

Decisions and dilemmas in the research journey

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Abstract

This paper looks at the dilemmas encountered by a Doctor of Philosophy researcher who has a personal history with her research topic: family-member suicide. It explores whether or not the researcher's own experience-derived view of the topic allows her full access to new or different experiences, explanations and understandings. How can a researcher ensure object purity and process validity in the light of potential effects of reflexivity? How and when should personal history be disclosed? The ultimate credibility of research depends on the answers these questions, and their exploration can serve as guideposts to other students on their own research journeys.

Introduction

The doctoral research project followed a previous research Master's degree which explored the grief of children bereaved by parental suicide when they were young (Ratnarajah, 2005). The methodology used for the previous study was Narrative Inquiry. As the aim in the doctoral study was to explore the grief narratives of those bereaved by the suicide of a first-degree relative, it was decided that Narrative Inquiry was an appropriate methodology. In the master's degree study the narratives of family dysfunction emerged as themes and one of the recommendation was 'to recognise there well may be a history of generational dysfunction in the family system which contributed to and/or culminated in the suicide'. A rider was added 'while every effort is made to not pathologise an already grieving family, it is important to understand the context in which a suicide occurs'.

It was realised that the story of the family culture and way of being with each other may have impact on the circumstances leading to the suicide. These factors also influence the family's ability to cope after the death, with responses that range on a continuum from family regroup to disintegration.

Choosing a topic of research

Advice was given to be passionate about the topic. 'The passion you feel about your topic will be the most vital ingredient to ensure the energy is sustained throughout your project'.

Methodology

The study explored how individuals seek to understand or find meaning in the suicide death of a family member. It is through the stories that are constructed following critical or traumatic loss that people assimilate disruptive experiences into their frames of reference and try to make sense of what has happened and of themselves. Narrative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate method for exploring the storied experiences of the participants. The way people commonly understand themselves and their world is through the medium of narrative.

Conceptual framework under-pining methodology

Narrative inquiry, in contrast to an objectivistic ontological approach to investigations derives its foundations from an epistemological approach to the acquisition of knowledge. Epistemological research looks to understand what can be known and of relationship between the knower and the known. The epistemological paradigm relates to methodologies that define investigations that are interested in constructivism, the stories or narratives about interpretation and sense making. But also, the following theories were drawn on in the interpretation and analysis of the narratives. Also informing the analysis were Grief theory – Kubler-Ross (1973), Rando (1992-3) and Worden (1999); complicated grieving (Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies 2002), disenfranchised grief (Linn-Gust 2007) and traumatic loss and feelings of self-blame and guilt (Walsh & McGoldrick 1991). Grief journey and adaptation to loss (Forster & Murray, 2007), and the bereaved person's sense of self (Neimeyer, 2001). Transitions of psychosocial adjustment (Parkes, 1971), and continuing bonds (Stroebe et al, 1992).

Aims

1. To explore the recollections of adults who had experienced a family member suicide death
2. To understand the family history both prior to and after the suicide, the development of meaning systems and the development of resilience.
3. To identify the nature and timing of support, if any, accessed by the bereaved family members
4. To seek information on participant vulnerability and the factors that affect coping.
5. To identify protective external factors that encourages moderation between stress, risk, and coping and the development of resilience.

The primary aim was to explore the recollections of adults who had experienced a family member suicidal death at some time in their lives. Thus offering an opportunity for the participants to speak of their meaning-making endeavours to understand the context in which the suicide occurred. This exploration was a search for understanding about the family of which they were a part, the roles and behaviours that the various family members had and of their own sense of self. Attachment theory (Bowen 1988; Nichols & Schwartz 1998) and relationships theory (Bowlby, 1969) provide a useful perspective through which to analyse how the participants viewed their developmental years and the personal history of the deceased relative.

Another aim of this study was to understand the family history, both prior to and after the suicide. Family systems theory (Bowen 1988), offers a useful lens to explain the way various systems operate within a family and holds that if the behaviour of one family member within the family changes, then this will have a corresponding effect on the other family members.

