Keeping and Using Reflective Journals in the Qualitative Research Process

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Abstract

The problem of bias in qualitative research particularly is still debated in methodology texts and there is a lack of agreement on how much researcher influence is acceptable, whether or not it needs to be "controlled," and how it might be accounted for. Denzin (1994) refers to this as "the interpretive crisis" (p. 501). I chose to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research process through keeping reflective journals and using them in writing up the research. The aim of this paper is to show how reflective journals were used in engaging with the notion of creating transparency in the research process, and explore the impact of critical self-reflection on research design.

Keywords

Self-reflection, Qualitative Research, and Research Journals

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Acknowledgements

Keeping and Using Reflective Journals in the Qualitative Research Process

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The problem of bias in qualitative research particularly is still debated in methodology texts and there is a lack of agreement on how much researcher influence is acceptable, whether or not it needs to be "controlled," and how it might be accounted for. Denzin (1994) refers to this as "the interpretive crisis" (p. 501). I chose to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research process through keeping reflective journals and using them in writing up the research. The aim of this paper is to show how reflective journals were used in engaging with the notion of creating transparency in the research process, and explore the impact of critical self-reflection on research design. Key Words: Self-reflection, Qualitative Research, and Research Journals

Introduction

A reflexive approach to the research process is now widely accepted in much qualitative research. Researchers are urged to talk about themselves, "their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process" (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3). Reflective practice such as this aims to make visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes, a construction that "originates in the various choices and decisions researchers undertake during the process of researching" (Mruck & Breuer, p. 3). Increasingly qualitative research, particularly that which is situated within feminist, critical, and poststructuralist paradigms is,

> ...presented in ways that make it clear how the researcher's own experiences, values, and positions of privilege in various hierarchies have influenced their research interests, the way they choose to do their research, and the ways they choose to represent their research findings. (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 325)

Rather than attempting to control researcher values through method or by bracketing assumptions, the aim is to consciously acknowledge those values. Keeping self-reflective journals is a strategy that can facilitate reflexivity, whereby researchers use their journal to examine "personal assumptions and goals" and clarify "individual belief systems and subjectivities" (Ahern as cited in Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 2). Whilst keeping a reflective journal is a common practice in qualitative research, particularly reflexive research (Etherington, 2004), there is relatively little literature on the use of reflective journals in the research process, and limited guidance for novice researchers as

to the purposes of keeping a reflective journal from a methodological perspective and how to use their reflections as an integral part of the research process.

This aim of this paper is to *show* the reader how reflective journals were used in engaging with the notion of creating transparency in the research process, and how keeping a reflective journal can have concrete effects on the research design. The goal is to provide a research "trail" of gradually altering methodologies and reshaping analysis. My target audience is novice researchers, perhaps doctoral students, who have been advised to keep a research journal, but are not sure about the purpose of keeping such a journal or how they might use it in their research. The purpose is to share my experiences with, and uses of, reflective research journals so that novice researchers can more consciously engage in journaling and make it part of their research from the beginning, and also, to illustrate in a descriptive way how journals might be written and how they might be used.

The project in which I used reflective journals was a doctoral research study that explored how tertiary supervisors understand and practise assessment of the early childhood practicum. Participants were tertiary supervisors who supervised and assessed students enrolled in pre-service early childhood education courses offered by universities and/or institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia.

In addressing the aims of this paper I draw on examples from two different reflective journals. One was a reflective journal that I had kept four years prior to the beginning of my doctoral study, which I will refer to as my "pre-research" journal. The other was a research journal that I began keeping at the beginning of my doctoral study in which I documented the research processes and my practices as a researcher, and reflected critically on those processes and practices.

Before moving on to discuss and show how I used my reflective journals, I provide an overview of the personal context for the study: who I am (or was when I began the study), what drew me to the topic, and my personal investment in it. The paper then addresses the two major themes introduced in the abstract; engaging with the idea of transparency in the research process and the effect of critical self-reflection on the research design.

