on Kelly’s repertory grid technique to measure the way in which the young person construes himself and people he interacts with. Raegan and Emma explain how visual representations of the young person’s viewpoint were represented and interpreted. They also outline how comparisons between the young person’s views or construal of himself and others at different time points are calculated using general Procrustes analysis.

Rosaleen McElvaney, in Chapter 9, discusses the reasoning behind her choice of the use of constructivist grounded theory in exploring children’s experiences of disclosing sexual abuse. Rosaleen outlines her journey from originally selecting Straussian grounded theory as her methodology to eventually moving to constructivist grounded theory in order to answer her research question, which focussed on examining how children disclose their abuse. The chapter provides insight for readers in relation to the use of Straussian grounded theory, which might be more suited to novice researchers as it provides a systematic procedure for data analysis. However researchers more interested in understanding the processes behind a subject matter or phenomenon may find constructivist grounded theory more beneficial. This is due to its focus on developing a conceptual framework which captures the experiences of research participants.

In Chapter 10 Gerard Moore discusses psychoanalytic research and outlines a study he conducted in an Irish mental health service. The chapter offers readers an understanding of psychoanalytic techniques and strategies used in non-participant observation and psychoanalytically informed interviewing. Gerard emphasises the importance of researchers being respectful of work being
undertaken at the research site when choosing what to observe. He discusses how he used the technique of quiet presence during observations. He also outlines how detachment and being non-directive is used in psychoanalytically informed interviewing. The chapter concludes with guidance in relation to the application of psychoanalysis in the data analysis process. The emphasis here is on the importance of using field notes and reflections made when collecting data as well as psychoanalytic literature to inform analysis throughout the data collection process.

Mark Smith, in his discussion of research about child sexual abuse, specifically the case of Jimmy Savile in the UK, draws attention to issues inherent in conducting research on topics that have been moralised and politicised. He discusses the importance of reflexivity on one’s own position towards the topic of research as well as awareness of the situational, historical and cultural embeddedness of knowledge produced. He invites the reader to consider the use and power of stories or narratives in today’s society in constructing self and reactions to cases of child sexual abuse. He also draws attention to the contested nature of truth. As in Chapter 2 readers are advised to question how subjects and concepts are presented and understood and “search for as near to the truth as one can hope for”.

Hans and Kathleen Skott-Myhre, in Chapter 12, discuss post qualitative inquiry. Based on their experience of writing about the concept of love in child and youth care they outline the key techniques used in post qualitative inquiry. The authors, questioning the ability of conventional qualitative research to effect social change, suggest using a transdisciplinary approach. They argue the value of reading and researching across philosophies and disciplines in order to consider new realms of knowledge which may have been previously unconsidered. Hans and Kathleen introduce the readers to core strategies used in post qualitative inquiry to move beyond more traditional ways of conducting research. They outline the technique of close reading used to analyse literature. They recommend the value of post qualitative inquiry for understanding concepts in a different way.

In contrast, Paddy Dolan, in his chapter on the analysis of documents, emphasises the importance of accepting how a topic is constructed and presented within its time period. Paddy identifies documents as both an alternative and a supplement to other methods. Paddy outlines a study he conducted which examined the changing social position and status of children in relation to adults throughout the development of the primary education system in Ireland during the 19th century. He uses the framework of figurational sociology to guide his analysis. The chapter outlines the importance of remaining detached from moral positioning and judgements based on the present during the analysis of documents from the past. Identifying the management of the volumes of documents as a key challenge that often faces researchers using this method Paddy offers some suggestions for accessing and selecting documents as well as discussing the issue of representativeness in the documents selected for analysis.
In Chapter 14 Dave Williams provides the reader with invaluable advice about the role and use of a theoretical framework in the design of a study as well as the analysis of data. Drawing on examples from his research examining the retrospective experiences of birth children of foster carers in Ireland, he emphasises the importance of theoretical frameworks being made visible throughout the research process not just in the initial design of a study. Dave discusses the factors that guided the selection of the sociology of childhood as the theoretical framework for his study. He explains how this framework influenced his selection of research questions and data collection method. Dave also identifies the impact of the theoretical framework on the data analysis phase of his research, recommending to readers the significance of theoretical frameworks in helping researchers manage as well as interpret the findings from the dataset they have collected.

While Chapter 14 discusses how a particular theoretical framework of children guided the design of and the findings from a piece of research, Chapter 15 focusses on how the research paradigm and its assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge influences the way the research is conducted and the knowledge constructed. Fiona McSweeney, using examples from research on practice teaching in social care in Ireland explains the fit between ontological and epistemological assumption with the aim and approach to her research. She also describes how analysing the same dataset two different ways results in highlighting and hiding different aspects of the data, revealing different findings and therefore knowledge about a topic. Her recommendations for readers are to take a critical stance to how knowledge is constructed both in reading and conducting research, carefully consider their choice of research paradigm and consider taking a pluralistic approach to analysis.

In the final chapter of the collection Mairead Seymour and Ben Meehan discuss how to ensure credible outcomes in qualitative research. Using examples from a study conducted by Mairead about compliance by young people under community supervision orders on the island of Ireland, the authors outline strategies used to promote authenticity and dependability in qualitative research. They recommend that researchers maintain a stance of critical reflectivity in relation to data collection and analysis as well as adopting a systematic approach to data analysis so that credible outcomes are produced. Also recommended are the use of an audit trail to allow others to follow the choices made throughout the research process and the use of external reviewers to enhance the credibility of qualitative research.
Gatekeepers
The experience of conducting research in a prison setting

Nicola Hughes

Introduction

Beginning a research project can be a daunting task as there is much to plan, organise and consider. One aspect of conducting social research which is often overlooked, but which can have a significant impact on the research, is gaining and maintaining access to the research site. This process begins with identifying who is the relevant person in an organisation to talk to and so beginning the process of negotiating access. These individuals are known as gatekeepers and they are the “individuals . . . that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purpose of research” (Burgess, 1984, p. 48). All too often researchers assume that once access has been granted at a management level they can conduct their research unencumbered. However the reality is often very different, as once access has been granted at a macro level, access must then be negotiated and possibly re-negotiated at a micro or local level with the individuals at the coalface. They are the real gatekeepers and their support and assent is essential for the success of the research.

A common miscalculation, made by researchers and students alike, is underestimating the time that it will take to gain access to the site where they wish to conduct their research (Bryman, 2015). Gaining and maintaining access involves forging relationships with key personnel, the gatekeepers, and generating their support and backing for the research. If gatekeepers are to help with our requests for assistance then they must be convinced of the relevance and importance of the research (Crowther-Downey & Fussey, 2013). If a key gatekeeper is moved on or leaves, then the process of forging new relationships with new gatekeepers must begin. Thus, the time it takes to gain access can take considerably longer than originally anticipated. Add to this the possibility of renegotiating access with the personnel on the ground and the original research deadline is quickly extended (McDonald, Townsend, & Waterhouse, 2009).

Despite all the planning engaged in prior to conducting research, research often evolves in the field and a successful researcher must be able to seize the opportunities that arise and to deal with the challenges that occur along the way. Based on my research in prisons this chapter will consider the role of gatekeepers in the research process.
The learning points for the reader are:

- Identifying key factors in gaining access to a research site;
- Identifying key factors in maintaining access in a research site;
- Being adaptable and planning alternative approaches if the gatekeepers prove reluctant to lend their support.

**Overview of the research study**

My field of interest is criminology and during my time as a social researcher I have conducted research in a number of different settings and with many different groups, such as with incarcerated prisoners, released prisoners, heroin users and victims of domestic abuse. Subsequently I have had many experiences of dealing with gatekeepers, some very positive and some not so positive, and the difficulties and delays that can arise, and the frustrations that inevitably accompany it. In this chapter I will discuss what I have learned from engaging with gatekeepers when conducting research. To do this I will concentrate on a large study I conducted with young males who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention centre.

In 2007 I conducted the fieldwork for a research study involving young males who were due to be released from a juvenile detention centre. The purpose of the research was to establish the expectations and plans of these young men prior to their release and their attitudes towards reoffending on their release. The criteria for inclusion in the study was that participants had to be between the age of 16 and 20 years, had been sentenced to a period of detention and were due to be released within one month. The nature of the offence and the sentence length was not deemed important, though a range of offence types and sentence lengths were identified.

This research was a follow-up study from a quantitative study that established the rate of reimprisonment of prisoners in Ireland over a four-year period (O’Donnell, Baumer, & Hughes, 2008). This was the first time that such a study had been conducted in Ireland and its findings were significant as they highlighted, for the first time, the rate of reoffending among Irish prisoners. The overall rate of reoffending for Irish prisoners was established to be 49.2 percent over a four-year period. One of the findings of the study stood out, and it was this finding that was the catalyst for the larger study of young males due to be released from detention. It was found that the rate of reoffending for younger prisoners was significantly higher than for older prisoners. The rate of reimprisonment for younger prisoners, aged 20 years and younger, was 60 per cent, compared to 40 per cent for prisoners aged 30 years and over. Thus, the reimprisonment rate for younger prisoners was 50 per cent higher than for older prisoners (i.e., 60 per cent compared to 40 per cent).

I wanted to try to understand why the rate of reimprisonment was so much higher for younger prisoners and what their experience of prison had been.
Thus, while the previous quantitative research had established the extent of reoffending among this group, I wanted to try to find out why this was the case. This was achieved by giving the young men an opportunity to speak about their experience of imprisonment and, as they were nearing the end of their sentence, what their plans and expectations for their release were. I was also interested in what their thoughts were on reoffending following their release from prison. Giving a voice to the individual and allowing their voice to be heard, in this case young males who had spent time in prison, is an approach which is particularly strong within the field of desistance in criminology (Farrall & Calverley, 2005; Healy, 2010; Leibrich, 1993; Maruna, 2001). Desistance is when an individual ceases their association with crime, usually following involvement with the criminal justice system. It is also an approach that I, as a social researcher, enjoy, as it provides a unique research perspective and gives a voice to the individual. This was particularly important given that the research participants in this study were all serving a period of imprisonment. For the purpose of my research it was also a good approach, as it built on the knowledge gained from the quantitative research previously referred to.

For this reason, a qualitative approach to the research was taken. In total 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young males, who were all within a month of their release from a juvenile detention centre. The 60 young men who agreed to be interviewed were aged between 16 and 20 years at the time of the interview. Parental consent to be interviewed was sought for all participants aged 16 and 17 years. The interviews were conducted in the juvenile detention centre, in a private room away from other prisoners and prison officers. All but one of the interviews (as this participant did not want their interview recorded) were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves reading and rereading the transcripts in order to identify themes relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2015).

A year after the interviews had been completed imprisonment information from the prison authorities was extracted in order to establish the extent of reimprisonment of the young men who had been interviewed. This was an important element to the study given the plans and expectations expressed by the young men prior to their release and their thoughts on reoffending.

Many participants described feelings of panic, fear and anxiety on first entering prison. These feelings were soon replaced by a feeling of normality around being in prison, which some participants described as not being ideal if prison is to act as a deterrent. Many participants expressed a desire not to return to prison and to turn their lives around, while some were unsure about what they would do following their release and whether or not they would reoffend. There was also a sizable group of participants who believed that they would commit crime again following their release and that they would return to prison in the future.
The imprisonment data from the prison authorities allowed me to establish who had returned to prison following their release and who had not. Interestingly, there was no clear pattern between the plans and expectations expressed prior to release and whether or not someone reoffended, with those who said they would not reoffend just as likely to reoffend as those who said they would reoffend. Some participants who said they would reoffend following their release were not returned to prison during the follow-up period of the research.

Each of the two elements of the study involved negotiating access with gatekeepers to gain entry to the prison and to gain access to official imprisonment information a year later. In this chapter however the focus will be on negotiating access with gatekeepers within the prison setting.

A brief account of the research does not provide a full description of the complexities involved and the limitations in the measurement and research design. It does, however, provide the reader with an understanding of the research and the important role of gatekeepers in conducting complex research in a prison setting – particularly if they also wish to conduct research in an area or environment which is sensitive and where gatekeepers play an important role.

Gaining initial access

The experience of my research shows that there are many gatekeepers who must be accessed along the way for research to be completed. Learning about the research site in advance and who the potential gatekeepers are is essential when planning a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first part of gaining access to any research site and research participants is to achieve ethical clearance from your institution and, if necessary, from the organisation where the research will be conducted. In my case this was from my university and from the prison authority. The first gatekeeper I met on my journey was the prison governor. Despite clearance from the prison authorities it was necessary to gain the consent of the prison governor. This involved a face-to-face meeting and answering questions on the research. This conversation involved what I would require from the prison staff and how potential distress in participants was to be dealt with. I also explained the purpose of the research, how and why it was being conducted and the potential learning that could be achieved from the research. This was a straightforward process and once the prison governor was assured of the merits of my research and the way in which I was planning on conducting it, I was granted access to enter the prison. I was given the name of a chief officer in the prison and told to arrange my visits to the prison through him. This involved a similar discussion to the one that I had had with the prison governor and at the end the chief officer was supportive of the research and agreed to provide his assistance. The decision about whether or not to provide access is usually based on a trade-off between the possible benefits of the research and the demands of having a researcher around (King & Liebling, 2008). Once I had negotiated access with the chief officer to come
into the prison the real task of gaining access to my research participants began, by negotiating access with the real gatekeepers, the prison officers.

Once a researcher enters a research site and begins data collection they constitute a new element in that environment. From the perspective of conducting research in a prison environment “staff and prisoners cannot avoid taking some notice of the researcher even if it is only in the form of avoidance procedures. The researcher cannot help but participate by carrying out the role thus created” (King, 2000, p. 305). For the prison officers, the gatekeepers, this involves either facilitating or hindering the researcher and the research. Wincup (2017) describes the skills necessary to successfully negotiate access to a research site as those of salesperson and diplomat, and from my own experience I completely agree.

Most of the prison officers I encountered were supportive of the research and interested in what I was doing and why. Talking to them and answering their questions openly and honestly ensured their support and assistance. Most wanted to know where I was from, why I was undertaking the research, how I became interested in this area and what I was going to do with the results.

Strategies for maintaining access to gather the data

Much of my time in the prison involved dealing with the prison officers, developing a rapport with them, resolving problems and issues that arose and had the potential to delay my research. Denscombe (2014, p. 85) suggests that “access, in the sense of permission from a gatekeeper, is necessarily renewable and negotiable”, and as such gaining access should be regarded as a relationship rather than a one-off event. While Davies (2011) describes negotiating access as a recurring issue, rather than a one-off hurdle, Bryman (2015, p. 151) describes it as “the research bargain”.

Based on invaluable advice from a colleague who had also conducted research in a prison setting, I decided to base myself in the detention centre in order to complete my interviews, rather than come in when potential participants were available. This meant I was in the detention centre and ready when someone was available to talk to me rather than being called in. This ensured that I was always visible in the prison, both to the prisoners and the prison officers, and potential participants did not have to wait for me to come in.

Spending time in the prison in this way, waiting for participants and observing the day-to-day activity of the prison, provided me with understanding of how the prison worked (Carrigan, 2015). With the exception of organised visits to see around prisons, this was my first real experience of going into a prison on a regular basis and dealing with staff and prisoners, and it was very different to my previous visits. My expectations and concerns at the start of the fieldwork period bore no resemblance to the reality of what it was like to conduct interviews in such an environment. The reality was that there was a lot of waiting
around, waiting for doors to be opened, for doors to be unlocked and for participants to interview. Unlike conducting research in other settings where it is necessary to arrange to meet a potential interviewee and there is always the possibility that they may not turn up, prisoners are in one location and so one could think that access should be relatively straightforward. Prisoners, however, have limited out of cell time each day and access to a quiet, private room may not always be possible. In addition prisons are unique places in which to conduct research and they are governed by very specific rules in terms of when the research can be conducted and where.

It is essential to the success of the research to ensure that an accurate account of the research, what is being requested and the possible implications of the research is given to all gatekeepers (Burgess, 1984). This was done initially by talking to the officer in charge of the area where I was based and explaining everything to him and asking for his help. I also went through this process with each new officer I met. I explained where I was from, what I was doing and why. It is important to communicate to gatekeepers your institutional legitimacy and the importance of your research (Heath, 2012). Negotiating access and dealing with gatekeepers raises other important issues for researchers, such as how much information researchers should provide to gatekeepers and the impact of our actions on our fellow researchers who will come after us. For all researchers it is important to leave the research site on good terms and not to act in a way which could hinder access for the researchers who come after (Wincup, 2017).

Gatekeepers may be wary of the research, what it involves, what it means for them and how it will be used, thus it is your job to reassure them. This was an ongoing process with different gatekeepers due to different rosters and staff moving about the prison. This was a necessary and essential part of the research, but it was also at times frustrating as it took valuable time away from the limited window that I had each day to conduct my interviews. There either was not enough time to start an interview or to complete an interview. Also, due to the nature of a prison, interviews were sometimes interrupted midway to accommodate unexpected visits and had to be rearranged to be continued a day or two days later. I found talking to my supervisor and my colleagues to be very helpful in relieving my frustrations and reminding myself to be appreciative of the assistance that was being afforded to me.

The prison officers who were tasked with locating potential participants and bringing them to me were the most important gatekeepers. I had very specific requirements of the prison officers. They were to locate potential participants in the prison, tell them about the research and ask if they would talk to me. The information to be given to the prisoners at this stage was minimal as I wanted to ensure there was no misunderstanding and that any refusals to participate were because of the research and not because of some other reason of which I was unaware. I also wanted to minimise the role of the officers in the research (Wincup, 2017).
Research in a prison environment can be disruptive and the involvement of prison staff has implications for other activities in the prison (King, 2000). Thus, it is essential to be realistic and honest in terms of what is being requested (Bell, 1999) and why. A common theme for many of the prison officers was the additional workload that my research was placing on them (King, 2000). I did not want to be seen as a burden by the prison staff who were tasked with facilitating my research. I tried to prevent this by always talking to the officers in the morning and politely asking them to check if anyone was available and if it was possible to bring them to me to talk to. I behaved in a way that was always polite and appreciative of their assistance and always prioritised their work above my interviews, while at the same time highlighting the value of my research. I may not have wanted to be a burden to them, but I still wanted to ensure I completed my interviews.

I was assigned a room in the school building to conduct the interviews that was private and away from the main body of prisoners. Unfortunately, it was also away from the officers’ station and meant that it was easy to forget that I was sitting waiting for a prisoner to interview. This happened on a number of occasions and required me to pack up my bag, as nothing can be left unattended in a prison, walk to the officers’ station and ask if a prisoner could be located. Depending on who was on duty, the response varied, from fast action to locate a potential participant and bring them to the interview room, to a promise to do something if they found the time, to a denial of any knowledge of the research and what they were expected to do. Each time I was required to explain the research again, what I needed and why and how their help and assistance was so invaluable. Without the help and assistance of the prison officers there would be no interviews and ultimately no research, despite the support of the prison authorities, prison governor and chief officer. Harvey (2008) describes the need to be pragmatic when conducting research and gaining access, and there were undoubtedly times when the prison officers were too busy to help and I needed to be conscious of that as well.

There was one particular prison officer who was very vocal in his lack of support for the research and belief that it was an additional burden for prison officers. This view was expressed each time I met this officer, in front of both other prison officers and prisoners. I tried to explain the value of my research and why it was worth supporting, despite the additional work involved, to him but he remained unconvinced. On one occasion he decided that I could not use the room that I had been using all along to conduct my interviews. Fortunately, another officer who was present at the time helped me to find an alternative room. If he had not intervened I would not have been able to conduct any interviews on that occasion. In all research there is always the potential to encounter someone who just does not wish to assist you in your research and so it may be necessary to find alternative assistance or an alternative means to ensure your research can be completed. Hence, there is the need to be adaptable.
Being adaptable and planning alternatives

The greatest potential threat to my research came from this officer when he decided on another occasion that I could not conduct any interviews at all that day as my presence was too disruptive and it would be better if I left the prison. This was communicated in a polite and respectful way, but it was done in front of a number of other officers and prisoners. It was an embarrassing experience and unfortunately on that occasion there was no officer to offer an alternative solution. I did speak to an officer who had been very helpful in the past and he suggested that I come back in a few days to resume my interviews. My first response when I left the prison was to ring my supervisor, who was extremely supportive. This incident severely dented my confidence and I was fearful that I no longer had the support of the other officers to conduct my research. I was also very concerned about how to deal with this incident. Aurini, Heath, and Howells (2016) describe the importance of being able to respond to different situations, over different periods of time and from person to person, if research is to be successfully completed.

In the end I waited two weeks to return to the prison, and emailed the prison governor to confirm that it was still acceptable for me to go into the prison, though I did not mention this incident. The prison governor assured me that I was welcome to return to the prison at any time to complete my research. Thankfully when I returned to the prison I did not see this officer again and I was able to complete my interviews. I also felt there was a renewed impetus on the part of the prison officers to ensure that I got my interviews completed. I believe this was because I had worked hard to create a rapport and to constantly reiterate the importance of what I was doing and why I was doing it. The chief officer and I began a countdown to completing the interviews and his support was essential in the end as the other officers followed his lead in working to get the interviews completed. Despite my earlier experiences, his support, and that of the majority of prison officers, proved that gatekeepers can be positive and can ensure the success of the research (Eaton, 1993). The need to react to situations and to find alternatives is an essential learning outcome for all researchers.

Research is constantly evolving and it may be necessary to modify or change the research if access is not forthcoming or is too slow. Unexpected difficulties may also arise at the research site that may require a reassessment of the feasibility of the research in that site and a consideration of alternative sites (see for example King & McDermott, 1995). Therefore, thinking about alternative ways to secure access and collect the data is an essential part of the planning process and one which should be engaged in with your supervisor, or from talking to other colleagues. All research is constrained by the demands of time and funding, and part of the planning of any research is to think about what to do if the research is not going according to plan. This could involve seeking an alternative gatekeeper in the organisation or, at the extreme, an alternative
research site, or changing the focus of the research or trying later. This has happened to me and while at the time it was frustrating, the data I finally collected probably gave a greater insight, as it forced me to do something different, such as conducting interviews with individuals in the community following their release, rather than only talking to them in the prison. Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (2010, p. 158) offer six strategies to consider if access is denied: “approach other individuals”; “approach other institutions”; “approach other individuals in the same institution”; “try again later”; “change your research strategy”; and/or “focus your analysis and write up on the process of undertaking research”. Ensuring sufficient time for the research is essential if alternatives must be explored. It is important for researchers to be flexible and to have the courage of their convictions and to make the best of opportunities that present themselves, even if they are not what were originally envisaged.

Conclusion and recommendations

When I think back to the period of my fieldwork I see my naivety in thinking that once I got access to the research site everything would be straightforward. It was not, and I needed to explain myself and my research on an ongoing basis. Even then my research took longer than I originally planned and I experienced great anxiety about the completion of my research. I learned a huge amount from conducting this research and I believe that I am a better researcher as a result. I learned to be patient, to talk to my supervisor or colleagues if I feel anxious or frustrated. I learned the importance of identifying the key people who can help and always to be grateful to be given the opportunity to explain my research and answer questions, no matter how many times I have done it before. Conducting fieldwork can be a lonely experience and it is important to seek the support and guidance of those colleagues around you who also have experience of conducting research, as they can offer encouragement and advice when needed.

Engaging in fieldwork and collecting data is not easy and it can be a daunting prospect if one has never conducted fieldwork before. There will inevitably be many challenges along the way. Challenges that may test the confidence of the researcher, lead to frustration and anxiety and cause them to question what they are doing. Gatekeepers represent one such challenge, as they have the potential to delay entry to the research site and the collection of data. This can have far-reaching implications in terms of the completion of the research and the type and extent of the data that can ultimately be collected. There are, thus, a number of recommendations for beginning your research and your engagement with gatekeepers. Be realistic in the planning stage about how long it may take to gain access. Learn about the research site and who the potential gatekeepers are. Talk to your supervisor and other colleagues about their research experience as this will provide confidence and a good understanding of what to expect prior to commencing the research. Even the most accomplished researchers have
had difficult experiences and encountered reluctant gatekeepers along the way and it is important for new researchers to remember this and to learn from the experiences of others.

Be ready to explain your research, and what you are doing and why, to gatekeepers throughout the research process. Always acknowledge what you need them to do and the possible implications for them and the organisation, particularly in terms of time and other costs. But at the same time always stress the importance of your research. Be flexible and be prepared to change the focus of the research or the research site if necessary if difficulties arise or if access is slow or not forthcoming. This is not an easy decision to make but at times it is the best decision to make. Again, talking to your supervisor and reading about the experiences of other researchers are vital here. King and Liebling (2008) provide an invaluable list of dos and don’ts for conducting research. The focus is on conducting research in prisons but the lessons are universal.

Despite the difficulties and the challenges that will be encountered as we undertake research, there is much to be learned from our experiences of gaining access to an organisation, as they can provide an invaluable insight into that organisation.

Thus, the ordeals, detours and false starts that researchers often experience in gaining access to the field not only present problems to be solved but also opportunities for discovering significant aspects concerning the structures and the boundaries of the field.

(Aurini et al., 2016, p. 148)

Thus, identifying potential problems and dealing with them is an essential part of conducting research and provides a valuable learning experience.

References


Introduction

Suicide research can be both exciting and challenging. On the one hand, the researcher has the unique opportunity to reveal phenomena that were previously hidden or poorly understood, while also being challenged to ensure that this is done in a manner that is robust and safe. The topic of suicide is viewed as sensitive and people experiencing suicidality and those close to them, such as family, are viewed as vulnerable populations. Researchers have greater responsibilities and face more challenges when they are conducting sensitive research with vulnerable populations, and more so when they are dealing with both issues simultaneously (Marsh, Browne, Taylor, & Davies, 2017; Moore & Miller, 1999).

The complexity of these issues has led to avoidance of researching sensitive topics and an under-representation or exclusion of vulnerable groups in research (Shepherd, 2016). This evasion of researchers’ responsibilities (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006) has resulted in limited understanding of their health care needs and of how they are impacted by sensitive issues. This has contributed to an incomplete or erroneous knowledge base (Moore & Miller, 1999), and consequently poor quality care (Shepherd, 2016). Thus, researchers may find themselves wanting to confront important or controversial issues in their research, while also feeling ill equipped to systematically address the concerns and challenges that sensitive research poses (Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Suicide research has been limited in this way, for example, fears about intruding into the lives of those bereaved by suicide resulted in a poor knowledge base and an absence of best practice guidelines over a substantial period of time (Grad, 2005).

The aim of this chapter is to increase awareness of several key challenges that researchers encounter in suicide research by illuminating ethical, practical and methodological issues and sharing strategies to address them. Sensitivity and vulnerability will be discussed, highlighting aspects of these concepts that give rise to concerns about researcher competency, that is, their ability to plan and conduct a research project successfully and safely. In suicide research, the
researcher needs to demonstrate competency and failure to do so can pose barriers to undertaking this kind of research. Examples from two research studies about suicide are used to highlight lessons learned from the field that emerged at different phases in the planning and conduct of these studies.

The learning points in this chapter are:

- The need to take a critical stance towards how terms such as sensitivity and vulnerability are used in relation to the issue of suicide;
- Ways of demonstrating researcher competency throughout the research process, from gaining ethical approval to disseminating findings, and being risk aware not risk avoidant.

Overview of the research studies

We have been involved in research projects in the areas of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention. Two research projects will be outlined and aspects of them discussed to illustrate key learning points from our research. The emphasis is mainly on dilemmas in qualitative research as this is the approach most frequently used when undertaking sensitive research with vulnerable groups (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007).

The first example is from research on suicide prevention. This was a classic grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that set out to capture young men’s experiences of being suicidal and being involved with mental health services. It involved interviewing seventeen young men, aged 16–34 years, who represented the highest risk group for completed suicide at that time (National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP), 2005). A third level institution granted ethical approval and participants were recruited through mental health services, throughout the country of Ireland. Participants were also recruited through snowballing, whereby study participants brought the study to the attention of their peers. The research showed how young men transcended suicidality by ‘re-vitalizing their worthiness’, or developing a sense of value as a person who is deserving of life (Gordon, 2016; Gordon, Cutcliffe, & Stevenson, 2011). The transcending process involved three non-linear and interlinked phases as the participants moved from their suicidal despair to a newly constructed person of purpose and value. The study also identified key intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that facilitated and impeded their recovery process. For example having the capacity to reflect and having validating encounters with others enhanced recovery, while excessive self-blame and having negative judgemental encounters with others impeded this process. This project is referred to as the YM project throughout the remainder of the chapter.

The second research project was a mixed methods study evaluating a group intervention initially called PISA (A Psychosocial/psychoeducation Intervention for Recurrent Suicide Attempts) and later renamed Skills for Safer Living (SfSL). PISA/SfSL was designed for people who made repeat suicide attempts
(Bergmans & Links, 2009). It is a trans-diagnostic 20-week group psychotherapeutic intervention, which has four interconnected modules to help group members develop strategies and skills to live life more safely, manage psychological distress, problem solve and enhance their relationships. The aim of the intervention is to lessen the intensity, frequency and duration of suicide-related crises and help members begin their recovery journey (Bergmans & Eynan, 2014). One component of this study that used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the acceptability, or perceived appropriateness, of this intervention to clinicians is discussed later in the chapter. A third level institution and three mental health service providers granted ethical approval and the services also facilitated access to client and professional participants. The participants in the IPA component of the study were nine multidisciplinary group facilitators who had been trained to deliver the intervention. The research demonstrated acceptability of PISA/SfSL and highlighted a transformation in facilitators’ attitudes and practices with this client group as a result of having a clear theoretical framework and practice guidelines (Gordon, Kenny, O’Reilly, & Moore, 2018). This project is referred to as the PISA project throughout.

Sensitive research and vulnerable populations

Sensitivity and vulnerability are complex concepts as they hold different meanings in different contexts and their meaning evolves over time; thus they are fluid social constructs (Moore & Miller, 1999; Ruof, 2004). Some definitions of sensitive research focus on the specific topic under study, such as suicide, while others incorporate broader aspects of the research, such as its implications for practice or the consequences for participants or the wider research community (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006, 2008; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). In general, sensitive topics are those that are not normally discussed and when revealed, pose potential threats that may result in harm. Different types of threats have been identified (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Personal threats may arise in the form of intrusions into participants’ personal sphere on issues that are deemed private, sacred, stressful or taboo (emotionally charged and stigmatised), for example, religious beliefs about suicide. Discriminating threats may arise when participants reveal information that exposes or incriminates them and may result in sanctions, for example, in assessing suicide risk it may transpire that an individual’s level of distress is related to illegal activity. Discrediting threats may arise when research takes place within areas of power that might lead to social conflict, for example, assisted suicide.

Vulnerability generally refers to individuals or groups of people who are considered more prone to exploitation or harm because they are viewed as potentially compromised in terms of their capacity for making personal life choices or decisions, self-determination or maintaining their own independence. They may be considered to have diminished autonomy because of physical or psychological factors, status inequalities, such as age, gender, education, culture or
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by being asked to talk about a sensitive topic which may leave them susceptible to distress (Marsh et al., 2017). Some people who are deemed vulnerable by others may reject this label because the term implies negative connotations, such as having diminished social standing or being passive victims of life’s circumstances. Conversely, some people who perceive themselves as vulnerable may not be recognised as such because their issues are undisclosed or hidden (Marsh et al., 2017). The YM study revealed the often hidden nature of suicidality as some of the participants deliberately concealed their suicidal distress from others for fear of upsetting them or being negatively judged. Therefore, they appeared to be functioning normally, making their suicide attempt a shock event to those who knew them.

A well-documented example of change in the meaning of suicide took place in Ireland during the 1990s when the act of suicide was decriminalised. This was instrumental in deconstructing the concept of suicide and shifted the focus from the criminality of the person to the individual or societal shortcomings that led to their distress. This generally promoted a more humane view of the suicidal person and those bereaved by suicide while also situating them as vulnerable rather than criminal. People who hold positions of governance and power in relation to your research can be influenced by such discourses and their decisions can be clouded by misconceptions and misunderstandings around the topic or population (Maple, Cerel, Jordan, & McKay, 2014). The YM project involved talking to participants about their suicidal experiences, which drew attention to a commonly held myth that talking about suicide increases the risk of death by suicide (Joiner, 2010). When seeking approval and support for the study the first author, Evelyn, explicitly addressed this myth and highlighted research showing that talking about suicide reduces levels of distress and suicidality (Hom, Padologar, Stanley, & Joiner, 2017), that well-established suicide prevention programmes (for example, ASIST and STORM) and best practice suicide intervention models are based on encouraging and initiating conversations about suicide (Sledge et al., 2014).

This emphasises the importance of taking a critical disposition to the taken-for-granted and dispelling myths. Researchers who explore sensitive topics with vulnerable populations require a critical lens to thoughtfully and ethically appraise the impact of dominant social, political and economic discourses on their research and their participants. Such discourses carry with them taken-for-granted assumptions that create real and imagined concerns for all involved in the research process. The tasks for researchers are to anticipate and navigate these concerns and the challenges they pose in a well-informed, reflexive (Steier, 1993) and responsible manner (Marsh et al., 2017).

Demonstrating competency

The onus is on the researcher to demonstrate to all stakeholders that they are competent to deal with emergent issues at each stage of the research process.
Although this often relates to issues of safety for the study participants, in recent years there is increased recognition of the need to address researcher safety. The discussion that follows will examine issues of researcher competency at key stages of the research process, from seeking ethical approval to disseminating the research findings.

**Gaining ethical approval: addressing the risk-benefit ratio**

One of the first challenges researchers face is obtaining ethical approval to conduct their research. The researcher is required to demonstrate that they have thought through their research, have weighed up potential benefits and risks and have plans in place to address and manage potential risks and adverse events. Research ethics committees (RECs) have responsibilities to safeguard the welfare of those who are deemed vulnerable and to ensure that sensitive research is both necessary and safe. Ethics is concerned with enacting a set of moral principles, which includes: respect for autonomy (self-determination); non-maleficence (preventing harming or wrongdoing others); beneficence (promoting the good and improving wellbeing); and justice (being fair and impartial) (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). When RECs have concerns that any of these principles may be compromised and/or that the potential risks associated with the research outweigh the benefits, approval may not be granted, the research may be delayed while these concerns are being addressed or the researcher may be directed to incorporate measures s/he perceives to be unnecessary or problematic for their research. Consequently, we have found it useful to proactively address concerns about potential risks and benefits in our research.

**Highlight benefits**

Contrary to common concerns about participant risks, research has shown that providing vulnerable groups with an opportunity to voice their concerns and views, perhaps on hitherto silent issues, can bring a sense of relief (Kvale, 1996). Involving suicidal populations in research can fulfil their altruistic desires to help others in a similar situation (Gordon, 2016), help them to recognise their own needs and instigate help-seeking behaviours, realise that they are not alone in their distress and increase hope (Lakeman & FitzGerald, 2009a).

In the YM project, the researcher, Evelyn, used relevant research literature to provide an evidence base to make strong arguments for the rationale and importance of the research. She argued that the research was necessary due to the increasing rates of suicide among this specific age and gender group (NOSP, 2005), that understanding the needs of this group could only be illuminated by accessing their insider expert knowledge and that the research could provide insights into their lives and needs that could add to existing knowledge and inform professional practice (Gordon, 2016). She provided evidence that rather than doing harm the participants might benefit from participating in
the research as it gives them a voice and their health care needs are highlighted (Kvale, 1996; Lakeman & Fitzgerald, 2009a).

Addressing risks

Potential risks in suicide research, ranging from inconvenience to physical, psychological, social, economic and legal consequences, need to be identified and managed by putting appropriate safety protocols in place. Research that does not do this is unethical and can be legally dangerous, as it can place participants at higher risk of harm, and ignorance or lack of expertise is not a reasonable defence (Hom et al., 2017).

To identify potential risks and develop solutions to include in safety protocols, it is useful to talk to other researchers, clinicians and the research population. This preparatory fieldwork is invaluable in identifying idiosyncratic group or cultural specific issues, generating shared practical solutions that work for the people involved, and facilitating a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. It also provides opportunities for the researcher to begin the process of developing and maintaining strong working relationships with those involved in the research, demonstrate their thoroughness and problem-solving focus and establish their trustworthiness and credibility.

In the PISA project, the authors collaborated with former PISA participants and the local mental health services to develop safety protocols. This was important as there were local differences in how to access services and what services were available. For example, in one service people could present directly for psychiatric assessment in suicidal crisis, while in other services access was only available through a general hospital emergency department. Part of the safety protocol involved mapping these service pathways so that the researcher was able to direct participants to an appropriate service, based on their needs. This was reassuring for the services involved and for the researcher who had a plan that specified the measures to be taken to address participant risk and clearly outlined the circumstances where confidentiality could not be maintained.

An important part of the risk management process is to ensure that any incidents that do occur or ‘near misses’ are reported and reviewed, so they become part of a continuous learning cycle and essential lessons learned in the field are not forgotten (Williamson & Burns, 2014). At our regular research monitoring meetings, we updated the study safety protocols as the projects progressed to incorporate new learning and processes. We adopted an ‘ethics-as-process’ approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharin, 2002), whereby consent was revisited at each stage of the research process to incorporate concerns that could not be anticipated in advance. In the YM project, there was a delay between participants receiving information about the project and when they were interviewed and there was a possibility that the safety protocols were updated in the interim. To ensure that participants were consenting to the updated protocols, the researcher highlighted any changes that had been made since the initial
information had been issued and she facilitated a discussion with participants to ensure that they understood the new protocol and were clear that they were consenting to the safety protocols, as well as consenting to participate in the research.

The researcher has opportunities to proactively address issues that might influence RECs by drawing on empirical evidence and demonstrating their knowledge in the area. To address the risk benefit ratio s/he can highlight hidden benefits and demonstrate risk awareness by involving a range of experts in anticipating risks and developing robust safety protocols. This inspires confidence in the research by reassuring RECs about researcher competency, minimises adverse outcomes by identifying those in need of support and promotes researcher–participant collaboration as they are aware of and have consented to the evolving study protocols.

Gaining access and recruiting: managing gatekeepers

Gatekeepers, those with authority to grant access to particular populations, have similar safeguarding responsibilities. Formal gatekeepers, such as service managers, may be reluctant to support research in their organisations due to several concerns. They may fear that the research will negatively influence the relationship between them and their service users, that a group who have already suffered will be overburdened, that the researcher will be intrusive or insensitive leading to re-traumatisation or that confidentiality may be breached in identifying potential participants (Lakeman & FitzGerald, 2009b). They may view the potential benefits for participants as inadequate in terms of offsetting the disruption caused by involvement, or they may be bombarded with multiple requests for access (Moore & Miller, 1999).

They may also be concerned that the research will create additional work, as was the case in the PISA project. Local clinicians were initially worried that the researcher’s anxiety in working with this vulnerable at-risk group would result in an increase in their already high workloads. Alongside the safety protocols that had been developed, it was necessary to demonstrate that the researcher was adequately prepared to determine risk levels to distinguish between those who might require intervention and those who might be vulnerable but not require this, and to tolerate the uncertainty that involvement with this group can cause. We developed clear lines of communication within the research team so that the researcher had timely access to support and supervision. Additionally, we established regular meetings with the services, to keep them updated on emergent issues and updated protocols, and to provide opportunities for them to highlight any evolving issues during the study. These structures facilitated collaboration between the researcher and clinicians, promoted teamwork among the researchers and provided a sense of containment for the researcher in the field.
Informal gatekeepers, such as peers, may not trust researchers. They may perceive an imbalance of power between themselves and the researcher who controls the research agenda, the analysis of data and presentation of findings. They may view the research as a form of domination or social control (Marsh et al., 2017), particularly if they have had negative experiences of this in the past, and may fear further discrimination, marginalisation, exposure or incrimination. Thus, they may seek to protect potential participants by denying the researcher access. Therefore, while the researcher controls the research agenda, it is important to highlight that participants have control over the content, pacing, sequencing and sometimes the meanings attributed to the accounts they provide (Marsh et al., 2017). In the YM project, snowball sampling was used to access some participants. To recommend the study to their friends or peers, previous participants had to feel confident enough in the researchers’ ability to conduct the interviews sensitively and to allow them to speak freely. This experience helped to instil trust that others would not be disadvantaged in any way and indeed might benefit by participating.

Conversely, gatekeepers may try to assist the research or protect the researcher, influencing recruitment and possibly compromising participant autonomy and researcher integrity. For example, they may select ‘good’ study participants, who are co-operative, will provide a positive account of the organisation or who might benefit from participation, while not considering the more ‘difficult’ cases. Such biases, conflicts of interest or competing agendas regarding the research process and/or outcomes may be explicit or hidden and may be outside of the gatekeeper’s conscious awareness, making it difficult to identify and/or to negotiate once identified. In the PISA project the researcher spent a lot of time in the services and developed a good relationship with clinicians. As a result the clinicians did not want to recruit difficult participants for her. Regular discussions with the services helped to identify and resolve these issues and enabled the researcher to address issues about the credibility and usefulness of the research if it was based on a biased rather than a typical clinical sample.

We have found it helpful to keep in mind the metaphor of the hallway with many doors when negotiating access with gatekeepers who may for various reasons be more or less disposed to assisting them.

Some of the doors are open; some are closed. . . . Doors that open sometimes close, occasionally for no discernible reason. Conversely, a door that was closed may open just enough to allow one to get one’s foot inside. Not all doors are completely open or shut. There is a range of in-between.

(Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003, p. ix)

The concerns of gatekeepers might not always be explicit but can nevertheless have substantial consequences for gaining access and being assisted with recruitment. Thus, it is worthwhile spending time in the partnership organisations
talking to key personnel, hearing their concerns and responding to these in a manner that demonstrates contextual sensitivity (Renzetti & Lee, 1993) and enhances transparent and collaborative partnerships through clear and open communication lines.

**Gathering and analysing data: researcher safety**

In general, researchers are attuned to participant issues regarding the impact of exploring sensitive topics with vulnerable participants. In contrast researchers can be slow to consider the impact of research on themselves, perhaps because they are seen as occupying positions of power relative to the research population (Downey, Hamilton, & Catterall, 2007). Therefore, it is important to consider what the researcher is required to do to engage with vulnerable populations and gather sensitive data, the impact that this process has on them and their needs in relation to these issues.

**Psychological safety**

The relationship between participants and researchers is complex and has given rise to several issues related to boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008), which refer to the physical and psychological limits people set within relationships to protect themselves from intrusion (Gordon & Kenny, 2018). Boundary issues can arise for a number of reasons, such as when the researcher perceives her/himself as using the participants or their stories to promote themselves in some way, for example, gaining an academic award. Researchers can struggle to find the right level of closeness and self-disclosure to facilitate participants to tell personal and perhaps difficult stories, they can have difficulty distinguishing between research and friendship boundaries when in close and/or prolonged contact with participants or it can be challenging to avoid adopting a therapeutic role when a participant becomes distressed (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008; Etherington, 1996). Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) suggest including protocols and supervision that address each of these areas.

Researchers can be at risk of psychological overload, due to exposure to personal, emotional and at times distressing or disturbing material (Etherington, 1996; Taylor & Bradbury-Jones, 2011). This can lead to traumatisation of the researcher (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001) and indeed others who are involved in the research, for example, those transcribing or analysing the data (Taylor & Bradbury-Jones, 2011). They can also feel responsible for resolving participant dilemmas, referred to as ‘responsibility anxiety’ (Etherington, 1996). In the YM project Evelyn, who is also a clinician, was preoccupied and distressed following an interview with a suicidal young man as she worried about his welfare. Fortunately, there were regular monitoring, support and debriefing spaces in place to provide opportunities to identify and discuss emerging concerns and reflect upon the impact of decisions and actions (Marsh et al., 2017). Therefore,
she contacted her PhD supervisor and discussed her dilemma. The consultation confirmed that she was in danger of blurring the clinician-researcher boundary and clarified that she had followed the protocol in relation to assessing and managing participant risk. This reassured her that the protocol was robust and that the participant had adequate supports in place, allaying her anxiety (Gordon, 2017).

Physical safety

In addition to attending to the psychological wellbeing of the researcher it is also important to consider his or her physical safety. Interviews can take place in participants’ homes, in public places or other locations where the interviewer may have little control over the surroundings and the people present. Threats to the physical safety of the researcher include being subject to violence, sexually inappropriate behaviour or verbalisation, or intoxication, from either the participant or someone else in the vicinity (Williamson & Burns, 2014). Managing these risks typically involves thinking ahead and being practical and sensible. In our PISA and YM research, we ensured that the researcher had access to a fully charged mobile phone so that they could contact other members of the research team, emergency services or other relevant people. Researchers can have someone else accompany them when they are concerned about poor mobile telephone coverage. In both projects, research interviews were held in clinical locations with assistance nearby if required and another member of the research team had details of the interview, such as who was being interviewed, the location, time and expected duration. The researcher made contact with a named person once they had safely exited the interview. It was agreed that if there was no contact at the specified time, the named person would try to contact the researcher and if unable to do so would contact the police.

Given the strong emphasis on participant safety and the minimal emphasis often placed on researcher safety, it is essential that the researcher consider their own needs when conducting suicide research. Ensuring that adequate measures and supports are in place for the researcher reduces the risk of boundary blurring and compromised physical and/or psychological safety.

Disseminating findings: reaching your audience

Identifying your audience for dissemination purposes requires consideration in terms of how, when and to whom the findings and their implications are reported. Audiences will require different dissemination methods based on their differing levels of understanding and interest. For example, the participants may be drawn to short summaries of the main findings and the impact of the research in terms of what it means for them or others like them. Research colleagues may be more interested in the ethical and practical challenges encountered in the research and how these were addressed and funders or clinical services may be more interested in outcomes. In the YM project, to support a
wide dissemination of the research findings, the researchers produced a range of leaflets targeting families/carers of people experiencing suicidality, professionals working with suicidal people and their families and suicidal individuals. These leaflets were sent to the services involved in assisting with recruitment and, as they were accessible and well-designed, other services began using them as a means of increasing awareness about suicide and providing some practical tips about how to respond when someone is suicidal or has lost someone to suicide.

When wider audiences are being invited to examine the findings, it is important to consider how to minimise the risk that these are misrepresented or misused to fit other agendas or that they are portrayed in ways that further stigmatise or marginalise the issue or the research participants. When research has been supported or funded by organisations, they may want to read the research prior to publication to ensure that they are represented accurately and that the findings are not going to negatively impact on them. We have found that this can be a useful way to ensure that any facts about the organisation are accurately reported in the research while being mindful that adequately and fairly representing the findings of the research is our responsibility. Therefore, we provide funders with a draft of the study report in advance of finalising it so that they can make factual corrections. Researchers can reap the benefits of their hard work by considering carefully who the best research audience might be and how best to reach them. Being creative facilitates this process and helps to get important messages and their implications to those who might use or benefit from this information.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This chapter outlined the complexity of the concepts of sensitivity and vulnerability, particularly in relation to suicide-related research. It illuminated key concerns that can arise regarding these concepts, highlighting the paradox about how concerns about risk management lead to the development of clear and robust study safety protocols while simultaneously posing barriers to undertaking such research. The socially constructed nature of these concepts, whose meanings change across time and context, was emphasised. Thus, a critical disposition toward the taken-for-granted is necessary for researchers wishing to dispel myths, uncover new insights around sensitive topics and include the voices of groups who are often marginalised.

