

Ann Scott

# The Effect of Doing Qualitative Research on Novice Researchers

## Abstract

*This study investigates the effect of doing qualitative research on novice researchers. The heuristic approach as outlined by Moustakas 1990 was applied to reports given by six novice researchers on their experience of qualitative research, either in a heuristic or phenomenological framework. Analysis of these reports supported earlier work in showing that a common feature of this experience is enmeshment of the investigator with the research topic, with resulting consequences in their personal lives. This enmeshment is described, taking one report as exemplar and using additional material from other reports in support. The study concludes with some personal reflections including an allegorical story expressing the experience under investigation as understood by the researcher.*

## Introduction

Before commencing this research, I had recently completed a small phenomenological study for a Masters dissertation which had affected me profoundly (Scott, 2005). During that time, I had seriously been challenged by the methodology. I attempted to engage epoché to ensure that the analysed material was that of the participants in the study and not generated by me. (Moustakas 1994). This posed difficulties. Passion about my topic (The integration of Christian faith into psychotherapy practice) was necessary to sustain the work, yet it inevitably affected everything I wrote. The study also influenced me both in my practice and in my spiritual life. To investigate this further, I interviewed other recent Masters' candidates, attempting to capture the essence of the experience of conducting qualitative research. I chose a method where I could include myself overtly in the research process as I wished to be more congruent with my manner of practice as an integrative psychotherapist. In this practice I see the use of my self within the therapeutic relationship as vital to the healing of the client. I therefore looked to heuristic methodology.

## Literature Review

There is little written on the topic of what effect research has on researchers (Etherington, 2005). Most studies of qualitative research focus on the outcome of that research ignoring the research process (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000). However, all aspects of research must be affected by the choices the researcher makes about what is studied, both in content and procedure. These choices will be affected by personal beliefs of the researcher (Crotty 1998, Dertins 2002). Etherington noted that Masters course supervisees reported transformations in themselves as they went through the research process, and that those using reflexive methodologies were affected more profoundly (Etherington, 2005). So profound was the effect that sometimes it was more efficacious for personal development than was personal therapy (Etherington, 2004). This echoes Reissetter et al (2003), where one student described the change as 'A metamorphosis of self.' On a professional level, students found that heuristic research was congruent with their aims as clinical practitioners, particularly those who valued the use of the self and self-transparency in their work (Etherington, 2004, Reissetter et al. 2003).

There are negative effects in doing this kind of reflexive research, with references to getting lost in the process or feeling out of control of the data, even to the extent of the research driving the researcher (Etherington 2001, Etherington 2004). There are some external effects recorded, such as the researchers' sense of identity being shaken and family life being affected (ibid). Etherington (2001) stresses the importance that adequate supervision plays in overcoming 'lost-ness' helping students to balance objectivity needed to pursue the research with subjectivity in being involved in a heuristic process. This kind of reflexive research is not particular to the area of psychotherapy. It is well established in the social sciences (Holland 1999) and the difficulties of staying with the process are documented (e.g. Finlay, 2002).

Research is never value-free (Douglas and Moustakas 1985) and in heuristics, passion about the topic is vital (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985, Polanyi, 1961, Smith, 2003, West, 2001). Some suggest that the researcher is drawn to the topic for specific reasons (Cartwright, 2002), and it is often of personal significance, whether conscious or unconscious (Etherington 2004, Hiles 2001). There is therefore evidence of a two way effect, the research affecting the researcher and vice-versa.

Heuristic inquiry is a type of phenomenological methodology contrasting with other similar

methods, in it acknowledges the impossibility of bracketing off the researcher's own material. (Moustakas, 1994, Walsh,) This allows a deeper understanding than can be achieved by less reflexive methodologies, enabled by the full engagement of the researcher with the process. (Hiles, 2002, West 2001). Reflexivity allows the filtering of the experience of the co-researcher through that of the researcher. It acknowledges the value of 'tacit knowledge' (Polyani, 1961), i.e. knowledge is there all along (Etherington, 2001) below an immediate level of consciousness which helps make sense of experience (Smith, 2003).

