**TITLE: Beyond listening – the value of co-research in the co-construction of narratives**

**Abstract**

In this article we discuss how co-research - two researchers working together at each stage of the research process - can be used to analyse narratives created from qualitative interviews [drawing on Brown and Gilligan’s Listening Guide]. We argue that co-research affords a richness and depth of analysis and propagates multiple, layered interpretations through a process of co-reflection. To illustrate our approach we present an analysis of two case studies from the ‘From Adversity to University’ project, a longitudinal qualitative study evaluating the effectiveness of a bridging module as a way into higher education for students who have been affected by homelessness in England. We co-reflect on how our participants, our relationship with our participants, and our relationship with each other as researchers has changed over time. We conclude that a co-researcher approach to analysing narratives is textually and emotionally enriching as the co-constructed multiple interpretations transform not just the analysis of the text but also the relationship between researchers and their participants in new and unexpected ways.

**Introduction**

In this article we discuss how co-research - two researchers working together at every stage of the research process - can be used to analyse narratives produced from qualitative interviews [drawing on Brown and Gilligan’s (1991) Listening Guide]. We argue that taking a co-researcher approach throughout the collection and analysis of narratives affords a richness of interpretation and new and multiple understandings of the text. To illustrate our approach we present two case studies, Linda and Sam, from the ‘From Adversity to University’ project, a longitudinal qualitative study, and our analysis of their I-poems from interviews recorded a year apart. Following the analysis we co-reflect on how our participants, our relationship with Linda and Sam and our relationship with each other as researchers has changed over time. Edwards and Weller (2012: 203) state that:

the construction of varying ontologies of self in relation to other through different processes of data analysis are complementary rather than exclusive.

With this is mind, we are not presenting our approach as being ‘better’ than others but as a complimentary approach that might be used and adapted.

*The Listening Guide*

The Listening Guide [or Voice-Centred Relational Method as it is sometimes known] is a qualitative interpretative feminist methodology and method developed by Brown and Gilligan (1991). In a departure from more traditional qualitative methods, which are data led and reduce complex narratives to predetermined categories, the Listening Guide is a ‘relational method’ giving attention ‘to the particular voice of the person speaking’ (Brown and Gilligan, 1991:55). The focus on the relational provides ‘spaces to hear those who may have previously been silenced’ (Woodcock, 2016:2). The Listening Guide specifies multiple ‘listenings’ which are designed ‘to take in a person’s story and to hear its complex orchestration, its psychological and political structure’ (Brown and Gilligan, 1991:45). The first listening attends to the ‘plot’ [or ‘survey[ing] the terrain’] with a focus on who is there; who is not there; what stories are told, gaps and contradictions; and what is the researchers’ response to the person and what is said (Gilligan and Eddy, 2017: 78). The second listening attends to the ‘I’ (the first-person voice of the speaker) and the creation of an I-poem. The I-poem is composed by extracting each phrase which begins with ‘I’ and the associated verb and accompanying text [if this is considered to be important] and listing them in chronological order on separate lines (Gilligan, 2003; Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan and Eddy, 2017). In this phase the researcher engages with the speaker and responds emotionally to the narrator’s thoughts and feelings (Brown and Gilligan, 1991: 47). This part of the process is designed to ‘create a space between the interviewee’s own self-perception and the analyst’s perception of them’, thus providing an opportunity for the narrator to speak before the research produces their analysis (Edwards and Weller, 2012: 206). The strength of the I-poem is that is creates a space for the listener to ‘imagine [themselves] within the experience’ (Koelsch, 2015:96). The final listening, ‘listening for contrapuntal voices’ involves listening to how the different voices interplay with each other – including harmonies, tensions and what is said and what is silenced (Gilligan, 2015: 72). Important in this phase is paying attention to how the voices might speak to the research question.

