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"I thought… I saw… I heard…": The ethical and moral tensions of auto/biographically opportunistic research in public spaces.

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Abstract

There are ethical and moral tensions inherent in studies that utilise auto/biographically opportunistic methods. The researcher may live/work alongside participants, walking the same streets, developing personal connections with the social settings, groups and individuals being studied. To do this ethically demands explicit and reflexive self-observation, sensitivity and awareness of the relational nature of research. I discuss these tensions in relation to findings from my qualitative study into young people's relationship with nature, using a short story that blends data from informal interviews with naturalistic observations in public spaces. Drawing from creative and auto/ethnographical research methods, and applying the concept of the sociological imagination to explore the complexities of this approach, I argue it is a valid and appropriate way to research the role of space, place and nature in auto/biographical accounts whilst remaining cognisant of our own values, beliefs and emotions.

I thought… I saw… I heard…

Laughing, I lower myself down the steep section on my bottom, thinking to myself that I am polishing the rocks as I go. It's been a good walk, up and over the hill. I'm looking forward to reaching the bottom and the final stretch of relatively flat walking to reach our car (visions of a cold drink waiting for me at our favourite pub spur me onwards). Glancing up I see a youngish couple (possibly late twenties/early thirties, he looks a bit older than her, although I

can't quite see from this distance) with a girl of about 10 or 11. They are approaching this steep section of the path. The man and the girl are in sportswear and trainers. The woman is not. She looks like she was expecting to go for a stroll in a park, not a hike over a hill. In a few shuffling slides, I will be alongside them. I pause as I hear a voice, exasperated, saying "*That's it. I can't go on, there's nothing left in me. Go on without me. Leave me behind.*" She is speaking to the backs of the other two who are already giddily leaping up the path, racing to the top, skipping surefootedly from rock to rock. Gazing up at them as they pass, I admire their youth, their fitness, their ability to stay on their feet, whilst I have resorted to an awkward downward shuffle. Looking ahead, I see the woman sit down and remove her phone from her handbag. She resolutely stares down at it, ignoring the other two. She does not appear to have noticed me yet. As I draw level, she looks up. I smile, and say, "*it's tough going isn't it? Especially on such a warm day.*" I hear her sigh as she nods, agreeing without words, then looks back down at her phone. She looks exhausted. I carry on with my walk. Hearing voices again (I can't quite make out the words), I glance over my shoulder and see that the man and child have turned around and are making their way back to where the woman is waiting. They seem exhilarated by their walk, joking and laughing as they skip back down together. I wonder who they are – is the man the father of the girl (they do look alike)? Is the woman a new partner navigating her way into this family unit? I wonder how the woman will react to their arrival. Conscious that I am staring, I make myself look away and allow them their privacy as they regroup as a three rather than a two. I walk on. Over a cold drink, the moment lingers in my consciousness, stirring memories from my recently completed doctoral research. I recall the words of a young woman called Lexi telling me, "*You should think about people's abilities when planning activities, when I can't do something that others can, I think they're going to laugh at me, it makes me upset and not want to go out.*"[1] Her voice blends in with those of others I have listened to over the course of my study: Liz who told me that given the choice, he would "*go where the moon is rising, just sit there and look at the surroundings.*"[2] Jack who thought that disconnected from nature might mean you were scared of sheep.[3] The young woman, whose name now escapes me, who refused to attend a residential experience at an outdoor education centre, expressing embarrassment at her inability to do all the activities on offer and her reluctance to admit she needed extra support. The sense of achievement expressed by those who had made it to the top of a mountain and had then returned to the centre for a game of hide and seek in the woods. The challenges of addressing the needs of different abilities and preferences.[4] I find myself questioning, not for the first time, where does the

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[1] Pseudonym; informed consent gained. (Hayes, 2017).
[2] Pseudonym; informed consent gained. (Hayes, 2017).
[3] Pseudonym; informed consent gained. (Hayes, 2017).
[4] Hayes, 2014a.

'research' begin and end, what counts as research, how do we address the messiness of research?[5] When we are using methods such as auto/biography, boundaries can become more blurred, transcending more traditional methodologies. I sip my drink, lost in thought.

