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RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

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AUTHORS

Charlotte McPherson
Rosie Yasmin
Michelle Walter
with Hernan Cuervo and Jenny Chesters

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Youth Research Centre
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne, Vic 3010

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RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

The Youth Research Centre (YRC) plays an integral role in the development of research projects, research publications and researcher training in the fields of sociology of youth and sociology of education and within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), at the University of Melbourne. Our team includes PhD candidates, early career researchers, mid-career researchers, professors and emeritus professors.

The aim of this series of reports is to showcase the variety of research methodologies, methods and perspectives that our researchers engage with. Each report includes three case studies. Our aim is to cover a range of methodologies and topics that may be of interest to students and early career researchers in the disciplines of education and sociology and, particularly, within the field of youth studies.

Within each report, each case study is a snapshot of an actual research project currently being conducted in the YRC. Our researchers are sharing their experiences and offering their advice for conducting social research in an increasingly complex and diverse societal environment. The practices presented in this series of research reports reflect the innovative and contemporary research methodologies and methods undertaken by YRC staff and students. Some of the methods illustrated here are traditional but employed in new ways; while other methodologies and methods depart from conventional research practices to cover more innovative practices to investigate and understand the multidimensional ways of being young in the twenty-first century.

This report includes contributions from Charlotte McPherson, Rosie Yasmin and Michelle Walter. In the first piece, Charlotte McPherson describes the co-production of research with and for young people in Scotland within a pluralistic social justice framework. Despite her intentions to flatten the hierarchies of power between researcher and participants, Charlotte exposes the distance between rhetoric and reality in co-production research and presents a series of challenges that arose from her experience in the field. Most importantly, she shows how power imbalances are often difficult to dismantle and how researchers' assumptions on what young people need and want are usually wrong. Within her research experience, Charlotte realizes that co-production research can work against the needs of young people by presenting them with additional burdens and responsibilities to their already busy and complex lives. In the second piece, Rosie Yasmin analyses the challenges of building rapport with

children living in slums in Bangladesh. In her ethnographic study, Rosie is interested in constructing ethical research engagement with children attending NGO schools, such as BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities), in marginalised communities. From the outset, she explains the challenges of adopting a socially just sociological approach that places children's voices and views at the centre of her methodological approach against the constraints she found in Bangladeshi societal values and norms that de-centre children's autonomy. Further, Rosie describes the obstacles that researchers can find in institutions, such schools. For example, she argues issues of consent and confidentiality can be complicated when teachers get involved in the relationship between the researcher and children and demand access to more information from the research process and outcome than they should. Finally, Rosie presents some research steps that are necessary to build sustainable and ethical rapport with children and how to negotiate the outsider-insider relationship between researcher and children in a school. In the third piece, Michelle Walter offers a detailed account of what to expect from autoethnography as an enabling methodology that facilitates conversations with others, self and culture. After opening up her piece with a powerful experience of the impact that her autoethnographic research on youth mental health had on one individual attending her conference presentation, she takes us on a journey exploring the uses and benefits of autoethnography. This is followed by a meditation by Michelle on the role of care, trust, reciprocity and mutuality in autoethnography; and the relationship between speaker and audience in a presentation, particularly when dealing with issues of trauma, mental health, violence and marginality. While she stresses that care and respect are essential in this speaker-audience relationship, Michelle urges us to not close down the conversations that autoethnography, as an evocative, aesthetic, emotive and affective methodology, can open up. Overall, what transpires from Michelle's piece is that while doing autoethnography can be challenging and complex, it can also be a joyful, emancipatory and hopeful for the self and others.

Overall, these three pieces on researching young lives are a significant addition to the vibrant field of youth studies. They represent the Youth Research Centre's continuous support, contribution and engagement with high quality research and practice for, with and by young people.

Hernan Cuervo and Jenny Chesters

OUR CONTRIBUTORS



CHARLOTTE MCPHERSON

Charlotte McPherson is an ESRC-funded doctoral researcher at the University of Stirling in Scotland. She has just returned to the UK following a 3-month visit to the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral qualitative research explores the lives and perspectives of working-class young people in urban and rural communities in Scotland through the lens of social justice, with a particular focus on how young people's relationships with others, place and the broader social context inform their everyday choices and their orientations towards the future. More broadly, her research interests lie in youth, place, social justice, social class, intergenerational relations and the future.

Email: charlotte.mcpherson@stir.ac.uk



ROSIE YASMIN

Rosie Yasmin is a PhD candidate at the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Her research interests include education, child rights and wellbeing of marginalized groups, social justice, rights-based approaches, third sector, capability approach and human development, gender, and participatory methodologies. In her PhD project, she is investigating the effect of catch-up education on learning and well-being of children living in a slum in Bangladesh. For more than a decade, she worked with various national and international organizations including academia and international NGOs.

