

Locating and Understanding Voices in Narrative Inquiry

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A Journey of Discovery

Myfanwy Maple and Helen Edwards

This chapter describes my (Myfanwy's) experiences as a doctoral student and one of my mentors (Helen) in the application of narrative inquiry methodology to a research study, a study that examined the parental stories of the death by suicide of a young adult child. We have structured the chapter in a manner that allows you as the reader to experience a narrative mode of writing and to think about how to analyze data using this method. As the dialogue is developing, we will take turns in providing you with a view of the research, the analytic process, and the ways in which narrative inquiry can be used with relation to a particular study.

We start with an overview of the choice of methodology and then recount my interview experience with one participant that occurred around the halfway point of the research project. We chose to do this to illustrate the absence of a linear path in narrative inquiry, and highlight an interactive, engaging, one-step-forward, two-steps-back kind of journey. This approach to writing not only represents a way to analyze the data, but also demonstrates how narratives can inform the work in a way that honors the whole. This chapter differs from others in this text as it also follows the developing narrative between the two of us, doctoral student and mentor. Some shared life experiences and disciplinary expertise in the allied health professions helped to develop our

relationship. These shared experiences opened us to open communication, a feature vital to a successful student-mentor relationship.

Why Narrative Inquiry?

In some of our initial meetings, we discussed the gaps in the research literature in relation to suicide, in particular the associated poor understanding of family grief (Maple, 2005a). We also talked about the possible range of methodologies that could address these gaps and answer the research question that had emerged: How do parents live through and live with the suicide of their young adult child (Maple, 2005b, p. 3)?

Editors' Comment

Matching of Objectives and Approaches

It is interesting that Myfanwy chose a narrative perspective among several possible choices. It's important to realize that whatever approach is selected, you have to find one that matches your objectives. In this case, she wanted to hear the voices of parents and their stories. This provided the optimal way for her to understand the issues that parents were telling in a way to keep their stories intact. She started out using another approach, grounded theory, but abandoned it because it was generating themes that were generic but not representative of the individual voices that she wanted to highlight and honor. As a side note, it also should be mentioned that she had to advocate strongly for this approach in order to convince her mentors. There is always a wide menu of choices from which to select those items that best suit particular goals and to generate the kind of data desired.

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Myfanwy and I (Helen) discussed grounded theory in some detail (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) and Polkinghorne's (1995) two types of narrative methodology, paradigmatic and narrative cognitions. Grounded theory and paradigmatic narratives appeared to focus too much on the commonalities and overall frameworks arising from the data. Myfanwy argued the value of taking a narrative cognition or inquiry approach, "noticing the differences and diversity of people's behavior" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11). Narrative inquiry provided mechanisms that "retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivation meaning connected with it" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11) as the focus of analysis.

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In reflecting to the supervision team on my understandings of suicide grief and from an awareness of the interviews that had been completed, I determined that narrative inquiry was the methodology that would enable my study to reach a deep understanding of the unique elements of the parents' stories. The term *narrative* was taken to "refer to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Because I am a social worker with previous research interview experience, Helen and I were confident in my ability to gather data. Narrative inquiry provided a framework to analyze and produce explanatory stories from the mass of data gained from the interviews.

A narrative methodology seemed to me like a natural choice for this research. I liked the distinction that narrative inquiry gave by steering clear of mining the data for themes and the danger this has to depersonalize and decontextualize the stories from the participant. The orientation toward understanding the story within the teller's social situation, locating not only what is said and not said, but also the way in which events are placed and the importance given to them (Gilbert, 2002), was critical to a sound study in the area of suicide bereavement. I carefully examined and took note of my own assumptions and understandings about the experience of loss through suicide in a process of bracketing to allow me to immerse myself in hearing the experience as voiced by the participants (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Once I had settled on the broad methodological stance that I would take, I had to work through the various schools of thought within narrative to find the right mode for this research. Ultimately, I settled on narrative inquiry—primarily the work of Donald Polkinghorne (1988, 1995). The analytic focus of this approach is the plot of the narrative—the way narrators configure their stories and the meanings they attribute to the events within. Due to the intimate and sensitive nature of the research topic, it was very important to honor parents' stories. This study required a methodology that would allow me to explore the full breadth of their experiences through the stories they told during long, in-depth interviews. About halfway through my interviewing, my choice of methodology was confirmed when I interviewed Kate.

