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RESEARCHING THOUGHTFULLY

Abstract: This article presents aspects of my personal journey from novice to thoughtful researcher drawing attention to things I learned along the way that may be of benefit to others travelling in the same direction. In passing, I discuss the messiness of real research, two doctoral studies (one in Geography, abandoned after data collection, and one in Education, successfully completed), my background in more scientific approaches and my more recent ventures into aspects of ethnography, auto-ethnography, autobiography and life-writing, and with non-traditional ways of collecting, analyzing and presenting qualitative data, including fictionalization. In places, the text also draws attention to resources useful for exploring what it is to research thoughtfully.

Keywords: thoughtful research, writing, skill sets, CA, emergent methodology, integrity, NI, auto/biography.

The view from where I stand now

From my current perspective as an experienced researcher, contemporary research training often feels narrowly formulaic. The oft-heard mantras: 'Decide what you want to find out' and 'Start with your research questions', seem unnecessarily prescriptive and surely need adjustment for in-depth qualitative research. To me 'Decide what you want to find out *about*' and 'Consider what your research is *aiming* to achieve' are far more helpful, allowing the process to unfold as the work commences and continues. For I care passionately that every student's research journey be allowed to follow its own learning curve, and respect the role of trial and error, renegotiation and restatement.

I found that as research progresses it becomes clear which choices are viable, which unhelpful, and which are simply incongruent with the project aims and data. And, having considered my own experiences and those of my doctoral students, I believe that a researcher who has learned to think-in-context will naturally continue to do research with sensitivity as their career develops, despite the pressures of time and cost restraints. Muddling through to a satisfactory end can feel challenging but it enables significant learning to take place and what is learnt through practice and reflection has a tendency to endure, for such learning involves expansion of consciousness and a changed worldview (Elias, 1997) meeting Jack Mezirow's criteria for 'transformative' (Mezirow, 1991).

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I make my claims for qualitative research with confidence, certain from my early training in Geography, that I know how to work differently across the quantitative-qualitative divide, for this was a discipline that required that duality of approach back in the seventies when I graduated. I had a thorough grounding in the relevant applied sciences, in cartography, statistics, basic computing and mathematical modelling, too – but, also, the softer subjects of human and historical geography, so I understand how rigour is performed differently across paradigms. Thus, when I subsequently chose to be a qualitative researcher, I did so from an informed position towards alternative approaches. Indeed, when qualitative practices were still being developed, and researchers still working out how to do things through *doing* them, there was significant leeway for experiment and reflection.

Through these experiences, I have come to believe that there are considerable benefits to returning to foundational texts in which researchers wrote openly about the difficulties they encountered – like the authors in the edited collections by Geoffrey Walford (ed., 1998) and Alan Bryman and Robert Burgess (1994). Other texts demonstrate *how* specific methods can be carried out rather than setting out standard procedures (like Strauss, 2010).

Revealing that research is messy and possibilities many

Research is a messy process, qualitative research particularly so, yet many textbooks continue to present methodologies tidily as a series of clear-cut steps, thereby encouraging readers to believe that the research process is straightforward and success likely if procedures are carefully followed. Such expectations do little to prepare a new researcher to handle difficulties when they arise and I am certainly not the first to express this view.

Geoffrey Walford, writing in the late nineties, pointed out: "while these 'cook-book' textbooks have much to offer, they present research as largely an *unproblematic* process" (Walford, 1998: 1) and this is misleading. Well-known researchers contributing to Walford's earlier edited book *Doing Educational Research* (Walford ed., 1991) revealed that their early steps were dogged by doubts and anxieties. In this book, there are debates about how to determine a research sample (from the linguists, Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes, 1991), how to engage the reader (from Neil Mercer, 1991) and details of how Linda Measor and Peter Woods attempted to move beyond "antiseptic accounts" (Measor & Woods, 1991: 59). They also talk about "not knowing exactly where one is going" (Measor & Woods, 1991: 60). I also found Jennifer Nias' discussion of *Primary Teachers Talking* (Nias, 1991) very reassuring. Studying her former students, she mentions a "mismatch between what they wanted to tell me and what I thought I wanted to know" (Nias, 1991: 148) and talks about the benefits of "time

spent walking, swimming or gardening… [which] can be immensely productive as it leaves ideas to form in the subconscious" (Nias, 1991: 162). Those ideas resonate with my own experience. Indeed, for me drafting often occurs during sleeping hours. And I have learned to keep a notebook and pencil by the bed to capture those bright ideas or carefully constructed paragraphs before they are filed away in my brain, effectively tidied away forever. Nias also demonstrates the importance of researcher resilience. "Over-zealous cleaners" binned her box of interview notes, forcing her to visit and search the municipal waste tip where, luckily, she was able to retrieve them (Nias, 1991: 153). Her research was 'messy' in several senses, including the physical; municipal waste tips are not pleasant places whatever the weather. Stephen Ball (1991) presents worked examples from his own research that provide excellent support for those unsure how to analyse their data.

