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Heuristic research as a vehicle for personal and professional development

Kim Etherington

This paper reports one aspect of a more extensive narrative inquiry into how two counsellors experienced their involvement in heuristic research and the contribution it made to their personal development. The paper is located within stories of *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research* (2004) and shows how reflexive conversations enabled participants to co-construct meaning and create what Rosanna Hertz called 'reflexive knowledge' (1996).

Key words: heuristic inquiry, heurism, personal development, reflexivity, counsellor

Personal development is not an event but a process, lifelong and career-long: it must and will happen incidentally before and after any training course, through all aspects of life and work (Johns, 1996: xi)

In a recently completed narrative inquiry I set out to explore the stories of practitioners who become reflexive researchers. My interest in this topic grew out of my role as a tutor and supervisor for Master's and doctorate students at the University of Bristol where we attract students interested in using reflexive methodologies. It would be disingenuous to deny that students are influenced by the methodologies they see practised by their tutors and by the level of enthusiasm for those methodologies displayed in our teaching. However, I believe it goes beyond that: reflexive methodologies seem to be close to the hearts and minds of practitioners who value using themselves in all areas of their practices (including research) and who also value transparency in relationships.

I chose a narrative approach for this study because it leads to understandings of how our socialisation and life choices have impacted on the creation of our identities, recognising the importance of locating individuals within their local environments, while also recognising that these, in turn, are situated within, and influenced by, wider historical and socio-cultural contexts (Mishler, 1999). These perspectives have steered me away from

viewing identity as 'fixed' or entirely intra-personal, and towards viewing identities as constantly reconstructed and constituted through interpersonal processes, and 'performed' through the stories that we tell.

My own identity as a researcher has grown out of my initial counsellor training in an integrative humanistic model, underpinned by person-centred philosophies. As a researcher I still value the skills, theories and understandings of moral and ethical issues my training gave me and which I go on using for creating and maintaining research relationships. However, in more recent times I have begun to move away from individualist notions of self informed by humanistic ideas towards relational models, and postmodern and social constructionist thinking and practices. I am influenced also by feminist principles relating to equality and power and by some post-structuralist thinkers, notably narrative therapy practitioners (White and Epston, 1990; Freedman and Combs, 1996).

Research questions

My curiosity about the process of becoming a reflexive researcher stems from the mid-nineties when my colleagues and I noticed how frequently MSc students told us about the sometimes profound personal and professional development they were experiencing through their research training and experience. We began to anticipate these transformations (their word). Many research students, however, seemed surprised at these transformations,

What does this study explore?

- The effect of conducting reflexive research on the development of the researcher

not expecting research training to affect them personally as well as intellectually. I became intrigued to know more about how this came about and began to observe more closely the differences between those who spoke of transformation and those who did not. I noticed that it appeared to be students using reflexive methodologies who reported profound changes rather than students using methodologies in which they bracketed off themselves and their own experiences.

About that time I engaged for the first time in an experiential, collaborative, reflexive study with two of my ex-clients that placed our therapeutic relationships at the heart of our exploration (Etherington, 2000). Through that study I experienced first hand a sense of being changed by the process at a level I had not experienced during my earlier phenomenological research. Since then reflexivity has become central to my work and an important bridge between practice and research.

All of this fuelled my interest in discovering what others had to say about their transitions from practitioner to practitioner-researcher, and in some cases to being an academic or a trainer of researchers, particularly about their relationship with reflexivity. I wanted to use the knowledge embedded in people's stories to inform and support students and trainers in the social sciences who were embarking on this kind of journey. I was curious about where people would begin stories and the manner in which they would tell their stories. I wanted to discover the meanings people ascribed to their experiences and the ways their identities had evolved over time.

Participants

My participants were 17 men and women at Master's, doctorate and postdoctorate levels. Fourteen had been trained in counselling or psychotherapy (having previously qualified in disciplines such as psychology, social work, teaching) and three others were from social work, sociology, and education, respectively. I sent out invitations to participate via colleagues who valued teaching reflexive methodologies at universities throughout the

UK. Some participants were known to me, others were not; some were well known in the field of counselling and psychotherapy research, some were not; some were academics; some were professional researchers; some were practitioners; and some were Master's or doctorate candidates.