Listening for Meaning—An Example From Kate

Kate was the thirteenth parent I interviewed about the experience of losing a young adult child to suicide. It was in reflecting on Kate's story that I really had to sit back and think—her interview was so different from the others. At first, I could not put my finger on why it was so different. All the parents before her had told me unique stories regarding their deceased son

or daughter. The stories were all so different that I was starting to panic about trying to make sense of the narratives. Thus far, the only analysis I had done was written reflections on the interviews, reflections on the data gathered, and my own thoughts about the process. How was I going to make sense of all these data? I was desperately hoping the answer would emerge—as the qualitative methods textbooks had promised.

When I interviewed Kate, everything suddenly looked different. At first I did not understand exactly what it was that was so different. Like the other parents I had spoken to, Kate shared with me experiences of her daughter over the years, from when she was young until the day she died and since. But in her voice was a quality that I had not yet heard from the other parents. Her dialogue revealed something that had not been present in the stories I had previously heard. The way she spoke made her daughter, Sallie, come alive. Her voice was so full of pride and love for her daughter, and her dialogue was breathtaking. To this day, four years later, I can still hear her voice in my head. I share some of her story here to illustrate the type of data I collected, and how interviewing Kate changed my study, the analysis, and how it ultimately directed the findings of my research.

I (Kate) had been told in a lot of different ways. Eight times she had tried to take her life and so when someone, at first I am sure they were cries for help, then they became really, she usually slashed her wrists and took sleeping tablets and antidepressants, but the last time she gassed herself. . . . It was as if I could see her go into this pit of blackness and she would feel herself slipping into it and she would do things to avoid slipping into it and find herself at the bottom of the black pit and to get out would take a lot of energy and struggle until the day came when she went into that black pit and she said “I know I haven’t got the energy, it’s not worth it, I cannot get out, and I cannot bear the thought of living the rest of my life.” . . . So I guess that was the end of the story, but it was also the end of a hell of a lot of pain and suffering, sadness, and dysfunction and none of us would wish her back because it is too painful, too hard. . . . How could she, how long did she have to continue with that black depression and her hopes and dreams, you could see them gradually being torn down.

I am just grateful that I have been able to get up again, but get up with an arm missing and I am constantly thinking of her. . . . And it is a pleasure, I love to think about her. . . . It is like where you have a cenotaph and the little light flickering eternally, it’s like I have got that burning inside me all the time, a little Sallie Light that’s always going to be there and it is precious and don’t touch it. It is my hallowed spot and I want to have it there and it is never going to go out, so I carry that little light everywhere, that little Sallie Light.

After a lot of thought, I became aware that there was not an ounce of shame in Kate’s voice, nor was she concerned that I, or others, may judge her negatively (something all the parents commented on experiencing in

relation to their child's death). She had already experienced that and had consciously chosen to ignore such behavior. While the other parents I had spoken with all expressed their love of their child, Kate was not ashamed of the way in which Sallie had chosen to die. In fact, Kate was proud that her daughter had chosen to end the suffering that she experienced throughout her life and knows now that her daughter has found a peace that was not available to her in life.

Editors' Comment

The Art of Listening

One of the distinguishing features of qualitative journeys is that researchers must listen carefully, attentively, and analytically to the experiences that are described. It takes considerable training and practice to learn to withhold your own biases, preconceptions, and expectations in order to hear clearly what is being said, rather than "hearing" what you anticipate will be expressed. Qualitative interviewing involves opening yourself up to explore, and being surprised with what you learn. It means taking on a position of respectful curiosity, prompting open sharing in such a way that you don't overstructure and guide the conversation, but instead allow participants to tell their own stories in their own unique ways. This is remarkably difficult to do since often you must surrender control and a position of authority.

