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Navigating the narrative space: Insights, experiences, and emotions of the novice researcher.

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Navigating the narrative space: Insights, experiences, and emotions of the novice researcher.

Abstract

Design

This paper draws on the experiences and emotions involved in undertaking narrative inquiry as a novice researcher. The paper focuses specifically on the challenges of opening, working in and closing the narrative space.

Purpose

The purpose of the paper is to explore the theory and approaches employed by a novice narrative researcher to open, work in, and close the narrative space. The paper reflects on this personal journey and aims to provide insight for other novices to successfully navigate the narrative space.

Findings

Through a critical and reflective discussion of approaches to narrative inquiry, the paper points to key theories, approaches, which guide narrative research. In doing this, the diversity in interpretation and application of narrative research are noted as essential components of both its challenge and beauty.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this paper are linked to its utility in helping others reflect on their own practice and also providing insight and support to other novice researchers seeking to navigate the narrative space.

Originality / value

The paper provides a subjective interpretation and application of the theory underpinning narrative research and how it was used to guide the authors research into care leavers journeys into and through university.

Introduction

The novice researcher is presented with many challenges and the research journey is long, complex, and evolving. Choosing a robust methodological framework is an essential part of the process. For me, narrative research linked well to my ontological and epistemological beliefs in that there are multiple realities and that meaning is subjective. Equally, the following overview of narrative research reflects my own experience of living a narrative life, whereby I have organised meaningful life events into story form and have told, re-storied and retold them, depending on the audience and the context. Much narrative research focuses on preserving the human voice (Bekaert, 2014) and for my study, which focused on the experiences of care experienced students, I felt this was essential, as many young people in care report feeling they are not listened to and do not have a voice (BECOME, 2020). Whilst this paper is grounded in my personal experience of researching care leavers' journeys into and through university, the focus of this paper is on how narrative inquiry was used as a methodological framework and the practical challenges of opening, working in and closing the story-telling space as a novice researcher.

What is narrative research?

Narrative research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting a post-positive stance, which recognises that knowledge is not absolute, but is instead relative, subjectively created; it is dynamic, evolving, and transient in nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2015). People by nature lead storied lives and narrative researchers describe such lives, collect, and tell stories of them (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The terms story and narrative are used interchangeably in the literature, however, Polkinghorne (1998) suggests that the story is the outcome of events or experiences being told, whereas the narrative extends beyond this to consider the thought processes and influences that shape the story. Consequently, the story is much more than an aimless string of words, it is constructed and meaningful. Clandinin and Connelly are often cited as being the first to use the term narrative inquiry. In their work narrative is considered both the phenomenon and the method. Narrative inquiry focuses on the individual, society and culture expressed through narration and analysis of this (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The term inquiry underlines that the stories or narratives are being used for research purposes

and so move beyond retelling of events, to interpreting them (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007); the story is viewed as rhetorical, constructed, and interpretive (Riessman, 1993).

One of the inherent challenges of conducting narrative research is that there is no consensus about how to carry it out. Indeed, Andrews (2020) refers to the difficulty of doing quality research in a methodology as notoriously murky as narrative research. Narrative research is often used as a generic term and some researchers conduct narrative studies focused on collecting narratives of human experience based on key principles, as opposed to outlining a distinct approach (Buttina, 2015). This reflects Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) reference to three "commonplaces" that are essential in distinguishing narrative inquiry with other methodological approaches. These are temporality, sociality and place. These commonplaces are linked to the philosophy of Dewey (1938) whose theories on education referred to the importance of exploring the personal, social, temporal and situation and so, to understand people, we need examine not only their personal experience, but their interactions in the world. Equally, Dewey (1938) suggests that experiences grow out of other experiences and this can be expressed through the continuum of the imagined now, imagined past and imagined future. So, essentially here, it is important to recognise the immediate impact of experience, as well as the later and possible future impact this has on on-going experience and understanding (Ricoeur, 1984). This is a vital feature of narrative inquiry, whereby attention is paid to how we look back and look forward (Cousin, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984) and often appears in many approaches to narrative inquiry (Goodson et al., 2017). In my work I drew on these principles by asking students to look back at how their aspirations for university developed, to look to their present experience and to look forward to their imagined futures.

