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The Researcher as the Ex-musician: Considering Researcher Status in the Interview Setting

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Abstract

Looking at the music-making practices of a group of young Australians who experience some level of disadvantage or stigma as a result of personal experience, I consciously positioned myself as both an 'ex-musician' and as someone who reviews new music. Personal self-disclosure and treating participants as experts in their field allowed participants to be more forthcoming with their own experiences.

In my research, self-disclosure allowed for a more level playing field leading to a greater sense of trust and rapport between participant and researcher. Through disclosing my own personal story when conducting interviews, participants felt more comfortable speaking of their own vulnerabilities. Presenting as someone also with a certain level of musical knowledge and as someone who writes about music meant participants felt comfortable leaping into discussion around the more technical aspects of their practice. Having participants assume a role of expert in their field also assisted greatly in providing detailed honest data. Through telling of my subsequent giving up of music due to a lack of technical prowess, I had positioned myself as someone there to learn, thus allowing the young person to assume the role of expert, simply by being embedded in a music-making practice.

This paper will explore how, through the use of a reflexive approach, smart and crafted methodologies can be used allowing for an approach that is designed to not only ensure that the interview experience is built on a level of trust and honesty, but also deliver robust and detailed data.

Introduction

In the context of my doctoral research, I have consciously drawn attention to my dual identification – I am both a researcher and an ex-musician/current music writer. In the specific context of my research, this dual positioning has been both meaningful and beneficial. As this paper will argue, this positioning enabled me to provide a knowing space for these young people to examine their personal experience which ultimately led to the co-production of richly detailed data and important insight.

Part of this research involves an at times self-indulgent foray into what makes young musicians, especially those who use their music as a way of negotiating personal identity. That self-indulgence arises in this:

Prior to beginning this doctoral research, which has involved interviewing vulnerable young people engaged in music making, I had set out on pursuing a career in music. Piano was initially my instrument of choice, having learnt all throughout my childhood. At 16, I also took up the drum kit to very forgiving parents and neighbours. I pursued drum kit as part of my final year at high school and then continued on with a full three-year advanced diploma in music performance with drum kit as my instrument of choice. During this time I was exposed to a whole range of contemporary music styles including pop, punk, hip-hop, funk, jazz, world music and electronic music. Through this exposure to various new styles, I pushed myself to broaden my own take on music making. I went back to my old piano teacher who, instead of making me do the scales and classical music from my childhood lessons, helped foster a real sense of creativity and improvisation. I was able to bring musical ideas to her, and as I sat down on that piano stool, hands tentatively hovering over the ivory, my piano teacher and I would work together to flesh them out.

It was towards the end of my second year of an Advanced Diploma, after what I thought at the time was a rather bad relationship breakup, when these ideas started to become songs. Many may now be thankful that recordings of these songs do not exist, and indeed that I do not remember them myself. In hindsight they were rather emotional 'woe-is-me' piano led ballads, but they did help make sense of what I was experiencing. I was able to craft my way through emotional difficulty using a language I had started learning at four when my dad took me to Saturday morning music classes, but had only now realised how to put to use. A month or two into my final year, as my music theory was excelling, my actual playing was not. Although I did end up finishing that course, it was at this point that I concluded that music making was not for me – while I enjoyed it immensely, the musical technique needed in order to succeed was far beyond me.

That was ten years ago. I still occasionally attempt to create strange electronic music on my laptop, although I fear that my skill and technique (even when using a piece of software) limits what it is I am able to make. My involvement in music has not been lost completely. For the past four or five years I have been writing about new Australian music. I have written for a few different online music publications and have founded two of my own. It is an area I am incredibly passionate about, and it still allows for an active involvement in music, albeit on the other, critical side.

This doctoral research falls under the research project 'Engaging Creativity Through Technology' as part of the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre's Connected and Creative research. The project is specifically focused on how technology can be used to engage young people who may be more vulnerable to developing a mental illness and how to enhance their participation and connection through

technology-based creative content production.