Recognising there was a need for such support, Bryman and Burgess' book (1994) *Analysing Qualitative Data,* created a space for invited researchers to share their experiences of the problems and processes involved. They clearly record that 'messiness' was not a new phenomenon.

The research process, then, is not a clear-cut sequence of procedures following a neat pattern, but a messy interaction between the conceptual and empirical world, deduction and induction occurring at the same time (Bechoffer, 1974: 73).

Messiness is reiterated many times in subsequent decades. By Donald A. Schön (1983: 42) who talks of the "swampy lowlands", by Sue Atkinson (1994: 399) who found the process "messy and fraught", by Elizabeth A. St Pierre (1997: 180) who refuted its "clear, linear process", and Patti Lather (2010) who was considering how qualitative research can influence policy decisions and found this messy. More recently, Nicola Gratton Ryan Fox and Teri Elder (2020) discuss the messiness of research during the COVID-19 pandemic and I, too, found myself needing to tease out novel ways of researching (a messy experimental process) when social interaction was banned (Wright, 2021a, 2021b). Yet, some works still sweep the mess under the carpet and present the tidy version to the outside world. Surely, we can cope with contradictions and complexity, with difference and diversity and with likelihoods rather than truths as long as we write honestly.

It is my view that books that really support qualitative researchers explore the realities of the process, empowering readers to think for themselves and find ways of working that are congruent with their particular purposes and data; or demonstrate ways that research can be carried out. For this reason, I find Anselm Strauss's *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (2010) useful, as it shows the reader how to do things like write memos and create codes and themes by offering examples to study rather than rules to follow. This book is less structured than Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's

(1967) explication of Grounded Theory and, as the title implies, the ideas are easily transferred into other qualitative contexts. Strauss provides a language to discuss practice in detail, not just a set of steps a student can (should?) copy precisely, enabling readers to select, adapt and adjust ideas for their own work, researching thoughtfully. Such texts acknowledge the complexity of research practices and enable researchers to shape their own methodologies without implying that the process will be simple, and that simple is good enough.

Becoming a sociologist without knowing It

By the time I began work on my second (completed) educational doctorate, I saw myself as a Sociologist and had the confidence to develop my own "Emergent Methodology" (Robson, 2002). I believe this confidence grew from several earlier experiences: the (non-completed) Geography doctorate, a significant career in publishing, and a lengthy involvement with small-scale research using different methodologies. However, I readily admit that becoming confident took time and did not altogether start well. Indeed, I failed to take advantage of my own initial learning-through-doing until it was over. What I did out of genuine curiosity alongside my formal data collection for the Geography doctorate, made sense only in retrospect when the opportunity to gain from it had already passed. If that sounds confusing, it does so because it was, so now I will attempt to explain further.

After graduating in the '70s, I was offered the chance to carry out archival research in Mexico (despite speaking no Spanish). I was to study the distribution of population on the Yucatan peninsula, to see if the reality confirmed a popular theory. I dutifully embarked on the reading of handwritten Spanish *Visitas* (reports from the previous century/centuries by Bishops inspecting their domains). This was tedious work carried out in the cathedral of Mérida, capital of the province, where the documents were stored in damp cardboard boxes in the Men's toilet, too close to a dripping overflow tank; not quite what I expected from the label 'archive'.

I worked diligently throughout the mornings but with nowhere to take the customary siesta, often spent the afternoons exploring – the Mayan ruins, the local beaches, the thatch-hut villages where the local farmers lived and worked in forest clearings, the rural Spanish haciendas devoted to cash crops: henequen, maize, sugar and cotton. I wandered the city, examining the colonial architecture, the fountains and palm trees and local food markets, marvelling at Diego Riviera's vivid murals, and taking shelter from the sun in the local churches. Returning to the family home where I was staying, I spent hours talking to the two Mayan servants, as curious about their lifestyle as they were of mine.

It was my first chance to travel beyond Europe, my first encounter with colonialism and biculturalism, my first time alone a long, long way from home – and a steep learning curve. It was a trip that kindled my interest in the significance of education, for the Mayan girls had received very little. They could barely count, read or write, and most of their Spanish was centred on their household tasks; and this lack of education seriously reduced their frames of reference. Talking to them, I found them unable to grasp that I lived beyond America, as they knew nothing about the wider world. I saw how they struggled to make sense of me as my behaviours did not fit the typologies they recognized. Was I rich or poor? To them, I seemed to be neither. I mixed with the Spanish family, but barely spoke the dominant language. I wore cotton jeans and shorts, not the cashmere twinsets favoured by the wealthy. I preferred visiting the kitchens to learn to cook Mexican food to sitting in the shade, sipping lemonade. The realization that education really matters has informed all my later decisions but the fieldwork was life-changing in other ways, too.