Social constructivism refers to the process that occurs when people speak of their experiences to others, with the feedback that occurs, these stories are shaped and a mutual understanding can be reached (Crotty 1998). In this study, the family history prior to the suicide death was sought, so these family narratives would be the result of the process of constructivism as the family lore and myths are created and told and retold through each generation. These family stories were part of the historical, social and cultural context against which the suicide death occurred with a shattering force, changing forever the family narrative for the tellers of the tale (Gergen & Gergen 2003). The objective was to hear not only these suicide narratives, but also the meaning making that the participants and their family undertook to

accommodate this happening into their changed narrative. Of relevance was the construction of a new narrative by the participant and other family members together, or in the aftermath of a fracturing in the family system, within a smaller restructured family group. Hearing each participant's narrative allowed an understanding to be reached that was in accordance with the way the individual made meaning of these events and the resultant consequences within their socio-cultural context (Polkinghorne 1988). The need to create new stories out of disorder and to endeavour to find new meaning out of the meaninglessness of suicide was the reflexive journey that the participants had undertaken and were sharing in the interviews (Gilbert 2002). During the interview, each participant was undergoing the process of revising or constructing their narrative in conjunction with the listener, as probes or reflexive questioning allowed the opportunity for new insights or shades of meaning to be accessed by the speaker. Thus, the narrative that evolved during the interview was a co-construction between the speaker and the listener.

After an extensive search of the literature available on understanding suicide within the context of a family, this research study was designed to allow the bereaved family members' experiences to be explored. This resulted in a process that allowed the participants to relate their family history and climate prior to the suicide, the events surrounding the suicide, their reactions to the loss and subsequent on-going family outcomes and adjustments. As explained by Owens and her colleagues (2008:241), the participants have a need to tell their story and, in a similar manner, the researcher feels compelled 'to listen and hear the whole story, spontaneously told'.

A methodology was required that would allow in-depth exploration of the complex and influential aspects affecting the participants' experience such as their relatedness to the deceased, the participants' age at the time of the death, developmental influences, the family patterning and the environmental and social context in which the family lived. A narrative methodology is therefore appropriate for addressing the research question and the aims of the research project. The research question is: *How do suicide-bereaved families narrate their experience of loss in the context of familial relationships?*

The interview dialogue covered the period of time before the suicide, the events surrounding the suicide and how the participants' understanding may have changed or developed since that time. The 'time' element within the participants' narratives is important within the methodology used, as the participants searched back through the family history in their endeavours to answer their inevitable questions as to why the suicide happened. In telling their narratives, the participants described their understanding of how events happen over time, and how past family behaviours led to the present story being told. The effects of the suicidal loss on other members of the family and how these changes have impacted on the informant and their relationship with their family were also explored. The interview process follows a co-construction and exploration of the meaning of these events, allowing the perspective of the participants to stand forth (Owens et al. 2008). Gavin and Rogers (2006) conclude that new understanding and insight can be gained through a narrative inquiry into the complexity of the circumstances and reasons why some people decide to end their lives.

Participants

Media coverage about the project was disseminated through suicide-bereavement support newsletters and also through notification to other professional colleagues. The sample in this project represented every class of first-degree relative of the suicide deceased: spouses and partners, children, parents and siblings. Eighteen participants who experienced the suicidal death of a family member volunteered to be interviewed for this project representing all types of first-degree family relatedness among the participants.

Ethics and qualitative research in suicide grief narratives

It was recognised that qualitative research into grief experiences presented ethical issues for the researcher. In an in-depth interview on such a sensitive topic, distress may be caused for the informant. Yet all of those who were interviewed volunteered to tell their stories. So often those bereaved by suicide are 'shut down' when they try to speak of the deceased relative (Maple, Edwards, Plummer and Minichiello, 2010). It can be experienced as a relief to be able to share their story of loss and to describe in as much detail as they wished who their deceased family member was, what the relationship meant to them and how the death affected them. There can be benefits in taking part in such research has been acknowledged by other researchers (Gibson, Benson & Brand, 2012).