Another stark difference in my interview with Kate was that she knew prior to Sallie's death that her daughter would take her own life. There had been previous attempts—as there had been for other families—but Kate, unlike others, could understand the need for her daughter to do this and ultimately saw Sallie's actions as justifiable considering the pain that her daughter was suffering in life.

So, in terms of the analysis for my research, this was a breakthrough. Let me go back and give you an overview of my research to place this breakthrough in perspective. Then I will highlight the way in which narrative inquiry helped me to understand these parents' stories and ultimately write up the research in an accessible manner, uncovering some important aspects and new understandings of parental bereavement through suicide.

The Research Project

For this research, I set out to interview parents after the suicide of their young adult child to gain a beginning empirical picture of their experiences. I wanted to gain some insight of what these parents experienced before, during, and after the death by suicide of their son or daughter.

While there had been a lot of research focused on youth suicide prevention, little attention had been paid to those who have been intimately affected by a suicide. My rationale for this study was that in addition to learning more about parental grief and appropriate support for those bereaved through suicide, this intimate knowledge also could help unlock more understandings of why young people in Western cultures are vulnerable to suicide.

To answer the research question, I wanted to delve deeply into participating parents' stories, while allowing them to tell their narrative in any way they were comfortable doing so. To do this, I used a variety of design strategies, including allowing the parents to choose whether they wished to be interviewed alone or with their partner, allowing them the choice of where the interview would take place (their home, my office if they were local, or a public place). Parents also were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym, to protect their own and their child's identity. I used a single open-ended question to begin the interview. After that, I only used prompts from their story to explore an issue more deeply or to gain clarification. The question I developed and used was this:

I would like to hear about your experience of losing a young adult child to suicide. You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable, perhaps beginning with telling me a bit about before [child's name]'s death, and then your journey since the suicide.

This question was carefully worded to provide the participants with a guide to the research focus—that is, the story of their experience. The interviews typically lasted for between one and three hours. Most interviews were with one parent, four were with both parents. From the outset of the project, in the research design, I instinctively sensed that it would be important to honor these parents' stories in every way I could, and I wanted a method that could offer this.

Editors' Comment

Flexibility in Design

In quantitative research, there is a strong emphasis on standardizing procedures, keeping everything consistent and the same. Such consistency adds to the perception of objectivity and precision. Yet in qualitative studies, the possibility of such consistency is contested. Nevertheless, it is critical to demonstrate flexibility, adapting your approach and sensitivity to the context and each individual as illustrated by Myfawny's methodological choices. Some participants will require a bit more structure than others will. Some will tell their stories with little prompting except an initial inquiry or two; others will stop and start, looking for a bit more direction. Depending on the relationship you develop, the personality of the participant, and their responsiveness at any moment in time, you will need to make continual adjustments in your style and approach.

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE DATA

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As a part of Myfanwy's supervisory team, I (Helen) was conscious that she was deeply immersed in the stories and listening for the meanings that parents were sharing. It was necessary to remind her that in order to analyze the narratives, she had to step back from the first-hand experiences to make sense of it. In narrative inquiry, Polkinghorne (1995, p. 177) explains, "the goal of analysis is to uncover common themes or plots in the data. Analysis is carried out by hermeneutic techniques for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories." In relation to the data, this type of analysis made sense to enable Myfanwy to explore the meanings that parents attributed to their experiences through the story they told. It also provided her with a way to understand why some events were talked about and others were not, and the influence of the social context.

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While I was committed to the use of this method for the study, I discovered there were no clear steps that described how to do narrative inquiry analysis. Unlike most quantitative and qualitative methods that clearly provide generalized steps for undertaking the analytic process, narrative inquiry looks to understand meaning within story. As I read further in methods texts and examples of research using this method, I realized that, while there were clear foci of narrative inquiry (primarily the plot, in this instance), there were limitless ways in which the focus could be directed.

