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Abstract

This research note discusses being self-conscious methodologically. It illustrates my pains to be deeply reflexive about research and academic writing. It does so with reference to a personal experience that raised, as feminist research often does, emotional as well as intellectual issues. It specifically explores the use of the first person in academic writing. Writing as 'I' forced comparisons between the personal and impersonal which in turn have caused me to reflect more deeply on emotive, individual and subjective analyses of personal experiences. With reference to a case study of 'me', this note is a reminder of the materiality and sociality of writing. It shows how social scientists have emotions about the subjects they study. Furthermore, it demonstrates implications for parental experience studies research and policy and practice in child and family social work.

Keywords

emotions, experience, 'I', individual, personal, reflexivity, subjective

Introduction

In contemporary society, an emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects of our daily lives is ever more acute and such reflections increasingly feature in the analysis of social policy and practice. In these contexts, discourse on reflexivity is now commonplace. In research on family life, a focus on how judgements are made, of ourselves and other people, is well established and it has prompted the resurrection of a range of concepts

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and analytical ideas that connect to both the ethical and emotive in social enquiry. There remains, however, scepticism about how deep and wide the reflective project has been and how adequate the consideration of affective civilities is in much analysis of social activity (Davies, 2011c). This research note comments on the difficulties I have encountered in my effort to contribute to the deepening of the reflexive project.

This note arises out of a writing project where the author focused on a 'signal experience' in her family life in *Child & Family Social Work* (Davies, 2011b). That effort to achieve authorized (academic) and experiential knowledge (Letherby, 2003) was fraught with difficulties. I now strive to illustrate how my original personal experience in a child protection investigation, and my subsequent efforts to write about it, raised – as feminist research often does – emotional as well as intellectual issues. In part, this note explores the use of the first person in academic writing. Writing as 'I' has forced comparisons between a personal and impersonal analysis of social interaction. In the context of a particular social work intervention, these comparisons were thrown into sharp relief, causing me to reflect more deeply on individual and subjective analyses of dynamic social interactions. It discusses being self-conscious methodologically and taps into recent concerns about the emotionalization of reflexivity and how emotions might be subjected to the reflective process. First, I present a case study of 'me' which captures my emotional response; this leads into a discussion on writing as 'I' in academic work, writing from the perspective of my emotional experiences and about my emotions as a researcher. I do this under the heading of the personal-impersonal. I then put my efforts to be deeply reflective about my research and writing in a broader reflexive project context.

A Case Study of 'Me'

What gave rise to the case study of 'me' and the child protection investigation was a 'boggy swelling'. On the evening of his first birthday in April 2005, our third son rolled off the sofa in our living room. The sofa is low and the floor is carpeted. Afterwards, he seemed fine. His father was in the room nearby and I was watching from the hall. However, two days later, it was obvious that he had sustained a head injury. A visit to hospital resulted in a child protection investigation. Although the case was closed, we found the experience devastating. Nobody, including us, did anything wrong and proper professional procedures were followed. Our appointed social worker was supportive and we were cooperative. She probably also did much damage limitation work. This did not prevent us from suffering. Not only was our son seriously hurt but our worth as parents was called into question.

Early in the morning after Frederick was admitted a strategy meeting took place in the hospital. We were not invited. From this point onwards all three of our children were placed under protection. This lasted until the case conference could be convened. Eighteen days later the conference took place. During this time, social worker inquiries and police investigations were made. In May, one month after the strategy meeting, the police wrote to inform us they were taking no further action. There was no similar correspondence following the case closure at the conference.

My Emotional Response

After the discovery of the swelling, I sought help for Frederick, and, in doing so, I was sucked into a child protection investigation. As his mother, I seemed to be the obvious person to blame and I began to feel wrongly accused. I was ushered into an investigation where my predicament was handled by an abundance of professionals who were predisposed to treat me with deep suspicion.