Key challenges that can arise for the researcher in managing risks to participants, the research setting and themselves were identified, highlighting the need to also consider potential hidden benefits. The importance of researchers being contextually alert and sensitive and creative in their approach when putting study structures and protocols in place to address concerns and when disseminating findings was emphasised to ensure that collaborative and respectful working partnerships are established and maintained and that researcher competency is evident.
In highlighting typical issues that researchers can anticipate and address in the planning and conduct of the research project, for example, acknowledging potential risks and associated concerns explicitly in ethics applications and the research protocols, we hope to help counter some of the barriers associated with undertaking sensitive research with vulnerable populations. We do so in the further hope that this will enhance our understandings of important aspects of people’s lives that can inform social developments and professional practice especially for those living on the edge of life and death (Bergmans, Gordon, & Eynan, 2017) and those close to them who also carry the burden of uncertainty about what the future holds for them (Delaney & Gordon, 2017).

References


Ensuring the active participation of people with intellectual disabilities in research

Implications for researchers and professionals

Judit Fullana and Maria Pallisera

Introduction

The emergence of participatory approaches in recent decades has provided strong support for the inclusion of vulnerable groups in research processes aimed at generating awareness of the issues that affect them while fostering cooperation, co-learning and empowerment (Stack & McDonald, 2014). However, it is still uncommon to find members of communities considered vulnerable participating in research. One such example is that of people with intellectual disabilities (ID), who have long been ignored as a potential source of valuable information and as participants in research (Walmsley, 2010). The idea of ‘giving a voice’ is not limited to ‘listening’ to people with disabilities through the use of certain data-gathering instruments or strategies; that is, it is not restricted to awarding them the role of informants. Rather, they must be included in the research process itself as a necessary condition for responding effectively to their needs, contributing to improving their living conditions and making their rights exercisable (Johnson, Minogue, & Hopkins, 2014; O’Brien, McConkey, & García-Iriarte, 2014). Based on a research project investigating the transition to adulthood of people with intellectual disabilities, this chapter addresses the shortage of documented tools and strategies available to practitioners, educators, students and researchers in their quest to transform social research design by employing strategies that significantly contribute to including people with intellectual disabilities in educational research. The chapter is based on the authors’ own experience in conducting research with people with ID, in particular the methods implemented to ensure the active participation of participants.

The learning points for the readers are:

• Gaining insight into how to plan and develop research that incorporates the voices of people with intellectual disabilities or other vulnerable groups as informants;
Ensuring active participation in research

- Applying social and education strategies and methods in research to foster the participation of people with intellectual disabilities and other vulnerable groups as researchers.

Overview of the research study

The transition to adulthood poses one of the most complex challenges not only due to the changes that take place at this time but also the increased uncertainty affecting these young people and their families. Dyke, Bourke, Llewellyn and Leonard (2013) suggest that, compared to non-disabled young people, the transition of adolescents with ID is longer and they have fewer opportunities to participate in significant learning activities that prepare them for adulthood. Research indicates that they experience greater difficulties in accessing vocational training programmes supporting their labour market inclusion (Clarke et al., 2011). There is also a reduction in the formal support they receive from services during adolescence, which consequently leads to changes in the family routine (Dyke et al., 2013; King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2010). In addition, they experience more difficulties than their peers without disabilities in building and maintaining a social network for support (Small, Raghavan, & Pawson, 2013). Most experience difficulties with regard to independent living (Mill, Mayes, & McConnell, 2010) and do not live with a partner or have children. Indeed many people with intellectual disabilities do not have control over who they have sex or relationships with and whether they will have children (Monk & Townson, 2015).

The emphasis placed over the last decade on recognising the right of people with disabilities to full and effective participation and inclusion in society, promoted by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), has meant that listening to the voices of people with disabilities is now the most important element in determining what they want for their lives and in planning, developing and evaluating the support they are offered. It is necessary to include their voice in the study of processes that can lead to them having greater control over their own lives (Björnsdóttir, Stefánsdóttir, & Stefánsdóttir, 2015).

The University of Girona’s Research Group on Diversity (Catalonia, Spain), which the authors of this chapter belong to, addressed this issue by conducting research into the transition to adulthood for young people with intellectual disabilities during the period 2012–2017. Two aims were defined:

1. To identify the main problems faced by young people with ID in their transition to adulthood and determine which factors facilitate transition in their own experience;

2. To propose actions or strategies aimed at optimising transition processes to adulthood and working life for people with ID from an inclusive perspective.
In this research, various strategies were implemented to incorporate the voices of people with intellectual disabilities: on the one hand, strategies for listening to their voices as informants; and on the other, in line with the Inclusive Research Approach (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003), actions to increase the participation of people with ID as co-researchers. Inclusive research promotes an active role for people with disabilities in decision-making on objectives and phases of research into issues that affect them (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Depending on the type of participation, three main approaches are usually identified: research in which people with ID act as advisors; research in which they act as leaders; and collaborative research (Bigby, Frawley, & Ramcharan, 2014). In line with this, an advisory committee was organised. Its members were made up of people with intellectual disabilities, who participated in various phases of the project: instrument design; data analysis; and dissemination of research results. Listening to the voices of people with ID and including them as co-researchers were the two methodological axes around which the study was organised.

The research was carried out in two main stages. The first consisted of a case study aimed at capturing the complexity of relationships, beliefs and attitudes within a delimited unit, using different forms of data collection (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Eight young people with ID, aged between 17 and 22 years, participated in the study. They had completed compulsory education and were participating in a transition training course. They participated in two semi-structured interviews, one at the beginning of the study and another at the end, nine months later, when the young people were finishing the training course. Interviews have been used widely in research with people with ID as a method for obtaining data about their experiences and gaining insight into their world (Corby, Taggart, & Cousins, 2015). Two focus groups were conducted to gather insight into identifying supports and difficulties in transition processes. Barr, McConkey, and McConaghie (2003), Cambridge and McCarthy (2001) and Kaehne and O’Connell (2010) advocate the use of focus groups to foster the inclusion and empowerment of people with ID in research. Graphic elicitation, photograph elicitation and Photovoice were used together with interviews and focus groups with the aim of facilitating the active participation of young people and collecting their voices, opinions and assessments. The potential of using visual methods in combination with other methods such as interviews has been highlighted by different authors (Harper, 2002; Keats, 2009), especially when the interviewed person is the one who does the drawings and takes the photographs. The following section explains the visual methods used in research on transition in more detail.

The scripts for the interviews and focus groups were discussed with the advisory committee. The topics dealt with in this study were related to support received during compulsory education and support and difficulties perceived during the transition process, barriers that complicate the process of emancipation from the family home and construction of their future project and perception of support that might help them accomplish this.
The second stage consisted of inclusive research on the process towards independent living. The advisory committee, which was created in 2012 and was comprised of ten people with ID, took a more active role in the research, analysing the barriers and support encountered in their independent living process. Over one academic year, they took part in monthly meetings, participating in various stages of the research: collecting information about the research topic by watching films and documentaries on support options and case studies; compiling data through the Photovoice technique; analysing and discussing data; and disseminating the results.

After agreeing to participate in the study, all participants and all members of the advisory committee signed an informed consent document in accessible format, which guaranteed their rights to anonymity and to abandon the study at any time. Table 3.1 summarises the stages of research, participants and

### Table 3.1 Method, participants and role of people with ID and strategies in research on transition to adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Role of people with ID</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>Eight people with ID. 17 to 22 years old participating in a transition to adulthood training programme</td>
<td>Two individual interviews including graphic elicitation (Timeline) and drawing about their future expectations Two focus groups, one of them including Photovoice Creation of an advisory committee (2012–13) who participated in: Assessing scripts for interviews and focus groups Participating in interviews and focus group data analysis and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive research</td>
<td>Ten people with ID participating on the Advisory Committee</td>
<td>Photovoice Two-hour meetings were held once a month at the university during the 2013–14 academic year Advisory committee members participated as co-researchers in: Formulating research questions Gathering information Identifying barriers and supports to independent living Discussing results Disseminating results</td>
</tr>
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methods used to better include the voices of people with ID and provide them with a more active role in the research as co-researchers.

Interviews and focus groups from the case study were fully transcribed. Two researchers shared out the cases and reviewed them. A thematic analysis was carried out on the initial individual interviews using structural coding (Saldaña, 2013); that is, using codes based on the research topics (primary school, secondary school, family, friends, leisure and planning for the future). A third researcher reviewed the coding and all three researchers discussed and evaluated the appropriateness of the assigned codes before the fragments were given a definitive code. One researcher reviewed the transcripts for the second interview. Individual reports were written for each case. Transcripts of the focus groups were also encoded by one researcher using the same codes. Finally, a researcher conducted an initial joint and cross-referenced analysis of the data (individual reports and data from the focus groups) to prepare a final document identifying the patterns, common issues and discrepancies in each of the study topics. The results of this analysis were presented to the advisory committee who during a two-hour session discussed the main ideas that emerged from the study and offered their points of view. The researchers discussed this document and agreed on a final version.

To promote inclusive research, the advisory committee analysed the information using the Photovoice method, which aims to facilitate the participants’ narration in a group situation, using photographs they themselves have taken. The aim is for participants to become involved in analysing their own situation, make their own contributions to the narration and jointly interpret the issues (De Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007; Mitchell, 2011). Based on the work carried out using the Photovoice method a focus group was established in which the advisors discussed and agreed on a number of proposals that in their view could aid their plans for an independent life. The proposals were written on a mural. In order to agree on a priority for the proposals, the advisors voted individually for the three most relevant ones in each person’s case.

The findings clearly showed that young people with ID experience difficulty in completing secondary education and continuing their studies and that both they and their families expressed their concerns regarding their future inclusion in the labour market and emancipation (Pallisera, Fullana, Puyalto, & Vilà, 2016). An assessment was made of the need to incorporate meaningful activities linked to socio-professional inclusion and how to promote guidance actions during compulsory secondary education. It was also suggested that the full participation of the young people be encouraged in decisions linked to their transition and their social network be strengthened, thus enabling them to play a greater role in the community (Pallisera, et al., 2018). The need to promote coordination between those services and professionals who offer support at school and after school was also assessed (Pallisera, Vilà, & Fullana, 2014). This research confirmed that the knowledge provided by people with intellectual disability regarding their own experience is indispensable in bettering their
living conditions. This assumption implies a radical transformation in how such research has traditionally been carried out so as to establish support mechanisms that give the people themselves the prominence they deserve.

The two learning points mentioned in the introduction will be discussed in the next sections. The first, gaining insight into how to plan and develop research that incorporates the voices of people with intellectual disabilities or other vulnerable groups as informants, involves asking what methods can be used by researchers to promote the participation of young people with ID as informants. The second learning point, applying social and educational strategies and methods in research to foster the participation of people with intellectual disabilities and other vulnerable groups as researchers, raises the question of what methodological strategies can be used to increase the participation of people with ID in research processes.

**What methods can we use as researchers to promote the participation of young people with ID as informants?**

When designing the different phases of the research and the instruments to be used, different questions were considered, each of which led us to take methodological decisions related to the selection of data collection instruments and techniques. One main issue was related to the question of what strategies can be used to help the person feel welcome and supported to express their thoughts and feelings freely. This is particularly important when working with people with ID or others that can have difficulties in communicating. Making the voices of participants heard entails much more than just talking and listening to people. It is necessary to identify strategies that allow them to express themselves, which requires diverse methods that can be adapted to different people and are less directed by the researcher than traditional research methods. The search for flexible and adaptable instruments led us to use visual methods to facilitate people with ID decision-making about what they wanted to talk about, to facilitate elicitation of their thoughts and points of view and to foster their active participation as informants. Finlay, Sheridan, McKay, and Nudzor (2010) highlighted the value of these methods in involving, empowering and giving people choices in relation to the subject matter and research design that the traditional methods cannot give. Visual methods can also be useful when the person want to express his/her emotions and feelings or when evoking experiences which are difficult to communicate through words (Bagnoli, 2009; Pink, 2006). Graphic elicitation interviews and Photovoice are two of the visual methods that we used in the research presented here.

The graphic elicitation technique includes the use of drawings, diagrams, conceptual maps and other graphic expressions produced by research participants. The use of drawing in research is a method that helps participants depict thoughts and feelings which are often difficult to express through words.
Judit Fullana and Maria Pallisera (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011). The fact that drawing activities have little structure and no barriers or limits allows participants to communicate their personal experiences without the influence of the researcher's preconceived ideas, which may unintentionally impose themselves. However, drawings and photographs in the case of photo elicitation must be accompanied by participants' own interpretations. What is of interest is not their drawing skills, but rather how drawings are used within the context of an interview to facilitate reflection and obtain a global image of the subject matter to be researched, which takes into account the different needs and expressive styles of participants (Bagnoli, 2009). Applying these methods in the context of an interview, it is possible to open up participants' interpretations to the different questions and construct a creative path for the interview, which responds to the meanings and associations intended by participants. In the research presented here, drawing was used as a support to oral narration in individual interviews to explore the young person's medium-term expectations and life plan. Specifically, the young person was asked to draw, even if only in the form of a sketch, roughly how they saw themselves in ten years' time. They were offered material and support if needed. Once the drawing was finished, the young person explained what the images meant for them in their future plan. Figure 3.1 at the end of the page shows the drawing of an 18-year-old boy. He drew the situation hoped for in ten years' time, while explaining what his future plan consisted of. He used the first image to explain that he wants to play sport to be strong. In the second image, he reinforces this idea by showing that he would like to share this interest in running with a friend and have a partner and, with his partner, socialise with friends. The final image shows him working on tasks that involve the use of computers. This case is an example of how using graphic elicitation as a support provided the young person with the opportunity to think about their future and define their personal, relational and work-related goals.

The example on the next page (Figure 3.2) presents the use of the timeline as a support for the participant's narrative. The aim was to help participants explain the pathway they took during the process of living independently from

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**Figure 3.1** The future expectations of an 18-year-old
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the family. In this case, the interviewer deemed the drawing to be true based on the oral explanation given by the interviewee. The picture is very simple but summarises the times in this process that the person considers to be key: 1. incorporation into a sheltered workshop; 2. joining a supported living programme in a shared flat; and 3. accessing a home of their own. The picture provides a clear visualisation of the pathway followed by the person and helps them reflect on it (difficulties experienced, supports received, etc.).

Photovoice involves participants using cameras to document aspects of their lives. Its use is aimed at developing people’s critical awareness of themselves and their relationship with the local community and broader society, with the goal of overcoming social injustice (Mitchell, 2011). The subsequent narration of these photographs helps the researcher to understand their point of view. Photovoice is used for the purposes of advocacy for community improvement, as well as research (Holm, 2010). Photovoice was used in this study with the aim of identifying barriers, difficulties and supports perceived in the transition to adulthood. The example presented here relates to the process to independent living. As previously mentioned ten people with ID participated as members of an advisory committee for the research. They were asked to take photos that reflected ‘things that help in the process to independent living’ and ‘things that didn’t help in this process’. Figure 3.3 shows a fragment of the mural that the participants made using photographs or drawings either made or chosen by themselves. The participants highlighted the importance of family and friends, the need to be able to carry out domestic routines, have a job and financial resources and have a partner. This debate led to ideas as to what were the barriers to an independent life. These included other people’s lack of confidence in the possibilities for people with ID, over-protection by families and professionals, problems dealing with daily routines, the fear of emancipation, the lack
of financial assistance and excessive control by professionals and relatives. The Photovoice activity was particularly useful in encouraging the participation of the advisors and highlighting the issues they considered relevant. The graphic format makes the activity more accessible. As one of the participants said: “It depends a little on what the person says or feels, with the images you can see how others see things. And you can show how you see them”.

Using visual methods facilitates the participants’ involvement and choice. This contributes to creating trusting relationships between researchers with or without a disability and for people with ID to take part in the reflection process of subjects that affect them.

**Methodological strategies that can be used to increase the participation of people with ID as researchers**

Since the aim of the research was to explain the problems people with disabilities face in this process we considered it necessary to incorporate an advisory committee formed of people with an intellectual disability, as previously explained. When conducting inclusive research, researchers’ experience and
Ensuring active participation in research

knowledge plays a key role in designing and creatively organising the supports necessary to allow groups considered vulnerable to feel they are a fundamental part of the research and be able to take an active part in the various stages of the research. Actions aimed at facilitating the construction and cohesion of the research group and to ensure the accessibility of the participants in the various stages of the research are requisites needed to facilitate the conducting of research from an inclusive perspective (Strnadová, Cumming, Knox, & Parmenter, 2014).

People with disabilities participating in research endorse their need to feel part of a group that is working towards a common goal, one in which their voices are relevant (Nind & Vinha, 2014; Puyalto, Pallisera, Fullana, & Vilà, 2016; The Money, Friends and Making Ends Meet Research Group & Tilly, 2012). This entails taking their needs into account when discussing the type, length, frequency and dynamic of meetings. This results in group members progressively feeling that they are members of a group of people working together to meet a common aim. With this in mind, we did the following to promote genuine teamwork:

• Including an informal slot at the start of each meeting to exchange views; a small snack was also provided;
• Using the focus group method during meetings. One of the strengths of focus groups is that it constitutes a safe environment that helps participants to gain confidence, collaborate and receive support from the rest of the group, as well as helping contrast opinions and experiences (Kaehne & O’Connell, 2010). Furthermore, it allows those people with few reading and writing skills to actively participate in the research process. One of the participants emphasised the value of this technique in helping make joint proposals: “The best thing about the focus group is that everyone can say their opinion and together you can go further with proposals”;
• A group review of the meeting at the end of every session, assessing the contributions the group had made to the aims of the session and jointly establishing the tasks to be carried out in the following meeting;
• Detailed preparation of meetings, taking into account what had happened in the previous meeting and designing accessible support material (minutes, presentations, documents, questionnaires, etc.). This involves using images as support for the ideas presented and simple texts (short sentences, avoiding technical language). Figure 3.4 shows an example of accessible minutes from a meeting, which lists the place, date, duration and attendees at the meeting, and then the sequence of activities (1. Snack; 2. Presentation of new participants on the advisory committee; 3. Reminder of the subject of research work; 4. Signing of informed consent by new participants; 5. Summary of work session; and 6. Summary of agreements made).

Planning and developing training actions aimed at researchers with ID is a powerful strategy to ensure inclusion (Carey, Salmon, & Higgins, 2014;
Strnadová et al., 2014). Nind, Chapman, Seale, and Tilley (2016) note the issue of training is not neutral as it implies deciding what the aim is: is it about facilitating the learning of research-related skills so that people with ID may tackle more complex tasks throughout the process? Or is it to contribute to providing people with disabilities with a socially valued role as producers of knowledge through their participation in research processes? In this research, an
Ensuring active participation in research

An educational research course was organised and aimed at members of the advisory committee. The goals were to provide participants with greater knowledge of the research processes as a way of contributing to knowledge and to provide the advisors with knowledge of the processes, tools and strategies used by our team. This was to enable them to assess their availability and motivation to participate more actively in the research. Training took place over eight work sessions and covered a range of subjects. These included the meaning of research in the socio-educational field and the stages of research. Specific attention was paid to two of the data collection methods most used, that is, interviews and focus groups as well as the use of visual methods. Training took place concurrently with the research, thus facilitating the application of some of the course subjects into the transition to adulthood and independent living (Fullana, Pallisera, Català, & Puyalto, 2017). Table 3.2 shows the content of one of the sessions.

Strategies were used to support the participation of researchers with disabilities in the data analysis phases. Information analysis is a cross-disciplinary process carried out at various stages of a research project, and it has different aims. At the beginning of (and during) the research, it is used to compile data about the topic studied. Once data is compiled, it is used to further the significance of aspects of the data and establish links with the results of other research. Once research is finished, it is used to select and organise the information needed for the dissemination of results. To guarantee the participation of researchers with disabilities, they should be aided through the choice and design of accessible materials, which should be progressively sequenced before the design of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 3: The interview</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ascertain key aspects in preparing an individual interview.</td>
<td>- Debate based on viewing extracts from a television interview with a person with Down’s syndrome who lives independently with their partner. Questions posed included: how does the person interviewed live? What other life choices do people with ID currently have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify good and bad interview practice.</td>
<td>- Preparation of an interview script, in groups of three to four people and with the support of a member of the research team in each group. The subjects were independent living, and the options of people with ID in this area.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Role-playing, in which the participants practiced the prepared interview.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Analysis and discussion of the role-playing, highlighting strengths and problems that arose.</td>
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comprehensible activities. Table 3.3 on the next page shows some of the actions undertaken to facilitate participation of researchers with disabilities.

Throughout the entire process adaptations were considered based on the access needs of the various participants. The number of activities based on reading and writing were minimised and individual support was provided for those who needed it. Each session was planned taking into account the process and results of the previous session and the participants’ satisfaction, as well as their preferences regarding the activities and methods used. Feedback from research participants showed high levels of satisfaction and positive experiences with regard to the learning acquired as researchers, as well as an improvement in their social role (Fullana et al., 2017; Puyalto et al., 2016).

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The research discussed on here is based on a project on barriers and supports encountered by people with ID in their transition to adulthood. The researchers faced challenges about the meaningful participation of people with intellectual disabilities and ensuring that their voices were heard. This led to an effort to incorporate their views, perspectives and experiences. Based on our experiences we highlight some recommendations for other researchers.

Ensuring that people with intellectual disabilities have opportunities to participate in research processes entails the use of methods and procedures that help facilitate the free expression of their opinions, their views being respected and their work sufficiently recognised. To this end, visual methods, in combination with focus groups and interviews, are recommended strategies. They facilitate expression by people with ID, the compilation of information adapted to their characteristics and, by not being overly researcher-led, provide participants with greater freedom of choice.

Listening to people with ID is not the only element that helps their participation in inclusive research. It should also be made easier for them to actively participate in all stages of the research. As researchers we had to consider our role as facilitators of the processes of expression and narration in the participants’ experience; visual methods were useful here. We also considered our role in providing support according to the needs of each person by adapting documents and making them accessible to the participants.

Inclusive research is not merely a powerful source of knowledge regarding the realities of groups considered vulnerable, but also an instrument of change in itself. It is an effective instrument that contributes to social change, as it considers people’s needs and requests and allows them to become the people who lead this change. That said, for such change to be truly effective, further opportunities should be explored that enable people with disabilities to actively participate in the research that affects them, as well as play a leading role in dissemination of the research undertaken.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documentation on research subject</strong></td>
<td>Further examine the various support options for independent living: residence, group home, personalised support in one’s own home.</td>
<td>Extracts from films and documentaries were chosen that show a range of support options for independent living. They were then watched with the advisors. The pros and cons of the options were discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assess how the various support options for an independent life can be adapted to specific personal contexts.</td>
<td>Small groups discussed different case studies focused on people with intellectual disabilities who wish to further their independent living process. One of them lived at home, another in a group home. The advisors discussed the personal context, assessing the wishes of the people in each of the case studies, setting out the possible options in each case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data compilation and analysis</strong></td>
<td>Discuss together the barriers to and supports for independent living.</td>
<td>Through the use of drawings and photographs, the participants carried out a Photovoice activity in which they discussed their ideas and opinions regarding independent living. The session had two parts: the first being the Photovoice activity using material provided by the participants (see Figure 3.3). Then, through the focus group technique, they discussed those factors and situations that hindered their progress towards independent living projects, as well as those elements that helped it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion of results</strong></td>
<td>Compare the results of our study with those of other research into the opinions of people with disabilities about independent living.</td>
<td>The advisors were divided into three groups, each with the support of a researcher. Each group was given cards with input from other research – chosen by the researchers and in accessible language – and the list of contributions from the research project itself. Figure 3.5 shows an example of the cards used: the left-hand column indicates the group conducting the research and on the right there is a summary of the results in easy read format. One group focused on comparing barriers; another on comparing support; the third on suggestions for improvement. These results were then pooled, the results discussed and the procedure assessed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, as stated by O’Brien et al. (2014), establishing stable research communities that can obtain funding to study and improve whatever interests them is a challenge that requires effort to alter the balance of power between people with ID and academics or professionals. Professionals are key, both in supporting the participation in research and actively collaborating in studies aimed at improving the quality of life of groups considered vulnerable. Ultimately, the will and commitment of academic researchers to democratise research processes by giving up the control they have traditionally exercised plays an essential role in revitalising and providing support for inclusive research.

Note
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References


Introduction

Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that children’s opinions and views should be listened to. The introduction of this convention, Karp (2008) argues, brought changes to the way childhood was viewed, with a new partnership between children, their parents and state institutions being recommended (Smith, 2011). Harcourt and Conroy (2011, p. 39) argue that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has provided “a significant platform from which to include children’s view on matters that concern them”. Living conditions and poverty are obviously matters of concern to children. However to ensure the full participation of children in research on such a topic, several factors in relation to access, consent, relationships and design of data collection instruments need to be considered. The focus of this chapter is on how child participants were included and involved in research on poverty and social exclusion. The research discussed here is part of a larger study that explored the living conditions of children and young people identified as living in contexts of poverty and social exclusion that took place between 2009 and 2014 in Porto (Portugal). Access to participants was through engaging with projects organised as part of the Portuguese Government’s initiative to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from economically disadvantaged communities using principles of informal learning and social pedagogy. This is known as Programa Escolha¹ (Choices Programme). This programme commenced in 2001 in Portugal, with the aim of deterring young people from engaging in criminal activity and encouraging school completion. The second stage of the programme began in 2004 with the additional aim of the promotion of social inclusion, the third stage in 2007, the fourth in 2010 and the fifth in 2013. By 2013 the programme had five broad aims: school inclusion and informal education; employability and vocational training; participation in the community and civic life; digital inclusion and empowerment and entrepreneurship.

In line with views of children as individuals capable of forming and expressing opinions that should be taken into account in decision-making processes
that involve them (James, Jenks, & Prout, 2002; Prout, 2005; Sarmento, 2002),
the approach taken in the research was to work directly with the children in
the design of the data collection method and in the process of gaining consent
and assent. Therefore the research fitted with Hart’s (1992) 2nd degree of child
participation, consultation and information. Although the project was proposed
and conducted by adults the children and young people were informed and
consulted and their opinions were taken seriously. This also fitted with viewing
the research as a way of promoting social participation towards full citizenship
through being a space for discussion about matters that concern every citizen.
This allowed the research to reveal how children perceive complex notions
such as social exclusion and poverty and demonstrate that children can make
valuable contributions by sharing their views on these.

The main learning points for the reader presented in this chapter and illus-
trated with examples from the research study are:

• Ways of accessing child participants who are living in social disadvantage
and gaining consent in a respectful and empowering way;
• Building trust and maintaining relationships with children, their families
and other stakeholders throughout the research process;
• Consulting with and using children’s feedback in the design and adminis-
tration of a data collection instrument.

Overview of the research

The first stage of the research was consideration of how to conceptualise and
theorise about the phenomena of poverty and social exclusion. The work of
theorists and writers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim as
well as Serge Paugam (2003), Robert Castel (1998) and several authors such as
Sen (1979, 1985), Townsend (1979), Spicker, Alvarez Leguixamóm, and Gordon
(2007), Gordon (2000), Rowntree and Bradshaw (2000), Lewis (1966), Rosan-
vallon (1995), Room (2000), and Levitas (2000) informed how the key con-
cepts of poverty and social exclusion were conceptualised. Their work led to
an understanding of poverty as a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon
and social exclusion as a broader notion containing the concept of poverty as a
measurable phenomenon. This approach was enriched by an overview of works
that focus on childhood from a standpoint of poverty and social exclusion (for
example Ridge, 2002; Bradshaw, 2005).

169 children and young people between the ages of 10 and 18 years of age
agreed to participate in the study. A mixed methods approach was used for data
collection. In the first phase participants completed questionnaires. The content
of the questionnaire was developed from interviews with the project direc-
tor and coordinators, other poverty and social exclusion related questionnaires
(Bastos, 2008) and refined through discussions with a sample of the children
themselves. The questionnaires covered the following areas: family background and living conditions; financial and non-financial income; health and hygiene; representations of poverty; and education and learning. To overcome any comprehension difficulties and help the participants to maintain attention on the questionnaire (based on the pilot study) a member of the three-person research team assisted and guided the child during completion of the questionnaire, clarifying any matters and filling in the answers. This resulted in 169 valid questionnaires. In the second phase of data collection 14 children were interviewed. All the interviews were conducted by the same member of the research team. The interview questions were based on the questionnaire with the aim of gathering more in-depth data and detail about the children’s views. The interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed to facilitate a deductive thematic analysis using the following pre-defined categories: socio-geographical characterisation; ways of life and household relationships; feelings and representations of poverty; representations of school and the Programa Escolhas; and perspectives for the future.

The findings from this study showed that the children and young people mostly understood poverty as material deprivation. They saw social exclusion as being related to unemployment, deficits in education and a lack of professional qualifications. Therefore they associated social exclusion with a lack or insufficiency of personal resources to meet the needs of current society as well as a separation from social systems.

In the rest of this chapter the discussion will focus on the learning points, as previously outlined. Firstly issues relating to access to participants and the process of obtaining consent from both the children and their families will be examined. Then developing trusting relationships with project coordinators, the young participants and their families will be explored. Then information relating to the third learning point, how the research team involved the children and young people in the design of the data collection instrument and used their feedback from piloting it, will be discussed. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for readers based on the experience of conducting this research.

**Access and consent**

The residential areas in which the participants lived were mainly social housing areas. These areas were recognised as being impacted on by social exclusion. This can cause difficulties in accessing participants due to mistrust of those from outside the community. The researchers were therefore dependent on the coordinators of the five projects under the Programa Escolhas in the area to mediate the relationship between the researchers and the children and young people. The research team first had to meet and present the planned research to the programme director, the projects’ coordinators, the schools involved
with the projects and the families of the children and young people. At first, email contact was established with the projects’ coordinators. Then meetings were arranged with all partners/stakeholders where the lead researcher presented the credentials of the research team and outlined the plan and objectives of the research. This was the first step in entering the research field. Through these stakeholders contact was made with the families living in the community.

Figure 4.1 shows an example of the document presented to the families. This document introduces the researcher, outlines the objectives of the research as being to explore children and young people’s views about their living conditions and other aspects of their lives. Permission to approach the children to participate by completing a questionnaire is sought. Confidentiality of the young people’s answers is assured and the families are thanked.

In Portugal, as in other countries, consent from the parents or guardian of a person under 18 years of age is required for him or her to participate in research. After receiving permission to approach the children we made the decision to provide the children and young people with information about the study and gave them consent/authorisation papers to bring to their parents. This motivated the children as it put them in the position of deciding whether they wanted to participate and to bring the consent form to their parents (Ridge, 2002; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 1998). It also fitted with our belief in the child as a competent social actor and a person of “competent mind [who] has the right to determine what is done to him/her and the right to determine what is not done” (Edwards, Lilford, Thornton, & Hewison, 1998, p. 1825).

After their agreement and before any data collection (questionnaire and interview), permission was again requested from the child. The children and young people were told that they could end their participation at any time and decline to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable answering. Therefore the children’s choice to consent was viewed as a process, with several opportunities provided for them to reconsider whether they wished to continue their participation in the research (Cocks, 2007; Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2011).

Focussing on the importance of the children’s views attributed them a different social status, from being children and young people living in conditions of social exclusion to that of being important informants in social research whose views mattered. As Smith (2011, p. 14) points out: “if children’s ‘voice’ is being sought, then children have to be positioned as participating subjects, knowers and social actors, rather than objects of the researcher’s gaze”.

Before the first meeting with the children and young people, the researchers started by stating that they were there to listen to their [the child’s] views, that nothing would be considered a wrong answer and that they were free to express their honest opinions. This was helped by the relationship built between the researchers and the children and young people, as discussed in more detail in the next section. The children were told that it was a conversation about their views on social issues.
Creating familiarity and maintaining relationships

As the research team was in the field for more than two months a decision was made to only have three people involved in data collection to allow participants and their families build a sense of trust and familiarity with the
researchers, following the teachings of Foote Whyte (1943/2012) and Wac-quant (2006).

To ensure that the children and young people were physically and psychologically comfortable during the process of data collection the contexts in which the questionnaire was administered were carefully chosen and were ones that the child was familiar with, such as their school or the facilities where the projects operated. Before the questionnaire was completed the children and young people were told that only the researcher and the participant would know what they said and no person would be identifiable in the report. Each child or young person was also told that his or her help was much valued, but that they did not need to participate and they could go back to their activities.

A key element of the research was the relationship established between the research team and the young participants. As Harcourt and Conroy (2011, p. 41) suggest: “if researchers want to work with children rather than on children it is critical that time is dedicated to establishing a relationship with children”. Grover (2004) argues that building trusting relationships helps alleviate the tendency of children to give the answer they think the adult wants. This was done by talking in an open and friendly manner, by adapting the language to the individual child’s vocabulary and by spending time with the children outside of the direct data collection phase itself. Researchers visited the local playgrounds with the children, took walks around their neighbourhood with them and joined with them in playing football matches and playing table tennis. Clark, McQuail, and Moss (2003) suggest that interacting with children in the places they live and socialise provides the opportunity to build a bond with researchers.

Initially the children and young people appeared to question the value of their contribution to the research, asking the researchers such things as ‘studies are for important people, why are you talking to us?’ However, changes in how the children and young people related to the researchers and how they viewed their participation in the research were observed as the fieldwork progressed and the children became more familiar with the researchers. The children greeted the researchers by name and invited them to partake in activities with them such as playing games and sports. Some children asked the researchers for their opinion on art and school work. With regard to how the children and young people saw themselves, they seemed to become more aware of the importance of their opinions and insights into the topics under investigation, hence their value as research participants. This concurs with Tisdall, Davis, and Gallagher (2009), who point out that involving children in research has many benefits including pedagogical benefits (in relation to contributing positively to their social development, empowering them and developing their feelings of responsibility); political benefits (in that children become aware of their rights and possibility of influencing policy); and epistemological benefits (that a more holistic view of the topic being researched is provided).
To choose and to participate

Also essential was the relationship with the children’s families, particularly those who requested additional information about the research. Some families were concerned about the aims and objectives of the research, the credentials of the researchers and why the research was being done. We arranged meetings with these families at the projects’ headquarters to clarify any issues, queries or concerns they may have had. Concerns raised by the families included why they were being asked about their income and living conditions, which they considered to be personal and private issues. The researchers assured them that the research study was focused on the children’s general views and understanding of their living situations. Families also expressed some concern about the confidentiality of the information gathered. They were assured that all data collected would remain confidential and that no individual participant would be recognizable in the final report or other publication. All meetings were held at the projects’ headquarters as per the request of the families.

Regular contact was maintained with the families throughout the data collection phase of the study and information about the progress of the research was provided to them. When data collection was completed summary documents of the findings were prepared and publicly presented to the families in one of the project’s facilities. These summaries were also sent to all the project coordinators. During these meetings the families appeared engaged and interested as the research team were asked questions about difficulties faced in collecting data, how it was analysed and how poverty and social exclusion were defined.

**Consultation and feedback in adapting and administering the questionnaire**

As previously mentioned the content of the questionnaire was informed by various sources, including the findings of interviews with the project directors and coordinators. The knowledge of the project coordinators was invaluable. As the coordinators had worked in the areas for a long time they had extensive insight into the issues and difficulties faced by many of the families, such as unemployment, lone parenting, financial issues, lack of educational opportunities and poor physical living conditions. The knowledge and experiences of the project coordinators were vital in providing advice about ways of approaching participants due to the potential sensitivity of the topic being researched as well as the varying living situations of the children and young people. For example, some of the children who participated were living in out-of-home care situations, thus extra sensitivity and care was required when asking about their family circumstances, in line with the recommendation of Oakley (1994, p. 26) who points out to researchers with either adult or child participants the importance of dealing with “controversial and or personal topics with sensitivity”.
The wording, format and order of the questions on the questionnaire needed to be adapted to the child participants. Prior to commencing the data collection phase of the study the entire research team discussed issues such as whether the child would understand what they were being asked, particularly as children of varying ages would be completing the questionnaire; whether they would be able to complete the questionnaire themselves or would require assistance; and whether the children would be able to maintain attention for long enough to complete the questionnaire.

As poverty and social exclusion are difficult enough concepts for adults to understand and the aim of the research was to grasp the child’s perspective we decided to involve the children in the design phase. We consulted with a number of children to make sure the wording used in the questionnaire would be easily understood by children of various ages and thus comprehension abilities. This, Tinson (2009) argues, ensures that the meaning of questions is understood by the both researcher and the children, resulting in more rigorous and reliable findings in relation to the children’s views on their living conditions, poverty and social exclusion. The children initially struggled to understand some of the concepts that we aimed to measure such as social exclusion, socialisation, the various types of poverty as well as different types of income. However, through continued consultation and discussion with the children and young people, we were able to ascertain the meanings they attributed to these concepts. This enabled us to word them in a comprehensible way for all age groups. For example, the children’s interpretation of poverty related to not having necessary commodities such as food and clothing, not having a good house to live in and not being able to travel to other places outside the areas and communities in which they lived and went to school. The children explained social exclusion as not having the same living conditions as others, not attending a good school, not having the same rights as others nor the potential for attending higher education and obtaining well-paid employment. As Tinson (2009, p. 43) says: “a greater depth of data can be collated when researching with children if the social worlds of the children are explored through their eyes (and not through predetermined factors or variables identified by the adult researcher)”.

After the questionnaire was drafted we piloted it with a sample of children and young people to further ensure its comprehensibility and the most effective way to administer it. Wellman and Kruger (1999) suggest that the value of piloting includes discovering the time required for completion of a measuring instrument as well as observation of any discomfort or confusion experienced by participants. From our pilot study we found that the length of the questionnaire and the children’s unfamiliarity with participating in research was an initial difficulty. For example, the children did not understand the reasons why they were being asked so many questions. They also had some difficulties in maintaining focus for the period of time required to complete the questionnaire. This led us to consider how we were going to structure the
To choose and to participate

questionnaire. We reorganised the questionnaire to create different sections and decided to build in pauses during the completion process. During these pauses the researcher talked about topics of interest to the child or young person, such as football, games or other subjects brought up by the child her/himself. These pauses allowed the child to have a short break and helped holding his or her attention. They also were used to facilitate the change of topic from one section of the questionnaire to another. Another tactic used to maintain the child’s attention was to use a variety of response formats, such as yes/no and true/false. This is illustrated in Figure 4.2 on the next page.

The decision was made to administer the questionnaire in a face-to-face situation so that the child could be supported and helped maintain attention during its completion. The questions were read to the child and the researcher recorded their responses. This allowed for the researcher to reassure the children that there were no right or wrong answers, as the children’s previous experience with questionnaires was most likely to be in the form of school tests, where there was usually only one correct answer. Administering the questionnaire in this way also allowed the researcher to monitor the child’s levels of comfort or discomfort as well as attentiveness. These observations were key in knowing when the child needed a break and thus maintaining the children’s focus, as well as managing the quality of the experience for each child. In line with our beliefs about children and the benefits to them of being involved in research we wanted to ensure that participating in the research study was a positive one for all the children and young people involved.

Our research team was briefed and trained to deal with foreseeable issues, such as access to the field, length of the questionnaire, difficulty in maintaining children’s attention and researching with people living in challenging conditions. Weekly briefing meetings took place where any new issues were discussed amongst the research team and possible solutions explored. The reactions and experiences of the researchers were also discussed in the briefings. We found that working with children in contexts of poverty and social exclusion presented issues to the researchers themselves who faced, as they did, very troubling circumstances and heard about very poor living conditions and difficult life stories from the children and young people who participated.

Conclusions and recommendations

Through conducting this research we found out that children and young people like to be involved in research as they feel important when social researchers want to hear about their views and experiences. During the research process they manifested sincere interest and felt they were responsible social actors by being included in and contributing to research. Therefore devising ways in which children can genuinely be involved in research not only captures their views but helps them understand that they are active citizens and valued members
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Learning</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Choices Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop Thinking</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects related with different disciplines (classes)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know how to relate with other people</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn the values of the heart, and social and human values</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To adhere to a schedule</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to be solidarity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to work in a team</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to work with different technologies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to express own's feelings</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to respect other people</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about your own important tasks and responsibilities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to express your own doubts and fears</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be motivated to do different things</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand rules and discipline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To believe in myself</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in communal living</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have initiative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful knowledge and competences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel part of a group</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of things</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to things by myself</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To face the challenges</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General knowledge about life</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be motivated to read</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel affection towards others</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know other places and people</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.2 Sample page of questionnaire*
of society. This is particularly important when researching with children and young people who may feel excluded or marginalised from mainstream society.

This research was shaped by a constant dialogue with the local actors such as the children, their families, project coordinators and teachers. Taking the time to build familiarity and trust with participants and their guardians is essential, as well as being available to discuss any concerns any stakeholders in the research have. Thus it is argued here that time and space should be built into the research process in order to enable reciprocal dialogue and give back to the community what the community offers, that is, knowledge. This promotes research as a democratic process. Therefore it is recommended that researchers working in a community context, as in this study, find ways through which to establish means of maintaining good communication channels to provide the community stakeholders with information about the research, its development and its results.

Also recommended, based on the experience of conducting this research, is that researchers allow for the time taken to develop trusting relationships with potential participants and other members of the community. This is particularly important when the participants in the research study are children and young people as familiarity and trust will facilitate them to express their view rather than the view they think the adult researchers want. Being cognisant of the presence of researchers in people’s communities is also required and related to the development of trusting relationships. When working as part of a research team minimising the number of researchers who engage actively with participants and other community members is a useful strategy to avoid the community experiencing feelings of intrusion.

When researching with children and young people, it is essential that their perspective of the topic is measured, not the adult researchers’ conception. Therefore I recommend consultation with a sample of the target population to determine their representations of the concepts being researched. This results in a more valid and reliable data collection instrument. Thinking about how and where data will be collected is also important for the validity of the study’s findings. Considerations about the age of the child participant, their attention span and where he or she will be most comfortable to answer questions are necessary not only for the quality of the data collected but also that participation is a positive experience for the child.

Finally I recommend that researchers are mindful of the potential impact of the research topic on themselves and put in place strategies for support and debriefing with others.

Note

1 Details of the Programa Escolhas can be found at: www.acm.gov.pt/-/escolhas
References


Managing relationships in the field

Practitioner research with the travelling community

Tamsin Cavaliero

Introduction

This chapter focusses on the value of practitioner research, which provides opportunities for accessing in-depth data through pre-existing relationships with participants and other key actors within the field. However, these relationships require an emotional investment on both sides and consequently ethical dilemmas may arise (Dickson-Swift, 2005; Levinson, 2004; Marshall & Rea-son, 2007; Slattery & Rapp, 2003). The research outlined in this chapter was informed by my practitioner-based experiences working as a Home Youth Liaison Officer with the Travelling Community (HYLOTC) in Ireland supporting young Travellers and their families to access and remain in education. This research provided insight into the differences between daughters and mothers as they negotiate the home-school interface. The reason for this was because against a background of changing lifestyles, younger Travellers are required to reformulate their own understandings of Traveller identity, and this is influenced by increased involvement in schools and by the ways in which Traveller identity is represented within the curriculum (Bhopal & Myers, 2008; Cavaliero, 2016; Cavaliero & Levinson, 2018; Levinson & Hooley, 2014). Due to the relationships I had already established in the field, I chose to capitalise on the contacts made through professional roles to access the research participants. Based on my study, this chapter will highlight the importance of balancing current and previous relationships and ethics through ongoing negotiations with participants.

The three key learning points for the reader in this chapter are:

• Understanding the role of the practitioner researcher;
• Outlining the challenges and ethical dilemmas that can be encountered in conducting practitioner research;
• Examining some of the challenges of managing ongoing ethical negotiations with participants in practitioner research.

Overview of the research study

The research investigated how Traveller women negotiate different spaces, in particular, the home-school interface. The approach to research was informed
Managing relationships in the field

by ethnography. Iphofen (2013, p. 2) suggests that ethnography “is best understood as a ‘style’ of research requiring the observation and description of people in their normal social context”. Ethnographic approaches to research are exploratory and open-ended and conducted over a significant period of time. The ethnographer becomes a participant observer in the daily life of the group and interviewing takes place within the context of informal conversations. The researcher begins with an idea or interest in a particular issue that tends to evolve organically during the course of the research as the data collection takes place (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The researcher takes part in day-to-day activities and data is gathered in an unstructured fashion usually in the form of descriptive field notes, audio and video recordings and document analysis, as well as conversational interviews.

Irish Travellers (or Pavees or Minceirs as they refer to themselves) are an indigenous group of people traditionally resident on the island of Ireland. In the UK the term most frequently used is Gypsy Traveller or Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT). In European policy the term used is Roma to describe diaspora commercial and nomadic groups for those who identify as Traveller, Sinti, Roma, Ashkali, Manush, Dom and Lom (European Commission, 2011). A number of writers have discussed particular lifestyle and cultural characteristics of the Travelling Community. These include: extended family networks; value of collective over individual; nomadic existence (Turner, 2000) or nomadic mind-set (McVeigh, 1997); a tendency towards self-employment (Turner, 2000); sibling child care (Helleiner, 2000); marrying earlier (Helleiner, 2000); observation of distinct hygiene codes (Turner, 2000); separate language (Okely, 1986); opposition to dominant groups (Belton, 2005; Liegeois, 1987); assumed criminality; using fighting to settle disputes; symbolic attachment to horses and expensive cars (Holloway, 2005); patriarchal gender relations (Smith & Greenfields, 2013); miscreant youth and low literacy levels (Holloway, 2005). Whilst practitioners and researchers should certainly familiarise themselves with cultural details surrounding particular communities, these signifiers serve to paint a picture that fails to take into account the variations that exist within any community.

Traditional nomadic lifestyles meant that many of the older generation of Travellers received little education. A culture based on oral traditions as opposed to the written word, combined with sporadic school attendance, resulted in poor literacy levels for some Travellers (Department of Education and Science, 2006). Parental education has been associated with children’s educational achievement (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). A lack of educational achievement determines not only the ability to secure employment but also the type and quality of employment, which, in turn, influences income, the ability to secure adequate housing and health issues, leading to cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and poverty (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Travellers experience social disadvantage in all areas including poverty, health and education (Watson, Lunn, Quinn, & Russell, 2012).

My research began in tandem with my position as Home Youth Liaison Officer for the Travelling Community. Participants were selected and accessed
through prior relationships established through my work as a practitioner and this will be discussed in greater detail in what follows. Twenty-five Traveller women, between 18 and 45 years of age, were interviewed. They lived in a variety of housing situations including trailers, halting sites, council housing and private rented accommodation. The majority of the participants had at some point in their lives moved between the UK and Ireland. All participants were interviewed on several occasions (between three and six times) depending on their availability (some moved back and forth between Ireland and UK). In addition to interviews, much time was spent over the course of the research process simply spending time with participants, an aspect of the study that is discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

The findings indicated that despite shifting expectations amongst young Traveller women due to prolonged participation in education they continued to experience discrimination in the education system at both an individual and systemic level. Discrimination was evidenced by schools offering limited (and often stereotypical) opportunities for diverse expressions of Traveller identity. Changing Traveller lifestyles, with more engagement in education bring with them added tensions and conflict, which are experienced within the home and family environment.

The following sections discuss the three key learning points in this chapter illustrated with examples from conducting the research study previously outlined.

