The research interview and professional learning.

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between researcher and respondent and their shared experiences through interaction in the interview processes. Ethical considerations related to the balance of power and potential for change in respondents professional actions and decisions post interview are discussed whilst problematizing the concept of truly informed consent.

The paper draws on the researchers experience of undertaking a qualitative based study founded in the principles of phenomenological hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1998; Heidegger, 1962). The research, which concluded successfully in 2016, investigated the impact that pedagogical training programmes had on respondents' teaching practice and engagement with professional learning. All respondents were experienced lecturers working in the adult education sectors of Scotland and Wales (UK). Upon project conclusion, several respondents contacted the researcher to share their post interview experiences. The research was not designed to elicit change in respondents nor influence professional choice or practice. However, each communication received independently accredited participating in the research as the source for renewed interest and engagement in professional learning. Although research interviews becoming an enriching experience for respondents is a recorded phenomenon (Kvale, 1996), the ascribed effects were profound, potentially life changing, and not fully anticipated. The paper explores important questions related to ethical considerations for researchers designing and undertaking interview based research and the potential for engagement in research interviews to be an enriching source and trigger for professional learning in practice.

Key words

Professional learning, Research interviews, Ethics, Professional practice

Introduction

Upon completion of interviews being undertaken for a qualitative research study focusing on reflections on the lived experience of further education lecturers in their initial teacher education programmes, I received several unsolicited (but not unwelcome) informal communications from three of the respondents (from the original 20). On conclusion of the interviews three respondents had been compelled to further critically reflect on their working lives, experiences, professional beliefs and values. As a consequence, they had been motivated to identify and seek out learning opportunities that by their own admission, they would likely not otherwise have done. The participation in the research, as evidenced by the account of the respondents, had engendered a change in the lived reality of the individual, leading to the desire to engage in previously unplanned or anticipated learning. This was not a specified aim of the research, and although it is not surprising that interviews led to continued critique and reflection (Kvale, 1996), the actions taken by respondents in undertaking new work and changes to their lives was not fully anticipated or planned for. Thankfully the experiences of the respondents in these reported incidences were positive and reported favourably. However, this paper seeks to problematize the circumstances that affected the respondents, and questions the processes and guidelines for the development of ethical considerations and the preparation of research interview participants giving fully informed consent.

The study and subsequent communications

The study, completed in 2016 had its foundations in phenomenological hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1976; Watson, 1971) and was conducted with the aim of reviewing the initial education programmes of lecturers in further education in Scotland and Wales (Husband, 2015a; Husband, 2015b). Using the lens of several years of post-graduation teaching practice, respondents were asked to critically evaluate their lived experiences in 'training'[1], the potential impact the training had on their engagement with continued professional learning and their perceptions on the efficacy of the programmes in preparing them for their career as a college lecturer. The interviews lasting on average 40 minutes were designed to form a shared understanding between the interviewer and respondent on how the initial educational programmes afforded to respondents, specifically in relation to learning and teaching, had added to their professional and personal capacities and positioned them to progress their careers as lecturers.

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[1] Training, although a contentious term when used to describe teacher education programmes, is still frequently used within literature referring to further and vocational education. It is used here with full acknowledgement that it is not universally supported or used when describing the professional formation of teachers and lecturers.

Through purposeful questioning and discussion in the carefully designed semi structured interviews, respondents were asked to re-live their formative professional learning and go beyond basic recall of events in an attempt to critically evaluate their lived experiences as a lecturer. In the process of doing this, respondents were able to unpick their early professional formation, ongoing professional learning, constructs of identity, and emergent agency. These insights shed light on the perceived efficacy of the initial learning and 'training' supplied by employers and its subsequent impact on the respondents' continued professional learning.

The subsequent supplied testimony of three of the 20 respondents in relation to their post interview experiences also indicates that the reflective process undertaken in critically evaluating a past learning experience or event has the potential to lead to a broader and more generalised inspection of an individual's situation, desires, needs and interests. This then leads to the focus and aim of this paper. Given the potential for influence on personal and situational circumstance arising from research participation (which will be explored more fully in due course), should the ethical considerations related to respondents engaged in research interviews extend beyond the common respect given to anonymity, comfort, wellbeing and professional standing (BERA, 2011)? Should ethical considerations be extended to consider the consequences of the possibilities for real and tangible personal and professional change brought about through reflection and discussion? If a respondent has the potential to be challenged in their thinking or resolves to reconsider professional actions (such as learning and practice) as a result of participating in research interviews, where then does the ethical responsibility lie for such possible actions? Furthermore, how can this potential be mitigated against and what questions does this ask of the concept of informed consent?