The Context of the Study from a Personal Perspective

As a practicum supervisor and coordinator in the Victorian TAFE sector in the 1990's, I experienced the introduction of competency-based assessment (CBA) for the practicum component in childcare courses offered through TAFE. This was used in conjunction with a triadic assessment process in which the field supervisor, the student and the institutional representative (tertiary supervisor) engaged in a three-way discussion of the student's progress and achievement, and deemed the student "competent" or "not competent." Initially, I welcomed this model of assessment because I believed it would be more consistent, objective, and easier for me as an assessor. However, as time went on, and I gained experience in using the method, I found myself questioning this approach to assessment. It was not the objective measure that I was led to believe it would be. There were still "grey areas," and I discovered that I still had to use my own professional judgement to make decisions in novel situations for which there were no clear guidelines or rules. I wrote about my experiences in a reflective journal that I was

keeping for a course of study, which related to supervision skills for educators. As a result of this study, particularly keeping and then analysing the reflective journal, I found myself wanting to find out more about practicum assessment and the tertiary supervisor's role in that process. When I went I enrolled in a Masters degree by research (which I later converted to a PhD), tertiary supervisors' perceptions of the early childhood practicum assessment process became the topic of my research.

In the beginning, I wanted to know the "best" way to assess the practicum, and I wanted to critique CBA. However, access to poststructuralist perspectives early in the study led me to rethink the possibilities and potential of the study. I became more interested in how my participants had come to think about or understand practicum assessment in the way that they did, and how they had come to practise practicum assessment in the ways that they described. I wanted to know how the current process of assessment of the early childhood practicum (competency-based and triadic) had come to be seen as right, appropriate, and desirable. Thus, I situated the study within a poststructuralist paradigm and used a theoretical conceptual framework that drew on poststructuralist constructs to guide the analysis of the data.

Engaging with the Idea of Transparency in the Research Process

What is important in poststructuralist research are "the assumptions made about the nature of, and relations between, subjects, the texts they produce and the conceptual tools and strategies that are used to analyze them" (Davies & Gannon, 2003, p. 7). The researcher cannot claim that what is described is true or valid because particular strategies have been put in place through method. Instead, the aim is to make the process of data analysis as visible and transparent *as possible* (MacNaughton, 2001). Creating transparency in the research process was thus an important consideration, one that I engaged with by drawing on my reflective journals at key points in writing my thesis. My aim was to make my decisions, and the thinking, values, and experiences behind those decisions visible, to both myself and to the reader. Having said this, I acknowledge the tensions inherent in situating research within a poststructuralist paradigm on the one hand, and claiming to create transparency through knowing and exposing the self through reflective journal writing on the other. What I did was to engage with the idea and enact practices that might make some degree of transparency possible.

My research project was primarily interview-based and therefore I was the main "instrument" of data collection. Much of my reading about the role of the researcher was thus in relation to the role of the researcher as interviewer. I started out reading traditional qualitative methodology texts that presented the research process as linear and unproblematic, as long as the researcher followed the rules and paid attention to reliability, validity, and objectivity (Glensne & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 1990). In relation to interviewing, this requires the interviewer to be non-reactive in order to increase the reliability of the interviewee's responses, that is, that the same answers would be given if the questions were asked at another time, in another place, even by another interviewer (Glensne & Peshkin, 1992). Given my personal and professional investment in the project I felt uneasy with this approach and wrote about it in my research journal.

The Interpretive Crisis

I am a tertiary supervisor researching other tertiary supervisors. I am a woman, and so far all my participants are women. I am not a neutral participant in the research project from the outset. I have issues, concerns and opinions about assessment of the early childhood practicum. I have desires for the project and what it will achieve or discover that are bound up with my views on assessment of the practicum and what it should be or achieve, what is desirable and undesirable. I am not an objective data-gathering tool! If I were to take the view of the traditional methodology texts on interviewing, in the light of the above points, I should be particularly concerned about my role in the research process as the main instrument of data collection. (Research journal, 10/4/00)

My concerns relate to what Denzin (1994, p. 501) refers to as "the interpretive crisis" in qualitative research. The debate about the problem of bias in qualitative research remains unresolved. There is a lack of agreement on the amount and type of researcher influence that is acceptable, and whether and how it needs to be "controlled" and accounted for. In interview-based qualitative research this is a particularly pertinent issue, and again, there are a variety of different views on how interviews should be conducted and the role of the researcher as interviewer. Scheurich (1997) proposes that research interviewing can be reconceptualised in keeping with a postmodern approach by making the "baggage" we bring to the research visible.