**Understanding the role of practitioner-based researcher**

This research developed out of my experiences of working with the Travelling Community in the North West of Ireland in a variety of educational posts, including tutor assistant, trainer and facilitator for a number of Traveller Support Groups, and, finally, as a Home Youth Liaison Officer for the Travelling Community. In my professional role I was conflicted as I attempted to address the needs of both the Traveller and sedentary communities.

I witnessed many incidents of teachers’ frustration at being entrenched in situations where they were trying wholeheartedly to support Traveller pupils and families but due to the cultural gap were challenged in engaging Traveller students in education. I saw parents and pupils’ powerlessness and frustration, which, in turn, led to disengagement and a refusal to re-engage with schools due to feelings of being misunderstood. Subsequently they lost trust in the educational system. I participated in education working groups aimed at supporting Travellers in education but never fully explored the Travellers’ perspectives. These are the experiences that prompted my initial interest in conducting the research. However, as I began navigating the roles of researcher as well as practitioner I became conflicted.

Practitioner researcher is not new in Traveller research in both the UK and Ireland (see Buckler, 2007; Griffin, 2008; Hegarty, 2013; Kenny, 1997; O’Boyle,
Managing relationships in the field

Practitioner researchers’ voices are important for raising awareness of difficulties encountered in implementing policies on the ground. Indeed Leonard (2000) advocates for a synthesising of practitioner and researcher roles, stating, “if practitioners were to be regarded as researchers and researchers came to be regarded as practitioners, their relationships might generate positive power-laden practices which would contribute to the educational development of all participants” (p. 8).

During the early stages of the research I sought out texts written by practitioners. Existing literature (see Helleiner, 2000; Okely, 1986) was extremely useful and provided valuable context to my research. However the specific aspect of practitioner research that I found to be most helpful in working with Travellers came from Buckler (2007) and Griffin (2008). Both authors highlighted the challenges faced in working across Traveller and sedentary and practitioner and researcher communities. These challenges included conflicts arising between Travellers and particular organisations due to different value systems, different styles of communication and shifting allegiances amongst Traveller extended families when offspring marry. I experienced all of these tensions. In addition, these authors highlighted the difficulty of finding a space to write and reflect so emphasised the importance of this to me.

After reading accounts that I found relevant to my own area of interest I contacted the author and explained my interest in their work. In addition, I attended conferences where experienced researchers were presenting and made a point of introducing myself to them, emailing them afterwards with specific questions relating to my research. For example, I explained my area of interest and asked for their perspective on the value of particular approaches to research and recommendations for further reading. One instance was when a researcher introduced me to the concept of indigenous research methods through the book *Decolonising Methodologies* (Smith, 1999). This approach helped me to understand some of the dynamics at play in research relationships between non-indigenous researchers and the indigenous communities they are attempting to research. The researchers were generous with their responses when they knew that I shared an interest in their field of work. For example, initially I struggled to explain the project to potential participants, particularly those who struggled with literacy. Hearing how other researchers had explained their projects in a straightforward manner provided me with ideas of how to talk about my research. For example, I was struggling to find a way to explore participants’ perceptions of education in the home environment and one researcher suggested that I begin by asking participants: ‘What did your mammy teach you?’

Following from practitioner-based approaches, I chose to apply the Cultural Safety model as outlined by Jessica Ball (2008). This advocates a strengths-based model of working, rooted in personal knowledge, protocols, good partnerships and positive purpose. The model promotes a commitment to social justice and social change. Cemlyn (2008) argues that all social work with Travellers must incorporate a human rights-based approach. This model allows practitioners
to take a holistic approach towards working, whilst also acknowledging the impact that effects of cultural trauma have had on the communities’ willingness to engage with services. This is important as research conducted with Irish Travellers in 2010 (All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS), 2010) highlighted the level of trust held by Travellers for health professionals as 41 per cent, half that of their sedentary counterparts. Furthermore, a deep fear rooted in historical experiences, particularly of losing children into care (Warde, 2009), may contribute to the lack of engagement between Travellers and educational and health service providers.

Awareness of a culturally safe approach ensures that practitioners are informed, respectful and cognisant of the need for respectful dialogue and the damage which can ensue when this is not practised, such as low uptake of services, lack or partial engagement with service providers and practitioners, resentment and non-compliance (Ball, 2008). Based on frameworks from New Zealand and established with health care professionals, cultural safety seeks to support the practitioner to develop a mode of practice based on five principles – partnership, personal knowledge, protocols, process and positive purpose. The model operates on five levels:

- Partnership involves adopting a joint problem solving approach;
- Personal knowledge requires one to recognise one’s own ethnocentric bias and being aware of one’s cultural identity and its impact;
- Protocols require one to be proactive in seeking out knowledge regarding culturally appropriate engagement;
- Acknowledging the process of two-way learning from both research participants and practitioner researchers to ensure alignment with cultural values and lifestyle;
- Working from a strengths-based approach focusing on the positive.

These five principles then informed my approach as: I worked in partnership as a participant observer in the field; utilised ethnographic principles that acknowledged a range of perspectives; sought cultural knowledge from indigenous communities; recognised the importance of oral based cultures; followed protocols of informed consent and process consent in relation to participants who struggled with literacy; reviewed data in conjunction with research participants; applied a reflexive framework to hone my awareness of my own social locations and privilege; and engaged mentors through my community of practice in the research and Traveller communities.

An example of working in partnership as a participant observer using ethnographic principles and seeking cultural knowledge, which is then reviewed in conjunction with participants, is detailed in what follows. Later in the chapter, the second and third learning points outline how I followed protocols of informed consent and applied a reflexive framework. For example, when conducting research I spent time with Traveller women in their homes as they
went about their daily lives. When researching attitudes to education and child-rearing the exchange oftentimes took the form of a conversation between a Traveller mother and myself where we would compare experiences of child-rearing. They explained how certain practices were not possible in particular living conditions so teaching a baby to sleep in their own bed is not practical with a family of nine living in a trailer. Sitting a child in a high chair to feed them is also impractical in a cramped kitchen and living space. This allowed me to acknowledge a range of perspectives and work as a participant observer. The participants were equally interested in my child-rearing practices as I was in theirs and these conversations provided a space for them to explore their perspectives. At the end of the day I would then write up field notes and review them. I would then identify areas for further exploration and return to the participant to ask them if we could continue discussing it.

Drawing on earlier research (Levinson, 2008; Okely, 1986; Smith, 1997) that highlighted how Traveller children learn better when lessons are based on real life experiences as opposed to more abstract approaches, I found that a flexible informal environment produced a more enjoyable, creative and reflexive experience for both parties. As a practitioner I used approaches such as arts and crafts, film making, cooking, dance, woodwork, horse riding, sport and oral history projects when running workshops on issues such as interculturalism, healthy eating, drug and alcohol awareness and school attendance. Yet at the start of my research I failed to integrate these aspects of knowledge in my new ‘researcher’ role. As I began to read academic texts about research methods I was intimidated by the language and envisioned research as serious scientific work conducted in formal settings. In doing this I failed to recognise the value of my practitioner experiences. My earliest interviews were therefore disastrous. Initial attempts to understand extended kin connections and their impact (or not) on future educational successes were hampered by this misunderstanding as I attempted to conduct ‘proper’ interviews sitting in my office. For example, when I suggested that we draw out a family tree participants were unwilling to engage. However, a chance meeting with the same participants at a local graveyard that contained a number of family plots later led them to bring me on a fascinating tour of all the Traveller graves with accompanying explanations of the family connections involved. Following this experience and reflecting on my unsuccessful attempts I decided I needed to seriously reconsider how to conduct research in natural real life settings using a variety of methods and media. I therefore went walking, swimming, shopping, to the gym, to birthday parties, weddings, christenings and funerals with research participants and documented activities of daily life in descriptive field notes that included my reflections. These reflections allowed me to understand the wider context of participants’ lives and the impact of out of school experiences on educational experiences. Participating in many of the activities of daily life is familiar to many practitioners in the field of social professions, such as youth workers, social care workers and social workers. It is therefore important to draw on those parts of your practice that will support
you to conduct research rather than seeing the two roles as entirely separate. However, ethical dilemmas may arise.

**Challenges and ethical dilemmas encountered in accessing participants**

A key challenge when conducting research is gaining access. This is particularly so when the group being researched is marginalised or hidden (Liam-puttong, 2007). An arguably suitable way for someone who is not from the Travelling Community to gain access is by capitalising on networks already established through a practitioner role (Buckler, 2007). For this research participants were selected through connections made via my current and previous practitioner role (for example, one of the participants had been involved in a Back to Education Initiative in 2000 where I had worked as a tutors’ assistant and was now a parent of a child in school). However, the new role of the researcher requires some further consideration. It is necessary to emphasise to potential participants that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they ought not to be swayed by the researcher’s professional role (Bergum, 1998; Clark & Waller, 2011; Smith, 2008; Ulrich, Wallen, & Grady, 2002). Thus, when I spoke to participants about my research I began by explaining that this research was separate to my practitioner role, but obviously informed by my interest in the area, saying:

As you know I’m interested in Travellers in education and I’m interested in hearing from you what your experiences are. Do you think this is something that you would be interested in being involved with? And remember, if you decide to be part of the research, but later you change your mind, then you can tell me that you don’t want to be involved anymore.

I asked this question at regular intervals throughout the research process to ensure that consent was ongoing.

Despite my familiarity with the Travelling Community I was anxious about approaching families to ask them to speak about their experiences of education, particularly those I already had a relationship with. I often wondered if this was because I had previously occupied a role where I had felt a refusal to engage was an indication that they did not trust me, which would have challenged my professional identity. As I was nervous my initial attempts felt clumsy and laborious. I did not articulate the research clearly and I kept stating how the research could be ‘good for Travellers’. Smith’s (1999, p. 2) assertion that, “belief in the ideal that benefiting mankind is indeed a primary outcome of scientific research is as much a reflection of ideology as it is of academic training” was useful as I reflected on my learning from these encounters. Reflecting on the awkwardness of the initial attempts to explain my research to potential participants I realised two important things. Firstly, whenever I stated the research
would benefit Travellers the conversation would close down. I realised that as I became clearer about my own motivation for doing the research I became fluent in describing it so when I explained that I wanted to do the research to document Travellers’ own experiences in a format that other professionals would accept the participants were welcoming. Secondly, I needed to acknowledge how the participants’ contribution would benefit me (I needed to talk to so many people because I needed help to complete this research). This second realisation relates to the second principle of the cultural safety approach, personal knowledge that calls for practitioners to acknowledge their own social locations and was an important part of my acknowledging the power in the research encounter, as noted by feminist researchers such as Sangster (1998). Whilst I did not feel that I held much power as a junior/novice researcher, as a white, educated, employed professional I had access to networks that my research participants did not.

When conducting practitioner research, an initial explicatory document does not adequately serve as a means of achieving informed consent. Furthermore, when working with communities that mistrust the written word (Levinson, 2007), written consent forms carry little value. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) identify two separate types of ethics. The first type of ethics are procedural ethics, that is, ethics concerned with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception and protecting human subjects from harm. The second type is situational or practice ethics, which are concerned with the aspects of research that one is unable to predict prior to entering the field. Following ethics committee approval and prior to beginning fieldwork, further efforts were made to go beyond standard practices. This was done by engaging in ongoing family and individual discussions throughout the research process as I returned to the field to review data with research participants stating: ‘This particular topic seemed to me, to be important, would you talk more with me about it?’

The letter of informed consent that I brought along to interviews that I read out to alleviate literacy issues, stated:

If you decide to take part in the study I will talk to you about your life, including things like what it was like growing up, what it was like going to school, what kinds of work you like to do, what it is like being a parent/young adult. Also, I will ask you how you think about how Travellers are treated by the government, the media and also by ordinary country people. In order for me to remember exactly what you say I will record some of our conversations. Each time I come to visit you, you can choose whether you want to take part.

Reflecting on this I realised that written consent forms, by drawing attention to the written word as opposed to the spoken word, highlighted power imbalances around literacy as opposed to addressing ethical issues. Participants who struggled with literacy became embarrassed and flustered by the appearance of pens
and paper, shutting down the discussion by hurriedly stating, ‘It’s fine as long as you can’t tell it’s me’. It is important, therefore, when conducting practitioner research with marginalised communities, to take into account the specific needs of the group that you are researching, familiarise yourself with cultural values of the group and apply knowledge gained from your practitioner experiences so that you can tailor your approach accordingly.

Managing ongoing ethical negotiations with participants

Over the last two decades a focus towards researchers as ethical thinkers has gained traction, with a move away from rule-based and participant focussed ethical protocols and procedures (Smith, 2008). Relational ethics focusses on those aspects of relating that develop out of interactions between researchers and individual participants as well as researched communities. These include recognition, value, mutual respect, dignity and connectedness (Lincoln, 1995; Brooks, 2006; Reason, 1993; Tierney, 1993). This can create challenges for researchers during the research process (Blackman, 2007; Cruz & Gay y Blasco, 2011; Levinson, 2004). As my research continued emotional intimacies were shared as participants discovered more about me and I about them and I experienced moral and ethical challenges. Ellis (2007) suggests that researchers need to construct a third dimension of ethics based around an “ethics of care” and “relational ethics” (p. 3) that requires one to be “true to one’s character and responsible for one’s actions and their consequences on others” (Slattery & Rapp, 2003, p. 55). Links were forged with research participants as I shared some of my experiences (of mothering, being a daughter and a sister) when asked, or if I felt that it was appropriate (such as recalling the emotions of experiencing my children starting school and siblings leaving home).

Challenges also became apparent when research participants came into conflict with one another leaving me feeling pulled between conflicting loyalties as I struggled to manage the roles of practitioner and researcher. For example during one stage of fieldwork when a participant was struggling to remain in education and wanted to pursue a relationship with a man from the sedentary community she spoke frequently about wanting to run away. I felt caught between responsibilities towards the participant whom I had known previously through my practitioner role and my responsibilities to the other members of her family whom I came to know through the research. During this phase of the research I struggled with question of ‘What is the role of the researcher in changing the attitudes and expectations of research participants?’ As a researcher I listened to all participants and did not disclose the intentions of any party to the other yet I experienced the tension of inhabiting dual positions as I felt loyalty towards both parties. My feelings about the situation changed as I examined it from the perspective of each party involved. As a practitioner involved
in education I thought about the opportunities available for a young woman; as a practitioner working with the Travelling Community I imagined the challenges facing a young woman leaving behind the support network of a tightly knit community; as a daughter striving for a different life I understood the need for liberation from a stifling environment. Engagement with this dilemma was an ongoing process that I reflected on throughout the duration of my research. Reflexive conversations with other practitioner researchers allowed me to examine my feelings about the situation and alleviate some of the anxiety that I experienced as they provided me with a useful structure of three basic questions: ‘did you do harm?’; ‘are you safe?’; ‘are your research participants safe?’. What I recognise now is that inhabiting dual roles causes anxiety during moments of conflict. Experience allows the practitioner researcher to become more comfortable with tolerating these feelings.

Bergum (1998) argues that relational ethics must be viewed as a process of continuous reflection and questioning which attempts to address the reality and practice aspects of relationships that are fluid and subject to change over time. A consideration of relational ethics offers a useful framework for practitioner researchers who, by virtue of their role, continue working with research participants long after the research study has been completed. A relational ethics framework (see Bergum & Dossetor, 2005) recognises that knowledge is framed within a situational context and therefore not complete. Furthermore it requires practitioners to be self-reflexive, continuously asking questions such as ‘What should I do?’ and ‘Who are we?’ The self-reflexive questioning can be achieved through reflexive conversations with experienced peers and reflexive writing. Throughout the course of my fieldwork I engaged in reflexive conversations with peers on a monthly basis. Reflexive writing was also useful and it took the form of field notes as well as supervision preparation notes throughout the research process. The documenting of reflections was particularly helpful as it allowed me to review my progression over time. It is therefore important to schedule in time specifically for reflection throughout the research process. Writing up reflections after a long day of fieldwork was often difficult when I was tired so I developed a habit of recording reflections as a voice memo and then wrote them up at the end of the week.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

This chapter has explored aspects of practitioner research. Through defining practitioner research and providing examples of the challenges encountered through my own research process, consideration has been given to the tensions and ethical challenges that may arise throughout this type of research. Some practical recommendations that may be helpful for you to consider when conducting this type of research follow.

Firstly, value your practitioner knowledge and allow it to inform your approach to the research. Consider what you know about the group you are
researching already based on your practitioner experience and allow this knowledge to inform your approach to research. Secondly, think about how you will access participants and how involving participants who you already work with will impact on your relationships. Consider also how you need to adapt your research agreements to consider specific needs that some members of the community may have. This will be significant as you may be working with them beyond the duration of the research relationship. Finally, consider the relationships that you have with your potential research participants and think about what supports you have in place throughout the research that will allow you to tolerate any difficulties that may arise. Supports can be implementing particular approaches and frameworks as well as developing allies and mentors who have experience of similar research.

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Chapter 6

Between policy and practice
Ethical challenges in longitudinal social work research with street youth

Jeff Karabanow and Ian Stewart

Introduction
In the field of social work research qualitative approaches face distinct ethical challenges due to the dynamic, open-ended nature of the research. When these approaches are used within longitudinal studies (i.e., over time), these challenges can both be intensified and take on new forms. Important general policy guidelines dealing with ethical challenges of qualitative social work research are offered at a number of levels. For example, such research must always pursue the profession’s values (as outlined at national levels, such as in the Canadian or American associations of social workers, respectively). Furthermore, national research ethics guidelines governing research on persons provide guidance to academic institutions. For example, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy: Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) (2014) guides the research ethics boards developed by universities, whose approval must be sought by researchers intending to do research from within those institutions.

Nevertheless, situations do arise in qualitative, longitudinal studies for which neither institutional nor professional ethical guidelines are adequate. As one early practitioner ironically put it, qualitative methods often find themselves “irreversibly contaminating the body of social science knowledge with the messiness of lived experience” (Ellingson, 1998, p. 511). This chapter addresses this messiness through reflecting on a particular longitudinal, qualitative research project that took place in two Canadian cities (Halifax, Nova Scotia and Toronto, Ontario) during the years 2010–2014. In this chapter we begin by summarising the project and situating its longitudinal approach within theoretical literature relevant to social work research. Next, we summarise the Canadian policy context for research on persons, as defined by Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al. (2014). Section three summarises four central issues as they emerged from the study, locating them, again, within broader discussions within the qualitative methods and social work literature and reflecting on the relevance of the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014) to
these, indicating in what respects the policy guidelines are and are not adequate for the research context reported on here. Lastly, we make concrete recommendations drawn from this experience for students and practitioners intending to engage in similar research.

Although the specific use of the Canadian context will be highly relevant to Canadian readers, the lessons learned here are quite likely of relevance also in other jurisdictions. The main learning points for readers are:

- Recognising that ethical guidelines may not provide complete guidance in managing the issues that arise in qualitative, longitudinal research;
- Appreciating the challenges inherent in longitudinal research with a marginalised group in relation to role boundaries, intimacy, risk and authenticity.

**Overview of the research**

The goal of the research was to explore how formerly homeless youth make the longer-term transition from life on the street to life in non-street spaces and communities. Using primarily qualitative methods, the researchers explored the experiences of previously homeless youth as they negotiated the individual, sociocultural and economic difficulties of transitioning out of homelessness and into secure housing, including: mental health concerns; lack of employment; education; and drug/alcohol addictions. The research team consisted of six research assistants, three project coordinators and three principal investigators (PIs) in the fields of social work, nursing and psychology. Research assistants and project coordinators were hired through the PIs’ university. A total of 51 youth were recruited through community partner agencies in both cities. Youth participated in four in-depth narrative interviews, at roughly four-month intervals. Interviews began with questions about life experiences on and off the street, and moved conversationally towards a more focussed enquiry concerning: personal coping strategies; services/interventions/supports that helped or hindered transitions; processes of transitions; and explorations into changes concerning sense of self, community, home and relationships. Interviews two, three and four used a similar framework, grounded, however, in events and changes that had taken place since the last interview(s), successively. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using grounded theory, which involved building conceptual narratives from the data through coding structures. These allowed us to: organise the data into conceptually specific themes and categories (open coding); rebuild the data in new ways by linking primary categories and auxiliary themes into a path analysis (axial coding); and construct narratives shaped by data integration and category construction (selective coding) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Findings included: housing is important but not the only foundation; safe, affordable and supportive housing stock is in short supply; homeless youth are a diverse population, with diverse needs/options; the role of supports is significant; youth seek connections to
mainstream cultures and need belonging, which takes multiple forms (Kara-
banow, Kidd, Fredericks, & Hughes, 2016).

The project was subject to the PIs’ university’s research ethics board (REB) approval, as guided by the TCPS2. It also sought to be consistent with the social work profession’s code of ethics, in particular the valuing of the human relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2008); embracing the pursuit of social justice; and underlining the importance of dignity and worth of the person (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005).

**Qualitative, longitudinal social work research: theoretical background and research policy**

*Theoretical background*

In the last 25 years, the landscape of social work (and social work research) has benefitted from methodological analyses that have critically examined and challenged more traditional positivist/naturalist understandings of what ‘research’ on human persons is and ought to be (Lincoln, 2010). A crucial issue is the traditional idea of the researcher as independent of the ‘object’ of research and, as its correlate, the notion of ‘objective science’ as supposedly grounded in such independence of researcher from researched. Particularly relevant for social work research are the important contributions from a variety of disciplines, from feminist, post-colonial, participatory action and anti-oppressive research traditions (Padget, 2017). These have all brought a deeper critical lens to bear on issues such as power, voice, representation and interpretation that are in play between researcher and research subject (Parada & Wehbi, 2017). These standpoints serve the epistemological task of highlighting the ways that researchers, as supposedly privileged ‘knowers’ in a research situation, are deeply implicated in, conditioned by and reciprocally engaged in the conditioning context of their time and place, as well as being in complex relations to the ‘objects’ of research. One of the crucial results of this theoretical work is a recognition that concepts of ‘research’ and ‘researcher’ in social science enquiry on human person are themselves constructs (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009) and ones that can be creatively explored in the course of research itself. These insights from social science have been extended to all fields of science (including natural science) by scholars working in the field of science and technology studies (STS), seeking to situate science as such within the enquirer’s unavoidable embeddedness within a wider socio-political context (Harding, 2015; Jasanoff, 2004; Kellert, Longino, & Waters, 2006; Kochan, 2017). The important takeaway of such work for students and practitioners to consider is that the socially engaged character of social sciences research (as pursued by social work research in particular) need not stand in opposition to conceptions of ‘science’. As a field of social science, social work research is a part of a larger, ongoing, critical enquiry into the situated-ness of science (whether social or natural) within its times and places.
The scale and depth of the longitudinal research project presented here provided an opportunity to explore the ethical challenges of conducting this research with a highly marginalised population. This entails a view of the researcher as unavoidably engaged with the research and with those researched in a way particularly important to social work research. Working with populations such as street youth, particularly over time, demands research to confront its own limits. Doing so provides researchers with a more flexible opportunity to recast their research as a form of authentic engagement, one of the core themes of this chapter.

Research ethics guidelines: the Canadian policy context

At a general level, the challenge to establish research ethics guidelines adequate for the distinctive needs of qualitative research is an ongoing one, with key questions emerging some decades ago that are still current (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Peled, 2010; Wiles, 2012; Wiles, Crow, Charles, & Heath, 2007). An ongoing question is the degree to which research ethics guidelines developed for quantitative methods (employed especially in bio-medical research fields) are appropriate for qualitative research and in particular for social work contexts (Adler & Adler, 2002; Haggerty, 2004; Peled, 2010; Wiles et al., 2007). In particular, the dynamic, organic, open-ended nature of qualitative research, in which situations arise requiring ethical judgement that cannot be predicted or prescribed in advance by guidelines, require a flexibility and open-endedness that often conflicts with the mandates of guidelines to predict risks to participants and to prescribe methods to mitigate them in advance of research (Goodwin et al., 2003). This is heightened in studies employing longitudinal methods (Guillemin & Gilliam, 2004; Warin, 2011).

In the Canadian context, at the national level, the most important policy statement, which provides the framework, for example, of university Research Ethics Boards (REBs), is that of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014). The TCPS2 offers general principles for matters of relevance here, such as consent and equity in research participation. A distinct chapter, Chapter 10 of the TCSP2, discussing qualitative research introduces and offers helpful, general guidelines both as distinct from, and in parallel with, quantitative methods. While the TCPS2 does not refer explicitly to longitudinal research, there are guidelines for long-term data management that arise from longitudinal studies (p. 45). There is also discussion of the potential need for continued ethics review and dialogue with researchers concerning flexible timing for reporting schedules (p. 82). Furthermore, this chapter of the TCPS2 implicitly addresses ethical issues encountered in longitudinal studies, including the dynamic, organic and potentially open-ended nature of research questions that evolve over time, the importance of specific contexts of research, the complex possibilities of relationships between researchers and participants that predate.
and postdate the research timeframe. As a whole the discussion of qualitative research in the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014) is fair and accurate and serves as a useful introduction to the field and a firm basis for guiding institutional research ethics boards (REBs) in their judgements on research projects. In the third section of this chapter, specific issues that arose in the research project and the limitations of TCPS2 guidelines are addressed.

**Four issues emerging from this study: when policy meets practice**

*Doing social work research or doing social work?*

The complex make-up of the research team meant that members brought to the research context different abilities and backgrounds, giving rise to opportunities over the course of the interviews to bring this diversity to bear in ways that went beyond the formal methods and goals of the research. Comprised as it was of research assistants, project coordinators and principal investigators, the issues encountered were new to some and familiar to others on the basis of other research contexts. Interviews were conducted by three health profession graduate students with experience of interviewing this population. The length of time afforded for exchange, reflection and dialogue within the research team added a significant dimension of flexibility and adaptation within the duration of the study.

Both these factors (the internal, protracted dialogue within the team and the diverse backgrounds of its members) influenced the way the team responded to the fact that the four interviews over the year began to take on the character of a complex relationship. For instance, after the initial interviews many members of the team reported feeling challenged with only collecting stories and information about people, without a mandate (within their scope as researchers) to offer assistance or engage participants in the realities of their situations. Many of the participants were youth just getting off the street, often expressing needs and problems that members of the research team were professionally trained to help them with (coming from such disciplines as social work, psychology and health studies). However they were not formally permitted to provide assistance within the context of the study. Therefore boundaries between researcher and participant were felt at times to be conflicting. Many team members believed that despite their attempts at maintaining a professional distance, they were undoubtedly becoming tied to that person’s life and decision-making. For example, interviewers were often asked by participants for their advice about life issues. In effect, they were potentially impacting and even shaping the lives of the participants despite experiencing the need to maintain, or at least present, a somewhat neutral/professional stance to the data collection.

The TCPS2’s discussion of qualitative methods recognises the diversity of approaches inherent in qualitative research, and that the socially constructed
character of knowledge as assumed in much qualitative research entails that
knowledge “is shaped by the personal perspective of the researcher as an observer
and analyst” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 140). Oth-
wise the TCPS2 is silent on this particular challenge faced in this study. As
data collection in social work research often calls on researchers to draw crea-
tively and fruitfully on their professional experience and background in social
work itself, we consider this fundamental to social work research generally.
This relationship of social work researchers to their own personal and profes-
sional backgrounds is addressed in the TCPS2 only indirectly and in negative
terms. It is treated as a potential conflict of interest, which must be disclosed to
participants as part of the informed consent process necessary for the project
(Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 29).

Identifying or distancing: the challenge of intimacy in
longitudinal studies

Another aspect of the emotional work of interviewing, one that illustrates the
tensions that surrounds this approach to intimacy, is the struggle to know when
to challenge or confront harmful or negative attitudes and beliefs and when
to keep quiet in order to maintain rapport. This is a particularly tricky issue
because it involves competing priorities. On one hand there is a priority to
the research (i.e., to ensure data collection continues). But, on the other hand,
as social work researchers, there is a desire to honour that relationship and
to engage with the youth participants honestly rather than approaching them
merely as subjects. In one example, a particularly aggressive and confrontational
participant repeatedly made degrading and harmful comments about women
and ethnic minorities, casually talked about being violent towards the women
in his life and then often looked to the researcher to share in the ‘joke’. In such
circumstances, the risk of challenging these beliefs was that it could provoke
or embarrass participants and perhaps push them to drop out of the study.
At the same time, the interviewer was working to create some level of trust
and to forge a non-judgemental relationship with the participant, particularly
during the first or second contact. When such situations arise, the interviewer
is confronted with the ethics of simply ‘laughing along’, disagreeing and/or
remaining silent. In the absence of a formalised and purposeful ethical strategy
to help identify and actively engage with this dilemma, the researchers in the
previous examples tended to default to a strategy of gently chastising respond-
ants to emphasise their embarrassment – attempting to show some level of
disapproval while still maintaining a rapport. But the ethical question remains:
is this enough and is it the best course of practice?

In reflecting on this situation afterwards, and returning to the view that
research with vulnerable youth should engage with participants as honestly
as possible, the research team judged that it would have been better for the
interviewers to express their disapproval more directly. It seemed disingenuous
and unethical to step away from the role of ‘objective’ researcher in emotional moments when that felt more honest and humanising, but then to reinstate that more ‘objective’ detached role in other moments in order to avoid the discomfort of confrontation. In support of this strategy, Swartz (2011) recommends that being straightforward and non-indulgent with youth research participants can actually improve rapport by facilitating a more honest relationship and breaking down power barriers.

Another example highlights where a more intimate identification was highly appropriate. With a couple of these youth, the connection made over time was such that it led the interviewers to wonder whether they might have been friends with the participants under different circumstances. Kidd (2003) illuminates that forging genuine relationships over time may be novel for street youth who more typically encounter “people pretending to be friends” (p. 254), a situation that can become coercive and abusive. In the context of this kind of mutual respect and intimacy, it was more tempting to disclose personal details and to offer advice. In one example, a youth came to the interview preoccupied with relationship trouble. Over the course of two hours the interview became an intimate conversation about relationships, an exchange that was meaningful for both parties, but one that challenged traditional interview boundaries.

In subsequent dialogue we agreed as a research team that this unique situation required us to challenge the typical role of researcher and to embrace the emotional labour required to bridge the gap in intimacy created by the research context. The team reasoned that we were asking a great deal of the youth who participated in terms of emotional investment. Thus it seemed only fitting that we match this emotional commitment by engaging with these youth as unique individuals. From time to time, this took the form of members of the research team sharing personal information, stories and experiences with the youth they were interviewing. This was a reoccurring theme that guided our ethical practice throughout the project.

The TCPS2 is mindful that “the emergent nature of many qualitative studies makes the achievement of rapport with participants and feelings of interpersonal trust crucial to the . . . collection of dependable data” and advises REBs that “qualitative research may pose special ethical issues around . . . building rapport” (p. 142). However, the subtle judgement calls previously discussed are not addressed by TCPS2, perhaps wisely so given their unpredictability. Social work research of the kind described here must rely fundamentally on intuitive judgements, again drawing on both professional experience and on frank discussion between team members and also with participants.

**Defining and mitigating ‘risk’**

The issue of risk in general is complex, for which general guidelines are clear in the TCPS2. The key issue concerns the consent of participants, which must be “free, informed and constant”, as well as normally given prior to the
commencement of the research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 26). Risks are to be clearly communicated, along with potential benefits, as integral to the consent process (p. 33).

Social work research projects potentially raise many risk concerns, all of which are addressed, albeit cursorily, in the TCPS2, including the risks of re-traumatisation and the exposure of harmful relationships with persons or institutions, particularly in the case of vulnerable populations. In general, risk assessment work that REBs must do to adjudicate social work research projects such as this one is all the more difficult because risk has a precise meaning associated with actuarial science and probability calculations based on prior histories used to predict future undesirable outcomes. Thus it is more suited, for example, to research in bio-medical contexts than to qualitative research contexts (Haggerty, 2004). Certainly in the case of social work research, a whole category of risks is passed over in the TCPS2, namely the risks encountered in the lives of the participants outside the research context. In this study researchers were sometimes placed in a situation where they came to see a potential harm that was not rooted in observation but rather was based on a feeling or a statement that a participant made about themselves or their situation outside the research context. Identifying these harms was most definitely ad hoc and subjective, and the TCPS2 provides no guidance for this as it falls outside the research methods themselves. In such cases the expert judgement of the researcher is called on. In one instance, one youth reached out to book an interview very quickly with a member of the research team. The researcher could tell immediately that something was wrong and the youth described that he was ‘pill sick’. The feeling of the researcher was that the meeting might have been put together simply to earn the honorarium and purchase more pills. In this case, the researcher let the person know that they were ethically obligated to advise someone if he was going to harm himself. The youth said “I’m not going to kill myself”. Of course, the researcher was more concerned with an overdose, was left feeling unsure about her response and about the ethical boundaries of the exchange.

The previous scenario underscores again the need for a grounded ethical strategy that is considerate of issues that fall outside standard ethics protocols. How do social work researchers address such harms when the ability to influence the participant’s life threatens the standards of traditional research goals of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’? This dilemma is particularly pronounced in our study, given our interest in studying trajectories and the risk that by being impactful and/or being an agent of support or change, we were actually affecting change in the lives of young people, including altering their trajectories as they exit from homelessness.

Given the realities faced by our participants, our research team could not help but frame the data collection process as a form of support or a means of shaping the individual’s context, regardless of whether or not the researcher explicitly assisted the youth. Far removed (in the field) from the formal bureaucratic discourse of consent, harm and risk, the research team members were
required to make instant decisions on how best to support, help, act or simply do something for the person in front of them. As Haggerty (2004, p. 403) concludes: “This is not to say that harms imagined by REBs are fictional, but that decisions about future potentialities are much more subjective and ad hoc than one might have concluded from the discourse of ‘risk’”.

**Participatory action research (PAR) and the persistence of social difference between street youth and researchers**

The ideal of identifying with or ‘coming-alongside’ that emerged naturally in this study confronts the stark and persistent reality throughout the project of social difference. The youth in the study tended to share common backgrounds and features, including low socio-economic familial contexts, low educational success and what sociologists generally describe as a low degree of both human and social capital (Coleman, 1988). Conversely, those conducting the interviews were collectively struck by their own, quite opposite, life course trajectories, filled with high degrees of educational success and resources. The differences were real and researchers and participants were always aware of them, for example, when participants asked interviewers about their upbringing, education and pastimes. The TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 142) offers no guidance on this fundamental challenge, although it does address this potentially in noting that:

> access to particular settings and populations is sometimes developed over time, and the relationships that are formed may well exist outside the research setting per se, which sometimes makes it difficult to determine exactly where the ‘research’ relationship begins and ends.

Literature in the field of social work research offers some comment. Social work practitioners have long been alert to the capacity of research contexts to disingenuously ignore or hide this stark reality in the interests of controlling research contexts for the purposes of data collection (Irwin, 2006). In the case of the interviews, despite a genuine connection between the interviewer and the participant, which also allowed for possibilities of positive intervention, the interviewer was still the one collecting, appraising, analysing and reporting the interaction and doing so as part of their paid employment. There is a power dynamic inherent in qualitative data collection under these circumstances that cannot be negated simply through good rapport building and increased self-disclosure. The distance of the academically trained expert social work researcher from those being researched is more often than not present, and the art of navigating the ‘hyphens’ separating expert-non expert, distance-intimacy, privileged-unprivileged within longitudinal research is a fascinating aspect of the professional challenges of this field (Karabanow & Stewart, 2017; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Lincoln, 2010).
The principles of PAR are an important resource for allowing for authentic levels of parity to be achieved, yet without avoiding, the obvious reality of such ‘hyphens’ that define such research contexts. Otherwise socially disenfranchised youth were the subjects of research by enfranchised and socio-economically empowered researchers. As a method, PAR provides ample opportunities for the participants to witness, participate and take ownership of the process of interpretation and meaning making. In PAR, a dismantling of the privileged status and identity of the expert is sought and achieved through a democratisation of knowledge formation precisely because so much knowledge is, in fact, created by participants based on their own experiences, which they alone can sufficiently grasp and communicate (Altpeter, Schopler, Galinsky, & Pennell, 1999; Cahill, 2007; Conrad, 2004; Powers & Tiffany 2006). Projects involving artistic creation offer particularly powerful avenues for PAR (Karabanow & Naylor, 2015; Karabanow & Stewart, 2017). In this research project, PAR methods were brought to bear in two distinct areas that go beyond the purview of the TCPS2 guidelines: remuneration and consent.

**Remuneration**

Participants in this study were paid $40.00 per interview (up to four interviews). This was in fact an ethical strategy, consistent with the ideal of ‘giving back’ common in youth work research (Swartz, 2011). The risks in this are much discussed. Some scholars argue it can be patronising (Jeffrey, 2006). The TCPS2 “neither recommends nor discourages the use of incentives” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, pp. 26–27), but further notes monetary reward is liable to the risk of inducement, namely inducing a participant to be subject to research and thus to undertake risks for monetary reward and is otherwise mute on how to deal with this beyond requiring disclosure of what payments should be given (p. 31). This research project, typical of social work research projects, dealt with participants who were struggling financially in their new housing arrangements. Without housing, Ferguson, Bender, and Thompson’s (2014) research illuminates that formal employment and predictable income will be rare for street youth. Swartz (2011) comments that PAR seeks to ask participants what they want from the research process and from researchers. Relying on past experience in working with this population, the team was more than confident that the monetary offer was well received and in no way patronising. With respect to the ‘risk’ of inducement, about which the guidelines (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014) are vague, the research team employed a version of PAR and engaged the participants directly on the issue of remuneration. The approach taken was to communicate that the honorarium was not payment for an individual’s story but rather a modest appreciation for the individual’s expertise and time. It was also emphasised that respondents were under no obligation to share all aspects of their lives and that it was acceptable to keep some portions private. This process of talking openly
with respondents left room for youth to have different relationships to the research process. Some may have been participating because they found it helpful or therapeutic in some ways, whereas others may simply have been doing it out of the sort of savvy self-interest common among street youth willing to participate in research projects (Karabanow, 2006). As much as possible the freedom lay with the participants to make their own meaning of the remuneration, including the judgement regarding any risks they themselves might encounter in taking part in the project. What emerged from this participatory approach was the clear perception that given the small amount of the honorarium, whatever risk of inducement that was incurred (against the overall risk of harm posed by the research) was relatively low.

‘Ongoing consent’ in longitudinal research

The TCPS2 ably approaches the issue of consent as “free, informed and ongoing”, in such a way as to seek to strike the balance of being neither too vague nor too prescriptive (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 7). Too much prescriptive detail can hamper the freedoms needed particularly in qualitative research. The TCPS2 is particularly sensitive to the fact that qualitative studies often can be described as requiring “emergent design” approaches, which can add complexity to the researchers’ duty to “provide information” to participants sufficient to ensure “ongoing consent” and freedom to withdraw at any time (pp. 31–32). While instructing REBs to “consider the range of strategies for documenting the consent process that may be used by researchers using qualitative research approaches” (pp. 31–32) and with attention particularly on different types of consent forms, the document is silent regarding the evolving nature of consent itself that is inherent in the dynamic nature of longitudinal research.

In fact, consent in longitudinal studies, especially those involving participatory models, is likely more complex, nuanced and dynamic than guidelines for providing information can address (Renold, Hillman, Holland, & Ross, 2008; Rooney, 2015; Warin, 2011; Wiles et al., 2007). PAR approaches allow for participants themselves to witness, participate and take ownership of the process of interpretation and meaning making through involving the interviewees, in the final interview, in sharing their experiences of the interview process itself. Their consent is thus informed and ongoing at a deeper level because they themselves participate in the deliberations concerning what and how information is being provided. A particular instance of this complexity came into focus upon consideration of how the team would script the final interview. Youth participants had by this point shared intensely personal stories across three previous interviews over the course of a year with the research team. An understandable tension had begun to arise with respect to how to reciprocate those experiences against the practical, real task of distancing oneself from the youth and, effectively, ending the relationship and saying goodbye both as
persons and as researchers. This occurred in the context of a consciously shared space of intimacy, won over the course of the project, and an awareness of the sustained power dynamic at play in the research context. Together the team fleshed out a set of new questions that permitted participants an opportunity to reflect on their experience of being interviewed, allowing them a chance to articulate a deepened self-conscious understanding of what the project was that they initially had consented to participate in and how they themselves had contributed to shaping the projects results. Some participants spoke of their evolving capacities to distinguish themselves, to ‘tell a story maybe in a different way’. One participant spoke of gaining a retrospective sense of having received ‘counselling’ within the context of the interviews by virtue of the encouragement of self-knowledge that emerged:

I wasn’t doing a whole lot of reflecting for a lot of that time because of what I was going through . . . but I did do reflecting in here.

Another male respondent spoke of an evolving experience of the distance in social status of himself and his female interviewer, an experience of moving from intimidation to openness about that difference in a way that enabled the research interview itself to be more informative:

You’re a successful well educated woman right? So, and I’m uneducated by comparison and not successful but I would say that the way you were, your personality and everything was what broke down those feelings and allowed me to open and up and be honest with you.

These are experiences of reciprocal insight about self and other, both on the side of researchers and participants in the last round of interviews of this project. It is hard to imagine what guidelines there could be for protecting participants from enticement through remuneration or for ensuring consent. PAR as a methodology grounded in reciprocal exchange makes possible the kind of “working the hyphens” (Lincoln, 2010, p. 6) along the researcher-participant divide that facilitates exchange without effacing the real (and revealing) differences that the hyphens contain.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are three conclusions and related recommendations that follow from this reflection on the longitudinal study reported here. Firstly, the comparison here to the Canadian TCPS2 guidelines (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014) offers a valuable foundation for guiding qualitative social work research employing a longitudinal approach, consistent with the values of the CASW and National Association of Social Workers, guidelines that are broadly similar to other jurisdictions. The challenge for institutional REBs to interpret
these for research projects of the kind reported on here comes in allowing for flexibility on the part of the researchers to explore and even question the rigid distinctions between researcher and research participant generally assumed in those guidelines. Recourse to the growing body of both theoretical and applied literature in social work research is crucial, some of which is referred to in this study. Students and researchers are urged to consult this literature for more specific guidance on how to design research projects of this kind, both so as to facilitate approval by REBs but also to more meaningfully contribute to this literature on epistemic and ethical challenges of social work research as well as the field of social work itself. The dynamic nature of social research sometimes goes beyond what is predicted in the ethical guidelines of the research.

Secondly, methodologies such as participatory action research (PAR), which underscore the reciprocal role played by researchers and research subjects in the methods and execution of research, are particularly fruitful in longitudinal research. The roles to be played by research participants may evolve in the course of the research and attention to this possibility from the outset of the project is important and should be communicated both to REBs and participants, as far as possible.

Thirdly in longitudinal studies, ongoing reflection and communication is essential, both on the part of individual members of the research team and within the team as a whole. This is the heart of reflexivity in research of this kind. As this study amply testifies to, both methodological changes and interpretations of research were possible through such reflexivity. Moreover, such reflexivity establishes a culture of research that facilitates the inclusion of research participants in PAR. The result can be a rich and profound process of learning on the part of both researchers and researched.

References


Because obviously I couldn’t talk to anyone about like what had happened at that stage, because obviously if you’ve just met someone you’re not going to speak about that kind of thing, you know.

– Patrick

Introduction

This chapter is an account of my experiences as a researcher collecting interview data on the RaPSS (Response and Prevention of Student Suicide) study (Stanley, Mallon, Manthorpe, & Bell, 2010), data that would also go on to form my PhD thesis. I interviewed many individuals as part of this work but, in this account, I will focus on interviews undertaken with friends of those who died by suicide because they most clearly illustrate the problems that I faced when developing a research strategy for interviewing in this challenging area. The quote above from Patrick sums up in a distinct way how undertaking fieldwork into a sensitive topic can break ground for the researched, as they are asked to reveal intimate details about events they may rarely speak about to a person they have only just met. However, it is not only the researched who may feel anxious when entering a research interview. Interviews can be a challenging time for new researchers who may experience feelings of ‘researcher naivety’ and who often undertake frantic literature searches looking for answers about how to develop and ask appropriate and innovative interview questions. This was certainly true for me early in my career as an interviewer, a role which, as the title of this chapter suggests, I found was considerably more complex than I had expected. The key themes discussed in this chapter are interview style and questions and researcher self-care. Personal testimony, in combination with examples from interview data, will be used to highlight some of the decisions I made prior to and during data collection and reveal their consequences for the researched, the researcher and the research data. One of the overarching aims of the chapter is to encourage the reader to reflect upon the value and limitations
of using the literature to inform fieldwork in areas that require the researcher to engage with subject matter that is challenging for the both researched and the researcher. I have therefore interwoven examples of literature I found helpful in developing my approach to fieldwork into my account.

The learning points in this chapter are tied to the lessons I learned from conducting my fieldwork. They fall into three areas: finding one’s feet when beginning your fieldwork; adapting to your own particular research environment; and developing boundaries to protect your participants and yourself.

Therefore the learning points for the reader are:

• Being confident in how to think about and make some of the decisions that are crucial in developing an approach to a sensitive research topic (Lesson 1, 2 and 3);
• Being able to respond to unanticipated challenges that emerge during the process of interviewing participants about sensitive topics (Lesson 4, 5 and 6);
• Understanding the emotional impact the interview process can have on the researcher and be aware of some of the strategies that can be developed to help manage this (Lesson 7).

**Overview of the research study**

Death by suicide is an emotionally charged, often stigmatised subject. The topic of suicide touches upon some of our most fundamental beliefs about life and death. At the core of this work were the tragic suicides of young adults and the experiences of their friends who lived with the aftermath of these deaths. The research was framed by the suicidal nature of the death, the nature of the friendship between the person who died and the person who was left behind, as well as the age of both those who died and of those who participated in the study. In an effort to be comprehensive in approaching the interviews, the literature that came to influence the study was broad and interdisciplinary, covering areas such as thanatology (study of death), suicidology, bereavement and sensitive research.

The research under discussion comes from an interpretivist study undertaken across the whole of the UK (Stanley et al., 2010). As previously mentioned, here I focus on one group of participants from a larger study whose overall findings have been reported elsewhere. The research received ethical approval from the NHS Multi-Region research ethics committee. The larger study was a case-based study involving interviews from multiple participants and documentary sources such as coroner records. The aims of the aspect of the research under examination here was to explore how the phenomenon of death by suicide was conceptualised, understood and reacted to by the friends of a young individual who had died in this way.

Recruitment for the study took place via a third party. All university counselling services in the UK were asked to forward a letter to the parents of those university students who had died by suicide between one and five years
previously. In the letter parents were invited to contact us if they wished to take part in an interview about the death of their son or daughter. Recruitment of friends of the students who died was then guided by Biernacki and Waldorf’s (1981) snowballing technique in that parents who had consented to an interview were asked to pass information about the study to individuals who had been friends with their child. Using this process, I was able to undertake interviews with 12 friends of a student who ended his or her life while at university. The interviewees comprised seven men and five women who were aged between 20 and 37 years. All were British. During the interview they described the deaths of nine individuals (eight men and one woman) aged between 20 and 32 years of age. Participants thus formed a purposive sample of self-selected volunteers. Semi-structured interviews based loosely on a series of topics were undertaken. The interviews involved asking participants to talk about their relationship with the deceased, explored the nature of the death and then asked them to think about how they learnt information about why the suicide may have happened. The length of the interviews varied greatly, lasting between one and three hours. Participants were asked to consent to be digitally recorded and these were subsequently transcribed verbatim. In accordance with good practice in suicide research (Hawton et al., 2003), at the end of each interview, participants were given a bereavement pack with details of support organisations (Hill, Hawton, Malmberg, & Simkin, 1997). To protect the confidentiality of participants the names of interviewees and their friends have been changed in this chapter.