The past and present actions of the storyteller or narrator can provide insight into potential future action (Wang and Geale, 2015), but as mentioned previously, the narrator may have multiple versions of their history and may also select which version they present (Cousin, 2009). This links to the performative nature of storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1998). The notion of temporality differentiates narrative research from other approaches such as phenomenology, but also underlines the value of individual experience and meaning (Ricoeur, 1984). I felt this was important for my research because I wanted to understand the way experience shapes

decisions to go to university, as well as experience once there. The second commonplace, sociality, refers to the milieu, the conditions under which peoples' experiences and events are unfolding. So, in the case of my study, the social context of widening participation for care leavers. The third commonplace is the specific place or sequence of places that the events took place. So, in my work, place is university, but notably other places may also be of relevance, for example the care setting and compulsory education settings. This three-dimensional way of working is what allows narrative research to be considered a methodology, rather than simply a method of data collection (Clandinin, 2006).

In my own study these commonplaces connected well to Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice, which was the theoretical lens through which I conducted the study, where past and present experience (primary and secondary habitus) and the capitals accrued are measured in the context of field (university). This combination of the theoretical and methodological approach enabled me to explore the temporal nature of individual experience, the collective experience of care leavers, as well as the wider social and cultural influences on their educational trajectories, and importantly, to understand how they imagined their possible futures beyond university; what Ricoeur (1984) refers to as a sense of hope. In using Bourdieu's (1990) theory my narrative research was grounded in a sociocultural methodological stance, whereby my focus was on the broad cultural narratives that influence individual experience (McAlpine, 2016). So, here I was considering the wider context of higher education and the increasingly dominant socio-cultural value placed on university education, as well as the widening participation agenda and how this influenced the narratives of the care experienced students in my study. This differs from the two other key stances: Naturalist, which focuses on rich descriptions of people's stories about significant issues and literary, which focuses on the discourse, images, metaphors used to represent experience and how the story is acted out through plots, storylines and characters (McAlpine, 2016).

I drew on a particular approach outlined in the work of Reissman (2008) and Squire (2013) whereby the focus was on personal experience. This reflects moves within the broad remit of narrative research to be more precise in declaring the conceptual distinctions between different approaches and being clear about whether research is focused on life story, biography, discourse, history, oral history, collective narratives,

or experience centred narratives (Denzin, 2009). The experience centred approach is based on the premise that narratives are sequential and meaningful, definitely human, re-present experience, reconstituting it and expressing it and that they display transformation and change (Squire, 2013). There are arguably overlaps with other approaches to narrative research in that the narrative may include elements of life history and biography and the inclusion of non-story material (Goodson et al., 2017), but it also emphasises description, theorising and looking to the future. In contrast, often life history and biographical approaches focus on narratives of past experience and lived situations (Roseneil, 2012). For me I wanted to capture how students imagined their futures beyond the university setting and their possible future self, considering whether going to university had had a transformative effect. The flexibility of experience centred narrative methods allowed for me to expand the context from the interview to the inclusion of documents shared by two of the students taking part (Squire, 2013). One student brought in four of her social workers case files documenting aspects of her pre-care and care experience and another student brought in school and university reports. These allowed for the consideration of non-first person accounts from the professionals involved in the lives of the students, as well as allowing contextualising the work in the larger cultural narrative about young people in care (Squire, 2013).

It is often the case that researchers who are interested in personal accounts of experience are also interested in the role of stories as a means to express and build personal identity and agency (Squire, 2013). These features are central to the ethos of this study and the recognition that often care leavers do not have always have a voice and whilst stories may change and be altered over time, this study aimed to capture what the participants wanted to share about their lives. In doing this the process of narration can help the individual to think more deeply, to not only give meaning, but to make sense of experience and emotions, as well as consider responsibility, blame, and praise for specific individuals and circumstances (Elliott, 2005). Further to this, by telling these narratives, my research aimed to address the dominant narrative discourse, which positions care experienced students as "unsuccessful" in the education system, reinforced by statistics that label them as not in education, training and employment and over-represented in the criminal justice system (Centre for Social Justice, 2015; Department for Education, 2017), without

considering the complex and cumulative social inequalities that produce these outcomes. This is synonymous with wider social narratives where under-represented groups in university are labelled as lacking motivation, aspiration and capability, so positioning them as neo-liberal subjects who are responsible for their own educational trajectories (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). Narrative research, and particularly that which is conducted from a social methodological stance (McAlpine, 2016), occupies a key role here in illuminating the gulf between dominant narratives and social reality, as well as foregrounding the injustice that produces unequal opportunities (Goodson et al., 2017). In my research I wanted to publicise the assets and success of care leavers, as well as providing a forum to understand how, as educators, we can work towards challenging this discourse and present a different truth (Goodson et al., 2017).

Opening the story-telling space.