Youth specific creative practice organisations and associated research often place such young people in a transitional phase or mode of becoming. This has particular ramifications for young people who experience some level of stigma or marginalisation as it suggests that because of their perceived disadvantage, those young people are in a state of deficit. This, in turn, diminishes the likelihood of their real lived experiences actually being told in a truthful manner.

My own self-disclosure in this project became something inescapable. Naturally, I also found myself immediately drawn to the topic of music making. As with many other researchers, our own experiences often influence our decision to conduct particular research and focus on particular topics. While there are clear benefits in acknowledging and accepting our own experience, we must also be critically aware of how this experience shapes and at times dictates our own approaches to research. With careful consideration, however, this experience can in fact be used to the researcher's advantage. Drawing from methodological literature from several traditions, the following will examine the impact self-disclosure had on the methodology used for my doctoral research.

Introducing self-disclosure

When conducting research directly with young people, self-disclosure becomes naturally embedded in the process. A concept developed by Reinharz and Chase (2003, p. 79), self-disclosure refers to the sharing of 'ideas, attitudes, and/or experiences concerning matters that might relate to the interview topic in order to encourage respondents to be more forthcoming'. As with most methodological techniques, it is designed in order to elicit particular responses and data from participants. Central to all research conducted with young people should be a conscious dismantling of the immediate traditional hierarchical researcher – participant structures at play (Berger, 2001). For research conducted with young people, a more casual and friendly approach is often needed in order to develop a sense of trust and rapport between researcher and participant (Swartz, 2011). This trust and rapport can be heightened through self-disclosure, which also requires a nuanced and conscious revealing of personal information as it relates to the interview itself. For those sceptical of self-disclosure as a methodological tool, there is a tendency to assume that the researchers themselves are more interested in telling their own stories rather than hearing the story of the participant (Abell et al., 2006; Poindexter, 2003). This is where much of the tension lies with coming to terms with the importance and role of self-disclosure – what a researcher discloses very much relies on the uniqueness of each interview.

Having your own story known by participants impacts the entire research process. From the recruitment phase, right through to the writing up of the data, participants aware of the researcher's story are more inclined to not only participate, but also to disclose information of a more personal nature (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). For researchers conducting research within the social sciences, a certain level of the researcher's background will always permeate the work itself (Liamputtong, 2006). Our own experiences often influence our decision to conduct particular research and focus on particular topics. While there are clear benefits of acknowledging and accepting our own experience, we must also be critically aware of how this experience shapes and at times dictates our own approaches to those topics we research. As Liamputtong argues, self-disclosure 'encourages participants to elaborate on their subjective experiences'

(2006, p. 72). This in turn supports development of a level playing field between the researcher and the participant, which allows for the facilitation of some level of trust and rapport between the two parties through the use of data collected as part of the interviews conducted with young people. My work advocates for a focus on using this notion of self-disclosure to the advantage of the researcher.

Self-disclosure as an interview tool arose to prominence largely due to feminist research (Berger, 2001). Self-disclosure allows for the power dynamics evident in much qualitative research to be managed to some degree due to a purposeful display of vulnerability on behalf of the researcher. Because of this, typical displacements such as age, gender, and social class are massaged somewhat in order to create a more equal playing field (Abell et. al., 2006). However, in this telling of their own story, there is a chance that researchers can place too much of themselves into the interview setting, thus refocusing the interview. While not a conscious effort on behalf of the researcher, when discussing topics that may be deemed uncomfortable or sensitive with young people in particular, it is integral to be in constant negotiation with how much one discloses. Through this equalling of the playing field, a greater level of disclosure on behalf of both the researcher and participant is developed.

