



Footprints in the field: researcher identity in social research

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Abstract

This paper encourages researchers to consider their own identity to be of particular importance within any research project. Rather than seeing our own identities as being fully formed and therefore detached from a project, this paper suggests that we invest ourselves into research and acknowledge the impact we have on research. Investing ourselves into research, also involves considering our identities to be open to adaption. Consequently, an investigation of how our own identities can be influenced by the process of carrying out research is also discussed. It is suggested that this investment may open up endless possibilities for future research and practice. Notably, the process of self-investigation can result in transparent and ethical knowledge production. I use the example of my own research to highlight the advantages of remaining open to and embracing these opportunities for growth. Drawing on a poststructural conceptual framework, I critically explore some of the possibilities that a thorough interrogation of the self can create.

Keywords: Method/ology, Reflexivity, Feminism, Disability, Intersections.

Introduction

Within this paper I seek to describe some of the ways that the identity of a researcher has an important impact on any given research project. Moreover, I argue that the identity of the researcher is also influenced by the process of carrying out research. These assertions lend support to a view that identity is a free-flowing and malleable construct which is always ready to become nomadic and foreign in order to concord with the diversity of the social world.

Drawing on a poststructuralist framework, I will describe how research can benefit from a thorough investigation of the identity of the researcher(s). I use my sociological imagination to tease out some of the insights I have gained from my on-going doctoral research. My research uses the analytical technique of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to analyse data gleaned from a number of methods and approaches within the qualitative paradigm. I use this data to investigate the identities of seven men aged between 25 and 35 years who sustained an acquired brain injury (ABI) during young adulthood.

Roughly 10 years ago, I sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury (a form of ABI). Throughout my research I have included my own thoughts and experiences to complement those of my fellow participants. In sharing this facet of identity with participants', I feel that a thorough examination of both the impact I have had on the research, and the research has had on me to be particularly relevant. Initially I felt that I was ideally placed as an 'insider' to explore the lives and experiences of others who had sustained similar injuries. However, upon further reflection, I believe it has been crucial that I did not allow this similarity to provide me with a (false) sense of familiarity with my participants' complex, unique and ever-changing lifeworlds. Furthermore, I am

not sure how much of an advantage having similar experiences to my participants' has been. In using a poststructuralist framework, which highlights the "multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987/2004) and "nomadism" Braidotti (1991; 2003; 2006; 2011) of identity, my research seeks to dislocate notions of identity which suggest the static and ever-steady qualities of this construct.

I begin with a brief description of some of the events which have led me to my opinions regarding the value of knowledge. This is both important and necessary given my commitment to the transparency of research. I then continue with a discussion of some of the differences between the methods we use to carry out research and the methodological considerations that are made. Many of the assertions I make regarding the knowledge production process are drawn from the academic discipline of feminism. I therefore discuss some of the ways in which this body of literature has had an impact upon my theoretical beliefs. I then turn to an exploration of some of the ways that the identity of the researcher can be explored in a more detailed way in terms of how it may impact upon the research within the domain of disability research. Finally I turn to a discussion surrounding some of the finer details of my own research, where I stress the importance of recognising the complexity of identity.

In-keeping with the poststructural theme of the paper, it is intended that the 'sections' in this paper are viewed as interconnected plateaus which may overlap and swell, rather than neat and altogether separate sections. Largely due to my belief of the centrality of the researcher within any research project, I feel it is important to set out some of the more significant aspects of my personal biography at the very beginning of this paper. Following Letherby et al (2012), the act of 'theorising the subjectivity' of the researcher(s) is crucial as this may provide an important glimpse into the researcher(s) epistemological, ontological and theoretical beliefs.

Situating myself

In the pursuit of honest, ethical and above all else theoretically sound knowledge, it has been stated that one way to do this is by theorising or situating the subjective viewpoint of the researcher. This process has been termed as achieving 'theorised subjectivity'. 'Theorised subjectivity' is defined as '... a reflexive approach that acknowledges the significance of both intellectual and personal auto/biography of researchers and of respondents' (Letherby et al 2012: 90). Research often strives to investigate the various discursive forces that interact to help shape the identities of participants, but less attention is paid to enacting such an investigation on the side of the researcher. In theorising subjectivity, researchers are encouraged to celebrate their life experiences in acknowledging their impact upon knowledge production (Eppley 2006; Mills 2011; Thompson and Gunter 2011).