The transcribed interviews were securely stored and coded using Nvivo 8. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as described by Eatough and Smith (2007). In the first stage of the analysis, coding was used to explore the ways in which each individual described the death and to specifically ascertain how they came to interpret and respond to the suicidal nature of their friend’s death. During the second stage of coding, I looked for patterns across the individuals’ accounts. As is usual in phenomenological research, reliability in the coding was assured by the development of a comprehensive coding structure as set out by Willig (2001). In summary, preliminary thematic clusters were created and data representing alternative or confounding constructions were examined until I was satisfied that the themes represented participants’ accounts. The results of the analysis focused on participants’ experiences of three core areas that were identified as fundamentally enabling and constraining their bereavement. These were: participants’ efforts to ascertain that their friends’ death was a suicide; their experiences of trying to find an explanation for the suicide and managing their own personal reaction to the suicide. The study showed the profound impact that a death by suicide can have on the friends of those who died and made key links between wider representations of suicide, showing how these both enabled and constrained their bereavement. The findings further suggested that young adults carefully considered the physical and emotional aspects of their friend’s death to determine
whether they meant to bring their life to an end and why they had done it. This was an emotional, challenging and potentially dangerous task for these young people. The study concluded by encouraging those working with those who are bereaved by suicide to consider how they can best support individuals who seek to find meaning from the act of suicide as part of their bereavement.

Silences and sugar-coating

The previous summary gives a technically accurate account of the research I undertook in a format you are probably quite familiar with. In essence, it reveals broad details about how I went about my research and what I found as a result of undertaking interviews with friends of young people who died by suicide. On the face of things, it may seem like a full account of how I went about researching, it tells you all the key facts you need to know to assess how the research was conducted and analysed. However, there is arguably as much concealed as there is disclosed in an academic account of this nature. As Halse and Honey (2005, p. 2142) astutely sum up “the investments, dilemma and implications of researchers’ ethical decisions and moral choices are usually secreted away, buried, concealed, and hidden from public scrutiny”. The use of the word scrutiny is important here, because it is important to realise that researchers, even apparently open feminist ones (such as me), work in their writing to satisfy several competing demands, including presenting their research within a framework that encourages the validity of findings and acceptance for publication.

This version of my research journey tells you nothing about the emotional tensions I felt when invited to eat cream cakes during an interview. It tells you nothing about my struggle to stay focussed while a hungry cat prowled around my feet as I asked questions. Readers will know nothing about the emotional dilemmas I faced at the end of each interview when I wondered if I should hug the interviewee. Furthermore, they would be oblivious to 4 a.m. awakenings, or the feelings of anxiety I experienced whenever suicide was on television. These may seem like irrelevant details of the research encounter, details that are not really necessary to understand this research study. However, I will use these examples to illustrate what really happens when a researcher with no experience of suicide, either personally or professionally, sets out to interview those bereaved by the suicide of a friend. Is she really comfortable asking difficult questions about the death? How is her performance shaped by the literature she reads and the people she meets? How does she cope with her own emotional response to being involved in research on such a challenging subject?

The purpose of this part of the chapter is to explore these questions as well as other aspects of the research process that are typically less visible in traditional research accounts. I focus on those areas that caused me most concern; these were around how I decided which questions to ask, the manner in which I asked them and finally the impact that all this had on me, as a researcher. I will make clear those aspects I have tended to sugar-coat in other accounts of this
data collection process with the aim of showing the reader how the ethical and methodological dilemmas that emerge from the research can be responded to in ways that are manageable and reflexive.

How to find your feet in the field: lessons 1, 2 and 3

Benefits and baggage

The first thing you should know about me is that I am a first-generation university attender. A child of the benefits-class, who grew up on a housing estate as part of an extended family, none of whom had attended university. I tell you this because it frames some of discussion that follows, explaining my crippling sense of researcher naivety at the outset of this research journey. The first day of this journey was hugely significant to me. Walking home from university took significantly longer because the bag I carried was laden with heavy academic textbooks. I felt this must mean I was a ‘proper’ researcher. However, academic mobility like social mobility has its limits. These soon became apparent as, too frightened to admit my insecurities to my supervisors, I tried to rely upon the literature to show me how to be a good researcher. As this account will show, I soon found out the literature can encourage a sense of simplicity where simplicity does not exist. But I didn’t know then that when starting out, it is okay not to know what to do, how to be and what to say. Therefore my first lesson from the field is that knowing that it is perfectly okay ‘not to know’ may be your greatest asset.

Sensitive questions and sensible structure

Inviting research participants to talk about the suicide of someone with whom they were close was an exciting but challenging prospect. As I have already indicated I initially turned to the research section of the library, focussing on edited collections about research methodology similar to the one you are now reading. Books were a good starting point as they were written in a style that I found to be more accessible and less daunting than journal articles. A colleague recommended Lee’s (1993) work on sensitive research as potentially relevant to my work. In his book, Lee established sensitive research topics as those accompanied by an “intrusive threat” in which participants are asked to reveal information about a deeply personal experience that is within their private sphere (1993, p. 6). It has been suggested that the nature of research on sensitive topics requires a “trial-and-error approach” that can be highly stressful for the researcher (Tewksbury, 2001, p. 9). At this point, while I found the framework of ‘sensitive research’ to be useful as a concept, to limit both my trials and errors it made sense to me to limit my literature review to studies from the suicide literature that could directly inform my initial approach to my research. As is so often the case I found a large
body of articles had already been published on the topic of suicide. Many of
these were clear, instructive, printed in respected journals and written with
a pronounced sense of surety and a ‘how to’ tone that I found reassuring.
This literature stressed the specific challenges and taboo nature of the topic
of suicide and highlighted the need to carefully manage the information
participants were asked to reveal during the interview process and how they
were asked to reveal it. In response, at the outset of my period of data collec-
tion I placed clear restrictions on the topics that should be discussed during
the interviews (issues of blame and responsibility among others were to be
avoided) and I developed a clear structure for the order in which questions
about particularly sensitive issues (such as finding the deceased’s body) should
be approached. By the time I embarked upon my first interview my prepara-
tion had included so much reading that my supervisor cautioned me about
delaying tactics and told me to “get a move on”. Somewhat reluctantly I set
aside the books and agreed. Therefore my second lesson from the field is that
there is a time for reading, and there is a time for action. Sometimes it takes
a more experienced eye to spot this.

Stumbling out of the starting block

I set out for my first set of interviews fairly confident that I was emotion-
ally prepared, grounded by theory and perhaps most guilelessly, I felt I had
achieved a degree of vicarious experience by reading the work of research-
ers who had trod these paths before me. However, after undertaking a few
interviews feelings of researcher naivety came crashing down heavily upon my
shoulders again. It was apparent that despite my careful preparation little I
had read had really prepared me for the emotional nature of the interviews and how
little control I had over the encounter itself. This was particularly telling when
I tried to direct the interviews by asking questions in a specific order. The inter-
view originally opened by asking participants to speak directly about how they
found out about the death of their friend. This approach reflected the guidance
offered by other suicide researchers who reported that participants found this
aspect of the interview particularly challenging, therefore to minimise anxiety
participants should be encouraged to speak about this topic at the beginning
of the interview (Hawton et al., 1998; Hawton et al., 2003). However, in my
early experiences this direct approach was both awkward and unhelpful as the
following exchange with Monica shows:

Me: We start out . . . when you find out that he’d died. And that’s so that
we can get it over and done with.
Monica: Do you want just to start when, when he died or afterwards, like
after the funeral and things like that?
Me: The day you found out he’d died so.
Monica: So it’s all fact rather than.
Me: No, no, it's what you remember really, or.
Monica: Well the day he died, I spoke, okay; it's kind of interlinked, so it's a bit difficult to explain.
Me: What about if you just start where you like.
Monica: Before he died.
Me: Okay.
Monica: Well a couple of days before anyway.

What you cannot tell from this exchange is the utter confusion this line of questioning caused Monica, who seemed genuinely thrown by my request to start at what she saw as the end. Monica’s response concerned me for several reasons. Firstly, her reference to the interview as being ‘all fact’ was in direct opposition to my original aims for interviews, which was to explore the individual’s experiences in a meaningful way. Secondly, my sense was that the confusion was at least partly because Monica had met me only a few minutes earlier and was straight away being asked to reveal information about the most difficult aspect of the most difficult experience of her young life.

This was not the only example of this kind of discussion; I had similar exchanges with other participants. Typically, when I tried to impose this structure upon the interviews, it disrupted the natural flow of the participant’s narrative. As this exchange took place at the beginning of the interview it was particularly challenging, as it meant I felt amateurish and clumsy from the outset. I started to think that despite guidance to the contrary, interviews worked best when participants were permitted to discuss those topics they felt were relevant, in the order in which they felt most at ease. Therefore my third lesson from the field is that you should trust your researcher's intuition; if something feels like it isn’t working then it probably isn’t.

**Lesson 4, 5 and 6: learning how to adapt to your emerging research environment**

**Shock of fieldwork**

The benefit of hindsight means it is now obvious to me that I needed to change how I was asking questions. However, in those early days deciding to alter the flow of the interview felt very meaningful because I was shifting from a plan that had been constructed from the advice of other published suicide researchers, all of whom I assumed had a great deal more experience than me in these matters. I began to wonder if it was my approach to asking the questions that was at fault, rather than the approach itself. Why was I struggling so much with something that was so established?

Fortunately, around this time what I experienced as the ‘shock’ of fieldwork was reduced by returning to the literature on sensitive topics and an
associated shift in my understanding of the issue of epistemology and its influence on the research process. This shift came about in part because of a book on a very different subject entitled *Emotionally Involved: The Impact of Researching Rape* (Campbell, 2001) that I happened to hear about at a conference. Campbell’s book helped me to see that I had based my approach to data collection on other suicide researchers and naturally there were parallels that could be drawn between their research and mine. This research had, however, been undertaken by clinicians, mainly psychiatrists, working from a positivist epistemology that has the assumption that objective truth can be revealed through using rigorous methods (Campbell, 2001). The stance of these researchers had not occurred to me before because the position of the researcher was rarely made explicit in these articles and I had initially been convinced that suicide research was best guided by other suicide researchers. However, the stance of these researchers was incongruent with my emerging epistemological position as a social constructionist and a feminist. Their advice was thus of limited use in helping guide me in how to be a researcher in the field.

I undertook further reading to find work from other similar minded researchers and became influenced by a range of work from other sensitive areas including sexual abuse (Scott, 2001) and self-harm (Spandler & Batsleer, 2000). From these I was able to develop an alternative approach to interviewing that responded to my early concerns about engaging with the research participants and accommodated my emerging epistemological position. Instead of having a formal interview structure based around questions asked in a particular order and format, each interview now began with an open opportunity for participants to describe the nature of the relationship they had with the person who died. The purpose of this beginning was twofold. Firstly, it allowed participants to characterise their friendship, thus setting the scene for their narrative. Secondly, it provided participants with an opportunity to speak about their friend in a way that acknowledged that they had lived a life, not just died a death. Rather than making the suicide the focus at the outset of the interview, participants were instead encouraged to speak about this topic when it arose as a natural part of the interview. As the interview progressed, instead of asking formal questions, I allowed participants to speak at length without undue interruption. In the back of my mind, I had a list of topics that I wanted them to touch upon, but I only asked a prompt question when participants appeared to stall in their narrative. At this point, I interjected with a question that was either based upon the topic they were already discussing or if this appeared to have been exhausted, directed the interview towards topics that had not already been covered. Therefore my fourth lesson from the field is that the best advice does not always come from the most obvious sources. If the methodological framework does not fit, then read or ask questions of more experienced researchers until you find a new one that does.
Style over substance

I was pleasantly surprised by the response of the interviewees to this new non-interventionist style of questioning. However, there was one area that continued to make me feel uncomfortable; this was the power dynamic between me as the researcher and the interviewees as the subject of the research. This was exacerbated by the new style of interviewing, as I was acting as a largely passive interviewer who avoided saying very much at all. When alone with the interviewee, there was an acute sense of how much social trust the interviewees were placing in me as an individual. This was particularly acute because of the unexpectedly social nature of the interviews. Rather than being seen as a professional researcher, I felt like I was treated as a houseguest, offered cakes, invited to stay to dinner. During my reading on feminist researchers I had been struck by the lack of innocence in the research process and I began to feel like a double agent, awkward with the mono-directional nature of the conversation and aware that I was taking more from the participants than I was giving. This was particularly an issue, as some participants appeared to worry about whether their reactions to the death were ‘normal’. They frequently asked direct questions about how their reaction to the suicide of their friend compared with those shared by other participants in my study. I was unsure how, or if I should reply. When I returned home I began to ruminate on the nature of the encounter, frequently waking at 4 a.m. worrying about the people I had talked to.

In order to address some of these issues I felt my feminist style of interviewing could be expanded upon to fundamentally change the way in which I performed during interviews. I was particularly drawn to the principles of reciprocity, in which the researcher and participant engage in an interview based on reciprocal sharing (Acker, Barry, & Essevald, 1991). Oakley (1981) an influential researcher working on sensitive topics had suggested this style of interviewing allows participants to speak with greater ease about subjects that are traditionally viewed as stigmatised or taboo. This seemed like a minor change, I envisioned merely becoming a more active participant in the research, actively answering questions and engaging on a more personal level with participants. Little did I know that even small changes could have dramatic effects on the research dynamic. Therefore my fifth lesson from the field is that you should be aware that even small actions have big effects. Self-reflection can help you be mindful of the impact of changes you make.

Faltering feminist

Initially, this new style of interviewing appeared to be a methodological success. It enabled the rapid development of an intimate interview relationship between the participants and me. The interview developed a natural flow with none of the previous stumbling at the outset. However, as the following example demonstrates, my active participation in the research interview was not
without consequences. The application of the principles of reciprocity came to blur the boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship in ways that were unhelpful.

Me: Had he been the victim of crime or any, any like bad thing that he talked about happening at university that might have caused the depression or anything like that?
Edward: . . . there was nothing at university, or here that I can imagine just kicking, kicking it off, at all. No. I don’t think so. Do you?
Me: I mean I’m not aware of any, I’m not kind of fishing for something.
Edward: I mean he lived in a rough area.

In this unwitting error of judgement, it was clear that I altered Edward’s narrative of the suicide of his friend. What I brought into the research through my question was the fact that I suspected this was a factor in the suicide of his friend. It was clear from the interview transcript that my comment reverberated in Edward’s account throughout the remaining time I spent with him, causing him to question things he had previously not considered. Upon reflection on the whole encounter, I can see that in this context, I listened not as a researcher, as should be the case, but as a person whose identity was more akin to friendship, and the engagement was more like a conversation than a research interview. I immediately regretted my oversight because it was neither helpful nor appropriate to imply that this was a factor in his friend’s suicide.

Careful reflection undertaken in painstakingly detailed, but often-chaotic fieldwork notes helped me to make some sense of the things that I felt were going wrong. Eventually, I was brave enough to have frank conversations with my supervisors who helped me come to the conclusion that while research interviews may sometimes appear to be conversational in nature, in some instances they should essentially remain non-interventionist. I was further reassured by an article I read that suggested caution was required over the researcher’s influence over the way a bereavement experience is remembered (Liamputtong, 2007). This helped me to conclude that it was not me or the style of interviewing that was wrong, it was simply a mismatch of style and topic.

I decided to make some subtle changes by reviewing my transcripts to assess what worked and what was problematic. I felt it was important during the interview to be able to respond to participants’ questions and to reassure them that what they were saying was understood and acknowledged without judgement. However, this needed to be balanced with the desire to leave their narratives as untouched as possible by the research and the need to maintain a degree of separation between the researcher and the participant. Lee (1993) points out these types of encounters also occur in counselling settings. My new strategy thus adapted counselling principles, relying on basic but important issues such as positive body language and the use of non-judgemental, non-directive language and an awareness of the importance of boundaries. Therefore my sixth
Lesson from the field is that even the best fitting framework may need adjustments for your individual style, take what you need and carefully adapt the rest.

**Lesson 7: developing boundaries, endings and separation**

I had finally hit upon a structure and style that worked for the research. Each interview took me further away from the sense of research naivety I felt in the early days and closer to a place that was more comfortable. However, there had been other consequences that engaging in reciprocity brought about, in that it led me to develop a sense of attachment to participants that felt inappropriate for both them and me. I had an increased number of requests for follow-up visits. This was challenging because the research required me to meet participants only once and for a brief amount of time. Train journeys home were often emotional as I began to feel a sense of abandonment when leaving the interview and I wondered if my participants felt the same. After a few interviews, it was apparent this level of engagement with participants’ emotions over such a limited amount of time was a major source of tension for me. I experienced upsetting intrusive thoughts and felt traumatised whenever death by suicide was portrayed in the media. Aspects of the feminist style of interviewing left me feeling exposed and out of control. I quickly began to question, ‘was I really a feminist, was I a real feminist?’

In addition, while I had expected the research encounters to be emotionally laden, I discovered that while topics such as suicide are widely considered to be taboo, they are a part of daily life to some and I found that my participants had developed ways of speaking about the issue that indicated a comfort with the topic that I had hitherto failed to appreciate. I found myself being offered cheese sandwiches and having cats clamber over me while asking sensitive questions about suicide and listening to the often-distressing answers. The social nature of the encounter confused me, and I found nothing in the literature to help me with the increasingly confused emotions that accompanied me on my journey home and sometimes stayed with me for days after. I felt that while I was becoming academically nimble in understanding my role within the interview setting, I was also psychologically stuck, somewhere between seeing my interviewees as sources of data and real-life people with emotions with whom I had formed a bond.

I was keen to make these encounters as informal as possible, however, it was clear that I needed to work to establish a professional researcher identity with participants. Following examples from Bower and De Gasparis (1978) I did this by developing a self-disclosing statement that was shared with participants at the outset of each interview. The statement was designed to make it clear that I was acting as a researcher whose motivation was to learn from them and help wider audiences better understand the experiences of losing a loved one to suicide. This statement varied slightly between interviews but in general
I explained that although I had not been personally bereaved by suicide, I was keen to hear their story so that I could help wider audiences better understand the experiences of losing a friend to suicide. This was further reinforced by the inclusion of a set of ‘ending strategies’ designed to signal the end of the research interview. In brief, I spent time with participants after the interview had concluded, chatting to them about issues unrelated to the suicide. This enabled me to focus on the less traumatic and normal aspects of the participants’ lives and helped us both to refocus on the present day. These routines established subtle boundaries, developed my sense of control over the research encounter and became invaluable in creating a sense of professional identity that meant I could leave certain emotions behind when I left the interviewee’s home.

Finally, upon leaving the interview I established routines to separate myself from the participants and their narratives. Although it often meant long train journeys late into the evening, I felt it was important for me to return to my own home immediately after the interview. To prevent my thoughts returning to the tragic suicide narrative I listened to a playlist of uplifting music and delayed writing up research notes until the day after the interview. These simple actions had an important effect in creating a sense of separation and an ending to my interview encounters. Therefore my seventh lesson from the field is that it is important to develop strategies that can help you to understand and manage the emotions that emerge from research encounters. Doing so protects you, the research and those you are researching.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Suicide can be a difficult and challenging topic to talk about. I entered this area of work with exceptional levels of researcher naivety. I had no personal experience of suicide or bereavement by suicide and very little experience of social research. As a result, I attempted to use the literature to inform and develop research procedures and boundaries that I hoped would guide me in my research journey. Conventional wisdom suggests the more knowledge you accrue, the more confident you will become. However, as a now experienced researcher, I have learnt that the literature can be the propagator of a model of research that is very different from reality. Knowledge accrued by reading must therefore be evaluated, practised, trialled and adapted. This can be a tough process for a novice researcher who wants to do the best possible research in the most ethically and methodologically sound manner. It is particularly hard when you haven’t quite figured out that it is acceptable not to know some things.

It is inevitable that when you start out in social research you cannot know everything you need to know to be a successful researcher. Learning on the job is an inevitable part of the process, even for very experienced researchers. I have held up my experiences as both an example of both the limits and possibilities of knowledge gained from books. Despite the drawbacks, a great deal can be gained by reading other researchers and there is an important sense of kinship...
to be found when the right author is located. In my case, the most useful sources were classical texts in areas other than my own, rather than up to date journal articles. However, this will vary depending on the topics being studied and the individual approach of the researcher. It is important to remember that there are many different types of research and researcher, therefore it is essential that each individual finds a way to work that they are comfortable with. I hope I have also shown that a strategy for fieldwork needs both literature to guide it and self-reflection to drive it. The literature delivers an orderliness that can provide a safety net for your research and your participants while field notes set the tone of the conversation you have with yourself, teaching you how to use your voice, your intuition, your skills and humanity within the academic research setting.

The most important lesson that I can impart to new researchers is that they should be aware that establishing an effective strategy is a complex process and that it will continue to evolve as the research progresses. Be kind and patient with yourself. It is useful to remember that a responsive and reflective approach when undertaking challenging qualitative interviews should protect the integrity of the data collected as well as the researcher’s personal sense of mental wellbeing. Although the starting point is important, being ready for emerging and future challenges requires the researcher to be reflexive, open and honest in all aspects of their work. My experiences lead me to conclude that leaving behind the emotional and academic naivety is challenging but can lead to a rewarding experience that can be truly life enhancing.

References


Introduction

We encounter children and adults from various socially and economically disadvantaged communities who sometimes present with challenging behaviours and possible emotional and cognitive difficulties. Such difficulties, as experienced by some children, may hinder their progress within a school setting so assessment and intervention may be needed. Working within community settings furthermore underscores the need to enter fieldwork prepared to conduct assessments as efficiently and as scientifically as possible, whilst retaining the client at the heart of the engagement process. At the core of our work within dynamic assessment, is the individual. Dynamic assessment is an approach to assessment where learning potential is emphasised more so than learning achievement. The individual in context is emphasised as opposed to examining the individual in relation to their peers. In so doing, the individual’s movement across time as an expression of idiographic or individual change is highlighted. An idiographic focus is particularly useful when evaluating changes over time in self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-concept. Idiographic methods treat the data from each person as a complete study. The experience of a person is examined without recourse to normative or criterion-based comparisons. The difficulty faced by idiographic researchers thus far has been the scarcity of suitable methods of measurement of change to demonstrate the efficacy of an intervention for one individual.

This chapter explains a novel approach to the evaluation of change in one individual, from an idiographic perspective. The approach to data collection is based on George Kelly’s personal construct theory as its way of eliciting an individual’s worldview fits well with the idiographic nature of our research. The method described in this chapter also allows for a pictorial representation of how the person perceives him or herself and how that perception changes over the course of intervention. Further analysis allows us to evaluate the degree of change over time. Using open card sorting as a method of data collection and analysing the data allows us to study an individual over time. The intervention
phase of this study consisted primarily of a series of cognitive-reasoning exercises delivered using a dynamic assessment (DA) approach.

The learning points for the reader are:

- Understanding how to use open card sorts to collect data;
- Understanding how the data can be analysed and a visual representation of data at each time point is produced using multidimensional scaling (MDS);
- Understanding how change across time points is evaluated using general Procrustes analysis (GPA) and how to interpret the data output.

**Overview of the research study**

The case study that is used to illustrate the previous learning points is that of a socially disadvantaged learner living and being schooled within a mainstream education setting in Ireland. Stephen (pseudonym), age 13 years, was in 6th class in a rural Irish primary school when the study took place. Stephen had been assessed prior to the study and had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). One of the criteria for selection into the study was that the student be ‘not flourishing’. Stephen was described by his teachers as having few friends in school, did not make eye contact with teachers and did not appear engaged in school. The quality of his schoolwork was considered poor and he had to repeat a school year in the same class. Stephen had a high degree of absenteeism, frequently arrived late and tended to fall asleep in class.

The form of learning support provided to Stephen was that of dynamic assessment. Dynamic assessment (DA) is a way of ‘assessing individuals’ at times hidden potential’ in a “process-oriented, diagnostic, engaged and flexible manner” in which guidance through “instruction and feedback of cognitive skill acquisition” is central (Murphy & Maree, 2009, p. 420). It draws on the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1930–1934/1978), Alexander Luria (1928/1994), and, more recently, on the mediated-learning theories of Reuven Feuerstein (1972) (Ferrara, Brown, & Campione, 1986). DA is widely used in several countries across several learning contexts with various cohorts. The primary purpose of DA is to maximise learning potential (Hurley, 2011; Hurley & Murphy, 2015; Murphy, 2008, 2011; Murphy & Maree, 2006a, 2006b, 2009).

The aim of our study was to assess the effectiveness of the DA intervention, in particular to document and measure change in Stephen’s view of himself and other people. Ideally, we want to capture a detailed account of Stephen’s own experience. Idiographic methods are often used in case study research where the interest is to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals like Stephen. To achieve this we engaged with Stephen over four sessions.

To explore how Stephen viewed himself and the people in his life we used a card sort method to gather data based on the approach of George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory. Briefly (for a full explanation see Bannister &
personal construct theory proposes that a person’s experience of their world is subjective and based on how they interpret or construe information in their social environment, including that about themselves and other people. Thus a person constructs an internal representation or schema of their social world through building and testing a repertoire of theories of being. These theories of being consist of constructs that have two dimensions (for example, kind versus unkind), which are individual to that person and used to compare other people and him or herself. Constructs are also seen to be linear and continuous (Fransella, 2007) in that there are various points between kind and unkind where a person can judge her/himself and others as being positioned. Through seeing oneself as identifying or not identifying with constructs (me/not me) and possessing a high or low level of a construct the person builds a schema of his or her own self-concept. Also possessing a high or low level of a construct has either positive or negative connotations.

Personal construct theory proposes that we cannot know how people construe their subjective reality unless we enquire about it. The method of enquiry that Kelly developed to explore how a person construes his or her world is the repertory grid technique. The repertory grid technique involves a person being given or, more usually, asked, to generate a number of elements, which are “people, events or things in our lives” that are “representative of the area being investigated” (Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2003, p. 18). Then constructs are elicited.

There are various methods used to elicit constructs (see Fransella et al., 2003 for a full discussion), but in this study the one used was that first described by Hinkle (1965), known as laddering. Laddering is a particular way of interviewing that facilitates the revelation of constructs. It involves using a series of directed questions or probes, beginning with a ‘why is that important to you?’ question (Reynolds & Guttman, 1988). This approach was chosen as the aim was to be as non-directive as possible and discover qualities of people that the participant valued. In this study Stephen was asked a series of questions beginning with ‘can you tell me what is important to you?’ and his responses clarified with follow-up questions such as ‘what is important to other people?’; ‘why?’; ‘can you tell me what X means to you exactly?’, ‘why does it matter?’; ‘why doesn’t it matter?’ (this last question is particularly useful in eliciting the reverse scored dimension of the construct). In this way Stephen was facilitated to isolate and name a construct that was meaningful to him.

Once the researcher and participant are satisfied that a viable construct has been generated through the laddering process, the card sort commences for that construct. The card sort technique as a data-gathering tool within personal construct theory is expanded on by Fransella (2003), Fransella et al. (2003). Card sorts use index cards with some descriptor or element on each card (in this case names of people in the person’s life including the person). The participant is asked to sort these cards into piles, into levels along the construct. Cards deemed to be sufficiently similar are placed in the same pile. An advantage of the card sort technique is that the degree of input from the researcher can be controlled. A fixed card sort is commonly used with repertory grids, where the
researcher has predetermined the number of levels of the construct, but in this study an open card sort was used, allowing the participant to determine the levels of each construct, in line with our interest in the individual's subjective construal of his world. How the open card sort was completed in this study is fully explained in the next section.

The data generated from the card sort can be then used to produce a visual representation of an individual’s life space at that time. A further step in the analysis allows for comparison of data sets from one individual across time. The analysis of data from the four sessions conducted with Stephen suggested that considerable change had taken place in Stephen’s construal of his subjective reality, indicating that the DA intervention used had some success. In particular Stephen saw himself more positively in later sessions than in earlier ones. However, as Stephen’s internal construal system did not reach equilibrium by the end of the intervention and data collection process, it was concluded that further intervention was warranted.

In the remainder of this chapter we explain the process used in our research. We start by describing open card sorts as a data collection tool, then we introduce the analysis of the open card sort data and how to visually represent the results using MDS. This is followed by an example of how to evaluate change using GPA as well as how to interpret the data output by referring to the case study of Stephen.

Using open card sorts as a data collection tool

Stephen undertook four multiple card sort sessions over a period of twelve weeks. The first step was to generate a card pool of elements. To do this Stephen was asked to name people in his life. He named people with whom he had regular contact and each person’s name was written on a separate card. To ensure that everyone he came into contact with on a regular basis were included prompts such as ‘have forgotten people that perhaps you are not very fond of?’ or ‘are there any adults other than your guardians/parents that you regularly see?’ were used. The name of each person was written on an individual card along with their relationship to Stephen. This information was then entered into an Excel spreadsheet by the researcher with Stephen reading out the information on the cards. Although Stephen had been described as being generally non-communicative, he engaged with the process.

Stephen was then invited to choose constructs meaningful to him using the laddering technique previously described. This method allowed him to identify the traits and behaviours by which he measured both his own self-concept and his conceptions of others. Then Stephen sorted the cards into different piles depending on where he saw the person in relation to the bi-polar construct.

The number of levels, or piles, during any given sort is generated during the sorting process. The person begins by placing their first card on the table and compares each subsequent card with the card in front of them, placing them to the left or right of the first card depending on where they feel the person named on the card falls along the construct continuum. Cards deemed to be sufficiently
similar are placed in the same pile. In this way the number of piles (or levels) are generated during the card sort process and is deemed to reflect most accurately how the person construes that attribute. The participant is then asked to label each pile. For example, a person might not identify ‘Very unkind’ as a level, seeing only ‘Unkind’, ‘Kind’ and ‘Very kind’ people in their world (three levels), while another person might see ‘Extremely unkind’, ‘Very unkind’, ‘Unkind’, ‘Kind’ and ‘Very kind’ (five levels). Piles are then numbered from 1–5, where 1 indicates the most positive level of the construct. The open card sort was used to gather data across each of the four time points and different constructs were generated at each card sort session. Figure 8.1 illustrates this process for three constructs.

In the first session (Time Point 1) Stephen identified 13 friends and family members as elements and compared these people with himself, the 14th element, using constructs in relation to self-regulation, the level of self-discipline he saw the person as having, how much he liked the person and how supportive he considered the person to be (see Table 8.1 on the next page). Table 8.1 also shows the number of levels Stephen considered each construct to have (ranging from five in relation to disciplined and nine for supportive). Once Stephen reached a point where no new constructs were identified, the session concluded.

After two weeks Stephen was invited to a second session (Time Point 2) utilising the same multiple-card sort method. Again Stephen was not limited in the number and nature of constructs generated at Time Point 2. As can be seen in Table 8.2 on the next page, in this session the constructs motivation (seven levels), sociable (five levels), kind (six levels) and generous (six levels) were generated by Stephen. This is not unexpected as noted by Canter, Brown, and Groat (1985, p. 28):

The sorting task is likely to be a self-exploration for the individuals doing it, a learning process in which they come to understand more about their own conceptual system. As a consequence, it is possible that an individual would not give the same sortings twice. Certainly, the order in which he/she carried out his/her sortings is likely to vary from one session to the next. What is being studied is the overall conceptual system a person uses.

Figure 8.1 Example of a card sort for constructs ‘smart’, ‘funny’ and ‘kind’ showing the different levels of each
Table 8.1  Data input at Time Point 1  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Self-regulation</th>
<th>Disciplined</th>
<th>How much he likes the person</th>
<th>Supportive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friend 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepdad</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (m)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower numbers indicate higher levels of the construct thus a positive endorsement for the person in relation to that construct.

Table 8.2  Data input at Time Point 2  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Sociable</th>
<th>Kind</th>
<th>Generous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friend 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepdad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (m)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower numbers indicate higher levels of the construct thus a positive endorsement for the person in relation to that construct.
Now that the technique of data collection has been explained and the type of data generated illustrated we will move on to explaining the process of analysis and how a visual representation of the data is produced.

**Initial analysis and production of visual representation**

The previous tables show the scores produced during the card sort process and represent the raw scores prior to analysis. We can examine these scores in the same way we would other types of descriptive data. We examine the pattern of scores for each person across constructs. In Stephen’s case an idealised person would be represented by a pattern score of 1,1,1,1, for example. Stephen’s construal is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, he does not tend to collapse positive scores on constructs with liking a person, something that was otherwise common with this younger cohort. There are no idealised people in his world and this is reflected in the pattern scores of the people (Guttman, 1985). More interestingly when considered in relation to the purpose of DA Stephen’s pattern of scores at Time Point 1 is 5,4,5,5, which fall towards the negative end of each construct.

At this stage we can begin to formulate theories of being for Stephen. His scores at Time Point 1 suggests that he does not like himself very much in relation to what the educational system values. He sees himself as undisciplined, considers himself to have poor self-regulation and scores himself a five for being supportive (in a construct with nine levels). Conversely, he sees his school friend (school friend 1) and his teacher as possessing the most positive qualities of the group.

To produce a visual representation of how Stephen views himself in relation to others, multidimensional scaling is used (see De Leeuw & Heiser, 1982; Kruskal & Wish, 1978 for more detail). This is a data reduction technique. Through MDS analysis a set of coordinates are produced for each person (element) from the raw data, that is, their ratings on the constructs (Borg & Lingoes, 1980; Kruskal & Wish, 1978). The MDS analysis uses a Euclidian distance\(^2\) measure, which assumes an origin of 0.0 on the X and Y axes respectively of a two-dimensional coordinate map. Data points for each construct are then positioned into a common space. If we conceptualise each construct’s data points as a shape in two dimensions then each shape is overlaid upon the next shape. Borg and Lingoes (1980) describe this as imagining a set of transparencies overlaid and being rotated and manipulated to conjoin items’ coordinates across constructs.

Table 8.3 displays the coordinates produced from the raw data shown in Table 8.1. The data can then be shown in a visual display or map along two dimensions as shown in Figure 8.2 (‘up and down’ or Y coordinate as well as ‘left and right’ or X coordinate). This map is known as a life-space map.
Table 8.3 MDS coordinates at Time Point 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>$X$ coordinate</th>
<th>$Y$ coordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friend 3</td>
<td>−88</td>
<td>−69.295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepdad</td>
<td>−100</td>
<td>−100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>77.768</td>
<td>−55.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>63.443</td>
<td>−34.147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 1</td>
<td>71.375</td>
<td>46.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 2</td>
<td>85.318</td>
<td>−48.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>77.768</td>
<td>−60.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 1</td>
<td>82.886</td>
<td>−54.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>68.063</td>
<td>18.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 2</td>
<td>63.876</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>90.005</td>
<td>−72.717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (m)</td>
<td>96.489</td>
<td>−74.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>26.326</td>
<td>−7.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>70.075</td>
<td>−35.086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This map compares the distances of each person mentioned by Stephen with every other person. Think of this as locating an area on a map using longitude and latitude. Each person is represented by a point derived from several constructs that are collapsed together.

Figure 8.2 shows Stephen’s life space map at Time Point 1. This map is a visual representation of Stephen’s construal of himself in relation to others and can be viewed as his schema of himself and others at that point in time. Similarity of any two elements is reflected by their proximity on the map, that is, Stephen construes these people to be alike in relation to the constructs he named at that time. Extreme cases where an element may be distant from all others or which are not part of a cluster can be very informative as this tells us something about the nature of the relationship between Stephen and the person mentioned.

Stephen spends a great deal of time gaming on the internet. The two internet gamer friends depicted on the map live in the USA. Stephen spent much of his night gaming online and got little sleep. This dynamic is clearly reflected in his life-space map where he identifies most strongly with his internet gamer friends and his sister (3). Referring to the pattern scores of the elements in this sector of the map, it suggests that this area represents a somewhat negative space. The bottom left quadrant of the map depicts a large cluster of people between which there is little discrimination. This suggests that Stephen views this group as all being similar (except for his brother and sister 1), despite these individuals being from disparate groups such as family, school friends and teachers.

From examining the raw data at Time Point 2 (see Table 8.2) we can see that Stephen perceives himself more positively in relation to the constructs,
motivation, sociable, kind and generous, rating himself 2, 4, 2, 3 on constructs with seven, six, six and six levels. The map (Figure 8.3) shows that Stephen identifies more strongly with people in the physical world such as his sisters and brother rather than his virtual world. He sees his internet gamer friends as the same as at Time Point 1. They have the same pattern scores.

It is important to note that while proximity and distance can be considered within the same MDS map at any given time point, MDS maps cannot be compared with other MDS maps (Hammond & O’Rourke, 2007). Similarity and distances of people across maps can only be determined using GPA which will be discussed in the following section.

Table 8.4 on the next page shows the raw data at Time Point 3. This was obtained after Stephen had completed three sessions of intervention. As can be seen from the table, the constructs elicited in this session are again different from those in previous sessions.

Figure 8.4 shows the third map. Given that one of Stephen’s barriers to learning was lack of sleep, this was addressed during intervention. Stephen clearly valued his time gaming and felt understood within that environment, although as evident in Table 8.4 he differentiated himself from his internet gaming friends in relation to some constructs. He was particularly interested in computer coding and wrote his own hacks for the games he played. He was open to suggestions about how he could manage his time and agreed to get more sleep at night. He had little interest in academic work at this time and said he was feeling bored in school. In this third map Stephen identifies most closely with his mother and school friend whom he also sees outside of school.
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Friend 1 (m)
Stepdad
Sister 1
Sister 2
Internet gamer
friend 1 (m)
Friend 2 (m)
Brother
Friend 1 (m)
Friend 3 (m)
Stephen
Sister 3
Cousin (f)
Teacher (m)
Sister 1
Sister 2

Figure 8.3 Stephen’s life space map at Time Point 2

Table 8.4 Data input at Time Point 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elicited construct</th>
<th>Quick to temper</th>
<th>Mellow-happy</th>
<th>Creative</th>
<th>Rebellious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friend 3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepdad</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (m)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower numbers indicate higher levels of the construct thus a positive endorsement for the person in relation to that construct.

This area of the map is denoted by scores that are a mix of positive and negative across constructs.

At the fourth session, again different constructs were elicited (see Table 8.5). Stephen’s scores for himself are 1, 1, 2, 1 and are all at or nearing the most positive scores for each construct.
Figure 8.4 Stephen’s life space map at Time Point 3

Table 8.5 Data input at Time Point 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elicited construct</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>Passionate</th>
<th>Open to other cultures</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friend 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepdad</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School friend 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet gamer friend 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (m)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.5 is the fourth and final map. There appears to be considerable movement in maps across times. While his teacher scores a ‘1’ and thus scores highly in ‘open to other cultures’ this individual does not score as highly in other constructs and this can be seen from the scores of 5, 4 and 5 for ‘loyalty’,
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‘passionate’ and ‘appearance’, respectively. This is true for many of the people in Stephen’s world. Likewise, his cousin scores a 1 on this construct but is not seen as loyal or passionate.

There seems to be an increase in how Stephen discriminates between people in his life when this map (Figure 8.5) is compared to his first map (Figure 8.2), which suggested that he saw little difference in a large cluster of people. Given that the number of levels Stephen uses across the card sort process does not differ appreciably over the course of the study, this increase in discrimination of people could be considered to be due to the intervention. He also moves away from identifying with his online friends and moves towards identifying more closely with people with whom he has daily contact.

Maps produced using MDS analysis of card sort data provide us with an overview of how Stephen construes his world across time points. MDS allows us to visually depict a map but without the use of GPA we would not be able to compare the maps across time. In the next section we will explain how change across time points is evaluated using GPA.

**Figure 8.5 Stephen’s life space map at Time Point 4**

How change across time points is evaluated using General Procrustes Analysis (GPA) and how to interpret the data output

GPA gives an evaluation of the degree of change across the card sort sessions. Output of GP analysis shows how the shape of the data, as visualised in two dimensions, changes over time. Data from Time Point 1 and Time Point 2 are combined to generate a baseline configuration. This configuration accounts,
to some degree, for error or ‘natural’ movement in identity against which the researchers compare self-concept after the intervention. The assumption underlying any change across time is that change is due to the intervention. In this study, the first two sessions were completed before any intervention was delivered. Movement across these time points is evaluated using GPA. A test statistic called the stress index at Time Point 1 and Time Point 2 gives an indication of stability in the life-space map.

Table 8.6 shows output from the GPA analysis of the first two sessions. The output shows the various cycles of the analysis process. In this case the analysis goes through five cycles before the optimal fit for the data is produced. The higher the stress (see De Leeuw & Heiser, 1982), the less the solution reflects the positioning of elements within the space. Stress of .1 or lower is acceptable. Conversely, the mean RV is a correlation coefficient that indicates the degree of data similarity across the two time points. The higher the number, the more similar the data is, with a coefficient of 1 indicating the two sets of data are identical. The data reaches optimal stress after five cycles at .81 suggesting that data collected at the two time points have high similarity. This suggests a high degree of stability in Stephen’s perception of his world and his perception of the people in it.

The results indicate that the data from times one and two fit well. GP analysis at time points three and four are then also compared. Output from these steps of the analysis is shown in Table 8.7.

Table 8.7 shows the goodness-of-fit statistic for each of the subsequent sorts. Goodness-of-fit is the correlation between each time. As can be seen, fit is poor at .44 and .33 for Time Point 3 and Time Point 4 respectively (perfect fit = 1) and this goodness-of-fit has decreased over time. This is reflected in the uniqueness scores for each time. Uniqueness scores indicate the degree of variance. A uniqueness score of 0 indicates that two samples are identical. The results indicate a large amount of uniqueness at Time Point 3 and Time Point 4. The decrease in goodness-of-fit across times coupled with an increase in uniqueness (sometimes described as error) suggests considerable change has occurred across times. Table 8.8 shows correlations between Time Point 3 and Time Point 4. Analysis of similarity between these two maps within this space is conducted. The purpose of this is to give an indication of stability or movement between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Stress (how well the data fits)</th>
<th>Mean RV (correlation coefficient)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1163 (not good fit)</td>
<td>.2841 (not similar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.0185</td>
<td>.8077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.0117</td>
<td>.8093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>.0032</td>
<td>.8097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>.0009 (fits very well)</td>
<td>.8098 (very similar)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.6 GPA analysis output of Time Point 1 and Time Point 2
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Time Point 3 and Time Point 4. High correlations indicate that stability has been achieved and that further intervention of the type conducted would not be warranted. Low correlations indicate that change is still occurring and further intervention is warranted.

In Table 8.8, the number above the diagonal, .155, is the correlation of Time Point 3 and Time Point 4 before GP analysis. The number below the diagonal, .289, is the low correlation of time three and time four. This means that Stephen will likely benefit from further intervention so that his scores reach a state of equilibrium. When taken collectively, the output from both Tables 8.7 and 8.8 suggests that change has indeed taken place across time and the qualitative nature of this change can be deduced by studying the life-space maps over time. One of the advantages of the method used is that analysis gives an indication of stability or, conversely, movement.

### Conclusion and recommendations

In sum, this chapter showcases current research that utilises an open, multiple-card sort technique. The purpose of this approach is to elicit how the participant views their world with a minimum of interference from the researcher. This chapter also showed how to analyse multiple-card sort data using multidimensional scaling and general Procrustes analysis and how to interpret the life-space maps generated using this method. The essence of this approach is based on the idea that it is possible to measure change in an individual across time. The unique use of dynamically assessing an individual over time using multiple-card sort data allows for this change to be captured and analysed objectively within the framework of idiographic measurement.

Our first recommendation to readers who intend on using this approach is to allow the participant to generate their own card sorts using terminology...
familiar to them. In this way, participants will feel that they are in control of the research process. Stephen generated the elements for this process with minimal interference from the researcher and he also produced the constructs to be used at each time, again with minimal interference. Through the sorting process he also developed the number of levels each construct had which were important to him.

Currently, the number of elements across time points must remain stable in order to conduct GP analysis. In this sense the process does not account for new people entering Stephen’s world. This can be considered a limitation. Also, while it is possible to stipulate that a client use the same constructs across times as well as dictate the number of levels for sorting in advance, imposing such constraints detracts from the generation of a representation of the client’s unique construal system. Thus, our second recommendation is that readers take note of this for any future study they wish to conduct using this method. What is presented here is a process that is as open as possible while allowing for evaluation of change across times using GP analysis.

One of the interesting artefacts of this process is a possible shift in the person’s construal system as a by-product of the card sort process itself. The card sort process asks the person to reflect on how they see themselves and others in relation to their own values or constructs. While this study suggests this construal is largely stable across time, we can see subtle shifts in Stephen’s construal across Time Point 1 and Time Point 2. For example, there appears to be greater discrimination between people in real life as opposed to the people in his virtual online world. In traditional classical psychometrics, such a confounding artefact is a potential pitfall of the method. This confound is accounted for during analysis in terms of determining the degree of change due to the intervention but it should be noted that the card sort process itself may have an impact on metacognition and on self-concept. Thus, our third recommendation to readers is that they familiarise themselves with both the advantages and disadvantages of traditional measures of change used in psychological research as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using idiographic measures of change such as that outlined in this chapter. Lastly, we recommend that interested readers receive training in laddering and card sort techniques. Training is available online and from institutions such as the British Psychological Society. While materials needed to conduct a card sort are readily available, currently software options available for processing the particular type of data described here are limited. The software used for this research is available on request from the second author and was developed by Hammond (2015).

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Notes

1 6th class is the final year of primary school in Ireland. After pre-school and before university education the education system in Ireland consists of eight years in primary school (junior and senior infants and 1st to 6th class) and five or six years in secondary school. See www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/ for more detail.

2 Euclidian distance is the distance between any two points measured by drawing a straight line between them.

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Chapter 9

Choosing constructivist grounded theory to explore children’s experiences of disclosing sexual abuse

Rosaleen McElvaney

Introduction

This chapter describes the process of choosing constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as a methodology for a research study that explored children’s experiences of disclosing sexual abuse. Despite ample literature on how CGT is used in research studies, there is limited focus how it is chosen. How children disclose sexual abuse experiences is a complex phenomenon, influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal factors. The suitability of CGT for a study such as this is discussed, in particular its emphasis on experiences as constructed within a social context; the availability of clear systematic procedural guidelines for how to conduct data analysis; the privileging of participants’ voices in a population whose experiences has often been one of disempowerment; and the focus on developing theory to not only describe experiences but to explain how it is that children tell.

My research journey involved consulting literature on qualitative methods used in researching children’s experiences (Greene & Hogan, 2005), exploring various qualitative methodologies that might fit with the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), discovering grounded theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and being drawn to the structured approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Finally, with emerging confidence in my analytic skills and having struggled with maintaining a good fit between my research question and my resulting analysis, I found that Charmaz’s (2006) focus on active processes in the data enabled me to develop a rich conceptual framework that captured the experiences of my research participants. This journey is described in what follows, through presenting an overview of the study, outlining the reasons why CGT was chosen as an appropriate methodology for this study and providing an illustration of how the shift from Straussian GT to CGT influenced the analytic journey.