The exploration of a different culture was very significant. It was the real learning I acquired from my research experience, and much of what I learned stays with me forty years later. The learning from the trip was transformative even though I gave up the formal research as I found it pointless, its premises potentially flawed. But maybe there could have been another positive outcome if I had tried to present a different study, a Sociological one, for I had spontaneously researched life in Yucatan. However, my supervisor had gone abroad on sabbatical so there was no-one to encourage me to write up what I had – and in those days academics staunchly defended their disciplinary boundaries, so such a shift might not have been permitted.

It was much later that I realized that my curiosity, my observing and questioning, was ethnography in the raw, practiced neither intentionally nor with formal training. As Harold C. Conklin (1968) described, and John Van Maanen (1979) endorsed, I was involved in:

a long period of intimate study and residence in a well-defined community employing a wide range of observational techniques including prolonged face-to-face contact with members of local groups, direct participation in some of the group's activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on the use of documentary or survey data … (Conklin, 1968: 172).

and I was analysing and verifying my findings 'in the field' rather than attending to this later, a further important attribute according to Van Maanen (1979: 548).

Indeed, my situation, as a stranger in an unfamiliar culture far from my own land, could be said to mirror that of the traditional anthropologists in that I had gone out from a European academic centre "to study in geographically distant locales" although it differed in as much I had not set out to research among "socially marginalized groups" (Murchison, 2010: 5), but had just fallen into this. My experiences met Van Maanen's

(2011: 219) claim that "One becomes an ethnographer by doing it" but had no need to make "the familiar strange" (Van Maanen, 1995); everything was genuinely strange to me, provoking me to be thoughtful.

Looking back now, I feel that this was an opportunity lost, and I wish that I had kept the notes I wrote at the time, but on returning to the UK I was keen to move on with my life and they temporarily lost significance. In the short term, I turned to publishing instead and thrived in this semi-academic but less rarified environment. Yet having spent two years working towards a doctorate that a supervisor had (poorly) shaped, sowed a seed of defiance that ultimately bred self-confidence; and a strong belief that if I were ever to embark on another PhD, I would be the person who decided what I did.

Acquiring the writing skills I needed through editing others

Escaping from the academia by finding a job in publishing, I worked through the ranks to reach the role of Managing Editor, mastering new skills along the way and confidently critiquing the work of more senior academics in a way that I would now find daunting when I move among them within the same University culture. Interested in what underpins good writing, I read the key style manuals published by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses (Butcher, 1981; Ritter, 2002; Butcher, Drake & Leach, 2006), and the more American but very readable *Words into Type* (Skillin & Gay, 1974).

I learned to help authors to 'say' what they intended to say to a defined word count and as part of doing this, to alter my style to mirror theirs – useful skills for a doctoral supervisor and an academic writer. I also improved my own fluency and understanding of the rationales for writing in certain ways, making explicit practices that previously I had merely followed instinctively.

Later teaching doctoral students how to write, cemented this new knowledge for me, and enabling them to experiment encouraged me to turn to more creative ways of writing myself (Wright, 2023). A text I found (and find) useful in supporting these areas, is Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams (1995), *The Craft of Research*, especially the earlier text rather than the newer and lengthier editions (Booth et al., 2024) that become more unwieldy. In similar vein, I favour Harry Wolcott's (1990) brief *Writing Up Qualitative Research* over the expanded 2001 (Wolcott, 2001) & 2008 (Wolcott, 2008) editions, although all are useful.

In short, my publishing experience taught me to view writing critically even when the author holds a senior post but, more importantly, that I can write for different purposes and in different ways and this engendered a confidence to experiment and expand my range of writing styles. I already knew that I had easily passed written examinations at school and university, but I was beginning to feel confident to see myself as having

the skill set to really write. However, I still felt that I had nothing to say! Writing to publish was not yet on the horizon.

Trying out different research approaches on my journey back to the academy

Acquiring the confidence to write for publication was a slow process. For several years, I worked as a freelance Editor while bringing up a family. During that time, I found a new interest in learning about, and then teaching others, how to work with very young children, for in the '80s and '90s pre-school education relied on parent volunteers. I got involved and quickly found that as a graduate entering a largely non-graduate sector it was also possible to move rapidly from casual paid helper to self-taught trainer of staff. However, teaching oneself to teach adults was not always as simple as it sounds. When I got it wrong the students were very quick to tell me this directly or vote with their feet (that is, fail to attend).

As my skills improved, I found work in different educational sectors (Community groups, Further Education (FE) colleges and ultimately Higher Education) and acquired the qualifications they each offered along the way. This piecemeal progression carried significant benefits for most studies concluded with a small-scale research project of some kind, giving me many opportunities to experiment with different methodologies and techniques and requiring me to research "thoughtfully".