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Introduction

This chapter opens with a short story, presented in the form of an auto/ethnographic vignette (after Humphreys, 2005) that provides a present-tense, reflexive, first-person narrative with embedded retrospective thoughts. This is designed to enhance the authenticity of the account, which will be utilised to exemplify, and reflect upon the ethical and moral tensions of "auto/biographically opportunistic research in public spaces". I use this term to refer to those times when we find ourselves in a public space, observing (seeing and/or hearing) something that has relevance to/with a topic we are studying, which we want to share with other people, for example through a story. It may be that the 'something' we observe will help us provide a context for our research or to show the potential impact of what we have found.

When constructing a story, the observational moment(s) chosen for inclusion may be relatively insignificant, part of the mundane or everyday (after Silverman, 2007) that goes unnoticed by others, or if noticed does not have the same meaning, and if it was retold in a story by someone else, would take a very different form. Humphreys highlights there are a number of closely related terms used to categorise stories like the one used here, citing '…narratives of the self (Richardson, 1994), self-stories (Denzin, 1989), first-person accounts

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[5] Hayes, 2014b

(Ellis, 1998a), personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996), reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), and ethnographic memoir (Tedlock, 1991)' (Humphreys, 2005, p.841). Like him, for the purpose of this chapter, it is Reed-Danahay's (1997) concept of autobiographical ethnography that has both more resonance and more use for the issues being explored. However, I use it in the form 'auto/biographical ethnography', with a slash between 'auto' and 'bio' to show that they stand in a dialectical relationship (see Roth, 2005) with the inclusion of ethnography to show that this approach has a specific aim of understanding social and cultural experiences. This extends the auto/biographical approach of using my own life experiences, to encompass the specific context of the surrounding culture. It also allows me to highlight that sometimes there may be more of a focus on the auto (personal experience), other times more on bio (life story), both of which are considered in relation to the ethno (culture), whilst at all times the aim is to be critical and analytical (graphy) about/with the relationship between them (see Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). This conceptual framing places the self within a story of a social context, and recognises that the story is both a method and a text.

The auto/biographical ethnographic approach creates a reflective space whereby I can make use of my 'sociological imagination' (after Mills, 1959) to analyse the experiences encapsulated in the vignette that started this chapter.

> The sociological imagination is the practice of being able to "think ourselves away" from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them with fresh, critical eyes. C. Wright Mills, who created the concept and wrote a book about it, defined the

sociological imagination as "the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society." (Crossman, 2018, n.p.)

Defined and applied in this way, it provides a useful concept for analysing apparently disparate moments (for example from planned and unplanned observations) that enables explicit and reflexive self-observation, sensitivity and awareness of the relational nature of research.

However, this concept is not limited to sociology; as Mills himself argued, it provides a 'common bond for all the social sciences' (Mills, 1959 cited in Harvey, 2005, p.211) and we can extend this imaginative approach to embrace our geographical imagination, or what Harvey refers to as "spatial consciousness" (Ibid.). As a transdisciplinary researcher (explored in more detail later in the chapter), I extend this to using my imagination in a multi-faceted, transdisciplinary way to develop criticality from my understanding of a range of knowledges – geographical, historical, anthropological, philosophical – using this broad range of different lenses to develop understanding without becoming 'muddle-headed' (Harvey, Ibid., p.237). We can avoid this 'muddle-headedness' by using physical and social 'maps' to guide our thinking in a way that allows us to distinguish between unreasonable prejudices, masked by adherence to outdated traditional methods and a perceived need to defend disciplinary boundaries. I propose that we view the process of gaining ethical clearance from a university review panel as a way of developing a useful map to guide us through our research studies. Furthermore, this approach allows us to consider the spatial and temporal dimensions of ethics, viewing them as agentic, active, lived, embodied, reflexive and retrospective as well as the more predictive. To do this, we need to ask some fundamental

questions about where research begins/ends and what we mean by 'data', so that we can begin to answer questions about the ethical and moral issues/tensions of opportunistic research in a public space.