Four arguments are presented as to why CGT was chosen in this study. Firstly, the theoretical underpinnings of this methodology with its emphasis on individual experience as constructed within a social context, valuing of subjectivity and diversity and flexibility advised in data collection and analysis
appeared to represent a good fit with the research question of exploring individual children’s experiences of a psychosocial phenomenon. Secondly, clear procedural guidelines are available in the published literature. Thirdly, as with other qualitative methodologies, participants’ voices are privileged, which fits with my worldview as a psychotherapist and researcher. In the case of CGT and other grounded theory approaches, there is an emphasis on staying close to the data and ensuring that the final analysis is a credible reflection of participants’ experiences. Finally, CGT focuses on developing new theoretical explanations of a psychosocial phenomenon, in particular where limited theory is available.

The impact of choosing CGT on the results is discussed, in particular how the move from Straussian GT to CGT led to a focus on process rather than content. The key learning points in this chapter are:

- Understanding the reasons behind the choice of CGT;
- How the choice of CGT over other forms of grounded theory influenced the analysis process.

**Overview of the study**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an important public health issue. Intervention with children who have been sexually abused often relies on the child being able to give a coherent verbal account of their experiences to relevant authorities (McElvaney, 2015a). However, prior to engagement with authorities, typically children must navigate the pathway of informal disclosure, telling someone in their social network (Morrison, Bruce, & Wilson, 2018). Both the clinical experience of the researcher and the limited research that was available at the time suggested that the disclosure process was a difficult one for children, resulting in delays in disclosure, often into adulthood. Survey studies in the US and Ireland suggested that approximately one in four adults or adolescents did not disclose until asked in a survey (Kogan, 2004; McGee, Garavan, deBarra, Byrne, & Conway, 2002; Smith et al., 2000). Similar findings have been confirmed in later studies in Sweden and Canada (Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, & Joly, 2009; Priebe & Svedin, 2008).

Exploring children’s experiences of disclosure could therefore assist wider society in learning how to help children disclose. Given the significant evidence for links between childhood sexual abuse and later victimisation and sexual exploitation (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010), early identification of victims of CSA may mediate its long-term psychological impact.

A review of research already conducted in this field revealed three major gaps. Firstly, the perspectives of children were markedly absent from the research literature as most studies had relied on retrospective reports from adults. Greene and Hogan (2005) highlighted the importance of asking children directly about their experiences, using child-centred methods. As a young participant in Mudaly and Goddard’s (2006) study put it: “get the kids interviewed from
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a kid’s point of view. No one knows kids better than the kids” (p. 10). Secondly, the methodology used was primarily surveys. Jones (2000) called for the need to complement quantitative studies with qualitative ones that capture the child’s individual experience and “their perception of the influences upon them which led to their disclosure” (p. 270). Thirdly, there had been limited attempts to develop theory in this field. Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones and Gordon (2003) proposed a conceptual model identifying older age, intra-familial abuse and feeling responsible for the abuse as predictors of delayed disclosure of CSA. Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) conceptualised the disclosure process as a staged temporal framework, where the young person came to a decision to tell, chose a confidant in whom they could trust and coped with the reaction to the abuse. They also found that consequences of the disclosure informed ongoing decisions about telling. The key aim of the study outlined here was therefore to address the shortcomings previously noted by accessing children’s narratives directly from the children themselves and developing a theory of CSA disclosure.

It was clear from the outset that a qualitative methodology was needed in order to “capture children’s lived experiences of the world and the meanings they attach to those experiences from their own perspectives” (Hogan, 1998, p. 6). A qualitative approach is also appropriate when investigating a complex and sensitive topic with a potentially vulnerable population. Compared to other qualitative methodologies, it was considered that GT best lends itself to the question of exploring how a process unfolds over time in different contexts and developing a theory that is strongly grounded in the words of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, the choice of CGT over other forms of GT, with its focus on active processes (what is happening in the data) and social context (what social influences impact on these processes), appeared to be particularly apt for the research question: how do children tell about experiences of sexual abuse?

The full study involved interviews with children (n = 22), their parents (n = 14) and adults (n = 10) who experienced sexual abuse in childhood (McElvaney, 2015b). Information about the child sample only is provided here. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children who had attended a child sexual abuse assessment and therapy service in Dublin, Ireland and a professional opinion had been offered that the young person had given a credible account of sexual abuse. Most of the young people (n = 20) were aged between 13 and 18 years. The type of abuse experienced ranged from fondling to penetration. Delay in disclosing, calculated from the time of onset of the abuse to the time of first informal disclosure, ranged from no delay to nine years. Children were asked about when they first told, who they told, what helped them tell, what prevented them from telling sooner, how others responded to their disclosure, subsequent experiences of telling and what thoughts they have about how we could help children tell more promptly. Interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed by the author to facilitate immersion in the data.
and to maintain the emotional integrity of the participants’ stories through a detailed listening to the audio.

An ecological developmental model was developed that conceptualises children’s experiences of disclosure as a process of containing the secret of child sexual abuse (McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2012). Three key dynamics were identified as illustrating this process: ‘actively withholding’ the secret; the experience of a ‘pressure cooker effect’; depicting the pull between wanting and not wanting to tell, followed by confiding the secret to a trusted other. The model acknowledges that children’s experiences of disclosure are multi-determined. Key factors influencing this process included ‘being believed’, ‘being asked’, ‘shame/self-blame’, ‘concern for self and others’ and ‘peer influence’ (McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2014). Distinctive findings included the extent to which children disclosed as a result of being asked about their psychological well-being. Adolescents in particular spoke of their concern for how distressed their parents would be if they told while also expressing their concern that other children may be at risk if they did not tell. Finally, young people spoke of the support they received from peers (most disclosed to a peer before disclosing to an adult) both in responding to the disclosure and, in many instances, insisting that an adult be told. The findings highlight the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics that influence the disclosure process, as well as the wider contextual issues such as family and peer relationships, the influence of schools and the social stigma surrounding the issue of child sexual abuse. The overall process of containing the secret reflects children’s need for the secret to be contained as they navigate the pathway of disclosure through their interactions with child protection professionals, therapeutic services and, for some, the courts process. While it is necessary to disclose their experiences in order to access these services, they continue to need the secret contained.

Choosing constructivist grounded theory (CGT)

The research question in this study was an exploratory one, seeking to discover how a process unfolds. This required a methodology that was sensitive to issues such as examining process, capturing the meaning of this process to the participant and authentically representing the voices of those with direct experience of the process.

Four key arguments supported the use of CGT for this study: the alignment between the theoretical basis of the methodology and the research question; the availability of clear procedural guidelines; the privileging of children’s voices; and the need to build theory to explain how these processes unfold. While these arguments equally apply to support the choice of other GT approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the importance of alignment between the analytic approach and the research question was the discerning factor in choosing CGT for this study. This became particularly evident when analysing the data, which is discussed in what follows.
The theoretical basis of the methodology

Grounded theory (GT), in its original form, did not have a theoretical basis as such (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as it focused on the development of new theory. Glaser (2002) aimed for an objective representation of participants’ experiences, while other authors note that subjectivity in GT is inevitable as two researchers coding the same transcripts can develop different conceptual categories (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). Given the uniqueness of each child’s experience of disclosing sexual abuse, a methodology that honoured subjectivity was deemed to be important.

Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) version of GT is seen as situated within a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework. Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how individuals construct meaning in relation to a social process, formed through their interactions with one another (Blumer, 1986). Charmaz (2006) saw herself as building on Strauss and Corbin’s work but was strongly influenced by a social constructivist paradigm, acknowledging that there are multiple realities, not one true reality, and that experiences are socially constructed.

According to Charmaz (2006), CGT aims to explain social or psychological realities through identifying processes, asking the question ‘what is happening here?’. In the context of this study, the process of disclosing sexual abuse was seen as a psychosocial phenomenon. Thus, while the individual psychology of the child was of interest, the social context of the disclosure was also of relevance. A theoretical framework that encapsulated both the psychological and the social was needed: “because grounded theory methods are designed to study processes, these methods enable psychologists to study the development, maintenance and change of individual and interpersonal processes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 30).

My questions for this study were: how do children disclose experiences of child sexual abuse?; what are the obstacles to disclosure?; how do children overcome these obstacles?; what made them tell when they did?; does age or gender make a difference?; how can we help children tell?

Charmaz’s theoretical position of the existence of multiple realities fits well with the need to respect the individuality of children’s experiences of disclosure. Children who are abused are not a homogenous group. Their circumstances and the dynamics within their families are as individual as they are. Thus a methodology that acknowledges diversity and encourages flexibility in data collection was deemed essential. Similarly, GT’s distinctive techniques of theoretical sampling, negative case analysis and theoretical saturation, which all form part of the CGT approach, value diversity rather than attempting to control for variability (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015 for a more detailed commentary on these techniques).

Finally, the acknowledgement within GT that the researcher, far from being an objective observer, impacts on the research process was appealing to me as a psychotherapist and fitted with my own worldview. Guba and Lincoln (2005) describe reflexivity as “the process of reflecting critically on the self as
researcher” (p. 210). In research, the researcher is a research instrument, much as in therapeutic work the therapist is a therapeutic tool. Reflexivity then in research is akin to personal awareness in therapeutic work. Both share a common purpose of making conscious or explicit the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that may influence the researcher/therapist in their research/therapeutic work. Both researcher and research participant influence the research process. Child sexual abuse is an emotive topic of research. While more has been written about how working therapeutically with children who have been sexually abused can impact on the therapist (O’Shea & McElvaney, 2001; Wheeler & McElvaney, 2017), these same issues apply to the researcher. Having a conscious awareness of one’s own family history and the potential influence this has on one’s development, one’s own attitudes to sexuality and child sexual abuse and one’s own life experiences and how these influence our belief systems and our work is essential. Charmaz (2006) contends that any observer’s worldview, disciplinary assumptions, theoretical leanings and research interests will influence his or her observations and emerging categories. The theory produced represents, therefore, one particular reading of the data rather than the one true position. Thus, while alignment between methodology and the research question is important, so too is alignment between the theoretical underpinnings of the chosen methodology and the worldview of the researcher.

**Clear procedural guidelines for the researcher**

GT’s procedural guidelines, primarily offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998), were used in the first analysis of data in this study. A description of the stages of coding and examples from the study are outlined in what follows in the illustration of how I moved from using GT to CGT. These include the processes of open coding, axial coding, the use of a reflective journal, memo writing and member checking.

Charmaz (2000, p. 512) was critical of the highly structured and detailed guidelines that Strauss and Corbin offered for guiding the analysis of data, describing it as a “maze of techniques” that diverged from classic GT flexible guidelines and developed into “immutable rules” which she regarded as rigid and over complicated. Nevertheless, Strauss and Corbin’s guidelines offer a clear road map and are useful in the early stage of analysis to ensure rigour and a systematic approach to analysis. On the other hand, Charmaz’s (2006) focus on identifying active processes in the data helped with keeping the analysis process aligned with the research question of how children tell.

These procedures and techniques assist in maintaining transparency and facilitating reflexivity and credibility (enable the reader to judge the rigour of the analysis), cornerstones of good qualitative research (Elliot, Fisher, & Rennie, 1999). Following these guidelines instilled in me a confidence that my analytic process was credible and that the theoretical model that I hoped to develop would be well grounded in my data.
Privileging the voice of the participant

GT aims to capture “participants’ own accounts and viewpoints” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003, p. 134) and the objective of the researcher is to view events and experiences “through the eyes of the people that they study” (Bryman, 2012, p. 399). This is consistent with many feminist approaches to working therapeutically with those who have experienced sexual abuse, where “the survivor is seen as the authority on her own experience which she is assisted to explore” (Courtois, 1988, p. 120). The inductive open coding methods used in GT of staying close to the data ensure an adherence to the integrity of the perspective of the research participant not unlike Winnicott’s (1971, p. 117) description of therapy as “not making clever and apt interpretations; by and large it is a long-term giving the patient back what the patient brings”. The word grounded in GT refers to the need to ground the theory in the data gathered from participants. Thus, the emphasis in GT of using the participants’ own words and identifying themes that stay as close as possible to what the participants said ensured that children’s narratives would be foreground in the final theoretical framework.

An emphasis on building theory

A distinctive feature of GT is its attempt to build theoretical frameworks that explain behaviour and processes (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). This study aimed to capture the participants’ experience of disclosure, not only a description of what this process looks like but an understanding of how the process of disclosure unfolded and the meaning bestowed on this process by the participant. Thus, it went beyond description and attempted to explain the process. This included how the need to keep the secret and the concerns about what would happen if they told resulted in children engaging in an active process of withholding the secret. It also included how several factors contributed to a building up of psychological pressure that led to the disclosure happening within a context of a close relationship.

In GT the simultaneous engagement in the data collection and analysis phases of research helps to keep the researcher focussed on the outcome, that is, the task of theory building. Norton (1999) describes this distinctive characteristic of GT as the abductive strategy of theory generation, which is a cyclical process of data collection, hypothesis formation, testing and theorising. These processes are facilitated through the techniques of theoretical sampling, negative case analysis and theoretical saturation (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2014) for more detail on these techniques).

From Straussian GT to constructivist GT: an illustration

This section offers an illustration of how the choice of CGT was influenced by and influenced the data analysis process in this study. Strauss and Corbin’s
Rosaleen McElvaney (1998) guidelines explicitly lay out procedures for coding in a step-by-step manner. The first stage of coding, the open coding phase, involves a line-by-line examination of the transcripts, labelling concepts that best describe what is being said in the text. As each new category or node is created, it is defined clearly and is then available for use if other data are identified as fitting with this category. For example, a 16-year-old boy described how his sister asked him if his cousin had done anything to upset him and he said “no, no, no” (McElvaney et al., 2012, p. 1162). This text was coded as an open code, ‘denial’. Categories are not mutually exclusive insofar as the same text can be allocated simultaneously to more than one category. Thus, this data was also coded as other open codes, ‘not wanting people to know’ and ‘being asked’. The label chosen for a category is the one that best reflects what the text is saying.

The second stage of coding, axial coding, consists of reviewing low level concepts and comparing them with each other in a process known as constant comparison and where appropriate, clustering them together to form higher level concepts, or categories. Similarities and differences between categories are considered and, on the basis of this, codes may be merged, amended or new category labels may be generated. These represent higher conceptual level themes that may have lower level themes connected to them, while all the time ensuring that the higher level categories are well grounded in the data so that the participants’ voices are represented with integrity.

However, the first attempt at open coding following completion of three interviews revealed a tendency on my part to move to higher conceptual categories prematurely (for example, ‘reasons for not telling’ or ‘triggers’). The categories were reflecting a structure imposed on the data by the questions from the interview schedule (for example, What helped you tell? What stopped you from telling sooner?). I was able to make a conceptual shift following my attendance at a lecture given by Kathy Charmaz in Leicester, UK, and reading her book *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz recommends that themes identified from data should be active if they are to portray an underlying social process. One of the coding problems she points out is that of “identifying topics instead of actions and processes” (p. 69). This is precisely what I had done. I created lists of themes that simply answered the questions asked in my interview schedule but did not address the question of how children tell. She suggests that certain questions be asked of the data such as, “What process(es) is at issue here? How can I define it? How does this process develop?” (p. 51) and in testing whether the code is an appropriate one “can you explicate what is happening in this line or segment of data with this concept?” (p. 68). My engagement with Charmaz’s work led to revisiting the data with a new lens, that offered by Charmaz who aimed to build on the roots of GT and the symbolic interactionist emphasis on meaning, language, interpretation and interaction, with her constructivist focus on process rather than content.

The raw data were reread with a particular emphasis on seeking a theme-driven approach that reflected active processes rather than describing passive
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phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). Through this process, certain themes that had previously been subordinate categories were promoted to higher level categories. Charmaz (2006) suggests asking questions of the data to elicit information about the process that the research participant is describing. A 13-year old boy described his father asking him questions and him responding, “I denied it for a while”. This data was initially coded at ‘denial’ but the code label was later changed to ‘denying when asked’ to capture both the process of the young person being asked and their experience of denying it. This in turn was clustered with other codes such as ‘not wanting to tell’ to form a higher level category ‘active withholding’. Through interrogating my domains with Charmaz’s question ‘what is happening here?’ I saw ‘denying when asked’ as a higher level domain, reflecting a process in itself that represented an active withholding of the sexual abuse secret. Thus, I was able to better align my analysis with the research question, the process of how children tell.

A reflective journal facilitated the recording of methodological decisions and accompanying rationales (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), such as why codes were merged with each other, how definitions of codes were expanded to accommodate other similar codes or why codes were deleted due to overlapping meanings. For example, at one point I reflected on the distinction between children denying that they were abused when asked and not wanting other people to know about it. The former, in my view, represented a more active process with deliberate intent and contributed to a later key theme of ‘active withholdings’ of the secret. Similarly, memos recorded my conceptual thinking in relation to particular themes as they were identified, providing a paper trail of the analysis process. Thus, a memo on ‘denial when asked’ detailed my reflections on how we can help children tell. Even when they are asked, it can be difficult for children to tell, but this should not stop us asking. One young person was asked to review the coding of their transcripts (member checking) and provide feedback as to whether they considered the coding reflected his/her experiences. In particular, the theme of ‘pressure cooker effect’ was discussed and whether the experience of pressure building up within the young person, both in response to their own escalating psychological distress and in response to others asking them about their wellbeing, was captured in this concept. The young person agreed that this term resonated with their understanding of the build up to disclosure.

Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter describes how CGT was chosen and used in a study of children’s experiences of disclosing sexual abuse. The research journey is described here to illustrate how CGT was chosen, the factors that influenced this choice and how the choice of methodology can influence the data analysis and ultimate findings. The importance of alignment between research question and methodology is highlighted in how my original choice of Straussian GT resulted in my
answering a different research question, ‘what influences children’s disclosure?’; while the focus on process in CGT helped me to address my question, ‘how do children tell?’ CGT was considered a good theoretical fit with my research question, with its emphasis on individual variability, subjectivity, privileging the voices of participants and building new theory. The step-by-step guide to data analysis offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and their updated edition (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) provides clear detailed systematic procedures for data analysis that can be particularly appealing to novice qualitative researchers, while those interested in developing theories that focus on underlying processes may find Charmaz’s (2006, 2014) approach more suited to their research questions.

It is important to consider your research question in detail. If the question is seeking to explore a process, a ‘how’ question, then CGT may be a good fit. If the question is concerned with psychosocial processes and the researcher is interested in the social context within which a process unfolds, CGT may be a good fit. If the researcher is attempting to explore experiences from the perspective of the participants and is interested in developing a conceptual framework to capture these experiences but wishes to stay as close as possible to the participants’ experiences, then CGT may be a good fit. When considering a methodology, there is a need to consider its underpinning assumptions. It is a good idea to read about the assumptions within the theoretical underpinnings of the methodology. In the case of CGT there is an assumption that individuals construct meaning from their experiences and that individuals are influenced by the social context within which they live in constructing this meaning. It is also assumed that each individual’s experience is different and this diversity is welcomed.

In addition to ensuring that there is a good fit between methodology and research question, other considerations are important, such as whether you as a researcher prefer a structured set of procedures to help you on your research journey or a more flexible approach that allows for more creativity in the analysis process. This may depend on your experience as a researcher, your worldview, or it may to some extent be influenced by the research topic. It may also depend on what other resources you have to draw on, such as supervision support or if you are working as part of a research team.

References
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Introduction

This chapter outlines the psychoanalytically informed methods used to collect and analyse data in a study of staff and patient relationships in a public mental health service. In relationships we experience strong and powerful affects that influence likes, dislikes and the quality of interactions. When we experience strong feelings of love or hate in an interaction there is an attempt to rationalise what is occurring. Conscious rationalisation invariably attributes the reaction to the social situation, the overt relationship to another. Psychoanalysis’s concept of transference exposes the unconscious source, purpose and potential of these powerful affects. Conducting psychoanalytic research is challenging as the data sought after relates to unconscious processes, hidden aspects of human experience. Data for the study referred to in this chapter was collected by non-participant observation, opportunistic conversations and formal interviews informed by psychoanalytic methods. The aim of this chapter is to increase the reader’s understanding of the application of psychoanalytic theory and practice as tools that extend beyond conventional approaches to social research. Institutions have a homogeneous nature and the study design outlined in this chapter offers a possible template to explore other social institutions.

The three learning points for the reader in this chapter are:

- Understanding how to conduct non-participant observation in psychoanalytic research;
- Understanding the key elements of psychoanalytically informed interview techniques;
- Understanding how to approach psychoanalytically informed data analysis.

Overview of the research study

The study site was a contemporary Irish mental health service which featured in the media as an exemplifier of the organisation of mental health care around
an institutional structure (Connelly, 1980; Gilsenan, 2005). The constituting nature of an institution influences the dynamic between individuals suggesting that change is unlikely to occur without recognition of the impact of the unconscious (Lyth, 1988). Change was imposed on the service at intervals of seven and two years prior to the study with the introduction of new mental health legislation and policy (Health Service Executive, 2006; Mental Health Act, 2001). The aim of the research was to investigate the unconscious dynamic of transference and to make recommendations in relation to how recognition and management of transference may have positive outcomes for service occupants.

Transference has a structuring effect on relationships and is generally understood as the attribution of the qualities of a significant person from the past onto a person in the present, sometimes without taking unconscious elements into account (Skelton, 2006). We experience transference in immediate reactions of liking or disliking someone we have never met before, in the experience of falling in love at first sight, in our reaction to others. Love therefore is of interest to psychoanalysts because it allows us to understand the mechanism of transference (Lacan, 1994).

When a person’s mental health is compromised we see aspects of their relationship style that we would not notice otherwise (Freud, 1917/2001a). If a person’s self-preservation instincts are challenged, they will act opportunistically, looking for another to give them a sense of safety, security, love and belongingness. Not surprisingly anyone entering mental health care may direct their feelings at those that express an interest in them, giving transference a positive quality. However, many staff and patients experience a reversal into the opposite, that is, hostile or negative feelings. Positive transference is normally identified with love whereas negative transference is never identified with hate. Instead we normally employ the term ambivalence. Lacan (1994) suggests that positive transference is when you have a soft spot for the subject and that negative transference is when you have to keep an eye on him. Keeping an eye on or observing the patient, in particular patients that may harm themselves or others, is a concern for staff whose practice is founded in observation and categorisation (Foucault, 1961/2006). Additionally patients observe and categorise staff for whom they may develop positive or negative feelings. Patients want to be loved by the staff and staff can be overwhelmed by this (Lyth, 1988). Health care delivery takes place within a relationship that carries expectations that differ from other social relationships. It should aim to be a therapeutic professional relationship placing responsibility on staff to acknowledge and address subjectivity.

Two settings were used for data collection: the acute admission unit and a day hospital. All site visits, following permission to conduct the study, were treated as data collection opportunities. Multiple data sources are commonly used in studies to reflect a total situation. Therefore the researcher was guided by four
ethnographic data sources outlined by Taylor (1994) and used in combination with a psychoanalytic approach:

- Data was collected from interviews, conversations, observations and documents;
- Behaviour was observed in everyday context rather than experimental conditions;
- An unstructured approach was adopted to data gathering in the early stages, to allow key issues to emerge during analysis;
- An in-depth study of one or two situations, in this case staff/patient and staff/staff interactions was made.

The primary data collection methods used were non-participant observation and psychoanalytically informed interviews. With the former, data was gathered on the observable relationships between staff and patients by watching and listening to their interactions. All data collection in the form of non-participant observation, development of field notes, informal opportunistic conversations and formal audio-recorded interviews took place on-site. Off-site field notes and researcher reflections were reviewed and expanded upon and audio recordings were transcribed and analysed. Quiet presence and free-floating attention, techniques of psychoanalysis, featured as guiding principles for the researcher’s conduct. Quiet presence and free-floating attention involve “overall” listening to what is being said as opposed to trying to catch every word”. It also refers to “going with” the participant and not trying to keep them on a particular theme. This allows for noting of “non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of communication”, while also noting your own “thoughts, feelings and body sensations” (Burnard, 1992/2013, p. 89).

To capture the total situation participants were observed in the real life context of services during normal office hours. Overt observations (n = 52) were conducted in general ward areas, corridors, hallways, sitting rooms, dining room, bedrooms, meeting rooms, therapy rooms and offices. Written consent was obtained from participants for formal interviews. It was anticipated that up to 20 formal interviews and opportunistic conversations were required to support the other data sources, in keeping with sample sizes obtained for similar studies (Bion, 1961/2004; Estoff, 1985; Lyth, 1988; Scheper-Hughes, 1979). The anticipated sample size was flexible allowing for data saturation and deemed appropriate for a qualitative study, as well as the subgroups of participants (McLeod, 2011). Data saturation is a point where the researcher is satisfied that no new information will be obtained from collecting further data. This determines the sample size in qualitative research as it indicates that sufficient data has been collected for a detailed analysis. The observation period allowed for the recording of 156 opportunistic conversations and ongoing analysis of this data and the field notes supported data from ten formal interviews.
Participants for formal interviews were identified based on the desire to get a picture of the total situation, the literature reviewed and field observations. Care was taken to ensure that I observed and listened to all grades of staff and patients occupying the study site. Group psychoanalytic literature (Bion, 1961/2004; De Board, 1978/2006; Freud, 1914/2001b), indicated the need to interview participants with limited as well as extensive experience of services in order to gain access to personalised yet contextualised accounts. All requests for patient participation were made through staff, as agreed when negotiating ethical permission, while staff were approached directly. Formal interviews were conducted in rooms designated for that purpose. In line with best practice participants were given a participant’s information sheet and asked for written consent. To maintain consistency in data management formal interviews were recorded electronically, transferred to the researcher’s password protected computer, identified by a set of codes, listened to repeatedly and transcribed onto field notes templates.

Psychoanalytic research, like ethnographic research, utilises multiple data sources such as participants’ speech and actions, observations of social and cultural structures, examination of the products of a group or culture, therefore making it an examination of a total situation (Bion, 1961/2004; De Board, 1978/2006; Diamond, 1993; Fotaki, 2010; Lacan, 1994; Lyth, 1988; Vanheule, 2003). The data was subjected to a psychoanalytic investigation with reference to the speech and actions of participants. The study did not involve the psychoanalysis of subjects. Instead it viewed the data through a lens informed by a specific aspect of psychoanalysis, Lacan’s discourse theory, which describes social bonds constructed by discourse, desire and social interaction (see Lacan, 1969/2007). The researcher looked for the actions of the unconscious in these sources as it is observable in our discourse and our social bonds and is particularly evident in anxiety, proving situations making critical incidents a rich source of relevant data.

Findings indicated that transference was unacknowledged and unmanaged in the study setting. Services were found to be constructed around a bureaucratic patriarchal structure supporting staff power and unconsciously generating jouissance. Findings also suggested that health care legislation limits patient access to meaningful therapeutic relationships. Services fail patients and staff by not incorporating knowledge of the importance of primary relationships founded on love but incommensurable with orthodox science. To achieve constructive consistent change, extensive staff retraining, education and support were recommended.

**Conducting non-participant observation in psychoanalytic research**

In overt observation participants know they are being observed and by whom (Howitt & Cramer, 2005). Overt observations were conducted and justified by
Foucault’s argument that mental health services are places of observation, often observation by strangers, staff, patients, inspectors and managers who observe and are observed Foucault (1961/2006). Non-participant observation involved the researcher making his presence known to participants and then taking an unobtrusive position, usually sitting in the background in a day room or nursing station where he could see, hear and absorb activity. The experience was that patients generally ignored the presence of the researcher on initial visits. Subsequent visits resulted in patients enquiring about the study’s progress and engaging the researcher in conversation.

Staff initially appeared conscious of the researcher, offering to explain their activities. This changed on subsequent visits to acknowledging the researcher’s presence and engaging less in meaning making. For observations to be meaningful it was necessary to be immersed in the setting, essentially developing a pattern of regular attendance to keep pace with day-to-day life (Bernard, 1988; Estroff, 1985; Lyth, 1988). Psychoanalytic research involves seeking sufficient data for saturation and providing a balanced picture mindful of repetitions. New data is repeatedly searched for until a level of certainty can be achieved, confirming what has been discovered while acknowledging that single events are not necessarily the norm of daily activity (Hollway & Jeffer son, 2000). After repeated visits, opportunistic conversations, interviews and initial analysis, repetition in service occupants’ speech and actions was noted, indicating saturation (Beins, 2004).

In observation the researcher is part of the situation under scrutiny and the way in which the method is constructed (Taylor, 1994). The researcher’s identity, their relationship with the researched and the process itself contains elements of interpretation and power that need to be accounted for. The management of transference in psychoanalysis captures the inter-subjective experience of researcher and researched. Observations in the examples given here were conducted in a particular manner that acknowledges the researcher’s presence, position and bias. Non-participant observation requires the researcher to demonstrate respect for participants by being mindful not to obstruct or hinder the work of the organisation and to respect participants’ dignity and privacy. For example, during one observation period I was aware of loud, distressed, inarticulate shouting coming from the bathroom area. Nurses rushed to what appeared to be a critical incident. Observation of the incident may have provided valuable data however it was in an area where observation would not normally occur. Therefore researcher judgement was applied that direct observation would have been obtrusive and I relied instead on the subsequent discussion staff had regarding the critical incident (Moore, 2017).

An understanding of the function of the social organisation is essential so discretion in recognising when it might be inappropriate to remain in a setting where privacy is required or where their presence may add to tension becomes a researcher responsibility. The non-participant observer should simply observe and not engage in activity, including note-taking, fulfilling the psychoanalytic approach of quiet presence and free floating attention.
Observing, but not engaging in activities, causes elements of reactivity in researchers, both consciously and unconsciously. For example, when conducting observation in a unit area, where different activities and conversations may occur simultaneously, why would the researcher choose to listen more attentively and report on one over another? I made pragmatic decisions about recording when conversations were audible and therefore easier to report accurately or when incidents evoked staff responses. I found my attention drawn to patient and staff discussions of mental health care as these related to the research question and the literature on social bonds and discourse. This allowed me to focus on data relating to the study’s aim. The motivation for these choices was recorded in the field notes, analysed and discussed in supervision to guard against missing potential relevant material.

**Knowledge of the field and recording in non-participant observation**

Fieldwork skills include learning the language, developing awareness and memory, maintaining naïveté and development of writing skills (Bernard, 1988). To become part of any social group, speaking the language of its inhabitants gives access to cultural expressions, symbols, signifiers and their significance. I had an advantage of having worked in mental health services for 30 years prior to the study. Psychoanalysis’s concern with the otherness of language and the distance between articulation and desire raised concern that two sets of language needed to be considered, formal clinical language used for observation and categorisation and colloquial language spoken by service occupants. Additionally the individual subjective use of language would normally be accounted for in psychoanalysis, suggesting that an analysis of the total situations is difficult. However group psychoanalytic theory allows for the emergence of shared unconscious associations. Building explicit awareness refers to an ability to note small details of life revealing significant things about the organisation of culture and society.

Researchers, similar to psychoanalysts, aim to collect data relating to a question while remaining open to possibilities that the material uncovered may or may not provide an answer. The requirement to recognise and analyse content and dynamic is a parallel process to maintaining naïveté. Adopting the position that the world is shaped by the self and shapes the self, there is a risk that naïveté would be sidelined in favour of seeking confirming data in the analysis process. By conducting an exhaustive description the possibility of arriving at an understanding of what is observed and analysed is somewhat protected. Assumptions in psychoanalysis are held at bay by free-floating attention, which is not attempting to make conclusions or connections until an exhaustive exploration is completed. The avoidance of deliberately concentrating on any particular aspect guards against following expectations and inclinations and the risk of only finding out what was already known. Maintaining naïveté allows
the researcher to be surprised. Psychoanalytic research is directed at what is seen but also what is hidden such as the latent (hidden and disguised) content and gaps in the data. The investigation is less in description of phenomena and more in the analysis of speech and actions. In the following example we see a student unconsciously mimicking patient behaviour. Both patient and student are distressed and both are unaddressed by the staff present:

Outside the window in the observation area there is a male patient pacing back and forth. Occasionally he talks to himself as if he is responding to a voice he hears. He also makes unusual gestures with his hands; he appears distressed. This behaviour is consistent for the hour I spend in the office. There is a student nurse on the unit. He is on their first placement in a mental health service and does not appear to be engaged in any specific activity. The student is also wandering back and forth outside the office. At one point the student came and stood outside the door looking into the office in the same manner I had noted patients doing. He then paced around the observation area mimicking the gestures and movements of the patient I had noticed pacing in this area.

(Moore, 2012)

This critical incident picks up on the small details of life in the social situation that would not have been captured if interviews alone were used. Similarly it would have eluded analysis without the psychoanalytic approach to analysing latent content in a social setting.

On-site field notes were taken by hand. For consistency all data was transferred onto a standard template including indices of time, place and social activity as well as the researcher’s reflections and analysis of the recorded observation. While consistency in data recording is important and used as an expression of validity, there are inherent risks that valuable information can be misrepresented or lost in the process of translation from one medium to another, therefore original notes and recordings were retained and reviewed to ensure accuracy. Being mindful of reflexivity and the desire to maintain quiet presence the researcher observed interactions, incidents or activities and then left the immediate area to make notes privately, to avoid being intrusive (Taylor, 1994). All participants were assigned a code to disguise their identities, to reflect the translation from individual to group psychology and to gather data on the total setting as opposed to analysis of subgroups or individuals. Quotations, including participant speech, occasionally included biographical work role information to establish context. An exception was made when attending multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings, where notes were recorded in the presence of participants. MDT meetings varied in duration between 45 minutes and two hours generating more data than could be retained accurately without notes. If I had opted to remove myself at intervals for note making it would have disturbed participants, data may have been missed and/or quiet presence not maintained.
This flexibility in recording data, while essential, led to an incident where the note-taking was commented on, 'he is writing frantically now' (Moore, 2012), by a team member during a fractious exchange about patient care.

**Interviewing techniques in psychoanalytic research**

The technique of quiet presence guided observations in both opportunistic conversations and formal recorded interviews. Non-participant observation generated opportunistic conversations with participants who addressed the researcher, indicating an element of self-selection. Frequently these started when a participant inquired about the study and proceeded to speak about their understanding of the mental health service. These participants had something to say and used the opportunity opened to them by the researcher’s presence and interest. I presented no agenda, beyond a brief explanation of the study, and then allowed the participant to speak freely. This approach is similar to the instructions given to a patient in psychoanalysis who is asked to say anything and everything that comes to mind, to free associate, while the analyst listens.

Quiet presence is established over time and enables observation of and acceptance by participants and implies being open to making your presence explicit when required. Copies of the permission to conduct the study and the ethical approval were carried on all data collections visits. Introductions were repeated on return visits even after I became recognisable to participants who acknowledged my presence allowing the observation of activities without repeating explanations. Psychoanalysis is usually conducted with the analyst outside the patient’s line of vision. Taking a position at the periphery, listening in a focused manner is a specific purposeful ritual (Nixon, 2005). Following repeated visits my peripheral presence did not appear to disturb the organisation unduly.

In conversations and formal interviews I remained detached so as not to engage in a relationship where participants performed to produce satisfactory answers. Detachment was achieved by not expressing opinions or reacting to participants’ critiques. When participants responded to the open-ended question to say anything and everything they wanted to about the mental health service and their relationships with other occupants, by asking me to be more specific, I responded by encouraging them to start anywhere as I was interested in everything they could tell me. Narrative interviews with open-ended non-directive questions, as recommended by Kvale (1996), centre on the stories the participants want to tell, were encouraged. Free association in the clinic involves asking the patient to say whatever comes into their mind to elicit narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic, in other words, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and this was my aim during conversations and interviews.
This technique required the researcher to allow a silence to occur if the participant cannot answer immediately or to provide additional cues by rephrasing the question to stimulate a response such as saying: ‘How do you find it here?’ or ‘What kind of encounters have you had here?’ For example when given this opportunity a participant gave the following account, which provides data about the social bond between service occupants:

I was frightened to talk, I could not find a beginning, it was so tangled I was talking in reams. I relied mostly on the nurses; being feminine they could calm you. I would not trust anyone at all to understand to know me, I was afraid of myself and the power in my head.

(Moore, 2012)

In contrast, another participant gives an account of the power the social setting gives staff to behave in a manner that would be unacceptable in another social situation:

You reduce their personhood to a diagnostic problem and everything gets sucked into the explanatory power of that and it is enormously powerful and you end up finding people behaving in ways that they wouldn’t do in any other context. It is really quite astonishing. It swings almost completely to the opposite direction where you have people being talked at in very, very disrespectful kinds of ways. Ways that you would not speak to someone at a party, in a café. Really astonishing stuff and you know there is almost like an implicit permission when you dehumanise people, to behave towards them in certain kinds of ways, it’s part of kind of institutionalisation, kind of culture that sometimes dominates the mental health system.

(Moore, 2012)

Systemic chronological narrative was discouraged by not including a timeframe in questions as this is less likely to lead to the disclosure of unconscious material than a free-flowing account of anything that comes to mind. The instruction to tell your story as it occurs allows for repetitions and for new and additional material to emerge. In this way data collection and preliminary analysis merge. The cues provided, which cannot be set in advance, are generated by the narrative and are an initial interpretation of the data.

The researcher seeks, through analysis of the narrative, themes that connect aspects of the story. “The interview technique involves not intervening until the interchange is handed back and identifying the themes which are apparent, so as to return to them in the order of their appearance to elicit further detail” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 40). The style in which Freud encouraged patients to speak and how he recorded case histories with little regard for the sequence of their histories (Mahony, 2005) implies circularity in interpretation, the relation
of parts to the whole, indicating interdependence between the interpretation of individual interviews and the total data amassed (Audi, 1999). An analytic task for the researcher is to enable unconscious data to emerge from participants by enabling them to run around in the data allowing interpretation to take place. Cues need to be simple, encouraging and balanced in order to maintain quiet presence and enable free association, for example, ‘Continue, I’m listening’ or ‘Yes’. This maintains quiet presence and avoids leading the participant in a particular direction in their narrative. This requires the researcher as analyst and the participant as researched to remain active in the process even when it appears daunting or fruitless. By allowing each story to be finished rather than seeking clarity and risk cutting across the interviewee’s narrative s/he is invited to continue his/her story wherever it goes with noncommittal but interested cues resulting in narratives that are a product of the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This style demonstrates that the key elements of a psychoanalytically informed interview technique are intertwined with the application of psychoanalytic theory in data analysis.

The application of psychoanalysis to data analysis

Data analysis is an ongoing circular process requiring multiple revisions. Analysis commenced during data collection and was aided by keeping reflective notes enabling secondary extensive analysis and reflection. For example, in the early field notes given below I noted the untidy office and inside-out jacket of the service manager. I pondered frequently on the significance of this. It was only at the end of the data analysis phase that its relevance as a metaphor for service disorganisation and the exposition of what normally is unseen or unconscious became significant.

“For extensive interpretation of meaning, rich and nuanced descriptions in the interviews are advantageous, as are critical interpretive questions during the interview” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 216). This necessitates detailed verbatim descriptions. However Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that the commitment in social science research to represent interviewees’ voices can eliminate distinctions between description and theoretical interpretation emphasising the need to analyse the data with a theory of the subject, including reflexivity to assist in the analysis. Therefore I did not commence data collection until I had conducted a careful review of the literature relating to transference, social bonds, Lacian discourse, psychoanalytic interview techniques and the organisation of mental health care. This enabled the application of psychoanalytic theory in data analysis. Equipped with knowledge of previous research, pertinent theory and appropriate skills I was able to gather and analyse data from an informed perspective. Reflexivity is not a substitute for utilising theory but it can strengthen a theoretical conviction (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). For example, in the first set of field notes made following a meeting with a service
manager, the chaotic approach to organisation and inside-out nature of the unconscious, which emerged in subsequent data, were presented as if written in the office space and on the body of the manager:

I met with the service manager. It was a number of months since I had been there to meet the previous service manager. There were a lot of boxes filled with papers, reports and files scattered about. X told me that they were having a clear out, tidying things up. We discussed the research project. I was very aware throughout the meeting that the X’s suit jacket was on inside out.

(Moore, 2012)

Second stage analyses led to the emergence of threads of information and recognition of commonalities in participants’ perceptions and were added to the texts. This process of additions to the text differs to coding which is frequently used for the management of “a mass of unstructured data” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 68). By making additions the researcher is enabled to understand the data in relation to a total situation. For example, in the previous quotes from two participants, one notes their fear of speaking and the other the misuse of power in speaking. Second stage analysis allows for the commonality in these threads to be analysed regarding the total situation and the underpinning psychoanalytic discourse theory. “The structuralist movement, which started in social anthropology and linguistics, emphasise that meaning could only be understood in relation to a larger whole, whether it be the culture, the sentence or the narrative” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 69).

A third phase of analysis was conducted as transcripts were reread with identified threads, with commonalities and reflections in mind. This repetitive process of reading, rereading and condensing data into coherent threads allowed for immersion and the identification of connections between different data sources in a bottom-up approach. Similar to Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) approach, five elements of the data were drawn together, which resulted in the emergence of psychoanalytic formulations:

1 Verifiable information in the interview transcripts (references to external sources, job titles, service structures);
2 The free associations of interviewees (what they said when left to give unstructured narratives);
3 Shared cultural assumptions of the interviewer and interviewees (nurses are usually female and doctors are usually male);
4 Sociological knowledge (from the literature reviewed and the researcher’s experience);
5 Psychoanalytic knowledge (from the literature reviewed and the researcher’s experience).
All stages required awareness of subjectivity, however this third stage required extra vigilance to ensure that in manipulating the data the researcher remained inclusive of all data related to the research question and true to psychoanalytic discourse in generating findings. Returning to the example of the participant who feared to speak, in the nuance of her language she describes speaking to the nurses because ‘being feminine they could calm you’, a shared cultural assumption about nurses. However a percentage of the nursing staff were male, which she addressed by saying feminine instead of female. This economy of language captures psychoanalytic theory relating to unconscious process, identified by Lyth (1988) in relation to the nurse equated to the mother and aspects of the social bond, discourse and desire as identified by Lacan (1969/2007). Subjectivity is managed by ensuring that analysis is verified against social reality and relevant literature. In psychoanalysis the analyst is slow to offer early interpretations. By adopting the psychoanalytic position of quiet presence, the researcher is free from drawing early conclusions, conducting linear analysis and even suggesting to participants possible conclusions, which potentially bias the information they disclose. Consequently the social reality of service disorganisation evidenced in policy documents, the observation and interviews and the first set of field notes relating to the service manager’s office had to be repeatedly explored to ensure the analysis was verifiable against existing psychoanalytic theory.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The matching of two traditions, ethnography and psychoanalysis, is not a new approach and has its roots in Freud’s work dating back to the 1920s (Wallace, 1983). Lacan’s (1969/2007) discourse theory and researchers concerned with the unconscious (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lyth, 1988; Main, 1957, Parker, 2005) provide support for this joint methodological approach designed to uncover unconscious elements of relationships in the social setting of a mental health service.

My advice for those interested in approaching research from a psychoanalytically informed way is firstly, to familiarise oneself with the site of the research, particularly with regard to the culture, language and symbols. Secondly, it is essential to acquaint oneself with an in-depth knowledge of psychoanalytic theory prior to commencing data collection, in particular how concepts that are key to your research aims and questions are explained.

While the methods I used, and are discussed here, are common to other qualitative approaches to research, the psychoanalytically informed interview in particular, is dependent on the application of psychoanalytic theory in its design, implementation and analysis in order to uncover unconscious elements in the speech and actions of human encounters. I suggest to readers that they practice and become comfortable with being detached and non-directive in interviewing, along with tolerating silences. Do not be too quick to ensure that
you immediately understand the meaning of what the participant says by probing but instead encourage her or him to tell their story using non directive but encouraging comments.

With regard to non participant observation the researcher is required to be as unobtrusive as possible, yet be prepared to explain the research and your presence. By maintaining quiet presence at the periphery one can fully observe and capture elements of conscious and unconscious interactions. Additionally the researcher must be mindful of not having an influence on the work being undertaken in the organisation and be respectful towards service occupants, particularly when the opportunities for valuable data collection may create a dilemma. Detailed notes of what has been observed should be kept during the phases of data collection as what may not seem significant at the time could become relevant during data analysis.

Data analysis should be accepted to be an ongoing process of reading and rereading data from all sources, including reflections, to facilitate identification of connections between the different strands. This will allow for a total analysis of the total situation, as required. Finally, the researcher, particularly in the latter stages of data analysis must be vigilant so that all data relevant to the research question is used in generating the findings. I caution the reader at this point to manage their subjectivity to maintain openness to emergent findings and psychoanalytic concepts within the literature.

References


The politics and ethics of research into ‘wicked’ social problems

The case of Jimmy Savile at Duncroft

Mark Smith

Introduction

While research might be imagined to be a dispassionate search for the truth, it is rarely that simple. In most fields of research, but in social scientific research in particular, any conception of truth is invariably overlaid with personal, political and ethical sensitivities. Within this, some research topics are more sensitive than others. Child sexual abuse (CSA), understandably, is one such topic (Sikes & Piper, 2010). This chapter will identify some of the issues involved in researching subject matter that has become moralised and politicised. It takes as its focus the case of the former BBC entertainer, Jimmy Savile, who, following his death in 2011, became subject to allegations of historical sexual abuse.

The chapter will outline the emergence and impact of the Savile scandal based on research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to collate a database of information on the case. I will reflect on the experience of seeking to open up such contentious subject matter to serious research. I, rather naively, set out to bring an academic perspective to the Savile case amidst lurid media accounts and knowing that I had access to information that cast doubt on some of the central claims made against Savile. I quickly discovered, however, that even raising such a possibility is contested at deep existential and visceral levels, threatening fundamental beliefs, identities and political positions. It can be represented as calling into question the accounts and, by extension, the experiences and identities of those claiming to have been abused and of making it more difficult for those who have been abused to come forward. It also threatens to disrupt a highly politicised consensus that we should not question the accounts of those who claim to have been abused. Engaging in research that may do so leaves one subject to accusations of contributing to a backlash of denial or, worse, of complicity in abuse.

Alongside external pressures, there are intrinsic disincentives to questioning dominant narratives around abuse. To seem to dismiss the experiences or the pain of others is not something that most academics, and certainly social work academics, would wish to do. Foundational ethical principles of professional
practice and of research are those of non-maleficence, of doing no harm and ideally of doing some good (beneficence) (Humphries, 2008). Moreover, anyone researching this issue does so in the knowledge that there were abuses in the past that were not adequately addressed and that there have been significant and proper advances in how we respond to child abuse, which we would not want to see reversed (Burnett, 2016).

Therefore one of my aims in this chapter is to problematise the conceit that there is a ‘truth’ waiting out there for researchers to uncover. Although it is, I argue, a conceit, a quest for the ‘truth’ has nevertheless become a common claim in approaches to historical abuse. Canada, for instance, has established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). The English and Wales Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has set up a ‘Truth Project’. In the Savile case, Surrey Police, in a letter sent to former Duncroft residents stated: “This is a search for the truth and you will be believed”. Such a statement, through equating believing one’s account with the ‘truth’, opens up an ethical and epistemological minefield that needs to be deconstructed. I go on to do so, asking how we have got to the point where such misguided assumptions can take root and then identifying some of the conceptual and indeed policy problems inherent in such a position.

The learning points for the reader are therefore:

- To understand the need for researchers to locate themselves reflexively in relation to their research;
- To recognise the concept of truth as contested and politicised;
- To appreciate the power of stories in constructing a particular version of reality.