Our participants had all been affected by homelessness and their life stories were complex, therefore we wanted to employ an approach that was both respectful and also enabled us to really listen to their voices. The listening guide shares commonalities with other qualitative methods, however, as Gilligan and Eddy (2017:72) points out it ‘goes beyond them’ by giving attention to the first person voice and listening for how voices interact with each other and the researcher’s question. More importantly it acknowledges the ethics of research and the challenges for researchers in interpreting another’s narrative and providing a safe space for stories to be told (Woodcock, 2016). The approach enables the researchers to ‘stand alongside’ rather than ‘gaze upon’ the subject – thereby actively acknowledging both the participant and researcher in the co-production of the narrative (Edwards and Weller, 2012). It is particularly appropriate for subject matter which is sensitive and where the voices of the participants have historically been silenced and/or conflicted (Koelsch, 2015; Woodcock, 2016). The approach is also appropriate for longitudinal qualitative studies [see Brown and Gilligan, 1991; Edwards and Weller, 2012). It was for these reasons we were drawn to this approach as an appropriate method and methodology for our research as a way of exploring the lived precarity experienced by the interviewees.

*Dialogism*

The Listening Guide falls within the type of narrative analysis Riessman (2008:105) refers to as dialogic/performance – that which ‘interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative’ focusing on ‘who’ is being addressed, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘for what purpose’. Brown and Gilligan (1991:46) draw on Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of dialogism acknowledging that narrative is the co-production of meaning-making which occurs between the teller and listener. Volsoninov (1986:103) aptly describes this process as ‘an electric spark that occurs when two different terminals are hooked together’. Dialogism not only includes the space between teller and listener but also between ‘speaker and setting, text and reader, and history and culture’ with the researcher an active participant within the process (Riessman, 2008:105). Narratives are therefore performed for others with both the listener and storyteller involved as active participants. Central to this approach is Bakhtin’s (1981:60) notion of heteroglossia, the ‘multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch’. Heteroglossia recognises that language is ‘multivoiced’ reflecting the ‘multiplicity of meanings of individual words of phrases and […] different ways of speaking’.   Thus narrative is dynamic with each encounter during the analytical process affording new and multiple understandings (Cohen, 2009:336).

Dialogic/performance analysis is an appropriate approach for exploring the performance and construction of identities (Riessman, 2008). Within this approach identity is conceptualised as ‘plurivocal’ [or multiple] – ‘dynamically constituted in relationships and performed with/for audiences’ (Riessman, 2008:137). I-positions reveal how individuals’ voices may or may not conflict or how one voice or collective voices may dominate. Hermans (2001:248) conceptualises the ‘dialogical ‘self’ as a ‘dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions’ moving between different spatial positions in time and situation.  The ‘I’ is able ‘imaginatively’ to give each position a voice, establishing dialogical relations between positions. In other words, the self is ‘multi-voiced’ and the ‘person can act as if he or she *were* the other and other *were* him-or herself’ creating alternative perspectives on the world and self (Hermans, 2001:250).   The voice of the researcher is also part of the narrative and becomes an active part of the analysis – contributing to the plurivocal text. If narrative is a co-construction of the teller and the listener, then it follows that the interpretative approach must apply equally to both the researched and the researcher. Therefore the relationship between the researcher and researched is of significance and central to the analytical process.

**A co-researcher approach.**

The listening guide provides a framework for analysis rather than a series of rigid steps to be followed (Gilligan et al., 2006). Many researchers have adapted the Listening Guide to suit the specific purposes of their research – however, the multiple listenings and creation of I-poems are considered essential (Davis, 2015; Koelsch, 2015; Woodcock, 2016). Building on Brown and Gilligan’s (1991) Listening Guide we have combined it with a co-researcher approach. This involved us working together at every stage of the research process thus affording opportunities to co-reflect on the co-construction of self-other relations within the research. We chose a co-researcher approach to further strengthen and enrich our understanding of our participants voices through the co-production of meanings and our emotional responses (Ellis and Berger, 2003). Employing two researchers enabled us to be open to different interpretations and multiple meanings recognising there is no single or ‘correct’ interpretation (Bakhtin, 1981; Koelsch, 2015). Taking a reflexive stance allowed us to attend to how we are socially located and reflect together [and challenge each other] on how we ‘see’ and ‘hear’ our participants (Doucet, 1998:54). Therefore our analysis provided us with opportunities to be reflexive and 'self-consciously to ask questions, give account, wonder, push and prod’ (Nutbrown, 2012:243).

The interviews were carried out jointly, with A2 taking the lead as she was more familiar to the participants and A1 prompting with further questions. Each interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed. In the first listening we listened together to the recording of the interview noting down any key phrases or words which ‘struck’ us as significant, at the same time considering any incoherencies or inconsistencies in the narrative. This free association approach enabled us to be open to different interpretations employing Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of multiple meanings. We discussed the things which were significant to us including our positioning towards our participants and how we felt at the time of the interview.