Opportunistic research is more open, less planned than other more formal research approaches; Andrew (2017) refers to this as "accidentalism" rather than intentionality. As a result, less anticipated/more unanticipated ethical issues may arise, making it difficult to predict what may happen and to address this within the customary ethical procedures. Indeed, as a result, many refute that this is even a form of research (Andrew, Ibid.), seeing it as more like auto/biographical research or journalism and as such, exempt from formal ethics review (discussed by Tolich, 2010). Similarities may be found with internet-based forms of research, particularly those involving participation in public fora, such as chat-rooms and online communities (see Roberts, 2015; Eysenbach and Till, 2001), in that the methods may be deemed to fall outside of formal ethical review procedures. Some researchers may even choose these methods in an attempt to avoid ethical review and consent procedures, which Roberts (2015, p.318) argues 'is a disturbing trend, particularly when dealing with vulnerable populations such as children and youth in relation to a sensitive topic'. I do not follow or approve of this trend. I have always been honest and open, in academic publications and in the applications for ethical approval that precede them, about the epistemological connections I make between my personal and academic experiences. In doing this, my epistemological approach is similar to that taken by Letherby (2015) and like her, I openly reflect on my use of creative methodologies and alternative ways to share research findings, or she phrases it 'to tell academic stories' (2015, p.128).

As I have written elsewhere (for example, see Hayes and Prince, 2018), for research to be demonstrably ethical and responsible, we need to acknowledge our position of power, explain the approach we have taken and take great care with our words, to avoid being inadvertently harmful. Davies (2012, p744) refers to this as being 'self-conscious methodologically' and she argues that 'Narrative accounts, auto/biographies and ways of writing that 'tell of the telling', allow tensions, nuances, complexities, confusions and unclear thoughts to remain…' (Ibid., p.747). However, we have to recognise that when we write about ourselves and our experiences, we also expose those around us and in the process, things that may have been private are made public. I find it troubling that Davies (Ibid.) does not attend to this issue. Whilst her paper openly and honestly analyses her experiences of being subject to a child protection investigation, the emotional impact this had on her and the challenges she encountered in her attempt to combine experiential knowledge in an authorized, academic account, there is no mention of the invasion of the privacy of her children, partner or other family members that was inherent in writing her story. As a reader we have to trust that she had their consent to publish this very personal account of an intrusive, distressing experience that occurred in the private space of their family home. With opportunistic research in public spaces, naturalistic observations happen without the participants' consent; indeed, unless they read the finished product, it is without their knowledge. As argued by Roth (2009) it is therefore not a surprise that this reporting of events from our lives is a contested research approach and that some may not view this as a valid or appropriate form of research.

This level of critique is familiar to auto/ethnographers and auto/biographical ethnographers, who regularly encounter claims that their work is narcissistic, a form of self-therapy or

arguably worse, a process of self-transformation. Atkinson (2006, p.403) demands we remember that, '…"Others" remain infinitely more interesting and sociologically significant than the majority of sociologists who document their own experiences rather than analysing social action and social organization'. However, how can we maintain this focus on 'others' in an ethical and moral way, whilst embracing auto/biographical ethnography? To address this question, I first provide a summary of my doctoral research, briefly explaining the methodology used and outlining the findings this generated. Drawing on these findings, I then move on to explore ethical and moral tensions in relation to the opening story, focussing the discussion around three key research methods: theoretical and philosophical perspectives (what we think); observations (what we see, through both planned and naturalistic observations); aural and oral (what we hear and say).

The chapter will conclude with a concise overview of storied approaches in research, highlighting the place of auto/biographical ethnography within this. Extending Letherby's argument for 'a position of theorised subjectivity (Letherby, 2003, 2013) – which requires the constant, critical interrogation of our personhood – both intellectual and personal – within the production of the knowledge' (Letherby, 2015, p.133), I argue that there is a way to navigate the moral and ethical tensions of auto/biographically opportunistic research in public spaces. And that we can do this in a responsible and responsive way, so that the resultant discoveries are both valid and appropriate. The chapter closes by providing guidance for others who want to utilise a similar approach.