Using my own life experiences as an example, these experiences have provided the inspiration which has been the driving force behind my doctoral research. Within the following section I discuss some of the experiences that have helped to shape my opinions on the central issues on which my research is based: namely, the identity of people who have sustained an ABI; how to enact research involving people who have experienced ABI; and some of the ways that research can learn from the experience of people who have sustained ABI.

I am a 31-year-old white, British male. At the age of 21, I sustained a severe traumatic brain injury. Immediately following the injury, I spent approximately one month in an acute Neurological ward. I was then transferred to a Neurological Rehabilitation Unit, where I spent a further seven months. For the two years immediately preceding the injury, I was a Physiotherapy Student. Due to the extent and nature of my physical impairments following the injury, I was forced to cease training as a Physiotherapist. After spending approximately four years recovering and gradually (re)integrating into social life, I decided to return to University and embark on a three-year Health and Social Care Studies degree. Upon completion of this degree, I managed to obtain a scholarship to complete a one-year MSc in Social Research. Although I very

much enjoyed these courses, my attention had been captured by the possibility of further study. In 2011, I managed to secure a three-year studentship to study for a PhD in Health and Social Care. This was awarded after the production of an in-depth research proposal and an interview supported by appropriate references.

Before writing the proposal I decided I wanted to carry out research in a subject that was close to my heart. Inevitably I based my proposal around the subject of ABI. More specifically, I wanted to investigate the complexities of the identities of younger male adults who sustained an ABI in early adulthood. I accept that I am far more intimately involved with both my topic of research and my participants than most. However, I wish to argue that this provides the ideal terrain upon which to consider my position within the research. Although other research may not be quite so personal to researchers, I argue that a thorough and sophisticated interrogation of how researchers may affect the research outcomes is important in any study.

Method/ology

Crucial to any consideration of researcher impact upon any research comes fairly early on in the research process. This occurs as part of the consideration of the methodological choices that precede any data collection. The methodology of a research project is far more than a simple choice between different methods to be used within a project. I argue that it is imperative that differentiation is made between the two. The choice of methodology needs to be thought through carefully before any decision over what specific tools are to be used to collect data. The distinction between the two is essentially that the methods of a research project refer to the way the researcher obtains information, or the tools s/he chooses to employ and the methodology refers to why a researcher makes a specific choice. The methodology refers to a whole plethora of issues concerning intricacies of carrying out research (Dumitrica 2010; Ellis and Berger 2001; Goodley et al 2004; Letherby 2002; Liamputtong 2007; Sikes 2004).

The reasons for such a choice are made before and inform the actual choice. For example, common within the debate surrounding methods is a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative paradigms including debate surrounding the sorts of substantive research questions that each is best equipped to answer (Alise 2010; Brannen 2009; Bryman 2008; Denzin 2010; Letherby 2002; Letherby 2003). In actuality, the consideration of the methodology would occur immediately after the establishment of the research question(s)/issue and would therefore precede the choice regarding methods. In providing focus upon *why* certain methods are advantageous to use within a specific paradigm a sound reasoning behind the choice must be provided. Put crudely, the method is what the researcher does and the methodology explores the reasons for doing it that way. A thorough examination of the methodology of research can provide vital insight into all sorts of epistemological, ontological and theoretical issues, as well as providing a more general impression of the research. A sophisticated awareness of methodological issues informs and therefore *precedes* any choice over which methods may be best suited to explore the topic.