The second listening focused on the I-poem [constructed from each I-phrase from the interview]. I-poems vary in terms of the length of phrases which are extracted from the narrative, for example, in Gilligan’s (2003) I-poem about Eileen only the associated verb is included. In other works longer phrases are used which may include the object or an extended phrase. For example, Edwards and Weller (2012:211) in their exploration of a young person’s sense of self over time uses phrases of up to 17 words [see Brown and Gilligan (2003), Zambo and Zambo (2013) and Gilligan and Eddy (2017) for further examples]. However, what is constant in the creation of an I-poem and essential in tracking how a narrator speaks of themselves is the extraction of all phrases beginning with ‘I’ – although arguably this could also include ‘me’ and the use of the third person for example ‘they’ (Edwards and Weller, 2012; Davis, 2015). In the construction of Linda and Sam’s I-poems we sometimes used short phrases [the I and the associated verb] and at other times a longer phrase was used. Initially the I and associated verb was important for tracking over time how our participants had changed in the way they spoke about themselves [see the analysis of Sam], however, the inclusion of longer phrases was useful when comparing narrative threads between the two I-poems [for example, Linda’s experiences of bullying]. We shared out the task of constructing the I-poems [with A2 constructing Sam’s I-poem and A1 constructing Linda’s I-poem]. We took it in turns to read our I-poems out loud to each other and focused our discussions on the use of tense, different voices and the emotion of our both participants and our emotional response to this. There were times when our interpretations differed which added a further level of co-construction as we listened and responded to each other’s comments. The reading of the I-poem took on a particular significance in terms of eliciting our own emotional response, which was often different to that experienced during the interview and the first listening. Overall the process enabled us to become ‘more emphatic and responsive listener[s]’ (Woodcock, 2016: 5).

In the final listening we co-reflected on the context of the I-poem - including our relationship with our participants and with each other. The use of reflexivity enabled us to deepen our understanding of how the narratives were co-constructed as well as giving attention to the implications of our research (Woodcock, 2016). Consideration was also given to the local context (where the interview[s] took place); and how we felt during and after the interview. At all stages of the process we made digital recordings of our discussions which were later transcribed and used in the analysis and write up of the research.

In the next section we present our analysis of Linda and Sam’s I-poems, who are part of the ‘From Adversity to University project’. The project is in its second year and to date 10 participants have taken part. All identify as White British and range between the ages of 32 to 55. All have experienced homelessness and the majority are recovering from alcohol and/or drug addiction. Linda and Sam had both completed the bridging module and had continued on to study undergraduate degrees at university. We interviewed them individually at the end of the bridging module and then again at the end of their first year as undergraduates. We asked a small number of open-ended interview questions which related to their experiences. In the second interview we reminded Linda and Sam about some of things they had discussed in their first interview, giving them the opportunity to reflect on changes which had occurred over time. In the next phase of the research we intend to share their I-poems with them so that together we can co-construct and co-produce the analysis. The I-poems were created from their individual interviews which were recorded a year apart – referred to as [1] and [2]. The analysis focuses on how their sense of self has changed over this period. The analyses are followed by our co-reflection on the context of the interview including our relationship with each other as researchers; and our relationship with the topic of homelessness.

**Analysis of Linda’s I-poems**

Linda is a student in Fine Art. She was home educated from the age of 12 and after returning to college at the age of 15 was ‘kicked out’ for ‘bad behaviour’. She has been homeless several times during her life, the first time when she was 16. The following analysis presents a comparison of Linda’s two I-poems. The first I-poem is composed from our initial interview with Linda after she had completed the bridging module. The second I-poem is created from our interview at the end of the first year of her degree which also coincided with the first lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

One of the things which struck us immediately is the continuity between Linda’s two I-poems. In both Linda states she is the ‘happiest’ she has ever been, ‘I’m more than happy’ [1]  and ‘I’m definitely the happiest I’ve ever been’ [2].  There is also a strong sense of looking forward ‘I’m looking forward to challenges’ [1] and ‘I’m looking forward.. I am looking forward to the next two years [2].  These positive emotions and intentions are juxtaposed with words such as ‘struggle’, ‘difficult’ and ‘hard’ in both I-poems highlighting the tensions for Linda. To illustrate the continuity and change that Linda experiences in terms of her identity we have focused on her voices in relation to her transition to university and her concerns about starting her degree.