My doctoral research: making sense of nature

My doctoral research was a creative exploration of young people's relationship with nature, titled 'making sense of nature' (Hayes, 2017). I looked at a range of facilitated programmes that offered outdoor learning opportunities and explored what young people (11-25 years) thought of their experiences. The aim of my study was to find a way to research and analyse how experiences such as these can enable young people to develop a positive, personally meaningful relationship with nature, and then to make use of this learning to inform policy and practice (see Hayes et al., 2016). I utilised an innovative transdisciplinary methodology, which blended hermeneutics, auto/ethnography and action research (Hayes and Prince, 2019) and used a range of data elicitation / collection tools to capture and '… make the most of the information available' (Tracy, 2013, p.26). This included using documentary data, observational and focus group data, with a mix of semi-structured and naturalistic interviewing, depending on the participants involved. To this, I added stories, anecdotes, memories and reflections, which I used to highlight and explore themes/issues in more detail as they emerged, and to provide context within the broader aims of my study. Tracy refers to this process as 'bricolage', and highlights it enables a researcher to creatively and flexibly '…create an interesting whole' (Ibid., p.26). She further asserts '…*qualitative researchers find meaning by writing the meaning into being*' (Ibid., p.275; her original emphasis in italics).

I add to this by stating that a storied approach provides additional data in the form of stories and allows flexibility for emergent insights to refine methods, enabling us to respond to context and most importantly, to participants. The stories created and shared within my study

are more than mere artefacts: they form part of the data set and are based on specific incidents within my research. I refer to these as 'magic moments': the moments when things seem to fall into place. A more conventional academic term for this is crystallization; as Robson explains, 'Such crystallizations range from the mundane to the '…earthshattering epiphany' (Fetterman, 1989, p.101) after which nothing is the same' (Robson, 2002, pp.488-9).

Although there has been movement in recent years towards adopting a more inter and/or transdisciplinary, creatively interpretive approach to research, this is still seen as controversial, arguably undisciplined, and is not generally accepted by policy makers as a credible method. There is still a political preference for more traditional, quantifiable and, in my opinion, simplistic methods, which ignore, or at the very least limit, the complexity, the nuance and the messiness of what we are studying. I find this unethical and more to the point, unkind to those we are studying. I argue that this is an area that warrants further research: we have a responsibility to keep up the momentum of challenge, and to promote more caring, humane ways to conduct and present research. We also have a responsibility to do our best to ensure this is perceived as valid and ethical research, so that we can enable others to follow our approach.

Throughout my study there were two concurrent processes: (1) data elicitation through primary and secondary research and (2) employing writing inquiry as a research method. When planning my methods for data elicitation and analysis I was aware of ethical considerations, as highlighted by Anderson (1999, p.65): 'Researchers have the power to misrepresent and abuse subjects when they interpret, selectively report and publicise the

data...' (see also Lounasmaa, 2016). Therefore, I endeavoured to represent participants' views as accurately as possible, whilst maintaining their anonymity and respecting their privacy. Key themes that emerged included the importance of *playfulness* (Hayes, 2016a/2015), *kindness* (Hayes, 2016b), *responsiveness* (Hayes, 2013), *comfort and belonging* – themes that will be drawn from when exploring the opening story.

I thought…

In the story, I am thinking to myself as I slide over the rocks, finding humour in the way I have chosen to navigate my way down the hillside. I am self-conscious, I feel the rock through my clothes and am aware that I am not as young, fit or agile as other walkers, however, although I notice this, I am not perturbed by it. My research over the last four years has enabled me to understand that we all experience outdoor spaces and activities in subjective, personalised ways. Through participating alongside others with a wide range of differing abilities, and analysing this through a number of alternative theoretical and philosophical perspectives, I discovered the importance of playfulness (I am polishing the rocks), kindness (to myself and others), responsiveness (to the rocky environment and other people around me) and I feel a sense of both comfort and belonging. I have chosen to come and walk here and have carefully chosen my walking companion. He understands me, and although he is a more experienced walker, he is very patient and encourages me when I need it. I cannot help but compare this to the family I encounter. They are having a different shared experience. It reminds me of one of my early conference presentations (Hayes, 2014a), near the start of my doctoral journey, when I used Aesop's Fable, the Tortoise and the Hare, to explore how we can facilitate outdoor learning in a way that helps to develop connections