Email: r.yasmin@student.unimelb.edu.au



MICHELLE WALTER

Michelle Walter is a PhD candidate at the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on the mental health of university students, help-seeking and the role of universities in promoting mental health. She draws on mixed methodologies, combining critical Autoethnography with a post-structural theoretical lens and traditional ethnographic methods. She is interested in the possibilities of story-telling and creativity in research and teaching practice.

Email: m.walter2@student.unimelb.edu.au

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRICKINESS OF CO-PRODUCING RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Charlotte McPherson

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Using a tripartite model of social justice, my research explores the lives and perspectives of working-class young people in two areas of Scotland as they transition into and through adulthood. Like most researchers involved in youth studies, one of the central aims of my research is to empower and give voice to young people, who are afforded so little of this in most other contexts (Davies, 2015). I was keen to maximise the potential for this using every research tool possible, including my methodological choices. Rather than take the more traditional route, where a researcher approaches participants with a pre-decided methodological framework and research agenda, I decided to proceed with the ethos of co-production. Co-produced research is distinguished by its focus on and commitment to collaboration with several parties and voices (Banks et al., 2019). In the case of my study, this meant that young people would actively co-produce key aspects of the research alongside me, the researcher. This report reflects on how and why elements of co-production failed to land with my participants, and the lessons this has taught me as a researcher involved with young people.

CO-PRODUCTION

A co-productive approach attempts to flatten the hierarchy that typically exists between those who are invariably powerful (e.g. researchers and policymakers) and the relatively powerless (e.g. participants and service users), who are invited to collaborate on ostensibly equal terms in efforts to achieve or improve on something (Jasanoff, 2004). Flinders et al. (2016) argue that co-production is driven by efforts to improve public services and/or knowledge. Both objectives are clearly relevant to the remit of academic research, which increasingly not only seeks to build knowledge, but also to have a significant, measurable impact on society (Bannister & Hardill, 2015).

Co-productive approaches have grown in popularity in recent decades, and adopting such an approach is increasingly perceived to be the ethically pertinent decision (Porter et al., 2012; Verschuere et al., 2012). Rhetoric around co-production describes it as an empowering impactful and innovative way to boost knowledge and/or service performance, which can dispense with power differentials and simplistic neoliberal distinctions between providers and consumers. Keating (2017) describes the benefits of co-produced research as including an enhanced capability to deliver social justice outcomes in research, whilst others consider it to enhance voice, wellbeing and a sense of empowerment, as well as promoting solidarity, community and social inclusion (NEF, 2008). At the heart of co-production is the belief that, far from their typical construction as passive recipients or 'consumers' of services, or as problems to be solved, members of the public are valuable assets of untapped knowledge and experience with much to offer policymakers and researchers (NEF, 2008; Flinders et al., 2016).

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Commentators have cautioned against an overwhelmingly positive assessment of co-productive approaches, however. Critics have raised important questions about the feasibility of co-production, including those who suspect that it can represent another way of shifting the responsibility for a service or problem away from the structural to the individual (Evans, 2011). Others have expressed concerns about co-production in the research context. Few question its ethical values and principles, but what seems to trouble many is the perceived gap between the rhetoric and reality of co-production (Ancarno et al., 2016). For example, projects can begin with co-production in mind, but traditional research/policymaking dynamics often reassert themselves as the process goes on, reintroducing power imbalances the co-productive approach strives to challenge, better and replace (Durose et al., 2012).

A MEASURED APPROACH

Co-production can be implemented to varying degrees. In the case of my research, I recognised that the power differentials and potential vulnerability of my participants not only justified my intention to give them voice and degrees of control over the research, but also presented me with some dilemmas around just how much this would be possible, or indeed enjoyable, for the participants. As has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Davies 2015), young people's interactions with non-related adults and institutions are typically characterised by a lack of power. This can be magnified further for those young people who are already disadvantaged in some way, and is precisely why adopting a co-productive approach is simultaneously so important for young people and why its implementation can be so difficult.

Considering this, I acknowledged from the outset that my research could not be fully co-produced. The young people I would be engaging with were from potentially complex backgrounds and could be as young as 13. From my previous research, as well as the legacy of other studies (e.g. Keating, 2017), I anticipated that I would need to ultimately take the lead in many respects, whilst retaining key elements of co-production. Specifically, I decided I would consult with participants about how they felt about my research questions, giving them scope to change or reject them. Additionally, I would invite participants to choose from a range of methods, thus giving them more control over their participation. Finally, I planned to actively collaborate with them during data analysis, consulting them on the authenticity and importance (or not) of emerging themes and my interpretations. Accordingly, the research was not entirely co-produced, as I set the original research questions, established a range of methods they could choose from, and will be bringing themes and interpretations to them for appraisal. However, I felt that within this measured approach, the young people would have more power and voice than they typically do, but would still have a modicum of structure and leadership.

