Finding My Intuitive Researcher's Voice Through Reflexivity: An Autoethnographic Study

Natalie Cunningham[1] and Teresa Carmichael[2]
[1]Origo Consultants, Western Cape, South Africa
[2]Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Natalie@origoconsultants.com
Terri.carmichael@wits.ac.za

Abstract: Using autoethnography as a method and looking back to and writing about my experience (in the first person) as a relatively inexperienced researcher completing her PhD in a business school environment, I share critical moments of my research journey. The context in which I was conducting the research was a business school environment in the subject area of executive coaching. Executive coaching is a relatively new and emerging field in contrast to the many other fields in business, such as finance and economics. We comment on the role reflexivity played in facilitating identity formation as a researcher. Reflexivity is the ability to explore, reflect on and examine social and contextual issues that impact on research. Combining reflexivity with the aim of ethnography, which is to study common and shared experiences for purposes of understanding the cultural implications of these social and contextual issues, I reflect on how the academic structure, systems and processes were an inhibitor to finding my voice. I share how reflexivity was a major contributing factor to increasing confidence in my own identity as a researcher. I examine and analyse the aspects of reflexivity that facilitated this growth in my confidence and how this experience might facilitate the same empowerment in other researchers. The paper looks at approaches to creating a reflexive culture of research drawing on Finlay's typology of reflexivity. One example of this typology is collective reflexivity in which more than one voice is heard. This paper is co-authored with my supervisor, and her reflections are included. Collaborative reflexivity assists in addressing some of the validity concerns of only one voice. This paper will assist not only novice researchers but also the practice of research – providing a way of not just "doing" research but "being" a researcher.

Keywords: Reflexivity, autoethnography, intuition, academic environment, researcher identity, research supervisor, PhD student

1. Introduction

The paper begins by presenting an understanding of autoethnography and describing the context of the paper by documenting some aspects of my story as a PhD student conducting a qualitative study into executive coaching, an emerging multi-disciplinary field. The aim of this paper is twofold; one is to provide insight, through the story, into the cultural aspects of the academic world and the identity of a researcher. The second is to provide an understanding of how reflexivity can, in fact, lead the researcher to develop a trust in their own voice as a researcher and ultimately to trust their intuition. The paper expands on the typology of reflexivity provided by Finlay and Gough (2008) and develops personal insight reflexivity into identity formation. There is a connection between self-awareness, reflection, insight and identity, and if the reflexivity is guided correctly, then identity development becomes a natural consequence of the process. A strong sense of identity with who one is as a researcher builds self-confidence in one's views and to trust that this emergent view may now be second nature or intuitive.

2. The context of the paper and autoethnography

This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to writing, with the aim to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy)* personal experiences (*auto*), with the purpose of understanding cultural experiences (*ethno*). Autoethnographers acknowledge that the researcher invests emotionally in their writing and within the topic they are studying. This personal investment may show up as subjectivity, and this is openly recognised as part of the autoethnographic process. The key difference between writing an autobiography and writing an autoethnography is that an autoethnography goes beyond "just telling a story"; it requires writing about the cultural context and cultural identity and analysing the story in relation to these aspects (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Some autobiographies lean more towards the pure story, but in this one, we leverage Wall (2008)'s notion of elevating the level of inquiry by weaving connections to the literature throughout the narrative and offer suggestions to other PhD students and their supervisors that may be helpful in their journeys. The identity and context that I write about in this paper are that of a PhD student doing qualitative

Reference this paper: Cunningham, N., and Carmichael, T., 2018. Finding My Intuitive Researcher's Voice Through Reflexivity: An Autoethnographic Study. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods,* 16(2), pp. 56-66, available online at www.ejbrm.com

research in a business school environment that has historically been rooted in positivist, quantitative, business research.

I will share some insights about the role of power, the importance of intuition and the role of identity that shift this story from a 'mere' story into an autoethnography. As part of this, I share how the experience of reflexivity moved my journey as a PhD student from a sole focus on the concrete aspects of content, process and the production of a physical thesis to an abstracted, reflexive personal growth journey that also achieved the thesis outcome. I have invited my supervisor, Terri (the second author on this paper) to add her voice as she participated in and experienced my journey. Including her as a co-author turned this paper into a collaboratively reflexive exercise (Finlay, 2002). She has inserted her reflections in such a way as to make this almost a conversation, and her inputs are preceded by her name and indented. The process of writing this paper is similar to that of Badenhorst and Xu (2016), also a joint publication between a doctoral student and his supervisor, also in the form of an autoethnography.

Terri actively encouraged me to journal and record all of my insights and experiences during the PhD process. She suggested that I document my thoughts, feelings, insights and questions, on a continual basis as part of my research insights. She did not prescribe *how* to capture my reflections, but merely that I do it. In autoethnography terms, this journal would be referred to as "field notes".