Our meetings were like snapshots in time: each of us uniquely embedded in whatever was happening in our lives. The stories they told depended as much on me as the listener, as on them as narrator.

Methods

Fontana and Frey (2000:657) present a view of interviewing that matches my own: 'interviewing and interviewers must necessarily be creative, forget how-to rules, and adapt themselves to the ever-changing situations they face'.

Narrative interviewing can follow the usual format with the researcher asking questions that the participant answers. Where it might be different is that the interviewer also notices or shares personal experience of the topic and comment on the unfolding communication between both parties, thereby creating a sense of 'conversation' rather than 'interview'. Ellis and Berger (2003:162) see the researcher's disclosures as 'more than tactics to encourage the respondent to open up; rather, the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to disclose, given the intimacy of the details being shared by the interviewee'.

As someone who also has a story to tell, my own stories become part of the data. More traditional research methodologies impress upon us the importance of excluding our selves from the research lest we 'contaminate' the data by our presence. Modernist research methodologies permit the researcher to be present providing they are 'bracketed off'. This recognises that as researchers we do influence the research process and it encourages the researcher to name their assumptions so that the work might be evaluated in the light of understanding the researcher's bias. It is only in comparatively recent times that research communities have begun to accept that qualitative research may be rigorously valid when the researcher's process is transparent and used as part of the data (Richardson, 2000; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2000).

Heuristic inquiry

We have come to recognise that the choice

of research topic often has personal significance for the researcher, whether conscious or unconscious (Devereux, 1967). Indeed some methodologies, such as heuristic inquiry described by Moustakas (1990, 1994), require us to have personal connection with the topic of inquiry, which inevitably leads to 'self examination, significant personal learning and change' (Stiles, 1993: 604).

Heuristic inquiry (from the Greek *heuriskein* meaning to discover or find) which developed out of humanistic psychology, attracts researchers in the field of counselling and psychotherapy who are interested in exploring the 'essence of the person in experience' (Moustakas, 1990:39). The stages of heuristic inquiry set out by Moustakas – engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis – echo more general theories of the human creative process that encourage us to reflect on and connect with tacit knowing, images, dreams, hunches, ideas that come between sleeping and waking, intuition, out-of-body experiences, synchronicity and exceptional human experiences (Braud and Anderson, 1998).

'Paula's and Rachel's stories showed how their heuristic process became a vehicle for personal development'

These aspects of experience are gathered along with data collected through conversations with participants, journal writing, and a range of relevant materials, all of which is filtered through the researcher's own experience of the topic under inquiry.

Our students are encouraged to fit their methodologies to the purpose of their research and sometimes this leads them to create a 'complex, quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:6). This bricolage is often underpinned by a heuristic journey of discovery.

This paper

My first two participants, Paula and Rachel, (pseudonyms) replied to an advertisement I sent to previous MSc students on a course I did not teach, so I had not met them before this study, although they had read some of my previous work. I have chosen to focus on their stories of personal development for this paper because they echoed powerfully what other students told us and because their stories showed how their heuristic process became a vehicle for personal development.

Paula's story

Paula had been awarded an MSc about six months before we met. As we conversed I was struck by her use of poetic imagery as she tentatively constructed meaning. Narrative and heuristic inquiry encourage a focus on metaphor, imagery and symbolic language and I have presented our conversation in stanza form (as advocated by Gee, 1991) in an attempt to capture her use of language, using natural breaks and hesitations to shape the lines. My own input is in a different font so that my part in co-constructing the stories can be clearly seen. Research interviewers have been criticised in the past for producing 'silently orchestrated' conversations (Speedy, 2001) and disallowing any view of the power relations in research (Mishler 1986, 1991; Kvale 1996, 1999).