The Children's Services inquiry created for me troubling and confusing emotions. It put me in a high state of anxiety for its duration. If it was deemed a non-accidental injury, one of us – 'me' – could be held responsible for deliberate infliction of physical abuse or we – I – could be found guilty of neglect and failing to protect from and prevent the injury. So, as a non-abusing mother, there would remain the question of whether or not I had failed to protect our child. Can such injuries be explained without it involving injury or negligence by a caregiver? The starting point for the inquiry assumed 'me' to be culpable and blameworthy already and this is the mode in which the inquiry was conducted.

I struggled to find a vocabulary that expressed my oddly juxtaposed and turbulent feelings. I was coping with the burden of innocence in that I knew I had done nothing wrong but neither could I prove it. This was confidence boosting and draining at the same time. It made the outcome of the investigation seem totally unpredictable. What I wrote drew attention to the hard emotional work that families are pressed into during investigations and the damaging effect they have. In reporting my own feelings and emotions on the impact of cooperating in the investigation, I drew parallels to how a victim feels. I was not criminally victimized or officially wrongfully accused, yet my feelings were akin to those reportedly experienced by those falsely accused and by some victims or witnesses of crime. There were many human costs.

Over five years later, I continue to agonize over all of this. The procedures professionals are all required to follow are recognized as intrusive and no matter how personally and individually sensitive they are in their practice, the process is inherently unpleasant. It is designed to be inquisitorial, invasive and challenging. I questioned my own mothering abilities and punished myself for others calling into question my love, empathy, tenderness and compassion. In blaming myself, I have only added to my own misery. I felt the crushing force of being suspected of being a bad mother. **The system seemed indifferent to my pain.**

It was only with considerable angst and dogged persistence that the article which attended to my feelings and emotions as his mother and explained the awfulness of my experience, my convoluted emotional disquiet, was published.

Writing as 'I'

Like many others involved in social scientific inquiry, as a social scientist cum criminologist, I have tended to sift out my emotions and feelings, having been trained to think and write in a detached impersonal style. Young has recently accused criminologists of being **abstract empiricists** (2011), which fits with the charge of being dispassionate whilst traditional sociologies also present knowledge as 'dispassionate and disembodied' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 4). Indeed, emotions and academia are normally thought of



as 'incompatible entities' (Bloch, 2002: 113). Others have noted how the use of emotive and emotional language is considered as irrelevant, disruptive and unacceptable – an impediment in our academic writing (Lupton, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1993). I have followed, reproduced and reinforced this tradition. As social scientists, for the most part we train ourselves and our students to think and write in this way. We take the personal and the emotional out, abstract them away. However, this dispassionate and emotionless style of communicating about our social scientific research is in conflict with a situation where our emotions are heavily involved.

In my attempt to write about the impact of the child protection investigation, I aimed for a 'retrospective multi-narrative' (Oakley, 2007). Writing academically and emotionally about my own emotional sensibilities and feelings proved challenging. My lack of skill and practice in autobiographical writing was, however, only part of my difficulty. I was ambitious not only to narrate a description of my experience of an investigation which necessitated the use of the first person mode of writing, but also to offer some academic analysis arising out of it. These were separate difficulties which combined to produce an even greater challenge. Each of these deserves further comment.

Narratives can be a positive source of insight, giving an intimate understanding of a life and inquiring into selfhood. Narratives have a plot, a purpose, goal or trajectory, they are interpretive and recollective, often focusing on a discrete phenomenon, and they have a 'teller' who can use the power of emotion in the voicing of the story (Roberts, 2002). Narrative accounts, auto/biographies and ways of writing that 'tell of the telling', allow tensions, nuances, complexities, confusions and unclear thoughts to remain and allow for a movement between intellectual and intuitive or other non-objective forms of knowing and thinking, between 'distance and proximity' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 168). Twenty years ago, Stanley (1993) noted the under-appreciation of the relevance of these genres to sociology. I find this continues into the 21st century and applies to cognate disciplines also.

In my efforts to write about 'me' as subject, the narrative style allowed for an active, rather than a passive account. The physicality of my emotions remained intact; my embodied and affective experience was vivid and intimate. I was writing about a situation with a very high level of personal involvement, where an approach that takes the personal out and puts a distance between the researcher and subject was neither possible nor desirable.

