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Abstract

This manuscript aims to embed a researcher's reflexive account within a qualitative interview in an iterative process whereby a self-analytic reflexive exercise was conducted prior to, during the interview, and within the analysis of the interview. This interview was conducted between an overseas PhD student as an interviewer and a native PhD student as interviewee. The researcher's (interviewer) demonstration of learning about herself is of particular importance in this piece of work. Having the chance to conduct this interview between an overseas PhD student and a native student provided insights about the stereotypes implanted within the researcher which meant that she assumed that a PhD is more stressful for overseas than for home students.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Interviews, Reflexive Accounts, International Students, Learning Experience, Thematic Analysis

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We would like to express our deep thanks to the study participant who allowed the first author and gave her the chance to go through and travel within herself by engaging in this self-reflexive exercise through conducting the interview with him.

Embedding Researcher's Reflexive Accounts within the Analysis of a Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview

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This manuscript aims to embed a researcher's reflexive account within a qualitative interview in an iterative process whereby a self-analytic reflexive exercise was conducted prior to, during the interview, and within the analysis of the interview. This interview was conducted between an overseas PhD student as an interviewer and a native PhD student as interviewee. The researcher's (interviewer) demonstration of learning about herself is of particular importance in this piece of work. Having the chance to conduct this interview between an overseas PhD student and a native student provided insights about the stereotypes implanted within the researcher which meant that she assumed that a PhD is more stressful for overseas than for home students. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Interviews, Reflexive Accounts, International Students, Learning Experience, Thematic Analysis.

Interviewing is a method of collecting qualitative data (Coar & Sim, 2006). UK based studies that interviewed students investigating their motivation for embarking on PhD revealed five main reasons; lack of job satisfaction, career development, personal motives, interweaving research with politics, and drifting in (Brailsford, 2010). Research investigating PhD students' experiences has focused on students' transition to independent learning process. During the PhD journey, students learn great deal about how to cope with PhD stress and challenges (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000).

The stress of the first year of the PhD journey is the most crucial; the uncertainty and novelty of the experience are contingent factors in the first year students' experience. Golde (1998) reported that usually PhD students feel incompetent during their first year of their doctorate. Various factors are involved in first year students' adjustment to the novelty of the PhD experience (e.g. institutional, social, and personal factors; Hockey, 1994).

In this paper, an international PhD student interviewed native PhD colleague examining his experience during the first year of PhD. According to Coar and Sim, (2006) interviewing peers, could possibly challenge some cultural and social assumptions. During the transactions of the interview, power issues exist and shift back and forth between the constituents of the interview. The power of the interviewers lies within his professional expertise and being a knowledge seeker. On the other hand, the power of the interviewee rests in being more or less a knower (Nunkoosing, 2005).

Reflexivity is a self-awareness practice achieved by directing an analytical gaze into the self in an attempt to understand the dynamics between the researcher and the researched. This should extend beyond self-awareness to an in-depth understanding of the social context of the phenomena of interest and the participants of the study through examining the dynamics between them as researched and the researcher (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007). Reflexivity is considered to be one of the core bastions of rigor in qualitative research; it involves researchers seeking to make sense of their influence either intentionally or unintentionally over the research process (Jootun et al., 2009).

Qualitative researchers who engage in a self-analytical exercise and relate their position in the world with the phenomena being studied are engaged in what is called positional reflexivity. Methodological rigor, it is argued, can be achieved when the researcher maintains an analytical and skeptical approach to all the possibilities of knowledge and social phenomena, whereby “grantedness” is questioned (Macbeth, 2001).

The social relationship of the researcher to the subject influences the way they interpret the world, and subjectivity is inescapable (Ratner, 2002). Adopting reflexivity in experiential qualitative research helps in formulating the researchers’ own understanding of their expectations and assumptions of the research, their relationship with the phenomena being examined, and the participants in the research. Reflexive research involves the researcher in an examination of the constitution of the meanings of the phenomena of interest, whereby the researcher and the researched are within the same order (Shaw, 2010).

Objectives

The objectives of this manuscript rest into:

1. Investigating the experience of a young first year native PhD student
2. Embedding researcher’s reflexive accounts within the qualitative analysis of the interview

Significance of This Paper

In this paper, a qualitative interview was conducted with a fellow PhD student to an international PhD student (interviewer) in order to ascertain and understand the former’s experiences of studying for his PhD under the age of 25. The interview was conducted as a part of a PhD training course in the School of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham. The interviewer was interested in investigating whether the interviewee as a native student has the same struggles with PhD as overseas students. Additionally, the interviewer integrated her understanding of her pre-assumptions and suppositions that might have had an effect on the interpretation of this interview.