This then has potential further reaching practical implications for researchers in the design and implementation of research projects. In ethical considerations for research interviews attention is given to the principles related to ensuring no harm or loss of standing comes to the respondent and a critical part of this is the notion of informed consent. Respondents, fully availed of all pertinent information related to the research and processes decide about participation based on the known information. If, as postulated above, there are conditions within and created by research interactions that lead to post interview reactions based on the experiences of respondents, this highlights the need to explore the nature of fully informed consent and what this means in practical applications within the research interview context.

In seeking to answer these questions this paper addresses three main areas of concern: it explores the assumptions related to ethical considerations of qualitative research interviews in educational contexts; it aims to begin the process of unpicking the vagaries and complexities of the concept of

informed consent, and finally considers the practical implications for researchers and respondents alike.

Respondent Communication

This paper focuses on the real and lived experiences of individuals who had participated as respondents in a research project. These individuals were willing participants in the research project and had interests and experience in the relevant area of enquiry. Detailed project information documents were supplied to respondents by the researcher and subsequently all participants gave their informed consent to be interviewed. The following reported experiences of three of the original twenty participants were unanticipated and offer an interesting opportunity to explore the impact of research participation on the professional learning of respondents.

The following three excerpts were taken from communications received by the researcher following an e mail to all participants thanking them for their participation in the project, and offering the opportunity to give feedback or ask any questions prior to the final report being sent imminently.

Response 1:

> '… I didn't expect the interview to be thought provoking and didn't think I would think about it again but I did. I realised after the questions about teaching and training that I hadn't really done any courses or learning for a long time (years). I have looked into things I can do and I have signed up for a course on mentoring that runs in the college every year. I will see how it goes'
>
> Male Engineering lecturer in Scotland with over 10 years teaching experience

Response 2:

> '…the questions seemed to shock me a bit. When you asked about the sort of professional learning I seek out I couldn't answer! I think I got stuck because I haven't looked for courses and things I just did what was available in the college on training days etc. It got me thinking about what I am interested in, and to be honest my subject hasn't changed much but some of the teaching methods etc have. I have looked into a Masters degree and one of the modules is about online e learning. I am really glad I did the interview as it has made me do something which is really exciting (and scary)'
>
> Female lecturer in Social Sciences in Scotland with 6 years teaching experience

Response 3:

> '…interview was a bit strained as I didn't have much to talk about in relation to professional learning. I have done bits and bobs but nothing more than I'm required to really. Sorry if the info wasn't much use. Anyway, I don't know if it's too late to include but after the interview I realised I'm pretty bored with work, I obviously can't quit and don't want to! but I realised I needed to do something to get the brain working again. I have decided to do an Open Uni

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degree [subject supplied but redacted for anonymity]. It's nothing to do with work but I already feel a bit more positive about my job, I'm guessing I will have to see how it goes, you never know maybe a change of subject in the future!'

Female lecturer in Social Sciences in Wales with 12 year's experience.

The effect of participation was real and tangible for each of the participants prompted to undertake new learning. The impacts of the interview process are clearly articulated by all three respondents and although this paper offers no methodology for predicting such outcomes, it highlights the potential for unanticipated and tangible change to individuals through engagement with research interviews.

Research interview participation, ethical considerations and informed consent

Education professionals working in both compulsory and further or vocational education do not routinely take part in research. Where research work is undertaken, people are either respondents in a university based project or are engaged in supported action research or professional enquiry. There is considerable theoretical analysis of the impact on learning of practitioners conducting action research or professional enquiry (see for example Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016). Equally, consideration of the ethical repercussions and conditions for working with professional respondents in relation to 'doing no harm' (BERA, 2011;Yin, 2011 is justifiably well explored.

Given the proliferation of qualitative based research projects focusing on the practice of teachers, schools and colleges, policy, young people, adult learners, curriculum, pedagogy and leadership (to name a small selection), it is a reasonable conclusion that many hundreds or indeed thousands of research interviews are conducted globally in education on an annual basis. Given the extent and wide scale engagement with interviews by researchers, there is now a vast library of good quality instructional literature pertaining to offer methodological guidance in the planning, preparation and undertaking of research interviews (see DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Drever, 2003; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2011, for just a few examples). As with all genres of literature there is an enormous variance in quality and consequently, useful content. The style of interviews, scope, structure, limits, rules and parameters are all described in a great many formats that range from offering suggested questions to methods of recording, transcription and analysis. It is tempting to think of these instructional guides as offering a formula to apply to the human sciences, a possible solution to make the unpredictable, predictable and to provide a structured framework by which to justify actions and processes of design. However, as Myers and Newman (2007) point out, qualitative research interviews are problematic and although withstand critique with due consideration to the limitation of

potential problems, are rarely predictable. The setting of the interview is an artificial construct of the research, the participants are frequently strangers, and respondents are asked to create responses to specific questions often in a time restricted environment. These circumstances offer up both methodological and ethical problems that require consideration by researchers.