For instance, I carried out literature-based research into postmodernism, establishing a set of oppositional characteristics that could identify postmodern thinking. Then, interviewing staff in the Early Years sector, I overtly gained information on their knowledge of policy-related issues whilst covertly exploring whether they challenged, refuted or accepted government directives. By doing this, I was able to establish whether individuals held conventional or more postmodern perspectives. I also saw how words alone do not always capture meaning, paving the way for later research for which I noted body language and tried out Conversational Analysis. For instance, one interviewee said: "Well we all know that the government is always right" but her stance and tone conveyed that she was being ironic and meant the exact opposite.

A later project was required to be experimental and involve pre-and post-test observation but also qualitative. Researching "thoughtfully", I devised scenarios that enabled me to examine whether – and if so, how – my intervention had been effective.

For a further qualification, I decided to improve my own pedagogy through action research[1]. I chose to work with students who often disrupted classes, so establishing

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[1] I can recommend a useful online resource endorsed by UNICEF that clearly sets out the AR process (VSO, 2019).

practices that enabled them to contribute freely required a great deal of careful thought. I needed them to feel that I would be open to hearing what it was that was lacking in the classroom experience.

I also researched "thoughtfully" when I adopted an ethnographic approach to ascertain how (my) Foundation Degree[2] students achieved graduacy. This study harnessed the observation skills honed through working with young children alongside my interviewing practices, again requiring me to establish ways of 'finding' an abstract concept in a real-world context.

I was developing my skill set, enjoying each project for itself rather than with a future goal in mind. However, new opportunities were about to open up.

The educational doctorate – developing an emergent methodology

Accepting the challenge to take on the establishment of a Foundation Degree within the FE college enabled me to make a case for further personal development and I managed to gain part-funding to start another doctorate. For this second-chance research opportunity I was determined to take control of all the decisions and consequently chose an experienced supervisor whose specialities were sociology and social policy (areas I still knew little about) rather than education, although I planned to carry out educational research. He accepted that this was *my* project but was happy to share our different knowledge bases when we met for supervisions. I took the process of 'knowing the field' seriously, spending hours reading in the stacks of a copyright library, grateful that my supervisor was willing to trust that I would eventually feel ready to focus. I decided to study the purposes of education and to create original data through interview rather than return to archival research where there is always the danger of missing something important that someone else later finds. I chose to research with ten cohorts of mature adult students for whom, uniquely, I held contact details, removing the competitive pressure to be first to publish, common within archival work.

Topic decided, I turned my attention to methodology texts. The commonly given advice was to carry out semi-structured interviews, as these were (Fortado, 1990: 33), and still often are, assumed to sit safely between the extremes of set questions and open conversation (Brinkmann, 2014: 236; Paine, 2015: 471; Wethington & McDarby, 2015) I was not aware of Sociologist Ray Pawson's (1996: 299) views that these were a "much used but little celebrated pluralist midway compromise" leading to a "fuzzy mid-ground"

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[2] Foundation Degrees, two-year vocational courses to enable students to blend existing practical experience with their newly learned theoretical knowledge, were intended to raise qualification levels in the workplace.

so I dutifully wrote lists of question and prompts, and admit they served as useful preparation for what later ensued – open conversations to which I fully contributed. I was a semi-insider researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) – perhaps an "inbetweener" (Milligan, 2016), being someone who had previously held a position of power in relation to participants – and I felt instinctively that open interviews helped to achieve a more equal interaction. Like Nias (1991), I learned that what the participants wanted to tell me differed from what I thought I wanted to know, and I found that accepting all that was offered enabled deeper understanding as it shifted the emphasis from my agenda to the students' viewpoints.

Continuing to read avidly, I found new strategies in Steinar Kvale's book *Interviews* (1996) that encourages the researcher to break with normative procedures to elicit greater detail. Indeed, Kvale argues for spontaneity, co-talking rather than interviewing and urges the researcher to develop 'presence' by sharing relevant aspects of personal experience rather than simply questioning the participant(s). He also challenges the taboo against leading questions, arguing that these are effective in getting participants to shed inhibitions and express opinions. These approaches enabled me to learn things about my participants that were never discussed in class.

I found further support for my work in Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's (2000) book *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. This introduced me to the 'free association narrative method', listening to what is *not* being said as much as what is said. These two psychologists explain how silences, hesitations, deviations, and juxtapositions of seemingly disconnected ideas, reveal that participants are voicing incomplete viewpoints. They encourage the researcher to probe such occurrences to find out what is being concealed. For as they write:

In everyday informal dealings with each other, we do not take each other's accounts at face value, unless we are totally naïve; we question, disagree, bring in counter-examples, interpret, notice hidden agendas (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 3).