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRICKINESS OF CO-PRODUCING RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY: A MIXED BAG

Whilst rhetoric around co-production, and particularly that involving young people, speaks to its voice-giving powers and potential for enhanced engagement and outcomes, I achieved mixed results. The most successful aspect of my co-productive approach so far, given that I am yet to fully engage my participants in data analysis, has been the first component. During the informed consent phase, I spent a long time with participants discussing the questions and aims driving my project, and enjoyed quite high levels of engagement with the majority in this regard. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the participants happily agreed with my research questions and themes. I did not get the sense that this was purely down to power imbalances or widely recognised researcher effects, however. I felt that the topic of my research struck a chord with many of the participants, who not only seemed keen to engage in discussions about their lives and futures, but also to be of the belief that this was important and timely work.

Many of the young people engaged in serious, considered conversations with me on this, providing a rationale for their agreement and, in some cases, their own input. This input, and that from the very small minority who were not as convinced by my research direction, alerted me to specific angles and issues that I had not anticipated or taken seriously enough. For example, one participant admonished me for failing to give enough emphasis to schooling or school-aged young people, arguing that school is where a young person's past mixes with, and heavily influences, their future. As a result, I actively recruited more school students and teachers, and incorporated a stronger focus on the experience of schooling, all of which undoubtedly improved my research. More broadly, the significant benefit of taking a co-productive approach at this stage of the process was that it made an early challenge to those tricky power imbalances endemic to research scenarios involving younger participants and older researchers, with clear benefits for building rapport, trust and enhanced engagement.

In the tradition of co-produced research, I included a host of participatory and 'innovative' methods alongside some more conventional ones. Participants had the choice of participating in the research via either, or a combination of, semi-structured interviews (online or in person), 'lifeline' drawing interviews, online video diaries and image-sharing, or ethnographic observations. Given the rise in popularity of such methods in youth studies (e.g. Harris et al., 2015; Snee et al., 2016), I anticipated that most participants would eschew the more traditional interviews and focus groups for the comparatively innovative and digital methods. I had also assumed that the young people would feel empowered by having the choice of these methods.

However, when I approached the participants with this, most seemed overwhelmed and unsure, and keen for the security of my direction. They sometimes became visibly flustered and stressed when considering their options, to the extent that I began to attach the caveat that they could limit these choices or have me choose for them if they preferred (almost all did). As has been suggested and found by others (e.g. Smith et al., 2002), I felt that my participants were anxious due to a combination of researcher effects - of wanting to make the 'right', 'best' choices that would please me and complement my research aims - mixed with feeling overwhelmed by having options and authority in a context unfamiliar to them, in relation to a stranger attempting to redress the sharp hierarchy typical of most adult-youth interactions. Moreover, virtually all of the participants opted to participate traditionally, choosing interviews and/or focus groups, with the most common response to my presenting them with the choice being along the lines of, 'can't we just chat?'

CONCLUSION

Two assumptions I had made of young people in the research context - as desiring an enhanced role and more control, and as being in favour of participatory, 'innovative' methods - proved problematic in my study. Attempting to equalise the relational dynamic between researcher and researched by incorporating consultation, choice and participatory methods appeared to burden and stress many of my participants, who seemed to seek comfort in my direction and to prefer a simpler mode of participation than the literature has suggested.

The egalitarian ideals behind co-production are clearly valuable, both within and outside of the academy. It is an attack on the status quo that rejects and attempts to flatten traditional roles and power imbalances by prioritising the perspectives and experiences of local communities and individuals above the interests and assumed superior knowledge of society's powerful knowledge- and rule-makers (Jasanoff, 2004; British Academy, 2008). These qualities are especially attractive and promising in the case of young people, who are largely without power, voice and recognition in major public spheres. However, as I learned in my research, there must also be a recognition that young people can feel burdened, overwhelmed and confused by the prospect of co-production, and assumptions should not be made about their preferences when it comes to engagement and participation. Moreover, practically, from a researcher's perspective, co-production is very difficult to implement, and certainly to its fullest potential, so endemic are those power imbalances between not only researchers and participants, but also adults and young people, which can echo loudly in the minds and actions of all parties.

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRICKINESS OF CO-PRODUCING RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

None of this is to deny the clear value and potential of a co-produced approach, which I saw the benefits of in my study in many ways, despite its failures in other areas. Fundamentally, such an approach rests on a vision of individuals, whoever they are, as more than just that reductive, neoliberal characterisation as passive consumers or spectators, and instead constructs and responds to them as engaged, involved social actors with something important to say, as experts of their own experience. This should be the starting point for all research and policymaking that hopes to make a difference to young people's lives, but it should also be tempered with adult/researcher reflexivity (Punch, 2002; Alderson, 2008).