*Conforming*

In Linda’s I-poems we identified two different voices in relation to conforming to the expectations of others – one which was resistant and a new emerging voice which is open to trying new things. In her first interview Linda talks about how she was home-schooled and had few expectations or boundaries at home. The voice in her first I-poem highlights how she finds following rules difficult and expects this to be an issue when she starts her degree. Her use of tenses - past, present and future - suggest the continuity of this tension over time.

I really struggle with rules.

I did struggle

I had to remember,

I find it hard getting my head round sets of rules

I think

I will find that difficult [1]

The struggle with conforming is also a dominant narrative thread in her second interview where she discusses how she felt when she started her degree course:

When I started it felt like a bit kind of how I imagine a first day of school would be

I had a few issues with feeling like “Do I really want to conform?”

I’m moving from one kind of institution into another institution

I haven’t got a good track record with this kind of environment

I did pick the right course

I’m pretty sure the tutors think I’m barking mad

I do challenge the lecturers

I’m not going to just conform and fit into their boxes [2]

Her voices in the above extract echo her past experiences of home schooling and her struggles with formal education. The question she poses to herself ‘Do I really want to conform?’ highlights the tensions for Linda as she looks forward to starting her degree. She explores this further in relation to one of her university assignments:

I said “I’m not doing that”

I’m artist..

I didn’t want to do that basically

I had to just kind of walk away ..

I did explore it an awful lot

Everything I did I was told it was wrong

I was wasting my time

I didn’t like…

I did..

I argued it ..

I argued my point right to the end

The tension in the above extract is reflected in Linda’s different voices – the voice who does not want to conform ‘I’m not doing that’ and a new emerging voice which is prepared to make some concessions ‘I did explore it an awful lot’. In her interview Linda discusses how she resolves the issue by managing to hold on to her point of view whilst at the same time fulfilling the criteria for her assignment. She reiterates this point again later in the I-poem:

I mean the entire year somehow

I was told you’ve got to do this this and this

I think okay

I say well

I didn’t do that

I did the complete opposite of everything you said

Despite doing the ‘opposite’ to what the lecturers asked she manages to pass all her assignments. Her new emerging self manages to resolve the tensions by using her non-conformity in a creative way without having to compromise. Thus suggesting a changed perception – that she can manage to both challenge the views of others whilst at the same time fulfilling expectations.

As the tutor for the bridging module, A1 had got to know Linda well during the weekly teaching sessions. A1 often refers to herself as a ‘mother-figure’, a role perception that is reflected in Linda’s first interview:

You believed in us all and no matter how much anybody struggled you were there going, ‘You can do it.’

Through analysis of the I-poems and interviews, A1 gains a parental sense of ‘letting go’, linked to an understanding that Linda’s integration of her non-conformist attitudes and new-found capacity to fulfil expectations represents a new identity, separate from that of Linda as a student from the bridging module and independent of A1 as her tutor.

During the bridging module Linda is introduced to the concept of Dweck’s (2012) mindset, the idea that our thoughts can have an impact on our ability to succeed. Linda draws on this concept in her second I-poem to reflect on changes in her sense of self :

I always used to be a kind of closed-minded kind of person

I listen to metal

I paint horses and seascapes

I will not listen to that music

I will not watch that tv show

I won’t paint anything else

I’m gradually

I’m changing

Her use of tense in the first line suggests that being a ‘closed minded’ person is in the past. Her use of the word ‘gradually’ reflects an emerging new self – one who is able to reflect and apply learning to herself and be open to new ways of doing and being.

*Fitting in*

There were differences in our perception of Linda and her own perception of herself in relation to how she related to others. Linda identifies strongly in both I-poems with being a loner and an introvert.

‘I’ve never been one that fits in well’  [1]

‘I’ll always be an outsider …

I will always be’ [2]

Her use of past and future tense presents this aspect of herself as ‘fixed’ and unchangeable.