These forms of probing offered me practices to use when following James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's (1995) active interviewing method, one that demands "that the subject's interpretive capabilities must be activated, stimulated, and cultivated" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 17) to empower the subject to think about what they are saying "because socially constructed meaning is unavoidably collaborative" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 18, citing in support Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). My interviews became a way of "formally and systematically doing so" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 17) that was very satisfying. Taking care to use the ideas gently to respect my participants' right to privacy, I sometimes found I had prompted them to voice ideas that they had not been aware they held, and the processes certainly helped

me learn to listen analytically and react to what I heard 'in the moment'. I now had an effective data collection method and feel that I was really researching "thoughtfully".

I transcribed by hand, as the attentive listening to recordings this required letting me immerse myself in the material and encouraged new understanding to float into my consciousness. I soon realized that written words alone did not sufficiently capture what was 'shared' with me. I needed more techniques and found support in Conversational Analysis (CA).

CA encouraged me to think in terms of utterance sequences (the turn-taking in conversational interchanges) and to note the changes of tone, pauses, emphases, *etc.*, that gave depth to my interpretations of the information shared and made this visible on paper. David Silverman (1998) led me to this route, but I then found it useful to go back to Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson's original work of 1974.

I read my way through several key texts but still find Ten Have (2007) offers the most helpful guidance on how to carry it out. Jack Sidnell (2011) offers a useful description: "the study of talk in interaction and other forms of human conduct in interaction other than talk, for example, gaze, gesture, body orientations, and their combinations", and recently I found that he wrote a very useful overview of *Conversation Analysis* in 2016 that is freely accessible on the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, online (Sidnell, 2016). It is worth noting that, although CA requires users to use standardized mark-up notations, this in no way undermines the independence of the thoughtful researcher.

CA is a complete methodological approach, but also time-consuming. So I used the marks just on those parts of the transcripts where the words stated failed to fully capture meaning, for instance when a lowered voice implied a need for views to remain secret, when pauses suggested hesitation, when identifying long pauses revealed a lack of response revealing that when I began to offer possibilities, hoping for agreement or disagreement with a suggestion, I was trying to keep the conversation alive. Without CA notation it would just look as if I were asking and then answering my own questions. Here again I was taking what I needed from available ideas and blending them into my own process, researching thoughtfully.

I maintained this flexibility throughout the doctorate, creating an 'emergent methodology' as explained in an early publication, *Trusting the Process: Using an emergent design to study adult education* (Wright, 2009), that I find remains freely available online and maybe continues to support others to research thoughtfully.

Persisting with my careful analysis, eventually I learnt that my students were not telling me their thoughts about education and its purposes – I had to ask specifically to find that out. Rather the way they intertwined the elements revealed that as parents of young children they chose to work in and learn about childcare as it gave their daily lives congruence and they enjoyed the variety of caring, working and studying – the

"little bit of everything". This I duly reported, despite the more normative position voiced in feminist circles that women need more official support to allow them to focus full-time on their studies (see for example Burke, 2002). I had to report my findings honestly – the thoughtful researcher must maintain integrity, however uncomfortable that may become.

After the doctorate – becoming a narrrative researcher

Post-doctorally, there followed an active period of research and teaching in Higher Education. Alongside my work related to Early Years (EY) Education, I developed strong methodological interests in Narrative Inquiry (NI). My interest in child development had led me to psychologist, Jerome Bruner, and thence to his works *Life as Narrative* (Bruner, 1987) and *The Narrative Construction of Reality* (Bruner, 1991). I was hooked! Narrative Inquiry stirred my long-term love of powerful prose, and I saw it would work well with my own research plans. I also took this new interest into my work with doctoral students, particularly on the Professional Doctorate in Education that I helped to set up and co-ordinate. I own and have read a significant number of titles but when asked to make a recommendation usually Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* as this offers a broad overview. My concern is always to avoid the narrowing down of NI, to refute the tendency for academics to impose rules to re-shape it in particular ways that they can claim as their own. For me, the beauty of Narrative Inquiry is its apparent simplicity disguising covert complexity. It is research that relies on the fluent expressions of ideas in written form and achieving such simplicity requires thoughtful research and advanced writing skills; texts must flow to have impact.

My dual roles teaching EY students and supervision left me little time to think and write outside of the box (but I wrote within it and occasionally found time to upload publications on Research Gate). Later, I chose a shift to Visiting Fellow status (in the UK a form of early retirement allowing further academic involvement) so that I could pursue my teaching and research activities with European colleagues and, very importantly, write. This, often illusional, freedom, enabled me to experiment further… but I have skipped ahead. I have yet to explain some of the other influences on the way I research and write that made me pause to think.

