

Landscapes of possibility. When autobiography becomes autoethnography

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Abstract

With many years of experience as a family therapist I became a researcher and embarked upon a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. I had wanted to illuminate the art, craft, and the aesthetics therapy where therapist expertise is creating the space for and architecting a dialogical process. Traditional research methods were too limiting for this project so I created my own bespoke methodology.

This paper shows examples of how I have blended reflection on personal and professional experiences and conversational storytelling in writing my doctoral thesis. I discuss details of my methodological journey and articulate these ideas through the creative use of two reflexive dialogues. These illuminate the value of systemic conversation and storytelling, how we make meaning and sculpt our identities.

What is therapy and how do we research lived experience?

My mother was somewhat alarmed when I left my job as senior manager in a Social Services Department to train as a psychotherapist and I remember her saying “What’s this job you’re going to do – chat to people?” I very inadequately tried to explain... She continued “Don’t you just tell them to pull themselves together and appreciate the good things that they have got?”

This story was summoned in an early conversation about methodology with my doctorate supervisor. In some dark recess of my mind lurked the idea that what I do and what I know do not have such great value, because all I do is *chat* to people. In that moment, in that conversation we had incarnated an idea. I had begun to understand why I do not always value the knowledge and experience that I have... and why I needed to explicate in the form of research the how, what, and why I perform as a systemic therapist and indeed what therapy is and can be.

My decision to embark on a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice prompted an interesting conversation with my daughter:

“Mum, I have often wondered why the whole of your working life and career has been about helping people to create a family. And now you’re wanting to write about it in the form of a Professional Doctorate?”

“I’ll read this paragraph to you Amelia,” I responded, “I have included it in every piece of work I’ve written from the beginning of my studies and it has made me realise that doing research can be as useful as doing therapy. Indeed, I’ve come to the view that therapy is research and research can be therapy- just worded differently...and it may help to answer your question...”

“There is a story in our family that as my grandmother lay dying, she called out for her mother. This would not sound unusual until you know that her mother died when she was very young and that she spent years of her childhood in an orphanage. Indeed, as both my parents’ -your grandparents- had an orphaned parent, the idea of childhood loss and abandonment has been a thread that has weaved itself through generations of our family and the tapestry of my life. My reflections led me to consider how this story provides a context, history and the engine that has driven my doctoral research endeavour. I have come to realise that this gravitational pull of history has held me in one particular orbit that has shaped and formed both meaning and language in my personal and professional life. It has inculcated a passionate desire to find families for dislocated children; make a career in social work and then as a family therapist... And to marry a man who lost his father as a baby and his homeland by the age of seven.”

I was reminded of what Ann Cunliffe said about research that “Scholarship is not purely an intellectual act but is situated embodied and intimately woven with who we are. Who we are is about we not I, our sense of self and scholarship are shaped in relational, poetic and political moments. And, this means implicitly that we have responsibility to others.” (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 2)

Putting myself in the picture

As I work with people I have needed to develop as a conversational artist and achieve a relational, reflexive and in the moment practice. This requires me to travel inwards, to know the inner stories I tell myself as I listen to the stories of the people that I work with. Conversational practice is multi-layered with each layer having multiple influences. So that I move in and out—and have come to experience—many levels of awareness as I listen. I take into the room layers of experience with its contextually and culturally shaped meaning so that the words that I hear are likely to sift through the narratives of my own life. I have to reflect moment-by-moment in order to be aware how my own experiences and contexts might be impacting on the listening and responding.

It is only in the depth reflection and the storying of my life as a researcher that I have come to fully acknowledge the part that the therapist’s own life plays in this dialogical process. It takes courage for both the client and therapist to engage in this mutually affecting, two-way process. It can be exciting as much as it can be terrifying. People are brave to talk to us and we have to be brave to listen. We can never know what people will bring and we can never know how this will resonate with our own experience, we only know that it will...

An emerging methodology

My studies for a Professional Doctorate have enabled me to establish my professional identity by validating a way of working that has developed out of years of reflexive, ethical conversational practice. In so doing it has offered a challenge to the traditional approaches of researching lived experience. In taking a “relational turn” research becomes *processual* with a focus on context, connections, events, and relations rather than a *content* approach of collecting and analysing data as static disconnected things. It has empowered me to put into words what I have come to know, and how I have come to know it. In so doing I have created a language of networks and relationships by illuminating them as dynamic, interconnected phenomena.

