

BECOMING A NARRATIVE RESEARCHER: A STORY OF MOMENTS, REALISATIONS AND TURNAROUNDS

TORNANDO-SE A INVESTIGADORA NARRATIVA: UMA HISTÓRIA DE MOMENTOS, REALIZAÇÕES E MUDANÇAS DE CURSO

CONVERTIRSE EN INVESTIGADORA NARRATIVA: UNA HISTORIA DE MOMENTOS, REALIZACIONES Y CAMBIOS DE RUMBO

Lorena Lozano-Sufrategui*, David Carless*

Keywords:

Methodology.
Qualitative research.
Ethics.
Narration.

Abstract: Narrative is now an accepted research methodology across the social sciences. However, for researchers from positivistic backgrounds, becoming a narrative researcher can be complex. In this article we share four stories to explore the dilemmas and challenges that Lorena, as PhD student, and David, as supervisor, experienced during Lorena's turn to narrative. We use a duoethnography to focus on pivotal moments during Lorena's journey that elicited important learning and personal development. By sharing these stories, we aim to stimulate reflection and dialogue between students and supervisors who may be embarking on their own journeys towards narrative.

Palavras chave:

Metodologia.
Pesquisa qualitativa.
Ética.
Narração.

Resumo: A narrativa é atualmente uma metodologia de pesquisa aceita em todas as ciências sociais. No entanto, para pesquisadores de fonte positivista, tornar-se um pesquisador narrativo pode ser complexo. Neste artigo compartilhamos quatro histórias para explorar os dilemas e desafios que Lorena, como doutoranda, e David, como supervisor, experimentaram durante a mudança de Lorena para a narrativa. Usamos uma duoetnografia para nos concentrar em momentos cruciais durante a jornada de Lorena, que despertou importantes aprendizagens e desenvolvimento pessoal. Ao compartilhar essas histórias, buscamos estimular a reflexão e o diálogo entre alunos e supervisores que podem estar começando em suas próprias viagens para a narrativa.

Palabras clave:

Metodología.
Investigación cualitativa.
Ética. Narración.

Resumen: La narrativa es actualmente una metodología de investigación aceptada en todas las ciencias sociales. Sin embargo, para los investigadores de origen positivista, convertirse en investigador narrativo puede ser complejo. En este artículo compartimos cuatro historias para explorar los dilemas y desafíos que Lorena, como estudiante de doctorado, y David, como supervisor, experimentaron durante el cambio de Lorena a la narrativa. Usamos una etnografía a dúo para centrarnos en momentos clave durante el viaje de Lorena, lo que generó importantes aprendizajes y desarrollo personal. Al compartir estas historias, pretendemos estimular la reflexión y el diálogo entre estudiantes y supervisores que pueden estar empezando sus propios viajes hacia la narrativa.

*Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom.
E-mail: l.lozan@leedsbeckett.ac.uk;
d.garless@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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1 INTRODUCTION

At this point in time, narrative research is widely accepted as a legitimate research methodology in the human and social sciences generally, and within the study of sport, movement and physical activity more specifically. Although it has been acknowledged that “[...] the narrative turn has been taken” (DENZIN; LINCOLN, 2000, p. 3), the incremental steps that together comprise a turn towards narrative (CLANDININ, 2007) continue to be contested in some quarters. In certain sections of the science and social science community – particularly those where quantitative, positivistic or post-positivistic approaches dominate – resistance continues, impacting the kinds of research undertaken and the researchers themselves. Within these areas, a researcher’s journey to embracing a narrative methodology – becoming a narrative researcher – can be complex, turbulent and highly personal.

In his book *Coming to Narrative*, Bochner (2014) provides a revealing look at his own journey to narrative inquiry. He considers:

What inspired my turn toward narrative? How did I move from facts and graphs toward meanings and stories? Starting to write the story of how I came to narrative, I worked under the assumption that I knew the answer and only needed to tell it. After a series of false starts, however, I learned that this was not the case. The question I had posed was more complicated than I originally thought. (BOCHNER, 2014, p. 14)

Bochner’s words resonate with us and articulate the underlying premise of our article. While Bochner wrote about his turn to narrative retrospectively – looking back several decades over a long and prestigious academic career – we offer a different view here by sharing Lorena and David’s current journey as it unfolds. Lorena’s position is that of a 29 year old Spanish female who recently completed her doctoral studies, while David’s is that of a mid-career researcher. While we are at different stages, we remain enmeshed in our own and each other’s ongoing journeys to narrative. We continue to live events like those recounted below; the experiences feel fresh and are still in the process of settling.