Heuristic research acknowledges that data collected from interactions such as research interviews is inter-subjective, a co-creation between interviewee and researcher, rather than being objectively true (Cartwright, 2002, Kvale, 1999). There is some evidence that interviewees shift their positions in accordance with their response to the interviewee and the questions asked. (Bravo-Moreno 2003). However, the methodology emphasises empathy (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000) and some self disclosure from the researcher. This in turn encourages the interviewees to disclose (Etherington, 2005) and helps to dissolve the power differential, hopefully giving more voice to the interviewee. (Etherington 2001). It must always be recognised that research is done within the value system of the researcher, embedded in a social context (Walsh, 1995). Therefore the more transparent the researcher, the easier it will be to evaluate the results.

From the above it follows that this way of working is congruent with psychotherapy practice in its reflexive, relational stance and acceptance of co-created inter-subjective truth. (Barber, 2002, Etherington 2004 Etherington 2005, Kvale 1999, Martin 2001, West and Talib 2002). It therefore seemed reasonable to use a methodology, not only relevant to the content of the research, but also to the profession of those interviewed. The formal research question is: "What is the Effect of Qualitative Research on the Novice Researcher"?

## Methodology

### Co-researchers

The term 'co-researcher' is used in preference to 'participant' to reflect the deep level of involvement of those who participated. It also acknowledges their effect on my intra-psychic process.

The six co-researchers were integrative psychotherapists who had completed a Masters' research dissertation within the previous year. All were new to qualitative research and known to me

(the researcher) personally. The reasons for this were:

1. Co-researchers were likely to be more open with someone with whom they already had rapport.
2. Expediency. One major aim of this project was to provide an exploratory experience of the heuristic research process for me, the researcher.

There were five females and one male. Ages ranged between 26 and 48 years. All were white and British.

### Procedure

The steps suggested for heuristic research by Moustakas (1990) were followed.

Individual semi-structured interview was conducted, duration of approximately one hour, but not time limited.

The data was analysed thematically for each co-researcher. A description of this experience was constructed and sent, together with the raw transcript of the interview to the co-researcher for validation with the questions:

- Does this accurately describe your experience?
- Is there anything that you want to change/add?

I as researcher then produced a 'creative synthesis' – an overall description of the experience in allegorical form – using the individual descriptions and my own experience of the research process as data. This was sent back to each co-researcher with the questions:

- Does this capture the essence of your experience?
- Do you want to change/add anything?

The procedure was interwoven throughout with researcher reflexivity, allowing the process to direct the next step. For example: I did not start out to write an allegorical story to describe the experience of 'doing research'. It simply emerged from the process. I kept a reflexive journal recording my thoughts and feelings throughout. Immediately after each interview I recorded my reactions to the sessions. I used the accumulated data to track where I was in my own process how it might be interweaving with that of my co-researchers.

## Ethical Considerations

General ethical principles were followed relevant to psychotherapy research (Bond, 2000). In particular, the co-researchers gave their consent, being adequately informed about the purpose of research and their expected level of involvement. Appropriate safeguards were in place to maximize confidentiality and anonymity, such as using pseudonyms and checking with co-researchers at each stage that they were happy about the extent of exposure.

## Findings and discussion

The Findings are presented to give maximum voice to the co-researchers, thus the inclusion of a high number of quotes. Initially I shall present material from Yvonne's exemplar, to illustrate the total experience of being involved in research. Following these major themes will be explored supported by material from other co-researchers.

Yvonne's story.

Her research topic: Disruptive relationships with food.

Her methodology: Phenomenological

Yvonne's story was full of references to eating. She agrees that this description is an accurate representation.

It is clear that the requirement of phenomenological research of epoché was very difficult (Moustakas, 1994). The process became an illustration of the topic under investigation.

Yvonne had a historical connection with the topic.