For the limited purposes of this paper I have presented the stanzas under headings that indicate the topics. I do not intend to search the narratives for themes or sub-themes but rather to present the conversations as actually constituting the social reality of the narrator(s) (Bruner, 1991; Riessman, 1993; Ochberg, 1994; Frank, 1995). Narrative analysis views life as constructed and experienced through the telling and re-telling of stories and does not seek to find similarities or conceptual themes, but instead tries to capture the messiness, depth and texture of lived experience.

I invite you as the reader to remain open to your own responses to the stories, to notice how they tell of personal and professional changes experienced through the research process and how moments of insight occur as a result of our reflexive conversations

We enter the first conversation, held in Paula's home, as she is speaking about her excitement on discovering heuristic methodology.

Beginning a heuristic process

That was the catalyst for me.

I thought

'I don't know how I'm going to do this',
because I'd never done research before
I'd never *attempted* anything like this before

but when I read his [Moustakas] book on loneliness
...my connection with heurism
was immediate, for me
very immediate.

Later she referred to this as 'jumping in at the deep end' and reflected that maybe that had not been the best way of approaching it. She went on to describe her experience:

Being in a heuristic process

I go all over the place
I go along different roads
that I've never been before.
It's like you sleep, eat and breathe it
...that's what it is for me.

A lot of my thinking was done very early in the morning
...when I woke up.

I was aware I was there... in the bed,
birds outside singing
(it's very quiet here)

I would start going back,
and coming back.
A bit like this

(she waves her hand from side to side)

Like being on the edge of consciousness, as you've just woken up?

Yes.
It's a lot clearer
at that time of the day.
Because it feels like the rest of the world isn't there
...there were no distractions then.

It was always on my mind.

I'd be thinking about what had been said on the tape
and thinking
'Yes, that was what it was like for me
when I was... such and such'

I was swinging between the present and the past.

Because I was doing heuristic research,
I believed... you had to look at yourself as well...

It was like going into another place
especially early in the morning...

...it invaded my life when I didn't want it to

It has had a great impact on my family
And my home life...
I had to be dedicated.
If I was going to get this right
I needed to put the effort in

It actually answered lots of questions for me
that I thought I'd dealt with years ago
but there were lots of things that came to me
...that I hadn't realised.

I wouldn't be frightened of research now
even though it was very painful... for me

...because I had to resubmit my dissertation.
I had to dig even deeper than I did
...the first time around.

But having done it
It's almost like another world
...another world altogether
...doing research.

Personal development

I always say I'm not academic

I left school with nothing
and all my learning as a counsellor
has been in the last ten years.

I never had any qualifications
So...
for me
it's been a struggle

and when I was at University
because I sometimes struggled with the work
my tutor would say to me

'listen to your own voice
because when you do that you're great.
Don't think you have to be 'academic'
because when you listen to your own voice
you *are* academic!'

Yes, yes. It comes from inside you. It's not someone
else's voice.

Paula intimated that the personal development she had experienced through doing the
research was greater than that she had experienced through being in therapy.

It means
that I've...
[found parts of myself]
I didn't know I had

So
that's given me more confidence

Because when I go to therapy,
(not so much now but a while back,
and I'm sure our clients do this)
there were parts I would hold back

to please my counsellor
and not let those dreadful things out
perhaps *too* much.

Protecting the therapist perhaps?

Yes.

But as a researcher
and being *triggered* into being allowed
to go back further into yourself
there isn't any need to protect.

It's almost as if the research participant is
stimulating you to...
your self-discovery.

There are two of me in there
There's one that's in the here and now
the researcher,
putting it down on paper
and there's another part that's the 'client',
being allowed to say what's going on inside...

So you don't have to *be* the client – you can hold
onto your position of power as the researcher *and*
what your doing can be stimulating and challenging
to your personal development?

Yes.

I've never really looked at it quite like that
but that's true.

It *is*, it's as if you are allowed to go there
if you *want*.

That's powerful isn't it?

It's made me more aware [with my clients].
I thought I knew it all.

It seemed to open me up
even more.

It's almost like I am 'fine-tuned' now.

It's as if I hadn't tuned the radio in properly
before

I'd found a better station if you like.