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BUILDING RESEARCH RAPPORT WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN SLUMS: CHALLENGES & CHAMPIONS

Rosie Yasmin

INTRODUCTION

In my PhD project, I used a participatory, ethnographic case study which examines how children living in an urban slum in Bangladesh perceive the impact of schooling on their learning and wellbeing. Building rapport or a degree of comfort and mutual trust in the interactions between the researcher and participants (Given, 2008) is central to gathering rich data. Establishing an ethical and respectful rapport with children living in the slum was a continuous challenge for my study. In this chapter, I describe these challenges and explain the steps that ‘worked well’ for me in building rapport with the children. I argue that despite there being constant and unexpected challenges in conducting research with the children living in marginalised communities (such as slums), the consideration of children being the ‘social actors and agents’ and researcher’s endeavour to be a ‘listener’ of children; ensuring continuous consent and data sharing; and becoming ‘localised’ within the context have the potential to build a strong rapport with the participants. In doing so, first, I briefly describe the purpose of my study. Then, I explain the challenges I faced followed by the associated steps in rapport building. Drawing on my field experience, I conclude by emphasising the connection between rapport-building and reflexivity—management of which is another challenge that the researcher needs to deal with continually.

WHY THIS STUDY

Bangladesh has one of the largest primary education systems in the world educating more than 18 million children (World Bank, 2013). Despite achieving a significant improvement in educational access and gender parity in primary education, the two major problems in Bangladesh primary education are the high rate of student dropout, and the poor quality of education (Ahmad & Haque, 2011; Nath, 2012; Nath & Chowdhury, 2009; Nath et al., 2005; World Bank, 2013). One in three children in Bangladesh drops out before completing primary education

(UNDP, 2013). More than 50% of primary school children enrol in government schools (GOB, 2013). There are twelve other types of primary schools, including NGO schools such as BRAC’s (Building Resources Across Communities) flexible primary schools.

BRAC’s single-teacher, single-classroom primary schools provide ‘catch-up’ education or a second chance to achieve the basic primary education, particularly for children who drop out from or who never enrol in mainstream primary schools. BRAC’s primary schools have been found to outperform government schools in relation to participation, learning achievements and cost-effectiveness (Ahmad & Haque, 2011; GOB, 2013; World Bank, 2013). While NGO schools account for 8.5% of Bangladesh’s primary education system with an enrolment of around 1.5 million students, BRAC schools are attended by 1.3 million children (World Bank, 2013). Therefore, these schools have a significant effect not only on the education of children living in slums in Bangladesh, but also in the overall provision of primary education. This study uses participatory ethnographic approaches to understand the participants shared patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and issues such as power, resistance, and dominance in relation to the influence of BRAC schools on children’s learning and wellbeing (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

CHALLENGES AND ‘WHAT WORKED’ IN BUILDING RAPPORT WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN THE SLUM

Twenty-seven children aged 10 – 14 years living in the slum and attending a purposively sampled BRAC school participated in this study. Building a close relationship based on trust with these children required manoeuvring two interconnected layers of challenges—on children’s and researcher’s levels. Figure 1 briefly shows the main challenges I faced and the interconnected measures that helped in building rapport with the children.

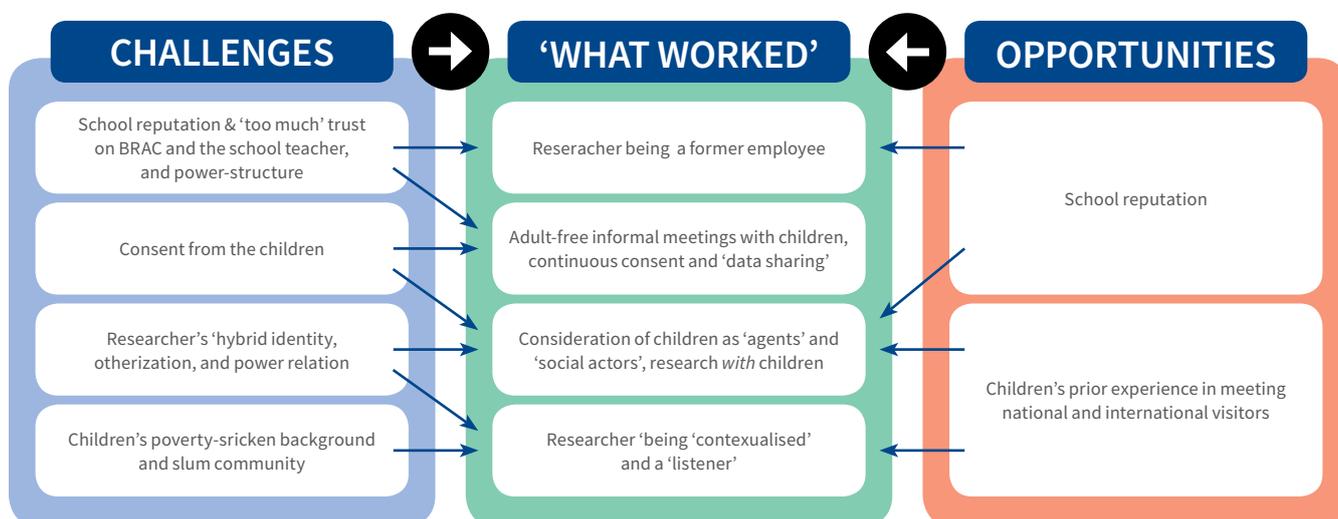


Fig 1: Main challenges and ‘what worked’ well in building rapport with children living in the slum