*'Why did I choose it? I think what it comes down to is personal stuff, me having struggles with my relationship with food all my life.'*

Initial steps in the project were very positive. She became self-reflective about her inner process:

*'It was interesting doing those interviews, how it affected me, during and after, --how it affected my own relationship with food, how I felt about things afterwards.'*

It became increasingly difficult for Yvonne to prevent enmeshment of her own material with that of the participants in her study:

*'There were times when after some of the session when I thought, 'My God! I haven't experienced this behaviour in myself for many, many years. What is going on here?'*

As the process continued she was danger of disappearing entirely into the study:

*'I had done all the transcripts and I thought, 'Oh God!'. This is going to consume me. I could feel as if I was going to be swallowed up by it.'*

The effect of the research process became so disabling that Yvonne had to rely on others to look after her:

*'I found that sometimes when I was analysing the data I wouldn't eat all day.'*

*'Friends ...were checking on me every few hours.'*

The internal congestion continued as she tried to make sense of her data:

*'I can't really remember a lot of what else was going on around me. I was just grappling with diagrams just as if it was absorbed on this piece of paper and trying to get it right. I couldn't sleep properly.'*

From the holding and analysis of the material a creative synthesis occurred, producing a diagrammatic representation that illustrated the processes under investigation:

*'And it was a spewing out, a process, of, 'Alright, you gained the knowledge, you understood it, you got the clarity and Phwaw!!! Here it is on a piece of paper as a diagram.'*

Finally the enmeshment could be unravelled and a more cognitive understanding of the whole process gained:

*'I felt I had achieved something, having gone through something, and I was coming out the other end. 'Wow I have done it!' academically, personally, on so many different levels.'*

On reflecting on the process and her part in it, Yvonne gained a sense of personally maturing through it:

*'When I look back on it, it was like a process of me, the research and the topic material, it was a growing up together.'*

## Major Themes

There were some major themes common to all co-researcher although their expression and depth of effect varied across the group. The intention here is to present a representative rather than an exhaustive picture.

## Personal relevance of research topic

This theme was mentioned to some extent by all co-researchers.

Example: ANGIE:

*'The reason I wanted to do the research was that I wanted to understand myself. I wanted to understand my own experience in therapy and I wanted to give it words and theory and sanitize it. Make it OK for myself.'*

This high level of involvement in the topic seems a valid starting point, as passion about the topic is vital in heuristic research (Douglas and Moustakas 1985, Polyani, 1961).

This echoes my own choice. I had recently completed my dissertation and was still in the process of integrating the changes that had come about in me as a result. Without passion and personal involvement it would be very difficult to sustain the effort required to complete what were highly individual projects. For the co-researchers there were no peer groups that could give topic-based support as perhaps would happen in an established university department.

## The overwhelming nature of the process

In this methodology, there is a deliberate decision not to bracket off one's own material (Moustakas, 1994, Walsh, 1995). Some enmeshment seems inevitable. In fact, all co-researchers demonstrated this. See Table 1 for examples.

**Table 1:**

<b>Co-Researcher:</b>	DEBBIE
<b>Methodology:</b>	Heuristic
<b>Research Topic:</b>	Yielding (Giving up your defenses.)
<b>Comment or happening showing parallel processing during the research:</b>	
She recalls how one of her interviewees said: <i>'She was seeing more clearly or hearing the birds sing'</i> and that she herself had, <i>'<u>heightened awareness, heightened sensory function, like listening to music and feeling it in your body.</u>'</i> She was aware of the enmeshment. <i>'The parallel process of that was that... I became extremely immersed in this topic. I wasn't particularly objective or reflexive at that point, when I was in it.'</i>	

<b>Co-Researcher:</b>	ANGIE
<b>Methodology:</b>	Heuristic
<b>Research Topic:</b>	Regression
<b>Comment or happening showing parallel processing during the research:</b>	
<i>'It got to be such a bloody pressure and at the same time, when I heard the content of the transcripts, <u>then that would send me into a sort of emergent place.</u> Actually then I couldn't write anyway. I would think about it and I would hear it and the heuristic way I did the research, I needed to do that. I just had no idea how destructive it would be.'</i>	