With over forty years of professional experience as a social worker and family therapist I have come to believe that we are created in relationship and weave our personal lives from skeins of imagination, memories and stories which have been [in]formed within cultural, temporal, and historical contexts. For example, I was an undergraduate sociology student in the late 1960's. Our teaching and learning about power and power relationships had a Marxist/feminist bias. We actively expressed our frustration with political ideologies that upheld inequality, oppression and taken-for-granted privileges. I was swept along in a wave of developing politicisation by an active feminism, marches of solidarity and university sit-ins. Until I had written my thesis, I had not appreciated how much I have been [and still are] influenced by this social context and how much these ideas have shaped knowledge acquisition, meaning and performance throughout my life.

I have blurred the traditional boundary between research and practice and in doing so have made transparent the role of both the researcher and the practitioner. I foreground reflexivity and ethical practice whilst using and developing systemic theories and practices to create an original method of inquiry. I have illuminated the emergent quality of this research process by “welcoming the unexpected as a way of learning about what I was looking for without knowing I was looking for it.” (Moscheta, 2011, p. 91). I had a sense of wanting to demonstrate, but no way of articulating, what Katz and Shotter (1999) describe as: “Those living moments in which certain not-yet-related events come into a... dialogically structured, responsive relation with each other... such moments are *poetic* in that they are to do with processes of first-time creation... once-occurrent events of Being.” (p. 4).

As the research process evolved, and I started to write about a practice that I had up until now only performed, I began to conceptualise, reflect on and make explicit in my writing things that up until now had been implicit, unacknowledged, and that I often thought of as “instinctive”. I was beginning to fully acknowledge the relationship between reflexivity and ethical practice; that expertise was not about theoretical or technical knowledge, and that for me, it had developed in, and through experience and the courage to improvise. It had become clear that there was nothing to distinguish between me as practitioner, and me as researcher. Whether it was in one session in a clinic, or over a number of years in my private practice, every collaborative conversation offers the possibility of becoming a “poetic moment”.

Having established the focus of the research - “*Moving Stories: Conversations in Creating Family*” - I had to find a way of putting these interactive processes under the lens of qualitative inquiry. I had to capture in microscopic detail the how/what/why a profound, reflexive and collaborative conversation is co-created. I was, however, mindful of the difficulty in representing the “ecological” and multi-layered aspects of living systems; that “there is no model or diagram [of living systems] that can

effectively illustrate the learning within the context.” (Bateson, 2016, p. 177). When I invite others into a performance that privileges language practices, I know that transformation does not happen in some sort of serendipitous way. Indeed, I have to be “a conversational artist – an architect of a dialogical process – whose expertise is in the arena of creating space for and facilitating a dialogical conversation.” (Anderson and Goolishian, 1998, p. 27).

In the beginning, my first Director of Studies had encouraged me to consider a traditional (and no doubt typical) approach to social inquiry. She suggested that, given I had permission from the licensed fertility clinic in which I work, I invite eight couples/individuals [patients] to be interviewed as research participants. I would then collect and document personal narratives, interpret individual responses to a pre-determined schema, and then choose some analytical format to produce findings, themes, and conclusions. I went along with this for several years, never quite understanding why I felt so uncomfortable. I wasn't sure how interviewing eight participants *after* the initial consultation would give a sense of the co-created, collaborative and often-transformative process that can happen *within* the consultation. In any event, after a great deal of effort it proved to be impossible to find any participants.

In grappling to find a way forward, my Director of Studies had given me a thesis to read on a related topic in order to consider its methodological format and conclusions. It confirmed for me the complexity of finding an appropriate method for researching living systems, and added to my frustration with any schema that attempts to categorise lived experience. For I had worked in a situation where categorisation by a professional “expert” could become an act of oppression and demonstrate a “power over” position with people becoming objects rather than participants.

How my autobiography became autoethnography

This thesis then became an entirely emergent process, I wrote about my own life as both therapist and client. I crafted an autobiographical tapestry of conversations from the material of a lifetime's reflection on my lived experience. And, in order to sustain an academic rigour, my stories were framed within a systemic discourse in the sense that every thought, idea and word was mediated through a consideration of its *ecology*.