> Terri: we have always encouraged our students to use a research notebook for capturing insights, on the basis that if the insights are not written down immediately, they are often lost forever. This practice can work whether it is approached in an *ad hoc* fashion, capturing insights as they occur, or else more deliberately. In the latter case, researchers set time aside for reflection and often follow a more structured process. Although students are free to capture insights in whatever way suits them best, I suggest two alternative mechanisms; the first being a free-writing approach as favoured by Badenhorst and Xu (2016) because "*It allows my thoughts to flow freely and helps me generate more ideas than I originally thought*" (p 34). This free-flow of allowing the subconscious to process can be very rewarding for the student, and I rather like the notion of meta-thinking (thinking about thinking) proposed by Crittenden and Woodside (2007), which is essentially what this is about.
>
> The other method is somewhat more structured, and in essence, amounts to writing most of the chapters of the thesis simultaneously. Thus, one might start with Chapter one, the introduction, but as one is writing it, one may have realisations about other parts of the developing document before reaching that section. A common example is to realise as one writes, what the research *excludes*, eg a particular perspective or theory such as Natalie's deliberately excluding theories of psychology from her thesis. These points are captured under the "Delimitations" heading. Doing this gives one a great sense of freedom as it releases the student from feeling that they have to constantly justify why they are leaving this or that out of their study. Another common insight is the many ideas that pop up about the numerous directions the study could take; I encourage students to make a note of these ideas as they occur, under the heading "Recommendations for further research" in the final chapter. This also helps them to stop going around in mental circles wondering if they are doing the "best" methodology.
>
> The beauty of these deliberate reflexive processes is that they contradict some of the critics of intuition as being "a lazy or degraded form of analytic reasoning" (Epstein, 2010, p. 295).

The key times for journaling came initially at milestone points such as after the proposal approval panel, after each supervision meeting (whether physically or via Skype), after each interview, after reading each transcription, after analysing each transcript, and after each writing session. As the PhD progressed, journaling became a pervasive activity that permeated every part of the PhD process. Furthermore, the research methodology selected - constructivist grounded theory, encouraged the use of memos. Being an intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts, memos capture thoughts, insights and comparisons; they crystallise questions and make the work concrete and manageable (Charmaz, 2014). A key insight came from realising what Karl Weick (2012) meant when he quoted one of his participants as saying about the importance of writing as a thinking process, "I don't know what I think until I see what I say" (p130).

Since part of the purpose of memos is for the researcher to develop awareness of their prejudices and to be open to data that opposes their own preconceived ideas (McGhee, Marland and Atkinson, 2007). Reflecting on

these insights enriched my own experience as well as pushing me to read, reflect on and investigate alternative explanations of the emerging theoretical concepts.

In putting together this paper, I have drawn strongly on this journal, which includes memory as well as the memos (field notes). There is a danger of over-reliance on personal memory as the major source of data (Chang, 2016), as it is selectively biased towards certain experiences and forgetful of others. As Daniel Doherty eloquently states (and what in essence captures my own experience): "It is never easy to trace the past, and of course memory is selective. I write in full awareness that this account is highly subjective and that, in constructing this narrative, some events and episodes are highlighted, while others remain in the shadow" (Doherty, 2016, p. 22). The field notes assist with memory recall to some degree as many of those insights would have been forgotten if they had not been recorded. These data were supplemented and enriched by input from my PhD supervisor, the co-author of this paper. The field notes, my supervisor's comments and my own experiences lead to multiple and varied inputs into this autoethnographic account.

Reflexivity is often written about along with autoethnography since the former is required in order to produce the latter (Delamont, 2009; Le Roux, 2017; Watson, 2009). In the same breath, when these concepts are discussed in the literature, concerns are raised about rigour; including the requirement that research be analytic as well as experiential (Delamont, 2009). In addition, we are well aware that reflexivity can easily be considered to be "self-indulgent, narcissistic and tiresome, even undermining the conditions necessary for emancipatory research" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). However, we prefer to subscribe to the view that autoethnographies provide value to both the writer and the audience as long as they can be shown to have research integrity, resonance, coherence (Le Roux, 2017), authenticity (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) and plausibility (Parry, 2003). Thus, the narratives should connect with readers who have had similar experiences, "ring true" to them, and resonate with their reality.

Bearing the above in mind, we would like to build on Chang (2016)'s ideas of collaborative ethnography, in which she describes how autoethnography is always written from the position of the author in relation to others, and that these others are part of the narrative. As such, we would like to propose that the inclusion of other voices within an autobiographical narrative provides a form of member checking (Thomas, 2017), which adds an element of qualitative rigour to the undertaking. It is assumed that the other voices will remind and confirm (or disconfirm) the primary author's account of events and happenings, and add "rich, thick descriptions" to enhance the value of insights being written about. It is equally important that no claims be made about generalisability, which we would not do in any case, since that is not what qualitative research is for.

