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A Personal Approach: An Empirical Study of the Process of Studying My Son's Problem With Computer Games

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Abstract

This study explored the process of taking a personal approach to my son's problems with computer games. As a psychology student, I should have been in a good position to explore the paradoxical emotions and this situation of conflict. Yet I was also aware that relating closely to the people we are studying has long been a taboo even in qualitative research. I nevertheless adopted a collaborative methodology in which I balanced a dual role of parent and researcher. Taking a personal approach, allowing intimate, reciprocal negotiation, I was not only able to put this taboo to the rare empirical test but also achieved an insight that would otherwise have not been available to me. By engaging in dialogue and encouraging the ability to object, a first-person plural (We), position was achieved in which an understanding of this situation developed and has transferred to our everyday lives.

Keywords

first-person methodology, first-person plural methodology, parent–researcher, ethics, methodological taboo

> Like social taboos, scientific taboo is kept up not so much by a rational argument as by a common attitude among scientists: any member of the scientific guild who does not strictly adhere to the taboo is looked upon as queer; he is suspected of not adhering to the scientific standards of critical thinking (Kurt Lewin, 1949, p. 279)

Introduction

Whereas theory in psychology is explicit and subject to challenge, the taboos of mainstream methodology are largely taken for granted. They are assertions, not arguments. Despite the great emphasis in psychology on "methods," compared, for example, to physics, the many courses and textbooks present a positivistic account of science that has long been challenged, and one that bears little connection to how psychological research, including experimental research, is actually done (see Costa & Shimp, 2011). The current, taken for granted, ideals of scientific objectivity—such as detachment and elimination of perspective—have a surprisingly recent history and, as Daston (1992) has argued, would have made little sense to Newton or even Darwin. In my final year as a psychology undergraduate, I became excited about the opportunity to conduct my own research project. Following 2 years of lectures, practical assignments and exams, I was now in a position where I could put into practice my psychological training. A large number of faculty staff had advertised areas of interest which would allow all of my experimental knowledge to be put to the test, but I wanted to explore a long-standing issue I had with my son Oliver and his relationship with computer games. Although computer gaming is the most favored pastime of children (Roussou, 2004), this pastime was problematic for my family. Many arguments between Oliver and I were generated surrounding computer gameplay such as which games are appropriate to play and how much time should be spent playing. Boundaries laid down long ago restricting game playing were in force but on the days in which game playing was permitted, it seemed to intrude on our family life in ways that no other activity did. A simple request to turn off the game to sit down for a meal would generally result in conflict due to the long, drawn-out process

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of having to save the game before turning it off, by which time tempers would have frayed.

My main concern was the uncharacteristic anger and distress my son displayed when playing computer games. Oliver would throw himself back into the chair, his shoulders slumped; he would hit his legs and shout at the game "it's not fair," "I hate this," "it's so stupid." His eyes would fill with tears and he would appear to be distressed but when I asked him to stop playing, he was consistently reluctant to do so. He responded with "I don't want to, I like it." I would then become angry with him and demand he stop play with a consequence of us both then being annoyed with each other. There were two things I found particularly baffling about this situation; one was the paradoxical emotions of Oliver wanting to play something that seemingly causes anger and distress, and two, my complete lack of tolerance for this situation. I consider myself to be an accommodating parent who usually encourages talking through any problems, but this was different. We found it impossible to find a resolution to this situation which concerned me greatly. I felt if we could not resolve conflict at this stage in our relationship, this may not bode well for our future relationship particularly moving into the "difficult" teenage years.

Adding to my confusion was that I had not observed Oliver demonstrating such displays of emotion in any other situation. Not even in situations in which I might have expected to see heightened emotions such as playing rugby. Of course, this could be due to the social context (see Fernandez-Dols & Ruiz-Belda, 1997) but I had concluded it was computer games that were the cause. After all, a plethora of negative media attention over the last decade had talked of linking computer gaming with antisocial behavior, obesity, low attainment at school, and lack of social skills. But this did not make sense either. Oliver was a generally well-behaved boy, was not overweight, achieved above the national average academically, and had a large circle of friends. Therefore something was amiss. I decided this would be the perfect research project as a first step in my career conducting psychological research.