(we both laugh)

It's coming through clearer?

So the process of doing the research has really
helped you with your client work?

Professional development

I might invite clients to try going back
a bit quicker than I would have before

It's *allowed* me to take a walk backwards
a bit more
with the client

I think it's helped me tune in better
to myself *and* my clients.

I think it's made me a better counsellor

in some funny way
and that's about knowing *me* better

I think I was an OK counsellor before.
It's made me more relaxed,
it's made me more
...open.

I really liked that image you used about the radio – you being tuned to another line, a clearer line and you just said again about how you've cleared those connections to parts of yourself. It sounds from what you are saying now that you are hearing your clients better... you've tuned *yourself* to the same programme so that you are hearing them more clearly somehow.

I think there was part of me
that wasn't quite so flexible before.

I was flexible,
to a degree,
but this has made me...

It's like when you start going to the gym
you get sore joints and aching muscles
but you keep doing it don't you?
But if you keep doing it for a long time
...you get really flexible.

It feels like the research has given me
a really good work-out,
it's really moved things
so that I can go with it more.

Yes and you said before that you felt like you'd been *stretched* – this physical image of going to the gym and having a good work-out is like what you said about being stretched into going beyond where you can normally go to.

You think you can only go so far.
I don't think that any more.

When I submitted my first dissertation
I thought:
'I *can't* do any more.
I can't dig any deeper than this'
and then I had to do it again
and it was quite
...earth shattering.

Paula explained the role of her supervisor in supporting her re-submission. She had previously used a local supervisor who was not attached to her university because she lived so far away. For her re-submission she used a course tutor. As a research supervisor myself I wanted to hear what had made a difference to her.

Supervising a heuristic process

I think it's more to do with the person
rather than having someone who knows the course

but it may be a combination of the two.
She was able to say something like:
 'there's something missing here',
without giving me the answer.

She'd explore a few things,
she'd tap into where I was and how I might add some more
 ...or look for something else...

I think she stretched me,
she made me...
 ...she didn't *make* me
she *allowed* me to look in other areas.

She was digging around as well,
 if you like,
she was *with* me, she was tuning into me,
she tuned into what I needed to be able to move on.

A bit like you were saying before – *she* tuned into *you*?

Yes, yes.

I asked her what the difference was between her first supervisor and the one who helped her through her re-submission.

She wasn't *just* being with me where I was
she was trying to push me beyond that.

I needed someone to push me
and I thought I'd been pushing [myself] all along.

Yes, well you obviously had been – but maybe there was yet another layer for you to reach?

Yes, there was...

So what do you think you added [to the dissertation] to make the difference?

I actually thought I... had been
 ...a bit *too* centred on where I was
 instead of looking at...
other people's work
and how that re-inforced what I was doing.

Almost like I became too engrossed in where I...
 too heuristic if you like.

You got lost?

Lost, yes, lost.
That's a good word.
Yes I felt lost.
I felt like I didn't know where I was going
 almost like I was submerged
 drowning if you like...
I actually felt like I was drowning in my own material.

Right. That's really graphic. So what did your tutor/supervisor do – what did you do – that helped with

Yes, she tried to guide me, steer me
like she was steering me up
rather than me going down.

that?

You were drowning and she was steering you up?

She was pulling me up and saying
'Hang on. Have a look round
and see what else is here'.

...like throwing you a lifebelt so that you could pull
yourself up to the surface?

Oh, absolutely!

I feel quite emotional...

(her eyes fill with tears)

...because there's only one other person
it's funny isn't it -
there's only one other person who was like that.
That was a schoolteacher I had at school
called Mr White.
I still remember him.

He encouraged me and I moved from a B class to an A class.
That's exactly what came to me
when I was with my supervisor.

She did that. Yes.

She brought you up to the surface again so that you
were in a position to look around to see what you
could find to ground you?

That's right.
She was wonderful.
I said to her once:
'you must be a Christian';
she said 'I am'.

You'd been saved...

(shared laughter)

Yes. I never thought of that!

