The importance of supervisory and organisational awareness of the risks for an early career natural hazard researcher with personal past-disaster experience

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A B S T R A C T

Higher education students are advised that research must be objective, focusing on research outcomes and a strict set of criteria upon which the student will be examined. Yet, for those undertaking natural hazard research, this advice is tested, particularly if the student themselves were also impacted by the same natural hazard. Such was the experience of this author. This paper reflects on the author's personal natural hazard experiences, and the drivers that resulted in the pursuit of a higher education degree which involved the phenomenological investigation of the impact of these disasters on the lives of those residing in isolated exposed locations on the Far North Queensland coast in Australia. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of supervisors and organisations charged with ensuring the students well-being understand why a student wishes to pursue emotion-charged research. The article concludes with recommendations that supervisors and Ethics Committees focus not only on the risks to participants, but also to the students themselves, by ensuring they also consider the student's own past-disaster experiences.

1. Introduction

The human geography PhD experience is one described by some as a *journey* (Brydon and Fleming, 2011), characterised by Richards (2005) as one consisting of twists and turns, with few signposts which constantly adapts to deal with unexpected events. Richards's (2005) description was certainly apt for the author of this article. My PhD *journey*, as I am sure is the case with many others', navigated the confusing array of theoretical and conceptual framework considerations, ontological and epistemological deliberations, ethics stipulations, endless literature and insurmountable data collections, advise from supervisors, as well as deadlines and expectations, while juggling life, family, and an array of part-time jobs producing meagre incomes necessary for survival. It was a *journey* I began hoping would lead to a satisfying career, providing fulfilment and financial stability. Yet, as a natural hazards student studying topics that affect the lives of vulnerable populations, my focus became less about my personal journey of gaining a qualification and more about providing a platform upon which those needing a voice could speak. Sometimes desperate, concerned people, generously participate because they trust that your work will finally make a difference to their lives.

This is a heavy burden for anyone to carry, especially someone learning the ropes. Calgaro described this feeling as "… humanising

[where] positionality [is] heightened when undertaking research in a new cultural setting, where unfamiliar social norms, interactions, and meaning causes a fundamental shift in the perceptions of the issue, the participants, and self" (2015, p. 45). Such was my experience, although unlike Calgaro, my situation was not as unfamiliar as perhaps it should have been.

My Honours and PhD research focused on populations living in small coastal townships located on the cyclone-prone coastline in Far North Queensland, Australia. These communities had been impacted by two severe cyclones between 2006 and 2011, leaving their region in economic decline, resulting in many out-migrating to larger centers in search of employment. Those who remained were mostly without the resources to relocate, amongst them, the elderly, providing a clear example that natural hazard events alter lives, disrupting communities and environments, best described by Dominey-Howes as "… shak[ing] the foundations of social and community structures, rip[ping] places and communities apart and undo[ing] the long socio-cultural histories of communities" (2015, p.55).

As a resident of Far North Queensland, I too understood the feelings of loss, fear and dread as cyclone season approached. My family and I had also been impacted by these cyclones, and we understood what it was like to experience extensive property damage and extended periods of disruption while repairs were carried out, sharing also memories of

sheltering with our children and pets in confined spaces during the height of storm. These experiences left me questioning why people remained residing in such volatile regions, how I could face this again, and if remaining in this region was an unwise decision. Explanations for populations persisting in the face of difficult environmental conditions were the subject of Adams (2016) research on mobility, place attachment and climate change. Such research applies behavioural migration theory to explain a person's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a place, stating that migration decisions are considered once dissatisfaction and place utility becomes negative (Adams, 2016). For me, the impacts of sequential cyclones resulted in thought processes that eventually resulted in my husband and I relocating from cyclone-prone Queensland, a process that took considerable time because of factors considered barriers to mobility. These included obligations to extended family residing in the area, our financial commitment to our property, reluctance to remove children from stable schools, cultural, sporting and social groups, and because at the time we could not identify a suitable alternative location. According to Adams (2016) such factors are not usual. For me place attachment, the emotional bond between a person and their environment, was better described as community attachment (Anton and Lawrence, 2014). I identified with the disaster experiences of those I interviewed. My experiences made me empathetic to the needs of others in the region, particularly those who I could relate to, in particular older women facing the storm alone. I related to the place attachment keeping others in the region; attachment to home, family and social ties; creating a dysfunction hindering decision-making in relation to rational choices about where to reside, factors also identified by Anton and Lawrence (2014). Adams (2016) labels such feelings as being 'trapped' - consciously knowing the environmental risk but lacking the capacity to migrate away. In retrospect, I believe that part of my interest in undertaking disaster research was to develop coping skills to overcome my fears because of the barriers that existed at the time preventing me from leaving.