I had encountered, and used, Laurel Richardson's (1994) process of writing as a method of inquiry, a "way of knowing" (Richardson, 1994: 516) in the Educational Doctorate. Like her, I had noted that much qualitative research was presented in texts that were "boring" (Richardson, 1994: 517) and her belief that research could be presented in more creative ways, through poetry and stories, for example. I had supervised a number of students who did this but not got beyond the occasional vignette

(small-scale scenario) myself, doubting my ability to create "evocative representations" (Richardson, 1994: 524), that is, work that makes the reader feel the writer's emotions.

Beginning to fictionalize

I had read Peter Clough's (2002) book that showed how fictionalization – changing or merging characters, locations and/or other contexts – provides anonymity. It allows researchers to import "fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness … without stripping away the rawness of real happenings" (Clough, 2002: 8), which I interpret as blending aspects of different stories or accounts into one credible and powerful version that captures the emotional context of an event without making the living subject identifiable. I saw that fictionalization could enable 'difficult truths' (harrowing stories) to be told but had not tried this for myself. However, this was to change.

During the COVID-19 pandemic my research options were curtailed. I could not easily meet and interview people and was not very confident to record interviews online as my systems were not set up to handle this, so I turned inwards to the family and local community. In the UK, we were allowed to walk for an hour a day during lockdown so I did this. Unfortunately, as that was the only permitted "non-essential" activity, everyone was out on the paths and pavements in my village, and many were just chatting two meters apart rather than actually walking. When families did walk, the collective pace was much slower than I like, and large family blocks were hard to navigate if you wanted to be sure to keep your distance. It was particularly difficult when I took my elderly relative out with me, to ensure protection from dogs, scooters, bikes and runners. I started to notice, and later note down, the way that people occupied the public spaces and quickly realized that I had two sources of research data readily available: my relative's experiences and what I observed for myself. As my data was local to both family and the village in which I lived, I needed to achieve anonymity – and fictionalization, and the building of composite stories from several sources, seemed to offer a way forward.

Why anonymity and fictionalization?

Anonymity is not merely a case of protecting identities. Indeed, it is unlikely that local people would read anything I published in academic journals (although not impossible as I live close to Cambridge, UK so am surrounded by University personnel). More important is the maintenance of my own belief in my research integrity. When people sign up to be participants I guarantee to make their contributions anonymous and keep their identities confidential. Why should I treat unwitting contributors with less respect when it is I who am 'stealing' the stories they are sharing with others? If I change key

details, or build a single story from many people's snippets, I believe I reduce this 'crime' although others may feel that the theft is multiplied! But there are strong precedents for gathering data from everyday life and unlike Harold Garfinkel's intriguing 'social breeching' activities with students (Garfinkel, 1967) and Stanley Milgram's (1963) horrifying electric shock experiment my work relies on neither deceit nor guile; and it certainly does no harm.

Ethically, fictionalization is a much simpler way to work in the real world with unsuspecting subjects, for, carried out well, it can capture the bigger picture and link the micro- and macro- social worlds without broadcasting person-specific detail. I believe, too, that fictionalization also offers a means to address disfluencies. In the role of story writer, I can tell difficult (personal, embarrassing, harrowing, identifying, *etc*.) truths that are shared, without obfuscation. Standing at a distance from the interview material I can recreate the emotions, the pain, the shame or despair that I believe I have heard within the discourse but do this one-step removed from the situation.

Using my craft as a writer, I can present other people's stories as if I were them (or as a narrator) but without the hesitations, deviations, tangential leaps and silences that had made the original story hard to follow. That, I have decided, is an effective way to tell difficult truths, but critics may find that they no longer feel genuine. In effect, I search for the balance between blunt honesty and verbal artistry, whilst always trying to stay faithful to the original story/stories shared. I strive, too, to establish an authenticity that makes the story credible to its readers, and to handle emotions without allowing them to bleed all over the page. These aims are seldom easy to achieve but, as the goal is worthy, I do the best that I can with the material I have.

Experimenting with storying

Writing up some of my observations, I created my first short stories, capturing the outside world as experienced by an elderly 'other'. I then went on to write narratives from aggregated fragments of material seen or heard as I walked. I polished these and published them in a series of articles (Wright, 2021a, 2021b, 2023) that had fun titles and clearly demonstrated the way my methods developed: from simple story to accounts with imaginary multiple voices, to theorization as I began to see myself as a modern-day flâneur walking the streets to see what there was to see. Like Charles-Pierre Baudelaire's prototype, my "passion" and "profession" was "to merge with the crowd" (Baudelaire, 2010: 12-13). Indeed, I casually referred to my research as "Skulking and Spying then Telling Tales" in the 2023 paper (Wright, 2023). I found this new creative style of working stimulating to develop and gained confidence as my approaches were acceptable to an academic audience. Kim M. Mitchell and Alexander M. Clark (2021) state that some academics had found one of their earlier editorials important

in "authorizing" experimental ways of writing. It is satisfying to be able to state, in contrast, that I overcame any initial doubts by myself, but the article exists for those who seek further justification.