BUILDING RESEARCH RAPPORT WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN SLUMS: CHALLENGES & CHAMPIONS

CHALLENGES ON CHILDREN'S LEVEL AND THE MEASURES

Obtaining children's 'autonomous' consent was a major challenge in my study. The challenge was a complex one because I needed to steer between how I situated children in my study and Bangladeshi social norms; the influence of the school's reputation, organisational trust and the power-structure over the children; and their poverty-stricken background and slum community. Firstly, I explain why I situated children as 'social agents' in my study. Then, I elucidate challenges with possible reasons followed by the discussion of the steps that were effective in obtaining children's 'autonomous' consent.

In my participatory ethnography, I situated children as *active* participants instead of passive respondents; I conducted research *with* children, not on children. Traditionally children were considered as 'not yet citizens', passive, dependent, (Kotsanas et al., 2014) and were the objects of the study on whom adults' perspectives were tested (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Kellett, 2010). Those traditional views of children exclude them from making decisions that affect their lives (Kotsanas et al., 2014). From other perspectives, however, children are viewed as social actors and agents (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Kellett, 2010) who have unique and valid understandings of their experiences and the world around them (Kotsanas et al., 2014). For example, Aubrey and Dahl (2006) show that children held clear, realistic and sophisticated views about several aspects of their school environment, their teachers, their peers, their lessons and their behaviour, as well as the importance of their education. Building on a sociological approach, in this study, children living in the slum are citizens who can express their own opinions and views about their schools, their lives and their learning.

According to the dominant Bangladeshi norm, and irrespective of socioeconomic status, children and their entitlements are mostly codified not by the principles of rights, but of guardianship—the guardianship of parents and adults. Furthermore, this guardianship is dependent on external conditions (Ahsan, 2009; White, 2007; White & Chowdhury, 2007). In BRAC schools, the guardianship of the children is often extended to teachers who decide over or in connection with parents. Children are nurtured under the 'close-eyes' spectrum of the adults, which often 'controls' children's social presence and interactions. Due to this apparent 'control' over children, obtaining the children's 'own' consent was difficult.

The reputation of the BRAC education system, overall, and the sample school being one of the best performing schools in the slum, influenced my data collection both positively and negatively. Because of my connection with BRAC as a former BRAC Education Researcher and my intention to research one of BRAC's successful schools, the BRAC authority approved my access to the sampled school. However, the same success and reputation of the school seemed to yield natural pressure to 'data share' with all stakeholders of the school including children. The hierarchical power-structure of BRAC channelled from the

head office to the school seemed to contribute to this pressure on 'data disclosure.' Children were concerned that their shared statements and views may influence their performance criteria, reputation and relationship. Further, the children appeared to be concerned whether their responses may also affect their grading. At the initial level, these situations created barriers in creating a comfortable relationship with children.

Having 'too much trust' in the school teacher was another barrier to creating a comfortable relationship with, and obtaining consent from, the children. Several studies demonstrated that interpersonal trust is important for the success of relationships (Jeffries & Reed, 2000; Rotter, 1980) including enhancing the learning of (at-risk) students (Muller, 2001; Teven & Hanson, 2004). However, organisational studies show, 'too much' trust or 'trust without verification' may result in control over, and stress on, the trusters and thereby trusters may feel obliged to pay back the trust bestowed on them (Langfred, 2004). In my study, 'too much' trust in BRAC and the teacher, created a 'seemingly invisible' control and pressure over 'trusters' such as parents and children. Consequently, parents and children may have felt pressure to reciprocate the trust and may have been influenced by the teacher.

Due to these encounters, I experienced a 'cycle of messy approval situations' in which children, instead of providing their 'own' consent, sought permission from both their parents and their teacher. Further, parents also requested permission from the teacher on behalf of their children.

To manoeuvre these challenges, together with being ethical and respectful to children's agency, steps to reassure data confidentiality, being caring in the use of words and interactions with them and continuing informed consent 'worked well' in building rapport with them. Together with 'adult-driven' formal sessions with parents, I conducted informal and 'adult-free' consent sessions with children. While taking informed consent during these sessions, I carefully explained their role, my role, what the research involved, what will happen to the data and how the results will be used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Tekola et al., 2009). To maintain trust with children, I continuously re-checked with the children for their consent each time I began activities (Einarsdóttir, 2007). I informed them that during the research they have the right to discontinue the conversation at any time. To ensure their comfort, I consulted with them about our meeting places and times. I also asked to them to choose their own pseudonym. I was constantly caring when interacting with these poverty-stricken children and selected my words carefully to avoid 'hurting and harming their emotions.' I also found that 'checking their responses' with them helped to build trust in my investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). 'Member checking' provided the opportunity for the children to formally confirm, raise concerns with, or reject any element from their responses (Yuen, 2004). All these important measures seemed to help children to feel 'valued and respected,' which 'worked well' for me to build a strong rapport with the children.