The desire for original projects was explicitly encouraged by members of the faculty teaching in my third and final year. This was not only a novel project but its pragmatic simplicity was also appealing. I had a dissertation to complete and a psychological problem that regularly impacted on my family that I wanted to understand. There would be no need to recruit many anonymous participants. I would not require technological equipment or the booking of laboratories. All I required was Oliver's consent and cooperation, a video recorder, and me. It was the obvious choice. I had the training and now the opportunity to really get down to the business of using my psychological prowess to explore a "real" psychological task which carried a great deal of importance to me personally. However, I had not progressed to my final year without learning that experimental psychology was held in the highest regard. From day 1 of the course, experimental methods were heavily introduced and maintained throughout the compulsory units. Lectures, recommended readings, practical assignments, largely supported mechanical, and detached "scientific" practices and were further reinforced by explanations on why these scientific practices are so important to the work of psychologists. Students and were instructed to only write in the third-person with first-person writing being vehemently discouraged. What I found particularly curious is that even when researchers are conducting first-person research, the studies are often written up in the third person (see Roth, 2012). The quantitative teachings were in-depth and influential while qualitative units, which interestingly always followed the quantitative units, skimmed the surface. No history was given of the importance this methodology has brought in terms of psychological knowledge, and little time was afforded to explore the methods practically. The matter that the university received far fewer qualitative dissertation submissions than quantitative may be indicative of the institutional biases at play.

My "personal" proposal therefore was viewed at best as unorthodox and at worst taking a retrograde step within the discipline. I found myself in an extremely paradoxical position. I had trained to become a psychologist, yet the first real psychological problem I wanted to explore was seemingly out of bounds because of psychology's refusal to accept relationships within research. It was clear to me the take-home message for a successful career as a psychologist was to "detach oneself from the object of research" and to use "*the scientific method.*" It was also clear that should I abide by these rules, I would be rewarded with reliable, repeatable data and even more importantly, data suitable for academic publication. This evidenced further by the vast array of modern psychology textbooks which not only support but unreservedly encourage mechanical working practices.

However, I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the artificial mechanical process and requirement for detachment intrinsic within these practices. Of course I could generate data using "ameaningful" thought in which the object of inquiry is viewed as an arbitrary irrelevance because the method will automatically produce the results (see Koch, 1999). But I could not reconcile how this information could be transferred to a natural environment or provide me with an understanding of this situation.

A Personal Approach

To work with my own son was not only frowned upon but was likely to be rejected purely on the basis that Oliver and I have an existing relationship. This is a curious position as baby diaries have been prevalent dating back to the late 18th century. Baby diaries were written by educators, evolutionists, philosophers and psychologists, and almost always parents. By the end of the 19th century, a canon of "scientific" baby diary literature had been established with important connections to the inauguration of developmental psychology's place in academia (Wallace, Franklin, & Keegan, 1994). The argument given for this paradox is based on the view that parents may provide biased and overly rich descriptions. However, Bissex (1980) and Long (2004) argue the parent–researcher role enables parent–researchers to reflect with a more critical lens. What is being overlooked is the ability for a personal method to challenge the researchers theoretical assumptions (see Yoon, 2012) and provide both an emic and etic view (Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014).

So I had a choice; I could use a "safe" quantitative method. I could recruit "the required sample size" of 10-year-old boys equipped with Nintendo DS's. They could complete a questionnaire, which I would have devised based on what I want to find, before and after outlining the emotion felt and recording the intensity levels. I could compile a list of the features each game possessed to assess if there was similarity in content and compare this to observed behavior. This process would be supported by the step-by-step guides on how to do psychological research found in many of the textbooks. The data collected would then be transformed by a statistical method producing a result which would either uphold or refute my hypothesis. However, the fact that Oliver did not have the same emotional outbursts when friends were present suggested this process would be futile. This would not increase my understanding of what was actually going on but simply lead me down the path of the null hypothesis ritual (see Gigerenzer, 2004).

Getting Started

Although exploratory research sits well within the sphere of qualitative methods, I did not expect to find myself looking through qualitative textbooks only to discover them to be similar to quantitative textbooks, outlining step-by-step guides on "how to do research." It would seem qualitative research too has a problem with relationships between the researcher and participant and often fails to acknowledge that relationships can develop within research. This is evidenced by the way in which any relationship between researcher and participant is given a cursory mention. For example, although Smith (2008) starts his chapter on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by suggesting that IPA is a "dynamic process with an active role for the researcher," he fails to mention or explore the "active" role of the researcher anywhere else in the chapter. The position of ignoring the researcher is also problematic for the interactive nature of qualitative interviews. Interviews are fundamentally a dynamic subjective interaction in which there is a two and fro of dialogue whereby all members are equally as important if true dialogue is to be achieved. With this in mind, I decided that if I wanted to understand the problem *Oliver* had with computer games and the conflict this caused, a break in the widely held taboo of working with a close relative was needed. In doing so, I would also conduct an *empirical* assessment of the benefits and difficulties of conducting this kind of research.