As storyteller I became aware of both inner and outer voices and thus positioned myself as both participant and observer. Although my stories were based on memory of real people and real events I was not simply reporting and describing episodes. I was creating them in a literary format and setting them in a new bed of reflection to illustrate meaning and the relationship to the performance of my life. Individually they sat up and spoke to the richness of lived experience not otherwise shown or heard. Together they not only offered the reader the experience of knowing from within and alongside, but also over time and across context. My personal narratives were based on facts but not completely determined by them being more involved with “narrative truth” and less concerned with “historical truth”. The only real name used is my own, with my responses and reflections as accurate as they can be to my own concept of truth. I did not describe the past *as it was* but rather, I am giving voice to the significance and meaning of my experiences.

However, meaning is not permanent and for each new telling the story is modified. The past is not frozen in the moment of experience; rather it is actively reconstructed in our memory. In this

autobiographical tapestry, the personal and professional are woven together with a provocative mix of story and theory. The content, process, meaning and spirit of the collaboratively co-created conversations in this thesis represent the heart of this research and to a large extent its data. ...And in so doing autobiography became autoethnography...

This thesis could also be described as narrative inquiry, in the sense that it is a methodology based on collecting, reflecting on and re-presenting [my own] stories. The epistemology of this approach views reality and knowledge as socially constructed, and that knowledge is situated within contexts and embedded within historical, cultural stories, beliefs and practices. Narratives are particularly suitable for portraying how people create meaning *within* a culture *and* how they experience their position in relation *to* a culture. Through stories people can illuminate their strategies for living and, how they make theoretical sense of their lives. By taking this approach we move away from the notion that identities are “fixed”, towards the view of identity as something that is constantly being reconstructed and constituted through relationship and “performed” through the stories we tell. Narratives have affinities with other types of stories, within which metaphor is used to make sense of the world in a way that enables us to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (Bochner, 2000, p. 270).

Creative writing and storytelling as research data

I had encountered Michael White and David Epston’s philosophical approach to Narrative Therapy while studying for a Master’s Degree in Couple Therapy. They said it is only through the experience of reflecting on our experience with a conversational partner that we make meaning of it. Then, in the telling and retelling of these stories, they can take on enough substance to change our lives. I have always held a healthy irreverence to “simple totalisations” that capture and restrict our thinking. Narrative Therapy then, takes the form of a dialogical conversation, framed in the context of researching one’s life. This enables a reflexive *re-engagement with*, rather than simply a *re-experience of*, our lived experiences. It embraces the idea that competing narratives represent different realities, not simply different perspectives on the same reality. So that “stories provide the frames that make it possible for us to interpret our experience, and these acts of interpretation are achievements that we take an active part in” (White, 1995, p. 15).

Retelling the telling

In October 2005, I had the experience of telling my story at a two-day workshop for narrative practitioners in Manchester facilitated by David Epston. I also had the experience of *re-telling* the *telling* in a conversation with Sarah, in preparation for me writing a piece about my experience with David:

Sarah: “How come you ended up being interviewed by David Epston?”

Helen: “Are you prepared for the long answer Sarah?”

Sarah: “Of course, if it helps you get your thoughts together for writing the paper, Helen.”

Helen: “I’ve always taken heed of theoretical, political and philosophical considerations in my work, probably because my first degree was in sociology. I can’t help but think sociologically and

anthropologically. I have always held what I consider to be a healthy irreverence to constructed discourse, models, theories and practices that don't allow for a spirit of adventure and unique outcomes in the work. – in other words, the “landscape of possibilities”. Working therapeutically with children gave me the courage to improvise and “suspend” any theoretically-inspired technique. The child and I *together* learn and develop creative ways of communicating.

This has probably been why I am interested in the idea that, in the modern world, considerations of rule and code often supplant notions of personal ethics. As a social work manager in the field of adoption and fostering, I seemed to spend ever more of my time implementing legislation and contriving bureaucratic checks and balances. This distanced me from what I considered fundamental; to create a vision of practice with an ethical underpinning that puts the child and the relationship at its heart... Sorry, Sarah. I'm moving away from what you asked, but as I start talking about it, I start remembering earlier stories that have been significant... But, in a way, that's just what the conversation with David was like- appreciating the significance of long-forgotten stories, in shaping meaning and identity.”

Sarah: “Isn't it interesting, Helen, how the re-telling-of-the-telling is thickening the story?”