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee: Approval No. HE06/159 Valid to 31/10/2009.

It was seen as very important that the ownership of the story belonged to the narrator, that is, the participant. To honour this, included in the thesis was a summarised story as it was relayed to the first author. It was recognized as important that each participant should be seen in their own light before analysis of all of the stories began. What is said and the way in which the story is put together creates a unique narrator's voice (Riessman 1993).

In identifying myself early in the thesis I spoke of my own history with this subject, and also my professional experience of being a counsellor with many years experience. Gilbert (2002) points out that the researcher also has their own narrative in relation to the topic under investigation and warned 'we must, then, be aware of how our own narrative limits us, and the implications of this for our work'. The researcher is a co-constructor of the research narrative, and when the focus of the research is grief narratives, it is important that the interpretive narratives remain true to the initial understanding and meaning made by the participant.

'How much of myself do I put in and leave out?' (Jones, 2005:764). Comment by one examiner, 'Early in the thesis, I wondered about her biases as she entered into the study. What were her beliefs about family members who experienced suicide? Did she believe they were 'fractured' as some of the literature suggests? I am most respectful of *the first author's* transparency in identifying herself as an individual who is bereaved by suicide of her son. Having had this experience and then completing a Master's thesis on the subject of children's responses to suicide loss, in my mind, positions her as somewhat of an expert in the area. A brief discussion of what she brought to the research in terms of knowledge and attitudes would serve to enhance the credibility of the thesis'.

Dilemmas

One of the first dilemmas was the recognition of the need to define the word 'Dysfunction'. I identified that there are many negative implications that may follow the word 'dysfunction'. In exploring the meaning of this word, it was found to be 'broadly, generally and ubiquitously, any disruption in normal functioning' (Reber, 1995:231). But how is normal functioning in the family system defined or recognised? Satir (1988:4) defines family systems as the 'rules people use for how they should feel and act'. The traditional purpose of the family structure is the nurturing of children (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Parents as the primary caregivers and nurturers of children, have the responsibility to ensure that children are raised in an environment that fosters emotional and psychological wellbeing. So in this study, the word 'dysfunction' refers to the disruption in the family's relationships that may result in a challenge to the secure attachment fostered within the family system.

Following the master's research project, it is owned that there was an expectation to find family narratives that indicated dysfunction in the family-of-origin of the

deceased. But on reflection now, the question is, if a researcher anticipates a certain finding, does that influence in any way the purity or veracity of the research undertaken and the results that are identified? Did I only find what I was already looking for?

Narrative inquiry methodology allowed the meaning making those bereaved by the suicide death of a first-degree family member made in constructing their narratives of loss. Commonly those who are suicide bereaved wrestle with the question of the 'why' the suicide occurred. For many participants, in seeking the answers to this question, they explored their own family history, and in doing this looked for the answers in the family history. This allowed for narratives that included descriptions of family patterning, and stories of abuse and addictions. Also relayed were the histories for some mental or emotional difficulties in earlier generations. Even though in every family narrative there was some history of dysfunction, this was not a quantitative research study with a large number of informants, therefore no conclusions could be drawn about generalisability.

In planning this project an aim was that of recruiting two or more family members from each family. It was intended to explore if the meaning making about the suicide death resulted in differing narratives that came from the relationship the participant had with the deceased. Unfortunately this was achieved in 2 families. In one case there was agreement and cohesion in the meaning making the two informants relayed. In this family, there was open communication and after the suicide death, a police support person spent time with all the family members during which the reasons for the suicide were fully explored. In the other family where the husband and the eldest daughter of a suicide deceased woman were interviewed, the daughter had been the mother's confidant and she had a completely different narrative about the 'why' of the suicide than the husband relayed to me.