One of my difficulties then arose from my being unpractised in writing in the first person – writing as 'I'. As noted earlier, another difficulty concerned my desire to offer authoritative criminological and victimological analysis on the experience. This related to the parallels I drew between how I felt and the concept of secondary victimization and my negative feelings and emotions. A third difficulty arose in my attempt to overcome my inexperience in writing as 'I' whilst establishing an academic critique. How could I combine the intuitive and the intellectual in one account and where should I try to publish and disseminate? Where should I and could I publish? What journal might I choose? Who were my target audience? Webb (1992), writing in the first person in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, has noted that researchers have experienced difficulties in having papers which are based on qualitative research accepted for publication because the papers have been written in the first person. Today there are few examples of this scholarly genre in sociological and criminological journals.

Personal – Impersonal

I now explore the consequences of writing as 'I'. Writing from the perspective of my emotional experiences and about my emotions as a researcher raises – as feminist research often does – emotional as well as intellectual issues. Having just reminded the reader of the materiality and sociality of writing and how social scientists have emotions about the subjects they study, here I linger on the difficulty of juxtaposing and combining a personal and impersonal analysis in one piece of writing. Feminist epistemologies are especially careful to emphasize the relevance of both subjectivity and individuality. Feminists have been concerned to put the personal, the particular, the emotional, the subjective and the 'private' on the agenda, and for issues of power and difference to be recognized.

My academic knowledge appreciates that feminist-inspired criminology has argued that female offenders are discriminated against for deviating from society's expectations as to how women should behave. Traditional perceptions of women are that they are the 'criminal other' (Walklate, 2005). It is hard to 'see' women as offenders. However, nuanced gender patterns of crime and victimization show women do engage in extremely violent behaviours and women do physically and/or sexually abuse children. This challenges the very core of social perceptions of femininity and motherhood (Turton, 2008) and, for those wedded to feminist perspectives, this is problematic for a variety of reasons. Traditional perceptions of women equate more readily with the concept of the ideal victim, men are the 'victimological other'. Women appear to bear a disproportionate burden of harm, suffering and victimization by taking on the woes of others. Women assume and accept self-culpability, question their own mothering abilities and punish themselves even when feeling inappropriately victimized by others. Blaming ourselves only adds to our own miseries (Davies, 2011a), as I discovered. Yet this, combined with my appreciation of other gender patterns to crime and victimization, whereby I know there are abusive mothers and I know crime and victimization cut across all social strata, is disturbing and emotive. I was 'suspect mother' and I felt the crushing force of being suspected of being a deficient, inept and bad mother.

Deepening the Reflexive Project

Several authors have commented in a range of different contexts on the dearth of emotional reflexivity in research and accounts of it (King, 2006; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Emotions do not appear to be subjected to the reflective process (King, 2006: 887). Whereas emotion has usefully been employed as a term that encourages reflexivity on the part of the researcher, as Holmes has lamented, 'research accounts do not de-centre the researcher as much as could be fruitful and often little is said about the (emotional) reflexivity of the participants' (2010: 146). As a consequence, she has argued for urgent theoretical and empirical attention to the emotionalization of reflexivity, suggesting that our conceptual and empirical tools for looking at emotional life need honing (2010: 148). Others too have argued for involving emotion in a less abstract way than is often done, especially in criminological (Hall, 2000, 2009) and victimological inquiry (Davies, 2011c).

I wanted to expose a personal experience where I had a full emotional involvement and strong subjectivity. Part of that project required me to provide a rich description of the impact an intervention had on my family life. One of the difficulties I faced was that this required me to write passionately. The way in which I chose to construct that piece of writing also demanded a balanced and authoritative tone. I found myself having 'different voices'.



Standpointism claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated. One of my voices is privileged and authoritative and arises from my position as a white, middle-class, forty-something academic. My other voice is peripheral and less empowered, fitting more closely to the spirit of standpoint theory that holds that the activities of those at the bottom of social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought and for *everyone's* research and scholarship (Harding, 1993: 54). Standpoint theory valorizes the perspectives uniquely available to those who are disadvantaged (Longino, 1993) and aims for 'knowledge that can be for marginalized people (and those who would know what the marginalized can know)' (Harding, 1993: 56). In the context of a child protection investigation, this is 'me', the forty-something wife and mother as disadvantaged and marginalized, a lowly underdog.