Within a thorough consideration of methodology, we are encouraged to examine the role of the researcher. As with all aspects of research, methodological concerns should be driven by a quest to provide informative answers to the research question(s) or issue(s). In exploring the methodological intricacies of research, the epistemological and ontological positioning of researchers, or put simply our beliefs on how knowledge is produced (Dumitrica 2010; Goodley et al 2004; Sikes 2004) often guide method/ological choices. It has been stated that a sound consideration of methodology must interrogate the role the researcher plays within the research (Ellis and Berger 2001; Eppley 2006; Liamputtong 2007; Letherby 2002). The research process begins with a detailed analysis of the research question(s) or issue(s). After this has been completed a sound investigation of the salient aspects of the methodological intricacies of our research is undertaken. Crucially, it is only after this that a sound and informed decision can be made over which methods we may like to employ. Research which is enacted as feminist social research has played an important role in helping to influence the

way that researchers' consider methodological issues (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Accordingly, I now turn to this body of literature to help me tease out some substantive methodological issues.

Intimations of Feminism

A sophisticated interrogation of the construction of knowledge is something that has historically been considered to be worthy of greater attention within feminist research (Dumitrica 2010; Letherby 2002; Liamputtong 2007; Sikes 2004). Indeed, the very practice of 'doing feminist research' has been said to 'highlight the problems in taking an epistemological position' (Letherby 2002: 4.3) either within a setting that is familiar or one that may be less so. Although a detailed consideration of epistemological concerns is not exclusive to the domain of feminist research, feminist research has arguably examined the interplay of factors which result in 'epistemological authority' (Letherby 2002 1.1) in a particularly sophisticated way. Epistemological authority is the result of a deep consideration of the way knowledge is produced. In order for this to be achieved, researchers' need to seriously consider their own position within research and how this positioning affects the research produced (Letherby 2002).

Elsewhere in the debate regarding how researchers should remain aware of their own impact on research, it has been stated that researchers may want to conceptualise these moments as 'Speed bumps' (Weis and Fine 2000) in the research process. Having reflected upon this statement, I consider that the process of how we produce knowledge within any paradigm needs to be thought through in some detail to assess the impact the researcher has over the research produced. Furthermore, rather than term these moments of reflection as 'speed bumps', I propose that research should use a sophisticated consideration of researcher identity to its advantage. Therefore, a more positive image such as that of an important tool or key to enacting high quality research could be more appropriate. This would seem to create more of a positive image and would emphasise the many possibilities that are provided by a reflexive approach. Consequently, a reflexive approach to research production may use these moments of reflection as keys that enable entry into otherwise unknown worlds and therefore can be said to provide a host of possibilities.

There is little doubt that contemporary qualitative research owes a great deal to feminism. Liamputtong (2007) lends her commitment to Feminist and transparent knowledge production when stating that the process of research is very important and even just as important as any outcome. One area in which contemporary qualitative research owes a particular debt of gratitude to feminism is consideration of reflexivity. Although reflexivity is sometimes understood as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England 1994: 82), there are further layers of complexity that can be explored (Davies et al 2004; Pini 2004).

One of the more substantive of these is enabled in considering the intersubjectivity created through researcher-participant interactions. For example, the researcher could benefit from a consideration of how participants' will perceive them especially in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, life experience and so on (Pini 2004). Crucially, reflexivity also involves what Davies et al (2004) term 'critical literacy' (Davies et al 2004: 361) where 'researchers come to see what is achieved through particular discursive acts as well as the constitutive means by which the particular act was made possible and interpretable as this act in particular' (Ibid.). In other words, researchers are aware of the wider discourses that shape the lives of the participants, and demonstrate this awareness in the choices they make regarding their research. This awareness can be demonstrated through the myriad ways in which researchers may choose to design their data collection from the structure of the approach through to considering how they present themselves.

Rather than being a unique disciplinary approach which informs the enactment of feminist research, I believe it to be sensible to suggest that research that is carried out within other spheres can also utilise the possibilities that a reflexive approach imbues. An example of such a body of literature would be research that is enacted within the broad, interdisciplinary sphere of disability studies. Indeed, disability studies researchers have been urged to engage in reflexive practices (Stone and Priestley 1996). It has been stated that disability studies has much in common with feminism, not least as both have a clear political dimension (Tregaskis 2004).