With the above in mind, we hope that Natalie's story will give young researchers reassurance that they are not alone in their journeys and that their experiences of frustration and confusion are quite normal, and also that they may be encouraged to write reflexive collaborative autoethnographies.

3. Types of reflexivity

In social and health sciences much has been written about reflexivity and how it differs from pure reflection, which can be seen as thinking about something after the event. Reflexivity is different in that it is dynamic, far more immediate and involves an abiding, continual awareness (Finlay, 2002; Finlay and Gough, 2008). However, even with this definition, the implementation of reflexivity varies. Initially, Linda Finlay was motivated to write about and study reflexivity in her own PhD journey as a novice researcher who did not know how to fulfil the expectations to be reflexive.

Finlay (2002) describes five types of reflexivity: 1) personal insight through introspection; 2) collaboration through reflective dialogue to reach a collective understanding; 3) intersubjective reflection in which the researcher explores the mutual meanings within the research relationship; 4) social critique which utilises experiential accounts situated in theoretical and social constructions of power; and 5) discursive or (as referred to later) ironic deconstruction, in which the rhetoric is challenged so that multiple voices may be heard. The ambiguity of language and meaning-making through language is reflected in ironic deconstruction.

At the time of my writing and reflecting, I had no conscious understanding of the different types of reflexivity. Finlay (2002) previously mentioned that, as with any typology, the borders overlap and researchers may well

employ several types of reflexivity simultaneously. The chosen types of reflexivity should take into account the epistemologies and assumptions underlying particular research methodologies; although it must be said of my own experience, that one may only become clear about one's own reflexivity with the benefit of hindsight. In 2012, Finlay added to this body of research and reflected that social critique is favoured mostly by postmodernists, social constructionists and sociologists. Introspection is favoured more by phenomenologists, and mutual collaboration and intersubjective reflection are favoured by research that ranges from humanistic, relationally orientated research to more feminist, discursive research (Finlay, 2012). In looking back, I see that I favoured introspection, mutual collaboration and intersubjective reflection as my modes of reflexivity. While my research is underpinned by constructivism assumptions of creating multiple realities through interaction with others, I did not consciously use social critique or ironic deconstruction. In hindsight, an orientation to the different types of reflexivity may have strengthened different views emerging from my reflexive processes.

4. Finding my voice as a researcher

The paper title begins "Finding my intuitive voice as a researcher". However, before one can find an 'intuitive' voice one has to find one's own researcher's voice. I had not had a career as an academic but had worked for many years as a leadership development consultant and executive coach. While I had completed my MBA and historically had been on part-time faculty for the university at the business school, I had not been a researcher but a lecturer. My identity was thus strongly related to teaching. I had recently joined the University full time and had developed a Masters qualification (Masters in Management in Business and Executive Coaching), which needed to be grounded in academia. I had drawn on existing research in developing the curriculum but recognised a gap in coaching theory. It was the need to contribute to the scholarly conversation surrounding this gap that prompted me to enrol for my PhD to develop theory around the coaching process. The strong view that theories should be grounded in empirical evidence are illustrated by Kuhn (1970) in saying, "theory without data is empty, and data without theory is sterile" and supported by Handfield and Melnyk (1998); "Without theory, it is impossible to make meaningful sense of empirically-generated data, and it is not possible to distinguish positive from negative results". With this principle as a foundation, the roadmap for the research to take a scholarly turn was much clearer in the face of an area of professional practice that was not well theorised at the time. Because there was considerably less research based on the coachee's perspective (the person receiving coaching) than there was on the coach's perspective. I was drawn to investigating and theorising the coachee's lived experience.

In reflecting on the beginnings of the supervisor relationship, Terri comments:

> The start of Natalie's journey for me as her supervisor was when she asked me to supervise her PhD. This took courage on the part of us both, as I am neither a psychologist nor a coach, nor were there such professionals at the Business School. However, I was one of the qualitative research methodologists in our department and Natalie felt confident enough in her role as the subject matter expert in the relationship, but she told me she would need methodological guidance. We intuitively trusted each other that this yin/yang relationship would work out, as indeed it did. I call it yin/yang because each of us is quite different to the other on the face of it, yet there was enough qualitative methodology in Natalie, and enough coaching exposure in me that we complemented each other exceptionally well.
>
> So, we started the long and winding road together, during which there were several methodological iterations as we tweaked and refined the study. I have found over the years that pinning down a research topic is one of the hardest parts of starting the endeavour, but once this has some clarity, it is much easier for the student to progress. I have borrowed a mechanism from Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin and Zikmund (2015) in requesting that students identify all the key concepts and key words that they intend investigating, and then constructing a single sentence that contains all the key words, the methodology, the relationship between the concepts and the unit of analysis. For example, Natalie's research statement: "This research proposes theory about the coaching process from exploring the ways in which business executives experience coaching" includes the elements that provide a boundary to the research.