With research specific to young people, self-disclosure can perform very particular functions depending on the status of the interviewer. The relationship between researcher and participant with regards to age and gender can be altered somewhat through the inclusion of researcher self-disclosure. As previous literature has argued, age and gender often provide particular barriers within qualitative research with the perceived power relationship between the researcher and participant halting any development of trust and rapport (Adler & Adler, 2003; Berger 2001). Within the context of my research, self-disclosure played a pivotal role in allowing for a more friendly and comfortable space for participants to delve into their practice. As Berger (2001, p. 507) suggests, the sharing of personal stories with participants 'fosters relationship formation and exchange between us, allowing all involved to feel a greater sense of rapport.' As a researcher, the ways in which I told my own story and the particular aspects I chose to tell were in a constant negotiation and depended greatly on the participant and the setting in which the interview was taking place.

Another key aspect of self-disclosure is its effectiveness when exploring sensitive topics with participants. Self-disclosure of the researcher plays a significant role in working with young people who experience some level of disadvantage or stigma due to personal experience (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). For the interviews that took place as part of my doctoral research, topics around this disadvantage and how they experienced it arose during the interviews. A topic is deemed to be sensitive if it:

...requires disclosure of behaviours or attitudes which would normally be kept private and personal, which might result in offence or lead to social censure or disapproval, and/or which might cause the respondent discomfort to express (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell, 2000, p. 256).

All the young people participating expressed stories of how they experienced personal discomfort due to particular stigma, alienation or experiences of mental ill health. Although this discomfort is something these young people actively engage with in their music-making practice, all participants were equally as open about their stories within

the context of these interviews. Interestingly, this honesty and openness on my behalf as a researcher, allowed for an easier experience for myself, as it meant that I was able to simply be myself and not enact a particular role. This is especially relevant when working with young people, as connecting on a very direct and 'real' level can ensure the viability of a project.

Self-disclosure was used as part of the methods undertaken within the fieldwork component of my research. Through the use of self-disclosure, a re-conceptualisation of participants' status allowed access to a broader, more detailed range of data. Self-disclosure was employed comprehensively, from the recruitment phase, right through to the writing up of the data. Because participants were made aware of and learnt about my own story, they were more inclined to not only participate, but also to disclose information of a more personal nature.

Orientation to the research

The fieldwork itself involved two stages. The first, an initial scoping phase consisted of interviews with 13 young musicians aged 16-25 who identified as being from either a disadvantaged background or as having experiences that they felt were stigmatised. These initial interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one and a half hours. Nine of these interviews took place via Skype, with the remaining four taking place in person. From that initial group of 13 young people, I then identified five participants to participate in stage two of the fieldwork, a series of three face-to-face follow up interviews that took place in person. These follow-up interviews lasted between one and a half to two and a half hours each.

The interviews, as part of this first stage, covered three key areas. We began by discussing the young person's music history. This included what the young person grew up listening to, how those tastes in music have changed over time, and who around them helped to influence those tastes. The second area covered was the young person's own music making process. Prior to the interview beginning, participants sent me a song they had written and were willing to talk about. Discussion occurred around the process undertaken in writing the song and what that song meant to them (a more detailed description of this process is below). A discussion about the role of technology in their practice helped to finish off the interview, with particular focus on how they would share their music online, the importance of different online statistical 'metrics' of success, and the role communicative technologies including mobile phones and social media played.

The follow-up interviews that occurred during stage two of the fieldwork all covered a different topic. The first discussed some of the general findings that arose from the initial interviews that took place as part of stage one of the fieldwork. The second interview involved a discussion around their actual practice, how they went about making a song and breaking down the process. This interview took place where they themselves made music. The third and final interview dealt with the young person's own idea of music community and provided an opportunity to reflect on their local scene. Questions asked in stage one of the research were asked again at the end of the final interview as a way of gauging involvement in the interview process, their approach to their work and their own knowledge may have changed.

During the interviews, discussion would often turn to topics not directly linked to the young person's music making practice. I argue that although not leading directly to new

and relevant data, these discussions enabled a relationship of trust to develop between myself and the participants. This, in turn, allowed participants to be more forthcoming with stories and experiences that were relevant to the work. When discussing these off-topic topics, I was able to develop not just a research-focused relationship with the participants, but also what I termed 'a version of friendship'. Through spending time getting to know these young people, I found myself invested. I therefore felt it my responsibility to be as open as the participant in the hope of further deepening the friendship but also as a way of ensuring the young person opened up and is more comfortable displaying their vulnerabilities. This aspect of the research is discussed in further detail in the following section.