If disability is viewed as a social construct, surely any research conducted within this topic would benefit from a thorough interrogation of the research process and may well have to grapple with the relational and situational circumstances of knowledge production. Indeed, these reasons have been cited as one of the most enduring reasons for a deep, methodological understanding of research (Liamputtong 2007; Richardson and St Pierre 2005). I now continue my discussion regarding methodological concerns of social research as they are related to the enactment of disability studies research.

Opening up possibilities for contemporary disability research

Research that is conducted regarding issues pertaining to disability, have largely ignored the methodological concerns of research (Tregaskis 2004). In solely reporting the findings of research projects together with a superficial account of the methods that were used to gather such knowledge, disability studies research may be suffering at the expense of the omission of theoretically critical and detailed accounts that explore the principles underpinning the research. Perhaps this may be due to the largely political parameters which have historically guided such research (Danielli and Woodhams 2005; Mecioca 2011; Mercieca and Mercieca 2010).

There has historically been a need for disability studies research to be 'emancipatory' (Barnes 2002; 2003) in nature (that is, to be driven by the acquisition of political rights for disabled people as a disadvantaged, disenfranchised group). Indeed researchers have been provided with six core principles upon which to base their research (Barnes 2002; 2003).

An in-depth analysis of these core principles is not relevant here as the purpose of this paper is not to discuss approaches to conducting disability studies research, but rather to explore to what extent and in what ways the role of the researcher demands comprehensive consideration within such research. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that 'if research starts out with the pre-existing commitments to a particular understanding it will prevent reflexivity' (Watson 2012: 101). As I have discussed above reflexivity is an important component in any consideration of researcher positionality. This predetermined and checklist-type of approach to research has received further criticism from those who believe that research should be allowed to develop without having to correspond to a pre-determined set of principles (Mercieca and Mercieca 2010; Mercieca 2011). Rather than simply paying attention to the method that is used in disability research (what we do), it may be useful to consider the complexities of carrying out research with disabled people (how we do it) (Mercieca and Mercieca 2010; Mercieca 2011). An in-depth discussion of how research is carried out may encourage researchers to be creative and sophisticatedly 'think through' the reasons for carrying out research. This enables critique, which is a necessary component of the production of new knowledge. Indeed, relying on taken for granted assumptions and quickly closing down opportunity for questioning these assumptions has been said to limit opportunities for progress (Salih and Butler 2004). Furthermore, if research is to be carried out in way that does not prejudge the lives of our participants, then surely this indicates a complex consideration of the identity of the researcher since any taken for granted assumptions would have already been addressed.

For example, it has often been asked whether it is important to have disabled researchers that research disability. The involvement of non-disabled people in the disability movement and disability studies as an academic discipline has been debated in detail elsewhere (Barnes 2002, 2003 2008; Stone and Priestley 1996).

However, it is particularly relevant to this discussion as a detailed investigation of the researcher identity necessitates a breaking of the 'orthodoxy of concealment' (Tregaskis 2004: unpaginated) or put differently, demands an investigation of how the researcher identifies. For example, the question of the position of non-disabled people within the disability movement was raised by Robert F. Drake (Drake 1997), and in a forthright manner, commented upon by Fran Branfield, in a later edition of the same Journal (Branfield 1998).

Within this response paper, Branfield suggests that non-disabled people 'who research and work in our area' do not belong there and 'their justifications [for being there] are doomed to failure' (Branfield 1998: 143). This reply provides an example of the difference between the political dimensions of disability and the quest to produce critically sound and transparent research. According to Branfield, there is no separation between the political dimensions of disability and disability as a critical and rigorous academic subject. To view the involvement of non-disabled people 'who research and work in [this] area' (Ibid.) as a positive or a negative notion, a differentiation between disability as a political issue and disability as an academic pursuit may need to be made.