Because the research was to explore the lived experiences of coached executives, the logical methodology to select was phenomenology with the analysis being Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith,

Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I justified this by describing the three main approaches of IPA; firstly, there is phenomenology, being the study of lived experience, with the richness of data drawn from individuals who had lived through the experience themselves. The researcher's skills in making the respondents feel safe enough to share their deepest feelings were something I could relate to as an experienced executive coach. Secondly, IPA is rooted in hermeneutics, in which the analytical cycle iterates between the whole and the parts of the whole until understanding appears to be saturated. The researcher is central to this cycle and is thus implicated in facilitating and making sense of the phenomenon, drawing out its essence. The third influence is ideography, which is concerned with the particular, and in which the researcher thoroughly explores each instance of the occurrence they are studying before seeking a general conclusion about the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). This is inconsistent with many other qualitative methodologies where data gathering and analysis take place more or less simultaneously (Anderson, 2017). IPA does not eschew generalisations but rather locates them in the particular and develops them more cautiously (Anderson, 2017). I intuitively felt that there was a fit between the proposed methodology and the research problem. I further believed cognitively that the theoretical underpinnings, the philosophies and values of IPA were congruent with the nature of the research, and the very purpose of IPA to reflect upon personal experience made it appropriate for executives reflecting on their coaching experiences.

Wanting to gather as much input as possible, I had consulted with academics other than my supervisor. In doing so, the strongly positivist leanings of the business school became clear enough to cause more than a little concern and, fearing rejection at the proposal approval stage, I proposed following the IPA data collection with a second, quantitative phase. Thus, my proposal was to begin the research process with IPA, but in recognition of the complexity of the subject and the need to take the in-depth knowledge gained from the interviews and to build the constructs on a broader base, I would apply a quantitative method of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) after the findings of the IPA study were clear. The IPA findings would inform the items chosen for the EFA.

In hindsight, I understand that the reason why I proposed a mixed methods recommendation (Maxwell, 2016) was at the time I had not heard of any other student using IPA at the business school. The intuitive insight based on the meetings with other business school academics and seeing that qualitative research was rather marginalised at the institution, was that IPA would probably not be acceptable to the panel on its own, but perhaps if it were supported by EFA the research would take on greater credibility.

After approximately a year of painstakingly developing a 50-page research proposal, I presented the research plan to a panel of five academics. Although my supervisor had gone out of her way to select both subject-matter and methodologically appropriate academics for the panel, when presenting, it was clear that none of them had actually used IPA and one of them, a quantitatively-oriented methodologist, was not familiar with it at all. I found myself doing three things: 1) justifying the appropriateness of taking a qualitative approach, 2) explaining the methodology almost in an educator role and then 3) defending why I was using it. I was grateful for my supervisor's presence; without which I would have felt like a lone voice. One panelist in, particular, insisted that IPA was too new and had no track record, that it provided broad guidelines only and would be difficult for examiners to assess. She was very persuasive in recommending that I do grounded theory, an approach with which she was very familiar and believed in because, "grounded theory is well-documented and has very specific analysis techniques and criteria against which the PhD can be evaluated" (an extract from the Research Proposal committee report for Natalie Cunningham, 23 November 2011).

At that stage I only had a superficial understanding of grounded theory and, in justifying my choice of IPA over other research approaches, had stated in my proposal: "The disadvantage of grounded theory is that the researcher is expected to set aside any preconceptions (Smith et al., 2009). This is in contrast to IPA which recognises that in the interpretative endeavour the researcher is an active participant (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000)" (Page 30 Research Proposal, Natalie Cunningham, 2011). I argued against the pressure from the panel to change to grounded theory because I felt that my researcher's voice was an integral part of the process. The panel said that I could still share my standpoint in grounded theory but would need to bracket it. The very issue I was struggling with bracketing my personal experience was provided as a solution. At the time I did not understand that the debate was not one of methodology but of ontology (our definitions of reality) epistemologies (explanations of how we come to know what we know), and worldviews (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). By recording my uncertainties, it led me to read more in order to find answers about ontology, epistemologies and worldviews. I then made my worldviews explicit, and this led to me having the vocabulary

and language to discuss my worldview. At the time I knew it did not feel 'right', but I could not articulate what was feeling at odds with me. Later I knew it was my very definition of reality that was being challenged.

I found myself feeling intimidated, not by overt aggression or the mannerism of the panel members, but by insufficient knowledge. Not having conducted a grounded theory study before I could not argue that it was not indeed better. Because the decision about whether or not to proceed with my PhD was to be made in the panel and I was very keen for them to approve my topic and methodology, I thus let time pressures and power relationships determine my acceptance of the methodology.