BUILDING RESEARCH RAPPORT WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN SLUMS: CHALLENGES & CHAMPIONS

CHALLENGES ON RESEARCHER'S LEVEL AND THE MEASURES

As the children belong to one of the best performing schools in the slum, they have been visited by many national and international visitors (mainly donors). They were experienced in meeting visitors which helped me in connecting with the children. However, one of the central challenges in building rapport was related to BRAC's introduction about me, as an 'other,' to the children, and my middle-class background. Due to this, I noticed changes in their interactions with me. During the study, I gradually shifted from being an 'outsider' to an 'insider', which helped me to build a comfortable relationship with the children.

On my first day at the sampled school, the Head Office personnel introduced me by saying, 'this is Rosie *Apa* (*Apa* means sister; using *Apa* is a cultural practice to honour a female), she has come from Australia ... She is here to know about your school.' Due to my cultural appearance (the dress code and the use of Bangla language), I hoped to be accepted as a 'usual' Bangladeshi, but I noticed that, I was accepted as 'other-outsider' due to the introduction of the BRAC authority and my middle-class background which was reflected in my gestures and posture. The children originally introduced me to their parents or neighbours as 'foreign-Bangladeshi *Apa*.' The children constructed a 'hybrid' identity for me, in which I was an alien belonging to the upper class and who was not living in Bangladesh. Meaning that I did not belong to Bangladesh 'fully,' let alone to them. It was a 'strenuous' task for me to break this notion about me.

By adopting, adapting and localising myself with the context, I became accepted. Being a 'good listener'; dressing less formally; speaking in the local dialect; visiting their homes; doing the same things as the children, such as sitting on the floor, accepting their occasional hospitality, playing and singing with them, listening to them and discussing children's issues with living in slums allowed me to gradually become part of their community. However, I often asked: "am I 'performing' a role that I'm not; am I maintaining reflexivity (power: the influence of researcher on the participants/research and the participants/research influence on researcher)." In those moments, I reminded myself that the use of ethnography is challenging because the researcher needs to have a solid grounding in the meaning of the sociocultural system (Creswell, 2012). I found that being a Bangladeshi, helped me to understand the sociocultural norms embedded in the children's daily lives. My previous work experience in some Bangladeshi educational research projects (including on BRAC) on ultra-poor and marginalised children also helped me to build rapport with the children.

On my 12th day, the children started using 'our' before 'foreign-Bangladeshi *Apa*.' Here, my hybrid entity started to be compromised and merged into being 'one of them.' Within the school, the children removed all their 'constructed' labels about me and started calling simply 'Rosie *Apa*' or '*Apa*'. Meaning that, at this stage, the children started accepting me as one of 'their-Bangladeshi-insiders,' which was a total shift from an 'othered-foreign-Bangladeshi-outsider.'

CONCLUSION

My participatory, ethnographic study sees the children as 'social actors'; in this frame, they can voice their school experience and stories of their lives. Despite the many challenges, I endeavoured to create an adult-free environment, to be 'localised and contextual', to be an attentive listener and to be friendly. Accompanying the children and embedding myself in their world, assisted in building comfortable connections and trust between us and generating rich data.

However, my field work experience with the children created a complex relationship between building rapport and reflexivity. I agree with Given (2008) that once rapport and relationships are established, issues of reciprocity and mutual obligation become increasingly important and this may affect 'reflexivity.' I was so overwhelmed when some of the children made Bangladeshi rice cakes for me. One child infrequently used to bring tea from their family-owned tea stall. I thought, 'paying the price of a glass of tea, would be a disrespect to his happiness, pride and human dignity... five Taka (national currency) could help him to buy half a kilo of potato, however, can 'an act love and respect' be exchanged with money, nor 'human dignity can be bought' (journal note, 28th day of my field work).

BUILDING RESEARCH RAPPORT WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN SLUMS: CHALLENGES & CHAMPIONS

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: THE CALL FOR AN AESTHETIC ETHICS

Michelle Walter

INTRODUCTORY STORIES: TELLING A WAY IN

My PhD confirmation. The room is not quite full, but close enough that I allow myself to feel pleased. It is time to tell my story-to 'do' the autoethnography that I have been promising throughout my presentation. This 'doing' has taken the form of personal data-my own history- translated into narrative in which I describe a particularly bleak moment of my slow, adolescent slide into mental illness. There is a tremble in my fingers that is mostly excitement; of a captured audience, of making my words heard in ways that I have been struggling to make them heard all my life.

I read, carefully and with expression. I do not linger over words but I allow each one its space, its place, and when I am done I allow a moment for the full stop.