In further response to this debate, Paul Duckett (Duckett 1998) points out the fluid and malleable nature of identity. The fact that 'there are as many differences within the disabled population as there are similarities' (Duckett 1998: 626) is described to solidify Duckett's argument supporting the position of non-disabled people both within disability studies and the Disabled People's movement as a political organisation. Crucially, the heterogeneity of the identity of disabled people is central to Duckett's argument. Furthermore, If disabled people are a heterogeneous 'group' of people of whom many do not wish to identify as disabled (Duckett 1998; Shakespeare 2006; Watson 2002) then perhaps this calls into question the relevance of whether a researcher is disabled or not. If research is enacted according to a conceptual framework where we no longer rely on oppositional traits to define identity, then how important is researcher embodiment? Surely a discussion of researcher identity brings this notion to life and opens it up to in-depth exploration. Notwithstanding the embodiment of the researcher, in striving to enact 'emancipation' the production of restrictive guidelines has been said to restrict the opportunity for research to adapt and remain open to the possibilities which such research may enable (Mecieca 2011; Mecieca and Mecieca 2010).

If research is to be judged solely on its ability to enact emancipation, then a complex consideration of the 'restrictions' would be rendered unnecessary. One of these 'restrictions' may be a thorough investigation of the methodological complexities of research. Research that is enacted in strict accordance with Barnes' (2002, 2003) principles may therefore oversee the importance of the investigation of methodological complexities of research, such as researcher identity.

In opposition to this approach, recently there has been a significant shift in disability research. Such research seems to be emphasising the importance of critical and diverse thinking. It has been stated that contemporary disability research is unfolding in a way which will 'challenge not simply existing *doxa* about the nature of disability, but questions of embodiment, identity and agency as they affect all living beings'(emphasis in original) (Shildrick 2012: 30). As well as having important implications for the type of research that is produced, this theoretical turn may well have an important affect on *how* such research is conducted.

Society is ever-changing and in no small part due to members of disability activist groups and the proliferation of disability studies as an academic discipline, the situation and level of oppression that disabled people now face is very different to that which was faced some three decades ago. A large amount of time has elapsed since 'disabled politics' began to be taken seriously, the situation has changed greatly and the time for fresh ideas may have emerged.

Smith and Sparkes (2008) have noted that research carried out with disabled people is beginning to utilise the rich and diverse possibilities that exist when using participant narratives. Furthermore, many scholars also have noted that there has been a subtle shift in disability scholarship and there is huge capacity for a critical approach (Davis 2010; Goodley 2011; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010; Hughes 2009; Kumari Campbell 2009; Shakespeare 2010; Shildrick 2009, 2012).

Indeed, some years ago it was observed that there were signs of ‘stagnation in the promising field of disability studies’ (Shakespeare 2005: 146). I do believe that the time for disability scholars to experiment with the possibilities of a maturing approach has arrived. In order to avoid any further stagnation, providing a sound and detailed explanation for the way that research is conducted (including an investigation of researcher impact) could well be important. I now move on to a discussion of how I am reflecting on how I position myself within my doctoral research. Due to the time-dependent nature of reflexivity I am fairly early on in this process. Accordingly, I leave my thoughts open to the possibility of shifting with the passing of time.

My identity in my research: a two way street

Within this section I will detail some of the ways that I feel I have had an impact upon my research together with an account of how I feel the research has affected me. My doctoral research project began in October 2011. As I discussed earlier in the paper, my research seeks to study the lives of people who have sustained ABI, and in particular how their sense of identity is (re)constructed after their brain injury. As well as aiming to add to the body of literature concerning ‘disabled identity’, my research also seeks to learn from the experience of participants’ with regards to improving the efficacy of the neurological rehabilitation process. I am using a multiplicity of methods and approaches to achieve this including using the insights I have gained from two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of my six participants.

These insights will be complemented by an account detailing my own autobiographical experiences regarding my brain injury. In utilising an autobiographical approach, I am a participant as well as the researcher. In addition I have also been a volunteer within an organisation which seeks to provide long-term rehabilitation to those who have sustained ABI. Crucially, I have had similar experiences to my participants. I believe that I am in the process of rehabilitation. Being a person who has sustained an acquired brain injury has had important implications for the way that participants view me as a researcher. This may well have impacted on the data I have gathered.