with nature. For many, especially young people and those experiencing physical and/or mental ill health, stepping outside into a natural environment can be a real challenge. What I see in front of me brings that academic exercise to life: as I argued then, hares may be happier and more comfortable walking with other hares, as may also be true of tortoises. Thinking about this can help us to ensure that we do not inadvertently intimidate or discourage others from joining us in activities. My thinking about it now is filtered through my research encounters, the voice in my head is joined by the remnants of conversations with young people over the last four years. Their voices are still loud and clear, as if I heard them yesterday, probably as a result of having listened to them so many times as I painstakingly transcribed and then analysed their words. However, their faces have become blurred in my memories; I am not sure I would recognise them if we met again.

I saw…

I saw lots of things on that walk, some of which are mentioned in the story. Observation was one of the main methods I used for my doctoral research, and is something I have found comes quite naturally to me: I notice things, someone who in everyday language may be called a 'people-watcher'. During my studies, I took on the role of participant observer at a number of rural and urban locations, capturing my thoughts and observations in my field notebook, along with initial reflections and analysis in the form of short stories and anecdotes. All references to individuals, organisations and locations were anonymised to respect confidentiality and/or privacy. There was also ongoing dialogue with practitioners by email and phone, which were incorporated into my reflective journal. Utilising these methods, data was continually being collected, elicited and analysed, not through separate

stages, but through an iterative, reflexive process. This helped me to develop my understanding through ongoing analysis of my data, and is an example of how writing formed part of the process of my inquiry (Richardson, 2000).

As a result of my analysis, I felt able to confidently answer my research questions in a particularistic way (after Maxwell, 2005). From my observations and our conversations, I can explain how the young people and practitioners I spent time with appeared to make sense of their experiences, I can explain and justify how I subsequently interpreted and made sense of that, through analysis with academic literature. I can even apply evaluator criteria to assess the quality of my work, to help me decide if it is ready for the examination that is integral to the doctoral process. However, my findings will only ever be partial and subjective, that is the nature of this type of research.

I heard…

The title of this chapter comprises the three notions of thinking, seeing and hearing; however, it is also important to consider what is said and what is left unsaid. Anecdotes, informal, naturalistic conversations – words said in passing in open, public spaces – may offer a stark contrast to those said in planned, managed spaces such as research interviews, where the words are more considered, more thought-through. In my doctoral study, I conducted individual interviews, with practitioners and with young people, and I had many more naturalistic conversations which inveigled their way into my thinking. Some of the young people I participated alongside were unable to speak due to their complex disabilities (Hayes and Prince, 2019); others were reticent as a result of their previous experiences (Hayes,

2016b).   Pausing now to think about the things I heard and did not hear, highlights the importance of using all our senses in research, drawing on observations, being mindful of body language, and other non-verbal methods of communication. This helps us to build a more holistic picture of what is happening and can lead to greater understanding of why this may matter.

Navigating the moral and ethical tensions

As asked within the story, where does the 'research' begin and end, what counts as research, how do we address the messiness of research? Reflecting on my choice to include an apparently trivial, unplanned moment, like the encounter on the hill side, I agree with Maxwell (2005, p.79) that there '…is no such thing as inadmissible evidence in trying to understand the issues or situations you are studying'. This is reinforced by Thomson (2016, non-paginated) who reminds us, 'Data is created when you actually sit down, back in the office, away from the everyday busyness of field work, to work out what you have that will actually help you answer your research question(s) (…) In a very real sense, the researcher creates the data'. It is important to consider the ethics of this, to respect the privacy, confidentiality and safety (emotional as well as physical) of participants and researcher (Kafar and Ellis, 2014).When we are using methods such as auto/biography and auto/biographical ethnography, boundaries can become more blurred, indeed may even transcend the constraints of more traditional methodologies. This needs to be accounted for within the overall design of the study, by being explicit about axiology, as well as epistemological and ontological perspectives. Axiology refers to the internal valuing systems

that influence our perceptions, decisions and actions, and includes our ethical and moral stance.