...the image you use, you used the word drowning...
she pulled you up – you looked at what other people
were doing and that somehow gave you some 'land'
to cling to?

Oh yes.

Paula went on to say that she believed she had to resubmit because when she wrote her first
dissertation she was still 'drowning' in her own material.

Jumping in at the deep end

Because I thought that was what I needed to do.
But...
it caught me unawares...

What do you mean when you say 'I thought that was
what I needed to do'?

I thought that heuristic research
involved total submersion and it's not that
it's about being able to submerge
and come back.

It's interesting that you are using that word 'submersion'.
I think what Moustakas says is 'immersion'.

Oh, yes!
That's strange isn't it?
So perhaps my thoughts were that I needed to drown!

(Laughter)

Or maybe it just came up too quickly and you didn't
have a chance to catch your breath (laughing).

Yes. It could be, yes.
Because right at the beginning
I had this immediate response:
 'Oh I want to do this, this is the one'
 straight away -
instead of saying:
 'OK it feels like this is the right one
 let's just put it to one side a minute and
 let's check the other things out as well'.

It's almost as if jumped in at the deep end.

Rachel's story

When we met, Rachel was deeply immersed in her study of how one of her clients and herself were experiencing 'change' in the counselling process. As a psychology student she had previously been trained in traditional research methods that discouraged subjectivity. The freedom to do research differently had powerfully affected her. She began by describing the impact on her sense of identity.

A focus on identity

What came out for me
were some memories that I had forgotten
about my earliest experience
of being back in this country
 because I was born abroad
 ...my heritage is mixed...

The research process brought this about
in my trying to monitor my experiences
and bring into focus things that were on the edge
 on the periphery -
things which have an influence,
 maybe subconsciously,
on what I am, who I am, how I think, how I behave
 all of that.

I've kind of...
 I suppose,
 named - well not named as such
 I've seen the image of what I am
to acknowledge the fact that:
 'Yes, I am - a 57 variety...'

What do you mean by that?

A mix... really.

A mix in terms of you as a person – or methodology
– or what?

Ferguson, in the introduction to a revised version of Gendlin's work *Focusing* (1981) describes focusing as moving 'inward, drawing on information from the deeper, wiser self' that is held in a 'felt sense' within the body that involves 'whole brain knowing', connecting our left and right hemispheres and leading to a sense of release that accompanies a new understanding of something that was previously unclear. This seems to connect with Rachel's description of what happened when she began to focus on things that were 'on the periphery' and Paula's description of the connections she made on the edge of sleeping and waking.

Rachel went on to say that by bringing into focus the 'things that were on the edge' she could name them and by naming them they 'moved forward' and 'other things took their place'. I asked her what she had named so far.

Weee-ell
It's me...
It's recognising that I'm feeling -
 I wouldn't say *very* comfortable
 but reasonably comfortable
with not belonging in any one place...

although part of me
always *wants* to be rooted in some particular spot.

I could apply that to the research methodology
 it's been a terribly frustrating journey
 in trying not to fall into the trap of saying
 'Yes, I'm definitely that'
and then trying like hell to mould the whole thing
to fit that particular thing.

And again, there's that connection between
me the person and me the researcher.

I think me the person has always tried to do that
and it's only recently that I've realised -
 'Oh shit, I don't belong in that camp,
 or that camp, or that camp.
 I'm actually a mix of the whole thing'
and I suppose the research has reflected that.
That,
 if you like,
has named it.
The research has named who I am.'

Rachel talked then about how difficult it had been to let go of her need for certainty and how being in a heuristic process required her to trust 'tacit knowing' (Polanyi 1966); immerse herself in the data through journaling; 'in-dwelling'; reading around the topic; and her engagement with the participant's material and her own.

Heurism required her to allow a period of 'incubation' during which she simply had to trust that she was getting somewhere, even when it didn't feel like it; to wait for 'illumination' when things would begin to make sense (which had not yet happened at the time of our conversation) and would lead to her being able to explain to herself and others what she had discovered; and to trust that eventually, she would be able to create something that represented an integration of the data that reflected her personal knowledge, tacit awareness, intuition, and understanding of meanings, in ways that would meet the criteria of an MSc.

