

## The use of narrative inquiry with at-risk young people: potential challenges

### Title Page

**Title:**

The use of narrative inquiry with at-risk young people: potential challenges

**Authors:**

Lesley J. Douglas, RN, BH (MH), GradDipMidwifery, MFMH, CMHN  
University of New England  
Armidale, Australia 2351

Correspondence to: [ldougl7@myune.edu.au](mailto:ldougl7@myune.edu.au)

Professor Kim Usher AM RN, A/DipNEd, BA, DipAppSc, MNSt, PhD  
University of New England  
Armidale, Australia 2351

[kusher@une.edu.au](mailto:kusher@une.edu.au)

Dr Cindy Woods  
University of New England  
Armidale, Australia 2351

[cwood30@une.edu.au](mailto:cwood30@une.edu.au)

Professor Debra Jackson RN, PhD FACN  
Oxford Institute of Nursing, Midwifery & Allied Health Research (OxINMAHR), Oxford  
Brookes University, UK, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Australia.

[djackson@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:djackson@brookes.ac.uk)

**Abstract:**

**Aim:**

To present an overview of several challenges that arose when conducting narrative research with at-risk young people.

**Background:**

Being identified as 'at-risk' places an individual in danger of future negative outcomes.

Conducting qualitative research such as narrative inquiry with 'at-risk' individuals has the potential for challenges to arise for participants and/or researchers.

**Discussion:**

Five main challenges identified and discussed were trauma disclosure, pre-existing relationships, insider/outsider perspective, power relationships and researcher and participant emotional safety.

**Conclusions:**

It is imperative that potential challenges be identified prior to the commencement of studies and plans made to address the challenges.

Implication for practice:

Difficulties can arise with any type of research involving vulnerable participants; hence as researchers we must always plan to ensure these challenges are managed appropriately.

**Keywords:** at-risk young people; challenges; narrative inquiry; researcher and participant trauma

### **Introduction**

Conducting research with any vulnerable group presents numerous potential challenges. These challenges may become even more complex when 'at-risk' young people are the focus of the research as their level of vulnerability is high. At-risk young people are defined as young people who may not achieve their psychosocial, educational and/or cognitive development goals secondary to detrimental issues occurring during the adolescent developmental period (Department for Child Protection & Family Services 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of several challenges that arose when conducting narrative inquiry with a group of at-risk young people. To begin, we present a brief overview of narrative inquiry, followed by an analysis of the challenges that occurred during the research process for both the participants and the research team. We then suggest solutions that may be helpful for other researchers in the future.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that involves gathering narratives or stories and offers research participants the opportunity to relay their lived experience (Clandinin et al. 2016). In fact, the basis of narrative inquiry is the belief that we as human beings come to understand our lives through story (Andrews et al. 2013). Story telling is considered to play a pivotal role in the lives of humans; it helps us to describe and make meaning of our experiences through the stories we share. Thus, narrative inquiry provides a methodology that assists researchers to grasp the meaning that people place on their life experiences (Clandinin 2006, Oliver 1998, Ollerenshaw & Creswell 2002). As such, narrative inquiry is much more than listening to stories; it involves trying to understand the participant's life experiences through the interpretation of their stories (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

The focus of the narrative inquiry described in this paper was to examine the experience of a group of at-risk young people who provide mentoring to other at-risk young people; their peers. Narrative research offers the opportunity for participants to have a voice it also offers an opportunity for participants to share their stories with others.

### **The interviews - retelling their own personal story**

One of the tenets of narrative inquiry is the use of a conversational approach to interviews (Denzin & Lincoln 2008). During this conversation, the researcher provides an opportunity for the participant to tell their story. Interviews as a method of data collection fit comfortably when the topics under discussion are sensitive (Hewitt 2007) and when the researcher is gaining insights into a lived experience (Clancy 2011).

Given this research focused on the experience of mentoring other at-risk young people, the researchers anticipated the participants would tell stories about their experience of mentoring. Despite the initial interview question being clearly focused on that experience, each participant began their story by recalling the personal trauma they had faced in their lives that had led to them being considered 'at risk'.

This phenomenon has been reported by others (Booth & Booth 1994, Thorne & McLean 2003), where research participants have elected to share their personal stories and memories without prompting. Corbin and Morse (2003) argue that participants agree to be interviewed for a reason; even if they are unaware of that reason. Furthermore, they contend that one such reason may be the need to unburden themselves of their story; in this case, the researcher offered the opportunity for the individual to unburden themselves of their own story of trauma by asking them about their story of mentoring other at-risk young people.