However, later on in her first I-poem we detect a new voice emerging – one which is more confident and chooses to put herself in situations with others which she might otherwise avoid. In extract from her I-poem she reflects on when she took part in a television interview about the bridging module:

I feel like there are certain things

I have to do

I think that they are good for me

I can be quite introverted

I’d rather not do stuff [1]

Despite describing herself as an introvert Linda agrees to talk in front a television audience – something which she might have chosen to avoid. Linda’s impression of herself as an ‘introvert’ is juxtaposed with how we perceived her – illustrating how self-perception and perception of others can be quite different. A1 recalls that during the television interview Linda presented as confident and articulate. Whilst A2’s impression of Linda, particularly in her second interview, is someone who is open and funny with a gift for storytelling.

*Bullying*

Related to feeling like an outsider is Linda’s experience of bullying and how she projects this forward to starting university. In her first I-poem her repeated use of the phrase ‘I’m hoping’ suggests that Linda wants to leave her past behind and have a different experience of education:

I’d like to think that at university it’s going to be above bullying

I will be 30

I’m hoping

I’m hoping

I won’t get tripped up

A1 points out how her reference to being ‘tripped up’ is evocative of her struggle to free herself from her past negative experiences of school now that she is older. Despite hoping this would not be the case, Linda describes a case of bullying from a fellow student during her first year at university:

I was being bullied

I let ride

I let it pass a couple of times

I snapped back at her

I think it should be okay now

I wish that I could be in a place where it could just wash over me

I wouldn’t even care

I wouldn’t need to shoot her down

I think people mistake me

They think I’m weak

I’m not at all  [2]

In contrast to the first I-poem, Linda’s reference to bullying in the second I-poem is in the past tense. However, there is a tension between a new preferred self where the bullying ‘wash[es] over me’ and an old self which ‘shoot[s] her down’. Out of Linda’s disequilibrium a new self begins to emerge - one who is able to be strong yet able to resolve issues without walking away or being ‘kicked out’.

Overall the analysis of Linda’s I-poems illustrate how she is transitioning between her past and future. Whilst some aspects of Linda’s self-remain constant other aspects have undergone or are undergoing transformation. Her use of tense within the I-poems illustrates how aspects of herself are relegated to the past [such as being bullied]; others are a constant [such as feeling like an outsider]; and how others belong to the present or future [such as becoming more open minded]. Emerging from the plurivocal text are new voices – reflecting a Linda who is becoming stronger and able to find a way forward to embrace new ways of being and doing whilst not compromising on aspects herself which she values.

The encounters with Linda’s narratives through the multiple listenings both deepened and separated A1’s ‘parent-child’ relationship with Linda. As Linda makes the transition from the bridging module to starting her degree A1 is able to let go of her perceived role as a ‘protective mother figure’ allowing their relationship to become ‘more equal’. Through analysis of the I-poems A1 and A2 both gained enhanced understanding of the way in which Linda’s present and perceived future are shaped by the adversity of her past. The ‘imagining’ of ourselves within her experience, created through listenings and analysis of the I-poems (Koelsch, 2015:96), led to changing inter-relationalities between the researchers and Linda and between the researchers as listeners and as co-constructors of the narratives.

**Analysis of Sam’s I-poems**

Sam has been affected by addiction for much of his life and like Linda he has experienced homelessness. He disengaged with formal education at a young age, believing that he was not ‘capable,’ ‘adequate,’ or ‘good enough.’ He was ‘thrown out’ of home when he was 15 and depended on his wits and his ability to survive on the streets. At the time of the first interview, Sam had completed the Bridging module and was about to start a BA Hons degree in Adventurous Education. The second interview was recorded at the point at which he had successfully completed and passed his first year, overcoming the challenges caused by the first lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He had also just become a grandad for the first time. We were particularly interested by the changing and maturing sense of self that emerges through comparison of the two I- poems. This seems to be linked to a developing internal locus of control (Rotter, 1996) – Sam’s belief that he has control over decisions in his life, an evolving sense of purpose based on increasingly realistic expectations of himself and others, and an emerging confidence in his rightful place in society.

*Past, present and future self.*

Sam’s re-definition of self-and identity has been explored by comparing and contrasting the language used in the two I-poems. Most striking is the fact that the second I-poem is dominated by the use of verbs in the present and future tense rather than the past tense of the first I-poem. The verbs he uses in the second I-poem reflect a sense of living in the present:

‘I am,’ ‘I’ve got,’ ‘I have,’ ‘I know,’ ‘I mean,’ ‘I want,’ ‘I can,’

This contrasts with the verbs used in the first interview which were mostly in the past tense:

‘I was,’ ‘I used to,’ ‘I tried,’ ‘I took.’