Overview of the research study

The BBC entertainer, Sir Jimmy Savile, died in 2011, lauded in the UK as a national treasure on account of his charity work. A year later, following a television documentary, he became engulfed in accusations of sexual abuse, the reverberations of which rocked the cultural and political establishments in the UK. The revelations have been employed at a policy level to reorient the criminal justice system towards a default position of ‘believing’ those who say they were victims of abuse. Savile was identified in the Exposure programme and in subsequent reports as a serial sex offender and predatory paedophile. Early allegations made against him emanate from Duncroft, a Home Office approved residential school in the South of England. Former residents claimed that Savile sexually abused them on the school premises and on visits to television studios. This version of events has become the received account of Savile’s involvement and behaviour at Duncroft.

With colleagues, I was working on another ESRC project exploring contemporary social issues and anxieties through a lens of moral panic (see Cree,
Clapton, & Smith, 2016). The focus of my own interest in moral panics was in relation to allegations made against care workers. In the course of this project, a colleague received the following email and passed it on to me:

I blog on the Internet as ‘Anna Raccoon’ and as such have published several articles on the current ‘Savile saga’ (https://annaraccoon.com/). However, having found myself at the centre of the ‘Duncroft’ furore, I have also been given a mound of information which I have not yet published. . . . I am not in good health . . . and I am growing concerned that should I kick the proverbial bucket, then the knowledge and the contacts that I hold will be lost forever, and one day academics will want to piece together the origins of this current panic. Although I am both a writer and a lawyer myself, I know it would be unwise for me to embark on a lengthy project like a book at this stage in my life, and really am looking for someone who might be interested in researching the actual truth and delineating the path by which we arrived at the current situation.

‘Anna’ was a former pupil of Duncroft and, as such, might be considered in current terminology to be an ‘expert by experience’, with a legitimate voice to bring to the unfolding Duncroft story. What initially piqued her interest in claims against Savile was an allegation made by another former resident who claimed that Savile had assaulted her at Duncroft in 1965 when she was 15: “If you were walking down the corridor he would come up close and touch you inappropriately. . . . He always came when we were getting ready for bed. There were girls in there who were quite terrified of him” (Greenhill & Ellicott, 2012, n.p.).

In the mid-1960s, Anna Raccoon had shared a dormitory in Duncroft with the woman making these claims but she herself had never seen Savile there. She began to blog on the case and a number of other former Duncroft girls contributed with questioning accounts. Subsequent investigation indicates that Savile first visited the school in 1974, a fact confirmed by police reports. So, a foundational claim supporting the Savile narrative is questionable.

Not long after this initial approach, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) put out a call for urgent research proposals, intended to enable researchers to respond to situations where there was a strong case for immediate research. The scheme only funded research focussing on urgent data collection and initial analysis. Given the important and contemporary nature of the subject matter, Anna Raccoon’s own health and the fact that other key informants were elderly or unwell, we applied for and were awarded a grant. The primary aim of the project, in line with the funding call, was to safeguard and archive Anna Raccoon’s social media content. A secondary objective was to interview former staff and pupils from Duncroft, especially those who were elderly or unwell, to gather accounts that might soon be lost. We also gathered the various official reports into Savile’s activities from the police, the BBC and the National Health Service. All of this material was brought together digitally, allowing
for cross-referencing between different sources and providing an archive that researchers might utilise in seeking, as Anna Raccoon hoped in her original email, “to piece together the origins of this current panic”.

The project team involved academics from social work, criminology, informatics and university librarians. The role of the data scientists on the team was to use text analysis tools to gather and study the large data sets that existed on Anna Raccoon’s blogs and the thousands of comments on these and to bring these together in a searchable form. In that sense it opened up relatively new sources of research data and methods for social science and especially, perhaps, social work.

The project was approved through the ethics processes at my then university. Unlike Sikes and Piper (2010), who detail attempts to obstruct their research project into false allegations made against teachers, my own experience of ethics approval was painless. Indeed, the message given was that this was the kind of subject matter that social scientists ought to be interrogating. The concern of the university was to seek to protect me through managing the hostility the research would undoubtedly engender. This may reflect the positioning of social work, which is my subject area, within a School of Social and Political Science. Academic disciplines such as sociology and anthropology recognise the complex interaction of individual, social and cultural processes and the need to interrogate these.

We sought to reach out to a broad range of former staff and residents, including those who had made allegations against Savile. However, because of ongoing police investigations, several of the staff members were reluctant to be interviewed. Apart from an anonymous email that seemed it might have been from one, and who did not follow up our prompts, we did not manage to engage any complainants. In the event, we ended up with a small number of interviews: Anna Raccoon herself; another resident from the 1960s; and two former residents from the 1970s, including the girl who introduced Savile to Duncroft. We also interviewed two former staff members.

Some of our initial findings are reported in a journal article (Smith & Burnett, 2017). Aside from obvious instances where certain stories could be shown to be factually incorrect, our research findings also began to unsettle some of the reported contextual details that had set the scene for Savile’s alleged abuse. A particularly negative and uncaring picture of the Duncroft staff and regime was painted in media coverage. One former pupil was quoted as saying that Savile treated Duncroft like “a paedophile sweet shop”, suggesting he had free run of the establishment. Former residents claimed that they had reported the abuse to school staff, including the headmistress, who allegedly replied: “Don’t be stupid”. This dismissive attitude was represented through what has become the standard story of institutional abuse, that of innocent victims whose pleas for help fell on deaf ears.

Our research portrays a very different picture of the school. It was not a lax or uncaring regime but a pioneering and highly regarded institution, setting
new directions for how to deal with what was, in the 1960s, called juvenile delinquency. The regime was tight and certainly not sexually permissive. Furthermore, Savile’s presence there was not necessarily sinister as might be imagined, as he was but one of a number of celebrities who visited the school. While we cannot discount that he abused girls there, it seems unlikely that he could have done so in the uncontained manner claimed and upon which the current narrative rests (Smith & Burnett, 2017).

I now move on to discuss key pieces of learning from this research as identified in the learning outcomes previously stated: reflexivity; the politicising of research; and the role stories play in constructing the social world.

**Reflexivity**

Traditionally, social research took its cue from research into the natural sciences and adopted a position whereby the researcher sought to stand above the object of her/his research lest this introduce bias. Over time, the quest for ‘objective’ research has been challenged by various shifts in the understanding of knowledge, associated, *inter-alia*, with feminist and other critical perspectives. These posit that knowledge is inevitably and unavoidably produced within social, cultural and historical contexts within which particular power relations are at play (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011 for an overview). Knowledge is also seen as being co-produced within the research relationship and what has become known as the positionality of the researcher (Reinharz, 1997) percolates every stage of the research process through data collection to interpretation and presentation. This being the case, it is increasingly recognised as being important, especially but not exclusively in qualitative research, that a researcher is aware of how their subject position(s) might influence the way that knowledge is constructed. This process of locating oneself in relation to the research to be undertaken is called reflexivity. It involves being aware of and turning a critical gaze towards oneself (Finlay, 2003) and how one’s various positions within a field might impact the way a subject is constructed and understood. There is rarely one truth, therefore, but multiple and contingent truths, which emerge through the intersubjective construction of meaning that emerges within research relationships and processes. Different researchers might engage with the same subject matter very differently and come up with very different findings and interpretations.

Central to my own engagement with the subject of this study was my own position, not just as a researcher but as a former residential child care worker, which, arguably, allows me to bring an insider perspective to the research. I could form a picture of Duncroft and locate it within a social context. Moreover, when it comes to addressing the vexed issue of historical abuse, while recognising that abuse happened in such settings as in any other where adults interact with children, I also bring a position as sceptic regarding the extent of claims made against residential care workers (see Smith, 2016). Doucet (2008) identifies how particular ‘ghosts’ can haunt a researcher’s understanding of a
particular subject. Personally, I am haunted by cases that I am aware of where I am convinced that care workers, some of them former colleagues, have been falsely accused and in some cases wrongly convicted of historical abuse. While the experience of those who were abused is increasingly and rightly being recognised, another category of victim is being created in those falsely accused (Burnett, 2016; Hoyle, Speechley, & Burnett, 2016; Sikes & Piper, 2010; Webster, 2005).

This experience has had a major bearing on how I engage with the subject. I am aware that my starting position is not to accept allegations at face value and in so doing I may be accused of dismissing accounts that are genuine. On the other hand, failure to question in a reasoned and suitably reflexive way allows other abuses, of, for instance, due process or the presumption of innocence, to seep, unquestioned, into the body politic which, in turn, leads to false allegations and wrongful convictions.

Furthermore, from an academic position, failure to subject contested subject matter to rigorous scrutiny, just because it is sensitive, leads to the debasement of social scientific research. While on a personal level, I did not find Savile to be an attractive personality and many of his behaviours were undoubtedly lecherous, it is perhaps because of this that he deserves to be judged on a fair appraisal of the facts and circumstances of the case rather than personal dislike. As a social scientist, I have become increasingly uncomfortable that professional and public discourse on Savile has become so moralised and politicised that assumptions about the case proceed with scant regard to any facts at all.

**Moralising and politicising research**

A case can certainly be made for questioning and perhaps disrupting the quest for ‘objective’ knowledge and its dominant modes of construction in order to give voice to groupings previously marginalised in the research process. On the other hand, privileging personal experience alone might lead to the acceptance of claims that may have little anchorage in facts. This trend is increasingly evident in public policy, especially in sexual matters, where there is pressure, reflected in police and prosecution service practice, to ‘believe’ such accounts as the default response (Henriques, 2016). This contributes to an intellectual climate in which rationally justified knowledge claims can take second place to subjectivist commitment to a cause. It is all the more important, then, for researchers to interrogate how a particular story can take hold, often regardless of the facts, and it is to such processes I now turn in relation to the Savile case.

These processes were intensely political, reflecting changing social and cultural attitudes across the Western world towards, in particular, sex crime and a corresponding turn within the criminal justice system and in civic society towards valorising a notion of victimhood (Campbell & Manning, 2014). The accounts of those who claim they were abused by Savile have resulted in a singular story of his behaviours, which assumes its power because it fits with
a wider cultural script rather than being built up through systematic inquiry. Thus, the cultural and political context within which a story has its origins and takes root determines what is allowed (and not allowed) to be said about it. The potency of such scripts is such that to question them is personally and academically risky. Only one story is allowed to be told.

Political or ideological standpoints can be bolstered by claims that they are supported by research, often termed advocacy research because it seeks to support a particular conclusion. On the one hand, advocacy research can identify and seek to improve responses to social concerns and, as such, can help raise awareness of hidden problems and can influence policy (McLaughlin, 2015). On the other, it can reflect the agendas of particular claims makers and can talk up and distort understandings of social problems and responses to them. Children’s charities are adept at using advocacy research to inflate particular matters of concern to elicit public sympathy and to encourage financial support (McLaughlin, 2015). In this sense, they blur the boundaries between research and ideology.

A classic example of this is provided in Giving Victims a Voice (Gray & Watt, 2013), a joint report by the Metropolitan Police and the children’s charity, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), which presents the findings of the police’s Operation Yewtree, established to investigate allegations made against Savile. Yewtree offers the lustre of research in its style and presentation and has been instrumental in laying down the received version of the Savile story. While its intention is to provide the impression of objective investigation and analysis, it is a thoroughly partisan and political account, which sets out to reify a particular narrative calculated to advance the shift in criminal justice practice towards ‘believing’ those who claim to be victims. It lacks any critical analysis but has, nonetheless been largely accepted by the media and also by the social work and social care professions, which, Trinder (1996) argues, often fail to address fundamental questions with regard to the political space within which knowledge is constructed.

Giving Victims a Voice states that, taken together, the various accounts of those who claim to have been abused by Savile “paint a compelling picture of widespread sexual abuse by a predatory sex offender. We are therefore referring to them as ‘victims’ rather than ‘complainants’ and are not presenting the evidence they have provided as unproven allegations” (Gray & Watt, 2013, para 2.4). Elsewhere it states:

From the information provided by the hundreds of people who have come forward to Operation Yewtree, police and the NSPCC have concluded that Jimmy Savile was one of the UK’s most prolific known sexual predators. Indeed the formal recording of allegations of crime on this scale is, to the best of our knowledge, unprecedented in the UK.

(Gray & Watt, 2013, para 11)
Yewtree assumes, explicitly, that the sheer number of those making allegations against Savile offers a corroborative picture of his behaviour and that one might conclude, by virtue of scale alone, that Savile was guilty of most of the allegations made against him. This kind of thinking exposes a logical fallacy at the heart of the affair. It takes no account of how the stories come to be constructed. For instance, an interview conducted in the course of our research indicates that the figures, introduced by the police and NSPCC, of hundreds, rising to over a thousand allegations made against Savile, only reflect phone calls or other contacts about the case, the content of which we are not informed of and which, mostly, were not even subject to even cursory investigation. Our interviewee questioned a police officer:

So I said can you just take me through the process of how *Giving Victims a Voice* works and how you dealt with all these? So he says basically people would ring up, oh, I’ve got something to report about Jimmy Savile, so we’d write it all down and everything. So I says and then what would you do? So he says well, what do you mean? So I says well, did you bring them in for interview or did you go to interview them? So he says the thing is, [name], what you’ve got to appreciate is that we need to concentrate the ones that are alive, not [Jimmy Savile]. So I says oh, I agree there.

Our interviewee continued: “So that *Giving Victims a Voice* is just an accumulation of telephone statements then? So he says yeah, that’s right”.

Central to the way of thinking exemplified in *Yewtree* (and indeed wider public discourse on historical allegations) is the premise that people’s stories refer back to and reflect a wider external reality. I go on to question this.

**The power of stories**

There has been a significant narrative turn in the social sciences over recent decades (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013), which emphasises the importance of stories in how people make sense of their social worlds. Stories shape the ongoing process of how we interpret and reinterpret our experiences, helping us construct our biographies and sense of self (Woodiwiss, 2015), connecting and integrating the past with the present. They are not fixed but shift in light of changing circumstances and understandings. There is often only a tenuous link back to an event and sometimes none at all.

Researching the Savile case has convinced me of how individual stories both draw upon and feed into a wider public narrative and it is to this process that I now turn. While we make sense of our lives through stories, we are constrained in the stories we can tell by the narrative scripts that our culture makes available and which determine which stories can be told and heard (Woodiwiss, 2014). Woodiwiss’s (2009) research with women who claimed to have experienced
sexual abuse in childhood but subsequently retracted is important in identifying how such claims can emerge from a general sense of disaffection in life, aligned with the availability of checklists of symptoms of CSA presented in self-help and self-improvement literature. The CSA story reflects and runs alongside what Furedi (2004) identifies as the therapy culture that has come to dominate the contemporary Anglophone world. This powerful cultural narrative informs the stories that individuals can and do tell, making it difficult to tell alternative stories.

In the context of residential child care, individual lives interleave and resonate with a public narrative that tells of endemic abuse. In such a context, people can, for a host of reasons, write themselves into the prevailing storyline. The Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking, in his work on the memory wars that were fought out over the course of the 1990s, notes, “When vile stories are rampant, minds that are sufficiently confused, angry and cruel will turn fiction into fact” (Hacking, 1995, p. 28). One might at least ponder how many of those making claims against Savile did so because the public story that was circulating offered them something on which to hook a range of personal troubles and motivations.

To identify this possibility is not to diminish the importance of the stories people tell or to suggest that all accounts of historical sexual abuse are false or questionable, which is clearly not the case. There is a need to hear people’s stories respectfully but also to pay attention to the context of their construction. In the Savile case, a key protagonist changed the published story of her time at Duncroft to include claims of abuse by Savile only after accounts of him being there began to circulate publicly, raising questions as to whether this public story might have prompted personal recollections or whether it gave the author the opportunity to write herself into a wider cultural script. Such questions merit academic interrogation.

Listening to people’s stories is the bread and butter of social research. In a wider political climate in which we are exhorted to validate people’s experiences, it can feel inappropriate to question stories. Yet, using stories for the purpose of research requires questioning. Riessman and Quinney (2005), in their review of narrative research in social work, conclude that there are few good examples of the genre largely because researchers do not subject people’s stories to the same methodological or analytic rigour that they might to other forms of research. Rather, stories are left to speak for themselves, “an indefensible position for serious scholarship” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 393). A concern for serious scholarship would ask questions of Yewtree’s ready acceptance of claims of abuse, highlighting the importance of research perspectives in offering an alternative, rigorously argued account to set alongside those laid down by the police and children’s charities.

Similarly, in his critique of the prominence given in the social sciences to narratives of suffering, Atkinson identifies that while sympathy might be an entirely appropriate response to people’s stories, it should “not substitute for
social science” (2009, para 2.12). Like Riessman and Quinney (2005) he highlights the importance of an appropriate analytic framework to making sense of stories, arguing that the failure to apply such “constitutes a betrayal of any claims to well-warranted knowledge” (Atkinson, 2009, para 4.4). The failure to question any of the claims made against Savile leaves anyone wishing to understand this central cultural episode with little of substance on which to hang any conclusions.

Suggesting that stories may not always be all they claim to be is not an exercise in either abuse denial, nor is it a self-indulgent expression of academic purity that ignores the experiences and needs of victims. One of my motivations for raising such issues is to question the headlong rush to victimhood that characterises contemporary society (Campbell & Manning, 2014). The victim label is rarely a helpful or attractive one. Telling a story does not heal wounds; people can be imprisoned as well as liberated by the stories they tell (Tavris, 1992), consigned to endless and formulaic repetition of a victim story. In fact, given the linkage between stories and identity, privileging one story over others is problematic in that it might render other, possibly more adaptive, selves less or unimportant, ‘fixing’ one identity at the expense of other possibilities. We only need look around to the serial victims who circle, restlessly, around child abuse inquiries never finding the ‘closure’ promised by a therapeutic discourse. One might legitimately ask whether the lives of those former pupils of Duncroft who made the initial claims against Savile are any the better for having done so or whether they might now regard themselves as pawns in a wider political game?

Conclusions and recommendations

A number of lessons might be drawn from the foregoing account. As someone who is drawn to ideas of narrative in research, this project has confronted me with the need to recognise that people achieve some sort of meaning from their stories, while reconciling such a perspective with the realisation that their stories often bear little relation to any wider reality. Moreover, when others are implicated in such stories to their detriment, facts matter. Certainly, the social world is much too complicated to be accommodated within simple realist accounts, which look only for facts. On the vexed question of historical abuse, for instance, just because a case cannot be proved does not mean something didn’t happen or that those claiming that it did should be disbelieved. But, neither should we go so far along the road to discount facts altogether in favour of mere solipsism. We need to go to the next level and explore where a particular subject perspective might arise from (Silverman, 2006). Such perspectives do not arise spontaneously but, as previously argued, are constructed and sustained by particular interests in particular cultural and political contexts. So, the researcher has to balance sympathetic understanding with facts. This is especially important in situations where the subject matter of research can elicit powerful, visceral reactions, which can make it easier not to ask questions.
Part of the difficulty in researching historical abuse is that the subject is currently bound up in a single linear story of rights abuses, resultant trauma and the right to redress. This reflects the dominance of particular disciplinary and knowledge regimes defined by therapists and lawyers (both human rights and personal injury). The privileging of one source of knowledge and one ‘voice’ is a major constraint to other ways of thinking about what is undoubtedly a ‘wicked’ social problem. It hinders the ability to unpack issues both theoretically and instrumentally, making it difficult to gain a more comprehensive understanding from which policy and practice might develop. Good research into ‘wicked’ social problems requires that researchers draw on ideas from a range of disciplinary perspectives to create new ways of thinking and problem solving around issues where there is no easy or readily accepted answer.

My final point is, in some respects, a personal reflection on what has kept me going in this and similar projects when it would be easier to walk away. There are two reasons: the first is that the subject matter is intellectually fascinating and perhaps all the more so because it involves going against the grain, encouraging the belief that I am unearthing knowledge and understanding that is not countenanced in conventional accounts; the second is to do with research integrity, which goes beyond procedural requirements, to involve subjecting knowledge claims to scrutiny, uncomfortable though this might be. This ought to be the role of the social researcher. It requires, at a personal level, a capacity to resist hasty reactions and look below the surface of what seems obvious and keeping an eye on the ultimate purpose, which is a search for as near to the truth as one can hope for. This is a story to live by, and one that draws upon particular values. This value dimension is captured in the conclusions of a philosopher writing on the issues raised as a result of the Savile case erupting after his death:

Rightful judgement weighs the evidence carefully, avoids snap conclusions and notes any potentially mitigating circumstances. Even where the crimes alleged against the dead are appalling, charity joins hands with justice in urging us to remember our common human frailty before we rush to condemn. One day people may come to pass posthumous judgement on us; and the same care and discretion (with a dash of mercy) that we would wish to be brought to our case we should ourselves employ when speaking about the dead.

(Scarre, 2013, p. 318)

Finally, coming back down to a more practical level, in an era where there is growing concern about the social significance and impact of research, questioning the origins of the Savile scandal potentially destabilises the foundations of the policy shifts in criminal justice that followed in its wake. One of the former Duncroft residents recognised this when she said “if all this Duncroft stuff could be debunked then the rest of it is going to fall apart” (Smith & Burnett, 2017, p. 15).
The politics and ethics of research

Note

1 See http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=ES%2FL011778%2F1

References


Introduction

This chapter will introduce a recently developed way of enquiring about social phenomenon articulated by Elizabeth A. St. Pierre (2018a, 2018b) as post qualitative inquiry. St. Pierre (2018a) argues that qualitative research has reached an impasse in its ability to serve as a vehicle for social change and liberation. She suggests that we move beyond traditional qualitative research and proposes that we relinquish our attachment to the “research problem, research questions, research design, site of study, participants, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis and so on” (p. 605). Such conventions, she argues, unnecessarily restrict the possibilities of new experimental modes of enquiry, premised less on interpretation and epistemology and more focused on what could happen if we opened ourselves to the realm of possibility. Because of this shift in orientation, the practices of post qualitative inquiry do not:

- analyse empirical data (e.g., interview transcripts and field notes) looking for ‘themes and patterns’ that repeat across the data because things are not alike, they don’t resemble each other, everything is different. Nor would one ‘code’ data, looking for all instances of, say, the concept ‘gender’ in interview transcripts.

(St. Pierre, 2018b, p. 4)

Instead, post qualitative inquiry is interested in applying concepts and theoretical frameworks as tools with which to unpack hidden capacities in any given situation. St. Pierre (2018b, p. 11) recommends reading broadly across disciplines, such as philosophy, social theories and “the history and philosophy of science and social science”, to find new ways to think about the world, not as it is, but as it might become.

In this chapter we demonstrate how we engaged in a post qualitative project through our analysis of the concept of love within the field of child and
youth care (Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2015). The key learning points for the reader are:

- How transdisciplinary research can be used in a post qualitative inquiry;
- How a review of the literature can be used to develop key concepts;
- How to use the method of close reading.

**Overview of our enquiry into love**

The piece of writing that we now identify as being constructed through post qualitative inquiry was an article published in the *International Journal of Child Youth and Family Studies* entitled “Revolutionary Love: CYC and the Importance of Reclaiming Our Desire”. Our intention was to define and position the concept of love within the field of child and youth care/youth work (CYC). We wanted to explore the relationship of ethics, marginalisation and oppression to emotions and affects within the 21st century world of work in which young people and CYC workers engage with one another. In terms of post qualitative inquiry, we were not interested in how love was currently defined or played out in the field of CYC. Instead we wanted to explore how rethinking love might change the world of youth adult relations.

Our aim was to shift and expand the literature of the field in such a way as to open an overtly political dialogue and engage a socio-economic discourse that acknowledges the positioning of what Gharabaghi (2014) terms purposes and practices in CYC within the emerging world of 21st century global capitalism. We considered it necessary to work from the broadest analysis of current contemporary social formations to the world of day-to-day practice to achieve this. As we thought about how to do this it became clear that we would need to reach outside the existing literature in the CYC field and draw on theorists and scholars who offered an assessment of current social conditions pertinent to the unique configurations of the 21st century.

Undoubtedly, the literature we selected and used reflected our own alignment to the theoretical propositions of the postmodern tradition. Most particularly, we find that the idea that claims to objective truth are always invested with power relations extremely useful. As Foucault points out, discourses that claim to have the truth are often used in the suppression of alternative ways of knowing and cannot easily be disentangled from the system of rule in any given historical period (Gordon, 1980). As scholars overtly interested in CYC as a forum for building platforms for liberation, we are interested in engaging practices and theories that allow for challenges to existing systems of rule by disenfranchised and marginalised groups.

Therefore our article is not designed to proclaim a truth. Our preferred reading is to see what we have written as a set of propositions, not so much about what has happened, but in the spirit of post qualitative inquiry more about what is possible if we clear away some logic of the current system of rule.
We are interested in suggesting an alternate viewpoint, not because it is more accurate or true, but because of what it allows us to think or do differently. Therefore, our writing in the article might be seen as what Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983) define as an ethological analysis.

Ethology is the study of a given organism’s set of capacities, that is, what it can do. Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983) expand this definition to philosophical concepts and theory to shift the mode of enquiry from a question of truth to a question of capacity. As such it lines up nicely with St Pierre’s (2018a) proposal that post qualitative inquiry is interested in exploring “something new, as yet un-thought” (Rajchman, 2000, as cited in St. Pierre, 2018a, p. 604). In other words, our writing about capitalism and CYC is less about speaking truth to power than it is about exploring the capacities of a particular analysis.

In taking an ethological approach, we agree with Deleuze’s (1968/1990) paraphrase of the philosopher Spinoza that, “no one knows what a body can do” (p. 118). That is to say, we recognise that the future is indeterminate and that we do not know, nor can we predict what the capacities of any of us are. When we write, we are aiming to open liminal spaces of indeterminacy or uncertainty. We want to seek to open possibility without claiming certainty about what might come. As St. Pierre (2018a, 2018b) suggests we take an ontological (study of the nature of being) rather than epistemological (study of meaning) position. While traditional ontology is the study of what exists or the investigation of being, we are not so much interested in being per se. Instead, we are interested in ontology as a dynamic process of becoming. While we acknowledge the essential epistemological concerns related to the use of language in critical discourses such as the sociology of childhood, we are more interested in the relations of bodies and thought function as a system. Put directly: we want to illustrate what Foucault discusses as the relations of force that constitutes the political in our historical period (Gordon, 1980). While that includes language and states of being, we concur with Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983) that language and being are subsumed within the broader field of a living dynamic force.

St. Pierre (2018a, 2018b) suggests that through experimentation the post qualitative scholar can explore the ways that new readings of concepts and ideas might inform new ways of imagining the world to come. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983), she sees concepts as tools that can be used to reimagine the world. As we previously noted, she recommends reading very broadly across disciplines so as to have a rich array of tools at one’s disposal. In order to discover which ideas or concepts might function to open new capacities in how we see the world as an emerging set of capacities, she argues we should try them out through experimental writing. Some concepts will work and some will not, and of course some will sort of work but will need a lot more thought. One example of this process, in the article we wrote, is how we began to experiment with the concept of desire as a question of lack versus surplus. We were interested in how such an analysis might help us to see how love as a concept functions in the age of capitalism.
We began with the concept of lack because it is so central to the Western lineage of thought in which we as CYC scholars and practitioners are embedded. Lack has been a hallmark of Western philosophy for analysing human behaviour both personally and socially. From Plato’s conception of a transcendent realm of pure form to Judeo Christian formulations of sin and a fall from grace, to Freud’s concept of castration, and to Hegel’s concept of the dialectic, Western thought has seen human beings and the material world to be imperfect and fundamentally flawed.

In each of these profoundly influential theoretical understandings of the world, human beings are measured against an ideal that they cannot reach. In the framework of lack, as human beings we make every effort collectively and personally to get closer to a state of perfection, but in the end we always fail. According to the theories of lack, our motivation is powerfully driven by what it is we lack in comparison to an ideal or perfect form. We are constantly measuring our bodies, our relationships, our form of governance and so on against concepts of what such things would look like if perfected.

The concept of lack has had immense impacts on fields that engage in working with people. In the article, we began to explore the concept of lack to see what its capacities might be in terms of who we imagine ourselves to be and how that might influence what we think we can do. Based on our readings in the philosophies of lack, we began to propose that the concept of lack may serve a central function as the driving impetus in capitalist logic. In other words, if a society premised in lack inducts us into imagining ourselves as subjects who are always deficient, always missing something, then capital can use this to create subjects that fit well into its consumerist profit driven logic. Put simply, it may well be that capitalism has the capacity, through the logic of lack, to create us as addicts to consumerism trying desperately to remedy that sense of lack. We argue that capitalism, as an abstract system of monetary value, cannot treat the feeling of emptiness and isolation or lack we experience as capitalist subjects. If we as CYC practitioners are subject to the logic of lack, then this might well significantly impact on our ability to work with the feelings of emptiness or isolation we may encounter in the young people we meet in our work.

As an alternative to lack, we began to look for an alternative set of ideas and found ourselves intrigued by the concept of infinite surplus. We were familiar with this idea from our reading of the work of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1677/2000) who also had a profound influence on philosophers and theorists we had already begun to be interested in, such as Deleuze. Spinoza’s ideas also deeply influenced St. Pierre’s (2018b) work on post qualitative research. We should note here that one set of practices that might guide post qualitative inquiry is to track a concept or set of concepts across a range of thinkers. In doing this it is not uncommon to uncover what might be thought of as a lineage of thought, that is to say, a tradition of conceptual experimentation that extends across multiple scholars and time periods. We suggest that tracking this kind of work can open a world of possibilities for thinking things anew.
As we explored the conceptual lineage, sometimes called immanence, which originates with Spinoza (1677/2000), we wondered what would happen if we accepted the immanent premise that life is made up of all that there is and as a result fills every moment with creative capacities. These capacities only exist in the lived experience of a given moment. Because they cannot exist in the future or the past, the present is all there is. The present is overflowing with more capacity than any of us could ever imagine. In this lineage there is no lack because all there is what is produced in the moment. In focusing only on what exists, there is no lack, only living creative force.

So, now we had an interesting new set of possibilities and capacities for rethinking our work in CYC. Our next step was to see if we could extend this set of concepts into the contemporary world of CYC practice under capitalism. In that regard, we had loosely identified the notion of surplus as an alternative to the current logic of capitalism. However, we needed to ground this concept in an analysis of contemporary capitalism. We wanted to think this idea of surplus in a more dynamic formulation. To do this we turned to Deleuze as a contemporary philosopher deeply influenced by Spinoza (1677/2000). Specifically we were intrigued by the work he did with the psychoanalyst and activist Félix Guattari. As we read Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) we saw a resonance between the concept of surplus and their concept of desire. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) articulate desire differently than our common understanding of the term. Instead of an idea of desire rooted in a drive for what we do not have (lack), they suggest that desire is the force of creative production rooted in the surplus of life itself. For us, it seemed that this was a powerful tool through which we might articulate a contra-positioning of abstract capitalism as lack, against desire as living force.

So now we had our key central concept. The next step for a post qualitative scholar is to see how this key concept might allow us to scaffold a series of related ideas, each of which opens onto the next. So in what follows we will give a brief mapping of what that might look like. In doing so, we are not going to go into each one, but just show our thought process as we move from one to the other.

So beginning with immanent surplus we had a new way to think about who we are and what we can do. However we still felt we needed conceptual tools a bit more specific to the world of 21st century capitalism. So we turned to another set of philosophers/activists also influenced by Spinoza, but who also used Marx to analyse the current version of global capitalism. In particular we were intrigued by the work of Hardt and Negri (2001) in their work on the emerging system of global capitalist rule they call, Empire. This led us to Negri’s (1996) work on, what he terms, immaterial labour. This concept deepened our understanding of how capitalism is appropriating our desire by putting our living capacities for sociality and creativity to work for its own purposes. Following that idea led us to explore the methods that capitalism is using to induct us into seamless participation and cooperation. This we found in the work of
Stengers and Pignarre (1999/2011) and Althusser (1968/1971). In all of this however, we still had not accounted for love. To begin to explore that, we were led back to the ways that emotion and affect are managed and exploited through the feminisation of labour as discussed in Hardt and Negri (2009) and Skott-Myhre (2016).

In this process of scaffolding concepts, we operated across disciplines that included political philosophy, philosophy of science, history, Marxist philosophy, immanent philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, literary studies, human services, women’s studies and economics. We experimented with them in order to analyse, understand and explore the ways that the purpose and practice of CYC both accommodate and resist the force of capitalist logic. One idea led to another and another. Each set of ideas posed a question that required us to look a bit deeper and wider. In this experimental exploration, we began to articulate CYC as a field of living relational encounter that holds tremendous possibility for revolutionary alternatives rooted in a political redefinition of a foundational set of relations called love.

In the end, as we followed the thread of these ideas, we found Hardt and Negri’s (2009) work on love as a revolutionary force. This allowed us to define love as those sets of relations that allows for reclamation of our idiosyncratic capacities for creativity and sociality as material living force. We were able to suggest that CYC as a field of caring relations between young people and adults has immense possibilities for exploring how desire and love, as concrete living relations, could change the world.

**Scaffolding concepts through the use of transdisciplinary research**

As previously indicated, we have taken a somewhat non-traditional approach to researching the role of emotion and its implications in working with young people. As a field of research, scholarship and practice CYC draws on theories and methodologies from a number of different disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, neurology, philosophy and social work, among others. CYC does not have a codified core set of research approaches nor a set paradigm that identifies it as distinct from other disciplines. CYC is what Biglan (1973) refers to as a soft or pre-paradigmatic discipline. A paradigm in this context is a coherent and agreed upon set of ideas and practices within a discipline. A soft-paradigmatic discipline, such as CYC, lacks an unambiguous approach to the way in which it organises knowledge investigation, acquisition, and production. If one explores the literature of CYC, we find significant levels of disagreement on key foundational concepts, whether new approaches and ideas are valuable or even valid, what are appropriate methodologies, how do we know if research findings are worthy of attention and over what we ought to study.

Undoubtedly, this could be seen from a traditionally disciplinary point of view as a series of weaknesses that needs to be remedied. Indeed, there are
theorists and practitioners in CYC who advocate for more consensus and the development of a devotedly CYC paradigm that would allow us to put some of these contentious issues to rest (Stuart, 2014). For those who advocate this position, the goal is to develop our field as one taken more seriously by the traditional disciplines.

As post qualitative scholars we argue against these proposals. From our perspective our positioning as a soft discipline opens more doors than it closes. We argue that one of the advantages CYC has is that it draws from multiple disciplines and it is richer for it. We are an interdisciplinary field and, as such, positioned well within the emerging pedagogical imperatives of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As much as we might yearn to be included in the serious research of the STEM disciplines, it is just possible that CYC as a less developed discipline holds a capacity for working in ways very pertinent to the interests of young people in contemporary society.

**Transdisciplinariness**

Toomey, Markusson, Adams, and Brockett (2015) distinguish between interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in several ways. They begin with a distinction between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Citing Choi they state that: “Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines, but stays within their boundaries. On the other hand, interdisciplinarity analyses, synthesises and harmonises links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole” (p. 1) that exceeds neat boundaries. Interdisciplinarity goes beyond merely bringing different disciplines together for common research or even integrating a methodology from a different discipline into an existing research project. Instead, interdisciplinary work seeks to integrate disciplines through the recognition of the limitations implied in their discriminating disciplinary approaches. The hope is that through bringing disciplines into contact with each other new and unanticipated answers might arise to both theoretical as well as practical issues. Toomey et al. (2015) propose interdisciplinarity as having material implications for new practices with radical possibilities for social change. However, they go on to propose an even more radical proposition for critical research. They suggest that this is found in transdisciplinary approaches. They define transdisciplinary as research and scholarship that goes beyond the bounds of traditional disciplines and even the confines of the university as such. They suggest that for transdisciplinary scholars “societal impact is laid out as a central aim of the research at hand” (p. 1).

As we have previously noted, this was our intention in writing our article in the way that we did. Our central impetus was not the creation of knowledge within the frameworks and confines of disciplinary registers of validity and objective assessment. Instead, we set out to cut across disciplines, drawing conceptual tools from each. Our work was designed to do something more than produce new answers to well-articulated problems.
How we used a review of the literature to develop key concepts

As might be surmised from what we have previously written, our approach to reviewing the literature as post qualitative scholars is also different from the traditional approaches both in intent and scope. While there is some variation in proposals as to the purpose of a literature review, Hart’s (1998, p. 16) work is a reasonable explication of the approach in social sciences. He suggests that a literature review should:

Distinguish what has been done from what needs to be done; 2. Discover important variables relevant to the topic; 3. Synthesise and gain a new perspective; 4. Identify relationships between ideas and practice; 5. Establish the context of the topic or problem; 6. Rationalise the significance of the problem; 7. Enhance and acquire the subject vocabulary; 8. Understand the structure of the subject; 9. Relate ideas and theory to applications; 10. Identify the main methodologies and research techniques that have been used; 11. Place the research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments.

We argue that this does not encompass the necessities of exploring the literature in a transdisciplinary project. However, there are some elements here that resonate with transdisciplinarity as we have previously defined it. In particular, in our review of the literature we endeavoured to synthesise and gain new perspectives as Hart (1998) suggests. We also sought to identify relationships between ideas and practices as well as setting a context for the topic or problem. Finally, we explored the literature for new vocabulary sufficient to our explorations of CYC in the 21st century and sought to put our research in a historical context, although we did not seek a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments as Hart (1998) suggests. In our exploration of the literature we deployed these tactics but to what, we would argue, is a different end. For us, the point of exploring and utilising the writings of fellow scholars and researchers is not to set out a field of enquiry premised in the work of colleagues who have written and researched in our area. It is not to demonstrate how our work breaks new ground against the background of the research we explore. Instead, what we want to mine from the literature are concepts that we can put to work in our discussion of love in child and youth care.

Putting concepts to work

We take the term concept in a very particular kind of way from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1996). In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari articulate a definition of the philosophical concept. While we would not suggest our use of the concept to be the work of philosophers, we do think that the
development of the concept has implications for the kind of transdisciplinary work we endeavoured to do in our article. Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1996) delineate the concept not just as an idea that attempts to describe a state of affairs. Instead, they suggest that the concept extracts and expresses “an event, which is not a universal truth of things but is rather a transformation that things incarnate” (Cook, 1998, p. 29). Thus the concept becomes a dynamic proposal for the capacities of transformation in any given moment. Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1996) propose that the concept arises in relation to a social problem that cannot be solved with contemporary conceptual frameworks. They propose that the development of the concept is within the sole domain of the philosopher. It is for this reason that we included philosophers like Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, Negri, Marx and Althusser in our project.

As post qualitative transdisciplinary scholars, we are looking for concepts to use as tools to transform the world as we know it. We seek articulations of future events embedded within the literature we review. This interest in possible new horizons is why we situate our work at the intersection of philosophy and CYC practice literature. Concepts, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1996), arise at moments of crisis. It is our contention that we are at just such a moment where the radical and emancipatory foundations of CYC as an ecology of living material relations are under threat and need new articulations, mutations and practices of subjectivity to survive.

To explore the capacities of this crisis we sought concepts that assist us in seeing the dynamic events and processes in the development of capitalism as an ever proliferating system of control and appropriation. Similar to the way we previously mapped out our tracking of ideas, we suggest that building conceptual frameworks for post qualitative work begins by finding concepts that resonate with one another. This does not necessarily mean a similarity. Instead, a post qualitative scholar is seeking elements from each concept that can be used as a tool to open elements of another concept. This can only be accomplished through experimentation. One takes a concept and extracts the parts of it that seem to open onto the as yet un-thought. The only way we can know if in fact they open up things we have not thought yet is by combining them with elements of other concepts that seem to have the same capacity.

To this end, we explored the idea of ideology in Marx (Tucker, 1972) and Althusser (1968/1971), the articulation of 21st century virtual control foreseen by Deleuze (1990/1992) at the end of the 20th century. We explored the concept of immaterial labour and the appropriation of our intellect and creativity in addition to our physical labour in the work of Negri (1996). From the work of Stengers and Pignarre (1999/2011), psychiatric hypnotist Milton Erickson (Rossi, 1980), some of the work of Freud (Rieff, 1997) and the radical propositions of alternative psychoanalysis in Guattari (1989/2005), we drew emerging concepts of the role of the unconscious and trance states in the appropriative mechanisms of virtual capitalism and in possible modes of radical alternative subjectification. To understand the shifts in governance and modes of rule by
global capitalist empire, we turned to Hardt and Negri (2009). To make proposals about alternatives to capitalist rule and appropriation we took the concept of living desire from Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983), Guattari (1979/2010) and Spinoza (1677/2000). Finally, we intersected these conceptual frameworks with our understanding of problems in the emotional registers of CYC work in the phenomenon of burnout (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Smullens, 2012), the relational literature in the field (Krueger, 2005) and the regulatory statutes in the CYC competencies. Having put these ideas in experimental proximity to each other, we now had the task of finding a way to read them, but to read them in a particular way. To do this we began a process of close reading.

Reading closely

Once we had assembled our toolkit of concepts pertinent to our exploration of love, revolution and CYC, we used close reading as our method for analysing our data. In doing this, we are employing a method of analysis premised on what Deleuze has called ‘transcendental empiricism’ (Racjhman, 2001, p. 8). The use of the term empirical here may seem at odds with the definition of data we have just given. After all, traditional empirical data is premised on scientific, objective observation or experimentation. It bases its investigation on practical experience of the world we can see and touch. Empirical may seem to be an odd term to engage with our data analysis which is arguably entirely theoretical and based on conceptual analysis.

However, Deleuze adds the term transcendental to empiricism (Racjhman, 2001) and in doing so radically alters its orientation. He therefore allows us to see data in an entirely different way. While a complete explanation of this very complex idea is beyond the scope of our discussion here, Smith and Provetti (2012) offer us the aspect most pertinent to our discussion. They tell us that transcendental empiricism does not aim to discover any level of universal truth or any state of things that can be characterised through normalisation, taxonomy or hierarchy. Instead, transcendental empiricism seeks to ‘find the singular conditions under which something new is produced . . . fostering the conditions of creative production’ (para. 6). In other words, transcendental empiricism fits very nicely with the intentions we previously stated, which were to investigate the capacity of any given set of social conditions and their attendant descriptions and articulations. Our mode of enquiry is not designed to analyse the concept of love in order to discover its universal qualities. Instead, our analysis and methodology are designed to interrogate the capacities of love as a liberating force in youth adult relations.

To that end, we found that the process of close reading linked well with Deleuze’s proposal for transcendental empiricism (Racjhman, 2001). In the most general sense close reading refers merely to a disciplined way of engaging a text at multiple levels (Cleaver, 2014). It involves a careful unpacking of the
possible meanings inherent in a text. The term unpacking here refers to a way of reading that assumes that the meaning of a text does not reveal itself either in the intentions of the author or the common sense interpretations of the reader. Instead, any given text is situated within a social and historical context that profoundly influences the way we read it. Derrida (1967/2016) suggests that any given text is riddled with language full of contradictions and antagonisms that reflect histories of struggle over what precisely different terms mean. That is to say that each text is a reflection of the relations of force, domination and subjugation in any given historical moment.

To read love historically, philosophically, psychologically, culturally and within the ways we make meaning in the emerging world of 21st century capitalism is to acknowledge that how we understand love is not a given common sense shared understanding, but an always emerging set of meanings. These meanings are driven by a struggle between the logic of the dominant system (in this case the logic of lack) and alternative understandings (in this case living desire). Generally speaking then, the common sense understandings we have of a textual term such a love reflects the logic and values of the dominant system.

At the same time, however, love as text also contains what Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) refer to as passwords that operate under the surface of language as a form of social order. These passwords are premised in the ways that language cannot help but fail to encompass the material actuality and complexity of living relations. There is always a remainder. Foucault suggests that we find this remainder in what he terms subjugated knowledges or modes of expression glossed over by universalising claims to truth or accuracy of description (Gordon, 1980). In the case of love, these passwords open themselves to us precisely at the moment the dominant description fails to fully encompass our experience. However, in order to perceive these gaps in the dominant logic of our age, we need to step outside that logic. This is the utility of post qualitative inquiry. It proposes that we look at our common sense understanding of a term such as love from as many perspectives as possible. However, the goal is not to define love in any determinant way but instead to open love up as a set of possibilities. St. Pierre (2018b) says this is done through saturating oneself in difference and then becoming attuned to an intuitive sense of capacity and possibility.

Close reading offers us a way that allows us to explore love as a contested term that has capacities and possibilities for CYC that exceed the current readings of emotion and relationship in the common cultural vernacular. In our close reading, we follow Grossberg (1998, p. 68) in seeking “a context-specific theory/analysis of how contexts are made, unmade and remade as structures of power and domination”. To read the field of CYC this way means to entangle it within the socio-economic system of capitalism as a determining structural influence as well as the un-thought capacities of all of the alternative social forms that are yet to come.
Conclusion and recommendations

Post qualitative inquiry is not for everyone. Indeed, we might agree with St. Pierre (2018a) that it becomes a certain kind of necessity only after other more traditional approaches have failed. It requires an approach and scope of reading across disciplines that may be unfamiliar to those of us trained in traditional research. The goals of post qualitative research may seem a bit arcane. After all, what does it mean exactly to seek out the ‘not yet’ or the ‘un-thought’? But we argue that for those of us interested in practices of enquiry that have implications for liberation or even revolution, post qualitative inquiry offers the vehicle for truly thinking outside the box.

There are some key elements of post qualitative inquiry we would like emphasise. The first is that to do this work, one must abandon disciplinary allegiances and read broadly across many different theorists and scholars. To find the scholars and theorists that will work for you, you will have to experiment and see what concepts work together and which do not. Secondly, the goal of post qualitative research is never to reach a conclusion, define a problem or make a claim on truth. Instead, this kind of work is designed to open possibilities of worlds not yet imagined. Finally, to read closely means to step outside our common sense understandings of our world and engage a rigorous, yet intuitive, reading of the world as text. It is to use the realm of the concept to open the world of the in between space of thought, where we can only faintly glimpse the infinite capacity of worlds to come.

For CYC, that would be an as yet unimagined world of youth adult relations in which our mutual capacity for infinite creativity is enhanced beyond any understanding we currently hold. If that sort of work appeals to you as a way to investigate what it is you do as a CYC worker or academic, then post qualitative inquiry might be just the thing.

References


Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the use of documents in social research through the example of previously published research on the status of children and adults in Irish primary education (Dolan, 2015, 2016). Documents offer either an alternative to the more dominant research methods of interviewing, observation and questionnaires within the social sciences or a supplementary method to them. The advantages of using documents includes the possibility of tracing social processes over time, of understanding the flow of the present from the past and of avoiding the temptation of imagining the present as an entirely new era (Inglis, 2014). Access to relevant documents written in particular historical periods (including those written in the recent past such as several years ago) can give the researcher a view from the perspective of particular witnesses of events, routines and practices. Documents can also be seen as organisational instruments that direct the activities of workers and those who depend upon them. Therefore, we can often see how organisations functioned and shaped those within and around them through analysing the documents such organisations produced and used (Prior, 2003). Documents can also reveal the prevailing values and ideologies of particular societies, social groups and individuals, even if these are largely implicitly conveyed through the meanings of the content (Scott, 1990).