Atkinson (2006, p.400) concerned about this blurring of boundaries, argues for more analytical and theorizing research approaches which '… are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions for subjective and evocative ethnographic work'. He emphasises that the autobiographical has always been a key aspect of ethnographic work and that the '… very possibility of social life and of understanding it ethnographically depends on an elementary principle: the homology between the social actors who are being studied and the social actor who is making sense of their actions' (Ibid., p.401-2). However, it is possible to embrace all of this. For example, we can follow Letherby's advice to '…start with the subjective, and make our position throughout the research *process* and in the research *product* clear, our work is not only more honest but also more useful' (2015, p. 137; my emphasis added in italics). Creative research methods, especially storied approaches, can offer an effective and ethical way to do this.

Storied approaches in research and the place of auto/biographical ethnography

Storied approaches are a creative way to capture the essence of research findings and present them in a way that aims to show, rather than to tell, what has been found. As identified by Ingold (2000, p.21) '… the 'idea of showing is an important one. To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced – whether by touch, taste, smell or hearing – by that other person'. Hence the descriptive language used within the opening story. This is an approach advocated by both Pelias (2004, p.1) as a way of inviting

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'identification and empathetic connection' and Sparkes (2007, p.522), in that in this format, the story '…simply asks for your consideration' without lingering on methodology or theoretical concepts. This can come afterwards, as exemplified by this chapter.

For the purpose of exploring ethical and moral tensions inherent in auto/biographically opportunistic research in public spaces, three key research methods were identified (thinking, seeing, hearing) to provide a focus for the discussion. However, these are not distinct, separate methods: they are interwoven, relational and interconnected, and my choice to apply them this way is subjective – someone else could choose to do this in a different way. Therefore, it is important we remain conscious that our interpretation and subsequent presentation of what we think, see and hear has been filtered through our own prior experiences (Denscombe, 2002). Mason (2017, p.22) asserts that scrutinizing our '…own changing perspectives and assumptions should become almost a habit of active reflexivity' whilst avoiding becoming self-obsessed in the process. In my case, my experiences of conducting research into how we make sense of nature inveigles its way into all my encounters in outdoor spaces, it is not something that I can simply switch off. As elucidated by Maxwell (2005, p.79), I have been a research instrument, my 'eyes and ears are the tools…' that I use to make sense of what is going on. I notice things more than I used to, I am more aware and conscious of what is happening around me. Moreover, as Cotterill and Letherby (1993, p. 74) argue: 'we draw on our own experiences to help us understand those of our respondents. Thus their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present (whether we admit it or not) in our written accounts'. We can also draw on the responses of our respondents to help us understand our everyday, lived experiences. There is

no actual temporal and/or spatial divide between our academic research and personal experiences, much as it may appear more professional to pretend there is. The reality is much more complex and indeed, messy than that. Transdisciplinarity provides us with an holistic approach that enables us to more effectively understand and solve contemporary issues (problems) by placing the topic/issue at the centre of the process.

Transdisciplinary Research

Transdisciplinarity goes beyond involving academics (or literature) from different disciplines, to include practitioners and other, non-academic stakeholders. Leavy (2016a, p.24) explains transdisciplinarity '… has emerged in order to meet the promise of transcending disciplinary knowledge production in order to more effectively address real-world issues and problems.' Leavy (2016a) cautions it is important to recognise that taking this approach does not necessitate abandoning individual disciplines; indeed, there need to be disciplines for transdisciplinarity to exist, as they provide the foundations, the building blocks for a methodological approach. Transdisciplinarity draws on knowledge from disciplines relevant to specific research issues or problems, while ultimately transcending disciplinary borders and building a synergistic conceptual and methodological framework which is irreducible to the sum of its constituent parts. Transdisciplinarity views knowledge-building and dissemination as a holistic process that requires innovation and flexibility. However, it still needs to be ethical.