Most narrative inquirers begin their inquiries either with engaging with participants through telling stories or through coming alongside them in the living out of stories (Clandinin, 2006). In my research, as the students were unknown to me, I had to invite the stories through interview conversations. The interviews were arranged via e-mail or telephone with each student and were conducted on university campuses at convenient times for the students. Most of the students requested a campus venue, citing this as a convenient and familiar location. I felt it was important to offer this choice, as it is consistent with the narrative approach, which fosters shared decisions and negotiation (Bashir, 2019). The face to face interviews were held in either private study rooms in library locations or private rooms within the campuses, which provided familiar and comfortable surroundings and avoided interruptions (Cousin, 2009). Each interview lasted about 90-100 minutes.

In narrative research one interview is rarely enough. The value of second interviews is in adding depth, but also creating space for storytellers and researchers to reflect on initial discussion and the opportunity to further explore any points or add detail and depth is noted (Polkinghorne, 2005). In my study the second interviews did not generate any new themes, but did allow participants a chance to confirm what they had said, but also to ask questions. One student also used the second interview to question me, asking me to recall information she had shared previously. Whilst she

did not explain this, I interpreted this as her way of checking I had listened, remembered, and was interested in her story. This underlines the responsibility to treat the storytelling space and the storyteller with care (Bashir, 2019).

The first interview I conducted was at a time when I had not had chance to undertake as much reading as I would have liked, but being conscious that I didn't want to lose the chance to capture the student's story, I carried out the interview. Having asked one of my early doctoral supervisors, an experienced narrative researcher, how to begin I set off with the advice to "simply ask for stories". I felt the interview went well and the student talked freely and at length. However, as my experience and reading progressed I drew more on the work of others to inform my approach. There is no set formula for getting narrators to tell their stories, but the important thing is to use an approach that encourages the story-teller to do most of the talking and allows them to time and space to speak (Connelly and Clandinin,1990); the researcher's role is to "sponsor the voice of the narrative teller" (Goodson, et al. 2017, p. 4). Establishing a climate that allows for storytelling is vital and as narrative researchers we create or visit the space for tales (Barusche, 2012, p. 5). These spaces can be through conversations, but may also include spaces such as correspondence, emails and social media, (Barusche, 2012); in my study these included the case files and school reports, mentioned earlier. I found that creating the story-telling space was helped by introducing some general small talk at the beginning of the interviews i.e. asking how students were enjoying their courses. This was to initiate conversation, helping participants to feel relaxed and created a conversational approach, as opposed to a more interrogative style. Whilst researchers often do this both at the beginning and end of the interview, they make different decisions about whether to record this or not (Ranse, et al., 2020). I made the decision to start recording, with consent, at the very beginning and right up until the end of each interview. This meant no data was missed, but it also helped me to remember introductory details the students had shared.

Working in the narrative space

Co-construction: The relationship between the narrator and the researcher

Narrative researchers recognise and accept that the narratives told are influenced by who is telling them, to who and for what purpose, as well as the impact of the

researcher's own subjective interpretation of them and consequently they are often considered to be co-constructed (Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 2008). This relationship reflects the multi-dimensional nature of narrative methodology. In this methodological approach it is not possible to bracket the researcher out of the inquiry, instead attention must be paid to the relational process and acceptance that the researcher is complicit in the world they study (Clandinin, 2006; Allen, 2017). Importantly Reissman (2008, p. 6) refers to narrative methodology using the analogy of "nested uses". These begin with the narrative impulse, the desire to tell a story, which is in itself interpretive. This leads to narrative data that is then interpreted by the researcher. A further stage of analysis occurs when the published account is read. To add to this process further, drawing on the work of Bruner (1990), the entire process helps both the narrator and the listener pause to look, a time for reflection on the narratives of their lives and those of others. Such reflection may lead to personal and practical change as we understand how we compose and recompose the stories we live by (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007).

The focus of my interviewing approach was to create a space whereby the students could freely tell me about their personal experiences and therefore, I began by making the broad inquiry "tell me how and why you got to university". Inviting stories through a broad opening question is a widely used approach to narrative interviewing and allows the storyteller to influence the direction of the story, but at the same time directs the conversation to focus on the story that is of interest to the researcher (Wengraf, 2001; Roller and Lavrakos, 2015; Allen, 2017). Having posed an initial opening question, or what Wengraf (2001) refers to as the single question initial narrative, I actively listened, giving the student time to speak freely. This was not without challenges. For example, when Lily (a pseudonym) said:

> **Lily:** "Oh, you're not going to go anywhere. You're just going to end up in prison. A teacher saying that. So, I'm just kind of like, if I could just see him now, I'd like to give him the finger".