The room is silent. For a beat, I am full. Of a sensation that might be power, that might be satisfaction but is not quite either.

I have been heard, and it is precious.

And then.

I look up and see that there is a woman crying. She sits, head bent and silent but face wet.

The moment stretches to a point somewhere past uncomfortable.

I am surprised to find myself angry. I did not anticipate, nor did I want, the responsibility that her tears have placed on me. But as the teller of the story I am responsible and the choice of each word and phrase and memory I have chosen to share suddenly holds a different weight.

Though it is not my fault through the telling I am implicated.

The responsibility fits badly.

I look down; I pretend that she is not crying.

I draw on this moment as both a demonstration of autoethnography as method, and as a way in-for the reader, for myself. More importantly, however, I write of this moment in order to press pause. To allow it to be lifted out for examination and consideration, but also as an example of affect masquerading as meaningful engagement.

As autoethnographers, the stories we tell are often urgent; they break open long held silences and place the "... 'complexity and fragility' of life" (Tillman, 2009a, p. 95 cited in Holman Jones et al., 2013) at the centre of what we do. Often that fragility is our own as we put our inner selves on display and open up our wounds to scrutiny. In autoethnographic work, this may be referred to as presenting the intentionally 'vulnerable subject' in which "...secrets are disclosed and histories are made known" (Holman Jones et al., 2013: 24). Who we are as researchers and where we position ourselves in relation to our work is central to the research practice itself; the self becoming both evident and evidence. Yet autoethnography is also a methodology that cultivates a reciprocal, responsible and responsive relationship with its audiences, and it is this reciprocity that distinguishes it from other forms of personal and autobiographical writing (Holman Jones et al., 2013). As an *enabling* methodology, it works

to provide space for meaningful, thoughtful, moving and critical conversations with others, self and culture. There is tension in this balancing of story and the telling of difficult truths with the responsibility that we as autoethnographers also have to our audiences. It is the exploration of this tension with which this report is centrally concerned.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE

- *Autoethnography is an aesthetic methodology that draws on traditionally creative techniques from multiple artistic practices. These techniques aim to invoke/evoke emotive, affective and critical responses.*
- *Autoethnography honours story and personal experience; it embraces complexity, vulnerability and feeling, and works to resist the erasure of difficult truths. In doing so, it works to elevate and make room for those who have traditionally been silenced.*
- *Autoethnography cares for audience. It seeks a reciprocal, mutually responsible and responsive relationship, in which audiences are asked to engage with and act upon the work in meaningful ways.*

(Holman Jones et al., 2013).

Autoethnography is a complex methodology-as methodologies invariably are-and yet it maintains at its core a simple aim: to locate and explore the cultural within the personal (Holman Jones et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2011). It is the practice of combining autobiographical and ethnographic research traditions and has its roots in ethnography, a method which utilizes participant observation and cultural immersion as a way to try and understand, as best as is possible, how a particular culture operates (Watt & Scott-Jones, 2010).

Ethnographers use reflective practices to examine their work, their role and the multiple influences which may be operating within and on their research. Data collection may include observation, interview, focus groups, the collecting of 'artefacts' such as diaries or journals, video and audio recordings as well as the ongoing commentary and observations of the researcher (Watt & Scott-Jones, 2010). From a methodological standpoint, ethnography and autoethnography further share similarities in that they both embrace a relativist stance, understand representation, power relations, subjectivity, context and reflexivity to be crucial elements of doing 'good' and responsible research (Watt & Scott-Jones, 2010). However, there remain key differences between the two approaches. In autoethnography, one of the primary sources of data is that of the researcher's own experiences, observations and thoughts. Most commonly, this is due to the autoethnographer belonging to the particular culture or group being investigated, and therefore their own experiences are understood as being valid sources of information. In my own work, for example, I draw on personal narratives of mental illness

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in the context of a post-structural feminist theoretical framework in combination with the relevant sociological and public health literature, in order to illuminate, critique and discuss culturally relevant moments.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS AESTHETIC PRACTICE

Autoethnography is an *aesthetic* methodology (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones, 2005; Holman Jones et al., 2013). It draws on traditionally creative techniques, such as might be found in a novel, dramatic performance, poetry piece or visual presentation, that are designed to evoke particular emotive effect. It aims to evoke *felt*-or emotive-as well as critical engagement. In written work, for example, an autoethnographer may draw on a multitude of creative possibilities: tone; tempo; dialogue; metaphor and simile; narrative description; character description; point of view; non-linear time or even rhyme in order to present, discuss or interrogate their data. Importantly, however, autoethnography combines these techniques within a critical, theoretical framework and an in-depth understanding of the relevant field of research. For some excellent examples see: Ronai (1995); Tillman-Healy (1996); Adams (2011); Trivelli (2014); and Holman Jones (2016).