Blurring the lines between researcher and music writer

Part of the self-disclosure framework used as part of this research was to use my own experience as both an ex-musician and as a music writer within the fieldwork. While this led to more robust and detailed data, as detailed below, it did pose several ethical considerations. Through using this insider status, I was at times consciously blurring the lines between the interviews with participants resembling a music journalism interview and an ethnographer conducting research with young musicians. Although this proved to be, at times, a contentious issue, through considered planning the combination of expertise proved to be beneficial.

One of the key components of the research as a whole was developing specific socio-cultural definitions of vulnerability, resilience and technology. During the second of the follow up interviews with one of the participants, Dez, a 17 year old rapper, I opened up about some of the struggles I had had working through some of the conceptual work in my writing. The question I was working through was around how young musicians understand the role of technology and how they might perceive their instrument as a form of technology. For Dez, his voice was his instrument. Dez and I had built up a very respectful rapport, and I felt that the ways he spoke about his own voice related strongly to how I was considering the impact relationships with instruments had on music-making practices. I had, on the spot, opened up and given Dez a 'behind the scenes' view of the work I had been doing in the hope that he could help further some of the ideas:

Michael: Do you, now it's probably quite a hard question to answer, mainly because it's a hard question to ask because I'm not sure.

Dez: How to word it?

Michael: How to word it! [both laugh] Yeah, how to articulate it. Umm, so at the moment with my work I'm looking at instruments and the voice also as an instrument like an extension of the body-

Dez: Yeah.

Michael: And an extension of identity if you like.

Dez: Yeah, ok.

Michael: Yeah, it's a bit... I haven't really bolted it down yet, but that's where I think it's heading. So, I'm really interested in, especially with rappers and singers, how they see their voice as an instrument ...and maybe if we can just start to talk about how you see your voice acting as an instrument?

Dez: Yeah, I see my voice as an instrument in a way of emotion to be honest. Like, without your voice, you can't express yourself.

After much back and forth, we eventually reached the 'eureka' moment:

Michael: Yeah, I guess the question I'm trying to grapple with, especially in relation to the voice as an instrument, like, you can look at a guitar, and it's actually separate to you.

Dez: Exactly, it's something you play.

Michael: But when you pick it up, it becomes part of you.

Dez: Yeah!

Michael: And part of how you express yourself.

Dez: Yeah.

Michael: But with your voice, it's

Dez: It's a part of you.

Michael: Yeah, but do you see your rapping voice as something separate that you connect to when you're in the studio or connect to when you're writing?

Dez: Yeah, yeah, definitely man. Like, especially the whole rap persona thing. Me being a rapper, like there's normal me, and then there's rapper me when I'm in the booth and I'm ready to work and when I'm recording. Yeah. That's what I'm trying to-

Michael: [laughs] Yes!

Dez: Yeah, I get you man! I understood the question then!

Michael: That's- I am definitely going to quote that man! Instrument as persona – that's brilliant!

Dez: [laughs]

Michael: Thank you! I think you've finally helped me get down exactly what this is! [both laugh].

There was a tendency for participants to, at times, blur the boundaries as to how they perceived the interview itself. For example, during the initial scoping phase of the research I met Dez for the first time at a youth music making facility in which he participated. Conscious of not taking Dez too far away from the studio space, I had begun recording our chat whilst sitting on the couch close to where one of the facilitators was sitting. After our chat had finished, some of the other young people had asked whether I was from a radio station after noticing that I had my phone out to record the chat. (It should be noted that at this time, Dez had signed a consent form and it was Dez who explained to the other young people the purpose of the interview.) Later on in the interview process, during the first of the three case study interviews with Dez, he asked, 'Will these interviews be available online to listen to?'. This was actually mentioned with a certain level of excitement, suggesting that he could let other rappers know about his story. Although Dez did understand the context of the interviews – at the beginning of each interview I ensured that all participants were aware that the interviews would be de-identified – I again mentioned the fact that the interviews will be de-identified and the purpose of doing so was to protect the identity of all young people participating in the research. Although not a conscious decision on my behalf, this blurring between a research interview and media interview provided space for the young

person to delve into their practice.