Becoming personal

Autoethnography

The pandemic subsided but not the after effects. My elderly relative no longer had the confidence or physical strength to go out alone after the months when this was inadvisable. I found myself needing to take on more and more caring tasks and found this arduous, but it led me to write more personal material to manage my frustration, and I spent some time trying to decide whether I was still doing (auto)biographical work, or had shifted into autoethnography, maybe life-writing. Turning to the literature, I found that the overlaps and confusions between these three labels were as complex as I had thought at the outset. Autoethnography was the easiest to grasp conceptually, as in social research it is more newly established, its advocates and experts (mainly) still living and clearly identifiable.

Carolyn Ellis, citing herself (2004) and Stacy Holman Jones (2005), describes it as "…an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). That seemed adequate until I attended some online conferences and heard for myself the intensity of emotions many of the writers brought to their work, something that is not really covered by the broader linguistic definition above and maybe something that is not inherently part of the approach. I was not entirely comfortable with the rawness of many of the presentations, or the focus on very difficult personal subjects, and unsure of the research value, for me, of turning trauma into lyrical and mellifluous text that could be performed. I appreciate that this probably says more about the people who choose to practice autoethnography and the topics they need to deal with, than the methodology itself but nevertheless such activity seemed to be prevalent and made me re-adjust my researcher identity.

Auto/biography

I had long been interested in Life History and Biographical methods but always with regard to others, although I was, and am, an advocate for reflective practice, particularly in Dewey's relational sense (Holdo, 2023). To consider *Auto*/biographical work was a new direction for me, although this has a lengthy provenance. David J. Gordon (1988: 106) usefully describes it as offering advocates "three (overlapping) strategies to relieve

the self-consciousness inherent in writing about themselves and to throw attention forward to the truth of their meaning". One is to adopt the role of "impersonal historian" with "special access to interesting information"; a second is to "overtly dramatize an individual history through the use of scene, situation, and developing narrative", concentrating on capturing the feel of the life rather than a series of factual details, somewhat akin to storying a life or fictionalizing it; or, thirdly, the auto/biographer can "move away from the narrative of a remembered life and discursively engage the very project and problem of self-representation", in effect developing a monologue in which an insider and an outsider viewpoint interact, enabling an element of distance.

This is not the only significant mirroring, for, as Elizabeth W. Bruss puts it, "An autobiographer undertakes a dual role. He is the source of the subject matter and the source of the structure to be found in his text"… [and, serving as a check against dissimulation] … "The existence of this individual, independent of the text itself, is assumed to be susceptible to appropriate verification procedures." (Bruss, 1976: 10).

Maybe seeking simplicity and inclusivity, those establishing the British Sociological Association's Auto/Biography study group in 1992 (eminent academics, Liz Stanley, David Morgan and Michael Erben), talked of "…the activity of attempting to render a succession of narrative moments relating to a life in such a way as to make them comprehensible to others" (BSA Auto/Biography Study Group) which remembers the needs of the reader and allows for greater freedom and experiment in adding the qualifier 'attempting' before the verb 'to render'.

Life writing

Autobiographical and life-writing approaches are both claimed to be the broader category but, from the definitions I found, I think that Life Writing may be the more inclusive term, certainly the most open one (or the least theorized, as its first usage is attributed to Virginia Woolf in 1939). Zachary Leader (ed., 2015) includes both personal narratives and formal documents about people as key materials. In his 'Introduction' to the edited volume, *On Life-Writing*, he talks of "a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed" and lists sources as "not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings, . . . marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms (including blogs, tweets, Facebook entries)" (Leader, 2015: 1). That list feels both comprehensive and open to all possibilities and I like its flexibility.

I remain *uncertain* about my affiliation but *think* that my approach is perhaps best captured by 'Life Writing' simply because my style varies according to the subject matter:

I use the skills I learned as an Editor so many years earlier! Honesty and integrity are my bywords and, although it often hurts me to write about issues and experiences that I find troublesome, I do not feel a desire to spill my emotions onto the page. For me, writing is a vital way of recording that enables me both to capture *and* set aside any difficulties I encounter and contain the stresses and worries that I am living with. I write the 'truth' as I am feeling it at the time, and maybe later spend time reconstructing the material to make it better reflect and evoke those truths, but I fully accept that the writing is of the moment, and on another occasion, I may feel very differently and will accept this change of attitude without a second's remorse. The process is cathartic, perhaps (appropriating ideas from psychiatry) due to cognitive processing whereby the "development of a coherent narrative … [results] … in more adaptive internal schemas" (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005: 341).