Despite the extensive use of documentary evidence in the early development of sociological research, such as the work of Marx (for example his use of factory inspectors’ reports in Capital, Marx, 1867/1967) and Weber (for example his use of religious pamphlets in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber, 1905/2002), the use of documents as a specific method has received scant attention in the social research methodology textbooks (McCulloch, 2004; Scott, 1990). The use of documents in research became more closely associated with the work of historians rather than sociologists and other social researchers from the 1960s; the latter academic disciplines increasingly specialised in the use of interviews and questionnaires (McCulloch, 2004). While often indispensable, these methods can neglect the importance of social change
in understanding how various types of society and social organisation function. Therefore, this chapter sets out the following learning points for readers:

- Understanding the importance of relative detachment from moral positions and judgements;
- Understanding the process of selecting documents in a theoretically informed way;
- Critically examining the issue of representativeness of documents in relation to social relationships and values.

In the following section I discuss methodological and theoretical aspects of the research study.

**Overview of the research study**

The main aim of the research project was to examine how the changing social position and status of children in relation to adults relates to the changing ways people depend upon each other. This flows from a long-running interest in the figurational perspective developed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias. While this section proceeds along common categories found in methodology sections of research studies, it would be misleading to suggest that this particular study followed such a linear trajectory. Indeed many research studies and particularly those of a qualitative nature (relying mostly on words rather than numbers as forms of evidence), have the character of a spiral process; the researcher moves back and forward between aims, methods and initial analysis (or even hunches) but hopefully moving upward towards greater understanding of the topic or question of interest (the research problem).

This research study used various research questions as guiding principles for the selection and interpretation of documents: how are changing conceptions of the child and adults related to broader changes in the social network of interdependencies? How did state social policies reflect and promote these changes? How do national identifications and we-feelings relate to the status and value of childhood?

The theoretical framework followed for this project was strongly informed by the concepts and theories developed by Norbert Elias. His approach is highly suited to the use of documents in social research due to his focus on examining social and cultural change. Elias’s particular sociological perspective came to be known as figurational sociology. For Elias (1939/2012), the concept of figuration refers to a dynamic network of interdependent people. In terms of methodological choices, perhaps the most relevant aspect of the figurational perspective is the centrality of social change. Elias argues that all aspects of social life and organisation are actually in the process of more or less continuous change, though this should not be confused with assumptions of progress (Elias, 1939/2012).
Elias (1939/2012) wrote on civilising processes in the technical sense, in that he was not suggesting the West should be seen as civilised as a mark of social superiority or that the West represented an apex of social progress. There are many dimensions to civilising processes, but for our purposes here the most critical one is that as figurations become more complex over time there is a growing social pressure towards developing more all-round and even self-steering controls. Elias (1980/2008) argues that the cultural difference between adulthood and childhood emerges when social standards of emotional self-control advance and become part of second nature (or habitus). There is in effect a greater distance to be travelled for each person to reach the prevailing social standards thus producing a greater difference between being a child and being an adult. So when historians and historically oriented social scientists examine how childhood has changed over time, this is only half the story, because the expectations of adulthood have changed considerably.

My study became an attempt to examine these changing understandings of childhood and adulthood within an Irish context, though of course the 19th century development of primary education in Ireland meant also the political context of the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The teaching manuals, found partly by chance in the National Library of Ireland, presented an opportunity to see how children were represented from the mid-19th century and also the expectations on teachers in their interactions with children. The school is a useful research site for exploring differences and similarities between children and adults. While families are social institutions, they have not been subject to the same extent as schools in terms of regulation and bureaucratisation. The involvement of state and religious organisations in the establishment and administration of schools, requiring both large expenditure and the application of extant knowledge on appropriate educational practices, meant documents had to be written in order to bring some order, control and coordination to these processes and structures. Particularly for the 19th century, the teaching manuals were often published in multiple editions over several decades. This means that the researcher can trace the advice to teachers over time. This echoes Elias’s treatment of etiquette texts, first written by Erasmus but appearing in many editions over the succeeding centuries, for novices to European court societies. Methodologically, Elias argues that as certain guidelines and instructions on expected conduct at court disappeared from the advice manuals, they no longer needed to be stated (Elias, 1939/2012; Mennell, 1998). In other words, certain practices became so widespread and accepted that they were taken-for-granted; they had become part of the individual habitus. Of course many of them still had to be taught to young children, but this was increasingly left to parents and teachers, as adults generally assumed a certain standard of conduct in their relations with each other.

As well as teaching manuals, I also used reports of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland. These also contained school inspectors’ reports, based on their travels around schools to observe the standard of buildings,
teaching and other infrastructure in schools. While the manuals focussed on
the expected behaviour of pupils and teachers, the reports often provided tes-
timony of practices found in schools, admittedly from the perspective of the
particular inspectors, many of whom were former teachers themselves. For the
20th century (Dolan, 2015), I relied more on Department of Education rules,
curricula and reports in relation to the primary education sector, though I also
used publications from the Irish National Teachers Organisation.

Another important aspect of figurational research is to represent the changing
figurations themselves. Although figurations are real (in the sense that people
really do depend on each other for the fulfilment of many needs and desires),
they are less directly visible in documentation. In the analysis and synthesis
of the data, the researcher needs to map the extent and type of dependencies
between people relevant to the topic of the research study. In the early less
formal systems of education in Ireland (before the advent of widespread free
primary education supported by the state in 1831), the main social bond of
dependence was between pupils, teachers and parents. Of course parents also
anticipated other dependencies for their children, otherwise there would be
little importance placed on literacy, numeracy and moral instruction. But the
extent of the figuration broadened over time to include priests, bishops, inspec-
tors, politicians, civil servants and industrialists (not just in Ireland, but glob-
ally), amongst others. The main documentary sources for identifying the extent
of interdependencies and their dynamic over time were history monographs,
written mainly by academic historians (for example, Akenson, 1970/2012;
Coolahan, 1981; Inglis, 1998; Kee, 2000/1972; McManus, 2004; O’Buachalla,
1988; O’Connor, 2010; Walsh, 2012). For this study I also partly relied upon
earlier work on figurational dynamics in Ireland (Dolan, 2005, 2009a, 2009b),
though this work did not focus on the education sector.

History monographs and other academic publications (normally labelled
secondary sources) allowed for the relative dating of events and networks in
historical time. Not all forms of interdependency can be traced in this way but
then not all forms are equally relevant for a study of primary education. The
key is to map changes dynamically so that we can determine a direction in the
relative complexity of the figuration. Within figurational changes it is also use-
ful to focus on shifts in power balance between people and groups comprising
the network (and it is not necessary for the historical participants themselves to
be aware of all the power chances within the figuration for them to be affected).

The research findings largely supported Elias’s theories, though at least in the
Irish context after partition and partial independence the power of the Catho-
lic Church became more pronounced and the shift towards a more nationally
foocussed cultural orientation produced a less individualised view of the child.
However, the idea of the uniqueness of each child and the need to nurture each
child’s potential, as well respecting the right to live as a child, became more
prominent from the 1960s in particular. Indeed, in some respects the emphasis on
children’s rights implies somewhat of a convergence between adults and children.
The Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800 strengthened the political and economic integration of these countries, but, due to the effectively outsider status of Catholics in relation to the established religion, there remained considerable hostility and suspicion between the denominations. Political and administrative elites in the new state sought a greater degree of legitimacy and loyalty within the Irish population. Non-denominational education was identified as one mechanism to achieve this. However, this plan required the cooperation of existing organisations for implementation and this state reliance on religious organisations increased the dependency between them and the state. Previous attempts at religious conversion made Catholic elites highly suspicious of educational institutions beyond their control. As part of a dynamic between religious groups, each sought control for their congregation. This dynamic of mutual antagonism had implication for the control of education well into the 20th century. In turn this shaped the image of the child. However, from the mid-19th century children and adults were often addressed in similar ways in the teaching manuals (particularly on the need to be clean, tidy and punctual). The lesser gap perceived between childhood and adulthood can also be seen through the use of pupil monitors, children at primary schools who also acted as teachers or teaching assistants. Over time, this position fell out of favour as children were deemed incapable of controlling and educating other children. Bonds between people became more complex and encompassing by the end of the 19th century. Power balances became somewhat less uneven through economic developments such as the greater commercialisation of agriculture and other industries and other social developments such as new employment opportunities in expanding governance and bureaucratic structures. Such accelerating social change brought less certainty concerning moral codes and continuing to treat children in the same ways as before. Children were increasingly seen as discoverers rather than inheritors of knowledge.

However, societies rarely change without some form of conflict and there were ongoing struggles between those groups holding on to older ways of teaching children and those extolling new perspectives. A more strident cultural and economic nationalism, with clearer views of good and bad and us and them in the wake of independence in the 1920s, reinforced the purpose of education in terms of character formation. Growing interdependencies from the 1950s especially, both between people within Ireland and between Irish people and those from other nation states, encouraged a more individualised view of the child. It was recognised that new career and life paths were emerging and that each person had to make choices concerning the future. The emphasis on the unique personality of the child placed greater pressure on teachers to know and respect that individuality while also recognising the child’s right to privacy. In some ways, then, by the end of the 20th century the image of the child and adults became less distant from each other.

In the following sections I address the major problems encountered in undertaking the research study, referring to methodological debates and principles prevalent within the relevant academic literature.
Theoretical framework and documents

Firstly I will give a brief overview of the conceptualisation of childhood from the viewpoint of Elias’s figurational sociology and relate this to the use of documents. For Elias, the figurations within which people are enmeshed and enabled are not to be considered as mere background or environmental contexts, such that they might affect someone’s intentions or plans once initially conceived by the individual. Every person is born into a figuration comprising other people, without whom the child could not survive. These older people have learned, at various levels of consciousness, ideas and values about how to behave, think and feel in different social situations. These ideas are passed from generation to generation, changing as they go, because how people are bonded to each other in terms of their mutual obligations, expectations and antagonisms also change. So the concept of figuration must be understood in a dynamic sense. Social life and indeed our so-called ‘inner’ life, has become more complex for many people compared to several centuries ago. The networks connecting people together have become longer and denser, meaning the links between people stretch across the world and particularly in highly urban societies we tend to have many forms of dependency with others. In these changing contexts, people must learn to navigate more complicated social terrains and must learn to control their emotional displays in more differentiated ways. People must also learn a growing fund of knowledge. This theoretical understanding is crucial for appreciating Elias’s conceptualisation of childhood (see Elias, 1980/2008).

Documents are produced as part of a social process involving people working with and learning from each other at various historical periods. Though each particular document might be considered a kind of snapshot or moment in time, by observing them in sequences over successive points in time it becomes possible to discern a more fluid picture, more like a movie instead of a photograph. So a crucial issue in the use of documents for this study was how to select them as sources of evidence to map changes in how people depend upon each other and also in how ideals, values and cultures change. Also, it is important for the researcher to establish some distance from the moral and emotional concerns of the present to avoid projecting these value-laden concerns on to the past in a judgemental way. This does not mean that historical figures can never be judged, only that judgements should reflect the prevailing standards of the period in which such figures lived.

Documents and detachment: reflexivity and moral positions

Perhaps the first problem encountered in this study, which is common across historical approaches, is trying to find some emotional and cognitive distance from the connotations of the central concepts. In this case I was exploring the meanings and emotional connotations surrounding childhood and children. We
now live in an age that places much greater emphasis on protecting children than in the past, and children are often presented as full of unique potential to be nurtured and protected (Mayall, 2000; Prout, 2005). Without necessarily seeing this portrayal as misguided or one-sided, in order to examine childhood in an historically informed sociological way means to some extent suspending these evaluations of what it means to be a child. When examining documents I was careful not to treat the current meanings of childhood as correct, as this would then entail using those meanings as moral yardsticks to judge the depictions of childhood in the 19th century. When analysing documents I sought to identify associations with the identity of child or pupil and compare them with associations of adult or teacher. So a child could be associated with ‘evil passions’ in earlier documents but not in more recent ones. In this way a kind of concept map is constructed around the idea of a child for different historical periods.

Within historical sociology, there is a danger of projecting current political and social concerns into the past (D. Inglis, 2014). The advantage of historically oriented social research is that the changing meanings and emotions surrounding social and cultural categories become more apparent. Current conceptions no longer appear inevitable and different futures can be conceived (D. Inglis, 2014). This is not easy of course, especially when the topic concerns childhood. Children are sometimes presented as vulnerable, in need of protection, and somewhat contradictorily championed as capable and competent (Hammersley, 2017).

In order to overcome, or at least reflexively address, this problem I found it useful to follow Elias’s (1983/2007) arguments for the need for a relatively detached approach to methodology and methods (see also Dolan & Connolly, 2015). The more ‘reality-congruent’ knowledge of the natural sciences has depended upon the gradually more detached stance that scientists were able to take while observing nature over many generations. As long as nature was feared, it was difficult for people to analyse and explain its properties, processes and structures in a more rational way. This was a circular process; with greater understanding of nature came less fear and more analysis and understanding. According to Elias, the same level of detachment has not yet been achieved in the social sciences, partly because people remain sources of danger for each other. The fears that parents or teachers have for the future of children can impinge upon the perspective and actions of the researcher, even if this is not consciously embraced. It became important in the research study, then, not to moralise about the attitudes and practices of teachers, inspectors and pedagogues in previous eras towards children. This does not mean that no critical evaluation can be made against the policies and practices of the past, but it is more meaningful and indeed more practical to place such criticisms within the prevailing morals and standards of the time. For example, corporal punishment is now roundly condemned and carries serious sanctions for teachers who inflict it. But in previous generations it was often considered necessary as
a form of social control. As Irish society became more globally integrated and future-oriented, people’s fears about child development shifted from ensuring obedience to moral codes assumed to be relatively stable towards fears about damaging children’s curiosity and openness to new ideas. Without understanding how and why particular images of children and the duties of teachers developed, attempts to change them are likely to be futile or misguided. For my study, however, I was mainly concerned with how cultural representations changed and how these were connected to other social processes such as globalisation and commercialisation.

Selecting and accessing documents

One of the attractions of documentary research is the sheer abundance of documents (McCulloch, 2004). But the abundance presents another problem: how do we select from the multitude of documents available? The answer will depend upon the source of documents, and of course many documents are inaccessible for research. For historians in particular, archives kept in libraries and museums or in specially designated institutions such as the national archives of a particular country are often highly valuable. Archives as places of storage of documents also became associated with the preservation of national memories and, indeed, important for the display of national identity and significance (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). Archives are also sites of power in that policy decisions shape what types of documents are stored, catalogued and made accessible (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). This power can be masked by the “technicist cultures” prevalent in modern organisations, where efficiency and rational control may give the impression that correct decisions are always taken without any ideological bias (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998, p. 30). From a figurational perspective power exists in all social relationships, including those involving researchers and archivists.

For my study the appropriate documents were mainly teaching manuals, school curricula, inspectors’ reports and other department of education reports and policy documents. Not all editions of a particular author’s manual were available, but there were sufficient editions, including those of other authors, enabling comparisons across the historical period. As previously stated, the first teaching manual was found by chance in the catalogue of the National Library of Ireland. This catalogue can be accessed online from the library website (www.nli.ie). From the first manual I identified relevant search words, such as ‘school’, ‘teaching’ and ‘methods’, to look for other manuals and editions. From highly relevant sources, I then looked for publications by the same authors and within the subject terms provided by the library (for example, ‘School management and organization > Ireland’, ‘Elementary school teaching > Ireland > Handbooks, manuals’, etc.). Once publications were identified, I then completed the application for library material and the librarian retrieved the materials to review. Like many research libraries, and especially those containing old and
rare books and manuscripts, researchers must adhere to rules of note-taking (such as only using pencils or laptops) and handle materials carefully. In terms of sampling, I analysed available teaching manuals for the 19th century. With regard to the reports of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, it was not feasible to analyse all of the written texts from the 1830s onwards due to the volume of words. I followed a common selection approach of historians and historical sociologists of selecting reports at time intervals (ten years), though I also supplemented these with particular reports that evidence from other documents suggested were particularly relevant, such as the Powis Commission Report of 1870 and the Belmore Commission Report of 1898.

The credibility of observers is an important methodological issue in the use of documents (Scott, 1990), and here I relied upon the observations, testimony and anecdotes of school inspectors responsible for certain geographical territories. The question of credibility of school inspectors can partly be addressed by positioning them within their figurations, to speculate on how and why they might have chosen to recount certain events and not others, or indeed why they might fabricate events. In some ways even fabrication would reveal something of the social expectations placed upon teachers and children of varying ages. Such accounts would provide evidence of the impression the inspector wished to convey to others reading his or her reports and the need to display familiarity and expertise with educational ideals and correct practices. For example, in 1900 an inspector reported: “I have sometimes seen a pupil of the first class in charge of a class of eighteen infants” (Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1901, p. 44). While there is no way to corroborate this inspector’s account and, indeed, his testimony may be accurate, the statement also indicates that it had become unacceptable at governance levels that young children should be able to control and instruct other children of only slightly younger ages.

Representing values and processes

Another issue that affected the study and, again, pervades the use of documents in social research is the representativeness of the documents selected for analysis and interpretation (see Dolan, 2009c). This occurs on two levels: the representativeness of the primary documents identified, such as teaching manuals and inspectors’ reports, and also the reliability of historian accounts of events in the past. These secondary sources are themselves constructed by the historian based on his or her selection and interpretation of primary documents. In a way, one of the solutions to this problem is to take a less egocentric view of the social researcher. While some approaches in the philosophy of science has positioned the single individual on a path of discovery through observation of some imagined external world, Elias (1983/2007, p. 15) reminds us that every researcher works within a “pre-existing knowledge stream”. Researchers are necessarily dependent upon other researchers, past and present, and so they constitute a
kind of scientific figuration. This mutual dependence can lead to the advance or decline of knowledge, but the dependence is inescapable. Once documents are recognised as socially produced for social audiences, then an understanding of these social processes aids interpretation (McCulloch, 2004; Scott, 1990). For example, teaching manuals were written by established and successful pedagogues for the training of young adults entering the profession in the context of a rapidly expanding primary education sector funded by the British state. The researcher's knowledge of this broader context is based on other documents, including monographs written by historians. So interpretation of documents occurs not only through one single document at a time but by evidence in some documents supporting evidence in others.

For the analysis of the teaching manuals it was not crucial to believe that the authors accurately depicted all children in Ireland at the time or covered all the practices in which most children engaged. The key was to recognise that the changing expectations of children and adults within school settings, and these texts prescribed for teachers how to deal and interact with young people in particular social settings. An analysis over different years of publication (in some cases involving successive editions by the same author) allowed for the identification of regulations and advice that were aimed at children and teachers. For example, Joyce's sixteenth edition of *A Handbook of School Management and Methods of Teaching* (1894) emphasised child emotional well-being, compared to the fifth edition (1876). According to the 1894 manual, children should be allowed “a certain degree of cheerful freedom – a moderate indulgence in that joyous fun and glee they so much love” (Joyce, 1894, p. 67). Too much discipline “defeats its own purposes; for children governed in this way are orderly only in presence of the teacher” (Joyce, 1894, p. 67, original emphasis).

Where that advice or expectations converged, it seemed reasonable to interpret that pupils and teachers were not necessarily seen as very different in temperament and standards of emotional control. These were the critical dimensions for using Elias's theories for the research. This is the value of engaging in explicit theoretically guided documentary research. The theoretical framework places limitations on the type and range of documents needed. Without theory, researchers could never be satisfied that enough documents had been sampled. While one of the criticisms of historical sociology concerns the reliability upon potentially fragmented and unrepresentative materials, this ignores the fact that researchers in this tradition seek to accumulate “interdependent source materials” (Bryant, 2000, p. 499) akin to a “sociology of documents” to offset the emphasis on the psychological dispositions of significant actors in history (Dibble, 1963, p. 207), which then supports the popular belief in the supreme power of individuals to bend history to their will.

Another way of interpreting documents which to some extent bypasses the epistemological obsession with the ability of historical documents to accurately represent what actually happened is to recognise that the function of documents is not simply to represent some imagined reality external to the authors of such
documents. Within particular organisations and institutions, including government departments and state-appointed educational commissions, documents are written to direct people within those organisations (see Prior, 2003, 2008). Documents can thereby be read less in terms of accurate accounts of actual events and more by way of conveying the ideological and cultural assumptions and ways of thinking of the period in question. The writings of pedagogues and school inspectors need not be positioned as the unique thoughts of isolated individuals because this interpretation would be inaccurate. They wrote to address the social needs of politicians, civil servants and educational administrators who required new teachers to occupy positions in a growing number of schools throughout the country. The knowledge of context aids the researcher in the interpretation of specific texts. Based on reading history monographs, in particular O’Connor (2010), I was able to rely on short biographies of these authors whose relative social success as teachers and founders of reputable schools could not have advanced had their ideas and prescriptions been considered heretical at the time. Of course historians can make mistakes in selection and interpretation, as can any social researcher. Historians can misinterpret evidence, omit significant facts or causes or rely too heavily on general descriptions of the past informed by particular critical theoretical approaches (McCullagh, 2000). However, McCullagh argues that bias can be curtailed by considering other possible narratives and explanations as well as by adopting a critical stance towards the claims made in the data. For example, in an 1843 manual, Sullivan (1843, original emphasis) states: “The children, while in the play-ground...are never left to themselves”. I did not interpret this as accurate eyewitness testimony of what happened in Irish schools during the mid-19th century but as an ideal that writers employed by the Commissioners of National Education were trying to establish.

The extent of the critical stance a researcher should take depends upon whether the data is treated as an accurate account of events or a reflection of cultural values and ideologies. For my research the concern was mainly the latter, partly because figurational sociology is less reliant on specific historical events for explanations of social change, and more focussed on changing power balances between people and groups bound in different forms of mutual dependency. Within any society there are competing and contradictory values and beliefs. Even ideals of conduct can be written as rules to follow, but researchers are generally aware that rules are sometimes evaded and resisted as well as followed. Even though the school rules of the 20th century forbade corporal punishment for ‘failure at lessons’, there is a multitude of evidence pointing to the frequent flouting of this rule up until the abolition of such punishment in 1982. This does not mean one view is accurate and the other not; rather, it points to the contradiction between ideals of education and practices within educational settings. This contradiction suggests the coexistence of educational ideals shaped by more elite pedagogues advising government ministers and officials and some teachers losing emotional control in some social situations involving very unequal power balances (between teachers and pupils).
Conclusions and recommendations

As every research project is to some degree different, guidelines and recommendations must of course be applied selectively and critically by researchers. There are general concerns and approaches to follow that should aid in the use of documents, but even here such guidelines are informed by the broader theoretical or philosophical perspective informing the project. The figurational perspective previously outlined generally eschews philosophy as a guide for research, instead advocating for a sociology of knowledge development. Part of this means taking a more detached (or less emotionally involved) perspective towards the object of enquiry, in this case childhood. Essentially, this means looking at the topic as it is rather than as it should be. This is difficult when there is so much emotional and moral baggage attached to the concept of childhood. Immersion in different documents and histories of childhood over reasonably long time periods tends to put the current moral understanding of childhood into perspective, so the researcher can gain some distance from the prevailing ethos. The changing moral codes around childhood can be interpreted as cultural ideals related to how society functions at the time, or how the power balances between various groups have changed, for example politicians and priests.

When faced with vast quantities of documents, researchers might be tempted to avoid this method altogether, but the problem of selection occurs for all research methods. We cannot talk to everyone either. The task becomes simpler and more manageable when the project is informed by a clear theoretical framework. This does not mean that the framework should be supported as generally knowledge advances by finding out what does not work and prior explanations can be rejected or modified depending upon the interpretation of new evidence or new contexts. For historical research, the meaning of words can change, or people may have used different words to convey similar meanings in different historical periods. Again, interpretation is aided by placing words in the context of many other words. We can map the meaning of words, like child, over time by identifying other words and phrases that were associated with that word in various documents. For examining social and cultural change, ideally we should look for successive editions of the same type of documents or at least documents written for similar purposes, for example to train teachers. However, we must be careful not to assume continuity or linear trajectories, as societies do not change in the same direction towards every greater progress or rationality. There can be contradictory processes that can be integrated into developing explanations to provide richer, more credible accounts of change. Researchers can only produce the most plausible account based on the available evidence. There is no guarantee of forever accurate explanations. Knowledge develops through examining and re-examining prior explanations. Researchers work as part of broader figurations involving others who have worked before on similar topics. Research is a collective process rather than an individual, isolated moment that can be determined as completely accurate.
References


Introduction

Choosing a suitable theoretical framework is possibly one of the most important elements of research, yet is often one of the most challenging aspects (Silverman, 2010). Theories are formulated to “explain, predict, and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge” (Abend, 2008, p. 174). A theoretical framework provides “a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory . . . constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships” (Eisenhart, 1991, p. 205). The framework needs to be consistently visible in not only the design of the research but also throughout the research process (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Based on my research examining the experiences of birth children of foster carers in Ireland, the discussion in this chapter focusses on the selection and influence of theoretical frameworks on research. The key factors to be considered in selecting a particular theoretical framework for research will be examined. The reader will also learn about how the selection of the framework influences the choice of research questions, selection of research method, data analysis and findings throughout the research process.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the research study, which is followed by a discussion on the two key learning points for readers, which are:

- Understanding the influence of theoretical frameworks on the selection of research questions and choice of research method for a study;
- Understanding the influence of theoretical frameworks on data analysis, interpretation of data and findings.

Overview of the study

The research, used to illustrate the learning points for this chapter, examined the retrospective experiences of adult birth children of foster carers in the foster care system. In particular the study focussed on birth children’s experiences
of being consulted and included in decision-making in the fostering process. While a great deal of research exists on the topic of fostering, limited research has been published on the experiences of the birth children of foster carers (see Spears & Cross, 2003; Sutton & Stack, 2013). Hojer, Sebba, and Luke (2013) argue that greater recognition of the contribution of birth children’s role in fostering is more likely to lead to greater contentment within foster families and probably greater retention rates of foster carers.

While recognising that childhood has been conceptualised in different ways, the sociology of childhood was the theoretical framework I chose to examine the experiences of birth children of foster carers. The reasons for this are discussed later in the chapter. The sociology of childhood became recognised as a sub-theme of sociology in the mid-1990s following the introduction of James and Prout’s (1990) book on the construction of childhood entitled *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. James and Prout (1990) explicitly called for the study and theorisation of children as social actors, with emphasis on agency and on seeing children as full members of society rather than in terms of what they would become when adults. The sociology of children proposes that children are autonomous and have the ability to make contributions to the development of their own lives. They are not simply passive followers of adult values and rules but social actors capable of making sense of and affecting their societies and thus are active agents in social processes (James & Prout, 2010).

James and Prout (1990, 2010) identify the following key propositions as underpinning the sociology of childhood perspective:

- Childhood is a social construction with culturally determined sets of expectations and roles;
- Childhood is not purely determined by biological factors and the onset of key stages in the life course of children;
- Childhood is an important social structure, thus placing importance on the study of children’s lives;
- Children are autonomous and have the ability to make contributions to the development of their own lives, rather than passively following the values and rules of adults;
- Children are autonomous and should be afforded more political influence on issues and matters that influence their lives.

Hojer (2007, p. 74) identifies a changing perception of children’s roles in today’s society:

This new perception of childhood looks upon children as active subjects and competent social agents, not just as passive receivers of care and attention. Thereby, focus has been set on the agency of children and young people, and their involvement in social interactions, both within a familial context and as a society as a whole.
My interest in the research topic was influenced by professional experience as a social care worker working with foster families who had discussed with me the impact of fostering on their lives and that of their own children. The selection of my theoretical framework was therefore influenced by my values and experiences as a social care worker as well as my epistemological beliefs. This study positioned itself within an interpretivist paradigm, as the beliefs and assumptions of this paradigm are most suited to gaining insight into the individual experiences and perspectives of the birth children of foster carers. Neuman (2000) suggests that interpretivism allows an understanding of the social world through the study of how people manage their daily lives (see Chapter 15 in this collection for a further discussion on interpretivism). My epistemological beliefs underpinning the study design were influenced by previous professional experience as a residential social care worker. As a residential social care worker I placed a lot of importance on advocating for young people and ensuring their opinions were sought in relation to their life plans whilst in care. Social care work involves the provision of professional care, protection and advocacy to individuals and groups who “experience marginalisation, disadvantage or special needs” (Social Care Ireland, 2016, n.p.). Core principles underpinning social care include the promotion of social justice, empowerment and advocacy (Lalor & Share, 2015). Subsequently, my principles, values and beliefs as a social care worker most certainly influenced me as a researcher in the design of my study and the selection of the chosen theoretical framework; the general values and beliefs of both are closely aligned in placing importance on researching the childhood experiences of a population that previously has gone under-reported.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 birth children of foster carers aged between 18 and 28 years (12 females and three males). There were two main reasons for researching the retrospective experiences of birth children of foster carers. Firstly I was concerned that I could impact on the dynamics of the family if I interviewed people under the age of 18 years, as they were more likely to be still involved in fostering. Secondly I was “conscious that interviewing participants under 18 years of age would require the receipt of consent from their parents which may have influenced the interviewees’ ability or willingness to speak openly about their experiences” (Williams, 2014, p. 9). As suggested by Hardt and Rutter (2004, p. 261), a limitation of contemporaneous research studies can be that “some hidden experiences are unlikely to be reported contemporaneously in childhood”. The upper age limit of 28 years was imposed to ensure that the participants’ experiences were in the relatively recent past and as such their experiences would be reflective of current practice.

Findings from the study showed that for 12 of the 15 birth children interviewed, fostering was overall a positive experience, which helped them develop into individuals who were open-minded, caring and non-judgemental. Participants also appreciated that their families were able to help children coming from difficult circumstances. However it was clear that fostering also brought
a range of challenges for the participants. The findings suggested that the birth children in this study undertook a lot of emotional work in supporting, protecting and advocating for their parents, birth siblings and foster siblings. Despite the important part played by the participants in their families’ involvement in fostering, this contribution seemed to go unrecognised by fostering professionals and agencies. Participants stated that they were not included or consulted about foster care decisions that affected them. The findings indicated that birth children are competent social actors capable of making valuable contributions to foster care decisions that affect their lives and that of their family. Furthermore they act as knowledge agents who often gather crucial welfare information and insights when foster children disclose issues and experiences to them.

The influence of the theoretical framework research questions and choice of method

Flinder and Mills (1993) propose that as the notion of a theory has been defined by philosophers and academics from a range of backgrounds, there is no one definition. However for the purpose of this chapter theory is defined as:

a set of concepts that are integrated around a central theme to form a framework that can be used to explain the why, what and how of phenomena. . . theory takes a description to a higher level of abstraction by integrating themes/categories around a central theme through statement of proposed relationships.

(Corbin & Holt, 2011, p. 114)

Theory offers a map as to why the world is the way it is and as such helps explain some aspects of how the world works (Strauss, 1995). Subsequently the theoretical framework “consists of the selected theory (or theories) that undergirds your thinking with regards to how you understand and plan to research your topic” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 13). It is adopted from existing theories that have been supported through research and published in scholarly literature with the researcher uniquely applying the framework to their subject in order to view it in a new and different way (Anfara & Mertz, 2015).

The choice and use of a theoretical framework is a challenge faced by many researchers, be they novice or more experienced. Much of the difficulty centres on the selection of a suitable framework relevant to the research topic and threading the framework throughout the research study (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The theoretical framework is important to a study as it provides structure, flow and cohesion, thus influencing “the development of research questions, the conceptualisation of the literature and the analysis plan for the study” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). The theoretical framework affects all aspects of a study, “from determining how to frame the purpose and the problem, to deciding what to look at and for, to resolving how to make sense of the data
collected” (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 11). The theoretical framework offers new insights into the topic under investigation thus broadening our understanding of it.

In the initial planning of my study I was still quite naïve about the importance of the theoretical framework to the eventual design of my study. I was also still unsure of the exact research question I was focussing on in my study. Upon reflection my proposal lacked clarity in relation to what element of birth children’s fostering experience I was intending to investigate. This was evident when reading about the initial theoretical frameworks I had considered using for my study, for example, role theory and family systems theory. As I continued the planning of my study I believed I would not be able to easily operationalise these theories as I was more focussed on exploring birth children’s experiences of consultation and decision-making. While some of these theories had been used before within foster care research I did not believe they fitted well to exploring the aspect of birth children’s fostering experience I was seeking to examine.

Eventually after a period of frustration and blind alleys I began to read the research of Annabel Goodyer (2011) who had used the sociology of childhood to explore the experiences of children living in foster care. It was a key moment for the planning of my study as the more I read about the theory the more it helped me clarify the exact objectives I set for the research. It became clear to me that I was more concerned with examining birth children’s experiences of consultation and decision-making, as well as exploring how birth children attempt to influence fostering decisions that affect their lives, rather than the impact of fostering on their position and role within the family. This guided me in identifying the exact research questions I wanted to address in my research. While previous research documenting the experiences of birth children in foster families has tended to focus on the impact of fostering on the lives of foster carers’ own children (for example Hojer, 2007; Hojer & Nordenfors, 2004; Pugh, 1996; Younes & Harp, 2007) little was known about how birth children attempt to influence fostering processes. Therefore this further helped identify a gap in knowledge in relation to research of birth children’s experience of the foster care process and their involvement in decision-making and consultation regarding their foster care experiences. The sociology of childhood had already been used to examine how foster children attempted to influence fostering processes in their lives (Goodyer, 2011), which indicated that the framework would fit well with my research objectives. It did. Subsequently I stress the importance of researchers spending time in searching for a theoretical framework you plan to use in your study as this will influence your decisions in relation to what you want to find out, which aspects of a topic you wish to research as well as the construction of the exact research questions for the study.

The theoretical framework also helped guide the data collection phase of the study, as it influenced the choice of method used in the study as well as the drafting of the interview schedule for the interviews. Semi-structured
interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring the participants’ experiences but also provided a degree of structure in order to collect the relevant data in order to achieve the stated research questions (Gray, 2009). The choice of method allowed for gaining insight into understanding how the world is constructed for participants (McLeod, 2001), thus this fitted well with the objectives of my study regarding examining the experiences and perspectives of the birth children in relation to consultation and decision-making processes.

This method was also useful in encouraging respondents to reflect upon their experiences and, in turn, helped them “to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understanding” (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 32). The interview schedule was emailed to participants a week prior to their interview and they were encouraged to read through the questions to help them reflect on their experiences and perspectives prior to interview. The participants were also encouraged, while reading the interview schedule, to contact the interviewer (prior to the interview by email or during the interview) if there were any questions or topics not mentioned that they would identify as important to discuss in relation to their fostering experiences. None of the participants identified any new topics for inclusion on the interview schedule. Several of the interviewees commented that it had been useful for them to read the schedule prior to interview as it had helped them reflect on incidents that occurred in their fostering families that they had not thought about in some time. Six interviewees mentioned that having read the interview schedule, they approached their parents for some information related to the questions, such as how many children their families had fostered. The participants described this as a positive experience as it provided the opportunity for some to speak with their parents about their experience of fostering. The participants were again in the interviews asked for their views on the interview schedule. They stated that they found the interview schedule and process to be thorough and thought-provoking, thus helping them to reflect upon their experiences as the birth child within a foster family.

Scott and Garner (2012, p. 285) suggest that researchers conducting interviews must be mindful of the issue of reciprocity, in other words what is “in it” for the respondent. All the interviewees gave their time voluntarily with no monetary reward. When asked during the interview why they had decided to volunteer for the study to discuss their childhood experiences of fostering, two key reasons came to the fore. Most of the participants stated that they wanted to voice some concerns about their experiences of being a birth child in a foster family and hoped that by partaking in this research it would help improve the system for other birth children in foster families. Other interviewees revealed that the interview offered them an opportunity to speak about their experiences of being a birth child in a foster family, something that no one had ever asked them about before (Williams, 2014).

To help ensure the data provided an accurate account of the participants’ childhood experiences of fostering, interviewees were all offered a copy of the transcript from their individual interview and informed they could delete
anything they did not want included in the analysis. Seven of the participants requested copies of their transcripts. None of the participants asked for material to be deleted from the interview transcription.

As previously discussed, the concepts of agency and children’s autonomy are important propositions within the framework of the sociology of childhood. This provided some key areas to explore in data collection such as birth children’s involvement in decision-making, their experiences of being consulted and their attempts to influence fostering processes in their lives. Hence I ensured that I included questions related to these areas in the interview schedule. For example, participants were asked about their experiences of being included by fostering professionals on fostering issues. I also asked them for details about how they gave their opinions to parents and social workers about the decision made in relation to fostering in their families. The interviews began with the open-ended question: “Can you tell me about your experiences of fostering professionals since your families began fostering?” (Williams, 2016, p. 1398). The interviewees were then asked to discuss their experiences of being included by fostering professionals on issues related to their families fostering. I also asked the participants to give an account of how they “expressed their opinions about fostering decisions” (Williams, 2016, p. 1398). The choice of questions used in the interview schedule was also informed by questions used in previous research that had utilised the sociology of childhood, such as Goodyer (2011) who had used the framework to examine foster children’s experiences of participation and inclusion in foster care processes.

The impact theoretical frameworks on data analysis

Polit and Hungler (1999, p. 18) advise that during the data analysis stage of studies theoretical frameworks provide:

- efficient mechanisms for drawing together and summarising accumulated facts. The linkage of findings into a coherent structure makes the body of accumulated knowledge more accessible and thus more useful to practitioners who seek to implement findings and to researchers who seek to extend the knowledge base.

While researchers can often feel overwhelmed with large amounts of data to interpret, the theoretical framework can act as a “sieve” to help filter and sort through the data in order to identify how the pieces of data relate and where they fit (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 231). The theoretical framework is not only important to the planning of the study but is also useful to researchers in guiding them making meaning from the data they collected in order to answer their research question (Eisner, 1985).
The theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood provided me with a working plan to guide my analysis of the data through the concepts and propositions of the theoretical framework. Table 14.1 illustrates how the propositions underpinning the sociology of childhood influenced the interpretation of the data and identification of key themes from the dataset.

The concepts of agency, autonomy and dynamic engagement helped me filter through the interview transcripts to identify key themes that cut across the dataset. The concept of agency identifies children as autonomous, active agents in fostering and not just passive observers of the foster care process. Dynamic engagement helps recognise the interaction between children and their environment, as children are shaped by their environment but also actively engage in the shaping of their environment.

In conducting data analysis I also relied on Braun and Clark’s (2006, p. 79) procedure for thematic analysis. This “is a method for identifying, analysing and

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<td>Birth children as advocates for parents</td>
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<td>Children as social actors with the ability to make contributions to their own lives</td>
<td>Grief and loss</td>
<td>Strategies used by birth children to manage grief and loss brought about by fostering, e.g., avoiding getting too close to foster children, encouraging parents to take a break from fostering after a foster child has left</td>
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<td>Children should be afforded more influence on matters affecting their lives</td>
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<td>Attempts by birth children to influence social work decisions, e.g., requests to stay in contact with foster children who have left their homes, requests to attend meetings to challenge fostering decisions made by professionals, writing letters to social workers</td>
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They suggest the importance of reading and rereading data in order to jot down initial ideas, which are then generated into initial codes. I was conscious at the beginning of data analysis of trying to ensure that I was not coding data in relation to themes regarding direct questions from my interview schedule, as I was also interested in examining from the data the techniques and strategies used by birth children in the study in trying to influence fostering processes. As suggested by Anfara and Mertz (2015), the theoretical framework aids the researchers in moving beyond descriptions of ‘what’ from the data to explanations of ‘why’ and ‘how’. For example after a first reading of data, an initial note I made related to the motivations of foster carers for beginning to foster. Initially I did not see this as an issue relevant to the birth children’s experiences of decision-making and consultation in fostering. However through continuous rereading and coding of the data from the perception of children being autonomous and agentic during childhood, this became an important theme. For example, some participants identified strategies they used to deal with the challenges of fostering decisions, as they did want to raise the matter with their parent(s) to avoid causing upset to their parent(s), knowing how much fostering meant to their parent(s). This is illustrated by the following quote where one participant reveals how she used to discuss the challenges of fostering with her sister as she did not want to upset her mother:

I relied on my sister for more than just sisterhood. If one of the foster kids was being mean; there was a foster kid who bullied me quite a lot and I couldn’t tell my Mam because I didn’t want to upset her as I knew fostering meant a lot to her. I didn’t want my Mam to have to get rid of her, so I would go to my sister and tell her and she would be like ‘just do this’ or ‘just do that’.

The propositions of the sociology of childhood also influenced the interpretation of data in relation to constructing findings identifying how the birth children in this study attempted to influence the fostering decisions made by social workers, which affected their daily lives. Reading and rereading of the data from the proposition of recognising the autonomy and agency of childhood identified the attempts of the participants to influence social work decision-making practices. For example a number of birth children expressed frustration, confusion and sadness about why they were not allowed stay in contact with foster children who had left their homes but had lived with them for relatively long periods of time and whom the birth children viewed as siblings. This is demonstrated in the following quote from a participant who stressed the importance of social workers explaining why foster children are being moved
and allowing contact to continue between foster children and the relevant foster family post placement:

   Explain why you’re taking these kids back, why you’re moving kids to other houses. Then, when the kids go, let us visit them. I think this is a big thing, this kid has been your brother or sister.

   (Williams, 2017)

Some birth children in this study revealed how they challenged the decisions of professionals and were not simply content to accept adult processes, practices and rules but rather they attempted to exercise agency in the shaping of these matters that impacted on their childhoods. For example, in the following quote, a participant explains how she responded to a social worker who was reluctant to allow her to sit in on a meeting about a matter involving the bullying of her sister by a foster child in the home:

   The social worker asked what I was doing there and said that I could go now ‘I just want to talk to your Mam. It is private information, we’re going to be talking about your sister and the foster child’. I said ‘I live in this house and I have been living with this issue for the last six years, so I think I have the right to be here’

   (Williams, 2016)

Kearney and Hyle (2015) point out that during the conduct of a study some doubts may remain as to whether a theoretical framework is the perfect fit. For researchers, issues may arise that cause concern about the application of the chosen framework to some elements of the data analysis. For example, in my study the issues of grief and loss, although not initially areas of focus for my study, were ones that were very evident in the accounts of all participants. This related to their feelings following the departure of foster children from their homes. Initially this raised concerns and confusion for me as the categorisation of these experiences did not seem to fit my area of study or indeed the chosen theoretical framework. However continuous reading and analysis of the data, keeping in mind the propositions of the sociology of childhood, in particular the identification of children as being able to influence developments in their lives, assisted me in making sense of the data. Continuous reading of the data from this perspective helped me identify findings which described the strategies used by birth children to manage the feelings of grief and loss brought about by their families involvement in fostering (see Williams, 2017). If I had adopted another theoretical framework for my study, these findings may have been interpreted in a different way. However using the propositions of children’s agency and autonomy in analysing the participants’ experiences of grief and loss led me to focusing on the ways in which the birth children attempted to manage these experiences in their lives. For example, as illustrated by the participant’s
quote that follows, experience of grief and loss impacted upon how participants adapted to their family’s fostering as time went on, with some stating how they avoided becoming attached to foster children (see Williams, 2017).

The first girl I used to play with but then things changed and I didn’t want anything to do with it anymore. We had the first girl for four years and then they decided to put her in another placement and I just cut myself off from the others because I didn’t want to become close to other kids because they’d be gone.

Other participants discouraged their parents from taking on new foster placements following the departure of a foster child as they could see the impact on the family:

I remember saying on one occasion when my mother wanted to take another foster child too soon, “this is a bad idea, you’re not going to able for this”. It was taking a toll on us and my mother, especially short term kids coming in and her getting attached to them, and then them naturally going home.

(Williams, 2014)

Researchers should be conscious of discarding data based on the strengths and limitations of the theoretical framework as it may reveal insight into a particular areas of a subject matter or phenomenon which previously had not been considered (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Through the use of the chosen theoretical framework, data that might initially seem irrelevant may be identified and explained (Maxwell, 2012).

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This chapter has examined the role of theoretical frameworks in the conduct of social research. A key message has focussed on researchers ensuring that the theoretical framework chosen for research be visible throughout a study. This is particularly important in relation to key stages of the research process, such as planning of the study, design of research questions, selection of methodology and method and finally the analysis of the dataset. Drawing from my own experiences and learnings as a researcher in selecting and applying a theoretical framework during the completion of my study, the chapter proposes the following recommendations for readers.

Researchers should be mindful of their own epistemological beliefs and values as these will undoubtedly influence the selection and operationalisation of the theoretical framework in the planning and conduction of the research study.

Researchers should fully consider and understand the theoretical framework that is being used for their study in order for a research study to contain the
necessary cohesion and structure. It is important to consider a wide range of frameworks as topics can be researched from a number of viewpoints. The framework may be one that is already known to researchers from previous studies or one that they have encountered during reading for the study being undertaken.

Often researchers make reference to particular theoretical frameworks at the beginning of a research report but fail to return to it again, particularly post-data collection (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Key propositions and concepts that make up a theoretical framework can be used to plan and guide data analysis in order to try to gain insight into the meaning from the dataset.

Caution should be exercised in discarding or concealing data (either intentionally or unintentionally) that does not seem to fit with the framework as it might be utilised to interpret new meaning to the topic under investigation.

Notes

1 Role theory is concerned with “the study of behaviours that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain or are affected by those behaviours” (Biddle, 1979, p. 4).
2 Family systems theory draws on general systems theory to suggest that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another but rather as part of their family as the family is an emotional unit. Bowen (1978) identifies the family as a system in which each member has a role to play and rules to respect. Members of the system are expected to respond to each other in accordance to their role.

References


Introduction

The central aim of this chapter is to draw attention to how knowledge is constructed in the research process. This highlights for the reader the need to consider that the ‘knowledge’ generated by research should not be seen as neutral. Therefore a critical approach to examining knowledge construction, as well as awareness of the power of the researcher in making choices about conducting research, is encouraged. Blaikie and Priest (2017, p. 24) argue “all knowledge generated by social research is tentative because it is conducted from a particular point of view”, which puts “limits on what is seen and discovered”. They advise researchers to explicate their choice of research paradigm so that the findings produced can be appraised in terms of that paradigm’s assumptions. In a similar way Willig (2013) refers to epistemological reflexivity. This involves thinking about factors such as how the study was designed and how data was analysed have constructed particular findings and therefore knowledge and understanding about the topic of investigation.

Using examples from research conducted about social care education in Ireland, the focus in this chapter will be on two areas. Firstly how the choice of research paradigm and its underpinning assumptions impact on the way the world, participants and knowledge are seen and therefore researched. Secondly the discussion will focus on how the method used to analyse the data collected from participants leads to particular findings, thus constructing particular knowledge about the topic being researched. Using examples from my research on practice teaching, I will explain how using two different, yet complementary, approaches to data collection yielded findings that emphasise different aspects.

