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Retrospective reflexivity: The residual and subliminal repercussions of researching war

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ABSTRACT

Stories of the war have been a known part of my story as granddaughter of Polish post-war migrants. Yet venturing into these stories as researcher has been troubling; I found their closeness and their raw emotion difficult to process. Significant sections of my interview schedules entailed participants recounting their own, their parents' or their grandparents' stories of war and migration, with traumatic episodes frequently intersecting into their stories. As a researcher, these traumatic narratives have had a residual quality, lasting in my subconscious long after the interviews themselves and doctorate for which they were conducted had finished.

In this paper, I focus on experiences of, and reactions to listening to, analysing and writing about these traumatic cultural memories. Collins (1998: 3.35) has observed that 'the emotions experienced, whether by the interviewer or interviewee, are as real, as important and as interesting as any other product of the interview'; my powerfully felt experiences with traumatic content have validated this sentiment. With a retrospective reflexivity I now realise that these cultural memories were not the only 'product' of my research, but that how they were narrated *and* how I dealt with them were also a significant part of the research process, and indeed stories in themselves. Here I attempt to retell how these stories impacted me as the researcher; how in the case of particularly harrowing stories, I also needed time to absorb the narratives, to comprehend the participant's experiences and their ability to narrate such stories, and to recover from the experience of listening to such accounts.

1. Introduction

Nearly ten years have passed since I conducted the interviews that form the core of this paper. These interviews, for my doctoral dissertation were with first generation Polish survivors of World War Two (WWII), who had post-war, migrated to Australia, like my grandparents. It has taken considerable time to feel confident enough to acknowledge, and write about, my own emotional responses as the researcher conducting and analysing these interviews. While I inserted comments in my thesis about my responses to encountering the narration of traumatic memories, these were fleeting additions at best. I summarily did what Crang (2003: 499) has contended happens too often in qualitative research: 'the researcher's presence becomes quite attenuated after setting the context of the fieldwork, often still becoming a ghostly absence'. The wider narrative focused – as I thought it should – on discussing my respondents' stories, their processes of narration and of weaving together a comprehensive narrative of Polish struggle and suffering for freedom and autonomy (Drozdzewski, 2008).

Through a process of retrospective reflexivity, I now realise that these cultural memories were not the only 'product' of my research, but that how they were narrated *and* how I dealt with them were also a significant part of the research process, and indeed stories in themselves. In the thesis, I wrote about the need to be reflexive and mindful of my positionality, of what I was 'bringing' to the research. I drew from England's (1994: 244, original emphasis) influential paper on 'Getting Personal', which positioned reflexivity as a 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher'. In this paper, I seek to extend England's important assertions about self-reflection to argue for the importance of a retrospective reflexivity, the type of rumination capable only through the passage of time, and refracted through subsequent experiences. It is only now that I have been able to re-examine my encounters and their emotional reverberations, which

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I had tried to figuratively close because thinking about some of these interviews hurt too much.

This paper, then, focuses on my ventures into (and back into) these narrations of cultural memories of war, positioning the researcher's research process and responses to these cultural memories as the central narrative. Despite an established corpus of literature calling for researchers to be (more) aware of their emotions and positions within their research (Bondi, 2005; Davidson et al., 2007), few authors have focused on describing the outcomes of their research process on themselves, especially when the research involves traumatic narratives and/or ventures into traumatic places. This paper contribution's to filling this dearth in literature is twofold. First, dialogue regarding reflexivity and one's sense of preparedness for research in/with sensitive materials will hopefully prompt those starting similar projects to initiate spaces for dealing with the emotions they (may) encounter, whether this be setting plans with supervisors, or talking to colleagues, family or university counselling services. Second, this paper urges us not to disregard our own responses to the research material or to the processes of narration, but to see these as evidence of the multiplicity of ways knowledges about place, space and emotions are (re) produced.

