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Taking refuge in the branches of a guava tree: the difficulty of retaining consenting and non-consenting participants' confidentiality as an indigenous researcher

Dawn Mannay

Abstract

Issues of anonymity of place, participants and visual images are well documented in social science research¹. However, in this paper, I move beyond issues of the immediate concerns of anonymity to a wider application that encompasses the position of research participants, the researcher, and that of individuals who are unaware that they are a focus of research. The research study focused on the experiences of mothers and daughters residing in a marginalised housing area in urbanised South Wales, United Kingdom. The paper draws specifically on data that presents the darker side of family life; and explores the affective landscapes of trust, confidentiality, silence, and the unintended consequences that encroach upon, and beyond, research relationships in indigenous qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: confidentiality, ethics, experimental writing, familiarity, informed consent

Introduction

Often when we discuss issues of confidentiality we consider the consenting participants in our research study. However, lives are not lived in isolation and participant's accounts often include a range of characters who are enlisted in the staging of their life story. In the process of data production researches are offered subjective perspectives of these other lives without their 'owners' informed consent. This is particularly problematic when stories are troubling, in the form of domestic and familial abuse, and especially so when the researcher is indigenous and may know these 'unknowing others'.

This paper explores these ethical and affective elements of qualitative research, employing a poetic form to communicate a sense of the emotional cost of maintaining confidentiality, and the disempowering force of surreptitious knowledge. The paper also draws on the analogy of the character Sampath Chawla, from Kiran Desai's novel 'Hullabaloo in the Orchard Garden'.

Desai's (1998) fictional novel 'Hullabaloo in the Orchard Garden' is a satire on provincial India featuring the story of Sampath Chawla; a disappointment to his family who loses his job at the local post office and runs away from home to take refuge in the branches of a guava tree. Initial interest from the towns' residents is in Sampath, the man who has lost his mind and become a hermit.

However, when Sampath, drawing from many idle hours at the post office illicitly reading other people's letters, reveals intimate secrets to his audience beneath the guava tree their perception is altered; Sampath is transformed into a holy man and a

seer. The writers of the letters are oblivious to his intrusion and the individuals discussed by the letter writers perhaps completely unaware that their personal lives were ever the subject of a letter; and I recognised an uneasy parallel between Sampath's misdemeanour and the data produced in my qualitative research.

The data presented was drawn from a wider research project that employed visual and narrative methods of data production to explore the experiences of mothers and daughters, residing in a marginalised housing area in urban South Wales, United Kingdom. The research focussed on the ways in which the boundaries of the immediate culture and memories of the past mediate participants' educational and employment histories and futures.

Taking refuge in the branches of a guava tree

Insider and outsider dichotomies are perhaps no longer valid

But I know I am 'researcher near'²

For I once lived here

This intensifies the need to 'make the familiar strange again'³

To find strategies to guard against familiarity⁴

I attend to this, visually⁵

Collages, photographs, maps and narratives creating and reflecting the everyday lives

Of mothers and their daughters, women and girls

They share their worlds

Art may open up experiences, offer new ways of knowing, make the familiar strange

But talk, their stories around the images, auteur theory 6, brings more

Lives not spoken of before

I listen to the experiences in the stories and learn of lives through many characters

Sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, lovers, enemies and friends

The cast never ends

Unintended consequences encroach upon me the researcher, these other characters

Unaware that I am now privy to these recollections, I am characterised

I am Sampath Chawla 7

‘Hullabaloo in the Orchard Garden’ a beautifully crafted satire on provincial India 7

Sampath loses his job at the local post office and runs away from home, free

Takes refuge in a guava tree

At first Sampath, the man who has lost his mind and becomes a hermit, ridiculed

Then Sampath is transformed, magically, into a holy man and a seer

An oracle to revere

Drawing from many idle hours gleaning information by reading other peoples letters

At the post office, he reveals intimate secrets to his audience beneath the guava tree

Holy man and seer

Writers of letters are oblivious to Sampath’s intrusion and the individuals discussed

Perhaps completely unaware that their personal lives were ever subject to this link

Permanence of paper and ink

Letter writers are my participants and they control of the stories they choose to share

But every story involves a cast who are not privy and thus not giving consent

Which I can't prevent

Reflections on childhood experience confront us with the past self, often painfully 8

Futures haunted by phantoms of the past, will impact on the present 9

Pandora's box

My questions were never quite prepared for the answers, for stories elicited, shared

'Villains' appear in stories, the violent, cruel abuser, sacrifice, survival and such

I know too much

'Suffered at my father's hands', 'all of 'em booting me in the head', 'frightened'

'The abused poor battered child', 'beatings every day', 'love and hate him', 'helpless'

I know too much

Participants detail traumatic memoirs of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect

I have no recourse to confront the characters from the retrospective accounts

Unlike Sampath

Unlike Sampath I can not hide in the guava tree and will meet storied individuals

They will not be aware I have been exploring the consequences of their past actions

But I will know

So unlike Sampath I will carry my knowledge silently and when I meet someone

Who I now feel differently about, I will smile widely, as though nothing has changed

My face rearranged

Responding differently in my interactions with the 'villains' will not be an option

That may entail some sort of explanation, an explanation that would betray the trust

Of those who trusted

This is difficult, it involves an element of pretence, a false veneer, ugly in its deceit

But also necessary, unavoidable, inside I am quelling the flames of new knowledge

Outside, serene

In this way all that I learnt has acted to compromise my relationships with others

In ways that I did not envisage at the beginning, knowledge is power, but

Also disempowering

Inquiry is, at all times, 'political and moral' ¹⁰

Lives are never lived in isolation, for we are linked in a complex web of connections

We ask our consenting participants about their own lives but learn about

Non-consenting others

We carry this knowledge

They are unaware

Unchallenged

Irresolvable

Painful

Ethical?

We can not take refuge in the branches of a guava tree

Unfortunately

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