Managing the Challenges of Interviewing through Reflective Journals: A Novice Researcher's Journey

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ABSTRACT---- *In-depth interviews are widely used in qualitative research but they can be challenging for any researcher, particularly for a novice. Although many researchers describe their research journeys, few discuss the use of reflective journals as a technique for managing dilemmas and challenges while interviewing. The research was conducted through a narrative inquiry approach which investigated the experiences of six Asian migrant mothers about their identity negotiation within the New Zealand context. As a part of data generation for a PhD thesis, the researcher participated in generating data through reflective memos – one of the elements was personal reflective journals after the interviews. The findings from 40 written entries identified three themes. One was emotion such as frustration, embarrassment, and joy. Another was on-going questioning such as data generation process. The third was decision making statements in relation to the emerging questions. Those themes were tightly connected to manifest a trajectory of becoming an incisive researcher. Such outcomes contribute to the understanding of how reflective journals can be a useful technique to understand and manage challenging issues pertaining to in-depth interviews in data generation.*

Keywords--- In-depth interviews, Reflective journals, Novice researchers
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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is to present the outcome of reflective journals written as a researcher during data collection. Iterate interviews were the main source of data for my PhD thesis study. Conducting iterate in-depth interviews were challenging for me. For this reason, I adopted a reflective writing technique to manage the challenge.

Conceptual framework
In qualitative studies, in-depth interviews are widely used. This method allows researchers to uncover individuals' experiences and to make meaning of any change in interpretation between the individual and the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Hermanowicz, 2013; Knox & Burkard, 2009). Iterate in-depth interviews can provide rich data. To do this, building a strong rapport is critical (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Knox & Burkard, 2009). Writers of qualitative methodology such as Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) provide guidance and/or interview skills in the use of in-depth interviews. However, it is not an easy task (Knox & Burkard, 2009; Qu & Dumay, 2011) because each study has its own context. Novice researchers encounter un-expected challenges and they often share their journeys with colleagues and sometimes give advice to new comers.

Recent study in the field of qualitative research allows space for researchers to reflect on their journey and some novices illustrate their general journeys (e.g. Wilson, 2008; Moss, 2005). Amuchilani and Phambuka-Nsimbi (2012) describe the challenges of a doctoral research while Magilvy and Thomas (2009) and Backman and Kyngäs (1999) describe the challenges of researchers' chosen approaches to their research. Others such as Clancy (2007) and Martin (2000) focus on novice researchers' challenges when they collect data in the organization or group to which they belong to. They often provide practical suggestions and recommendations to other novice researchers. Yet, there is little discussion on how novice researchers manage the challenges.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that reflective journal writing is helpful to manage those challenges. Recent study also identifies that reflective writing helps people to become critical and analytical about their own learning and practice (e.g. Greene, 2011; Kennison, 2012; Sen, 2010). It has become a method of teaching and learning (Huang & Kalman, 2012; Kennison, 2012; Sen, 2010). Novice researchers in qualitative studies have adopted reflective journal writing as an additional data such as Adam (2013). However, as Jasper (2005) argues, reflective writing can be a main source of data which should be treated like any other data. From this framework, I have written reflective journals as a part of data generation process.

The following elaborates the details of the use of reflective journals that I adopted as a main source of data.

2.   RESEARCH DESIGN

My research methodological approach is a narrative inquiry. Studying individuals' narratives is not just about gathering stories but engaging in a meaning making process between participants and researchers (Sandelowski, 1991). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that 'narrative inquiry is a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying' (p. 4), and researchers become a part of a potentially 'caring community'. In this sense, researchers also become participants who contribute to data – through reflective journals. Before addressing the details of a researcher's reflective journal technique that I adopted, I will briefly describe the relation between participants and me in the research. I am an Asian migrant mother who uses English as an additional language like any other participant. One significant and obvious difference is that I am doing the research for a PhD thesis. I was anxious about the data generation process I had to conduct because of a few factors I was aware of. First of all, the success of the data collection depended on the commitment of participants' involvement for twelve months. I was not sure whether I would successfully finish collecting data as planned or not. The second was from the discomfort of imposing on people: I felt very uncomfortable initiating meetings and requesting commitment for my own needs, for collecting data. The third was that the participants and I shared many identities, an Asian migrant mother using English as an additional language as discussed above. I was uneasy to claim myself as a researcher. However, I was aware that the discomfort needed to be faced and dealt with.

Being aware of those factors, I designed the data generation process in a way to capture the struggles through writing reflective journals. As Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2022), and Strauss and Corbin (1988) suggest, the reflective journals would provide a space for the continuous reflection on the data and the research process. I also expected that it could display the 'identity trajectory' of me becoming a researcher – the study topic. The journey would show how I managed the difficulties and became comfortable with decision making as a researcher.