The positive aspects of participants knowing that I have sustained a brain injury myself include issues related to empathy. Ellingson (1998) emphasises the connections that can be made with research participants when the researcher shares similar experiences. These connections were evident in much of the data in the interview stage of the research, where my participants used phrases such as “you know yourself”, “as you know” and so on. Investing time in forming relationships prior to the interviews may well have resulted in the participants trusting and respecting me more than they otherwise would have. It would seem sensible to suggest that this trust may lead to an increase in the richness and depth of the interview data (Hayman et al 2011; Heliker 2009).

However there are also negatives to being a brain injured researcher. I have sometimes felt that participants may not have regarded me as a professional researcher (especially in the early stages). Having said this, this may well be due to the fact that I tried to create equal and reciprocal relationships with participants, that were more akin to friendships rather than the power laden hierarchical relationships that participants may have been more familiar with. I created these reciprocal relationships largely due to my belief that identity is constructed of a plethora of divergent and fluid strands, meaning that the sharing of a single aspect of identity does not render any person the same. Similarly, this recognition also encompasses an acceptance that a person may

share (a) specific identity trait(s) with others, thus providing opportunity for experiences to be shared and social bonds to be formed.

Returning to the methods I used during the project, I conducted my research using a multiplicity of qualitative approaches. Although I would not strictly like to categorise my research method(s), I feel my approach resonates with the way (Goodley et al 2004) conceptualise ethnographic research. According to Goodley et al (2004) ethnographic research can be research:

‘... that aims to *look again at the cultures we may feel we already know so well*. In this sense, ethnography is about turning a critical eye onto practices, dynamics, policies and meaning making within familiar cultures. It means turning social contexts into research contexts: the latter is associated inevitably with the participant turned-researcher examining the social context anew through the perspective of a critical enquirer.’ (Goodley et al 2004: 57 emphasis in original).’

I am using the analytical technique of thematic analysis, which presents ‘an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data’ (Braun and Clarke 2006:77). This technique affords the recognition of commonalities across a number of different methods within a dataset. My research is conducted within a poststructuralist conceptual framework, which emphasises the way that a range of discourses of a diverse and varied nature help to construct the identity of a person who has sustained ABI. Although at first glance this constructionist approach may seem to be at odds with my epistemological position, which denotes that personal experience is of paramount importance, thematic analysis is said to be compatible in relation to different epistemological and ontological positions (Ibid.). Furthermore, following Braidotti (2011) we are encouraged to embrace the view which suggests that:

‘The body or the embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological’ (Braidotti 2011: 25).’

This assertion guides us to embrace the notion that embodiment (in my case the embodiment of the person who has sustained ABI) should be understood as a construction of a number of discursive factors. In other words, in the contemporary social world we should view the body as something which is forever being ‘(re) configured by multiple and competing discursive arrangements’ (Erevelles 2002: 28). Indeed, this fluid way of conceptualising the identity of people who have sustained ABI guides us to consider life as a process of *becoming* rather than *being* (what we are at a given time). The investigation of the future and what we are becoming is particularly important when considering the lives of people who have sustained ABI, as the extent to which their impairment(s) will affect their lives is largely unknown.

Moreover, if we view life as an incomplete and fluid entity, where we are constantly growing, this could have important implications for the way society considers any ‘category’ of people (such as those who have sustained ABI) who deviate from the dominant so-called ‘normal’ way of being in the world.

Due to its refusal to conform to the demands of normalcy, this view of life enables a greater acceptance of difference and diversity. With regard to my research, such a viewpoint could well be used to critique taken for granted assumptions in neurological rehabilitation (such as the conditions under which rehabilitation should occur), as it can offer the opportunity for those who have residual impairment(s), to escape wholesale judgements, which are based solely on a single aspect of their identity.

Elsewhere, within research that seeks to explore the lives of disabled people, it has been observed that the static labelling and fixing of the identity of disabled people is problematic (Goodley 2011; Goodley and Roets 2008; Roets and Goodley 2008) and identifying a person as dis-abled notwithstanding the circumstance, seems to devalue their existence. This is a particular problem when viewing people in terms of binary opposition; as care receivers as opposed to care givers. This notion is pertinent when exploring the lives of people who have sustained ABI, as in certain situations they require care.