<b>Co-Researcher:</b>	HELEN
<b>Methodology:</b>	Heuristic
<b>Research Topic:</b>	Mother-Child Bond
<b>Comment or happening showing parallel processing during the research:</b>	
<i>'<u>Yes it was like a merger between mother and child.</u> And that was the experience that I had had with my mother. That is the experience that it took on And in that there was that symbiosis and that lack of...<u>loss of self that went on throughout the process of doing the research'</u></i>	

It is clear that the co-researchers' language of description of their experience is closely tied in with their topic (see underlined sections). They really became enmeshed in their research. It is notable that this enmeshment with research material was in contrast to the way these co-researchers would behave with clients. They were trained in self-awareness and in the operation of the internal supervisor concept (Casement, 1985) in order to be ethical clinical practitioners. Transferability of this skill into the research paradigm was not evident.

There is evidence that those co-researchers who used reflexive heuristic methodology are more likely to become enmeshed as mentioned in Etherington (2005).

In this study, there are two exceptions to this. Laura describes her experience of heuristic study as *'A journey that I skipped through'*. It was notable that she was very clear at the beginning of her research aims and saw it as *'a fine tuning of a pattern that was already there.'* In contrast,

Yvonne aimed to do a 'phenomenological study', but in reality became embroiled in a heuristic process.

The parallel processes (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000) within reflexive research methodology is evidently very strong. I also experienced its potency. Generally I am clear sighted and methodical in academic work. However, in the weeks following the data collection, continually hearing narratives of being overwhelmed, I personally lost all sense of direction. I seriously doubted my own ability to make sense of the material and needed to be guided back on track by my tutor and peers. This is perhaps an illustration of tacit knowledge, recognizing and understanding the experience within myself without the necessity of words (Polyani, 1961). The value of a heuristic approach became self-evident here. I was living out the experience my co-researchers were reporting. I could therefore more fully understand it and hopefully more accurately represent it.

### The effect on the self

It has been shown that reflective methodologies can have a major effect on the researcher (Etherington 2005, Reisetter et al 2003). This is borne out in this study. All co-researchers agree that the process of doing research had moved them on in their personal development.

HELEN: *'It certainly moved me to places in therapy faster than I would have got to, had I not been doing the dissertation.'*

However, for some it had negative effects such as loss of identity. It put pressure on family relationships (Etherington 2005).

HELEN: *'(I experienced a) loss of self that went on throughout the process of doing the research. I was quite childlike... at the time. I was very needy of reassurance all of the time...finding it difficult to stay in adult.'*

It had positive effects in professional life.

LAURA: *'I suppose an impact for me has been as a supervisor... I am (now) disclosing about being disclosing as a therapist. Recently supervisees have given examples differently because of their supervision with me.'*

I realised at the end of this study that the research had led to some personal development for me. I had a greater confidence that I could enter the world of another and experience some of their journey with them. This level of empathy is

common to many understandings of the psychotherapeutic relationship e.g. as deep attunement (Erskine et al, 1999) or empathy (Thorne 2004).

### The experience of academic supervision

Etherington (2001) emphasises the need for adequate supervision if the researcher is not to get lost in the reflexive process. All these co-researchers were well used to clinical supervision, to ask for what they needed, to be transparent etc. The supervision provided here seemed not always to be sufficient and the co-researchers seemed unable to express this lack to their academic supervisors.

LAURA: *'It was a bit here and a bit there, but not enough.'*

Those that did find it helpful were usually talking about getting the process moving.

YVONNE: *'The supervision was really good and helpful. I got on with it.'*

But more one-to-one dialogue on their topic and process with an informed tutor would have been useful.