There is a sense that Sam is no longer defining himself by his ‘troubled,’ past and is beginning to define himself by his future potential. There is an optimism in his second I-poem, illustrated by the use of verbs of reflection:

‘I hope,’ ‘I think’, ‘I’m concentrating,’ (2)

This suggests a move away from the impulsive, contradictory phrases of the first poem where the language often reflects highs and lows:

‘I wanted to be there,’ (1)

‘I didn’t want to be there,’ (1)

‘I can’t fucking do this,’ (1)

‘There’s nothing I can’t do,’ (1)

Whilst the language of the first I-poem is often unequivocal:

‘I’m going to love it,’ (1)

‘I knew what I was doing,’

‘by the time I’m 60...I can just kick back,’ (1).

The language of the second I-poem is more tentative, more measured, less contradictory and tempered by realistic expectations:

‘I was thinking along the lines of’ (2)

‘I’m dipping my toe in the water’ (2)

‘I should be alright’ (2)

‘I’m going to start finding out’ (2).

This suggests a developing understanding of self, of who he is and what he is capable of.

The evolving separation of Sam’s past and current self is continually reflected when the two I-poems are compared. In the first poem, Sam defines himself by his past, as ‘a criminal,’ who has spent time in jail, and as a ‘little shit’ when he was a child. In the second I- poem he uses the same phrase to re-position himself as lucky - ‘I just seem to be a lucky little shit’, admitting that he no longer needs to be defined by his past:

I don’t meet everyone now and go,

“Yea, I’m a recovering addict” (2)

*Internal locus of control*

Sam makes a clear distinction between his addicted, homeless self, which he describes as being in ‘the madness’ (2) and his ‘new,’ self, as a student. He uses slang [from living on the streets] to describe his battle with addiction and his belief that he has overcome it:

‘I’ve knocked the arse out of drugs and drink and crime,’ (2)

‘The last thing I want to be doing is sticking a needle in my arm

If I was going to do that

I would just put a gun to my head’ (1)

‘I think that being sober …that helps a lot’ (2)

These extracts suggest a growing understanding that he can take control of what happens to him – and that he can overcome his addiction. His new confidence and self-belief, both academically and socially, suggest a developing internal locus of control (Rotter, 1996), a sense that he has control over the decisions he takes in this life, which is also reflected in his increasing self-motivation to study.

In the first I-poem he states that his motivation for completing the course was because ‘I can’t let A1 down.’ In the second poem, he has gained an understanding of the value of education, seeing it as a pathway to achievement and self-fulfillment,

If I don’t get a degree

I still have the knowledge

I’ve learnt to do what

I want to do (2)

Whereas in the first I-poem he states, ‘I always wanted more,’ there is a sense in the second I-poem that he can look for fulfilment through current commitment to study and work and the future potential that this will unlock. He no longer perceives himself as running away from his past, but as an active participant in a better future:

‘I’m concentrating more on what’s going to happen next’

‘What am I going to achieve?

What am I going to accomplish’ (2)

Sam understands that he no longer needs to define himself by his past and much of the second I-poem is spent in discussion of what it means to be a student. The opening line is a celebration of what he has achieved academically, ‘I passed’, and throughout the poem he discusses the strategies he uses to learn effectively. Whereas in the first I-poem he measured his success, to some degree, against how well he could manipulate others to sell stolen goods for him:

‘I found another fence [someone to sell on stolen goods]

I’ve always got the gift of communication’

In the second I-poem his sense of identity is intertwined with his self-created role as a provider of empathetic emotional support and inspiration for the other students on his course based on his past experience.

‘I like to give them inspiration’ (2)

A1 reflects on how this belief in his potential to inspire appears key to his transitioning identity and self-confidence and is linked to the sense of purpose that he has found in his degree and the changed future he believes it can offer

‘I’m there for a reason’

‘I’ve got a purpose’ (2)

*Making amends*

A dominant thread in both of Sam’s interviews is the desire to make amends to those he has ‘hurt’. In the first I-poem he admits that he has hurt people, but there is a belief that a single action can make up for this:

I’ve hurt them

I made amends

In contrast, it is clear from the second I-poem that he is re-defining himself as a pro-active grandad using what he has learnt at university to develop a positive relationship with his new grandson.