Ruefully she told me there were times when she wished she had stayed with a more traditional approach, developing a hypothesis which she could set out to prove or disprove.

The fear of 'not knowing'

...knowing already what the outcome might be
would have been a *far* easier way of doing it,
instead of tying myself up in knots
which is what I have done...

It's become quite a frustrating convoluted process
and part of me would have appreciated it
if I had just gone the way I originally
thought I might have.

I think to do that would have meant
compromising quite a lot of me
and ended up with me writing about something
I didn't believe in
or didn't believe had any significance to me
which is generally not how I am.

When you said about it being a convoluted process I
had an image of this passageway with all sorts of
twists and bends – where you can't see round the
next corner...

That's exactly what it is...
I do like to have some sort of view
of where I'm trying to get to.
At least I can plot my way along.

This is just like...
in your imagery
there is no light and
I am just touching the walls
and working my way along it.

That sounds like a real process of discovery!
(enthusiastically)

Yes, it might well be
and it doesn't actually make it any easier!
(vehemently and laughing).

Her vehemence made me realise I had missed something important. So I backtracked and reflected her feelings

No, no – it sounds very scary as well.

It is very frightening.

One of my fears is that at the end of the day
I might end up with something that is
nothing... almost.

I know that's not rational...
but that's how it feels.

I suppose it's something about the unknown
the fear that's attached with not knowing.

All of this resonated closely with my own experience when I had been deeply immersed in a

heuristic process with my ex-clients (Etherington, 2000). I had sometimes felt out of control: so much data, so many ideas and thoughts and images and no understanding of how it might all come together – and the fear that it might not! It was a theme I had heard many times from students and one I was to hear over and over again from other participants.

Clearing a space

Well, I'm on my own
I have to say
...since I started all of this.

And I'm very happy to be on my own
I'm not withdrawn but I've become quieter...
more reflective...
I don't know whether it's been part of the impact
of the research...but it feels as if...
this doesn't sound reasonable or rational either
but it kind of feels that
it *needed* to happen.

I don't think this [research] process
would have been able to happen had I had....
somebody else there,
another adult there.....

With [my partner]...there was this covert need,
disappointment
if I wasn't doing or being there for [him].

I don't think I've *fundamentally* changed
It's that I'm beginning to recognise
that these aspects of myself
have *always* been there
but have never really been heard
or have never been given the chance
to come through

because of whatever else was going on.

I asked Rachel *how* personal development had occurred for her through the research and she spoke about the differences she experienced between research training and counsellor training.

What makes research different

...the certificate
and various other courses
it was basically course orientated,
achieving various modules...
and not paying too much attention to the personal aspects,
the self-development aspects
whereas the research is almost the other way.

The emphasis and the value has been on *me*,
what *I'm* doing,
what's happening to *me* as I'm trying to work this out...

And that's about...
allowing *it* to dictate to me,

rather than *me* dictating it
...from the positivist angle.

I asked her if her personal development through her research process was similar or different from personal therapy. She responded:

...when I write down something I'm experiencing
and look at that,
I'm aware of the split of...
experiencing it
and *not* experiencing it
just watching myself experience it.

In personal therapy - I don't do that,
I give it to someone else to do it.
And I'm aware that when they don't do it
I get irritated...

The thinking part of it?
Thinking about this experience you're having?

Yes and making the connections *for me*...
...when I'm writing in conjunction with research
and something pops into my mind,
I'll *push* it in there without thought to grammar or anything else
just pop it in to see what happens.
As I'm writing it down I'm already analysing it...
because it's all done very quickly
there's no boundary between the two.

I think in my therapy... I don't do that
I say
'this is for you to do, you're my therapist
that's your job - it's not my job to do that.
I'm here to give it to you and you can do the rest

I asked her if she thought these experiences might affect her counselling in the future.

The effect on counselling

Oh, I think that's already happening.
I am being *less* cognitive
although I still do put an importance
on cognitive processes.