I had to resist the urge to interrupt her story to question this further, but once it was clear she had finished that part of her narrative, I returned to the comment (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2015). Using the language Lily had used, I asked her "can you tell me more about experiencing that teacher's comment when he said "you're not going

anywhere. You're just going to end up in prison?" In this sense I was both actively listening, as well as being emotionally attentive to Lily's experience, but also asking for more detail without imposing judgement or opinion (Muylaert et al. 2014; Allen, 2017). This facilitated a space where Lily went on to talk about the impact of stigma and labelling she had experienced throughout her time in the care system and how it impacted on the identity she wanted to create as a university student. So, here, whilst following Lily's direction and taking cues from her story, my role was also to use the interview to elicit rich data from the narrative, whilst foregrounding her personal perspective (Muylaert et al. 2014; Allen 2017). In my later analysis, I was also able to contextualise this with the broader social narrative that care leavers are often labelled or perceived by the professionals working with them as having lower abilities than those not in care (Jackson and Cameron, 2012) and, as such, assigned the position of failing subject (Mannay et al., 2017). So, here, the narrative was both personal and experience centred, as well as socio-culturally bound (McAlpine, 2016).

Alongside the opening question I had formulated two broad (exmanent) questions based on my prior reading (1. Tell me about your experience at university; 2. Tell me how you see your future beyond university) seeking to understand journeys into and through university, which were followed by immanent questions (based only on the story), such as "what happened then" (Muylaert et al. 2014, p. 186). This is synonymous with the approach outlined by Giovanna et al. (2019) where the interview "opens the door" for narration, but is facilitated by active listening and open questions based only the content of the story. According to Squire (2013) most experience centred narrative interviewing is semi-structured and involves varying degrees of involvement, depending on the researchers individual approach. Whilst, conscious that my questions influenced the narrative, I did not want to "abdicate" from this role (Goodson et al., 2017) because ultimately, my research was for the purpose of understanding care leavers journeys into and through university. I did, however, restrict my questions to these three, basing further questions on seeking depth only by asking for detail based on the story.

The approach taken in my study may raise questions about the extent to which I controlled the narrative. Some narrative researchers see themselves and the participants as co-constructing each part of the inquiry, whereas for others, they prefer to maintain some distance (Clandinin and Huber, 2012). The level of

interaction presents a paradox for narrative researchers and whilst some adopt a role of listening and no collaboration or co-construction of the narrative (Goodson et al., 2017), others refer to claims of "letting participants speak for themselves" as naïve, given the implications of most research being conducted with and for specific purposes (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 747). There is also discrepancy about how to question with some suggesting you should avoid asking "why" questions (Muylaert et al. 2014) and others indicating these are okay (Allen, 2017). I accepted that my questions did shape the narrative. However, I ensured the questions were few and broad, aiming to strike a balance between providing a comfortable arena for storytelling, whilst also being conscious of my role as an academic and researcher and the purpose of my study. For me, this seminal statement by Bruner (2004, p. 708) captures the nature of asking for stories in narrative work: "a life as led is inseparable from a life as told- or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold". In this sense, there is a shared responsibility for the stories that are produced through the asking for and telling of life experiences, but equally the stories are about experiences that are already edited as they are told; edited both by the fact they are requested, by my presence, by the time constraints imposed by the interview, as well as by the narrator (McAlpine, 2016; Sikes and Goodson, 2017).

Whilst conducting the interviews I did share aspects of my personal story where relevant and was honest about my interest in the topic, when asked. It is suggested that self-disclosure can help establish comfort, trust, and rapport, particularly when studying sensitive topics (Batty, 2020). What I wanted to do here was establish my genuine interest, but also show honesty (Bashir, 2019). This can present a challenge in some instances, as narrators may ask probing questions. Indeed, Hydén's work on narrating sensitive topics refers to this issue and she reports feeling embarrassed when a narrator asked her to join her in discussing her sexual experiences. Hydén dealt with this by introducing more neutral topics into the conversation. Here, this presents a challenge in terms of silencing what might be an important issue for the narrator and Hydén admits that the narrator seemed to become irritated. As researchers' the balance of power is an important consideration. Whilst story-tellers are in control of which narratives they share, the researcher can also exert control in terms of encouraging or closing discussion, as outlined later. Equally, Hydén (2008)

suggests that researchers are often held in high esteem, which can also produce a power imbalance. In Lily's case I was reminded of her wish to control how she was represented when she contacted me to respond to the verbatim interview transcripts I had sent her. I had assigned Lily her pseudonym to protect her confidentiality, but Lily asked that it was changed:

Lily: "Jenny makes me sound old – I would prefer Lily".

This was particularly important for Lily and she described the lack of control she felt during her time in the looked after care system, when she was not consulted about the many changes of placement and school she had experienced. Whilst the other students in the study were also given the same choice, they were happy for me to choose their pseudonym. My use of pseudonyms had been in an attempt to emphasise the personal nature of the narratives in published work but Lily's request made me realise that that even without thinking I had assumed control of this part of the research process, and, importantly, that enabling choice was important moving forward in my research (Bashir, 2019).