The question of reflexivity

It is important that the researcher is aware of his/her own beliefs so they do not affect the interpretation of behavior, (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Reflexivity for a qualitative researcher means that the researcher is aware of his or her own beliefs, values and experiences, and how these may influence the choice of research topic and the research design and methods of the study to be undertaken. 'Reflexive ethnography maintains that the ethnographer is not separate from the object under investigation' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005:328), The relationships between researcher and research being multiple and unable to be discounted as influential in the choice and methods of any study. That such influences may be operating in me as the researcher is acknowledged. I have made apparent the personal meaning the topic of family member suicide has for me. I discussed my own subjectivity with my two supervisors, both of whom are experienced qualitative researchers.

Reflexivity in a researcher also includes the ability to be aware of self-consciousness by monitoring and inquiring into one's feelings and reactions to the narrative being heard through a self-reflexive process. Similarly, when reading through and listening to the replaying of the audio recordings of the interviews, it was necessary to pay particular attention to anything that had been missed at the time of the interview or in the reviewing, so that I became newly aware of an intonation or inference that offered the opportunity for more in-depth exploration of the data.

The researcher must reflect on his/her own beliefs and attempt to separate them if they are not to affect the data (Guba & Lincoln, (2005).

Researchers need to be reflexive in three general areas:

1. The topics they wish to investigate. This means they account for the personal and professional meanings the topics have for them.

2. The perspectives and experiences of the persons with whom they wish to do the research.
3. The audiences to whom the research findings will be directed. This means the researchers write for specific audiences, presenting ideas and evidence for the ideas in language that the audiences can understand.

The audience for a research thesis is initially your supervisors, then the examiners and finally, the readers of any publications that may follow from your thesis.

If the topic that is being explored is also the researcher's lived experience, how to ensure that the researcher's experience derived position on the topic does not blind the researcher to new or different experiences related by the participant/s? This might result because the participant's experiences do not match or are in conflict with the researcher's experiences.

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the research and ensuring rigor in the report coming from the project are critical components of the research. Trustworthiness attends to the issue of how the audience can be convinced that the research findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The frameworks that address the question of rigor include aspects such as credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

Findings

Following the analysis of the data, two main themes along with sub-themes emerged in the form of questions inferred by the participants. These are:

1. What does this suicide say about my family?

Under this question the following sub-themes are discussed:

- (a) Fractured families—this sub-theme describes the experiences of the families of those participants, who as a consequence of the family member's suicide were unable to regroup as a family and be supportive to the bereaved family member.
- (b) The legacy of suicide—including descriptions of the different grief experiences and meanings dependent on the kinship relationship the bereaved had to the deceased.
- (c) Negotiating changed relationships—in the context of the disrupted family either remaining disrupted or regrouping.

2. What does this suicide say about me?

The following sub-themes are discussed:

- (a) Managing trauma—including suicide ideation, on-going grief and mental health.
- (b) Making meaning—making sense of the loss.
- (c) Longing to speak with someone who had been through a similar loss.

Final comment

Two comments offered by a keynote speaker at a Suicide Prevention Conference resonated with me and guided my thinking when analyzing the narratives of the participants. 'Remember what you are told is really threefold; shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from them both by the dead man in the tale'

(McGoldrick, 2011). It is recognised that a family crisis event has its genesis not only in the past history of relationships in the current family, but back through time into the heritage of many generations. 'Suicide is a systemic experience which ripples out and down the generations affecting many who never even knew the deceased' (McGoldrick, (2011).

I also realise from my own experience of the search for meaning—a search for which all those who loved a suicide decedent experience—that it is easy to look for the motivations to remove oneself from life in recent events and relationships. From undertaking these two studies, I recognise that this is in effect a tunnel vision that seeks a recent cause and person or event as the target trigger incident for the suicidal impulse. While there may be some truth in this interpretation it is far from the whole picture.

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