I took up Scheurich's proposition (1997) and drew on my reflective journals as a way of making my history, values, and assumptions open to scrutiny, not as an attempt to control bias, but to make it visible to the reader. For example, in the introductory chapter of my thesis I used excerpts from my pre-research journal to make it clear what my experiences, values, and assumptions were prior to beginning the research.

The Researcher's "Baggage"

The problem is the grey areas in deciding a student's readiness to go out and work in the industry. Is the main thing the ability to write good goals for children and have the theory work completed and of a pass standard? Is it to be able to communicate with others, to show genuine warmth and interest in children? And how do you assess those things? My idea of warmth and care may be different from another person ... We have clear competencies and performance criteria set for practicum, but there are still grey areas, and many of the performance criteria are subjective and open to interpretation. If students have practical examples to offer, of their achievement of the criteria, and the staff member says they haven't seen this, who do you believe, particularly if you have observed this occurring when you visit. It's the problem of differing ideas about quality and good practice. It is also the dilemma of judging and assessing things that are not clear cut and easily observable (like putting a tyre back on a car). I am struggling here with the conflicts in my role as assessor, supporter,

communicator, listener, for both the student and the service. I can't be seen to negate the centre's contribution and opinion, but I want to be fair to the student ... I think I am too soft and I worry about being fair all round. (Pre-research reflective journal, 1996, p. 14)

In the methodology chapter of my thesis I referred back to this excerpt and acknowledged that these experiences, feelings, and opinions had influenced the choice of topic and continued to influence what I focused on in selecting the data for analysis and the interpretation of that data.

The Effect of Critical Self-Reflection on the Research Design

One of the concrete effects of keeping and using a critically reflective research journal, in which I wrote about my emerging understanding of research methodologies and reflected on different views about gathering (or generating) data, was that changes were made to the research design. In some instances critical self-reflection prompted me to change my approach during the research process, to use methods that I had not initially planned to use, and to discard pre-planned ways of going about the research that I had included in my research proposal. In what follows, I provide examples of the critical reflection that led to changes being made, specifically changes to the research design in order to achieve a degree of reciprocity and changes to the approach to interviewing.

For example, when I revisited my research proposal in preparation for writing a first draft of my methodology chapter, I reflected on what I had written in the light of further reading about methodology and research paradigms, and questioned the approach I had planned. An excerpt of my reflections about my draft methodology read as follows.

Rethinking Validity in Light of Epistemological Perspectives

I am stuck when it comes to writing about trustworthiness and how this will be considered and proven. In my proposal I stated that the study would utilise multiple methods of data collection and generation... [because] different data sources can be used to cross-check and validate findings (Patton, 1990). However, since then I have done more reading about qualitative research and discovered competing views on validity (trustworthiness) in qualitative research. My reading indicates that there are some problems with the idea of trustworthiness and the usefulness of triangulation. I am aware of this in relation to what I initially thought I would do and wonder whether my original idea about validity is still appropriate given that I have been considering interpretivist-constructivist or poststructuralist frameworks for the study? (Research journal, 17/2/00)

It became my practice to integrate theoretical material from my reading and to use my research journal as a place for "writing as a *method of inquiry*" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). It was through written reflections in my journal that I clarified my research aims and approach where I asked, explored, and answered ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions about what I could know, my relationship to what could be

known, and how I might come to know it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I wrote in order to learn and to understand issues around methodology so that I could settle on a way of conducting my research and justify my decisions. I began to see the relevance and suitability of this reflective writing process for the way I was conceptualising my study and enacting my research as an individual with particular personal experiences, desires, and ways of looking at the world.

Reflective journal writing enabled me to articulate my ideas about conceptual frameworks for analysis of the data and led me eventually to reject an interpretivist-constructivist framework.

Considering Conceptual Frameworks for Analysis: Poststructuralist Possibilities

I have been thinking how the tertiary supervisors' gender and class may influence their preferred assessment method. Stonehouse (1994) talks about the "culture of niceness" that operates in the early childhood field (would this be a part of the "discourse of early childhood"?) and this may impact on tertiary supervisors' preferred method- how they feel about assessment methods (does this imply any conceptual framework?). If this idea of niceness- the nature of the women who are early childhood professionals- was used as ONE guide for analysis, would my conceptual framework be feminist, critical? Perhaps power also influences how they feel, their opinions, their preferences? This points to a poststructuralist framework. I could look at what assessment means to tertiary supervisor and their preferred method from a poststructuralist perspective- identify what discourses are available to the tertiary supervisors and how their positioning within these discourses influences how they see assessment and how they see themselves as assessors. (Research journal, 20/3/00)

Keeping a reflective journal helped me to identify the theoretical lens most appropriate for my research and also to work through the implications of the chosen framework. I used my research journal in a critically reflective way to consider who would benefit from the approach I took to my research.