By sharing stories of pivotal moments that have shaped – and continue to shape – our journeys towards narrative, we want to explore two questions: What has inspired Lorena’s turn towards narrative? How has this change occurred within the context of Lorena’s doctoral studies? (LOZANO-SUFRATEGUI, 2015¹; LOZANO-SUFRATEGUI *et al.*, 2016a; 2016b). Our exploration adds to existing accounts of the personal-professional transformations described by other researchers in the sport and physical activity area (CARLESS; DOUGLAS, 2010; DOUGLAS; CARLESS, 2015; SMITH, 2010). Understanding our own reasons for embracing a particular methodology can serve as a stimulus for personal reflection. Witnessing, considering and understanding others’ transformations can both stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue and strengthen or reinforce the community of narrative scholars. By writing about and sharing moments from our own research journeys, we also bring a level of reflexivity to our work, increasing understanding of our selves, the participants and our research topic. As Etherington (2007, p.601) points out:

Reflexive research encourages us to display in our writing/conversations the interactions between our selves and our participants from our first point of contact until we end those relationships, so that our work can be understood, not only in

¹ LOZANO-SUFRATEGUI, Lorena. *Understanding the psychosocial aspects of health among men who attended a weight management programme* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom, 2015.

terms of *what* we have discovered, but *how* we have discovered it. For myself and other like-minded individuals, these are ethical, moral and methodological issues.

Finally, by recounting, exploring and reflecting on our research experiences we create an opportunity for learning – a pedagogical encounter – for others who might be at different stages of their journeys towards becoming narrative researchers.

To realise these purposes, we offer a generative account, focussing primarily on Lorena's experiences as a PhD student but also on David's experiences as a member of her supervisory team. Critically, through considering Lorena's journey towards becoming a narrative researcher, we ask: How does one become a narrative researcher? What kinds of moments matter? What are the pivotal triggers, realisations or turnarounds? How do these moments shape the researcher and her decisions of what, how and who to study? We align our work with Etherington's (2004, p.15) portrayal of becoming a reflexive researcher as a *process* which "implies movement, agency and continuity, rather than striving to reach a state at which we have 'become'".

By recounting four pivotal moments during our journey to becoming narrative researchers, we revisit and explore processes through which important learning and development took place. Inevitably, our stories raise questions on an array of topics, including supervisory relationships, reflexivity, ethics, writing lives, and how to 'make sense' of personal stories. In the spirit of dialogical research (FRANK, 2010), we invite you to respond to our stories with your own stories, reflections and, perhaps, actions. We share our stories as an experimental text, a duoethnography (SAWYER; NORRIS, 2015), that allows for the inclusion of our differing subjectivities. This way of writing supports our desire to evoke the visceral richness, complexity and emotional intensity of our lives. We offer our story in four sections, with Lorena's account in normal font and *David's reflections and reactions to those stories in italics*.

2 LEARNING HOW TO UNLEARN THE LESSONS

[...] as researchers, we have been trained to orient ourselves toward obtaining findings that must fit within the framework of understanding that we have constructed in advance. But this very process limits the possibilities of immersing oneself in wholly new ways of thinking, which is the essence of engagement with the other. If we are unable to release ourselves from the frameworks of meaning with which we are already acquainted, then we stand little possibility of learning something new. (ANDREWS, 2007, p. 508)

As I enter the staff room of my university building, I see David by the printer. He's filling the drawer with a thick stack of paper. "Perhaps he is going to print the 30 pages of interview transcript that I sent him last week?" I think. "No, that's not like David. We have got a meeting in 2 hours and David always takes his time to read my work and give me detailed, concrete and elaborated feedback. There is no way he can do all this in a couple of hours, and I would be disappointed if he didn't spend a bit more time on it, after all the hard work I am putting into this. He will have read it already. This is my first transcript and I am sure he's got some critical feedback to help me with future interviews."