In my work, whilst I was not asked any challenging questions, I did feel that one of the students, Kelly, (a pseudonym) talked about two sexually explicit encounters during her narrative. At both times she leaned towards me and looked at me intently, as if reading my reaction. Whilst I did not feel uncomfortable with the conversation, I was conscious about the potential impact of my response. Here, I tried to respond by asking how she felt talking about these experiences or what happened then? (Muylaert et al. 2014). In these situations, there is no guide-book about how to respond, but this perhaps presents an opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences between the narrator and the researcher. Hydén used her experience as an opportunity to consider how her own prior social and cultural background influenced her perceptions about what should be publicly and privately discussed and why this led to her own feelings of embarrassment when she encountered questions about her own sexual preferences. Bashir's (2019) research into the experiences of qualitative researchers working with vulnerable people acknowledges both the privilege and power of the researcher's position in being able to capture personal narratives, but also notes the vulnerability of researchers; this is referred to as the flip side of the research encounter. This vulnerability manifests in varying and

complex ways, but includes anxiety about the unpredictability of participants, the dangers of research in field settings, as well as gaining unexpected or emotionally charged insights, which might generate feelings of sadness or discomfort for the researcher. The dynamics between the interviewer and the narrator affect the narrative and perhaps the sensitive or private nature of the topics discussed shows that a comfortable space has been created. Sometimes the story-telling space allows for stories that have never been told, or perhaps formed, to emerge and be shared (Bashir, 2019). Mischler (1986) compares this space to special relationships i.e. doctor-patient, where the most private and intimate topics can be discussed. However, it is also important to consider the halo effect whereby, narrators tell you what they think you want to hear (Kvale, 2011). I was aware that even by nodding or offering affirming sounds or even saying "go on", this might indicate that the narrator was relaying something of interest to me and would shape the story, but also accepted that these were important features of showing interest (Bashir, 2019)). More than that, I was aware that the narrator and I were engaging in a process whereby we were both monitoring what was said,

Indeed, Kelly shared during her interview that she was watching for my reaction and would change her approach, consistent with the halo effect (Kvale, 2011).

> **Kelly:** "I do reflection in action all the time. So, every time I say something to you, I look at how you're reacting, and I change what I say, and I know exactly what I can say that might spoil it or change it".

This discussion clearly points to the halo effect and it was interesting that she had used the word spoil. This perhaps reflects the legacy of her care experience where the relationships she formed were often fragile and she recounted many friendships she had lost. What may also have been happening here, is that Kelly was establishing entitlement to speak and presenting what she considered were tellable stories. This is sometimes considered a defensive approach where the narrator is defending the validity of their position, but is also responding to their interpretation of the research context (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013). Looking back at this encounter I wish I had asked her to explain what she meant by spoiling it. Whilst this was a missed opportunity, it was only afterwards, when I became emersed in the data, that it seemed to hold such importance. Here, the murky or messy nature of

narrative research means it is not always clear what does and does not constitute data and how meaning should be made from it (Sikes and Goodson, 2017). There is no failsafe way to assure that the same words are understood in the same way by any two people, or even by the same person from one moment to the other (Andrews, 2020). Whilst this may lead to criticism of narrative research, narrative researchers to not pretend that their work is objective, but instead is based on people answering questions they have been asked and researchers building their work on what they think they have been told (Andrews, 2020). What is left out of the story can be as significant as what is told and, as in my case, researchers are not always able to discover omissions; what is reassuring is that participants are often keen to tell relevant stories (Sikes and Goodson, 2017). This can be confirmed by participants asking the interviewer if "this is the sort of thing you're interested in" (Sikes and Goodson, 2017, p. 65) and in my study:

Kelly: "is that the type of thing you want to know about?".

Whilst the narrative literature can inform our approach, it cannot teach us the nuanced and complex skill of navigating the narrative space. Here, we can only do our best to open the space and work in partnership to grasp each story and interpret it, as it was told and heard at that moment in time, to the best of our ability

Emotion work in the narrative space

As discussed earlier, my experience of interviewing Kelly led me to consider my own vulnerability as a researcher. Researchers' are not faceless interviewers and so being distanced from the experience of gathering data is difficult (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Bashir, 2019). This is particularly relevant to narrative studies, where the topics can focus on private or sensitive issues and indeed, as outlined already, sensitive questions for both the narrator and the researcher..