This paper and the special issue more generally, seeks to make a space for us to express how our research has made us feel: a space where we can grapple with how these feelings then influenced our interpretations of our research. A pivotal reason this type of writing surfaces so infrequently is likely attributed to the fact that as researchers we taught to, and seek to represent the people and *their* stories, especially those who may not have the capacity to do so themselves. For many of us, living in privileged circumstances, in the Global North and the Antipodes, focussing even momentarily on our own 'secondary' trauma over that of our research subjects is rather inconceivable. Klempner's (2000: 67) admission of feeling 'cheap' at hearing a survivors Holocaust story 'so casually', encapsulates my sentiments. However, Laub (1992: 57) contends that the listener of traumatic narratives 'faces a unique situation' where they may come to actually be a participant of the traumatic event, perhaps even sharing the trauma. In terms of the coproduction of traumatic narratives, Ellis and Rawicki (2013: 377) have employed a method of relational autoethnography premised on the collaborative witnessing of a 'changing life situation of the participant' being viewed in terms of its potential to 'alter the research relationship and affect the project'. While I approach these assertions of ownership or co-authorship of another's narrative with extreme caution, I do concur with Laub's (1992) explanations of the depth of understanding, of preparedness, of context and strength with which a listener must attend to the listening of a traumatic narrative. As a post-structuralist geographer, I am however somewhat uncomfortable with ascribing a coverall definition to the terms trauma and traumatic narrations, despite the frequent use in the paper (and issue). Trauma has many meanings, differently experienced, differently embodied, variously performed and felt. As the dialogues in this special issue will attest, no two people's experience of trauma could be the same, even if they were describing and/or witnessing the one event. In the paper then, I have attempted to explain my trauma – where possible – as bodily sensations, as subliminal responses, as harrowing thoughts, but these descriptions are my own, they are not (re)producible or neatly fit into one definition.

A key aspect of my argument for retrospective reflexivity is that going into my research interviews with my Polish participants, I had thought that I was (well-)prepared for their stories. I was perhaps even a little naïve in thinking that my extensive reading of WWII history and my own positionality had equipped me for this venture. My university ethics approval form confirms this naivety and self-assuredness. My ethics application was approved (UNSW Faculty of the Built Environment Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel: 045212) unamended. One question (in two parts) in the application addressed 'potential for harm to participants and/or researchers'. First the application asked 'is there any potential for harm, physical, psychological, social, cultural or financial?' to which I ticked 'No'. The second asked: 'Are there potential risks to researchers?' to which I also ticked 'No'. I answered both these questions truthfully; I did not conceive of harming my participants, nor did I think the research would harm me. Integral to answering these questions was my standpoint that undeniably, stories of the war were familiar to me, a granddaughter of four Poles who migrated to Australia (separately). My grandmothers had told me about their childhoods during the war, including their movements through Poland, Russia and Germany, with or searching for family, of bombings, loss of life, desperation, and of struggle. My mother had told me stories she had heard second-hand of my grandparent's friends during the war, some who had been less fortunate than my grandparents and had endured direct personal persecution or loss. Thus, I have always had and held an awareness of these war stories, embedding them into my own personal narrative (cf. Hirsch, 1999) of how I came to be an Australian, a twist of fate impelled by the death and movement of millions of people through Europe in the middle of the last century. Gibson-Graham's (1994: 219) declaration that: 'I am a unique ensemble of contradictory and shifting subjectivities' resonates strongly with how I feel about my situated knowledge emanating from my family's Polishness. Because the stories I heard involved my family members, I feel an authority over their content through an implicit closeness to their narratives, and to those of Polish involvement in WWII more generally. They have formed part of what I know 'without conscious awareness of that knowledge' (Birdsall, 1996: 620).

Despite this proximity, another facet of my positionality – being a middle class 'white' Australian researcher – endows certain privileges. Thus, I knew to question the reliability of these accounts of the war and their social constructions. Tonkin (1992) argues that oral representations of the past not only involve assessing the social context of the narrator, but also that of the audience and the potential for influencing the content and direction of the story. My grandmothers' reflections in wartime Poland were informed by 50 years of adult knowledge and were told to me and with an often implicit, sometimes explicit, narrative of mistrust of 'Germans' and 'Russians'. In this arena, Andrews et al. (2006) have detailed the methodological implications of researching oral histories with older generations. They argue that 'narrator reliability', selectivity, forgetting and shifting interpretations can all influence how people construct narratives (Andrews et al., 2006: 156).

1.1. The interview process

The analyses that follow draw from a selection of the 61 semi-structured interviews conducted in Sydney, Australia. Among this wider group, this paper engages with a subset of the interviews: 14 first generation Polish migrants who had migrated post-WWII. The interview method was employed to elicit responses about the participants' life experiences and memories, and those of their parents and/or grandparents where relevant. Semi-structured interviews afforded participants the opportunity to add information where *they* deemed necessary. The process of narration often reflected the process of storytelling and for older generations the narrative was often a chronological account of their life courses. McCormack (2004: 223) found that through the process of storytelling participants would add and expand on information and often provide 'more than description' to the narrative. In many cases, such stories revealed valuable details and data as well as