I look at him while I make a cup of tea, and he does not seem happy. I can see a hint of frustration in his face, perhaps exacerbated by the silence that separates us two in this small room. "It may just be the printer, which often doesn't work when you need it most urgently, that's

the source of his anxiety,” I think. The absence of words makes me feel uncomfortable, and I attempt to break this silence by boldly asking: “Have you read the life story transcript yet? I think there was quite a lot of stuff in the interview. With it being 30 pages long, I think I have covered many areas that are relevant to my research question”.

Like a volcano just about to erupt, David puts into words the frustration his face was already revealing: “This is *not* a life story!” he says, throwing the stapled pages of transcript onto the table.

Wait! Wait! I'm not a volcano! Reading this story now is making me sweat. Recalling these events, I'm feeling guilty. I don't like the person Lorena is portraying here – I don't want to be that kind of person! I want to apologise to Lorena right now. Was I too aggressive? Harsh? Critical? Open? Honest? Did I abuse my power as a supervisor? As a man? Was my response 'really' that strong? In my reality, it wasn't. But Lorena's story here – of her reality, her lived experience, as a student, as a woman, recounted now on the page – provide the answer which communicates the truth of her experience: Yes. Although it was never my intention, she experienced me like a volcano about to erupt. I guess I need to change...

My eyes could not help but focus on the blue ink under which the original interview transcript is now submerged. Taking a deep breath, perhaps in an attempt to maintain his composure, David continues: “Here, you’re just asking your participant to answer your research questions for you. This is very general and I’ve told you before we need to get to *specific* moments. You need to strive for vivid, rich accounts of lived experience. This equates to first-person stories of *what has happened*”.

My first reaction to David’s words is to defend myself by disagreeing. With the nervous tone that characterises my speech when I feel that I am being attacked, I try to explain: “But... I’ve done it... it’s here”, pointing at a section where I thought I had elicited those stories.

Quiet, but with an edge to his deep voice, David continues: “Supporting participants to elicit stories requires the interviewer to listen, attend, enquire, care... to be a ‘witness’”. He hands me his feedback and says: “Lorena, it’s a challenge what you’ve taken on, because you’ve come from a very scientific way of working. What I’m seeing is that you are courageous, but your style needs to change if you are aiming to do narrative inquiry. You need to unlearn what you’ve learned. It isn’t going to be easy, but you’ve got to make the call. I’d suggest that you read Harry Wolcott’s (2009) ‘Writing Up Qualitative Research’ as a start. I’ve got to go now. I’ll see you in a couple of hours”. As he leaves, I look at his feedback and read one of his comments:

[Feedback on transcript 24/02/2014] Lorena, these pages are examples of poor interviewing. They are closed questions, sometimes use scientific/psychological language and, most of all, these are things you shouldn’t expect participants to know. My approach would be to invite accounts of his life that might show these issues in action. You are simply asking him to answer your research questions for you!

The realization that the interviews I did weren’t actually the type of interviews I thought I was doing made me feel deflated, disheartened and discouraged me to continue with this research. Immediately after my unpleasant encounter with David, I felt that all the efforts I had made to get participants’ consent to participate, all the travels, the time spent in the field, the deadly hours I

spent transcribing interviews in a second language, and the long and daunting process to gain NHS (National Health Service) ethical approval were all forfeit due to my inability to set the stage for open conversations and dialogue during an interview.

Reading Wolcott's book later, I realize that a profound change is occurring in me. Geertz's (1995, p.133) words from two decades ago resonate with my personal experience: "Learning to exist in a world quite different from that which formed you is the condition, these days, of pursuing research you can on balance believe in and writing sentences you can more or less live with". What David seems to see as a resistance to change, an inclination to be argumentative, and an adherence to the scientific method, starts to become a willingness to open, discover and learn a new approach to research. This is illustrated in the feedback David gives me on my next interview transcript a few weeks after our tense exchange in the staff room:

[Feedback on transcript 14/03/2014] There is some good material here which you will be able to use to good effect. Matt [participant] often tended to talk very generally which made it hard work for you to achieve what I've been suggesting! But I think there are signs of improvement! The next task is to begin to distil and tentatively make sense of this 'data'. I'd recommend writing a short (perhaps 2-5 page) case study on each participant focusing on what you've learnt about their experience. You might not use this in your final PhD, but the process will be insightful I think. David.

Phew! I feel relieved reading this part of the story. My heart rate is slowing down. It helps me believe that my criticism was fair and perhaps even necessary. It is wonderful to hear that quite critical feedback inspired appropriate reading and deep reflection which paved the way for a radical improvement in Lorena's interviews – and very quickly too.