> Terri: The proposal defence panel is a tough hurdle to overcome, despite the intention of the panel to be constructive. I was feeling rather intimidated myself, not having any actual coaching experience or theoretical foundations of the discipline, and at times felt a bit out of my depth as well. Showing a confidence I didn't really feel, I assured Natalie and the panel that we could do this, and resolved, like Natalie, to embark on a steep learning curve.

So, the outcome of the panel was that I should change my methodology to grounded theory and resubmit for re-evaluation. They were otherwise mostly happy with the content and structure of the proposal but did make recommendations about additional literature that I should consult.

> Terri: The proposal approval process via an academic panel is quite intimidating but is a milestone that needs to be navigated successfully before one can proceed with the research. The reasons for this are not only to ensure that the student is on the right track and thinking about the research is a sufficiently theoretical way, it is also to solidify that the ethical principles and practices are being met.

Notwithstanding the value of the discussion, I suggest that I am not alone in this place of assenting to the suggestions of a panel; one feels that one actually does not have a choice and suspect that most students comply because they look up to and respect the experience and knowledge of the PhD panellists. This student attitude changes the power dynamics and the 'new' future PhD student might consent to and comply with the panel's suggestions. I also wonder how much will change in the world of academia and particularly with application of new methodologies, when panellists choose to remain with what is known and tested. There is a fine line between providing wisdom and guidance and remaining set in old patterns. Who is the monitor of this? Perhaps if my awareness of social critique as a reflexivity option, I might have questioned the power imbalance between novice researchers and experienced panellists within the academic system. My frame of reference at the time focused on power dynamics between researcher and participant but I did not actively record or explore the power dynamics of myself within the academic system. This begs the question, of whether being aware of the different types of reflexivity in advance would have been useful and made my written entries into the journal broader.

Thus, on leaving the panel with the agreement that my research would be based on grounded theory, I began the long journey of learning about this methodological approach. I struggled, initially, as a novice grounded theorist and was overwhelmed by trying to unravel and understand the three main threads of grounded theory, being, Glaser and Strauss (1967), then Strauss and Corbin (1990), then followed by Charmaz (2000), with their seemingly contradictory assumptions.

Initially, in my readings of grounded theory, it did not resonate with me at all. This was because I was reading the earlier works when grounded theory was first described, the pervasive methodological assumptions of the time were largely rooted in positivism (Charmaz, 2008). The more empirically structured approach to developing theory appealed to me as this original purpose of grounded theory resonated with the stated purpose of my research, to develop coaching theory based on a structured empirical approach (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006). But the stronger positivist stand did not resonate with my worldview. When I discovered constructivist grounded theory, I found a methodology that would achieve the aim of developing theory but also one that resonated with my worldview that our social reality is constructed as we interact with one another and no objective reality exists. Charmaz (2014) believes that constructivist grounded theory evolved in response to a postmodern world where social reality is multiple, processual and constructed. The researcher's position is, therefore, an inherent part of the reality of the research. The key difference between grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory is that in the original philosophy theory was discovered from the

data with the researcher being a scientific observer. At this point, I trusted that I was using the right methodology for my research problem, and one that resonated with my ontological view.

My insight into my own worldview had come through journaling. In my journal I wrote: "I do not know how realistic it is to bracket my own experience." At this time, I met a researcher, Rob Farrands, who had just published a chapter in a book (Birks and Mills, 2015). He shared with me how his personal reflections were an integral part of his chapter. I approached my supervisor and asked if I could write my PhD thesis in the first person. I had not seen many first-person theses in the world of business, and coaching PhDs were limited. In 2009 only 32 PhDs on coaching were found worldwide (Grant, 2009). I believe that recording my insights about the bracketing process increased my self-awareness, which led me to share my struggles with a visiting researcher. I think that reflection increases openness. By recording one's doubts, uncertainties and questions one is opening up one's self to exploring answers; to finding different options.

> Terri: we generally disapprove of using the first person in research reports because we find that it allows students to lapse into opinion rather than stating facts and referencing them properly; this particularly applies to MBA students who are generally embarking on their first research effort and are struggling to grasp the language and process of research. However, in Natalie's case, it seemed exactly the right thing to do, so I was happy to listen to my gut and agreed with her that it would be fine.