Clandinin (2013) also claims that narrative inquiry has a central component; the relation between temporality, sociality and spatiality. In this case, the participants appeared to be utilising the storylines of past, present and future, inner and outer emotions, and place (Clandinin 2013); and while these dimensions will be present in all narratives, one may have a stronger influence (Haydon et al. 2018). In this research, the story of the past appears to have taken precedence over the present and the future.

It is thus important for researchers to have a clear strategy planned prior to conducting interviews with vulnerable participants because of the potential for them to recount traumatic stories of their past without prompting. It is also imperative that the researcher organise for appropriate support to be available at the completion of the interview should the participant become distressed (Table 1). In this study, pre-

arranged psychological support for participants was available immediately after the interview and for several weeks post-interview if needed. There does not appear to have been any such issues as five months after the completion of the interviews, this support has not been accessed.

### **The pre-existing relationship**

The first author (LD) had been working as a volunteer with a formal peer-to-peer mentoring program from where the participants were recruited. Collaborative relationships with the at-risk young mentors had thus been fostered for 12-months prior to the commencement of the study.

Pre-existing relationships can bring both negative and positive attributes to the interview. FitzGerald (1995) postulated that a trusting relationship needed to be developed before a research relationship could commence. Both Ross (2017) and McConnell-Henry et al. (2009-2010), endorse this position suggesting that pre-established rapport between a researcher and participant can save time and resources usually needed to establish a relationship. Others have argued that a pre-existing relationship can legitimise the relationship between the researcher and participant (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009), expedite acceptance, and provide a degree of psychological comfort during the interview process.

Others however, argue that a pre-existing relationship may have a negative influence on the research process should the participants believe that the researcher has not fully explained the intended use of collected data, or when the information they provide could cause a rebound effect. It has also been documented that pre-existing relationships may cause role confusion (Asselin 2003) or provide a platform for exploitation within the developed relationship (O'Reilly & Parker 2014).

The principles of autonomy are a prime concern in studies such as this one as fostering relationships prior to research can be viewed as coercion (O'Reilly & Parker 2014). Coercion occurs where the young person may experience an obligation to participate in the research for fear of damaging or losing an adult based relationship and/or the respect of their peers. This is particularly a challenge when considering recruitment and issues of consent (McDermid et al. 2012).

To counteract the potential sense of coercion, participants for this study were anonymously invited to partake in the research study by an organisational gatekeeper (Table 1). This helped to ensure that researcher bias during the recruiting period was avoided.

It has also been argued previously that the researcher needs to be part of the process of the inquiry in narrative research where they are not only “describing participant’s experiences but are also actively in relation with participants” (Clandinin et al. 2016, p.36). Hence, the pre-existing relationship offers the potential for the researcher to be in a closer relationship with the participant as a connection has already been established.

Rapport and trust also needs to be built with gatekeepers (O’Reilly & Parker 2014) before access may be granted to at-risk young people within an organisation. In this research study, gatekeepers included the Chief Executive Officer and the Program Manager of the organisation. It is their role to protect the young people from further harm and persuading them to the positive benefits of a research study may be difficult. Spending time to answer any questions and discussing the potential benefits of the research will assist with potential participant engagement. In this study, the gatekeepers had known the first author for 12 months, however, gaining their acceptance and support of the study took time and sensitivity (Table 1).

In the case of the present research, the prior relationship developed between the participants and the researcher may have avoided the potential for the research data to be gathered without reciprocal trust and respect. Wadsworth’s (2011) description of a data raid, where researchers march into a vulnerable group, obtain their required data and leave, was negated by the development of a pre-existing relationship that had evolved prior to the study being conducted. It is possible that the participants’ willingness to partake in the research could be attributed to the long-term establishment of rapport and trust.

### **Insider perspective**

Considerations of the notion of insider/outsider perspectives is important when conducting qualitative research. Being an insider, with universal lived experiences or being an accepted member of the research group (Gair 2012,

Kanuha 2000), is vastly different from being an outsider, where group acceptance and/or shared experiences have not developed (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009).

As an insider, the researcher recognises and understands the nuances of the group dynamics and culture, affording a place of privilege within the group. Insiders usually find that access to participants is easier and they are often considered as equals, minimising the potential power differentials (Blythe et al. 2013). It may also provide the researcher with greater understanding and ability to succinctly represent participants who are seen to be marginalised or oppressed (Hayfield & Huxley 2015).