But, still, did it have to be so traumatic for her? Might my response have led to a different outcome with a less determined, strong or hard working student? Should I have found a way to respond more gently, for the sake of Lorena's wellbeing and confidence? Surely it's an ethical necessity for me to do so given our power differential?

But could I have even done this if I tried? Do I have the ability to 'cover up' my emotions through controlling my facial expressions? I'm not sure I'm that good an actor. I care so much that interviews are done ethically and well – that participants are given genuine opportunities to share their experiences in their terms, rather than being squeezed into a researcher's framework, assumptions, agenda or interests. But is it possible to care too much? Should my ethic of care have been directed more towards Lorena, and less to my principles regarding participants' opportunity to share their stories? Is it possible for both to co-exist? If so, what do I need to do to make it so?

3 OPENING TO THE CREATIVE "I"

We learn, not because we're told
Take chances, because we fear we're growing cold
(DOUGLAS, 2012, p. 529)

It's 7 a.m. I'm back in the office again. It was only 10 hours ago that I left. Without thinking about it, I turn on the computer, hang my coat and sit down at my desk. I yawn. And I yawn again. I may as well make a coffee and open the window, it's going to be a long day.

I open the folder named 'interviews' in the data analysis software I am using to code the 800 pages of interview transcripts that I've collected during my fieldwork. I've got to analyse John's and Matt's interviews today – finally, the last ones! I've already coded 22 interviews, so

it is just a case of dragging sentences from the interviews into the codes, as I don't think I will have to create any new codes now. I'm pretty sure I've reached what they call 'data saturation'. Almost without thinking, and hardly reading the whole sentences of each transcript, I highlight and drag the participants' words into the codes I created a few months ago. I just want to finish as soon as possible; I'm fed up with it. This is a boring, systematic and mechanical process. It finally comes to an end just after lunchtime. I email David to let him know that I've finished my analysis and rush to say I would like to show him the main themes and codes I've created. "This is dull and boring," David says, after I show him the themes I've found. "Dull and boring?" I think. Yes, that is exactly how I would describe the process of doing the analysis, but I didn't think it would be that obvious just by looking at the themes.

Really? Dull and boring? I'm struggling to believe I actually said this out loud – although it is exactly the kind of thing I might have been thinking. It's a response I have to quite a lot of research. And it looks like I'm about to become an erupting volcano again ... I hope not. What will people make of me? I really want this story to go in a different direction this time ... Lorena? ... Where are you taking me? How are you about to represent me? How are you about to construct me?

"You cannot rely on computer software to make sense of your 'data' – people's stories. Analysis is not something a machine can do! You have to distil. A good PhD requires sophisticated and careful distillation. You need to have a mass of information – if you haven't, it is superficial. But that doesn't mean that you have to report everything. All of our findings are partial and situated. You never tell the whole story. You cannot tell the whole story – even in 100,000 words. And it would be really boring if you did. This is why qualitative findings are more than data. A computer cannot do what we do. A machine can't do it. It's not just analyse it and present it. It's filtered and distilled, you're drawing insights from it. Sometimes you need to step back from it, get out of the mass of it, the confusion of it. Which is normal – every study I do, I feel lost at some point. So you just need to give yourself a chance to ask: Right, what are actually the critical things here? What's the So What? What do I need to know, and what do I need to share? Computer software cannot answer these questions. The way to do it is by feeling and thinking in different ways – you need to get beyond relying on rational, cognitive, logical thought to make sense of it all, to find meaning. So don't just sit at your desk! This is research! Go and re-search, discover, create! Allow yourself time outside of the office to reflect, go for a run or a walk on the beach, and ask yourself: What is actually powerful and meaningful here?"

Breathe easy, no need to sweat this time. I like this – I feel proud reading back what I said to Lorena. It sounds to me like good advice – advice I'd like to follow more often myself. Too often, the pressures of working life conspire to squeeze this way of being and working out of my schedule ... yet this is precisely where innovation, creativity, wisdom and insight lie...

*Many senses, one story
Flowing, changing, alive
Like you and I
Partial and Situated
Like us
How to encounter the self
to make sense of a story?*

My running pace is set by the rhythm of Andy's words as they flow through my earphones. What a painful experience, to be a prisoner in a body that others perceive as a target for insults,

mistreatment and abuse, I think. But this type of pain must be very different from what I feel right now in my legs. Emotional pain. Infinite pain. Never ending.