Methods

Selection of the Informant

The interview was part of my PhD training, and I was asked to conduct a life history interview. A first-year home-PhD student at the School of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, was my participant in this interview. The reason behind choosing the theme of the interview (the experience of PhD student doing his PhD under the age of 25) was my own personal experience as a PhD student; the PhD course of study is intense and challenging, requiring high-levels of survival skills both academically and in a life skills. Moreover, the young age of my participant as a PhD student made the case particularly interesting. Additionally, he did not have a master’s degree, because he had moved directly from a Bachelor’s degree to the PhD, which is rare in my country and motivated me to inquire and incorporate my reflexivity about it.

Negotiating Access

The technique employed in negotiating access to the informant was as a personal contact with the proposed participant, as the interviewee is my colleague in the postgraduate study office. Thus, it was easy for me to contact him personally and decide the suitable timing of the interview together. A consent form asking the participant to consider taking part in the interview was introduced to the participant, and having explained the purpose of the study he signed to indicate his informed consent. This form contained the study purpose, expected duration of the interview, and a guarantee from the researcher to follow ethical conduct. All of these issues were explained in full during the negotiation of access stage and prior to obtaining consent. Additionally the interviewee provided consent on the possibility of publishing from this work. The participant was assured of confidentiality and anonymity as well as his right to withdraw or stop audio recording during any part of the interview.

Ethical Issues and Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance for this research was sought and obtained from the University of Nottingham before proceeding and I undertook to provide the participant with anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. The interviewee gave voluntary consent to the audio recording of the interview

Data Collection Method

A face-to-face semi-structured interview with the participant was conducted in a meeting room at the School of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham. An interview guide was prepared before the interview with open-ended questions, and the interview was audio-recorded. According to Britten (1995), the qualitative interview should be open-ended, particularly when exploring experiences, values, knowledge or beliefs.

The interview guide included questions about the reasons behind his decision to embark upon PhD studies at this age; experiences during the first year of the PhD; whether challenges were faced during this year; whether at points he wanted to change his mind about doing a PhD; strategies used when challenges are met; how to maintain a balance between the PhD and his personal life; and the skills developed during this year.

Methods of Reflexivity Employed in this Research

Both personal and interpersonal reflexivity were employed in this piece of work. According to Walsh, (2003) Personal reflexivity refers to researcher's ability to expose his presumptions, suppositions, and reactions in relation to their research. This type of reflexivity requires openness and courage from the researcher. On the other hand, interpersonal reflexivity emphasizes researcher-participant interactions that in turn involve conversational aspect between the constituents of the interview as well as the ethical obligations involved in research process. In this work, the researcher kept field notes during the interview about the interactions with the interviewee that guided embedding interpersonal reflexivity within the interview. Additionally, listening to the recordings and familiarizing self with the transcripts assisted in applying interpersonal reflexivity.

Interviewer's Background as a Factor in the Assumptions About the Interviewee

I came from a diverse family whose members have differing beliefs and ideologies; some have quite strict religious beliefs while others are liberals. However nearly everyone in this family values education and professional development; therefore, I was reared to glorify education and to have an independent life. Additionally, my family members are relatively outgoing and extrovert, and the majority of them have a well-developed sense of humour. I internalised those traits while I was young, as I realised that I got validation from my family by exhibiting those traits (being open, independent, outgoing and humorous); I was always compared with my sister, who was shy and introvert, and who was not as favoured as me when we were children.

In my country Egypt, one of the personality traits against which people are being evaluated as nice or distant is the degree of people's emotional expression, involvement, and engagement with others. Sometimes, people find it difficult to accept introvert or emotionally reserved individuals as they might be perceived as acting aloof or superior. Personally, I notice I sometimes intuitively judge people according to their emotional expression or involvement; however, becoming a practicing mental health nurse has helped me to better understand the meanings behind others' behaviours.

My educational background is nursing and I worked as assistant lecturer of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing in Egypt from 2005. Between 2006 and 2011 I also worked as a mental health nurse in a private psychiatric setting because by working in both positions simultaneously, I felt I was filling a gap between academia and clinical practice that some academics perceive. During my first year of teaching, I realised my need to be immersed in clinical practice and self-awareness activities through peer supervision, from this point, my personal reflective journey began.