I have constantly questioned if I am just seeing/hearing/thinking what I want/expect to and not seeing/hearing/thinking, or worse, choosing to ignore things I do not like or agree with

(Bassot, 2016). I do not believe I have done this, and have openly admitted where I have been troubled or found the research 'messy'. Leavy asserts, 'Reflexivity is necessary in order to be able to "see" the big picture from multiple vantage points' (2016a, p.78). Wickson et al. (2006) also emphasised the importance of reflection, to enable the researcher to be conscious and aware of how our own '…frames of reference/values/beliefs/assumptions etc. have shaped the conceptualisation of the problem, as well as the development of the method of investigation and the solution' (Ibid., pp.1053-4). However, it is challenging to balance the need for reflection, for an auto/biographical stance, against the need to be perceived as a cutting-edge academic rather than a self-indulgent, egotistical, navel-gazer (Gutkind, 1997).

Transdisciplinarity thrives on creativity, on looking at, and thinking about things in a different way, with the purpose of doing things differently. Yet, as Leavy (2016a, p.14) reminds us: '… the modern academy has been based on the creation and maintenance of disciplinary borders. Therefore, the recent growth in transdisciplinary approaches to research signifies a major turn in how social research is conceived and conducted.' Being part of this movement, whilst concurrently establishing an academic identity, which is measured by quantifiable impact as part of the current audit culture, is not easy (Hayes, 2015b; for a more in-depth exposition of this, see McCoy, 2012; Sparkes, 2007; Humphreys, 2005). Creative processes can be used '… both as tools of discovery and a unique mode of reporting research' (Brady, 2009, p.xiii), enabling us to explore, gather/elicit and interpret in a more holistic and empathically connected way (McCulliss, 2013). However, these are not separate processes, they are symbiotically intertwined: creative, transdisciplinary methods can make visible the geographical, social, cultural, political, moral and ethical nature of these issues.

With regard to data collection and analysis processes, Van Maanen urges ethnographers to '…continue experimenting with and reflecting on the ways social reality is presented' (2011, pp.xiv-xv). He refers to this as 'intellectual restlessness', and highlights '…the distinction between literature and science in ethnography is shrinking ... newer voices are audible, new styles are visible, and new puzzles are being put forth'. As a researcher looking to be informed by both natural science and social science, whilst working within a practice-research-pedagogy nexus, this restlessness is something I recognise. Creating a blended methodology enabled me to find new ways to address old problems (for example, the relationships we have with young people, and with nature) and to be intellectually daring. I recommend this approach to other researchers. However, to be successful with it, to be judged to have made a substantial contribution to knowledge, this approach must involve scholarly caution, respect for process and academic rigour.

So, when does a research study begin and end? In my doctoral thesis (Hayes, 2017, p.292) I wrote:

> …my study draws from a wide range of theoretical constructs, which have been carefully applied to my experiences and observations from my time in the field. Formally this time is recognised as the four years of registered doctoral study; however, my reflexivity has made the most of the 45 years preceding this, taking a blended approach to life/work, as advocated by Ellis (2004/2014).

If we accept that data is spatially and temporally distributed, there is a shift in focus of responsibility on to the researcher to be overt and honest about the purpose, the rationale for

this approach. Spatial and temporal boundaries are imaginary as much as material, and as a result, the data extends beyond that boundaried by the method(s) approved by the ethical review board. Creative researchers like me may struggle with formal structures, such as review boards, which are often comprised of those from distinctively different epistemological and ontological perspectives; equally, our questions and challenges may be perceived as disruptive to the status quo. The fluidity of data elicitation / collection necessitates ongoing ethical thinking, which is responsive, creative, considerate and contextualised. Careful, considered scrutiny which makes full use of ethical processes in a dialogical and dialectical way allows us to be clear about what we are doing and why – enabling creative, responsive and responsible research by opening up a space for critical transdisciplinary and ethical inquiry.

I am advocating for a more dynamic ethical process, grounded in the relationship between research processes and outputs, which is explicit about what it is we want our research to achieve and how we want it to be applied within everyday life (if indeed that is the aim). My aim is to revitalize conversations about research ethics as a useful and creative part of the process. My analysis of the story which opened this chapter has included identification of key themes and ideas that emerged, weaving them together and interpreting them in a process of evaluation. Ely at al. (1997, p.223) explain that as interpreters '…we could be likened to filters through which we sift data in the process of making meaning'. The filtering process involves reflecting on what I have found, comparing it with other studies and relevant theoretical literature, before deciding what to include/exclude. There are choices to be made, for example, which stories to tell, which to leave until another day. This is an active process

of writing to discover what it is I am doing, what it is I am saying, rewriting, rethinking, finding meaning, clarifying understanding. This is all part of writing as a method of inquiry and I am aware each time I (re)listen to an interview recording, (re)read a transcript, (re)view entries in my field notebook, I (re)interpret the data. I find something new, different, another point of interest.