I stop the audio to take a moment to let other participants' words come to my mind. Matt, Martin, and many others talked about it. They experience it once, twice, three times, and 'being the fat lad who cannot do anything' becomes a part of their identity, their story, their life. How many sizeist attacks does it take for a man to withdraw from sports, society, and even from who they want to be or become? And this makes me think about my own life: To what extent do I do the things I do because of how I am being perceived by others, or how I want to be perceived? And once again, I think about my participants: What does it mean for men who have experienced these attacks to physically be in an environment (a men-only weight loss programme) where similar stories are silently revealed by the surface of other 'big' bodies? As I run, I start to think about my participants' words through my own personal experience. I begin to make some sense of my participants' stories with the help of my own, previously forcedly-overlooked-but-never-really-forgotten, painful experiences of feeling socially excluded. And I begin to see anew my own life ... through the lens of these men's stories.

Hurrah! Lorena's 'got it! She is becoming a narrative researcher. And here's the proof! (It's in print, in an academic journal, so it must be true! Mustn't it?) This is such an evocative story for me, of something I only began to 'get' towards the end of my PhD. It represents a level of connection between researcher and participant – a softening of the division between self and other. It took the constant support and encouragement of my long-time friend and colleague Kitrina Douglas (DOUGLAS, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014; DOUGLAS; CARLESS, 2013, 2014) to help me 'get' this, to understand that what I do when I write songs (CARLESS, 2010; CARLESS; DOUGLAS, 2009) could be important in narrative research too. For years, it felt like Kitrina and I had our own little 'conspiracy' – a way of working that you don't read about in research methods texts. And now Lorena is in on it too! Wonderful. We are not alone...

I smile at the fact that somehow I have been able to find what seems to be an embodied synergy between two very different types of gendered bodies. I stop to make a note on my phone about all these thoughts. Methodologically speaking, this sudden realisation of how I have (un)consciously accessed my past experiences through the (re)creation of my participants' stories has important implications. The word 'reflexivity' now comes to my mind, and I also make a note of it while my phone gets soaked under this pouring rain. This is a concept I have struggled to understand since I started my PhD, but it seems that it is starting to make sense now. I think I am now finding an essence running through my participants' stories, but what makes it meaningful is the fact that it seems to have emerged through also looking into myself – my own lived experiences.

*Let the story settle in you
Let it filter through
Distil it, refine it, purify it
Become a part of it
and let it be a part of you*

4 LIFE CHALLENGES THEORY

Abstractness does not work well for me. I do not look to theory to explain life. I look into life to intervene in theoretical writings. (DIVERSI; MOREIRA, 2009, p. 215)

“Men’s unhealthy choices may explain increased levels of obesity that lead to premature and preventable deaths”, says the tall professor in the opening keynote of this conference on men’s health. “Cardiovascular disease, some types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, stroke, to name but a few, are the current killers of obese men”, he asserts. He stops for a few seconds to let the audience digest these ‘true’ facts.

‘Stroke’? That word catches my attention, it really hits home. Unfortunately, my dad has had two. In the first one, he ‘only’ lost his speech, which he recovered after six months. In the second stroke, two years after, he became completely disabled. Before the strokes, he was a thin, fit, apparently healthy man who ate the organic vegetables that he grew himself. He exercised everyday with my mum and our dog, at least a 2 hour walk, *everyday*, sometimes twice a day. How is it possible that this supposedly ‘objective truth’ about death and morbidity that the professor told – based on scientifically accepted procedures of data collection and subjected to complex statistical analysis – is so at odds with my own, personal experience? Yet when is a single individual’s experiences ever accepted as a challenge to analysis of a dataset based on hundreds and hundreds of men? And, importantly, what would my dad think about all this? Would this ‘knowledge’ make him feel even more unfortunate, considering the healthy lifestyle choices he’s always consciously made? Yet he still undeservedly suffered what this professor calls the ‘consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle’? How would the ‘obese men’ he talks about feel receiving this pathologizing, victim-blaming information?

