Walking a Tightrope: Ethical Tensions and Power Struggles in an Autoethnography of Childhood Emotional Neglect

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Illustration1: The Tightrope Walker

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Introduction

In most quantitative research and much traditional qualitative research, the researcher-author is absent, invisible, assumed not to have any personal influence on the research. However, this is not the case for some qualitative research, especially those termed 'personal experience' methods. Autoethnography, combining elements of autobiography (me talking about my own story) and elements of ethnography (writing about a group of people), is one such method. In this kind of research, the researcher-author is self-consciously present, visible in both the research and the writing. I have therefore adopted a first person tone for this piece.

It is because I am consciously owning my presence in my research that I am concerned about issues of power in my research. In such personal experience research, critical examination of both the research process, through reflexivity, and of the person of the researcher, is recognised as an important aspect of methodological issues.[1] When working with participants, this includes consideration of the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. However, it goes beyond this into considerations about collaboration or the co-creation of research, the representation of participant 'voices' in the text and the way in which the research text itself is constructed.[2]

As I am writing about my own life, and the lives of others, there is a need to develop what John McLeod calls 'reflexive self-awareness of one's own position around class, race, gender and other sources of inequality.'[3] Indeed, if I am not doing this, I am almost certain to be operating with some level of unconscious bias influencing the way I conduct my research.

In this piece, I explore first my struggle to ensure that I work ethically with research participants who have identified themselves as disempowered in childhood, as we explore together their remembered experience of childhood emotional neglect. In the second part, I describe my struggle to find my place in a research world which is still heavily influenced by the positivist values of the natural sciences, using a personal experience method that is sometimes deemed not rigorous enough to be called science.[4] I have chosen to write mostly in the present tense, as I am still engaged in these ongoing struggles, and I want you, the reader, to feel that you are in these struggles alongside me.

Power and Research Participants

[1] Liz Rolls & Marilyn Relf, 'Bracketing interviews: Addressing methodological challenges in qualitative interviewing in bereavement and palliative care', in *Mortality* 11.3 (2006), 287.
[2] Ibid, 304.
[3] John McLeod, *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy, 2nd edition,* (London: Sage, 2011), 41.
[4] Susan Wall, 'Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography,' in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 7.1 (2008).

Autoethnography is associated with empowerment of the disempowered,[5] so it is of great importance that I strive to work ethically with participants. One aspect of this is gathering the data I need for my research without causing harm to participants. In exploring the experience of childhood emotional neglect, I am inevitably asking participants to recount painful details of their childhood. This is 'sensitive research;' [6] that is, research which risks causing harm to participants, in that they may become upset during and around the time of the interview. There is a further risk of harm through changes to their family relationships after the event. This is especially true because of the way in which I invite participants to recall distressing incidents[7] during unstructured interviews. I start the interview with a single, open question: "What was your experience of childhood emotional neglect, just your story, in your own words?" This enables me to elicit the aspects of the phenomenon that are of most importance to the participant; however, it may also leave the speaker vulnerable to going deeper into painful memories than they intended. This is quite unlike a semi-structured interview or a questionnaire survey, where I, as the researcher, may choose the specific topics that we talk about, and limit the answers.

One of the strategies I used to minimise the risk of harm was careful pre-interview preparation. As my participants are all university graduates, it might seem reasonable to assume that they would understand the participant information sheets and feel able to ask any questions arising from them. Even so, I anticipated that they might have questions or concerns that they found it hard to voice, so I arranged to speak either face-to-face or over the phone in the week before the interview. This pre-interview discussion provided some participants with the opportunity to express fears, for example, about 'the floodgates opening',[8] which I was then able to address in advance.

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[5] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social (*Oxford: Berg, 1997)
[6] Rolls & Relf, 'Bracketing Interviews', 286.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Participant 5, 'Alice,' in pre-interview conversation.