Primarily due to this lack of clear direction, I was overwhelmed by how this was done and underwhelmed by my ability to do it. A sense of desperation threatened to overcome the whole process, and there were moments when I thought that I should review my choice of method. While this may seem absurd to those with a more traditional scientific orientation to research, I realized over time that the lack of formal analytic steps allows for a freedom and flexibility of data analysis that may be lost when using other methods.

Editors' Comment

Overwhelmed With Data

It is perfectly normal and to be expected that you will sense that you are drowning in your own data, and that you will be uncertain how to organize or make sense of everything you have heard and witnessed. And how could you not feel this way, considering the innumerable hours you've spent with your participants and the thousands of pages of text that you now must review and analyze? What are you going to focus on and how do you know that is what is most significant? It takes patience and perseverance to give yourself permission to remain bewildered during this transitional period between data review and synthesis. Most researchers eventually discover meaning in their data, as illustrated in this section.

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Myfanwy discussed these internal conflicts with me (Helen) regarding the analysis of her data. In response, I shared my experiences of using knowledge visualization approaches (Burkhard, 2005; Edwards, 2003) to examine data. I indicated that visual representations of information, such as metaphors, drawings, and photographs, had been key elements for my own thesis development. Several of the other doctoral students I was supervising also had found rethinking narrative materials helpful, doing so from a range of visual and other perspectives. This gave Myfanwy an idea for a starting point to examine the data in terms of understanding how parents chose what they do and do not say.

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USING METAPHORS TO UNLOCK DATA

Metaphors provide a mechanism to relate, compare, and make meaning of new knowledge with lived experiences. In the process of debriefing with one of my peers, I describe below, using the washing line metaphor, how I interpret the stories that have emerged from my interviews. At the same time, I adopt Lincoln and Guba's (1985) verification strategies through peer crosschecking, an important way to enhance the rigor of qualitative research studies.

In trying to explain the data in a simplified version to a peer one day, I described how each parent appeared to peg pieces of their story on a piece of string and that this string could easily break, letting all the pieces fall. The pieces would then have to be readjusted in the next telling. This simple explanation led me to using a metaphor of a washing line as a concrete way to begin to think about my data analysis. I listened again to the tape-recorded interviews and thought about the ways in which each part of the narrative was presented to make up the whole. As my voice was limited in the interviews, the parents' stories were free flowing, influenced only through my presence, body language, and occasional comment.

Viewing each part of the story as a piece of clothing, with each parent having basketfuls of clothing that could be used to make up each story, and viewing the washing line as the plot, the choice between what will and will not be hung out each time the story is told was fluid. This fluidity means that feedback from the audience is interpreted each time a story is told, and that this feedback directs how the items will be hung out next time.

The washing line that holds the pieces of clothing in place for the story to have meaning for the parent and for me, the listener, is the plot. I began to understand how parents changed the composition of the contents of the washing basket and the order the items were placed in it, depending on

how I responded to what I was being told. Sometimes they added more pieces to explain something further, or sometimes they left some items in the basket if they did not feel safe to hang it out at that time. These choices ultimately affected the composition of the plotline and thus the story of their experience. The washing line was tentative and vulnerable to breakage, and sometimes it needed to be restrung depending on audience approval or disapproval, or depending on the social setting in which the parents told their story.

Uncovering this washing line, or the plot, of each parent's story was quite difficult. As you can imagine, each story was very emotive, telling of a young life cut short. Trying to understand these stories in terms of how they were held together was challenging, to say the least. Delving into the depths of the story—why each parent told me of particular experiences, gave preference to some situations, less to others—was challenging for me. At the same time, this process was also very exciting. I was honored that these parents had chosen to be so open with me, honest about their experiences and sharing of their child's life and death. I was moved by the experiences of these parents, and still am. This topic opens up a vulnerability for all parents that, no matter what they do for their children, some children will die. I acknowledge this vulnerability in my own parenting, but I was not aware at the time that this also may have had an emotional impact on my supervisors, as Helen explains.

UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE IMPACT

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Reading the suicide narratives as I (Helen) responded to Myfanwy's thesis drafts disturbed my sleep and impacted my dreams. My own and extended family members were approaching young adulthood at the time and I was challenged by thoughts of, "What if it were them? How would I deal with such an experience?" Such visualizations brought emotions to the surface that I worked through at another level.