Considering the Possible Effects of Taking up a Poststructuralist Perspective

What makes me feel uncomfortable about this focus [post structuralism] is that I thought I'd be doing something "practical" that tertiary supervisors would see as useful to them and that would provide some answers to the problems of assessment methods. I think that is what some of the TAFE tertiary supervisors think- that my research will help them understand methods, choose the best method, make changes and improvements. If I take a feminist postmodern approach or a critical theory approach will this be an outcome? Will my research be useful? And who is to judge the usefulness of it? I guess I believe that it should do something for those who are involved, as well as for the profession in general. (Research journal, 4/6/00)

Reflections that led to incorporating strategies, to achieve reciprocity in the research feminist qualitative researchers in particular, aim for reciprocity in and through the methods they use. This involves the careful use of self-disclosure in interviews and an active, subjective role for the researcher as interviewer. It can also involve asking the participants to look at and comment on the researcher's analysis of the data that they have played a part in generating. In this way, the researcher gives something back to the participants. Lather (1991) argues that it is a way of empowering the researched. Sensitised by my reading of the feminist research literature, and critical reflection on my research design in the light of this literature, I was concerned that my interpretations of participants' interview data might portray them in a negative light. Concerns about how they would perceive my interpretations were recorded in my research journal.

> When I think about some of the poststructuralist discourse analysis studies I have read, I am concerned that the tertiary supervisors will think this takes their words and does something to them that they don't recognise. This type of analysis of interviews does represent an imposition of the researcher's interpretation of the text using a poststructuralist framework. Will the research participants appreciate me stating that such and such a line of text could be interpreted as the tertiary supervisor being positioned or positioning herself as powerful or powerless? (Research journal, 3/7/00)

These concerns led to a change in the research design and the instigation of a method I had not planned to use at the outset. I sent the participants copies of what I was writing, including an explanation of the poststructuralist concepts I was using for analysis, and asked for their comments. Those who had access to email engaged in email conversations with me, often inserting their comments directly into the work. Others faxed or posted responses. Over a period of two years and four months (March 2000 to July 2002), seven participants made comments on early writing on at least one occasion, and two had comprehensive and ongoing involvement. They used this as an opportunity to clarify what they had meant in their interview responses and to comment on the approach to analysis and how the data had been interpreted.

Through this ongoing written communication, I aimed to make the process of analysis and the selection of data for analysis open for reconstruction by the participants. These strategies also enabled a degree of reciprocity (Lather, 1991) to be achieved. This was not something that I had considered at the beginning of the study, but it became an issue for me as the research progressed, one that I was made very aware of as a result of keeping a reflective research journal.

There were unforeseen outcomes of this change to the research design and the employment of email conversations that suggested that sharing interpretations with participants could also raise consciousness and lead to change. For example, one of the participants told me in an email that as a result of reading what I had sent her she had found herself speaking out more and not silencing views as she had done in the past. Patti Lather (1991) refers to this as "praxis". She proposes that "we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations" (p. 57).

Whilst the study was not conceived in emancipatory terms, engaging in written critical self-reflection had made me aware that I did want to do something practical which

the participants would see as useful to them, and which would provide some answers to the problems of practicum assessment. I also sensed that the participants thought this research would help them understand practicum assessment, choose the best method to assess, and make changes and improvements; a sense that I had recorded in my journal (see research journal entry 4/6/00 above). At the same time, I was fully conscious of what had led me to the research and the subjective position in which this placed me, as a reflection recorded in my research journal illustrates.

> I was fired up to do this topic because I disliked the competency-based and industry-driven approach of TAFE assessment of the practicum. I wanted to prove that CBA was not a suitable or acceptable way in which to assess the early childhood practicum. I wanted to reveal the issues. That was, and to some extent still is, my agenda, my bias. I imagined that I might get support for this from those who used the methods- agreement with me! Obviously this might not happen- they might love this method. (Research journal, 3/7/00)

Critical self-reflection is a way of considering the ethics of the power-knowledge relationship with participants. Recording my reflections throughout the study allowed me to do this. In addition, and as I have already pointed out, I drew on this critical self-reflection and included the above examples in my methodology chapter in order to demonstrate my investment in the research and my "baggage" as researcher.