I underwent peer group supervision sessions in a private psychiatric setting in Egypt where discussions of the therapeutic processes (i.e., assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the care provided) with patients took place weekly as a part of the hospital policy to develop and maintain the professional growth of the mental health staff. Additionally, I attended training groups (T-groups) where mental health practitioners learnt about themselves through interactions and feedback that happens during the group. Those two reflective practices enhanced my capacity for self-exposure and self-awareness.

After I was awarded my master's degree, I started to think about applying for a scholarship abroad to pursue my PhD studies and I was accepted as a PhD student through a joint scheme between my government and the University of Nottingham. After moving to the UK; the culture shock in the first six months was marked. Living in a diverse community, but found myself dealing with people's dogmas about my cultural and religious background. I felt that my mental processes were too slow to process what was going on around me. Fortunately, I was able to progress to another level of reflection in the UK, which was fortified by living alone, and the PhD system itself which imparts and the values of reflexivity where I have to act as an independent learner. It is worth mentioning, that the toughest moments which have helped in enhancing my reflexivity were being obliged to live independently and manage the obstacles of my life alone. I have to depend on myself, my intuitions and assumptions in all situations and keep them open and flexible enough to re-evaluate and change. This was also evident in this interview.

Reflexive Accounts During Data Collection

It was quite hard to interview an interviewee I knew already and with whom I am acquainted, and for the first few minutes, it was particularly difficult to maintain a professional

attitude with him. Field notes and audio recordings were used to analyze the interview and draw reflexive accounts as well. I entered this interview with some presuppositions and preconceptions about my participant as a native student. Although I know that the PhD is a highly competitive and demanding journey, at the same time I had a preconceived notion that native English speakers are less likely to struggle with a PhD compared to international students. I thought this especially concerning academic writing and self-reflective skills, as the latter is more typical in the British educational system. However, when my participant started talking about his experiences, particularly his emotions and feelings about being a PhD student:

“It is hard. I think sometimes because I think what am learning about PhD, is that you never have a day off really. I think it’s not that easy because I’m always checking my email, am always thinking what am gonna be doing next week is always in mind so that makes it harder. Sometimes what I do to cope with that and make sure I do have a personal life is to turn my phone off or if I’m going out I’ll leave my phone at home because I always check my emails on my phone which I sometimes find hard.”

I got the impression that actually not only overseas PhD students struggle in their PhD journey, also native students even if the struggles are different. I recognised that I had been judgmental prior to the interview. Additionally, I associated my participant’s responses to a critical question: why was the number of British PhD students in our postgraduate study office comparatively small compared to the number of international PhD students in our school.

This interview drew my attention as an interviewer to the nature of PhD stress in the UK where learning is based on experiential learning model. Whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience that involves reflective observation and active experimentation (Yamazaki, 2005). Compared to the position of many international students who come from societies and educational systems where traditional pedagogical approaches, for example, listen-and-repeat, memorization-based curriculums prevail (Rugh, 2002).

According to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Higher Education Funding Council in England, 2013), a higher percentage of first degree holders aged over 25 years in England and Northern Ireland progress to postgraduate studies after taking long breaks of up to 8 years after the first degree. This suggests that home students may better understand the complexity and the significance of pursuing postgraduate studies, explaining the relatively limited number of British postgraduate students compared to their international peers.

When my respondent started revealing his worries about not having a Master’s and moving directly from a Bachelor’s degree to a PhD I shifted my questioning and incorporated more questions about how he manages his worries and uncertainties about doing a PhD at this age within the flow of the interview.

Data Analysis of the Interview (Experience of Young First Year PhD Student)

An inductive thematic analysis method was adopted, which according to Braun and Clarke (2006) consists of the following steps; familiarization with data, which was achieved in this analysis by listening and re-listening to recorded data; transcription of the recorded data; development of provisional codes, which was done manually in this analysis; organization of free codes underlying related themes; and refining and reviewing themes, which in this analysis involved checking for codes underlying each theme and checking if they constitute a coherent system. Moreover, refinement involved looking at all themes and checking if there were any missing codes that did not include underlying themes, as well as whether the developed themes accurately represent the data. Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas, (2013) claimed that thematic

analysis is a flexible, rich, and detailed analysis method that allows the identification of common threads across an entire interview or interviews.