One of the interviews, with a student given the pseudonym Connie, contained lots (ten) of episodes of silence, ranging between 15 and 30 seconds. During some of these, it appeared that she was thinking about what to say, but I felt this did not explain some of the silences. Whilst I was conscious I did not want to respond by successive questioning, the three questions I had identified needed to be supported by other questions, such as tell me more about that, to encourage dialogue. Here, I was presented with a situation I had not anticipated and felt the interview had not

flowed and was generally less successful than the others. Perhaps some of the students I felt had told less of their story had actually told as much as they wanted to at that particular time. Allen (2017) refers to the concept of narrative coherence and suggests that if one is not able to narrate their experience it may mean that they are not able to understand it. Memory is also selective, and it is suggested that whilst we remember what we can, some experiences are deliberately or unconsciously forgotten (Muylaert, et al. 2014). This may have been the case given the pre-care experience of the students in my study, however, silence can also be an important mechanism for the narrator to seek power over the dialogue and determine what they do and do not wish to talk about; what is not said can be as powerful and as important as what is not said (Mazzei, 2007; Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017).

This silence can also exist on both the part of the story-teller and the listener, which is important to consider in research where interviewers refrain from questioning, as considered earlier. I found the lengthy silence disconcerting, and this can also be the case for those who are telling their story (Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017). Equally, the process may have been stressful for them. Relaying sensitive stories can generate powerful emotions and researchers' working in these spaces must be particularly alert to this (Sikes and Hall, 2019). Bekaert (2014) notes the social value or labels often ascribed to certain groups, whereby they are stigmatised and, at times, blamed for their own circumstances. In her work, this related to teenage mothers, but this is also true of those in the care system and, in Hydén's (2008) research, those who have been subject to domestic abuse. Whilst Hydén's earlier approach of changing the subject does not always work, she has found this a valuable strategy where narrators appear visibly upset or affected by their account. Here, she suggests intervening by asking if the story-teller is OK to continue or by asking them to recall a time when they felt differently, or whether they think others may have had the same experience. This is based on the premise that revealing sensitive experiences is culturally bound and connects to feelings of being unimportant, vulnerable, and powerless and, very often, alone. Knowing others may have had similar experiences can reduce feelings of isolation, but also, for some, guilt, and self-blame (Hydén, 2008).

A fundamental role of narrative research is to address what Bekeart (2014, p. 98) refers to as the "narrative silence towards experiences". Bekeart importantly notes

that people are not entirely free to construct their own narratives. As our lives are socially bound, often we can only use the narratives that are available to us within popular understanding. Given that some sensitive, personal and /or illicit experiences are not readily available in the narratives of everyday life, this can sometimes silence such experiences. By opening the space to talk about them, this gives them a voice, but further, by publishing these narratives, we can help people to relate to their own experience in the narratives of others. This has the wider impact of helping people to construct who they were, are, or might become (Bekeart, 2104); looking to the past and the future are central features of narrative research (Ricouer, 1984).

In the case of my study those involved wanted to challenge negative stereotypes about children in care and their academic potential, but also felt their stories of success at university could help others in care to imagine a better future. Therefore, the complexity of silence in interviews must be considered and care must be taken not to close down opportunities for a narrator to talk about something of importance to them (Mazzei, 2007). When interviewers feel uncomfortable, out of their depth and do not know what to say there is a temptation to try to "escape from an unpleasant dialogue" (Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017; and this is perhaps reflective of my earlier point about interviewers "abdicating" from their role (Goodson et al. 2017). Here, terms such as "it's okay if you don't want to talk about it" are tempting, as I wanted to say at times, but refrained from, being conscious I did not want to silence important experiences for the narrator (Bengtsson and Frynbo. 2017, p. 31). Here, whilst, again I was navigating unchartered territory, I tried to offer more neutral intervention, saying "are you comfortable to go on", as Hydén (2008) did, to try and keep the narrative space open. Further to that, I wanted to embrace the silence and examine it in more detail in my analysis, looking for patterns and connections between silences (mine and the narrators') to try and further explore the dynamics between us and the narrative space that had been opened.

Emotional work manifests in other ways for researchers, through eliciting and hearing distressing stories, but also when the researcher has personal, experiential and insider knowledge. Sikes and Hall (2019, p. 170) consider this in their work, and acknowledge that at times it becomes "too close for comfort" touching the lives of both the participant and our own. Having worked as a health visitor for many years, I had been involved in safeguarding children at risk of childhood neglect, abuse,

poverty, and bereavement linked to much of my prior professional experience; these are often the reasons children enter looked after care (Department for Education, 2017). Therefore, I did not anticipate my research to have such an emotional impact on me. However, two of the students had a profound effect on me and I found it difficult not to think about them or to feel sadness and concern for them. As a researcher, I was not able to follow them up or provide ongoing support, as I would have done in my health visiting role, and this produced a sense of powerlessness, as noted in Bashir's (2019) work. I was able to direct them to support within their university settings, which did help to address some of this concern Sikes and Hall, 2019), but did not completely remove the emotional work involved in conducting this research.