In my PhD report, I included a chapter entitled "Reflections on my role as a researcher." This is a direct quote from the chapter:

> In the research analysis, I developed a framework, which explored the coach, the coachee, the context, the process and the outcomes. In my research reflections, I kept reflecting on how the context would impact coaching and yet, in writing, my own context was influencing me. Being a part-time researcher who continued to practise coaching I was able to reflect on the analysis and findings as I was coaching my executive clients, which in turn. impacted my analysis. I felt myself straddling the world of academia and rigour as well as the practitioner world of utility, wondering whether this research would be accepted by either or (preferably) both of these worlds. The tension between these worlds would fluctuate, as at times I would become absorbed by theoretical constructs but ignoring their application. At other times, I would rush into the application to coaching practice, focusing on the historical preferences of the coaching profession, rather than the data. Straddling these two worlds helped mould my research and build the theory.
>
> Furthermore, the tension between practitioner and researcher confirmed my constructivist stance. I did not see how I would have been able to let go and bracket my experiences out completely. I realised that I am embedded in the philosophy that learning takes place within social life. I recognised the importance of my own reflexivity about my interpretations and was aware of the importance of the memos which I had begun writing when beginning the doctoral journey. This allowed me to run a critical eye over my own assumptions. The research found that coaching led to coachees questioning their assumptions and viewing the world through different eyes. Again, I was paralleling the findings in my research journey – questioning my own assumptions, seeing coaching through new eyes. I loved the resonance of my experience with the findings.
>
> The journey further reflected the research findings in many ways but perhaps the most significant is that the very writing of this piece of research is a meaning-making process, which has fundamentally altered the way in which I see coaching in the world. The most recent article that I cited in the research was a March 2016 article by Stelter, in which he describes the coach as a fellow human companion (2016). Recognising that my humanity and vulnerability can truly play a part in transforming another's life has changed the way I practise coaching.
>
> I end this research with an excitement and a hope for coaching to become more impactful in our society. I cannot separate what I know, what I do and who I am. This research has increased my knowledge, enhanced my thinking and changed my behaviour as a coach but it is ultimately my deeply held belief that coaching is a transformational tool (a bias I had to monitor for continually) and my delight that the research confirmed the value of coaching leaves me elated and hopeful. I have a

> new-found passion and respect for research. It was a hard journey but the rigour and discipline of building theory has been an invigorating process. The pain and frustration of struggling with time and with many concepts were outweighed by the moments of aha and insight. I am grateful that I used constructivist grounded theory and, in conclusion, quote Charmaz (2014, p. 241), who writes, "The constructivist approach fosters renewal and revitalisation of grounded theory and leads us to situated knowledge while simultaneously moving grounded theory further into interpretative social science."

I believe that in this piece of writing (above) I was "making sense" of my journey. I think sensemaking and identity development are closely aligned. Weick (1995) is considered one of the seminal writers in the sensemaking theory field; however there is no single sensemaking theory (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The original seven key properties of sensemaking state that sensemaking is understood as a process that is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Weick's properties were criticised and he responded by updating his explanation of the properties (Weick, 2012; Weick et al., 2005). Identity is ultimately who we think we are which is influenced by who others think we are (image). Even when writing a reflective piece without collaborating or having dialogue with others, the writing is based on the real or imagined thoughts and actions of the other person (Parry, 2003).

I would suggest that some of the processes of reflexivity enhance sensemaking. Yet one's sense of identity is filtered through sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) and one's identity is continuously adapted through sensemaking (Parry, 2003). As a result, reflexivity is a component of identity development. We are continually striving to create a coherent sense of self and to answer the question 'who am I?' as well as the question 'who am I becoming?" These questions apply to our social identity but apply equally to our work identity. We have experiences that support and solidify identity or negatively impact owning a particular identity. We develop an identity narrative – my story of who I am (Empson, 2013). By consciously reflecting and recording your experience and encounters with the world as a researcher, you move to a deeper level of awareness. Part of this awareness is a sense of self and an emerging sense of identity as a researcher, or, in the case of experienced researching, an evolving and possibly changing identity as a researcher.

So how does this relate to intuition and the intuitive researcher? A useful definition of intuition is provided by Betsch (2008, p. 4) in which he describes intuition as "a process of thinking. The input to this process is mostly provided by knowledge stored in long-term memory that has been primarily acquired via associative learning. The input is processed automatically and without conscious awareness. The output of the process is a feeling that can serve as a basis for judgments and decisions."

An example of where this was demonstrated was when deciding on my sample size. My supervisor, Terri, was asking me to increase the sample size after I had done 11 interviews and I intuitively felt it would not add value. I gave paltry arguments as to why this was the case. My supervisor pushed me to provide justification for this "feeling". I began reading and found several articles that I assimilated into a summary of why sample sizes need not be so large. I integrated this with my own experience as a researcher. This subsequently led to an article providing a logical, well-supported justification for smaller sample sizes. This began with an intuitive feeling. It was based on my years of doing coaching and recognising my interviews and the data were exceptionally detailed and comprehensive but I needed to substantiate this with supporting evidence. I found evidence that data saturation; the right appropriately selected participants; multiple interviews with the same participants; theoretical sampling; combined with concurrent iterative data collection and analysis can all contribute positively to working with a smaller sample size (Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2014; Davoudi, Nayeri, Raiesifar, Poortaghi and Ahmadian, 2016; Glaser and Holton, 2007; Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Mason, 2010; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Thomson, 2011). Most importantly in terms of my journey of trusting my voice, I found evidence of the experience and expertise of the researcher in both interviewing and their subject area as being a key factor in reducing the size of the sample and for reaching saturation (Glaser and Holton, 2007; Hoare, Mills and Francis, 2012; Lee, Saunders and Goulding, 2005).