I conducted 40 interviews with six participants from February to September, 2013. After each interview as early as possible, I wrote a brief memo about the interview just held which included my feelings and private thoughts. The collected data was analyzed using a thematic analysis method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). I followed the phases of thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.   FINDINGS

Three main themes were identified and each theme is described with direct quotation from the journals.

Emotion

Each reflective journal included private feelings prior to, during and after the interview. There were a few core features surrounding these emotional statements. One was related to the un-known future. At the beginning of data collection, there was an overall feeling of anxiety. I did not know the participants and how the interview process would unfold with them. However, the emotion often coincided with excitement. The extract below shows both the nervousness and the excitement prior to the meeting.

I could not sleep well last night. A bit worried. Maybe it is not because it is the first time but more to the fact that she is a Korean wanting to do interviews in English. She must be really good at English. ... I think I dressed like a 'student'. I was quite happy about it. ... I made sure I was on time, not too early, not too late. ...The fact that she was still struggling with English gave me a kind of confidence as well as a feeling of closeness towards her.

(Entry 1)

The other was related to my performance during interviews. There were statements of evaluating self-performance in terms of interview skills, social skills, and the data generation process. Sometimes I was relieved with what had happened, but other times I was worried about poor performance.

I thought the interview went really well. I was glad that she could show me some of her feelings about being an Asian. Maybe my interaction with her youngest child and her presence made it easier.

(Entry 29)

The last one was the feeling of getting stuck. There were situations that I could not do anything such as the following extract.

At the beginning of the interview, I shared my story. ...I felt comfortable sharing the story with her because I expected that she would understand it and furthermore, she might have a similar experience like mine. However, the story ended with me just sharing my story. There was nothing further [stories] from her side. I felt we were stuck with her not offering anything back.

(Entry 17)

The emotional statements were evident in most of entries and often there were the mixture of feelings. The following extract is one example of the change of emotion due to the surrounding features.

During the interview, I kept searching for a clue…. But slowly I realized I was failing…. Suddenly it came out [from nowhere] that she was a Sunday school teacher…. I was happy that she had something else [to talk about].

(Entry 11)

As seen in the extract, I was struggling to bring out a "good" story from a participant. The feeling of disappointment turned into excitement very shortly when the participant mentioned that she was a Sunday school teacher, not only a mother of three children. I was excited about future interviews with the participant.

On-going questioning
The fore-mentioned emotions were closely related to the emergence of questions going through my mind. The findings from reflective journals show that there are five categories of on-going questioning.
First, there were questions about the continuity of the participants' involvement. The journals written in the beginning included a detailed description of how to make sure my participants keep engaging in the research. Second, there were questions about the feasibility of the data generation process. I asked myself whether interviewing eight times a year was too much for the participants or not. The extract below shows the inquiry about the continuity of participant's involvement and the data collection design.

I helped her stack books on the shelf. Briefly I thought, "Am I bothering her? She may really not want to do this." This doubt became stronger when she said that she was too busy with all the things she was doing. And then she asked me what kind of result I wanted from her and said she would respond or say stories according to my aim of the study. "This is not what I want" "What should I do about this?" I was glad she asked me in a way, so I could tell her more about my research study. But I think she still thinks that she needs to tell me a story accordingly to my wishes. I really hope she understands the objects of my research cannot have simple answers. It is not just what, it is about how. Maybe she is worrying about whether she is contributing to my research or not. How can I make sure she is? Was I not clear about my research to her? Beside the emotional and relational discomfort that I felt, the worry about my methods- that she did not provide a recount- seems so trivial now.

(Entry 10)

Third, as I was becoming familiar with conducting interviews I began to focus more on the outcome of interviews than the research design. The following extract indicates that I was feeling comfortable talking to the participant but I had to question myself whether the conversation was worthy of data for the study.

…the conversation about her visit to Korea was really great. It was fun and informative. However, I had this feeling of anxiety after the meeting when she mentioned 'Was this conversation any good for your study?' Is it? I have to re-think about the interview again… I can't stop feeling that I have just spent some good times chatting with friends. I should re-focus on what I want to study because it is almost at the end of interviews and I won't have many more interviews left to ask questions if I missed anything I wanted to get from their stories.

(Entry 34)

Fourth, there were on-going questions about how to properly act when interacting with participants. I often did not know how to react on an unusual or unexpected offer from participants such as a dinner offer. The following extract illustrates my uneasiness of a certain greeting gesture from a participant and I questioned myself about this feeling and tried to find the best way to interact with the participant.

I found myself not really comfortable with her. After the interview, she gave me a hug and walked out to her car as I was gathering my stuff. I didn't know whether it was okay to walk with her to her car or wait until she was gone. …Do I find a difference in culture with her? Maybe hugging to greet and saying bye is not really my culture. I do it when it is "required" to be a culturally sensitive person. But this hugging thing is not something I expect from my research group, - and the rest of participants, we don't hug.