The concept of emotion work is largely derived from seminal work by Hochschild (1979) and was based on studying the significance of emotions within the workplace and the work expended in managing these. There are social rules that require us to induce or suppress emotions, depending on situation and context (Darra, 2008). These rules generally go unnoticed until there is a mismatch between what the individual feels and perceives they should feel. When this occurs, the individual is required to engage in emotional labour, which requires acted behaviour in order to try and show the socially accepted behaviour; this is likened in some studies to acting and putting on a happy face (Darra, 2008).

The literature around emotion work and labour has focussed on a range of occupations including flight attendants (Hochschild, 1979) and health professionals (Darra, 2008) and is increasingly evident in qualitative research literature. Early work by Campbell (2002) was useful for me, because it did specifically focus on the impact of undertaking qualitative research with rape victims and some of the individuals in my research shared their prior experiences of sexual abuse. Here, personal interaction with the research subjects and the sensitivity of the topic, were noted as requiring emotional labour in order for the researcher to manage their emotions. Whilst the literature around dealing with emotions during interviews varies with some researchers showing visible signs of being upset, including openly crying, others suggest it is inappropriate to show such emotions and indicate these should only be released afterwards (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Showing empathy can be achieved by paraphrasing when appropriate and picking up on the emotion, using

relevant statements. For example, "So, at this point you felt no one listened?" This is consistent with mirroring the emotion without imposing judgement (Wengraf, 2001; Giovanna et al. 2019).

One particular emotion that was not expected in my work was the experience of strong feelings of dislike for one student. This was encountered during the interviews and was reflected upon afterwards. There was no real reason for this, other than perhaps a human preference, but it was important to acknowledge it may have impacted on the interview. Many factors can impact on the dynamics of the interview, including age, gender, social class and that these can be conscious or unconscious (Bold, 2012). By being aware of it at the time, I was able to draw on previous professional experience to show empathy through active listening and whilst being conscious of the feeling, I was able to value the student's unique contribution to the study (Wengraf, 2001; Yow, 2006, cited in Bold, 2006). In this case, suppressing this emotion during the interview was paramount (Darra, 2008). A concern in suppressing emotions is that researchers can feel frustrated or overwhelmed (Dickson-Swift, Kippen and Liamputton, 2009) and in my case, guilt for not liking the student.

Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2014) capture the multi-dimensional nature of emotion work, where qualitative researchers work hard to gain access to the field, building trust, as well as maintaining that access by being conscious of and measured in their responses in order to inform their interviewing approach and not alienate the narrator. Drawing on Hothschild's earlier work, they outline the emotive dissonance that researchers' can feel by working in this "false" manner, but equally suggest that focus on the positive final outcomes of the research can help and indeed, enhance our emotional energy as researchers. For me, listening to some of the narratives where students had experienced pre-care neglect or abuse led me to think about my own health visiting practise and "should I have done more" (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 31) to safeguard children. These feelings are known to occur, especially when doing emotion work (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007) and at times, collecting, reflecting on and engaging with the narratives was stressful and, as other researchers acknowledge, difficult to "get out of my head" (Sikes and Hall, 2020, p. 167). Consequently, it was important for me to ensure that I had time to reflect after each one and that I spaced them apart where possible. I

found seeking formal peer support from my research supervisors, as well as informal peer support from other doctoral researchers helpful (Sikes and Hall, 2020). Further to this, I also drew from Yow's (2006, cited in Bold, 2006, p.104) framework to question myself and the relationships I developed with the students. Here, some of the questions I asked myself included, why am I feeling this about the narrator; what are the similarities and differences between us? I also considered the effect on me, as well as how my reactions might impact on the research (Yow, 2006, cited in Bold, 2006). Although this can never completely remove the researcher's impact from the study, this reflexive process was helpful for me in examining my role and the developing relationships with the students.

Closing the storytelling space.