With regard to the knowledge base informing child and family social work, with few exceptions (see e.g. Richardson, 2003), the personal has been abstracted. There is scant evidence of the personal or emotive, even within parental perception studies. The voice of the parent, and mothers in particular, might be seen as part of the overlooked, lowly and lay perspective in child and family matters. Family perceptions of services and family experiences of child protection are valuable sources of information and can be important in relation to both quality control and service development (Dale, 2004). Researchers who undertake parental perception studies agree that the views of the clients and the parents can offer useful insights into how to do child protection work with heightened sensitivity. Such research sheds light on some very private and often painful experiences of social work interventions and their impacts. Some parents report their satisfaction with interventions, whilst others are strongly critical about practice processes and the outcomes of child protection interventions. It is telling that those who have shared their experiences are usually mothers. Furthermore, a less positive picture emerges from the more qualitative studies of parental experience (Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006), whilst a more positive picture emerges from research of a more quantitative nature (my own account and analysis occupy the middle ground in terms of satisfaction with intervention). Results from all the parental perception studies show it is important to ask about clients', parents' and mothers' engagement and participation in child protection investigations and protective services (Yatchmenoff, 2005).

I had at least two 'voices' arising out of a blurred and fuzzy relationship between my personal and professional self. I was involuntarily thrust into the role of participant observer (Mackenzie, 2005: 3) while being closely observed myself. I was the 'subject' and complete participant (Gold, 1958), uniquely positioned to provide insights into an under-researched and sensitive area of child protection practice. My novel position brought a range of methodological and intellectual issues to the fore. My academic **(criminological and victimological)** knowledges seemed to heighten my already intense

emotions and feelings at the time of the experience and subsequently also in my efforts to write for an academic and practitioner audience about it.

My subsequent struggle to write academically about my own emotional sensibilities and feelings was the spur to my thinking about comparisons between impersonal and personal analyses. The inspiration for this research note is, therefore, a case study of 'me', where the usual distinction between the researcher and the research subject does not apply. Whilst there is an underlying and implicit critique of the dominant public textual discourse relating to child protection and its denial of the dynamic nature of such work dealing as it does with the emotive, emotional and personally intimate areas of family life, this note has broader relevance. It demonstrates how social scientists have emotions about the subjects they study and strives to deepen the reflexive project.



Concluding Thoughts

Using 'I' and adopting a personal narrative went against the grain for me and goes against the grain of academic writing. Writing in this manner has been challenging and difficult, not least because of the nature of the experience I have been writing about. This has been part of the reflexive process I have been engaged in. I have attempted to be considerate to the role of my emotions. Another part of my efforts to be more deeply reflexive has been to be self-conscious about my methodology. I hope that the result is that the impact the experience continues to have on me is better understood by the reader than if I had communicated in a more traditional, abstracted and dispassionate manner. I hope that my lived experience has been felt by you. I hope that, by writing in the first person, I have produced a more effective piece of research and writing. Self-referential emotionality can help us to understand what impact positive and negative social interactions have on us. Writing passionately about our own experiences, particularly those with a high emotional content, may contribute further to an acknowledgement that social scientists, inevitably and correctly, have material (and maternal) emotions about the subjects they study.

There are, of course, implications for research, policy and practice arising from this research note. Further qualitative studies of parental experiences are suggested and these might more rigorously explore the emotional impact that interventions have. Results, as this case study shows, are likely to be relevant to the development of more sensitive policy and practice. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research into different types of interventions: for example, maltreatment missed or misjudged, interventions that succeed and are effective, interventions that occur and are ineffective, intervention(s) or attempt(s) that result as inappropriate or misjudged suggesting that a more comprehensive research agenda is warranted.

With reference to a personal experience that raised emotional as well as intellectual issues, I hope to have provided an interesting example of the oddity of the social scientific distinction between the impersonal and the personal, the public and the private. And finally, I hope this note encourages others to fill the experiential vacancy in sociological, criminological, victimological and child protection literatures.

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