The initial niggle (feeling/ intuition) I had felt about the sample size not needing to increase was based on a journal entry:

> Today, Julia who is transcribing my interviews shared the following in an email: 'Your work is so interesting Natalie and I may speak out of turn, but your ability to summarise what you have heard leaves me completely gobsmacked - what a gift you have!' This makes me wonder what a less experienced interviewer would do. My years of coaching have developed my ability to listen carefully and summarise comprehensively. I am sure this has an impact on the quality of the interview. I know Julia's feedback is based on her experience transcribing but useful to have the feedback from an external source. This feedback plus my gut feel led me to disagree with Terri.

A contributing factor to being able to do this was the space and respect provided by Terri. She initially disagreed with me. She had many more years' experience in research but she allowed me the space, with structure and support to explore, to provide theory for what I was thinking. This is a factor in allowing novice researchers to find their voice.

> Terri: My concern about the sample size was rooted in previous experiences with PhD proposal defences in the positivist environment that we were in, where large-n samples were the norm and if one simply *must* do qualitative research, one should at least make the sample size worthwhile. It is very difficult to stop people from judging qualitative research using quantitative criteria. However, Natalie did find sufficient evidence to support her motivation for the sample size that she used.

5. Key Insights

There were many insights and a few key ones are summarised below:

a. The use of a research notebook documenting all aspects of the research journey adds value
b. The free writing approach is often generative in nature
c. Structured reflections can assist with capturing ideas for later chapters as well as highlighting exclusions (delimitations) from the study
d. Orientating PhD students in the typologies of reflexivity in advance of commencing the PhD research process could broaden the reflexive experience
e. The understanding and documentation of the ontology, epistemology and worldviews of the PhD student facilitates a sense of identity as an academic researcher
f. The role of a safe space and a trusting relationship with the supervisor where the PhD student can experiment with ideas, thoughts and 'try out' concepts aids both the use of intuition and science
g. The organisational context impacts methodologies encouraged and actively used e.g. a business school might be less open to exploratory qualitative studies than it would to positivist quantitative studies
h. Reflexivity increases uncertainty. By exploring areas of doubt and questioning the unknown it opens up one to exploring and finding answers
i. Reflexivity allows researchers to surface their assumptions. Reflexivity is about sensemaking, and identity construction is a key component of sensemaking. Reflexivity thus can contribute to a sense of academic identity.

6. Conclusion

> Terri: the single most significant shift throughout Natalie's PhD was her metamorphosis from student to colleague. This is something I speak about often to PhD students with particular emphasis on getting them to take ownership of their study. For example, they should not ask me what to do next, but to come with ideas for different options so that we can brainstorm; to not ask me to give deadlines, but to propose them; to not ask me to repeat the methodology lectures because something has slipped their mind, but to read and re-read and find new material to build on what we covered in class, and to come and tell me about their new insights. Natalie took this proverbial bull by the horns, and our meetings became stimulating for both of us; I was certainly enthused after each one.
>
> The highest point was when Natalie initiated a submission to present at the 2017 ECRM conference and requested that I co-author the paper. I did not know then, that between us, we would achieve two conference publications and two journal articles; this is the third – all in a single year. A worthy and independent colleague indeed!

I think that my PhD journey did not just shift my identity as a teacher and practitioner to that of a researcher and writer but it significantly integrated my sense of self. The reflexivity process clarified my world view, my beliefs and assumptions about life and I walked away from this journey a more mindful, reflective person. I accept my doubts, uncertainties as a key strength in helping me remain curious. Without the reflexivity; a more one sided, possibly closed voice may have emerged but I end this paper as I did my PhD with an openness to learning and exploring – perhaps a hallmark quality of researchers.

References

Anderson, V., 2017. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research. *Human Resource Development Quarterly,* 28(2), pp. 125-133.

Badenhorst, C. and Xu, X., 2016. Academic publishing: Making the implicit explicit. *Publications,* 4(3), pp. 24-40.

Betsch, T., 2008. The nature of intuition and its neglect in research on judgment and decision making. In Plessner, H., Betsch, C., and Betsch, T. (Eds.), *Intuition in judgment and decision making* (pp. 3-22). New York: Taylor & Francis.

Birks, M. and Mills, J., 2015. *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Bowen, G., 2008. Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 5(3), pp. 12-23.

Chang, H., 2016. *Autoethnography as method* (Vol. 1). New York: Routledge.