In the analysis of this interview a semantic approach was followed which is according to Braun and Clarke (2006) focuses on what is being said and does not seek anything beyond participants' input to the interview.

A constructionist paradigm guided the analysis of this interview where reality is constructed and invented from meanings and objectivity is impossible to be maintained (Allen, 1994).

Researcher's Reflexive Exercise During Data Analysis:

Analysis of qualitative research data is influenced by a researchers' pre-suppositions, cultural dogmas, institutional influences, and pre-conceptions (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Analysis of field notes and participant's verbatim was employed in this analysis. During analysis of the interview data, I was struck by the amount of emotional expression my participant revealed, and his confidence in expressing his worries, uncertainties and how he copes with the stress of a PhD. He talked about his continuous preoccupation with checking his university email on his mobile phone to the degree that he sometimes leaves his phone at home when he goes out with friends and family to stop this preoccupation:

"I think it's not that easy because I think I'm always checking my email am always thinking what am gonna be doing next week is always in mind so that makes it harder. sometimes what I do to cope with that and make sure I do have a personal life is to turn my phone off or if I'm going out I'll leave my phone at home because I always check my emails on my phone which I sometimes find hard, but I know it's go for me because then it's easy for me to switch off and spend time with friends and family to get that balance."

This revelation made me feel compassionate towards him. The reason for my being stricken during data collection is because the stereotypes and the cultural clichés embedded in the cultural construction about British people from my native milieu, meant that I had made assumptions that he would be conservative in expressing his feelings and emotions to the degree of being cold and distant. I started to analyse and consider this cultural pre-conception. I considered the media and pseudo-religious judgements imposed by some religious and cultural scholars in my native environment about people from different ethnicities and the historical experiences that played into constituting these assumptions.

It can be assumed that my personal background is also linked to my pre-suppositions. However, I can also say that after two years in the UK, I am not as extrovert as I was in Egypt even with my Egyptian friends in the UK as I feel I am not obliged to seek social validation as I was in my home country. Of course, I might be doing something else here to seek validation, something which I may not be able to catch at the moment.

Prejudice and stereotypes assigned to particular ethnic groups are related and linked with social heritage. Although such culturally embedded and reinforced stereotypes and prejudices are largely inescapable, (Ratner, 2002)

According to Corm (2007), the gap between Arab countries and the West which was evident in my presuppositions about British culture in this interview could be bridged by a unified secular view of the world that extends beyond the divisions between religions and implementing a code of conduct for both media and academic research where the views of the West are not conflated with global political issues.

I think my education, training, and work as a mental health nurse and researcher has helped me to be quite flexible in rejecting cultural stereotypes. Moreover, the experience of being an international student here in the UK has reshaped and is still reshaping my value system because I am mixing with people not only from British culture but from cultures all over the world, which has helped in reshaping my cognitive structures around people from different cultures.

Results and Discussions of the Interview

The findings from this interview elicited three themes: Decisions behind the PhD decision; PhD stress; and skills developed during the first year of PhD.

Theme 1. Decisions Behind the PhD Decision

The interviewee expressed that the reason behind his decision to do a PhD was an investment in the future: *“I saw it as an opportunity because although I was happy in my job there was no room to progress.”* However, taking this decision was not easy due to two reasons; the participant did not have a master’s degree, and this made the decision quite difficult for him: *“I was quite worried because I didn’t have a master’s and I thought have I missed something?”*; secondly, deciding to start a PhD at this young age could add to the difficulty of the decision: *“I sometimes worry am I too young to be doing it well enough.”* Uncertainties about the PhD decision were sometimes felt:

“Am I ready to be doing it? It's really difficult because I was in that good job I was in a safe job, and I have come here to do something that... you know... am I ready for it... I might be kicked out if I don't pass the confirmation review? So it was tough, but I do enjoy it.”

According to Wellington and Sikes (2006), the motives behind doing a PhD can be made in terms of a professional start, particularly for those who are in the beginning of their professional career; and those who have an established career yet seek more professional development, which is congruent with the participant in this review, who had already had a good career, but wished to do a PhD to invest in his future:

“But I knew that may be in five or 10 years’ time I wouldn’t have any way to progress or move forward, I was at the top of... the band, I couldn’t be promoted anyway so I saw it an investment in the future. That’s why I do this.”