The insider/outsider position can also increase challenges when assumptions are made secondary to past experiences within the group setting or where pre-existing information results in presumptions (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009-2010). Prior understanding can lead to a paucity of clarification and increased assumptions of knowledge, resulting in data collection that lacks richness and objectivity (Blythe et al. 2013). Blythe et al. (2013) proposed that while being an insider may lead to easier access to participants, it is also possible that participants may experience discomfort and prefer to talk to an outsider.

As an outsider, researchers are not personally familiar with the subject and there is the possibility that researchers may not be able to accurately represent the experiences as portrayed by the participants (Hayfield & Huxley 2015). It may also be more difficult to negotiate entry and develop rapport and trust, especially with marginalised groups who do not readily accept 'strangers' into their midst.

Like Breen (2007), the first author was neither an insider or outsider, rather placed within the midpoint. Full membership into the closed group was not granted through commonality of past experiences, but through the long-term development of trust, respect and understanding of the group's culture. The research was thus influenced by personal experience of working within a closed group without the shared trauma experiences.

The positioning of the first author as an accepted group member did however have the potential to result in the blurring of professional boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). Issues may have arisen through emotional involvement, overfamiliarity, enforced researcher detachment or relationship compromise through self-disclosure. Proactively, these issues were addressed through close supervisory support, clinical

supervision and the researchers ensuring that academic rigour was maintained throughout the research process (Table 1). Researchers conducting qualitative studies with vulnerable young people should identify their positionality prior to commencing the project and plan strategies to mitigate any challenges.

### **Focus on power relationships**

Being known to the participants also brings into play the potential for a power imbalance. Power imbalances between the researcher and participant have an increased focus in research with young people (Brooks & te Riele 2013) where researcher age, equality, financial status, developmental background and experiences may be vastly different to the participants'.

The noted power differential between an adult and a young person can contribute to increased feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability for the participant. Recognition was given to the participants having the knowledge and insight into the research topic and they held the power over the sharing of their experiences. For the young people to have representative control over the data collection and to diminish any power differentials, all were provided with a hard copy of their interview and encouraged to comment, question or respond. For the researchers, this was to ensure that data interpretation was congruent with the participants' meaning.

Achieving equality in the research relationship with young people considered to be at-risk was influenced by the long-term relationship that had been developed prior to data collection. Recognition of the potential for the researcher to be seen as a power figure was important in this study. Researchers need to ensure they are aware of similar power issues when researching at-risk young people and plan strategies to overcome this challenge (Table 1).

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, all health professionals are mandatory reporters. Mandatory reporting is the legislative requirement for selected professionals, such as registered medical practitioners, teachers, police or children services, to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect to government authorities (NSW Child and Young Persons (NSWCYP) (Care and Protection) Act 1998). Prior to the interviews being conducted, a disclosure caveat was given in clear language that should information be disclosed during interview that exposed a risk of danger to



self or others, appropriate authorities would have to be informed. This is a legal obligation but there is also a moral obligation to ensure safety and well-being which will override a confidentiality agreement.

### **Emotional safety for the participants**

Ethical review boards often become concerned about the potential risk of distress to participants when they are asked to recount stories of traumatic events. While we do not discount the associated risk with stories of trauma or vulnerability, we agree with Corbin and Morse (2003) that participants in qualitative research have the right to refuse to answer a question or to tell only what they wish to be heard. In this way, Corbin and Morse (2003), explain that the participant maintains control of the interview.

After each interview, an opportunity for debriefing was provided. While debriefing may not suffice to protect the participant from re-traumatisation, it does allow the interviewer to ascertain whether there are any concerns regarding vicarious trauma and provides the arena for the participants to talk through some of the feelings the inquiry may have raised (Alty & Rodham 1998). This debriefing also allowed for appropriate closure of the interview and opened discussions that had perceived relevance to the participants.