Closing the storytelling space is an important stage in narrative research and it is vital to be aware of cues that the narration is complete (Muylaert, 2014). One of the common features of narratives is that they almost always have a beginning, middle and an end and arguably, this reflects the nature of the interview, which generally includes an initialisation, main narration, questioning and closure phase (coda), sometimes followed by "small talk" (Mulyaert et al. 2014). When the narrator starts to say less, this may be simply that they are thinking about what to or not to include, therefore, picking up on closing statements i.e. that's where my story ends or that's about it, can help (Wengraf, 2001; Riessman, 2013; Mulyaert et al.2014). Wengraf indicates these often occur spontaneously (Wengraf, 2001). I felt it was important to give students the opportunity to ask me questions and talk about the interview process. Equally, as some interviewees often reflect on the events once the interview has finished and think about things they might have added (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013), my contact details were re-iterated. However, I realised that I had paid more attention to how I would open and work in the narrative space than I had to closing it and had naively expected that the interviews would end with some closing, informal discussion and that would be that, and I wouldn't hear from the students again. A fundamental principle of research is that those taking part should not experience harm (physical or emotional) beyond that, which they would encounter during the course of their normal lifestyle (Breakwell, Smith and Wright, 2012). Whilst, there is discrepancy in the literature about what constitutes a sensitive research topic, I was very conscious that asking for stories about care experience

may bring about powerful emotional responses including sadness, anxiety, anger and embarrassment and consequently considered the study to be a potentially sensitive area of inquiry. As such, I should have perhaps, anticipated that closing the narrative space may not be so straightforward, as some of the literature suggests (Muylaert et al. 2104).

Batty (2020) points to the risk of dependency produced by engaging in intimate conversations with researchers and indicates that some participants may feel abandoned when ending the relationship. This is notably of greater risk in the case of longitudinal research, as in much of Batty's work, but careless closure of the narrative space, even in shorter relationships, may cause harm. Indeed, participants have reported feeling used or shocked at the end of a study, and this can occur even when the end of the study has been clearly articulated (Morrison et al. 2012; Iverson, 2009). Whilst most of the interviews I conducted ended with brief informal discussion and goodbyes, one student emailed me regularly to ask about the progress of my work in the months following her interviews and another sent me two social media connection requests. In the case of my study those taking part wanted to understand how their stories would be shared and how I would re-story them. Whilst initially they had power over whether they took part in the study and what stories they shared, and essentially, as a researcher, I was asking something of them, there was now a shift in the balance of power. Through my re-storying what they had shared and developing this into scholarly work, I was in control of what was publicly shared (Hydén, 2008). With this in mind, and the privileged position I felt at having been given their stories, I wanted to assure the participants I would treat them and their stories with care. As such, this served as a reminder that I had opened a space for storytelling and, therefore, had to close the space sensitively. In this case, each time I was contacted I responded with a friendly, brief update, and, as Batty (2020) found, over time the messages stopped, and the relationship came to a natural end. On reflection, this is something I need to think about when closing interviews, preparing those taking part for the closure of the relationship. Here, rather than viewing closure of the narrative space simplistically, or as a one off event, it may be better, as Batty (2020) suggests to view it as a process, which may occur over time and that this phase will be governed more by the participant than by me as a researcher.

Batty (2020) outlined a range of approaches in her work where she exchanged text messages and phonecalls after the final interview. Again, this is an area where the researcher must make a choice. My own approach will incorporate better signposting that the relationship is ending, by outlining, for example, "this is the final interview", but also being clear about how any future contact may occur and underlining that this would be via a designated email account rather than social media. Hopefully, this will support more careful closure of the narrative space.

Conclusion

By sharing my own personal story of embarking on my journey as a narrative researcher, my intent is not to direct the individual work of other researchers, but more with the hope that others who are new to narrative inquiry and indeed, conducting empirical research, will be able to draw on some of the experiences I have shared to inform their own approach. My journey was both challenging and stressful at times, and I was initially overwhelmed by the volume of literature relating to conducting narrative research. Moving from my first initial interview, I was able to refine my approach and adopt a style of interviewing that allowed me to balance the skill of active listening, with facilitating the story through careful questions with increasing confidence and (I hope) competence. Opening the space for storytelling required careful thought and work, but so did working in the narrative space and this presented an opportunity to critically reflect on my interviewing approach and the impact of this on the outcomes of my research.

My own experience has helped prepare me better for engaging in further research and the potential for listening to emotive stories of life experience, as well as thinking about how opening this space impacts on those taking part. An important lesson is to consider how to plan closure of the storytelling space and to try and ensure to close it with care. Admittedly, I may look back in future years on my own story of becoming a narrative researcher and be critical of my decisions, however, I am ultimately happy that I was able to capture the "rare voices" (Chan, 2017, p. 29) of care leavers, whose stories may otherwise not have been heard. For me, part of the challenge and the beauty of narrative inquiry links to the diversity in its interpretation and application. What I have done in my own research is draw on the principles

outlined in this paper and in doing this was able to find my own voice as a researcher, as well as giving voice to the stories I was given.

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