In many studies, the considerations of ethical conduct and responsibility to the respondents themselves pass through a rigorous process of inspection by ethics committees based within universities housing the research groups or individuals undertaking enquiry. These submissions to committees and subsequent detailed research plans are frequently underpinned with specific points of consideration related to the person (respondent), knowledge, democratic values, quality of research (methods and rigour) and academic freedoms (BERA, 2011). The considerations towards respondents and participants set out quite clearly that respondents should suffer no loss of professional standing, suffer personal distress, and be treated equally and without prejudice or discrimination. This information is normally supplied to individuals prior to commencement and coupled with a clear and unambiguous statement empowering respondents to withdraw at any given time without prejudice (Corti, Day & Backhouse, 2000), and forms the basis for informed consent for participation. Signatures are recorded and the forms are retained in accordance with ethical guidelines and related agreed procedures for secure data storage.

However, this in and of itself is an adherence only to the ritual of procedure and as argued by Holm (1997), ethical behaviour in qualitative research interviews requires a reflexive an emotive human response to the individual and the circumstances. In this way then it is possible to view consent differently and not as an act or set of regulations or conditions set out at the start of a project. As is clearly laid out in the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice (2004), consent should be regarded as an agreement that is renegotiated over time and during the research itself. As Sin (2005) asserts, consent can only be considered informed if the information upon which it is based is current and responsive to changing circumstances (both emotional and situational). The BSA (2004) statement also offers that researchers are responsible for the output of the project, its content and impact. This has further implications for the issue of informed consent as at the onset of the project, although clear intentions as to what is hoped for in relation to findings and output are held, it is not possible to predict entirely what the project will find, and as such, related impact or output are uncertain. Equally, in conducting interviews for research purposes the interviewer is engaged in trying to understand the experiences of the respondent through questioning and discussion. Clearly individuals are unique and as such have different life experiences, agency and engagement and will react differently to situations and questions in interviews. A contextual and reflexive approach to consent and human considerations revisited within interactions throughout the life of the

project are clearly a critical and integral requirement of ethical qualitative research interviews (Sin, 2005). These considerations highlighting issues focused on critical factors of reflexive ethical research practice point towards the need for a greater focus on the end of project and post interview implications for respondents and the related responsibilities of researchers. The practical realities of this are illustrated directly by the statements supplied to the researcher in this project and detailed above, there were implications for the respondents after the interviews had concluded.

The communications from respondents received after this research would suggest that the interview experience offered potential for reflection and professional review of practice leading to decisions to enact change. This offers the opportunity to consider the scope of the human interaction within the interview space leading to these practical decisions made by respondents and the actions of the researchers that guided the interviews and influenced decisions. What was it about the questioning of the interviewer and the construction of answers by the respondents that led to a shift in behaviour by some of the research participants? In tackling this question it would be naïve to consider the interviewer as a sponge for pre-existing data (Myers & Newman, 2007) transmitted from the respondent. In participating in the research the interviewer is engaged in investigation and the sharing of ideas through discussion. The semi structured interview offers additional depth to that supplied by questionnaire or fully structured interview by inviting dialogic exchange. In so engaging the researcher is actively constructing knowledge in partnership with the respondent who is constructing answers to questions that may require them to consider issues in a depth not explicitly previously engaged in (Fontana & Frey, 2000). This space offers the potential for critical reflection on concepts, ideas and opinions that may be formed as the answers are constructed or newly articulated as they are recalled, thus bringing them to the fore of consciousness. It is therefore then, as Kvale (1996) argues, of little surprise that the research interview situation is frequently developmental for both the researcher and respondent. As ideas are shared and articulated, the understanding of experience and development of new knowledge offers the opportunity for a transformative experience for both researcher and respondent (Holroyd, 2007).

The responses received in relation to this project were positive. Each respondent had been through their own reflective process and concluded as a result of their new thinking that an action was required. Each communication tells its own tale and the respondents were sharing their positive conclusions to the process of engagement with research interviews. However, in problematizing this the extent to which further consideration is required is revealed. It is easy to accept seemingly positive consequences and additional unplanned effects of the research, however, if the respondents had revealed that through their encounter they had become troubled or had decided to enact negative actions, it would not change the ethical considerations or responsibilities of the researcher.

Problematizing the issue serves to starkly highlight the need for further consideration of three key issues, reflexive ethical responsibility throughout research encounters, information and discussion related to methods and informed consent pre-research. In considering the potential for negative eventualities, we remove the human predisposition to accept unanticipated positive outcomes unquestioningly and start to respond to a broader scope of potential and less desirable outcomes that ethical considerations and statements such as the British Sociological Association (2004) and BERA (2011) try to limit.