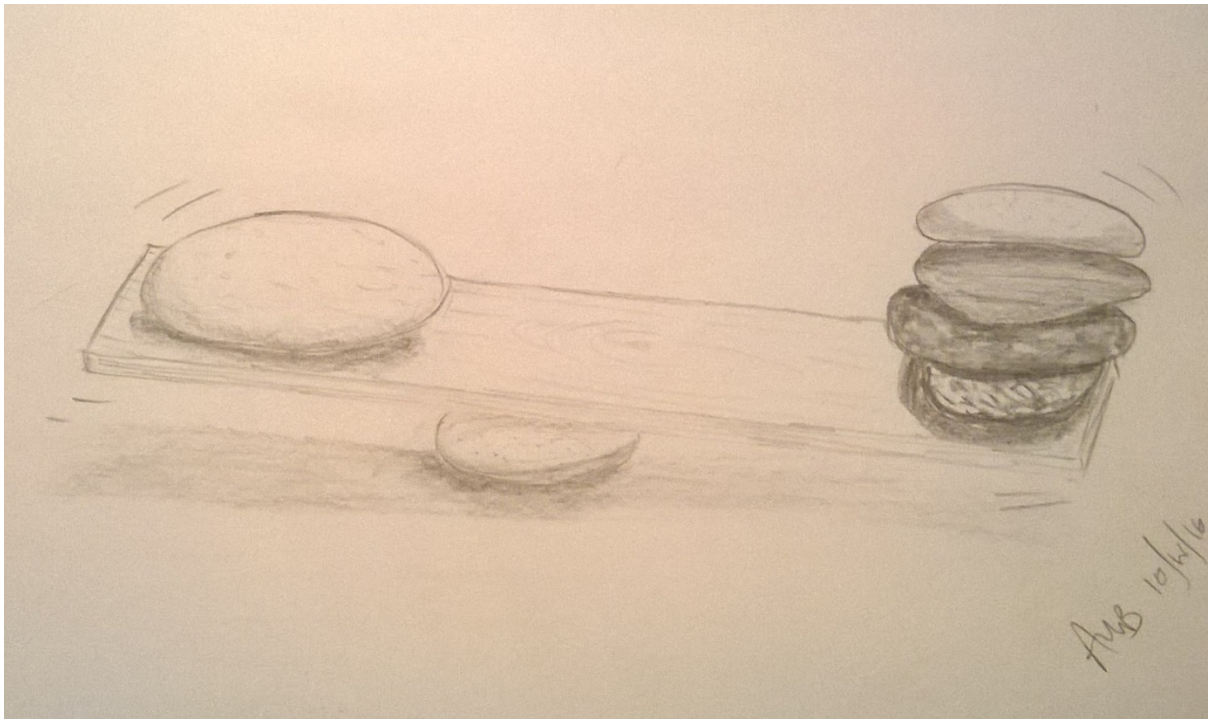

Illustration 2: The Power Imbalance

As well as developing 'non-oppressive relationships' with participants,[9] another aspect of reducing harm is striving to minimise the power imbalance during the research interview itself. As a person-centred counsellor, I aim to be consciously 'anti-expert' and 'anti-power,' and am familiar with working to create an environment as free from threat as possible.[10] Yet I cannot be sure that this is what I am achieving; evidence from counselling research suggests that therapists are not always perceived by clients as being quite so non-directive or empowering as therapists believe themselves to be.[11]

[9] McLeod, *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy* (2011), 41.
[10] Carl Rogers, *Client-centred therapy* (London: Constable, 1951).
[11] Mick Cooper, *Essential research findings in counselling and psychotherapy (*Chichester: Sage, 2008).

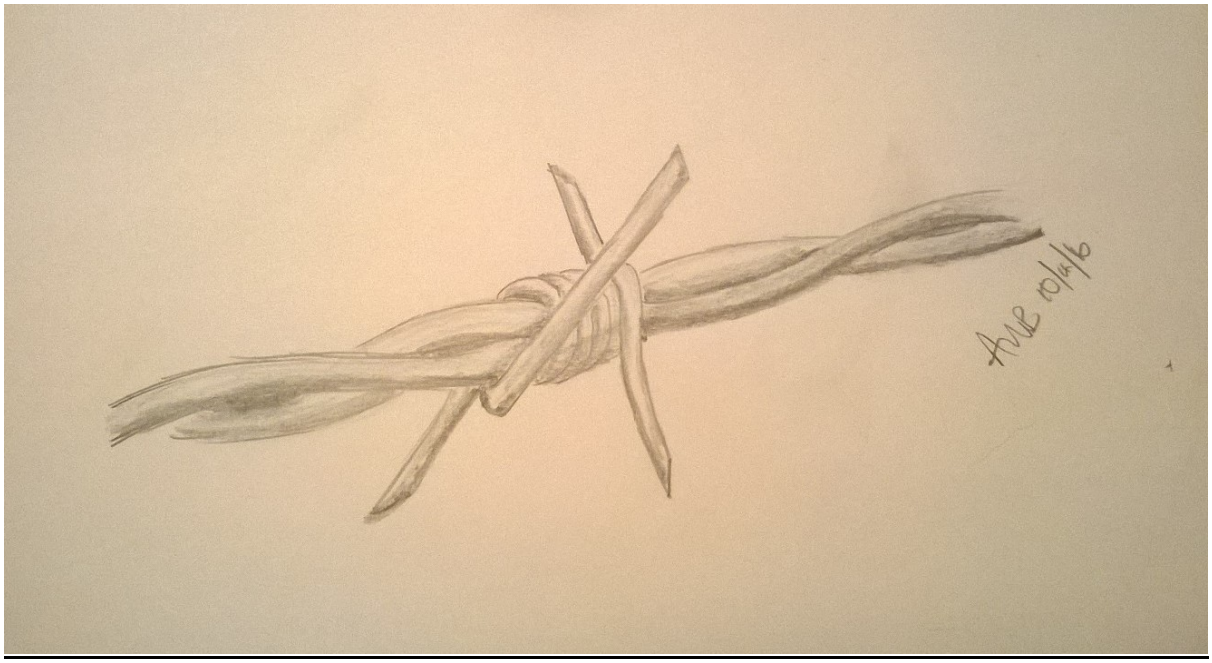

Illustration 3: Boundary Issues

Boundaries, both actual, like the barbed-wire fence, and metaphorical, are put in place to keep things in and to keep things out; they exist to keep us safe. A third, crucial element of reducing harm is therefore maintaining a secure boundary between the research interview and a counselling session, which the participant has not agreed to or prepared for. Allowing the interview to develop into a counselling session would be an abuse of power and could potentially cause harm. On two occasions when I became aware of this boundary issue arising, I managed it, not necessarily perfectly or elegantly, but effectively, by bringing it into awareness, and gently guiding the conversation back to the research:

> *RESEARCHER: Mmm, yeah…and I'm really aware just now of, of the – the sort of, the boundary issue that I knew could be a problem of – if this was a counselling session, maybe that's something we would explore together, and I'm really conscious that I'm listening to your story, not as a counsellor, but as a researcher,*
> HEATHER: Yeah,
> *RESEARCHER: Um, so I'm going to leave that for you to talk to a counsellor about on some other occasion,*
> HEATHER: Yeah,

RESEARCHER: But I'm really – I'm just really struck by what you've said there about that sort of self-doubt that keeps coming back to you…[12]

As well as reminding participants at the start that they can pause or stop the interview, at any point, and checking during the interview that they are happy to continue, I have tried to honour the concept of participant consent as an on-going process.[13] This has included inviting participants not only to check the transcript of their individual interviews for accuracy, but also offering an opportunity to edit the transcript. For example, one participant in particular expressed relief during the pre-interview conversation when I told her that she could review the transcript and let me know if there were parts of it she wanted me to remove, if she felt she had said too much. Whilst this carries a risk to the research, in that I might lose valuable data, it feels important to prioritise participant power, especially in view of the phenomenon that I am researching and the emancipatory and empowering aspirations of my chosen methodology.

Power and Research: The Broader Picture

In the second part of this piece, I turn to the wider issue of power and where it is held, and by whom, within academic structures and the wider research community.[14] Wall suggests that there is a need to 'deal explicitly with the validity, reliability, and legitimation of autoethnography within the dominant research culture'.[15] So one of the struggles I am engaged in is how to ensure that my voice is heard, without compromising the scientific rigour of the study.

Reading Heewon Chang's exhortation to move away from what she calls 'traditional academic writing' and to embrace the 'imaginative-creative writing style,'[16] I feel my heart sing. I am excited by the possibilities – this is what I want to do! Yet even as I aspire to creativity, I am aware of conventions around 'what "academic" writing should be: detached, objectified, "rational."'[17] Kim Etherington cites an e-mail

[12] 'Heather,' Individual interview, 01/12/14.
[13] John McLeod, *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy* (London: Sage, 2001).
[14] McLeod, *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy,* (2011).
[15] Susan Wall, 40.
[16] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 148.
[17] Pnina Motzafi-Haller, 'Writing Birthright: On native anthropologists and the politics of representation' in *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social,* ed. by D. E. Reed-Danahay (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 201.

from a colleague, who says of his heartfelt, personal writing: 'but it wasn't academically appropriate! so it went out.'[18] More recently, Jess Moriarty wrote, of her own PhD experience, that she found '…academic work had to be drained in order to be deemed worthy',[19] and that she was conscious of 'academic voices telling me to cancel this messiness and remain expert, objective'.[20] Pnina Motzafi-Haller's words, written nearly 20 years ago, match my thoughts today: 'Are such "critical academic voices" effectively silencing me? How can I break through such silencing power? What kind of "voice" *can* I claim?'[21]

Illustration 4: Edging Uncertainly

So this is the tightrope, along which I find myself edging with uncertainty. Thus I fear that when I submit my thesis, I may find that in satisfying what I perceive

[18] Kim Etherington, *Becoming a reflective researcher* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), 35.
[19] Jess Moriarty, 'Leaving the blood in: Experiences with an autoethnographic doctoral thesis' in *Contemporary British autoethnography*, ed. by N. P. Short, L. Turner & A. Grant (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), 63.
[20] Ibid, 68.
[21] Motzafi-Haller, 'Writing Birthright: On native anthropologists and the politics of representation', 198.

to be the requirements of an academic PhD, I may have conversely 'undermined the purposes of writing an autoethnography'.[22]

Concluding Thoughts

There are other questions that I could ask myself about ethical tensions and power struggles within my research, both at the macro and the micro level. However, I hope that I have given the reader at least a glimpse behind the screen of my research world. By looking in some depth at how I strive to work ethically with participants before, during and after the research interview, I hope I have conveyed some of the lived experience of this kind of qualitative research. In sharing the struggles I have experienced when attempting to balance competing demands of a personal experience, creative research method, I hope that I may also generate some conversations – or at least some reflections – on the power structures within the academic world.

[22] Wall, 'Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography', 44.

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