Maintaining academic professionalism

Overall, even when I fictionalize or 'story' material I choose to stay on the minimal end of the emotional spectrum, maintaining an academic 'professionalism' when creating material to share. Maybe I *am* "engage[d in] the very project and problem of self-representation" that Gordon (1988) identifies for I do spend ages agonizing about how people might react to my honest accounts of struggling to 'care enough' when an ageing relative becomes increasingly unreasonable, this also is "researching thoughtfully".

I am currently stock-piling notes and stories around the topic 'caring' with a view to an eventual book, but am in no immediate hurry to close this project down as I am writing to cope with life's challenges rather than to publish. This will come later when I can also look back on the caring process and forward to how it might be different in future for others. For the moment writing to stay calm is enough.

Extending thoughtfulness to other researchers

As I saw the advantages of "researching thoughtfully" I wondered how I could help my doctoral students to research more "thoughtfully". Although such research can be stressful, I believe there is a need to keep a clear head, too. Certainly, this is necessary as a supervisor as students need me to think on my feet during online supervisions when we discuss *their* plans and *their* writings. I continually encourage them to research thoughtfully, to build their own designs that meet *their* objectives rather than cling to the textbooks that set out steps to follow, and to make their own decisions. I concur that "It is necessary to guide students into autonomy and away from dependence" (Wisker, 2012: 30). Over time we need to offer "consultation and guidance rather than dictating the work to be done" (Wisker, 2012: 31).

Accepting messiness and uncertainty is hard for many research students, experimenting is made more difficult by the shortening of registration periods in the UK. I am forever on the look-out for freely accessible resources that I can recommend to students, recognizing that part-timers have little time to spend in libraries, and many libraries are shedding books in favour of computer screens, and database subscriptions that cannot be browsed in the same way. Even buying older books online is becoming more costly as platforms merge, and monopolies arise. However, careful searching reveals that there still are valuable sources freely available online. I recently found the Bloomsbury *"What is?" Research Methods Series* that currently has eleven titles as open access. These offer practical introductions with examples and give information without being too lengthy or setting out rules to follow, so are suitable for 'thoughtful' researchers. Breaking with convention, I list them under the Series heading 'What is?' at the end of the reference list.

Access to books like these is one of the benefits of open access as is the *Learned Publishing* journal, which offers articles on the topic open access that are themselves open access. Such publications reduce the barriers to knowledge created by traditional publishing methods, but open access has also created new problems along the way. American librarian, Jeffrey Beall, early recognized that charging authors to publish opened doors for scammers who set up what he termed 'predatory' journals (Beall, 2013), simply with a view to collecting revenue for doing very little.

Typically, researchers are sent flattering spam emails inviting them to submit their work for publication, and many do so as the emails can look quite convincing. They may be "littered with spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors" (Grose, 2017) and sent from dubious email addresses if you take the time to click and look. Some scams even 'hijack' legitimate journals, mimicking "the name (and the ISSN) of a reputable journal with the sole purpose of financial exploitation" (Moussa, 2021).

Non-native English language speakers may find these practices especially difficult to track so it is recommended that having researched 'thoughtfully' you make your publication choices 'thoughtfully' too. (I *am* a native English speaker, but I still cross-check sources and largely ignore unsolicited email offers. If an invitation sounds too good to be true, that is probably the case!) Patricia Logullo and colleagues (2024) refer readers to the 'Think Check Submit' checklist to help them carry out that process successfully. They do this in an article in a BMJ (British Medical Journal) publication (*i.e.* in a trusted source). However, careful checking cannot address the global inequalities that Pooley (2020) fears are created when "wealth buys authorship", allowing further amplification of the voices "of scholars from rich countries".

Working 'thoughtfully' is an attitude that could serve researchers well. This is achieved by being attentive, careful, sometimes cautious, but aware of possibilities and

willing to try them out. More importantly, it requires flexibility, being prepared to try another idea if something is not going well and, as I know, that can be difficult when one has invested a lot of time and effort into a particular choice.

As educator/broadcaster, Dr Neil Hawkes (2020) claims: "thoughtfulness invites us to think carefully and calmly before speaking or taking action".

When I suggest that people research thoughtfully, I am mainly referring to the 'taking action' element but recognise that the term equally applies to speaking and am mindful of how valuable that advice is when one is about to defend a thesis at a viva or present a paper to colleagues or at a conference. As an academic, I add 'before writing' too, whether that be email responses, letters, or words planned for publication. I *try* to be thoughtful in whatever I do while accepting that sometimes I fail; and recommend this attitude to other researchers.

Think for yourself, take ownership of your original ideas, and have confidence in your own decisions. Consider the legitimacy, relevance and standard of any articles, books, blogs and other sources that you access and if you are unsure, continue looking elsewhere. Above all, be sure to *research thoughtfully*.

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Supplementary annex

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