Many times I questioned whether I was ambitious or simply foolish. This research could be considered "unscientific" due to the existing relationship. It was a risk, moving away from the pre-prescribed "scientific method" supporting a discipline particularly conservative in its interpretation of science (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). I had a lot to lose both personally and possibly professionally. However, I fully believed this to be the only starting point if I was to attempt to understand what was really going on. It is worth noting though that should the project fail, I would still receive the worthy consolation prize of empirically testing this type of research. Also notable is that without a supervisor willing to back my "risky" project, this could not have happened. Luckily, I was pointed in the direction of a supervisor who fully encouraged this type of project as opposed to the many self-confirmatory experimental exercises that are typically conducted (Costall, 2010).

Realizing What I Did Not Know

Before Oliver and I got down to work, I wanted to be clear, as his mother, about the reasons for his willingness to take part but also so that he was clear on my motivation for conducting the research. We had gone through the ethical process, putting measures in place dealing with two concerns raised by the ethics committee. Firstly, assigning a third party to obtain informed consent to deal with any matters of coercion and secondly to allocate agreed time slots of when work would and would not take place, preventing Oliver feeling under permanent observation. But as Oliver's mother, I still felt compelled to protect him from harm. I needed to be sure he was taking part because *he* wanted to, not because I had asked him. I also wanted to be confident that were happy to work together to complete the project. I decided before any interviews took place that Oliver and I would have a chat about our motivation to take part. In hindsight, I should have recorded this conversation as this informal "chat" was to change everything due to Oliver's responses being a complete surprise. He recognized the project held great importance for me and wanted to help. This perhaps should not have come as a surprise since he too had lived through my degree. Both my children had often waited for my attention while I studied. He also expressed the importance of being open and honest and to not say things that he thought I wanted to hear or to feel afraid of upsetting me.

He suggested this could be a beneficial experience for him for later when he takes on his own school projects. Oliver was not merely looking at this as being helpful to me but also beneficial to his school career in the long term. The most poignant response, however, was when he said he hoped that by taking part in this project, I might enjoy playing computer games and if so, maybe I would play them with him. This response turned everything I thought I knew on its head. It became clear that I had approached this project holding a cynical view of Oliver's relationship with computer games. I was harboring the belief that Oliver's motivation for taking part was the potential it produced for *him* to play yet more computer games, when, in fact, the interviews were taking place on the days when gaming was already permitted. This is the point that I realized what I did not know. My theoretical assumptions were being challenged. Both Oliver and I had become significant, we the automaticity of daily life had been interrupted and the process of conscious theoretical understanding had begun (Roth, 2012).

Becoming Co-researchers

Following the "chat" about Oliver's motivation to take part, it was clear that he did not view computer game play in the same way that I did. Nor did he view it in the way that I thought he did. Now that I was taking his words seriously, really listening to him, I started to reconsider *my* position. Perhaps it was less Oliver's problem but more my problem with computer games. Yes, he was displaying paradoxical emotions, the trigger for the project, but how did this manifest itself as conflict between us? Oliver and I would need to unpack not only Oliver's relationship with computer games but also my relationship with computer games. The "chat" had managed to blow everything wide open and in doing so produced an approach in which everything was negotiable. Oliver and I had become equal partners attempting to resolve "our" problem together.

This also produced a reflexive dimension. I had to explore why I thought this was a problem in the first place, identifying my motivations and my assumptions underpinning the research. The project was no longer about Oliver's paradoxical emotions while playing computer games; the focus of inquiry had become *our* relationship and the situation of conflict. My approach as a researcher had changed. I no longer felt in a powerful position, I doubted all I thought I knew. Oliver and I were now on a level playing field which resulted in the natural emergence of his position as co-researcher.

Getting Down To Business

The first three interviews were driven by an expert/novice format, with Oliver as the expert. This maintained his co-researcher role. He would teach me how to play computer games. I was hoping to understand the attraction of computer games and what sparked his emotional outbursts. It quickly became evident Oliver had taken his role as co-researcher seriously. He took control of the interviews, giving a summary of what we had done, offering options of what we could do next. While playing computer games with Oliver, it became clear the basis of my negative beliefs about computer gaming were questionable. I was not sure what I expected, but I did not believe gaming to be positive. However, I found the games to require high levels of concentration, forward planning, multi-tasking, and the need to develop strategies, all of which I deemed beneficial to Oliver's development.