Charmaz, K., 2000. Grounded Theory: objectivist and constructivist methods. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Charmaz, K., 2008. Grounded Theory as an Emergent Method. In Hesse-Biber, S. and Leavy, P. (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 155-172). New York: Guildford Press.

Charmaz, K., 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Crittenden, V. and Woodside, A. G., 2007. Building skills in thinking: toward a pedagogy in metathinking. *Journal of Education for Business,* 83(1), pp. 37-44.

Cunliffe, A. and Coupland, C., 2012. From hero to villain to hero: Making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking. *Human Relations,* 65(1), pp. 63-88.

Davoudi, N., Nayeri, N. D., Raiesifar, A., Poortaghi, S. and Ahmadian, S., 2016. Theoretical Sampling: A Narrative Review. *Nursing and Midwifery Studies* (In press).

Delamont, S., 2009. The only honest thing: autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork. *Ethnography and Education,* 4(1), pp. 51-63.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). 2000. *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Doherty, D., 2016. The evolution of one practitioner's coach approach: taking the coaching turn. *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal,* 1(1), pp. 21-34.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E. and Bochner, A. P., 2011. Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung,* 12(1), pp. 273-290.

Empson, L., 2013. My Affair With the "Other": Identity Journeys Across the Research–Practice Divide. *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 22(2), pp. 229-248.

Epstein, S., 2010. Demystifying intuition: What it is, what it does, and how it does it. *Psychological Inquiry,* 21(4), pp. 295-312.

Finlay, L., 2002. Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative research,* 2(2), pp. 209-230.

Finlay, L., 2012. Five lenses for the reflexive interviewer. In Gubrium, J. F., Holstein, J. A., Marvasti, A. B., and McKinney, K. D. (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft* (pp. 317-333). Thousand Oaks: Sage

Finlay, L. and Gough, B., 2008. *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*: John Wiley & Sons.

Glaser, B. and Strauss, A., 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Glaser, B. G. and Holton, J., 2007. Remodeling grounded theory. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 5(2), pp. 47-68.

Grant, A., 2009. *Workplace, Executive and Life Coaching: An Annotated Bibliography from the Behavioural Science and Business Literature*. Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney, Australia.

Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S., 1989. *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L., 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods,* 18(1), pp. 59-82.

Handfield, R. B. and Melnyk, S. A., 1998. The scientific theory-building process: a primer using the case of TQM. *Journal of Operations Management,* 16(4), pp. 321-339.

Hoare, K. J., Mills, J. and Francis, K., 2012. Dancing with data: An example of acquiring theoretical sensitivity in a grounded theory study. *International journal of nursing practice,* 18(3), pp. 240-245.

Kuhn, T. S., 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Second ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Le Roux, C. S., 2017. Exploring rigour in autoethnographic research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 20(2), pp. 195-207.

Lee, N., Saunders, J. and Goulding, C., 2005. Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology: A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research. *European Journal of Marketing,* 39(3/4), pp. 294-308.

Maitlis, S. and Christianson, M., 2014. Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *Academy of Management Annals,* 8(1), pp. 57-125.

Mason, M., 2010. Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 11(3), pp. 1-19.

Maxwell, J. A., 2016. Expanding the history and range of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research,* 10(1), pp. 12-27.

McGhee, G., Marland, G. R. and Atkinson, J., 2007. Grounded theory research: literature reviewing and reflexivity. *Journal of advanced nursing,* 60(3), pp. 334-342.

Mills, J., Bonner, A. and Francis, K., 2006. The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 5(1), pp. 2-10.

Morse, J., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K. and Spiers, J., 2002. Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 1(2), pp. 1-19.

Parry, J., 2003. Making sense of executive sensemaking: A phenomenological case study with methodological criticism. *Journal of Health Organization and Management,* 17(4), pp. 240-263.

Pietkiewicz, I. and Smith, J. A., 2014. A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological Journal,* 20(1), pp. 7-14.

Pillow, W., 2003. Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 16(2), pp. 175-196.

Quinlan, C., Babin, B. J., Carr, J., Griffin, M. and Zikmund, W. G., 2015. *Business Research Methods* (1st ed.). Andover, UK: Cengage Learning.

Smith, J., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M., 2009. *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*: London: Sage.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J., 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J., 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*: London: Sage.

Thomas, D. R., 2017. Feedback from research participants: are member checks useful in qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 14(1), pp. 23-41.

Thomson, S., 2011. Sample size and grounded theory. *Journal of Administration and Governance,* 5(1), pp. 45-52.

Wall, S., 2008. Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 7(1), pp. 38-53.

Watson, C., 2009. Picturing Validity: autoethnography and the representation of self? *Qualitative Inquiry,* 15(3), pp. 526-544.

Weick, K. E., 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations* (Vol. 3): London: Sage.

Weick, K. E., 2012. *Making sense of the organization: The impermanent organization* (Vol. 2). Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.