The Role of Critical Self-Reflection in the Approach Taken to Interviewing

It was my discomfort with the modernist approach to the researcher's role in the interview process and my critical reflection on this issue (see journal entry 10/4/00 above) that prompted me to read more widely about the role of the researcher in qualitative, interview-based research. Initially I was worried about how much interaction the interviewer should have in the interview, "how much of your non research self can be present without contaminating or distorting the interview" (Glensne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 83). This was evident in the reflections recorded in my research journal after I had conducted focus group interview 1.

> I felt strange acting in the role of interviewer ... Because of my relationship with three of the participants [who I had worked closely with as a TAFE employee], I knew that they knew my perspective on assessment to some degree. I didn't put this out in the open, and wonder if I should have? I felt as though it was a bit fake and not like the equal conversation that it could be if we just sat around and discussed assessment issues and if I felt free to say more. I stuck to the guidelines according to Hurworth, in general. I did probe, and I did give some personal examples and opinions. I did restate and clarify, which, at the time I worried about (was I "contaminating" the data?). At one point, I played the devil's advocate. I recall saying, "Who's to say the National Competency Standards' judgements are right?" as a follow-up to K's

comment about "Who's to say that your [the tertiary supervisor's] judgements are right?" I wondered at the time whether this was okay in a focus group interview ... The dual role of interviewer and ex-colleague/friend was difficult. Also, having my own opinion and experiences and wanting to join in the discussion was an issue, however I did resist this. (Research journal, 29/3/00)

The degree of "closeness" to participants (Reinharz, 1992) and my contradictory understandings of the research interview process impacted on my capacity to engage in the interview process confidently. The effect of the researcher's "baggage" was made abundantly clear through the process of reflection. As Scheurich (1997) argues,

Interview interaction is fundamentally indeterminate- the complex play of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, fears, power, desires, and needs on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee cannot be captured and categorized. In an interview there is no stable "reality" or "meaning" that can be represented. (p. 73)

The play of thoughts, feelings, fears, desires, and needs, on my part, was very evident in my reflection. The interviewer's thoughts, feelings, fears, and desires impact on the interview, but they are not visible in the data or the transcriptions. The process of reflection helps to bring the unconscious into consciousness and thus open for inspection. I used the above journal entry when writing up the final version of my methodology chapter, precisely for this purpose; to make my thoughts, feelings, fears, and desires open for the reader's inspection. This relates back to the consideration of creating transparency in the research process as discussed earlier in the paper.

Exploratory and reflective journal writing allowed me to map my growing and changing understanding of my role as researcher, interviewer, and interpreter of the data generated via interviews, and to record decisions made and theoretical justification for the decisions. Influenced by feminist approaches (Lather, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992) to the actual interview process I changed my approach to interviewing. I conducted the individual interviews well after the focus group interviews and in these interviews I aimed for a non-hierarchical relationship, which was achieved by maintaining a certain degree of personal presence in the interviews. This approach involved revealing personal opinions and experiences, if and when it seemed appropriate, responding to questions from participants, and provoking responses with the aim of offering participants "pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 125). I played an active role in the interviews and saw this as appropriate, given my knowledge of practicum assessment approaches and experience in implementing these.

Conclusion

Keeping and using reflective journals enabled me to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation process. Methodologically, this is an

accepted practice from constructivist, feminist, interpretivist, and poststructuralist perspectives (see for example, Denzin, 1994; Lather, 1991; MacNaughton, 2001). However, the effect of keeping and using reflective journals went beyond achieving methodological rigor and paradigmatic consistency. Critical self-reflection had an effect on the research process; changes were made to the research design, methods used, and approaches taken. Boden, Kenway, and Epstein (2005) point out that inexperienced researchers are often not made aware of the "muddle, confusion, mistakes, obstacles, and errors" (p. 70) that make up the research process and that this is exacerbated when the results of research projects are presented as "a seamless, neat and linear process" (p. 70). Keeping and using reflective research journals can make the messiness of the research process visible to the researcher who can then make it visible for those who read the research and thus avoid producing, reproducing, and circulating the discourse of research as a neat and linear process.

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