I can use my stuff

I learnt at uni

I can teach him to be sensible (2)

The inference here is that he will help his grandson to make better decisions than he has made in his past. This is suggestive of a changing, less impulsive self who understands that ‘making amends,’ takes time and is not the result of a single action. There is a reflexivity in the second poem that is not present in the first - he understands that it is only through a ‘better’ future that he can compensate for the actions of his past.

I can try

  I can try and make up for the shit that

  I caused my daughter (2)

*Fitting in or belonging*

In the second I- poem Sam increasingly perceives himself as a student rather than as a criminal and a drug-addict, there is a sense that he is ‘fitting into’ a different life rather than feeling that he belongs in it. This is clear from his statement that he can ‘fit in’ anywhere yet he still feels the need to justify his presence on the course,

I’ve got just as much right to be there as they have (2)

Overall there is a contrast in the overriding emotions reflected in both of Sam’s I- poems. Whilst the first poem is focused on the ‘self’ (it is longer because he uses the word ‘I’ in his interview more often) and his criminal past, the second poem shows an awareness of his transitioning identity as he begins to view himself as part of the student community. The second I-poem contains concrete plans about how he will use his degree and engage with tutors to ensure he develops his academic skills. The tone of the second I-poem is reflective and demonstrating a growing self-awareness. It reflects a realistic view of a possible future. The language is muted compared to the more extreme language of the first I-poem and shows an understanding that there is merit in working towards a goal. This transition from an impulsive addict to a hard-working, successful student is a continuing journey that can be followed and tracked through the comparison of the poems. The change in attitude and awareness is clear from a comparison of the final lines of his I-poems:

‘There’s nothing I can’t do’ (1)

‘I look forward to next year’ (2)

As with Linda, A1 experiences a sense of separation from Sam through the analysis of his interviews and I poem. She compares the sense of gradual disconnection as he moves away from a dependence on her for his academic motivation, to the attachment a child experiences with their care-giver (Holmes, 2014), ‘Where he’s moving away from me but coming back every now and then just to check I’m still there’ (A1).

Through the multiple encounters both A1 and A2 develop a growing awareness of the rapid iterations of self and identity experienced by Sam, as his internal locus of control grows and his perception of self changes. A1 is aware that as his locus of control changes, so too, does his dependence on her. This involves a form of ‘letting go’ for both Sam and A1 and a transition from a teacher/student relationship to a position of more distanced mutual respect. For A2, the different ‘processes of data analysis’ (Edwards and Weller, 2012:203) reduced the sense of nervousness created by lack of familiarity with the interviewees. Through the imagining of herself within Sam’s experience she is able to gain a greater sense of his developing self and of the sub-contexts and references to things which are happening in his personal life.

**Co-reflection on the context**

In this next section we co-reflect on the context of the narratives paying attention to the physical space and how the relationship between us as researchers has changed over time. The co-reflection draws on our conversations which were digitally recorded.

*Physical space*

At the time we paid little attention to the physical location of the interviews – however, during our co-reflection we reflected on the significance of the ‘physical space’ and how this affected the dynamics of our interactions during the interviews. The first interview took place in our private office on the university campus. The second interview with Linda took place in a local park (as the campus was closed due to Covid-19 restrictions) and the second interview with Sam took place outside on the university campus. The informal context of sitting in a park on a sunny day with Linda facilitated a more free and easy conversation compared to our office space which is cognisant of the power dynamic between lecturer and student. We both remarked on how relaxed we felt meeting for coffee in a local park on a sunny afternoon, having just come out of the first Covid-19 lock down.

*Our relationship with each other*

Unexpected insights emerged from our co-reflection on how our relationship with each other as co-researchers has changed over the course of the research. The decision to interview together was initially taken because of our different relationship to our participants and the extent to which we were insider researchers. Greene (2014:1) defines insider research in simple terms as, ‘that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member’. According to this definition we were both ‘insider researchers’ however, as Floyd and Linet (2012) the extent to which a researcher is an ‘insider’ is complex (Floyd and Linet, 2012). A1 was much more an ‘insider’, having formed a close relationship with many of the participants during the course of the bridging module whilst A2 had little contact with the participants before the interviews. By employing a co-researcher approach we hoped to draw on the benefits of both of these positions and to gain from co-reflection on the things that had shaped our interpretations. We decided that A1 would take the lead in the interviews as she had a stronger relationship with the participants and that A2 would listen and ask additional questions as appropriate. In the following extract we reflect on the process:

A1 it must always feel like I’m the lead person

A2 but that doesn’t bother me at all …I think it’s good that you’re there..