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It was during this period of using metaphors to explore the plot that I (Myfanwy) came to understand what it was in Kate's story that seized my attention. Understanding that Kate both knew that her daughter would die by suicide and had no shame in discussing Sallie's life and choice for death began my deeper awareness of narrative inquiry as a method. I realized how a plot is used to hold together each story, and how each story is influenced by the individual narrating it. I had had one of those Aha! moments. This event allowed me to take the pressure off myself, enabling me to

believe that I could succeed. As a consequence, I freed up my thinking on other aspects of the data, which led to me exploring different ways of examining the similarities and differences between and across the stories of these parents.

With this new insight guiding me, I reexamined the data and found that another mother also had predicted that her son would die. While this mother was not proud of her son's action, nor did she accept them, she certainly was prepared for the fact that he would die young, well before he eventually did. I began to understand that while some parents were prepared for their child's death prior to their suicide, others definitely were not. In fact, they had never imagined such an event occurring in their family. There was also a group of parents positioned in between. While they had not thought their child would die, these parents could realize, after the event, that there had been clear signs that their child was suicidal. By the time each interview was finished, all parents' narratives had a plot that could be described as preparing before, preparing after, or never preparing for their child's death by suicide (Maple, Plummer, Edwards, & Minichiello, 2007).

While this plot of preparedness, as it became known, was a monumental discovery in terms of my research, it was not enough—there was so much more to each interview. There were the obvious things that I expected to find having read the literature—disenfranchised grief, stigma, and grief differences between men and women, to name a few. There also were smaller groupings of interesting data. For example, a number of mothers attributed the suicide of their son to emotional distance displayed by the child's father.

LOOKING BROADLY

When I looked more broadly, I began to see that what shaped these parents' stories was the way in which society—and themselves—silenced their narratives. These parents were unable and often unwilling to talk about their child. This was in direct contrast to their desire to do just that. In addition, these stories were ongoing. They do not finish with the death of the child. The parents remain in an ongoing, evolving, dynamic relationship with their child postdeath. This continuing bond had been explained elsewhere (Klass, 2000; McCabe, 2003); the data from my study added weight to an emerging field of grief and bereavement literature.

As I write this, I am aware that the process sounds clear and clean cut. Let me assure you: it was not. Searching through hours and hours of transcribed interview data, trying to understand what was going on between the lines, trying to establish what was holding these parents' stories together, what difference and similarity meant in and across the interviews was painstaking, extremely time consuming, yet ultimately very satisfying.

During this analytic phase, I needed support from my mentors to act as sounding boards while I was making sense of the data. I talked through my reflections during team supervision sessions, but was able to deepen my understandings more fully in one-on-one explorations. While my two more-experienced mentors were able to help me to think philosophically about these findings in relation to the research literature, it was Helen, only newly graduated with her own doctorate, who listened and reflected with me for hours while I tried to make sense of the data. Helen helped me to understand where my own narrative—the doctoral thesis—fitted into the big picture.

INTERCHANGING ROLES

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Due to a parity of research experience, we interchanged our roles often, moving from learner to expert and back. Our relationship helped to create a comfort zone where it was safe to admit confusion, to not know a way forward, to ask for help, and to reject information surplus to current needs. There were questions raised, as much in a process of interpersonal exploration as in project management. We each listened and put forward possible options, but ultimately Myfanwy was self-directing and self-affirming. I (Helen) became conscious that a primary focus of mentoring doctoral students was about supporting the appropriation of knowledge. New directions emerged for us both that were not apparent when working in isolation.

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Early on in the emergence of our professional relationship I indicated in an email that the feedback I was receiving from Helen “was so refreshing to have . . . since I commenced this long and arduous journey . . . during my reflections I was thinking how wonderful it was to have someone to talk to about my project and how it is going and the things I should be getting under control (especially the formatting).”