The learning points for the reader are therefore:

• Understanding the influence of the assumptions inherent in a research paradigm on the aim of research and methodological approach;
• Understanding how the method of analysis used for a dataset constructs the findings.
Overview of research study

An important part of the educational programme for the professions of social work and social care work is the practice placement. Through placement in different agencies students experience the realities of the workplace. When on placement students are assigned a practice teacher to monitor and supervise their work. This person is considered pivotal to students’ learning. Social care programmes in Ireland propose that the practice teacher should support the student’s learning and development while on placement through agreeing to appropriate learning objectives for the student, organising a timetable of work for the student to complete and providing supportive supervision through weekly meetings where the student’s current and future learning is discussed (Irish Association of Social Care Educators, 2009). However, research literature on practice teaching,1 from the viewpoint of both the practice teachers and the students, indicates that the role is multi-faceted and complex. It has been said to involve building a supportive relationship so that students find the practice teacher approachable and non-judgemental (Brodie & Williams, 2013). This facilitates students to be open in supervision (Abbott & Lyter, 1999), admit any difficulties they may be having, ask questions and not be fearful about making mistakes (Karpenko & Gidycz, 2012; Lefevre, 2005; Vågstrøm & Skåien, 2011), as well as discuss their cognitive and emotional reactions to practice (Fortune & Kaye, 2003; Knight, 2010). Making the student aware of agency policies and expectations of them on practice is discussed (Davys & Beddoe, 2000; Miehls Everett, Segal, & du Bois, 2013), while collaborative goal setting and listening to students’ suggestions is also found (Knight, 2001; Miehls et al., 2013). Modelling the values of the work through good practice is seen to be important (Bogo, 2006; Thompson, 2006), as well as direct teaching (Lefevre, 2005). Tsien and Tsui (2007) emphasise that assisting the student to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice is one of the goals of practice teaching so that students have a framework to understand their practice (Fortune & Kaye, 2003). Providing constructive, honest and performance-specific feedback is also seen as being part of the practice teacher’s role so that students can increase their self-awareness and develop as practitioners (Bogo, 2006; Brodie & Williams, 2013; Fortune, Cavazos, & Lee, 2005). At the same time the practice teacher has responsibilities to the clients and agency as s/he is also a worker (Davys & Beddoe, 2000).

It was due to the complexity of this role that I decided to conduct research on how the practice teachers I interacted with in my role as college tutor (the person within the college responsible for selecting and monitoring suitable placements for students), viewed their role (see McSweeney, 2017). I was particularly interested in what aspects of the role they saw as most and least important. Due to the breadth of the role, I expected both similarities and differences between the practice teachers’ views. Since I wanted to explore this individuality, the research paradigm I chose was that of interpretivism, which is discussed later.
in this chapter. While I intended to interview participants individually to allow for a more structured comparison between the aspects of their role they saw as being most and least important, I chose to use the Q methodological approach. While Q methodology is discussed more fully in what follows, essentially it involves presenting people with a series of statements, in relation to something, in this case behaviours they could engage in as practice teachers of social care students. I generated 31 statements from reading literature about supervision, asking students what they expected from their practice teachers and talking to a colleague who had been a practice teacher. This was to ensure that the statements used were meaningful to the participants (Webler, Danielson, & Tuler, 2009). The statements covered areas such as encouraging the student to be self-aware and open-minded; linking theory and practice; ensuring the student was aware of policies and procedures; ensuring the student was aware of the needs of the clients; providing opportunities for the student to learn and monitoring this learning; providing opportunities for additional training to the student; and assisting the student with college work. During the interview the participants were given the statements, each printed on a separate card, and ranked them in relation to how important or unimportant they saw them as being in relation to practice teaching. This is known as a Q sort. Firstly they sorted the cards into three piles: what they considered most important to the practice teacher role; what they considered least important; and those they were neutral about. After this was completed they were asked to look at the statements ranked most important and pick out the two most important (assigned +3), followed by the four next most important (assigned +2). This continued until all statements were sorted in the pattern illustrated in Figure 15.1 (Q sort arrays are usually in the form of a quasi-normal distribution). Statements ranked under each number are considered to be of equal importance. The ranking of the statements was quantitatively recorded and analysed. During the interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Least important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>+2</td>
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*Figure 15.1* Ranking and scoring format for statements
explained the reasoning behind their ranking of the statements. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

To access participants I used a combination of purposive (inviting people to take part on the basis of having particular experiences) and snowball sampling (asking participants to enquire whether practice teachers they knew would be interested in taking part). I invited people working in different areas of social care (residential child care; aftercare; sensory and intellectual disability services; chronic illness and mental health services; homeless services; youth work; domestic violence services; and addiction services), who had varying amounts of experience as social care workers and as being practice teachers. This was “to facilitate the expectation of diversity” among viewpoints, as recommended with Q methodological research (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 182). Twenty participants agreed to take part in the research and dates and locations for interviews were arranged. About a week before the interview participants were sent the list of statements. Before the interview began participants were reminded of the aim of the research, their rights as participants explained to them, given the opportunity to ask any questions and signed a participant consent form. After the interview participants were again asked if they had any questions. When interviews were transcribed each participant was sent a copy of her/his transcript.

To conduct the Q methodological analysis the computer programme PQ method (Schmolck, 2012) was used. This programme conducts a factor analysis, which, simply put, reduces a lot of data to its underpinning factors through looking for patterns across the Q sorts. It does this by correlating the entire pattern of ranking of all statements for each participant with every other participant. On the basis of the strength of the correlations between patterns, it produces the underpinning factors or what Webler, et al. (2009, p. 26) call “idealised sorts” and “social perspectives”. These are new Q sorts that represent the commonalities and differences between the individual Q sorts. By examining how strongly each participant’s sort loads or correlates with the idealised sort those who share viewpoints can be identified (presented in Table 15.1). By examining the ranking of the original statements within the two idealised sorts, the meaning of them was identified. The Q analysis resulted in two perspectives or views of the role of the practice teacher. These are presented in Tables 15.2 and 15.3 later in the chapter. Viewpoint 1 was interpreted as focussing on the role as being located more strongly within the agency as the centrality of clients and the agency’s policies and procedures were seen as most important, while also focussing on the student’s learning and support needs. Viewpoint 2 was interpreted as moving beyond the agency as elements in relation to reflection, appreciation of own abilities, the use of theoretical frameworks, goal setting and learning were ranked as more important. In both viewpoints direct engagement with the students’ academic work was judged to be unimportant.

The second analysis of the data involved conducting an inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (see McSweeney, 2018). As it was inductive
it was approached with a completely open mind and not influenced by a research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words I did not “predetermine which aspects of the participant’s account” I was particularly interested in (Willig, 2013, p. 190). Interview transcripts were coded line by line, with the aim of the code being to “capture the meaning contained within the segment” of data (Willig, 2013, p. 189). These codes were then examined for how they related to each other to generate themes. Five themes were identified that captured all of the data: 1. The nature of social care work requires support, openness and guidance by policies; 2. Students, staff and clients should be accepted as individuals; 3. Students and expectations of them have commonalities with workers but there are also differences; 4. The focus should be on the positives in relation to pointing out the contribution students make, their strengths and locate correction within praise; and 5. Social care work involves planning, doing and reflecting. Once themes were identified and verified in relation to the data the task was to discover what the themes meant collectively, what Braun and Clark (2006, p. 87) refer to as “the overall story the analysis tells”. A period of contemplation led to the realisation that the themes, representing the messages that practice teachers said they sent to students by the way they worked with them, fitted with Grotberg’s (1995) model of resilience. This way of conceptualising resilience sees it as something that is developed through relating to and receiving messages from other people about the availability of support, guidance and boundaries (I have); receiving messages about one’s own positive characteristics and abilities (I am); and receiving messages about one’s own abilities in relation to understanding self and others, communication, asking for help and controlling one’s own behaviour (I can).

**Explanation and reasoning behind paradigm and methodology chosen**

To explain the broad positioning of the approach taken to the research, first an overview will be given of research paradigms or worldviews. Then an explanation of the interpretivist paradigm chosen will be given in relation to the aims of the research and the methodological approach. Blaikie and Priest (2017) argue that researchers should consciously decide on the research paradigm they are using, state this unequivocally and defend it so that they are consistently attentive to what they are attempting to do with their research.

Kuhn is credited with coining the concept of a paradigm, which he conceptualised as being “rules and standards for scientific practice” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 11). Crotty (1998, p. 34) defines a paradigm as “an overarching conceptual construct” used “to make sense of the world or some segment of the world”, while Blaikie and Priest (2017, p. 18) argue that different research paradigms “lead to different research processes and outcomes” and vary in the extent to which they privilege the voice of participants. They point out that the research paradigm is selected on the basis that it will allow the research question to be
addressed, taking into account the paradigm’s ontological and epistemological assumptions. The former refers to beliefs about the nature of reality and the latter about how we can gain knowledge about this reality. Paradigms can also differ in relation to their logic of inquiry or how they achieve their aim of generating knowledge.

Research paradigms have been named and classified in different ways by different authors so here I will just give a short overview of Crotty’s (1998) categorisation and associated assumptions. Crotty distinguishes positivism, critical inquiry and interpretivism. Positivism he associates with an objectivist epistemology, which proposes that reality exists separately from a person’s awareness of it, so when conducting research the researcher discovers this reality. Its ontology therefore is realism, suggesting that if the researcher maintains objectivity and detachment the ‘real’ world or ‘real truth’ can be obtained. Positivism thus is very much associated with a natural science approach to research. It uses a combination of inductive and deductive modes of enquiry, the former to make generalisable statements from the data collected about the phenomenon of interest and the latter to test pre-existing theories (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). Since I wanted to capture participants’ individual reasoning behind their ranking of the statements through asking them to explain this in an interview, taking a position of detachment was not possible. Data collected through interviewing is inevitably influenced by the presence of the researcher.

Critical inquiry seeks to go beyond understanding the social world to challenge the current status quo and bring about change (Crotty, 1998). Its epistemological stance is that of subjectivism, where meaning does not come from the interaction of subject and object but comes from elsewhere and “is imposed on the object by the subject” (p. 9). What is considered to be knowledge is particularly influenced by power relations within a society (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The ontological position is critical realism, which proposes that what is seen as reality is socially constructed and shaped by current societal values (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While I accept that what is prioritised or not in practice teaching could likely be influenced by social care values and policies, my focus was on the individuality of participants’ views. Also my aim was to explore rather than challenge conceptions of the practice teacher role.

Interpretivism as an approach to research has developed from its original formulation by Weber and different methodological approaches under the umbrella of interpretivism exist (see Crotty 1998; Blaikie & Priest, 2017 for a full discussion). However, broadly speaking, this approach is used when the researcher wants to understand how others experience the world and the meaning of situations to them (Schwandt, 1998). The starting point of interpretivism is often the desire to better understand a phenomenon in the social world (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). This fitted with my aims of gaining a better understanding of how practice teachers view their role and what aspects they consider most and least important.
The ontological position of interpretive research or interpretivism is idealism (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Willig, 2013). Idealism views social reality as consisting of the “shared interpretations that social actors produce and reproduce” (Blaikie & Priest, 2017, p. 101). Willig (2013, p. 62) associates idealism with relativism and argues that this ontological position “emphasises the diversity of interpretations that can be applied” to the social world. The ontological stance is related to the epistemology. Blaikie and Priest (2017) and Crotty (1998) explain the underpinning epistemology of interpretivism as being constructivism. This states that meaning is constructed as people engage with their world. Therefore it is accepted that “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). This epistemological position fits with the expectation that participants could view the role of the practice teacher differently.

The logic of inquiry associated primarily with interpretive research is that of abduction (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). Abduction involves discovering the meanings and motives that people use in the area of life being investigated and through examination and interpretation social scientific descriptions and explanations are created. Thus it is “a logic designed for discovery” (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 39), where the best explanation is given.

While methodological approaches that use quantitative analyses are not usually associated with the interpretivist paradigm, there are a couple of exceptions. One of these is the repertory grid technique (discussed in Chapter 8) and another is Q methodology. Q methodology was developed in 1935 by William Stephenson with the aim of revealing individual subjectivities, as well as similarities and differences between them, in relation to something (Stephenson, 1936; Watts & Stenner, 2012). For Stephenson subjectivity, or operant subjectivity as he referred to it, entails a person expressing his subjectivity through the act of sorting statements in the Q sort or, as Brown (1980, p. 46) puts it:

Fundamentally, a person’s subjectivity is merely his own point of view. It is neither a trait nor a variable, nor is it fruitful to regard it as a tributary emanating from some subterranean stream of consciousness. It is a pure behaviour of the type we encounter during the normal course of the day.

The finished Q sort then represents the subjectivity or viewpoint of the person. As it can be seen and interpreted by the researcher, it is “substantive and objective” (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 30). In this way “the paradox of how to develop an objective interpretive science of subjective human experience” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 224) is overcome. This is similar to the aims of more typically interpretivist approaches to research. For example, Willig (2013, p. 72) notes that: “phenomenological research assumes that there is more than one ‘world’ which can be studied because, from a phenomenological point of view, what appears to be the ‘same event’ . . . can be experienced in many different ways”.

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As mentioned in the overview of research the Q analysis of the participants’ Q sorts reveals commonality and differences between them and produces underpinning factors or idealised sorts that show who shares similar viewpoints or perspectives about the topic. This fits with the ontological position of interpretivism (shared interpretations and acceptance of diversity) previously discussed. Webler et al. (2009, p. 10) explain that social perspectives are “coherent patterns of opinion about a topic”, which may not be exactly the same as the individual’s view. There is also likely to be some views that are “closer to the social perspective than others”. Table 15.1 shows the correlation coefficients between the participants’ Q sorts and the two social perspectives or shared viewpoints from the analysis. The closer the number is to 1 the more similar the individual viewpoint is to the shared viewpoint. An X after the correlation coefficient indicates that the sort is a defining one, which means that “in the numerical analysis, their Q sorts were closer to the social perspective than other people’s” (Webler, et al., 2009, p. 11).

The table shows that 11 Q sorts are associated with the first viewpoint and nine with the second viewpoint. The next stage in the analysis is to interpret the meaning of the viewpoints using the logic of abductive enquiry (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The programme provides the idealised or shared sorts with rankings of the statements, in the same format as the inputted rankings, for ease of interpretation (see Schmolck, 2014 for full details). These are illustrated in

### Table 15.1 Correlation coefficients between individual sorts and shared viewpoints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q Sort/Participant</th>
<th>Viewpoint 1</th>
<th>Viewpoint 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5141</td>
<td>.7672 X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.5388 X</td>
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<td>.1355</td>
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<td>.7393 X</td>
<td>.3904</td>
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</table>
Tables 15.2 and 15.3. At this stage the interview transcripts are also examined as details of the participants’ reasoning for their ranking helps with interpreting the meaning of the factor or viewpoint.

As previously outlined, this viewpoint was interpreted as prioritising factors within the agency (policies and clients) and the students’ learning within that agency due to the highest ranking of statements specific to the organisation. While the need to provide support for the student is considered important, so too is the need for students to be open-minded and take responsibility for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inform the student about the policies and procedures of the organisation</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss the needs of clients</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be supportive should issues or difficulties arise</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the student takes accountability for his/her practice</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the student understand how his/her values, beliefs and feelings affect his/her practice</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage open-mindedness to different practice approaches</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities for learning for the student</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide practical feedback on practice</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the student to reflect on practice</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss planned outcomes for clients</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the student appreciate his/her own potentials and strengths</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor the development of the student’s competencies</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify areas where the student needs to develop in practice</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use supervision to link practice to college work</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform the student about policies and procedures in the area of work</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively engage in communication with the college</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information on professional development</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be non-judgemental towards the student</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate the student in setting goals in relation to practice needs</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with linking theoretical frameworks to care practices</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide time to discuss how the course is going</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the study in balancing study and placement</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share your own practice experiences</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the student to attend training on specific areas of practice</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage critical examination of the applicability of theories to practice</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage achievement in college work</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate constructive self-criticism</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out gaps in the student’s knowledge</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist with college assignments</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide advice about college work</td>
<td>−3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass on knowledge about course content</td>
<td>−3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examination of the reasoning behind the rankings from the interview transcripts supported the high priority given to the clients. Clients were mentioned in relation to accountability for practice, polices being in place to protect clients, self-awareness of own values and beliefs so as not to impose these on clients (McSweeney, 2017).

Unlike the first, this viewpoint is interpreted as expanding beyond the agency setting to seeing the role of the practice teacher as being more reflective, developmental and encouraging the use of theoretical frameworks to inform practice based on how the statements were ranked (McSweeney, 2017).

### Table 15.3 Ranking of statements for viewpoint or factor 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support the student to reflect on practice</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the student appreciate his/her own potential and strengths</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities for learning for the student</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with linking theoretical frameworks to care practices</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the student understand how his/her values beliefs and feelings affect his/her practice</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate the student in setting goals in relation to practice needs</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify areas where the student needs to develop in practice</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use supervision to link practice to college work</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide practical feedback on practice</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be non-judgemental towards the student</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage critical examination of the applicability of theories to practice</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage open-mindedness to different practice approaches</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform the student of the policies and procedures of the organisation</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform the student of the policies and procedures of the area of work</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be supportive should issues or difficulties arise</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the student takes accountability for his/her practice</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share your own practice experiences</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate constructive self-criticism</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor the development of the student’s competencies</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide time to discuss how the course is going</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the student in balancing study and placement</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information on professional development</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the student to attend training on specific areas of practice</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out gaps in the student’s knowledge</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss planned outcomes for clients</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively engage in communication with the college</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage achievement in college work</td>
<td>−2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss the needs of clients</td>
<td>−2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assist with college assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide advice about college work</td>
<td>−3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pass on knowledge about course content</td>
<td>−3</td>
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</table>
Comparing methods of analysis and findings constructed

The choice of initially using Q methodology as a framework to guide data collection was based on arguments presented about its suitability for exploring complex topics (Watts & Stenner, 2005), as well as its appropriateness for exploring viewpoints people have about a topic (Lazard, Capdevila, & Roberts, 2011; Watts & Stenner, 2012). However, fitting with the constructivist epistemology of the interpretivist paradigm I was aware that the findings from this analysis were but one construction and another explanation or interpretation of the data was possible (Mason, 2002, 2009). Mason (2009) and Willig (2013) argue that because people’s social experiences are complex and multi-dimensional trying to understand them from only one approach will lead to an incomplete view. Willig (2013, p. 80), discussing a pluralistic approach to research, points out that:

A dataset can tell us about a number of different things, depending on the questions we ask of it. A pluralistic approach involves asking a series of questions of the same data; each new question that is asked of the data requires that the researcher returns to the data and interprets it in a new way.

This is what I did. I returned to the original interview transcripts with an open mind about what I could find therefore using an inductive approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is not usually associated with a specific epistemology and ontology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013). It uses an abductive logic of inquiry as the researcher identifies themes that best explain what the data is saying. Combining thematic analysis with a Q analysis is not unusual and is recommended to yield a more “nuanced overview” of the data (Lazard, et al., 2011, p. 147; Shinebourne & Adams, 2007). However, this is more usually done in combination rather than a completely separate analysis.

The Q analysis led to seeing the participants’ opinion of their role as being located within an overall viewpoint. The data from the interviews was essentially used to help interpret the factors and give detail to the explanation of the two viewpoints. This resulted in grouping the participants into holding one of two viewpoints about their role. Although analysing data this way is useful for identifying commonality and difference, it draws the reader towards interpreting findings as holding a particular viewpoint. Indeed, Kampen and Tamás (2014) critique Q analysis for creating shared viewpoints through its analysis process.

In contrast, the inductive thematic analysis was approached by coding what the participants said in the interview (see Braun & Clarke, 2006 for the procedure followed) and from these codes generating themes to categorise the participants’ explanations of their view of their role. Although it has to be accepted that the statements provided a framework for what the participants said, just like the questions asked in a semi-structured interview, the focus was on what the participants said throughout the entire interview not just in relation to a particular statement. As Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, thematic analysis is
used for organising and reporting patterns within a dataset so a theme should not be just the response to a particular question. For example, in relation to generating the theme acceptance of individuality data coded from discussion in relation to 14 statements were judged to be relevant to this theme. Table 15.4 shows some examples of data extracts along with the statement that led to the discussion in relation to acceptance of individuality of the student.

The final stage of the thematic analysis was to consider what the themes identified taken together meant. As Willig (2013, p. 185) says: developing “an explanatory framework which incorporates the major themes identified in the analysis and which makes sense of the phenomenon under investigation”. As discussed previously, it was considered that the themes fitted with Grotberg’s (1995) model of resilience (McSweeney, 2018). Table 15.5 illustrates how the themes found in the data link with the resilience factors along with exemplar extracts.

Thus the second analysis of the same dataset led to a very different conclusion from the Q analysis. This was that practice teachers say that they interact with students in a way that sends them messages to promote their resilience. Interestingly resilience was not mentioned in any of the interviews nor considered until the thematic analysis was completed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15.4 Data extract and generating statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example data extract</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>So it’s important that we judge the student on</td>
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<tr>
<td>them and not just what we perceive them to be</td>
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<td>You know some students will come in and they</td>
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<tr>
<td>are very good at explaining things or they are</td>
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<tr>
<td>very empathetic</td>
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<tr>
<td>I will always ask them why they want to be here.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do they want to learn from it because some</td>
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<tr>
<td>of them want to be the person working with the</td>
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<tr>
<td>kids all the time. But you do get other students</td>
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<td>who come and they want to be involved in the</td>
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<tr>
<td>funding aspect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Again it is adapting to the person. I do that when they start. Do you want to see me at a set time every week or will we just check in in an informal kind of way... over break, over coffee. It’s providing that time in a way that suits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have some students who have a lot of natural drive who may have some experience, may just be up for it and they’ll jump in... But inevitably you’ll have students who just can’t do that so it’s up to us supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They need to be accountable to the level of responsibility they can handle. So with a student you’re trying to get that match</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social care work requires</td>
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<td>Accept individuality</td>
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<td>Commonality and difference with practitioners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on positives</td>
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<td>Practice involves</td>
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Note. Adapted from McSweeney (2018)
Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter has focussed on how knowledge is constructed by the choices made when conducting research. The relationship between epistemological and ontological assumptions, as well as the mode of enquiry primarily used by a research paradigm with the research aim and methodological approach, has been discussed. The importance of being explicit about the choice of research paradigm is emphasised so that the researcher has clarity about what s/he wants to achieve through conducting research and others can evaluate it. With illustrations from the analysis of a dataset using two methods how the way data is analysed highlights particular findings and hides others has been shown.

The advice for readers is, firstly, when reading research consider how the choices made in the design of the study, such as methodology, the relationship between methodology and paradigm and way of analysing data, have constructed a particular knowledge about the topic researched. Do not accept this knowledge as being ‘real’ but instead created from a particular position.

Secondly, when conducting your own research, spend time considering how your research question and aim fit with the assumptions of a research paradigm. Ask yourself questions about what you are trying to find out and how you view the nature of reality and knowledge. As discussed in Chapters 9 and 14 of this collection, identifying your own worldview and the influences on it are relevant when conducting research. Engage in epistemological reflectivity about how the design of your research could lead to a particular construction about the topic under investigation and be open about what you are trying to achieve from this construction.

Thirdly, consider approaching analysis of your dataset using different methods or stances to analysis (see Willig, 2013) to allow the generation of more than one understanding of the topic or phenomenon being researched.

Note

1 Due to similarities between social care work and social work and the lack of research on social care education literature included that completed in social work education.

References


Chapter 16

Indicators and strategies to develop credible outcomes in qualitative research

Young people, compliance and community supervision

Mairead Seymour and Ben Meehan

Introduction

Drawing on a study of young people in the criminal justice system, conducted by the first author, this chapter discusses the use of indicators and strategies utilised to support the production of credible and robust qualitative research. Qualitative research facilitates open-ended investigation and seeks out detailed and nuanced accounts based on personal experiences and perspectives. It is framed on the premise that there are multiple realities involving individuals’ subjective views, meanings and interpretations (Creswell, 2009). While these are commendable characteristics to gain insights into the social world, qualitative research is criticised for what is considered its arbitrary approach to investigation, its failure to provide a strong rationale for the methods used, an absence of transparency on the analytical procedures and the production of findings and conclusions in a non-systematic, ad hoc manner (Noble & Smith, 2015). Leung (2015) levels further criticism in suggesting that there is an absence of clarity and consensus as to how quality should be assessed in the qualitative research field. These criticisms are pertinent because without demonstrated evidence of credibility, the impact of research on the development of new knowledge, theory or reform of legal, policy or practice issues is compromised. The resulting message is clear. There is an onus on those conducting research to ensure that the practices and procedures adopted in qualitative research are sufficiently transparent and robust to produce credible research outcomes.

Concepts of reliability and validity as traditionally understood in the research field are associated with “a world that can be quantifiably measured through defined rules of enquiry”. This presents challenges for much “real world” research, which is based on multiple realities and subjective perspectives where the singularity of truth is not accepted (O’Leary, 2017, p. 56). Thus O’Leary argues that a challenge for those engaged in research is to become familiar with “indicators of research integrity” or measurements of research credibility (2017, p. 67). This chapter focuses on reliability and validity as indicators of research
credibility, exploring their applicability in qualitative investigation and outlining strategies for their use, drawing on examples from a research study.

The key learning points in this chapter are:

- Understanding the importance of research credibility in qualitative research investigations;
- Being able to identify suitable indicators to assess research credibility;
- The application of strategies that enhance the credibility of the process and outcomes of qualitative research investigations.

**Overview of the research study**

The study from which illustrative examples in this chapter are based explored compliance with the requirements of community supervision in the youth justice systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Seymour, 2013). Community supervision is undertaken as part of a court order following conviction in a criminal court and is undertaken by the Probation Service in Ireland and the Youth Justice Agency or the Probation Board in Northern Ireland. Compliance with community supervision is an important legal, policy and practice imperative because without supervisees’ cooperation, the potential to positively impact on their offending behaviour is compromised and judicial confidence and public credibility is undermined. Compliance is a complex term and its meaning varies across the circumstances in which it is applied. For the purposes of this study, Bottoms’s (2002) distinction between short-term and long-term compliance was utilised. Short-term compliance refers to compliance with the requirements of community supervision, while long-term compliance relates to compliance with the criminal law through the avoidance of further offending. Researching compliance is challenging because it is not a static concept. Existing evidence highlights that individuals’ motivation to comply changes over time and is framed within the context of their life circumstances, norms and values, external incentives and disincentives, as well as their perceptions of the legitimacy of the requests made to comply (Bottoms, 2002; Robinson & McNeill, 2010).

The objectives of the study were as follows: firstly, to understand how compliance was constructed and operationalised from the perspective of young people and practitioners. This was important in establishing how decision-making about compliance was navigated. Secondly, it sought to provide insights into young people’s experiences under supervision, their motivations to comply and their perspectives on desistance from offending. Identification of the approaches employed by practitioners to promote compliance and respond to non-compliance was the third objective. A fourth objective was to explore the dynamics in the relationship between supervisors and young people and their perceived impact (or not) on compliance.

The theoretical framework underpinning compliance on community supervision suggests that compliance is motivated by internal and external factors
Credible outcomes in qualitative research

(see Bottoms, 2002). Internal factors include individuals' values, habits, attachments and perceptions about the legitimacy of the request to comply. The latter is grounded in the evidence base on procedural justice whereby individuals are more likely to comply when they perceive fair treatment by the authority figures seeking their compliance. In contrast, external factors involve incentives and disincentives, for example, reduced monitoring on supervision or being returned to court for non-compliance. The decision to comply involves a multiplicity of motivations and these are likely to change over time (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Tyler, 1990). Robinson and McNeill (2010) developed Bottoms’s (2002) work further in critically analysing the nature of compliance. They suggest that supervisees adopt different stances depending on their motivation to cooperate and/or make broader changes in their lives. These stances range from supervisees being fully committed to community supervision, to those who capitulate on recognising there are few alternatives, to others who resist supervision, disengage from it or ‘game play’ as part of the process. The study was also influenced by the literature on effective practice in community supervision and desistance. While some evidence exists to link effective practice with improved compliance (Trotter, 2013), the literature indicates that broader social-structural and personal issues such as gaining employment, establishing a relationship and becoming a parent also act as key catalysts for change (Barry, 2006; Bottoms & Shapland, 2011).

As already stated, a qualitative approach was taken to capture the detailed perspectives of participants about compliance on community supervision. The study had a number of data collection strands and those relevant to this chapter are outlined in the following paragraph.

The first strand of data collection consisted of five focus groups involving 33 probation officers and youth justice practitioners, the majority of whom were professionally qualified in youth and community work, education or social work (Seymour, 2013). The focus groups facilitated the co-construction of knowledge among participants on their decision-making and the strategies they used to manage young people’s compliance and respond to their non-compliance. The second strand involved in-depth interviews with young people on community supervision. The inclusion criteria were based on age and time on supervision. A minimum period of six months under supervision was deemed necessary for young people to have sufficient experience of supervision to inform the research. Young participants were aged 18 and 19 years.¹

The rationale for selecting older rather than younger supervisees (under 18 years) was due to the retrospective aspect of the study, which required participants with experience to reflect on past and present perspectives. Probation officers identified young people who met the criteria and a meeting was arranged with the researcher to explain the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Of the 24 young people approached, 20 agreed to take part, three refused and one was unable to participate due to health reasons. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour and took place at probation offices,
educational or community facilities or, in a small number of cases, in participants’ homes. Data collection took place within four geographical areas on the island of Ireland and included supervisors and supervisees from urban and rural areas. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and reviewed before the analysis process commenced.

Young people had been under supervision for an average period of 22.7 months at the time of data collection. Most had a lengthy history of involvement in offending and had been assessed as being of moderate or high risk of reoffending. According to practitioners, defining what constitutes compliance and non-compliance with supervision requires specialist knowledge and experience of young people to distinguish between behaviour characteristic of their developmental stage and more identifiable resistance and unwillingness to engage in supervision. Practitioners’ perceptions of young people’s compliance on community supervision were not restricted to their attitude and behaviour during appointments. Other aspects of young people’s lives that influenced their views included young people’s behaviour in the home, their attendance and behaviour at school, training or employment, their association with anti-social peers and/or their consumption of alcohol, drugs and other substances. It appeared that being non-compliant in other aspects of their lives negatively impacted on practitioners’ perceptions of young people’s commitment to change their offending behaviour.

Strategies focussed on encouraging compliance were communicating expectations of supervision and the consequences of non-compliance to young people. These approaches were perceived by practitioners as being fairer and more effective than reactionary responses to non-compliance. Practitioners identified the development of positive working relationships with young people as the key component in promoting compliance on community supervision. Relationships were built through practitioners’ persistent efforts to establish contact and support young people despite their initial resistance to supervision.

Two-thirds of the young people described shifting perspectives in their attitude and behaviour towards compliance. Participants reported that initial scepticism, resistance and game playing gave way to more positive perceptions of community supervision over time. They identified the support provided by their supervisors and supervisors’ willingness to advocate on their behalf as contributing to changes in their motivation to comply with supervision. The development of positive relationships with their supervisors culminated in a willingness to accept ‘straight-talking’ and directive guidance. The legitimacy derived from being treated in a fair manner was important in encouraging compliance and is evident in the broader literature on procedural justice and reduced offending (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Tyler, 1990).

Changing motivation to comply with supervision was also attributed to factors outside the supervisory context. These factors included young people’s evolving developmental maturity and changes in their life circumstances such
as the establishment of relationships, commencing training or employment and/or becoming a parent.

Overall, it could be said that for those who perceived change, their obligation to comply was enhanced when they developed social and psychological attachments within and outside the supervisory relationship. Not all young people changed ($n = 6$). They stated that they wished to change, but the challenges associated with doing so were perceived as insurmountable. Some explained that they had tried and failed, while others believed that their offending was associated with external factors, such as drugs and peers, about which they considered they had limited control. A desire to avoid imprisonment was the main motivation for compliance, but few were hopeful and as a result viewed prison as inevitable.

**Indicators of research credibility**

The question of how to meaningfully evaluate the credibility of qualitative research is a complex and contested area (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004; Flick, 2009). A commonly adopted approach has been to utilise indicators of research credibility drawn from the quantitative field and reconfigure them to suit the unique characteristics of qualitative exploration (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The most common indicators used to assess the credibility of research outcomes in quantitative research are reliability and validity. Reliability is about the consistency of the research instruments used and is related to replicability (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Therefore in quantitative research, studies are seen to have reliability when the measures, methods and procedures are repeated and generate the same results (Leung, 2015; Walliman, 2006). This measurement of reliability is problematic in qualitative research where emphasis is placed on capturing the nuances of individual experiences through less standardised and more flexible approaches to data collection. Qualitative researchers may digress from their interview schedules and probe study participants about something they have said or observed (see Rubin & Rubin, 2005 for further information on the technique of probing). The implication of differences between quantitative and qualitative exploration is that an indicator of reliability, based on replication of results, does not facilitate meaningful assessment of research quality within the qualitative sphere. While proposals differ, there appears to be some consensus that dependability is a more accurate indicator to measure the credibility of research outcomes in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; O’Leary, 2017). In this context, dependability refers to consistency of approach both in the execution and documentation of the research process and related outcomes (Leung, 2015; O’Leary, 2017).

Similar concerns exist about the appropriateness of validity as an indicator to evaluate the credibility of research outcomes in qualitative studies. In quantitative research validity broadly refers to whether the construct of interest is actually being measured (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Therefore validity involves
establishing the correctness of a “singular truth” and the soundness of the procedures to create this “truth” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 60). In contrast, the pursuit of truth in qualitative research is focussed on conveying multiple truths and communicating the detail and nuances of individual experience or phenomena. For this reason, authenticity is proposed as a more accurate indicator to establish if research findings have been accurately captured. O’Leary (2017, p. 67) defines authenticity as “concerned with truth value while recognising that multiple truths may exist [and] . . . with describing the deep structure of experience/phenomena in a manner that is ‘true’ to the experience”.

**Practical strategies for developing research credibility**

Drawing on examples from the research study outlined, much of the remainder of this chapter focusses on the strategies adopted during the data collection and analysis phases to support the development of credible and robust research findings.

**Embedding credibility in the data collection process**

Preparation of the interview and focus group schedules involved extensive review of the literature on compliance, consultation with practitioners and piloting of the schedules. It was identified very early in the data collection process that some questions in the young people’s interview schedule did not fully elicit the depth of information required. For example, initial questions asked were: ‘Do you ever miss supervision appointments?’ ‘If yes, what would be the most common reasons for missing them?’ Following reflection, it became apparent that the difficulty arose due to crafting questions based on literature from other jurisdictions where expectations surrounding compliance with supervision requirements differed and young people were afforded less flexibility than in the Irish system (Bateman, 2011). Given the differences in practice, it was recognised that there was much to be learned from exploring how reasons for non-attendance were presented by young people to their supervisors, what their understanding was of acceptable and unacceptable reasons and how they managed the process. By expanding the nature of questioning, a more nuanced account emerged of young people’s decision-making about compliance. This is demonstrated in the following when Claire describes the notion of acceptability of excuses for non-attendance at appointments:

Like you couldn’t text her [probation officer] an’ say ‘ah listen I’m dyin’ [ill from excessive consumption alcohol], I’m not goin’ in’ [for a supervision appointment]. If I was sick or if there was someone else ill or if I just literally wasn’t able to make it or if I had to mind me brother or somethin’, they’d be the only reasons I do make anyway. [Claire]
Failure to critically reflect on the nature of the questions asked after the research commenced would have resulted in much less detailed and consequently less accurate insights into how young people navigated their way through the requirements of community supervision. This highlights the importance of researchers continually reflecting critically on their data and their research practice to ensure that participants’ accounts are fully captured and contribute to the development of authentic findings.

In addition to reflecting on what was said during an interview, detailed listening of interview and focus group recordings shortly after they had taken place was beneficial. This process allowed the researcher to reflect on whether interactions with participants were conducted in a way that encouraged their participation and facilitated their authentic accounts. Overall, reflection on interview and focus group recordings helps to identify potential threats to the quality of the data, such as the interviewer unnecessarily interrupting participants and/or failing to adequately listen to their accounts, thereby missing cues to prompt the interviewee or focus group participant for further information.

Tuesner (2016, p. 89) provides a practical strategy for exploring validity in her qualitative investigation as an insider researcher in the field of occupational health and safety. She posed a series of questions to facilitate reflection on potential threats to validity including querying if there was potential for the researcher’s relationship with the researched to negatively impact on the quality of the data and if the researcher’s existing knowledge could lead them to make incorrect assumptions about their data. In the current study, many of the young people had experience of the care, education, health and/or social services systems and had become disillusioned in recounting the stories of their lives over and over within different contexts. This was highlighted by one supervisor when she described her first meeting with a young person who expressed frustration at being asked questions stating ‘read my file, it’s all there’. In light of this information, it was important to consider participants’ perceptions of the researcher as a potential threat to the authenticity of the study. It was decided to overcome any potential threat to capturing young people’s full accounts by explaining to them that the researcher was not a criminal justice employee and therefore did not have familiarity with their cases. Time was taken to explain why they were selected for the study and their reflection and critique of the system without judgement was encouraged. Care was also taken to seek clarification on unfamiliar terms used by the young people to avoid misrepresentation of their accounts. The following illustrates the approach where Robert is asked to explain his assertion that prison ‘is not worth it’:

Robert: I don’t want to go back to prison – it’s not worth it.
MS: You’ve said that quite a bit – it’s not worth it – what do you mean by that?
Robert: It’s just not worth goin’ down that track ’cause when you get locked up, yer just goin’ to keep goin’ back an’ back an’ back, d’ye know like that? Because, they say in prison, wherever ye write your name, you’re always goin’ to come back to that. An’ one of me mates were in there, has his name all over one of them prison walls, an’ ever since he put that there he’s always been back to that cell, since he writ his name he’s been goin’ back to them an’all, so they always say, wherever ye write yer name ye’ll always come back. …I’ve scribbled out all me names, I scribbled all me names out, just in case.

The final strategy used during the data collection process to support the development of credible research findings was to record fieldwork annotations and observations after each interview and focus group. The purpose was to provide a consistent mechanism for reflecting on the data and a baseline record to cross-check, later in the study, that the core features of young people’s accounts were captured through the data analysis process. In Figure 16.1, an example is provided of an annotation from an interview with a young female participant (aged 18 years) who had moved away from offending behaviour.

Systematic analysis of data: developing credibility through the analysis process

Given the level of data and multiple perspectives gathered in this study, the issue of how it would be managed and analysed was to the forefront from the beginning. The analysis involved a rigorous interrogation, which involved deconstructing the interview transcripts and a systematic rebuilding of the data into key categories and themes (see Figure 16.2).

A number of phases were involved. In Phase 1 each interview and focus group transcript was examined and segments of meaning were coded. This stage of coding, known as open coding, involved the researcher attaching labels to segments of the data in a way that summarised what was occurring in the data. The example that follows, from a young person’s interview transcript, describes his views on the challenges of being under the supervision of the Probation Service in the community. The segment of text was coded as ‘challenges of probation supervision’:

It’s partly being locked away now, but you’re not locked away. It’s kind of like being locked away, but you are not locked away. …It’s hard like, because you can’t really go and do your own thing, you are not free like, you are still under like, you’re still, like you are not, you are still under the law like you know what I mean? You can’t go away and do what you want like.

Bazeley (2013, p. 151) points out that while a number of factors impact the way researchers approach data coding and interpretation including their disciplinary
Annotations integrate hard data recorded in transcripts with soft data that captures contextual factors such as field notes and observations, coding assumptions and even researchers' thoughts and ideas as illustrated in this example.

Qualitative data is time and context bound, so capturing context is a core value that philosophically underpins the entire paradigm.

Figure 16.1 Example of an annotation
background, epistemology, methodology and personal influences, a reasonable expectation is that consistency exists across the data coding in a project and data should be interpreted and coded into categories that “make sense” to an external evaluator or study informant. To ensure consistency in the coding process, each code in this study had a clear label or rule for inclusion attached. The rule for inclusion in the aforementioned code ‘challenge of probation supervision’ was that it referred to young people’s descriptions of the challenges of probation supervision. The practice of systematically labelling each code meant that an external validator could understand why segments of text (data) were coded in particular ways.

Phase 1 resulted in over 166 individual codes. In Phase 2 these codes were merged, renamed and reordered and related codes were clustered into categories and themes (as illustrated in Figure 16.2). The coding stage known as axial coding sought to construct linkages between the data and to build a framework that brought focus to the enquiry. The process of writing descriptive memos also commenced in Phase 2 (see Figure 16.3 for an example of a descriptive memo) and was the starting point in translating raw data into research findings.

![Diagram of themes, categories and codes](image-url)

**Figure 16.2 Flow chart of themes, categories and codes**
Figure 16.3 Example of descriptive memo

Descriptive memos linked to the sub-category “Motivation to Stop Offending” under the main category “Young People and the Decision to Comply” allowed the researcher to reduce the data from 20 interviews containing 81 individual quotes in this category to a document describing and summarising coded content reducing the sub-category to manageable proportions.
Phase 3 involved breaking down the now reorganised data so as to better understand the meanings embedded within it. For example, ‘motivation to stop offending’ (illustrated on the left-hand panel of Figure 16.3) was broken down into the components parts: ‘avoid court and/or custody’; ‘family or partner’; ‘offender fatigue’; ‘probation officer’; and ‘self-motivation’.

In Phase 4, theoretical coding, the task involved writing analytical memos to develop deeper and more systematic thinking about the emerging findings (see Figure 16.4 for an example of an analytical memo) and to consider their importance in relation to existing literature. Memos varied but broadly included some or all of the following: content of the code; the processes included within the code; its importance in sequencing events and outcomes that influenced the overall findings; the relevance of background factors; how the code related to other codes and how it differed; and consideration of the broader literature in locating the study findings in context.

The final phase of analysis involved validating the analytical memos through critical reflection such as exploring potential alternative explanations for the emerging findings and exploring how the findings related to each other and to the wider literature in the field of offender compliance.

Audit trail

The production of an audit trail for the data analysis is an important criterion on which the credibility of the research can be established. The audit trail was originally proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a mechanism to ensure that findings were grounded in the data and not unduly influenced by the researcher’s bias or judgement. An audit trail lists the processes undertaken by the researcher with each process supported by evidence and documented in the main body or appendices of any resulting report. One of the key pieces of evidence in an audit trail is the production of a codebook showing each of the cycles of coding undertaken during the encoding process. The codebook lists the codes produced during each phase of coding, their purpose (rule for inclusion) and the levels of data they attracted (expressed as number of sources and references as illustrated in the left-hand panels of Figures 16.3 and 16.4). The codebook allows the researcher to make two statements:

The work was carried out and not just claimed to have been done;
The coding was conducted in a manner consistent with the guidelines in literature from the chosen method of analysis (for example thematic analysis; grounded theory).

Other evidence documented as part of an audit trail includes comprehensive records of decisions made throughout the fieldwork as well as fieldwork annotations and observations and descriptive and analytical memos as previously discussed. The audit trail brought transparency to the study in demonstrating consistency of approach in the research processes and the strategies utilised
Analytical memos allowed the researcher conduct a systematic review of her thematic framework in relation to extant literature.

Figure 16.4 Example of an analytical memo
to support the authenticity of the findings. Silverman (2017, p. 385) advises researchers of the need to overcome the “problem of anecdotalism” and “convince themselves (and their audience) that their 'findings' are genuinely based on critical investigation of all their data and do not depend on a few well-chosen 'examples'”.

**Seek out the views of critical others**

Seeking out the views of critical others spanned the data collection and analysis sections and is therefore presented as a separate section here. The research benefited from a number of critical reviews of the material from colleagues within and beyond the criminological field and criminal justice practitioners. Critical others are important at all stages, from ensuring that the research question aligns with the research design, to reviewing research instruments, recordings, observations, draft findings and analytical interpretations. As Appleton (2011, p. 10) describes, critical friends provide “a healthy and robust way of supporting a researcher’s integrity in qualitative research”. In this study, external critical review was sought on the research instruments, the literature review and the draft research findings and analysis. The following reviewer comment on some of the draft findings illustrates the type of constructive feedback provided:

> You may wish to consider developing further how the nature of the relationship between the practitioner and offender encourages compliance. You do discuss how the style of interaction between the two plays a role in influencing the extent to which criminal justice processes are viewed as legitimate and/or procedurally fair, but it may be worthwhile drawing out the relational aspects further.

This feedback encouraged the researcher to reflect on the relevance of the relationship between practitioners and offenders. This involved further analysis of the data to identify the specific aspects of the dynamics between both parties that were most influential in promoting compliance. The task enhanced credibility in capturing a more in-depth and nuanced account of the practitioner-offender relationship.

For students and researchers, the main critical other may be their direct supervisor but dialogue about research should not be restricted to this source. Developing small learning groups with selected peers provides a supportive way of receiving constructive feedback. Strategies include regular informal roundtables to present and/or discuss issues, circulating an anonymised transcript for review or posting to a closed online forum. When adopting strategies such as these, consideration needs to be given to any ethical implications that may arise from sharing data even where it is anonymised. Peers do not have to be experts in the subject field to advise that draft findings make sense and/or if the
evidence supporting the claims is convincing. An added advantage of a small learning group is that it gives the opportunity to reciprocate through reviewing others’ work. It is sometimes easier to identify the shortcomings in work that one is not so closely involved in than in one’s own work. It is challenging to risk negative feedback by sharing emerging findings but openness to feedback demonstrates willingness to engage in critical scholarship and commitment to research credibility.

Conclusions and recommendations

For research in the qualitative domain to be considered credible, thus valuable in expanding knowledge, policy and practice developments, it must be conducted to the highest standards of rigour with considerations of dependability and authenticity at the forefront. Dependability as an alternative indicator of research credibility refers to consistency in the design and execution of research and the extent to which decision-making is systematically recorded in a way that links data to the research findings and conclusions. As a further indicator of research credibility in the qualitative domain, authenticity encompasses rigour with regard to gathering multiple perspectives, detailed and systematic analysis to capture the diversity of perspectives and ongoing reflection over the research process (O’Leary, 2017; Tuesner, 2016). The strategies adopted for the research under discussion in this chapter were designed to support the development of credible research based on systematic and consistent approaches to each stage of the research process. It also involved critical reflection so that the researcher captured and presented participants’ accounts in an accurate and authentic manner. Arising from the experience of conducting this study and against the background of discussing indicators and strategies to promote research credibility in this chapter, the following advice is given.

As the development of credible findings is contingent on researchers being critically reflective throughout the research process, it is recommended that researchers engage in ongoing reflection, by reviewing their research collection instruments, listening in a focussed way to data recordings, reading and rereading transcripts and consistently compiling documentation such as fieldwork annotations, observations and memos in a methodical way. We also advise reflection on how you may be perceived by research participants and to minimise any barriers to participation by openly communicating with them, providing assurances about their participation and encouraging them to share their expert knowledge.

Research credibility necessitates a systematic approach to data analysis to produce credible outcomes. The phases of coding must be followed to safeguard against anecdotal and/or inaccurate conclusions and to generate trustworthy research findings. Segments of data in the form of codes should be meticulously labelled so that there is a clear rationale for how data is coded, categorised and organised thematically. Also writing descriptive memos is recommended as a
strategy to enhance the process of establishing what is occurring in the data while analytical memos support the process of building links within the dataset and with the existing literature in the field.

Furthermore it is recommended that all processes and procedures undertaken in the research should be documented, supported by evidence and compiled in a manner that is accessible to others. The documentation provides an audit trail that links your data to the research findings and is an essential tool for research credibility. The final piece of advice is to seek out external review and feedback on emerging findings as a way of enhancing the authenticity of findings. Development of critical learning communities is suggested as a strategy to build credibility into the research process.

Notes

1 Ordinarily 18 and 19 year olds are part of the adult criminal justice system. The exception is where they are under the supervision of the youth justice system prior to their 18th birthday and therefore remain in the system to complete their supervision. It was this cohort who was included in the research study.

2 Other queries related to whether the researcher’s morals, political views, cultural outlook and existing alliances could culminate in a misrepresentation of the data.

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