But I think I am asking clients
not to work with their intellect
to try and suspend it,
not discard it
but just to hold it
and to be able to explore...
just to allow *themselves* to do it...

They might like to sit there quietly
and think about what it is they are feeling or experiencing...
And if they can't do that
then that's fair enough
but just to give them the choice of doing that,
whereas
maybe I didn't do that [before].

Rachel seemed to be indicating that her experience of staying with her fear of 'not knowing' in the research had enabled her to stay with her clients in their 'not knowing', being alongside them as they experienced themselves more fully.

As our time together drew to a close I asked Rachel how she had experienced our conversation. She commented on the power of the image I had offered of 'a passageway with all sorts of twists and bends' referring to it as an 'intestinal tract, the large intestine and the small intestine', saying the image had helped her name her fear. I was reminded that fear is often experienced as a 'gut' feeling. It seemed as if she had connected with a 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 1981) that had shifted as we talked.

Discussion

The conversations above allow us a glimpse of two women speaking about how their experience of heuristic research had changed them. They have shown how, by clearing a space in their lives to focus on their topic and themselves, and by paying attention to tacit knowing, intuition, images and felt-senses they were able to experience themselves in different ways, personally and professionally.

Paula's increased ability to 'tune in' to her clients and herself appears to have occurred as a consequence of engaging in a heuristic process. Rachel felt she was better able to simply 'be' with her clients. She described how she came to know herself better through the process, gathering up parts of herself that she knew had always been there but not clearly connected to. Both women expressed an increased self-confidence.

By being both subject and object of her research Paula experienced herself as therapist, client and researcher. She experienced herself as more in control of whether or not, and when, she allowed herself to be 'triggered' into her own material. As it turned out she became 'flooded' with her own feelings and was unable to think clearly.

Heurism (as well as other reflexive methodologies) has been criticised as encouraging self-indulgence, narcissism and solipsism. It is clear from Paula's story that she believed she had become too focused on her internal world. Her second supervisor was able to help her balance her subjectivity with objectivity in a way that grounded her, balancing her feelings with her thinking by inviting her to come 'up to the surface' and look around to see what the literature could offer to help her re-focus outside herself.

Researchers and supervisors need to understand that subjectivity is not an end in itself and that heurism invites us to filter our participants' experiences through our own

and not to superimpose our own experiences onto theirs. Perhaps if Paula's first supervisor had had a greater understanding of the methodology she might have been able to throw Paula a 'lifeline' earlier in the process, before her personal material threatened to 'drown' her, thereby helping her to keep her head above water.

The underlying ontology and epistemology of heurism has been criticised as imprisoning the data and its methods as aping realist approaches (Martin, 2003). It has also been criticised for its inward focus that does not address 'the more outgoing dialogic and culturally embedded relationships between researcher and researched' (Speedy, 2001). Heurism is a methodology of its time and such criticism is valid in the light of more recent narrative and reflexive approaches that encourage us to locate our selves, our participants and the topic within a historical, cultural and social context. A combination of heuristic and postmodern methodologies can balance the personal with the social and can become a way of bridging our internal and external worlds.

Conclusion

This paper set out to show how heuristic research became a vehicle for personal development for two women, giving us a glimpse of the evidence that I have begun to accumulate on these issues. Several other participants have echoed these stories since then, also indicating that personal change was experienced as a result of undertaking research that required them to let go of structure and embark on a journey into the unknown; to reflect on self and others and to move beyond cognitive processes into connecting with body, mind and spirit through exploring felt-sense, tacit knowing and intuition.

My conversations with Paula and Rachel

What does this study tell us?

■ Reflexive research processes enabled the researchers to experience themselves in different ways personally and professionally

show, through the powerful use of images, what it can be like to engage in reflexive conversations that become a heuristic process in themselves as well as describing their past experiences. For both women the journey was difficult and rewarding. Through making their research journeys they were helped to re-collect (which is more than remembering) aspects of themselves that had not previously been fully known, thus increasing self-confidence and strengthening their sense of identity. ■

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