A1 maybe as time goes on it might change it doesn’t always have to be me…you could ask the questions

A2 I’m quite happy you asking the questions

A1 you are always so good at filling in where I’ve missed out something …you always pick really important things …

A2 that’s why it’s good to have two people

A1 I don’t think it would work so well if there weren’t two of us … … that personal investment that I put into it … that can make me really biased …it’s so important that there’s someone there who cares and makes people feel comfortable but can have a bit more distance..

Our relationship with each other has changed over the course of the research. We have worked together in the same department for the past five years and share the same office. During this time we have got to know each other well. The interviews were often emotive with participants sharing traumatic experiences in their lives. As co-researchers we were able to provide support for each other as well as our participants.

A1 there is something about us knowing each other very well …. if you are doing collaborative research.. you need some kind of shared value base …[…] …we’re constructing something….if the stones that you are building it on are not strong…you and me …the whole thing could collapse really easily

A2 I know that if you had any doubts …we wouldn’t be doing it together

A1 … I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather do it with .

The process of co-researching and co-reflection has deepened our relationship not just as researchers but also as friends, creating a safe place where we can be open and honest and support each other to think more creatively about our research.

*Beyond listening*

Cognisant of Bakhtin’s (1984) dialogic approach is having a moral responsibility to not just listen but also to respond. In response to this we reflected not just on how the research had changed us as researchers but also how our personal response to issues of homelessness has changed. A1 comments on how the research has not just transformed her understanding of homelessness but also her behaviour towards those who are rough sleepers:

I do stop in the street and talk to homeless people now ..it’s definitely changed my interactions..I don’t give money but I have to buy everyone I meet a cup of coffee and a sandwich and it has ..I’m not scared .. […] I feel like I engage with them much more as equals… in the past I had that unconscious bias..[…] but it could be my kids, it could be me [A1].

**Conclusion and final reflections**

Our intention in this article is to demonstrate how a co-researcher approach can be used effectively with the Listening guide to analyse narratives. Overall the co-researcher approach adds a richness and depth to the whole analytical process through the co-listening and co-reflection on the multiple interpretations. The I-poems provide an additional opportunity to co-reflect on the different voices and emotional responses - something which is arguably missing from more traditional qualitative approaches to analysis. A further strength of the co-researcher approach is how it attends to the context of the interview - and affords a means of exploring not just the relationship between researcher and participant but also between researcher and researcher. As A2 points out this relational triad is particularly powerful in the co-production of narratives. It was often in our joint discussions and co-reflection that we would experience what MacLure (2012:24) refers to as the ‘wonder of data’ – the ‘wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the entangled relation of data-and-researcher’. For us the times that we sat and listened to recordings of our participants telling their stories, discussed their I-poems and responded to each other’s different interpretations were times of interest and excitement – as we listened attentively to what our participants were saying and struggled to hear their different voices. In line with Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of heteroglossia we were conscious of not taking the narratives of our participants at face value but to be open to multiple interpretations. Therefore our intention was not to present a ‘correct’ interpretation of the narratives we analysed but to share the ‘interpretations we find consistent with the text, with other evidence we have about the speakers, the local context and wider political and discursive context that surrounds them’ (Kurban and Tobin, 2009:27). Perhaps the most transformative and unexpected part of our co-researcher approach was the impact it had on us personally, as we analysed the changes in our participants we also became aware of how we were changing. As our relationship deepened we also grew as researchers learning from each other and developing a greater understanding of narrative research. We encouraged each other to think differently about our data. The more we listened the more our empathy and understanding of what it means to be homeless increased changing our behaviour towards those we encountered in our everyday lives – as we responded to Bakhtin’s (1984) challenge to be more than listeners and become responders. As a further extension to the Listening Guide and the use of I-poems we propose that the transcriptions of the researcher co-reflections might also be made into I-poems to form a more integral part of the analysis. Arguably this would provide further opportunities for reflection as the researchers examine their own voices and how they talk about their participants and themselves. In the next phase of our research we aim to involve our participants in the analysis and interpretation of their I-poems. It is hoped that through this process our participants will become more fully involved in the co-production of the research and benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate their personal journeys into higher education.

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