However, in other situations or aspects of their lives they may not require such care. It is clear from this brief description of my research that being a person who has sustained ABI, has important implications for how I conduct this research. Being a person who has sustained ABI, I am able to recognise the benefits of using an approach which utilises the thoughts and opinions of those who have experienced such an event. Such an opinion has influenced my choice of methods to answer the research questions for my project. Notably, I feel that volunteering prior to conducting interviews played an important role in my research. It is commonly noted that two brain injuries are never the same and indeed the National Clinical Guidelines following Acquired Brain Injury state that ‘not all patients require formal rehabilitation following head injury’ (RCP and BSRM 2003: 25). Conversely, these guidelines also state that even concerning those who are said to have sustained mild brain injury, ‘proactive follow up and intervention demonstrably improves outcome’ (Ibid.). When considered together, these two potentially confusing statements capture the degree of variation that should be anticipated when studying brain injury. Therefore simply because I have sustained a similar injury to my participants, does not automatically mean that I can afford to assume any degree of familiarity with the lives of my fellow participants’. As well as offering crucial opportunities to become more familiar with the life-worlds of my participants, volunteering with my prospective participants also provided me with the chance to gain their trust and respect. I am sure that this has led to an increase in the richness of my interview data.

It has been stated that unethical practice is often entered into when dealing with people who have sustained ABI, because their humanity is not recognised (Collicutt Mcgrath 2007). I have endeavoured to engage with, and maintain that I am carrying out research with *human beings*, and have therefore tried to remain vigilant of that. Although I will be providing the analysed data to the participants, I maintain control over the final content of the report. It has been stated that research that is conducted according to feminist principles, should deem the sharing of findings with the research participants an essential part of the process (Francis 2003). However, this should not be viewed unproblematically as I still maintain control of the final content of the report and the opportunity for participants to modify any findings is not realised. I have consulted participants regarding this matter and without exception my participants reported that they trust me to accurately (re)present their experiences and they “probably wouldn't bother reading it anyway”. It was due to these discussions that I made the decision to retain control over the research findings.

Regarding my on-going involvement with the support group, one of the more complicated ways that I have been affected by the research, concerns the period at which I cease to be a volunteer in the organisation. Although it is arguable that remaining intimately connected to the research setting could benefit the completion of my project, I am reluctant to leave the organisation, as I have formed some solid friendships with participants. Therefore, as well as offering several benefits, in choosing to volunteer before and during data collection, my approach to the research has presented difficulties.

Although I accept that many other researchers are not able to achieve the same degree of integration with the research that I have, this account provides a glimpse into some of the advantages that are to be exploited when researchers consider their own identities in conjunction with those of their participants.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this paper, the detailing of researcher positioning as well as other methodological complexities in research is important in a number of ways. Firstly, the detailing of the epistemological position of the researcher adds an important degree of transparency to the research. Secondly, exposing some key aspects of the personal biography of the researcher can aid understanding and help to guide a reader through a project. This may well add a degree of empathy to a reading of a text as it may encourage the reader to see the report through the eyes of the researcher. Finally, detailing the way a researcher affects research and simultaneously is effected by research, adds a degree of analytical criticality, since an explanation is provided for the decisions that are made. This helps safeguard against any taken for granted assumptions that may impede the research process.

In considering this I have firstly set out some important aspects of my personal biography which provide a degree of contextuality to the assertions that follow. I have critically investigated the differences between the method and methodological complexities of research. Consideration of the identity of the researcher owes a great debt to the field of feminism and its discussion of reflexivity in particular. I then moved onto a consideration of the importance of researcher identity in disability research. Finally, I finished with a brief discussion of some of the ways that considering my identity in my own research has proved to be useful.

Further consideration of the identity of researchers' and how our presence both influences research, and is simultaneously influenced by research is a consideration that is clearly important if research is to be considered as thorough, ethical and ultimately useful in the ever-changing social world.

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Biography

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