Helen: “Indeed it is, Sarah. That's what I find so life-enhancing about good conversational practice... And, I promise, I am moving towards answering your question of how I got to be interviewed by David Epstein... I will get to the point, but how and why I got there feels equally important.

When I first started working for a national organisation providing relationship therapy, I was originally trained in the “psychodynamics” of human relationship. I was encouraged to think of things like: *Which of all of one's neurotic needs was being met by stepping in to this profession? or, How did this decision relate to unresolved issues in one's family of origin? or, Did this decision relate to one's attempts to work through an enmeshed relationship with one's mother (yes!) or attempts to work through a disengaged relationship with one's... (father, in my case!).* It also highlighted the dominance of the “termination-as-loss” metaphor that had been particularly prominent in supervision when discussing endings with clients.

I was becoming aware of a discomforting sense of transition both in my life and my work. Some theoretical aspects of familiar approaches were beginning to be uncomfortable bedfellows with my changing ways of thinking. Research undertaking for a Master's Degree in Couple Therapy had capacitated an in-depth reflection of me-in-relation to another and others, and to ever-widening contexts. Rather than frame my thinking about my family in terms of [problematic] psycho-dynamics, I was encouraged to start thinking *systemically*. I started to set my family in its historical, cultural and temporal context, in order to have greater understanding of a “me-in-relationship”.

I had been born into an extended family where three generations lived together – a matriarchal tribe – with tenacious women who distanced themselves from, and generally derided, their menfolk. I realise now, my consequent struggle, to understand what a couple-relationship as an entity looked like, had taken my husband and me into couple therapy and also drawn me towards training as a couple/family therapist.

...Do you know, Sarah, this conversation is allowing me to unpick the reasons for my discomfort, put them in context and make some sense and gain a deeper understanding of the major changes in my life...”

Sarah: “I think that is what narrative/systemic practice hopes to achieve, don’t you?”

Helen: “It certainly seems to, and it’s why I’m so committed philosophically to the approach... At that time – 2001 – a significant paradigm shift was taking place in the organisation I worked for, distancing from psychodynamic and moving towards systemic thinking.

Although I had appreciated my initial psychodynamic training, it had engendered a sociological queasiness with its leaning towards individual psychology/pathology without any cultural/contextual exploration, and explains why it had never sat comfortably with – in fact, it ran counter to – my feminist values. The Master’s degree enabled me to reclaim my feminist self by a re-examination of knowledge through the lens of women’s perspectives and values. In researching couple relationship, there was a growing recognition that there could be a masculine bias in theory and research methodology. I liked Carol Gilligan’s (1982) study, where women’s voices could be heard in their own right and with their own integrity. Researching the nature of couple relationship and interviewing couples in their own homes led me deeper into an understanding of my own life, and why I had felt so consumed with the idea of maintaining a sense of individuality in a couple relationship. This led to the MA research question: “How does a couple in a long-term relationship balance individuality and coupledness?”

Sarah: “It’s interesting where conversations like this today can take us, isn’t it?”

Helen: “Yes, it certainly is interesting... Anyway, getting back to the workshop, Sarah... I had met and attended workshops given by Michael White and had wanted to experience David Epston’s style of working as the other half of this creative duo of writers and thinkers. The workshop was designed to practice the practice of asking questions. David started the session by writing a question on a flipchart:

Why are you so proud of the problem-from-the past that either disappeared, dissolved or you overcame somehow?

Sarah: “I’m guessing that the question had some real meaning and really struck a chord with you?”

Helen: “Indeed it did Sarah. The question hit me like a bolt from the blue in the same heart-thumping way; as if propelled by some inner physiological compulsion that one experiences in a Quaker Meeting, before one gets up to speak. I knew that I had spent the previous five years immersed in the quest to answer such a question. I raised my hand immediately.”

Sarah: “Sounded like Big Stuff, then”

Helen: “Sure was... However, I don’t think I mentioned to David that the [ongoing] problem-from-the-past I had in mind was the relationship with my partner! Mind you, it wasn’t about the content of the “problem-from-the-past”, it was about the overcoming and moving on from it, or more importantly, *changing the nature of my relationship to it.*”

In Conversation with David Epston

Helen: [Putting up my hand] “I guess the word “proud” really appeals to me David. I have been a couple-therapist for fourteen years, and this year I have been awarded a Master’s Degree in Couple Therapy. I feel really proud, not only of the academic achievement, but also inspired by the idea that

the quest to find the research question set me on the road to understanding more about myself and the *me-in-relationship*. So, the process of learning and reflecting on the past has not exactly meant I've overcome a problem. It is more that I now see things differently, and therefore think about myself differently."