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I (Helen) was tentative about the direction I should be taking as a beginning supervisor, and about what sort of feedback I should be giving, as seen in the following email to Myfanwy: “I went in this morning’s session not quite knowing what best to do, say etc. . . . What is important to me is that the time is useful to your purposes, so I am very open to structuring or doing things in a way that will meet that need. Obviously, it is not possible when you have given me such a volume of material to discuss each response in a

supervision session. Would it be useful to you to take my written comments away to digest and then a few days later to meet again to give you the chance to challenge or ask for further explanation of what did this mean? Why would you have suggested that? How did you interpret what I wrote, because it does not appear to link to what I intended? Or whatever other questions you might think are worth exploring.”

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FINDING CLOSURE

In the text above, there is an email I (Myfanwy) sent to Helen about halfway through the research journey. As explained earlier, I was totally overwhelmed at the time by the amount of data narrative inquiry produced, how to manage and massage it into a dissertation that would fit university requirements and provide new insights into parental bereavement through suicide. I was also aware of the need to honor the experiences of the participating parents.

Throughout the whole journey, I sensed it was very important that the parents involved in the study were given the opportunity to retain ownership of their stories as much as possible. One way that I did this was with regard to pseudonyms. Rather than randomly assigning pseudonyms to the parents and their deceased child, I asked whether they wished to choose their own aliases. Most parents wanted to do so, and used names that were important to them, often nicknames for their deceased child. All were grateful of the opportunity to do this, and thanked me for my thoughtfulness.

Another matter that I had predicted being a potential issue in researching in this area was ending the research relationship. I was very careful throughout the process to keep parents a part of the process, ensuring they were kept up to date with the status of the research, sending them reports every six months. They all received a final four-page summary of the research. At the time of the interview and again when this report was sent I told the participating parents that the report signified the end of their commitment to the research. Many parents chose to keep in touch over the ensuing years, often through a Christmas card at the end of the year.

As I conducted some of the interviews in my local rural area, I became aware early on that I would meet some of the parents while conducting everyday life—at social outings, at the supermarket, around town. At the conclusion of the interview with local parents, I discussed this possibility and a decision was made on how this would be handled. Some parents wished to be acknowledged in social situations, others did not—the choice was theirs and I have honored their choice to this day.

I had considered both of these issues prior to the research, but as is the nature of the research process, I could not predict all the sticky moments. One

that became apparent early on was that in many cases I was of an age at the time of the interview that was close to the age of the child that had died (or the age that he or she would have been now). In addition, as the research was of such a personal nature all the parents wanted to know how I had come to study suicide. I had to give something of myself in developing rapport with the parents. Many research texts warn of not doing this, and my professional inclination was certainly to refrain from doing this. So, while it seemed unnatural at the beginning, I soon realized that I was asking of these parents something much more personal, and that I owed it to them to share a little of me. So, if parents asked about me—my motivation for the study, my family life, or commented on my age in relation to their child—I willingly had a short conversation about this. While at the beginning I was a little uncomfortable with this, I am glad that I shared with the mothers and fathers who so generously shared their experiences with me. Had I not done this, I believe I would not have received the depth of data that they ultimately shared with me (Hiles, 2002).

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

The other side of engaging in sensitive research topics is the potential that these interviews could negatively affect my own health and well-being through vicarious trauma. I carefully arranged debriefing sessions with the university counseling service prior to setting out to interview. I did attend a couple of these sessions, but contrary to what I had been led to believe by colleagues prior to the interviews (that I would be traumatized by opening up old wounds), I found the opposite to be true. The stories the parents told were traumatic, yes. However, I also was incredibly privileged to be told the stories, to provide a new avenue for these parents to express their experiences, and ultimately to share this new learning in broader ways—through publishing, presentations, professional training, and support for bereaved parents.

Editors' Comment

Personal Challenges Elicited by the Process

This qualitative journey describes vividly the ways that this kind of research can be so informative and fulfilling, yet also disturbing and evocative. It takes a lot of emotional energy and resilience on the part of the researcher to remain with the participant—and the data—when it reveals such agonizing stories. Whereas objectivity and rigor are defined as a form of detachment in quantitative research, the qualitative scholar has to find attachment in order to gain understanding, yet do so in a way that she doesn't lose herself in the process. *Bracketing* means recognizing your own assumptions and biases, owning them, but keeping them in perspective so they don't pollute and prejudice what you've heard and observed.