The remaining three interviews took the form of dialogic exchanges. I had taken notes in the expert/novice interviews of areas I believed to be important or interesting, requiring further exploration. These interviews were fraught with frustration especially on my part. It felt at times as though the project was going nowhere. I wanted to understand the emotional outbursts, why they happened in this context and not in others. However, Oliver could only respond with "I don't know" to most of my questions. After many "I don't knows" and Oliver detecting my exasperation, he responded by affirming:

> I'm not trying to say 'don't know' to every question you give me (Int 4, 305—adapted for clarity)

At this point, I began to question whether I had made a mistake entering into this project. It felt as though I could not get any information from Oliver about his emotions but Oliver was giving the only answer he could. He did later give a fuller response:

> I get really annoyed because I've been beaten and the reason I am really annoyed is because I have been beaten and the reason I want to carry on playing is because I want to beat the person that beat me. (Int 6, 145–148—adapted for clarity)

He also insisted that I was thinking too much about emotion:

> I was thinking you were thinking too much of the emotions so you were making a much bigger fuss of it than I was and I was thinking in my head why is it a big fuss I just lost. I could beat it again. All I have to do is beat it. It's no big deal is kind of what I was thinking. (Int 6, 234–239—adapted for clarity).

The outburst of emotion I had observed was simply Oliver becoming frustrated and irritated due to being beaten by a game in which he had worked hard to win. The aim of the game was to win and he had failed in his task. The desire to continue playing the game was because he knew he *could* win. Continuing play would allow him to achieve his goal. The "problem" was my interference, asking him to stop play and in doing so preventing him from achieving his goal. Although we managed to secure an answer to why the observed paradoxical emotions occurred, this did not fully help me to understand the situation of conflict between us. What I failed to keep at the forefront when questioning Oliver was that this project was now about our relationship.

Collaboration Enables Full Reflective, Theoretical Consciousness

What was interesting was that although the motivation "chat" at the outset had changed the direction of the project, I still continued to fall into my initial line of questioning. However because this was a collaboration, I had to question my role. Was it something that I was doing that prevented progress being made? Maybe it was my preoccupation with asking questions about emotion that was preventing Oliver and me from engaging in dialogue. Emotion was no longer what the project was about. Oliver had given his answers to the initial line of inquiry. The problem we were exploring was in fact the conflict that would erupt between us when he played computer games. These questions were enough to give rise to full reflective, theoretical consciousness as they stood out (Roth, 2012), I began to consider why I held such negative beliefs about computer gaming. Contrary to my belief, it did not occupy Oliver's mind every minute of the day. It was not the solitary pastime I had envisaged. Given the choice, Oliver would prefer to play the games with others. Oliver had clearly and logically discussed computer gaming as merely an optional activity alongside others such as rugby and reading, explaining that if the weather was nice he would prefer to play outside, should he be in the middle of a good book he may choose to read. Computer gaming was an activity he chose to do (on the days permitted), not an activity that consumed him as I had previously thought. The way I perceived computer gaming was not congruent with what Oliver told me. It became clear through the process of reflective, theoretical consciousness that the negative beliefs I had, manifested themselves in a situation of conflict within our family. I could not give a reasonable argument for why I felt the way I did about computer games and yet this is what was driving the research. What was also clear is that we would not have communicated these diametrically opposed positions had I not chosen to work collaboratively with my son. The matter that we had existing knowledge of each other had worked in our favor.

The Ability to Object

It was important to me that the information gathered held an accurate depiction of what Oliver wanted to say, especially as I had interpreted things so inaccurately up until now. I wanted to avoid a situation in which Oliver read the finished text and did not recognize himself. In fact, Oliver was quite keen to make his thoughts clear. An example of this is when Oliver suggested that he enjoys certain activities more due to the length of time he had played them:

> Like when you first start playing something you might not enjoy it so much because you don't really know how to play it but then when you get used to it you enjoy it more in my opinion. (Int 5, 292–294—adapted for clarity)

Oliver made it clear that this is *his* opinion. I pressed this suggestion arguing that his best friends at school are the ones he has known the longest but not necessarily the ones he plays with. Oliver objects to my interpretation arguing that he does play with the friends he has known the longest.