(Entry 20)

The last one was about questioning self as a researcher. I started the data collection thinking whether my English was good enough to do a PhD. Then I began questioning about my ability as a researcher such as not being confident in the field of the study and the process. Extracts from Entry 1 and Entry 33 show the struggling. They both indicate that questioning self was on-going. Unlike Entry 1, however, the later entry shows more detailed questions on my interview skills.

And I also thought how well she used her English. I became a smaller person because of her English. What would she think? That I am

doing a PhD with 'this English'?

(Entry 1)

Compared to the last one, I felt that I could have asked the right questions. I need to re-harness my interview skills before it is too late. At the same time, I need to re-ask some basic information which was not made clear.

(Entry 33)

As described in extracts, journals included on-going questions about self, participants, interaction, data generation process, and outcome.

Decision making

The on-going questions described above were answered in the form of decision making. Three phases of decision making were identified. One was settling into the reality: accepting the differences and/ or dealing with matters on the spot. This sort of decision making was described frequently and usually the problem was minor and/or straightforward to deal with.

The easy feeling turned around when I realized the recount was about something opposed to my opinion. I had to take my own time to think about how to approach this and how could I do this without expressing my opinion. Maybe that's why I didn't address 'her opinion'. I asked more about the details of the event, focusing on the facts. I think it went okay in terms of controlling my feelings about it, I found myself being rather easy going. I was even proud of myself being very objective. (Entry 12)

There were few but critical questions that the researcher struggled with. The questions were either too difficult for a novice researcher or too ambiguous to decide which would be ethical. In these cases I admitted that the matter needed a second opinion either from the participant or supervisors.

The comment seemed to be aimed at me and I didn't know what to say about it. I had a sleepless night struggling about if I would be able to have her as my participant, a Korean woman who is a lot older than me and who has strong opinions on what she believes in. I was in a vulnerable position making me worried that one day I would feel obligated to have to pay her back in some way. I wanted a second opinion from my supervisors.

(Entry 3)

The last one is decision making for future action – learning from experience. The researcher made plans for forthcoming interviews such as manners and attitudes, and interview skills. The extract shows that I reflected on previous interview journeys and reminded myself of the purpose of the study.

… going back to the starting point [of the purpose of the study] which even the supervisors kept reminding me of. This research is not about confirming my own journey as an Asian migrant woman. There is more to do with my research but I am stuck in my own private thoughts and even failed to give good reasons to participants as to why they should be involved in my research. I should write her an email to explain how much she contributes to my study and, as a result, to other Asian migrants.

(Entry 10)

A narrative of a novice researcher

Overall, the journals illustrated the narrative of a novice. There was a fuzzy image of challenges when commencing the data collection. The journals at the beginning indicated that everything was not clear and was problematic. As interviews progressed, I became more relaxed and comfortable in interviewing. At the same time, I was more convinced of the study design. At the end of the journey, I was more comfortable in decision making.

In detail, I was becoming more comfortable conducting interviews: I was less anxious and more relaxed as interviews progressed. The emerging questions became more focused and directly related to the outcome of the study. Accordingly, my decision making was more detailed. Even though I described the emerged themes in categories, they were tightly connected to one another. For example, the urgency of an emotion leads to a question and I answered the question. In this way, a trajectory of a novice researcher's narrative manifested itself. I could also see that I learned from the reflective journal writing. The following extract shows this clearly.

Some of her story and sentences, even though they were not elaborated, were very good. Now I am doing interviews and at the same time analyzing the detailed sentences rather than chunks of stories which I was doing at the beginning. Maybe it is the way to becoming an experienced researcher. I had a lot easier and relaxed wrap up with her compared to the first one.

(Entry 38)

The extract was written almost at the end of the interview journey. I talked about analyzing the data, which indicates that I was moving forward to the next step with the data I collected. Then I also mentioned the easiness of conducting

interviews. I was familiar with the process and was comfortable with the decision making.

4.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates how a novice researcher managed the challenges when conducting iterate interviews through emotion, emerging questions, and making decision. These identified themes were tightly linked to one another. The journey indicated that as a novice, I, became confident in conducting interviews and constructed a researcher identity. Reflective writing was central for me to develop critical thinking and to learn from experience (Jasper, 2005). I was also positioning myself as a scholar through reflexivity (Hunter, forthcoming). Reflective journal writing was a useful tool to capture the detail of the journey of becoming a competent researcher.

I adopted a reflective writing method to capture the struggles while interviewing. However, a more detailed journey was presented than I anticipated. I could see how I managed those struggles which were not clear when simply reflecting on my overall journey of interviews. This may provide insights to other researchers to use researchers' reflective journals as a main data collection method. Further, it may lead to the further study of researchers' learning trajectories, and researchers' identity negotiation.

5.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

6.   REFERENCES

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