The autoethnographic researcher is a bridge builder. Drawing together personal stories, critical, theoretical literature and the experiences of others in order to illuminate corners of human experience that have often been silenced in traditional research (Holman Jones et al., 2013). For this reason, autoethnographers often speak from difficult or silenced spaces (Holman Jones et al., 2013), including those who have experienced trauma (Ronai, 1995; Ronai, 1996; Tamas 2008); or mental illness (Tillmann-Healy, 1996; Trivelli, 2014) or those who come from marginalised and oppressed communities (Adams, 2011; Boylorn, 2013). Autoethnography provides those whose voices have often been 'locked out' of traditional research a powerful way in.

THE ETHICS AND RISKS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: SELF AND OTHERS

The ethics and risks of autoethnography are complex, not least among them the potential of offense to others and damage to reputation through the revelation of painful personal histories. There is also risk in the exposure of self that is needed - at times *demanding* - in order to do autoethnographic work properly, as to shy away, or equivocate or obfuscate is to deceive, and in doing so to break the autoethnographic contract. Additionally, in researching spaces and places of trauma, marginalization and oppression - as is often the focus of autoethnographic work - there is the danger of lingering too long and of becoming soaked in the space one is trying to escape. Autoethnography is a methodology that works to visibilise trauma and oppression on and through the self, and in doing so risks opening one's self

up to painful, public exposure (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones, 2005; Holman Jones et al., 2013). While this can be invigorating, freeing and affirming, it may be simultaneously difficult, frightening and confronting for the autoethnographer as well as for their audience. I make this point as many who engage with autoethnography will also inevitably be its audience, and therefore may also be those who inhabit traumatic, marginalized and/ or disempowered spaces (Holman Jones et al., 2013).

As a methodology that utilizes the evocation of emotion as a core element of its practice, and which often speaks from, and of, traumatizing and painful spaces, the implications of this need to be taken into consideration. Central to autoethnography is that relationship with audience, one that is marked by *mutual* responsibility (Holman Jones et al., 2013). What does it mean then, to write violently for an autoethnographic audience, to tell of assault, or mental illness or victimization? How might we balance the commitment to methodological integrity and the telling of difficult truths, with our responsibility to enable our audiences to engage meaningfully with our work? I suggest here that central to this reciprocal relationship is a core principle of trust and care - for our audiences, for our stories and for ourselves. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) argue that autoethnography positions its audiences "...not as passive receivers of a text or performance but... as active participants..." (p. 25). There is responsibility in such a relationship - of the audience to act, and of the autoethnographer to enable that action. It is to consider that an audience is, by the nature of autoethnography, implicated in the telling and that as autoethnography asks us to become 'vulnerable subjects' we in turn ask our audiences to "...engage with and respond to our work in constructive, meaningful-even vulnerable-ways" (pp. 24-25). In this, we engage in an act of trust; trust that our audiences will hear us, that they will honour and listen to the stories that we are telling and that in turn we will write, perform and speak in ways that enable that participation. In asking our audiences to open themselves up to vulnerability, I suggest that we are also asking them to open themselves up to risk. It is the management of this risk that I understand as care - and part of the 'mutual responsibility' of autoethnography.

I do not argue here for the shutting down of story - for the tale to not be told - but for an ethics of aesthetics - that the autoethnographic practitioner consider the *how*, the *where* and the *what* in the telling. This requires us to choose our words carefully; to not always write down to the blood and the bone of experience in ways that draw out the graphic, confronting detail. It asks us to write, to translate those moments, in ways that *enable* an audience to engage, to stay in the room, to remain a part of the conversation. I suggest that as an inherently aesthetic, evocative, emotive and affective methodology, this is a core responsibility of autoethnography. This is not to suggest that we write as an act of erasure, or to lighten tales of trauma or oppression for ease of consumption; only that we consider the purpose of the story we are telling, for whom and why we are telling it. We must consider the context within which the story will be told, and consider ways that we can open up our experiences

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for others as opposed to closing them down, as I did in the vignette I presented at the beginning of this report.

CONCLUSION

Doing autoethnographic work well is difficult. It demands critical as well as aesthetic skill, and asks the researcher to place themselves and their experiences at the centre of their work. Choosing to do autoethnography can be fraught. It involves personal risks that other research methods do not. There is the possibility that the work and the self, having become entangled, are equally risked when exposed to the critique of the academy (Holman Jones et al., 2013). Yet, to not risk the self through vulnerability is to not *do* autoethnography. However, autoethnography is also emancipatory, hopeful and joyous in its aims (Holman Jones, 2005; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2011). It enables voices, stories and experiences to be heard in the critical research space, and in their hearing allow the possibility for positive social change. To do autoethnography is to be asked to think and feel differently, not once but each time a new work is encountered on the page or the stage or the screen, and to value personal experience alongside that of traditional, critical knowledge. It is to consider our stories in context, and to write our audiences a seat at the table. To work in autoethnography is to work *'in-consideration'* - of those who populate our stories, of ourselves and of those who will hear, read, see and engage with our work.

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