Another participant, 18-year-old folk singer-songwriter Julia, also purposefully blurred the lines between media interview and research interview. She saw the importance of doing more industry-based interviews, and viewed the interview that took place as part of the research as 'good practice'. She had clearly stated that she was aware that the interviews she participated in as part of the research would go into a lot more personal detail than a music journalism interview, however saw the interviews not just as a way of having her own story heard, but also as aiding her in her career.

The 'I don't know why' phenomena

There were obvious benefits of adopting interviewing as part of the methodology. The sequencing of both the questions and the interviews themselves allowed for a real sense of trust and rapport to be built between researcher and participant. An unintended benefit of the work however was the 'I Don't Know Why' phenomena.

While there is an obvious connection between the opportunity the interviews provided the participants to reflect upon and consider their music-making in a new way and the literature on action research and designing methodology specifically as a form of intervention, it should be acknowledged that this is only part of what the interviews uncovered. The actual ramifications for the young person concerning how their practice changes as a result of this opportunity is less obvious. Although it is a step too far to argue that the interviews acted as a form of straightforward intervention, the possibility arose of interviews providing an opportunity where the young person may be more aware of the decisions they make when music-making as a result of their participation. The interviews provided an inadvertent form of intervention, one not designed specifically by the research team.

As a function within the context of the methodological design, providing this opportunity to the young person opened the young person up to discussing their music-making practice in a more considered and thoughtful manner. The opportunity to take a step back and sit and reflect on their practice and the reasons why they engage simply never emerge for the majority of young musicians. This is perhaps summed up best by the responses of Noah, a young electronic musician who participated in stage one of the fieldwork. Noah told me at the end of the interview that it had 'really made me think about what I do on an unconscious level'. He then emailed me, a month later, to let me know that a friend had asked him about the consequence of a personal story, a story that is told in one of his songs. Noah had refused to discuss the story with his friend but noted that he felt quite comfortable telling the full story to me. Noah's response highlights two key findings. The first is that for him, and for many of the young people I spoke to, music making acts as a supportive and safe space to explore ideas, feelings and emotions that they would otherwise feel uncomfortable navigating. It also, through talking about this experience with someone external such as a researcher, allowed Noah to gain perspective on his experience.

Exactly what this interview opportunity provides for the young person is, for the time being, up for debate. While some participants have stated that they now approach their own music-making practice conscious of this new found reflectiveness, not all participants offered this insight.

As Touraine (1980) argues, it is important as a researcher to present a hypothesis or a theory as opposed to an interpretation of someone's practice. The data is then found in

the participants' own analysis of their actions. According to Touraine, there is also a value in participants discussing their practice in a setting that is 'as far removed as possible from their practical activity' and that 'this disequilibrium forces them to look for a deeper significance of their action' (1980, p. 11). Because this interview was the first instance in which participants were asked to reflect on their practice, this may go some way as to providing evidence for this 'I don't know why' phenomena.

In terms of offering up an interpretation as to why participants felt compelled to consider their practice in a new way, Touraine's 'Intervention of the Researcher' argument is helpful as it offers a theoretical framework that supports this reflexivity. Outside of this context however, I feel that there is only value in the second point regarding the researcher being allowed space to consider their analysis. By taking the practice context out of the interview, participants may temper their answers and responses according to what they believe the external interview setting requires. While by removing the practice context, participants are able to respond to questions in a more objective manner, this depends on exactly what the research is seeking to address.

Interviewing experts

For the purpose of this research, the young people who participated were conceptualised as experts in their field. As a researcher, I had consciously and quite openly positioned myself as someone conducting these interviews in order to learn. I was the 'failed musician'. As with the story opening this piece, part of the rationale behind self-disclosure was to ensure participants felt comfortable in telling their own experiences. Through disclosing my own experiences with music making, I was allowing the participant more room to display their knowledge.