Theme 2. PhD Stress

According to participant’s self-reports, the feeling of stress during the first year of the PhD was encountered, as in the following example about receiving the supervisors’ feedback about his work: *“if I get some feedback and it's negative, I sometimes take it too personally and it gets me down.”* Moreover, the amount of work associated with PhD work can sometimes make it difficult for students to have a day off: *“It’s hard. I think... sometimes because I think what I am learning about PhD is that you never have a day off really.”*

Preoccupation with the PhD is another stressor which was reported in the interview *“I’m always checking my email, I’m always thinking what am I gonna be doing next week? It’s always in my mind, so that makes it harder.”* The participant’s reports are congruent with

findings made by Halse and Malfroy (2010), who reported that doing a PhD is associated with stress, uncertainties and anxiety.

According to Leger (1996) mature or adult students can experience stress from a variety of sources; firstly, institutional stressors, where students encounter stress when the educational institution imposes too much work load over the student; secondly, the stress coming from the student him or herself (dispositional), like feelings of inadequacy, or lack of confidence about one's abilities; and finally, situational stressors which are about time and role management.

Moving from PhD stress to the participant's tools for dealing with and managing this stress, the findings showed that the participant in this interview has tools to manage and cope with his PhD stressors; firstly, the personal strategies include some techniques to mitigate his preoccupation with his PhD:

“Sometimes what I do to cope with that and make sure I do have a personal life is to turn my phone off, or if I'm going out I'll leave my phone at home, because I always check my emails on my phone, which I sometimes find hard, but I know it's good for me, because then it's easy for me to switch off and spend time with friends and family to get that balance.”

Secondly, seeking social support was another personal techniques used by the participant to overcome PhD stress: “I mostly speak to my colleagues at work, I also speak to my friends at home, just sharing how I feel, really is what I normally do as a way of coping.” Thirdly, regarding what the professional environment can do to help PhD students, the participant reported feeling the connectedness and sharing he experiences with PhD colleagues (“we all are in the same boat”), as well as supervisors' normalising PhD stress, which is clear in the following quote: “speaking to my supervisors, it's clear that everybody shares that feeling, so it's important to get that support.” Finally, receiving help and guidance from colleagues was useful:

“Being in that environment around my colleagues... we all support, we learn lots of things from one another, so we all have different specialisations, we are all knowledgeable in different things, it's access to support from lots of people around me.”

Jairam and Kahl Jr (2012) reported that PhD students seek social support from their colleagues in the doctorate program, friends, family, and their supervisors. Wellington and Sikes (2006) reported that social and collegiate support are highly valued among PhD students.

Theme 3. Skills Developed During the First Year of PhD

Improvement in his academic skills is one of the skills he reported developing during the first year of his PhD: “this year helped me in terms of writing... academic writing mostly, writing for publication as well.”

In addition, networking skills developed during the first year of PhD were also cited by the participant: “I now have to work with lots of people from different disciplines and from different areas, like council, schools, psychologists, so building these networks has definitely been a big learning curve.”

Conclusions and Lessons Learned from Doing this Interview

This manuscript has examined the experiences of a first year PhD student doing his PhD in Health Sciences under the age of 25. I undertook the interview as an overseas student interested in the experiences of home students. The results of this interview elicited three main themes: Reasons behind the decision to do a PhD; PhD stress; and skills developed during the first year of a PhD.

Self-reflexive and analytical exercises were conducted in an iterative way whereby the steps I took are inter-related and sequential. Conducting this self-reflexive exercise through a qualitative interview has helped me to learn about myself, as well as learn about my participant and the rigours of qualitative research. Moreover, I realised that researchers' setting their assumptions and pre-suppositions aside is particularly difficult in qualitative research and some degree of subjectivity is inevitable; however, ensuring that those pre-conceptions do not distort the research process can result in valuable findings. This piece of work taught me again, that my life experiences are like pieces of a puzzle that I was collecting during this reflexive exercise and relating them to the theme of my interview has helped me in understanding myself by examining my prejudicial beliefs as presuppositions that may have contributed bias prior to and during the data collection stage. Such bias revealed itself to me as my presuppositions were revealed. The most illuminating moments in this interview were; finding out both international and native students are in the same boat as the PhD journey is stressful for both of them; additionally, the emotionally engaging way through which my participant expressed his worries, stress, and fears openly was a turning point in refuting my assumptions about British People's emotional expression.

Limitation

As mentioned earlier, this interview was part of the PhD courses in the University of Nottingham; therefore, a single interview was conducted which could be a limitation of this work.

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