David: "Can you think of another time in your life that has caused you to think differently about yourself, Helen?"

Helen: "I don't know why this has come to mind, David, but I remember being an enthusiastic twenty-two-year-old looking for something to do in the year after my sociology degree. Before deciding to become a social worker, I had thought of teacher training. At that time there was a serious shortage of qualified teachers; schools were taking on any graduate to fill the gaps. I applied to become a supply teacher in a primary school and I was given a class of thirty-nine five-year-olds, twenty-six of whom had just started school! It really makes me laugh now that I had no doubt, and was unqualified to boot, thinking I could handle a reception class of thirty-nine children at the age of twenty-two... But I did it!

... As I am telling you this, David, I am thinking of other times throughout my life when I have taken risks, and achieved great things, because I saw them as exciting possibilities. I never look – no, rather, I never even think of looking for any pit-falls."

David: "Sounds like you privilege the idea of taking action and stepping into the unknown as an exciting possibility rather than a possible problem."

Helen: "I'd never thought of it like that before... The other supply teacher at the school was a lovely woman called Sheila, who was nearing retirement and only wanted to work intermittently. We hit it off immediately. We happened to live very near each other, and together travelled the fairly long bus journey to and from the school. Those journeys became fast-track tutorials for me on how to teach. I learned so much from practicing it and talking about it at the same time. I was particularly struck by the way Sheila listened to, talked to, and respected children... In this conversation today, I have recognised that my preferred way of acquiring knowledge is in the threading together the practice, the theory, with the personal relationship... I know that I was able to develop a confidence and joy in working with groups of children, and to take this newfound knowledge and experience into my career in social work with children and families."

David: "Helen, I wonder what your relationship with Sheila tells *you* about *you*?"

Helen: "I remember that Sheila had told me her husband had some sort of mental illness; that it was necessary for her to be able to take time off to look after him. I sensed she trusted me enough to tell me something that was not so easily shared and acceptable to talk about over thirty years ago. I have just realised in talking about it today, too... And, I had never really considered the importance of it... And, what has indeed become a life-long habit of *finding a significant relationship, both personal and professional*, through which I (in fact, we) could develop and grow. That feels really important – both the doing and the *re-membering*."

David: "Helen, if Sheila were at your MA graduation ceremony, what would she say to you?"

Helen: "She'd say... *Well done, you* ... You know, that's really funny, I often hear myself saying that to my children, and the people I work with, today."

David: “You know, Helen, that listening to your story makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. You are putting into words; developing a narrative about the “knowledges” you have acquired in living your life. You seem to have reclaimed something important.”

Helen: “Yes, I have just realised that this has become a life-long process; my way of being ME!”

Concluding the conversation with Sarah...

Sarah: “The conversation with David seems to have been really important?”

Helen: “Absolutely, and it is only in re-telling you in this moment that I am able to put into words what this experience meant to me. On reflection, I felt truly acknowledged, not only heard but also that David had been affected by what I had said. I experienced a true sense of connection in the same way that I had with Sheila. It is only now, in conversation with you, that I realise how significant it was. So, this witnessed conversation with David confirmed for me that therapeutic conversations should be more about the people, who the people are, rather than the problems the people have. The problems may speak about what is important to us, and they may be part of the way of getting where we are going, but they do not define who we are. We are much more than that.”

On reflection...

In the conversation with David Epston, I was encouraged to reconsider a long forgotten, and ostensibly minor experience, at a deeper level. I was able to recognise its power and importance in helping to shape my identity. This conversation of “acknowledgement” had an enormous impact on me. It illuminated how much I have privileged relationship and dialogical conversation in my own learning and development. For many years after this conversation, I summoned this story in my imagination and found it uplifting, in the sense that it consistently reminded me how I have sculpted my identity. It is through the experience of reflecting on our experience that we make meaning of it. I have come to believe this is one of the primary tasks of conversational practice. In the telling and retelling of our stories, they can take on enough substance to change our lives.

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