Yes, yes and yes! Similar moments were important turning points for me too, which led me – and gave me the force of conviction – to turn to narrative. Early in my PhD I conducted a questionnaire-based study with people who had just experienced a heart attack. My dad, too, had experienced a heart attack despite being physically active, a non-smoker and moderate drinker. I remember how unfair he felt it was – that he didn’t fit the ‘risk profiles’ yet had still succumbed to heart disease. As I took my questionnaires round cardiac wards, I met and talked with many patients. I imagined my dad in one of the beds, imagined what he would think of these questionnaires, wondered if the patients’ families felt as worried and confused as my family had been. And it was the stories these patients shared when I visited them to ask them to fill in a questionnaire that gave me the most profound and meaningful insights (CARLESS; DOUGLAS, 2010).

I have witnessed professors of psychiatry and psychology recounting pejorative and limiting ‘facts’ about people with mental health problems (DOUGLAS; CARLESS, 2013) and I’ve read too many academic texts which misrepresent or ‘other’ LGBT+ people, people with a disability, women, or persons of colour. We still need to hear more voices of personal experience to challenge these dominant discourses – across the social sciences and in sport and physical activity too! We need more researchers to find the courage to sacrifice the comfort of self-other separation, to bring their own life experiences to their studies. Lorena has made that leap across the self-other divide that is still evident in so much social science. It seems she is no longer, to use Bochner’s (1997) term, a divided self...

This realisation was a key turning point for me: Science, and the scientific method, can be challenged by my own life experiences! After having completed three undergraduate degrees and a Master’s, this was the first time I felt the academic knowledge I had been taught did not sit well with my own life. ‘Facts’ made my personal experience even more painful. They did not explain – what is worse, they even contradicted – what had happened to my dad.

*Am I the only one?
Who is different
... from the average
... from the norm
... from you all?*

*But take heart!
Here, there are no rules or laws
No statistical certainty of fact
And through that, perhaps alone
Hope and freedom ring
Take heart!*

5 WRITING INTO THE UNKNOWN

[...] narrative inquirers recognize the tentative and variable nature of knowledge. They accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account. (PINNEGAR; DAYNES, 2007, p. 25)

Harry is sat down in front of me. Just the two of us, researcher and participant, in this big and cold room. Sweat is running down his forehead. His rhythmic, heavy breathing makes me wonder if this is the best occasion to do an interview. “Would you like a glass of water?” I ask him. But as I do this, he grabs a bottle of Coca-Cola that had been refilled with tap water from his bag. Today is the first day he has been able to take part in all the physical activities of the session, including the knee raises, the push ups, the sprints, and he even scored a goal when we played football! He must be exhausted. Perhaps he is too tired to talk to me today, so I start the interview by checking how he feels.

“Well, I am as I am”, he says. “Take me as I am day by day. Not a lot of things can be done, you know. It’s annoying really, because I can’t do anything about it. I’m in pain all the time. If I sit down for a long time, it takes me a long time to get up. Due to this disease, all my joints calcify up. It started in the spine, and it is slowly working its way up. There is no cure for it, it’s a case of keeping it under wraps by losing weight, exercising properly and taking the medication. It is a very rare disease; only 2 or 3 people get it each year in the world”.

As I hear this, I wonder whether I should interview him today or not. Our last interview a few weeks ago lasted 2 hours, but I didn’t know that sitting down for too long causes him so much pain. Should I prioritize my own research interests over and above Harry’s wellbeing? Should I cancel the interview? Or maybe I can have a bit more control over it this time to keep it shorter? While I weigh up the options, Harry continues talking about how he was diagnosed with the disease: “The X Ray showed how bad it was, they found out that two thirds of the spine from the lower coccyx was completely rigid, the two minor ligaments that run up the main body had started to turn to bone, and the muscle in the lower back had also started to calcify”.

While he narrates the story of his diagnosis, I feel the sharp edge of a long sword poking the skin of my tailbone and slowly being driven into my lower back. I quiver. Slowly, but surely, its blade becomes shorter and shorter as it disappears from my sight and finds a place in my body. A place where this sword came to stay, in Harry’s case, forever. He continues:

“Despite the pain, I still carry on doing the exercises, at least once a week, on a Monday morning, which has done me some good. I have been able to lose weight and got a little bit more mobile”.