In looking after myself with regard to the content of the interviews, it never crossed my mind that perhaps I should have prepared my supervisors, also. When I read the transcripts of the interviews, I can hear the parent's voice in my head. I am not overwhelmed or upset by this, because I also know the parents' story. This knowledge is not available to those who read my data, however. You may have noticed your own reaction to the excerpt from Kate I included at the start of the chapter. Due to the grounded nature of narrative inquiry and the narrative style in which the data are presented, this emotional response to my writing will always be a hazard. At the same time, though, I believe that it is this emotional response that allows us all to understand a little more clearly what it is that these parents have experienced and shared in this research process.

POSTSCRIPT TO NARRATIVE INQUIRY

From the outset of this research, I believed I had to use a method that honored the participants' contribution to the research. I set up stopgaps to ensure that in as many ways as possible the participants' ownership of their stories remained intact. At the same time, I had an obligation to the university and academic community to make sense of the data that these stories provided. I also had an opportunity to build knowledge in the area of suicide bereavement for the benefit of all families experiencing the suicide of a loved one and those professionals who encounter these individuals and families.

I believe that using narrative inquiry was an appropriate choice for this research, and that the outcomes have been valuable for all stakeholders. Most qualitative methods are extremely time consuming, and narrative inquiry is no exception. It is this level of engagement with and immersion in the data that led me to understand in a unique way the narratives that I collected.

POSTSCRIPT TO SUPERVISING A NARRATIVE INQUIRY PROJECT

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The opportunity to be a mentor in Myfanwy's doctoral program was stimulating for me. The way she engaged as an adult learner, scheduling each stage of the research and thesis process with advanced notice to supervisors, allowed us to block out spaces in our diaries. When supervision sessions were organized, she facilitated the process with a list of agenda items. This proactive approach made effective use of the supervision period. As Myfanwy's period of candidature grew, so did her confidence. She moved comfortably across to the role of expert in her discipline.

In this situation as a mentor, I found myself embedded in an environment where I was concurrently supporting a colleague to extend her research skills while broadening my investigative abilities and adapting my approaches to knowledge sharing to collaborate effectively with Myfanwy. This development process was significantly assisted by the feedback and modeling received from two very experienced academics who were cosupervising Myfanwy's doctoral work.

The openness of my relationship with Myfanwy facilitated extensive reflective critique sessions about the doctoral process. In these discussions, we explored ways to modify my practices and hers to more fully meet the career and academic goals we aspired to (Pearson & Brew, 2002). Our shared cultural, personal, and disciplinary backgrounds were factors that played a part in supporting the frankness of these discussions. An environment was created where it felt safe to admit not knowing and to work together to learn. Such critique identified gaps and stimulated our desire to build new knowledge.

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Conclusion

From our immersion among the voices in narrative inquiry, a number of strategies have surfaced that others could usefully apply:

- The student-mentor relationship is a challenging relationship to develop and nurture; it needs time to emerge. It extends over a long period; many external events can influence it. If you can relate in an open and honest manner, the relationship will be fulfilling for you both and new knowledge will emerge in a more seamless way.
- It is important early on to develop and adhere to a scheduled plan of action. From this base, short-term goals should be set. Such scheduling forewarns the supervisors and allows them more opportunity to meet your needs within their overall obligations.
- Make a firm decision on the particular form of methodology as early as possible. Otherwise, much time can be wasted exploring unhelpful possibilities.
- The process of data collection, analysis, and writing up narrative inquiry is complex and convoluted, but over time you will master it. Metaphors and other visualization techniques can enable you to examine the data from a range of perspectives. It also facilitates a back-and-forth dialogue between doctoral student and mentor.
- Expect the unexpected as normal. Work with this to explore the dimensions that open to you. What seems overwhelming and chaotic at the time often is the source of new knowledge.

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