### **The potential for researcher trauma**

The literature openly addresses the necessity of providing assistance for research participants who may experience emotional distress due to participating in the research process (McCosker et al. 2001). However, it is not as forthcoming when considering the potential for emotional impact on the researcher (McCosker et al. 2001) who seeks stories on topics considered sensitive or traumatic. In qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry where the intent is to produce rich narrative text (McDermid et al. 2012), shared stories of trauma may remain with the researcher after the interview; stories that cannot be dismissed or unheard (Beale et al. 2004) and are reheard when listening to transcriptions and during the act of coding (McCosker et al. 2001). Hearing sensitive stories that may relay traumatic experiences, can raise subjective distress with resulting emotions of exhaustion, anger, hopelessness, sadness and distress for the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). Elmir et al. (2011) explain that this phenomenon of vicarious traumatisation is

especially a concern for novice researchers. Vicarious traumatisation of the researcher must be considered initially by the research team and plans put in place to manage it in the event of researcher distress (Elmir et al. 2011).

Silviera and Boyer (2015) describe the potential for the development of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress occurring to care providers who provide care and interventions to childhood trauma victims. They discuss how listening to stories of trauma can evoke negative psychological responses for the therapeutic care providers but as the child grows and develops resilience, the carer is often relieved to see the growth in the child. While this phenomenon is similar for researchers who also listen to stories of trauma, they do not always have the opportunity to witness the growth and resilience that can occur with a structured intervention.

After each interview, the author who conducted the interviews reflected on the interview and discussed the experience with two members of the supervisory team (Witty et al 2014, Petty 2017). Having developed a relationship with the participants and hearing their stories previously in a formal peer-to-peer mentoring service where they volunteer as youth leaders, may have provided some protection from the effects of vicarious trauma. To support the researcher, guidelines for debriefing and supervision need to be considered and incorporated into all ethical applications (Mealer & Jones 2014) (Table 1).

**Table 1: Recommendations to overcome identified challenges**

Challenge	Recommendation
Retelling of personal trauma	*recognise and plan for participants to share their stories during interview *develop interview skills for the researcher *provide a supportive opportunity for personal stories to be unburdened
Provision of participant support	*appropriate psychological support arranged prior to interviews
Pre-existing relationships	*allow time to develop relationships with gatekeepers who are needed to grant access to participants and can assist with recruitment strategies
Insider/outsider positions	*acknowledgment of the researcher position *development of rapport & trust *be aware of possible presumptions
Power imbalances	*recognition of participant strengths and knowledge *be open and involve participants in data representation
Researcher vicarious trauma	*awareness prior to data collection that stories of vulnerability & trauma may be disclosed

	*pre-arranged debriefing with a clinical supervisor *pre-arranged academic supervision through a formal support guideline
--	--

## Conclusion

Potential challenges that may arise when conducting qualitative research such as narrative inquiry with at-risk young people has received little attention in the literature. Narrative inquiry is considered an effective approach for seeking the storied accounts of experiences from at-risk young people as it provides a platform for their voice to be heard. It also provides the opportunity for at-risk young people to recognise that their opinions and experiences are valued. However, it does have the potential for several challenges to arise during the conduct of the study. It is imperative that potential challenges be identified prior to the commencement of studies and plans made to address the challenges should they arise. It is important to remember that difficulties can arise with any type of research involving vulnerable participants; hence as researchers it is necessary to pre-plan to ensure the safety of both the participants and the researcher/s.

## References

- Alty A, Rodham K (1998) The ouch! factor: Problems in conducting sensitive research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 8, 2, 275-282.
- Andrews M, Squire C & Tamboukou M (Eds.). (2013) *Doing Narrative Research*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Sage Publications, London.
- Asselin ME (2003) Insider research: Issues to consider when doing qualitative research in your own setting. *Journal for Nurses in Staff Development*, 19, 2, 99-103.
- Beale B, Cole R, Hillege S, et al (2004) Impact of in-depth interviews on the interviewer: Roller coaster ride. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 6, 141-147.
- Blythe S, Wilkes L, Jackson D et al (2013) The challenges of being an insider in storytelling research. *Nurse Researcher*, 21, 1, 8-13.
- Booth T, Booth W (1994) The use of depth interviewing with vulnerable subjects: Lessons from a research study of parents with learning difficulties. *Social Science and Medicine*, 39, 3, 415-424.
- Breen L (2007) The researcher 'in the middle'. Negotiating the insider/ outsider dichotomy. *Australian Community Psychologist*, 19, 1, 163-174.
- Brooks R, te Riele K (2013) Exploring ethical issues in youth research: an introduction. *Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 21, 3, 211-216.
- Clancy A (2011) An embodied response: Ethics and the nurse researcher. *Nursing Ethics*, 18, 1, 112-21.
- Clandinin DJ (2006) Narrative Inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 27, 1, 44-54.
- Clandinin DJ (2007) Resonance between stories; Reading across papers. *Teachers and Teaching*, 13, 4, 323-326.
- Clandinin DJ (2013) *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Reference and Research Book News, vol 28, no.4, Ringgold Inc, Portland, United States.
- Clandinin DJ, Caine V, Lessard S et al (2016) *Engaging in narrative inquiries with children and youth*. vol 16, Routledge, New York