With regard to my doctoral study, how do young people (and other ages) make sense of nature? To answer this, it is necessary to consider how we/they encounter nature, through the recognisable processes of mediated, direct and indirect contact with nature – and how these are facilitated/accessed. There is no 'one size fits all' or most effective approach: for most people, it is a complex blend of all three processes, with socio-cultural and political influences determining the nature of this relationship. And it is a fluid relationship, like a river it ebbs and flows, gaining/losing significance within our lives, depending on what else is demanding our attention. For some people, at times within their lives, nature may go unnoticed: something that is just there, in the background – perhaps even an annoyance when encountered in a form that is more challenging than anticipated (the reluctant walker in the opening story); at other times, it provides a place of refuge, fun, adventure, solace, peace or escape. For me, it has been all these, at different times during my doctoral studies. I have valued the many walks with my dogs, friends, family and research participants in and with nature, and have found special places where I have been able to process and make sense of my observations and thoughts – to think about thinking (Nixon, 2013).

When I reflect on the research relations established with those I have studied - the way I have carefully selected the projects, the sites, the participants, the young-person-centredness, the ways I have chosen to collect and analyse data - I can see the importance of story. It is a golden thread weaving throughout. Some decisions I have taken were conscious, planned, and methodical; others were more instinctive and intuitive – in response to my encounters. There are inherent philosophical, ethical and political issues within these decisions. It is crucial to remember that what to me is a research project, may be perceived as an intrusion into the lives of others.

Consideration, care and kindness are vital.

Researching in a moral and ethical manner goes beyond ethics panels and their procedures: it demands ongoing ethical processes of self-awareness, empathic skills and a creative imagination – in this chapter, I extend that to embrace a transdisciplinary imagination. We have to stop, put ourselves in the "other's" position and consider how we would feel about what has been said about us – a very familiar position for auto/ethnographers and auto/biographical ethnographers. The three named young people in the opening story provided informed consent for me to include them in my doctoral study. Their identity and right to privacy are protected through the use of pseudonyms and through anonymising any references to specific places. This follows guidance provided for the procedural, anticipatory ethics of qualitative research. In contrast, I do not have consent from the unnamed young woman mentioned in the story, nor from the family I encountered in the public space of a hill. Does this mean these accounts cannot be considered to be of value within a research study? No, it does not; however, it does demand careful consideration of the purpose for including

them and highlights my responsibilities as an author to consider the ethics of autoethnography (Tolich, 2010).

Tolich provides a critique of the use of retrospectively gaining consent, arguing that this can lead to potentially coercive situations, where someone feels obliged to consent to being included in an autoethnographic account. Moving on with his critique by reviewing the work of well-known autoethnographers, Tolich further emphasises that:

> …some of the leading autoethnographers, often held up as experts in their craft, did not appear to anticipate ethical issues or recognize boundaries within their collection of ideas. They did not know how to answer the question: Do others mentioned in the text also have rights? (Ibid., p. 1602).

I agree with Tolich that we need to be able to answer this question with conviction, and like him, am unconvinced by arguments for assumed or apparent consent.

Bringing this to a close

For me it is not enough to be able to say someone did not object to being included within a story, or that they wanted me to tell their story. I feel the need to be able to evidence that. However, that is impractical with auto/biographically opportunistic research in public spaces: if I had stopped the family on the side of the hill to ask them if they would consent to the possibility, that one day in the future, I may remember our encounter and want to write about it in relation to something I was studying, they would quite understandably have thought me very strange. We cannot walk around with consent forms, just in case we see something that may be relevant and interesting, that we think may add depth to a topic we are writing about. And if we did, then by the nature of the process, I would have acquired their names and

increased the risk of violating their right to privacy. This serves to highlight the need for

clear, practical guidance for research of this type, combined with open, honest reflexive

practice.

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