Traditional conceptions of 'expertise' within the context of qualitative research are situated around institutional understandings. Much of the literature on interviewing experts appears to focus solely on those working in large scale institutions or organisations (Collins & Evans, 2008) and all appear to go some way to reinstate traditional social and workplace hierarchies (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). In fact, some literature actually supports a push towards 'factual' knowledge, or technical expertise, a further reinforcement of these traditional hierarchies.

Within both the music industry and the youth arts field, those on the ground practising and participating in the norms of the field are very rarely considered the expert. The music industry may call producers, engineers, record label representatives and even music journalists the experts. That is, they are observing but are external to what is happening on the ground. They have also most likely been around for some time. Similarly, within the youth arts domain, experts would be considered those observing what is happening on the ground, and to an extent external to the real lived experience, namely those who facilitate youth arts services or programs.

Unlike traditional research with experts, the young people who participated in the fieldwork are perhaps not used to being labelled experts, and traditionally are not really thought of as experts. When considering the role of expertise in qualitative research, those 'expert' voices that do not play into the conservative hierarchical conceptions are often overlooked. Young people's own lived experiences are left out of the discussion about interviewing experts within the existing literature. This not only diminishes the experiences of young people, but also goes some way to halting any progressive and

relevant developments in the ways in which we conceptualise youth and their experiences.

There is some literature that seeks to move forward conceptions of expertise however, pushing towards a more socio-cultural model. With regards to what makes expert knowledge, Michael Meuser and Ulrike Nagel (2009, p. 25) in the book *Interviewing Experts* suggest this:

A co-mingling between expert knowledge of active participants and that of professional- scientific experts takes place, resulting in the formation of hybrids between formerly separated fields of knowledge and symbolic orders.

The context of much of this discussion from Meuser and Nagel surrounds the professional world. Elsewhere within the same book, the only mention of 'young' or 'youth' is associated with the *lack* of knowledge on behalf of the researcher. With no mention of other types of experts, the text inadvertently perpetuates the traditional hierarchical understanding of expertise.

What I found however was that these young people displayed both that 'on the ground' expertise and an incredibly detailed knowledge of the wider concerns of the industry. These young people themselves had the expertise on how, as an 'early career musician', they could make it. Often during the last interview with the participants, discussion would move towards the topic of their local scene, who the new bands are and why the participant believes these bands are getting noticed, as well as how they see the music industry for those starting out. The young people participating in my research were incredibly prepared for the industry and what it might bring them.

Conclusion

As the body of this paper suggests, for much work conducted with young people, the focus appears to lie on the types of data that can arise. The ways in which this data is able to come to the fore needs greater focus. Research conducted with young people, especially those deemed to be 'vulnerable' is fraught with the implications of the over-researched agenda (Neal et al., 2015). Through the work conducted as part of my doctoral research I created a knowing space. Through the sharing of my own story, the young people participating were given room to share and reflect upon their own personal experiences. With many of these personal revelations occurring often for the first time, there were also the unintended benefits of the young person considering their practice in a more holistic manner.

Through self-disclosure, the positioning of myself as the 'ex-musician', and the blurring between my role as a researcher and music writer, participants were able to consider their own position within the industry in different and more authentic ways. Many participants revelled in the opportunity afforded to display their expertise, often showcasing their own knowledge of their local scenes as well as concerns they had for their own futures in music. This expertise and confidence was also given space due to the interview at times resembling a music journalism or radio interview.

Methodologies that engage directly with young people need to employ more innovative and youth specific techniques. Although at times messy, a tool such as self-disclosure allows the researcher an opportunity to gain insight into all aspects of young people's

practices. As has been evidenced throughout this paper, through the disclosure of the researchers own story to the participant, a greater sense of rapport and trust can be built, which in turn allows for interview settings which are conducive to more detailed and comprehensive data.

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About the author

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