ANGIE: *'I got no support through supervision. I would have liked a lot more discussion about the work that I am doing, whereas what I got from both of my supervisors, from one a sort of tolerance that I was doing it, but not much interest and from the other interest, but not experience or knowledge.'*

The co-researchers would have liked clearer guidance throughout...

HELEN: *'I ...didn't feel that I had any really guidance doing it the heuristic way.'*

...and some help in fitting the process into the available timeframe.

HELEN: *'The stuff that you read about heuristics is that... it should go and go and go until it is done. Obviously doing a Masters that isn't possible so it had to be done in that timeframe. So I was very much still in 'child' when it was being written up. That wasn't a good place to be.'*

From some, there was recognition that perhaps their difficulties were to do with the heuristic process.

DEBBIE: *'I was allowing the process to develop and unfold and emerge as it would, there wasn't a*

*great deal I could use supervision for, because I did not know where I was going.'*

It is clear that the research process profoundly affected the researchers. In heuristic methodology, the research relies on the filtering of the co-researchers' material through the experience of the researcher. Therefore some enmeshment takes is inevitable. It is notable however that one researcher (Yvonne) began her research on a phenomenological basis, but became engulfed by the process and her research was in the end heuristic by default. Others, Laura (heuristic methodology) and Jo (phenomenological methodology), did not become enmeshed although both were passionate and committed to their research. I was aware, because of my previous knowledge of the co-researchers, that all, including myself had chosen research topics closely related to personal issues that had been figural during the time preceding the research. I wondered if those that had more remaining unresolved issues in their chosen area were those likely to become more profoundly lost. This is an area for future study.

The degree of lost-ness experienced and the degree of difficulty in emerging from this state do seem to be the important factors in passing through the heuristic process successfully.

With regard to my experience of doing this research, when I became lost, I asked for and received timely support both from my peer group and my research supervisor. However, it is evident that the students in this sample did not always find their academic supervision helpful. It tended to focus on the technical completion of the project, rather than offering personal support and opportunity to discuss the content of their research. Perhaps this is inevitable in Masters programmes, where the time limits are short. Also some students may not have been able to access what help was there because of their lost-ness in the heuristic process. There was acknowledgement of this from two of the co-researchers. For some it was a very difficult experience indeed.

## Personal Reflections

This research methodology had a marked effect on how I was able to work. I could not dictate the pace (Etherington 2001, Etherington 2004). As I allowed myself to be immersed in the topic, I struggled to keep enough distance from it to keep to any pre-planned schedule. I needed external support for this. This is out of character from my normal way of being. I have a hard science background and in most circumstances work logically through research tasks. I became lost as my co-researchers became lost. This I think

allowed me to understand their experience at a much deeper level than if I had taken a more outsider viewpoint. (Hiles 2002, West 2001). It meant that when I wrote the final creative synthesis I did it at least in some measure from the inside, and hopefully gave a more accurate reflection of the experience (Moustakas 1994, Walsh 1995). Of course it is very subjective. Validity only comes with the agreement of the co-researchers, which was obtained. An unexpected bonus for me was a deeper understanding and experience of empathy. This will not only be of benefit in my research work, but also in my work as a psychotherapist.

My lost-ness meant that the whole research process slowed down considerably. This had a number of consequences. Firstly, without external encouragement and support I might well have floundered completely and given up on the research as an impossible task (Etherington 2001). It also meant that there was a long gap between the interview stage and the presentation of the final description to the co-researchers. For them it meant yet another visit to a difficult period in their lives in order for them to give me final feedback and I wish to acknowledge this.

I understood from the beginning that interviewing people I already know had its drawbacks, but the level of trust between us and my own transparency with respect to my research experience meant that I was given very rich data indeed. A more distant interview technique might have missed some of this.

Overall I found the methodology fit for the purpose intended, but more difficult in practice than I had anticipated.

## Creativesynthesis

Having dwelt in the data and the findings, and taking note of my own experience, this is my understanding of the experience of the novice researcher in allegorical form. The co-researchers all reported that they felt it described their experiences adequately.