Although it would be obvious to assume that it was the pain what made Harry go to the doctors in the first instance, I don’t want to impose a story on him that may not belong to him. So I ask: “What made you go to the doctors Harry, was it the pain?” “Yeah. Well, not really. Let’s put it this way, I was given an ear ache, one night.” Unsure, I ask: “What do you mean?” To which he responds with a question: “Do you believe in after life?” Not sure of what to think, I nod. In previous conversations with Harry, I remember he mentioned that his wife died in his arms 5 years ago. He continues: “My wife came and gave me an earful.” He pauses, glancing towards me across the table, as if to decide whether or not I was ready for what he had to say. “She came and chatted to me. It was the early hours, in the morning, she woke me up, when I was at my lowest. I was ready to do myself in. She came and she stood in front of me. She stayed with me for 2 hours”.

While Harry narrates this story, a sudden, uncomfortable and awkward feeling intoxicates my senses. With a sceptical tone in my voice, I ask: “Did you see her?” Boldly, he answered: “Yeah, oh yeah. I see her. The first 12 months after she died she was constantly there all the time, and since then she comes and goes. But I know exactly when she’s there.” He pauses once more. “She comes and tickles me, just behind my left ear, yeah, when she wants to let me know. And I,” he breaks off, pointing at my voice recorder, “turn that off, will you?” Immediately, I oblige.

Although Harry’s story seems interesting, I don’t want to be here right now. I don’t know if I believe in after life or not, but I don’t want to witness this story, not here, not now, not as part of my supposedly *scientific* PhD. I’m also not sure I want to play a part by co-creating this story with him, in writing, because I don’t want to ‘own’ this story. This is not my story! David has always highlighted the importance of becoming a witness and indwelling, but I don’t want to do any of these right now. I don’t want to listen to Harry’s story, because what I am doing is not just listening. It is not like playing a CD and stopping the music when you are bored of it. In this interview, many more senses have become involved, beyond just listening, in a free-wheeling and slightly scary way. The shivering, the fear, the crunching, the quivering... Listening to Harry is a more fully embodied experience than any interview I’ve done before. It affects me. Deeply. I feel his words flowing through my body as if they were the blood that runs inside my veins. My heart beat is fast and solid, as if the harsh, discordant and screeching violins of Hitchcock’s film “Psycho” were setting its pace. What do I do? Do I escape? Just run away? Is it possible to create a protective shell that prevents me from carrying with me the stories I don’t want to hear, but still allows Harry to share with me such a personal and pivotal moment in his life? Is it ethical to leave? Or to even ask Harry to stop this story? Can I purposively select the stories that I take away with me, what I want to write about, and what I want to learn from and publish?

While I toy with different options to find a solution, Harry continues with his explicit, detailed and thorough account of what happened, of the account I don’t want to hear, until he stops to say: “Can you feel the cold?” I nod. The shiver Harry’s story has triggered in me is clearly obvious to him. With a knowing nod and a long look into my eyes, he asserts: “She’s here”.

6 CLOSING THOUGHTS

So, what has been our purpose in telling these stories? Rather than being narcissistic (SPARKES, 2000), our aim in sharing stories of *our* experiences is to invite you – the reader – to revisit, reanimate and reflect upon your own research practices. We aspire to stimulate and support a pedagogical encounter through these visceral, emotion-laden, embodied stories of learning and development that took place during Lorena's journey to narrative research. Similar to other narrative researchers, Lorena moved away from facts towards meanings and away from master narratives toward local stories. This turn was not easy, nor was it unidirectional or smooth; it involved a number of challenges around supervisory relationships, reflexivity, ethics, writing lives, and 'making sense' of personal stories. While we may have preferred to keep these personal moments to ourselves, we hope that by writing in an open, revealing and vulnerable way about our shared journey, we offer a resource for those of you who are considering or becoming narrative researchers. By utilising a dialogical experimental text, we aimed to take you into a series of critical moments in our journey, not only to *understand* the kinds of issues and tensions that can arise conducting narrative research, but also to *feel* with these stories, to imagine yourself in a similar scenario. How would you respond to these tensions? What might you have done differently? What will you do in the future? We hope our stories can thereby help those of you who are considering or exploring narrative research – whether you are a student, experienced researcher or a supervisor – to anticipate, plan for and better respond to the kinds of complexities you may encounter. Perhaps most importantly, we offer our stories – including both Lorena's and David's voices as student and supervisor – to accompany you on your journey. A journey which, as the social and relational aspects of these stories suggest, is rarely (if ever) a solitary one.

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