These fears directing my research, directing my *journey* to one of self-discovery and self-questioning. I recognised that this type of direction had the potential to threaten the rigour of my research, so I paid careful attention to my interview questions, ensuring they were not leading or focused on my personal fears, focusing on ensuring every detail to ensure objectivity to satisfy the PhD requirements. Because of my self-awareness, the care taken to write my research proposal and Ethics Application, and my research rigour, I was not questioned by my supervisory panel or the university Ethics Committee about any obvious personal conflict. The Ethics Committee's only stipulation was that I was to be very aware of any distress my research questions could cause my participants, insisting I have in place safeguards to support those who may need assistance. This was provided by way of a one page document outlining the contact details of support networks. There was no consideration for the impact this research may cause me, the researcher. Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes (2015) acknowledge that this is typical of a geographer, suggesting that geographers are taught to think of their participants before themselves, ignoring the impact the research may have on the researcher's own emotional well-being. This is vital for objectivity, sometimes regarded as a weakness of qualitative research, and therefore something that a geographer with a preference for phenomenological research methods is more likely to be conscious of (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Rigour in fact became an ethical obsession informing my methods, holding up imaginary red flags when participants' stories cut dangerously close to my own experiences. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009a) reported that when listening to stories of others recounting emotion-generating situations, a participant's story can evoke strong reactions from the researcher who may have experienced similar situations. Although this can have the benefit of engaging the empathetic researcher, a quality that is essential to the success of a qualitative study, it is problematic from the perspective of the researcher, and in particular a PhD student, who is conscious of remaining objective, not allowing

emotion to direct the interpretation of data, particularly when interviews relive a similar, if not the exact same, natural hazard event experience.

Drozdzewski and Dominey-Howes suggested that researchers should in fact do the opposite by self-reflecting, adding insights and new hypotheses to inform the research questions, as well as positioning ourselves into our research and reflecting on how "… location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research" (2015, p.18). By doing this, the researcher remains aware of the emotional nature of what they are studying, especially within the traumatic landscape.

Qualitative research, and in particular, phenomenology, emphasises, prioritises and deeply explores the individual's real life experiences (Astill and Miller, 2016). It relies on the ability of the researcher to engage with the participant's reality and to relay an honest and trustworthy account of the person's lived experience (Paton et al. 2004). Dickson-Swift et al. (2009b) described the goal of the qualitative researcher as the ability to see the world through the eyes of someone else, making ourselves the research instrument. Gilbert (2001) advises that as qualitative researchers we should view research as more than an intellectual exercise, expanding it by exploring and discovering what is deeply felt. As such, this often means the qualitative researcher has to emotionally engage with the participant. Stuhmiller (2001, in Rager, 2005) deems this to be essential because such research requires empathy, something that is unachievable if the researcher was to remain distant. Calgaro supported this viewpoint, describing the undertaking of qualitative research as engaging the researcher and participant in a power-laden social relationship that "… shape[s] the nature of interactions and the information gathered" (2015, p.48). Similarly, my personal cyclone experiences, level of education and knowledge surrounding the policies that guide Australian emergency management, collectively gave me empathetic legitimacy in the eyes of those who participated, enabling me to secure participants from various sectors of the community: older adults, emergency services officers and community health carers who care for older adults *in situ*, and local government disaster managers.

At this juncture, I must clarify that my research was not conducted immediately after a specific event. My data was collected between 2012 and 2014, six years after Cyclone Larry, in 2006, and one year after Cyclone Yasi, in 2011. This point is significant, as most literature surrounding the impact of disaster research on researchers centers on studies conducted in the immediate aftermath of an event (Rager, 2005; Dominey-Howes, 2015; Eriksen, 2016), describing emotion-charged recounts of participants' experiences, and the impact such stories had on their own mental health over extended periods of time. Some also described the challenges associated with facing a post-disaster setting with participants who are highly-stressed, dazed, suffering the effects of shock, as well as the experience of conducting research in what remains a dangerous situation (Dennis et al. 2006; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2005; Stallings, 2002). These types of setting are described as "traumascapes" (Calgaro, 2015, p.46), which vary according participants' descriptions and recounts. For these researchers, the recounts of the horrors of bushfire, tsunami, earthquake and the like, resulted in Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) or Vicarious Trauma (VT): the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms resulting from the continuous close contact with trauma survivors, developing emotional disruption, whereby becoming indirect victims of trauma themselves (Bride, 2007). Such conditions are the result of, what Tillmann-Healy and Kiesinger (2001), described as vulnerable observers studying emotional topics, confronted with the horrors of others' experiences and usually unprepared for the responsibility of taking on another's "… full humanity and [the] explor[ation] and unveil[ing of their] own" (2001, p.101).

My experience, on reflection, seemed far less likely to result in any form of personal traumatic residue. At the time of my research, the region appeared to be well on the way to recovery, with cyclone debris removed, buildings either repaired or under repair, tourism activities