- Connelly F, Clandinin D (1990) Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19, 5, 2-14.
- Corbin J, Morse JM (2003) The unstructured interactive interview: Issues of reciprocity and risks when dealing with sensitive topics. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9, 3, 335-354.
- Corbin-Dwyer S, Buckle JL (2009) The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 8, 1, 54-63.
- Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (Eds) (2008) *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Sage Publications, London.
- Department for Child Protection and Family Services (2015) *At-Risk Youth Strategy 2015-2018*, Western Australia: Perth. available from <https://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Organisation/Documents/At%20Risk%20Youth%20Strategy%202015-2018.pdf>
- Dickson-Swift V, James EL, Kippen S et al (2007) Doing sensitive research: What challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research*, 7, 3, 327-353.
- Dickson-Swift V, James E L, Kippen S et al (2009) Researching sensitive topics: qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research*, 9, 1, 61-79.
- Elmir R, Schmied V, Jackson D et al (2011) Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. *Nurse Researcher*, 19, 1, 12-16.
- FitzGerald M (1995) *The experience of chronic illness in rural Australia*, PhD thesis, University of New England.
- Gair S (2012) Feeling their stories: Contemplating empathy, insider/outsider positioning's, and enriching qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22, 1, 134-143.
- Haydon G, Browne G, van der Riet P (2018) Narrative inquiry as a research methodology exploring person centred care in nursing. *Collegian*, 25,1,125-129.
- Hayfield N, Huxley C (2015) Insider and outsider perspectives: Reflections on researcher identities in research with lesbian and bisexual women. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12, 91-106.
- Hewitt J (2007) Ethical components of researcher-researched relationships in qualitative interviewing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17, 8, 1149-1159.

- Kanuha VK (2000) 'Being' native versus 'going' native: Conducting social work research as an insider. *Social Work*, 45, 5, 441-447.
- McConnell-Henry T, James A, Chapman Y et al (2009-2010) Researching with people you know: Issues in interviewing. *Contemporary Nurse*, 34, 1, 2-9.
- McCosker H, Barnard A, Gerber R (2001) Undertaking sensitive research: Issues and strategies for meeting the safety needs for all participants. *Forum: Qualitative Research*, 2, 1, Art. 22.
- McDermid E, Roen K (2012) Youth on the virtual edge: Researching marginalised sexualities and genders online. *Advancing Qualitative Methods*, 22, 4, 560-570.
- Mealer M, Jones J (2014) Methodological and ethical issues related to qualitative telephone interviews on sensitive topics. *Nurse Researcher*, 21, 4, 32-37.
- NSWCYP (1998) *New South Wales Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, No 157. <https://www.pco.nsw.gov.au> (Last accessed: 25 March 2018.)
- Oliver KL (1998), A journey into narrative analysis: A methodology for discovering meanings. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 17, 244-259.
- Ollerenshaw JA, Creswell JW (2002) Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, 3, 329-347.
- O'Reilly M, Parker N (2014) *Doing mental health research with children and adolescents: A guide to qualitative methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Petty J (2017) Emotion work in qualitative research: Interviewing parents about neonatal care. *Nurse Researcher*, 25, 3, 26-30.
- Ross L (2017) An account from the inside: examining the emotional impact of qualitative research through the lens of 'insider' research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 4, 3, 326-327.
- Silviera FS, Boyer W (2015) Vicarious resilience in counselors of child and youth victims of interpersonal trauma. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25, 4, 513-536.
- Thorne A, McLean KC (2003) Telling traumatic events in adolescents: a study of master narrative positioning. In Fivush R, Haden C (Eds) *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc Publishers, Mahwah, New Jersey.

Wadsworth Y (2011) *Do it yourself social research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Left Coast Press, California.

Witty K, Branney P, Bullen K et al (2014) Engaging men with penile cancer in qualitative research: Reflections from an interview-based study. *Nurse Researcher*, 21, 3, 13-19.

#### Funding

This study was funded by a scholarship provided by the Australian Government Research Training Program.