### The Journey

Setting out together, three friends had no idea of what lay ahead. They knew that their journey would take them into deep waters. What they did not know was what that would mean for each individual. They came to a fast flowing river and knew that they must somehow crossover.

The first traveller waded into the shallows with confidence. He looked carefully at the water, judged the current and understood the course he must take. As he started swimming, he stayed

near the surface, riding the waves. Although his head was submerged much of the time, he could occasionally look up, get a glimpse of the far bank and hear onlookers shouting encouragement. He was quite sure that life existed outside his present watery home. As he felt invigorated by the challenge, he kicked strongly for the shore. On reaching his goal, he looked back, tired but pleased that he had managed the crossing.

The second traveller watched the first and was encouraged that 'This thing is possible!' As he took the plunge, he completely lost sight of the surface. Panic rose as he felt the yawning blackness beneath him. Somehow he found within himself the strength to reach towards the surface. To his delight he found a hand reaching down to him. He grasped it and heaved himself up. He took a gulp of air before sinking back into the fast flowing current. Time and again he felt the blackness beginning to engulf him and managed to reach up for that helping hand. Sometimes he found it, sometimes he did not. Slowly he made progress across the river and at last he realised that he was in shallow waters. He gratefully found his feet and heaved himself up onto the bank. It would take him a while before he attempted a similar feat, but he was very proud of his accomplishment.

The third traveller watched all this in silent horror. He knew the only way forward was through the water, yet it seemed an impossible task.

With great courage he took one small step. As he did so, his foot slipped and he quickly disappeared from sight. His unprepared-ness for this sudden baptism meant that he was immediately caught up in the watery maelstrom. Down he went, losing all sense of direction. His only thought was of survival. Even if hands were reaching down to him, he didn't even know that they were there. He bumped along the bottom in the pitch black, swept along by the current at an alarming speed. He lost hope of coming out of his experience alive. Then, he realised he could just about crawl along the bottom, holding onto the rocks in the river bed. Painfully, he made his way to the far shore. Lungs bursting he found himself moving towards the light. Exhausted he lay face down in the water and would have drowned if his faithful companions had not waited for him and come to his aid.

Some time later when he could bear to look back, he still had no idea how he had negotiated the deep. He was glad to have survived, glad to learn of his own inner strength and the trustworthiness of his friends. But it would be a long time before he went near water again!

## Critical Evaluation

This is a short study taking a limited look at the issue in question. It can perhaps do no more than pose questions for future work. However, this methodology was effective in allowing exploration in depth of the experience, even if it is limited in the generalisation of its findings due to the small sample size.

I underestimated the level of reflexivity required to complete the study. I had read the literature on the subject, but the lived experience was much more demanding and isolating than I had expected. This again paralleled the co-researcher's experiences. However I was much better supported and much better equipped. It was not my first experience of research. This underestimation meant that there was a sharp learning curve for me as I went deeper into the study, so my level of reflexivity improved over time. I also understand that my previous scientific training was hampering me at the beginning. The unpredictable nature of this methodology was scary. It took time and practice to become more open to the heuristic process. Feedback from the co-researchers, on reading 'The Journey' was evidence that I had managed to capture the experience for all of them.

## Conclusions

In this study, light has been cast on the research topic. The voices of the co-researchers have been heard and the difficulty of the novice researcher negotiating a way through the heuristic process has been illustrated and discussed.

It seems clear that the depth of lost-ness experienced by some of the co-researchers was difficult for them to cope with and that finding a way out of the process was not always easy. Supervision varied in its effectiveness but was more useful for the technical aspects of the projects rather than helping the students to move through their own personal process.

Due to the highly disruptive and difficult nature of the heuristic process, questions arise regarding viability of such projects for Masters Students.

- Is there time in a Masters programme for heuristic methodology to run its course?
- Should students at this level should be involved in this type of work and if so, what level of supervision would be appropriate?
- Is it feasible for training institutions to offer this?

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