How should researchers respond to these considerations?

This paper, in considering the related literature and statements of the respondents, has thus far highlighted that despite the best intentions of the researcher and adherence to guidance related to ethical practice, unanticipated outcomes for respondents were recorded. Following the problematization of the issues related to professional reflection, this paper now goes on to consider further actions and protections that researchers can include in planning research, conducting field work and post research interaction that not only ensure that potential issues are anticipated but that learning opportunities are embraced.

The presented communications from respondents highlight several key interesting points. Engagement in research interviews is a potential source of reflection on practice, and subsequent action related to learning in the professions. It offers opportunities that may be difficult to replicate in other professional learning fora, but this as identified, is not the key purpose of research and as such does not often feature in the research project design process. This then ultimately begs the question, that if such potential exists, should an element of professional support for respondents be included in the design of research aimed at understanding professional practice? This may be seen as a reciprocity in engagement, the respondent gives of their time and experience while the researcher provides the forum and structure. In so doing the co-construction of knowledge meets the project needs of the researcher and, in engagement with the process, the respondent has participated in an exchange where by the potential for supported professional critical reflection is acknowledged and encouraged. This is clearly subject and focus dependent as not all interviews with professionals will be solely focused on practice alone, systems and procedural reviews may not yield such rich opportunities for critical reflection as practice focused research. However, it is reasonable to assume that if professionals such as teachers and lecturers are being engaged in interviews to establish an understanding about an element of their practice or knowledge base, they will be required to recall information, formulate responses and articulate their answers based on practice experience. These actions form part of the

process of reflection and in so doing the act of answering the questions and entering discussion becomes part of the process of critique and learning in practice which in turn, could lead to change.

Given then that the potential for such outcomes is inherent in the act of engaging in interviews whether positive or negative, there is an acknowledgement to be explicitly made by researchers towards these eventualities. If the result of engaging in the interview is potentially a reflection on practice by the respondent which leads to them considering a change (in these examples, further learning) then there is a responsibility on the research professional to foreground this before the research starts. This paper has discussed the acts associated with reflexive informed consent and ethical research practice and suggest some additional practical points of consideration for researchers.

In the design and implementation of research that proposes to engage professionals in interviews, as part of the information supplied to respondents and ethical considerations submitted to overseeing committees prior to commencement, an explanation of the potential for reflections and observations on practice leading to change should be included for respondents. It should be made clear that in answering questions and engaging in discussion, respondents may consider issues that they had not previously considered that could potentially change their perspective or views on an issue or area of exploration. It should therefore perhaps be made more explicit in the information provided to potential respondents that engaging in an interview requires emotional and personal engagement beyond that required to answer a questionnaire. Equally, I propose that ethical guidelines for research proposals including interviews should contain guidance on meeting these important respondent needs. In turn ethics committees considering applications for approval should actively look for a deeper understanding of interview methodology and acknowledgement of the potential impact on respondents on engagement with, and post interview process.

As a part of the theoretical and methodological positioning of the qualitative interview within the project, respondents should be given the opportunity to respond to the interview beyond its conclusion. This however should not become an onerous distraction, but be a natural part of the design process that is actively looked for by ethics committees considering proposed projects. Respondents should be given opportunities for post research communication and feedback in addition to supplied information about what the proposing organisation can offer in terms of support. I propose that universities that engage respondents in funded research have an obligation to respondents beyond the conclusion of the project in relation to issues arising from engagement. This extends to both positive and negative outcomes for respondents. I am not suggesting that researchers should shoulder the burden of psychological support but that the institutional facilities should be made available from the outset of the study for respondents wishing to seek support and guidance with issues arising from

engagement. Again, ethical considerations to this length should be embedded in design and implementation of research projects and provision made in information sheets for respondents.

This issue also feeds directly into the impact agenda now heavily embedded in research practice. Focus has primarily been given to the impact of planned outputs of research projects and I now propose that as secondary impact, the learning and transformative experience of respondents should not only be reported on as an aside but actively embedded as part of the impact agenda of the research where appropriate to do so. This lends itself to the consideration of bodies awarding funding to institutions and researchers and ensures that respondents are not treated solely as providers of data but as co-constructors of knowledge within the project. This then facilitates the empowerment of professionals in their learning and engagement with research and holds benefits for both researchers and participants alike. If the potential benefits to the respondents in terms of professional learning are made clear from the outset, this then offers the possibility that response rates within qualitative studies may be increased. Reiman (1979) asserts that outcomes of research participation should enhance the freedoms of the participant more than they enhance the researcher's career. In enacting these suggestions, the research community will make further advancements in engaging professionals in meaningful partnerships with research designed to inform and enhance practice.

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