> I did [play with my best friends] near the end. A lot near the end. (Int 5, 310)

The ability to object emerged from the openness of the collaborative dialogic exchanges. Oliver fully believed that his points of view were as important as mine and he was happy to point out any assumptions or inaccuracies I made. I was also happy to do the same. In Interview 6, Oliver contradicted a previous comment about his awareness of the emotional outbursts. I object to this and pressed him to clarify his point:

> on one hand you're saying well I don't understand why you're doing that because I'm fine but then on the other hand you're saying well I am aware I'm doing it because I don't want to do it in front of my friends. (Int 6, 254–257)

The ability to object was a two-way process of negotiating a mutual understanding within a dialogic exchange. Negotiating our assumptions in an open and at times confrontational manner is something rarely seen in academic research but common in therapeutic settings such as the psychoanalytical therapeutic interview. Although this was not a therapeutic setting, the use of collaborative dialogic interviewing was producing knowledge previously absent and transforming the way in which we viewed the situation. It also prevented me from trying to claim a more powerful position within the collaboration.

What is curious is that academic teaching includes knowledge deriving from qualitative interviews but rejects the methods used to generate this knowledge. This is mainly due to the common criticism that interview inquiries lack objectivity, but interview techniques such as the psychoanalytical interview which allow the ability to object often push the limits of objectivity rather than lack objectivity (Kvale, 2003). Adopting a collaborative dialogic approach produces a relational methodology that can allow collaborative partners to equally object to each other's interpretations in which transformations can be observed. Steiner Kvale suggested the psychoanalytical interview could be used as an inspiration for qualitative research. However, he later concluded that the academic interviewer may lead the interviewee into a therapy-like relationship but this could take several years and that obtaining these deeper layers are "ethically out of bounds for academic interview" (Kvale, 2003, p. 293). This may be the case for collaborations in which an existing relationship is not present but perhaps not when an existing relationship is already present. In our collaboration, data collection took around 8 weeks.

Taking a Personal Approach

This personal approach to psychological research gave the ability to unfold the complexities of each other's answers, allowing us to address our own preconceptions of this situation. We could not only object to what was being said at that moment but also if it did not fit with our previous knowledge of each other outside of the research context. This project was not a self-indulgent exercise but a difficult process of two people not only getting to know each other but also themselves. The ability to object produced a crucial dimension in achieving what Schutz (1967) eloquently outlines as:

> The moment I raise such questions as to have I understood you correctly, don't you mean something else and what do you mean by such and such action, I have abandoned my simple and direct awareness of the other person . . . the light in which I am looking at him is now a different one, my attention had shifted to those deeper layers that up to now had been unobserved and taken for granted. I no longer experience my fellow man in the sense of sharing his life with him; instead I 'think about him'. (p. 140/141)

The relational method allowed me to think about Oliver while encouraging me to think about myself and reflect upon our everyday relationship. It opened lines of communication that until now had been closed. Our relationship was transforming through dialogue.

The Emergence of a First-Person Plural

All six interviews took place on a Saturday morning in our family home. The shortest interview lasted 20 min, the longest 41 min, each one coming to a natural end. All interviews followed the same process in that the interviews were video recorded, all took place in the lounge area of the house and all followed a semi-structured format in which I had a set of prewritten questions however these were only used as a guide. Oliver and I agreed following the sixth interview that we had reached saturation for the purpose of the initial research question. Because Oliver and I live in the same home, we were required to agree timeslots of when research would and would not take place. This ethical procedure had created an “interview hour” and within this allotted time slot, I noticed something different happening between us. It seemed to provide an opportunity to suspend our everyday mother–son relationship and become colleagues. I am not suggesting we lost our mother and son relationship entirely; this would resurface when a question was answered in a way that did not fit with our existing knowledge of each other. It would also be foolish of me to suggest it is possible to detach myself from our relationship, much as it is absurd to believe human beings in human research can lose their social reality. But this prearranged interview hour was different; something transpired that had never happened before. Obviously we had engaged in conversation and interacted throughout our 10-year relationship but I could not recall ever having a conversation with Oliver that made me call into question all I knew of him and all I knew of children and adult interactions in general and all I knew of me.

By starting the research with the chat on our motivation to take part and because Oliver’s responses took me by surprise, this shook the very foundations of my knowledge of him and us. It not only made me question how I had developed this perception of him but it also created my desire to want to get to know him, not merely this situation of conflict. This I believe was instrumental in the collaborative co-researcher process; not only was I really interested in him as a human being but perhaps for the first time I was acknowledging him as an equal. Our positioning had changed; this may be described as a third wave of identity in which an individual’s identity is recreated through positioning and that this positioning comes from social interactions (Lewis & del Valle, 2009). This dynamic process had unintentionally laid the foundations enabling us to enter into a first-person plural (We) position whilst in the interview hour. What was not always consistent was how much of ourselves we would offer the other person. Although it seemed to take a little while to settle into the interviews, once we did, Oliver and I would shift between a first-person perspective, to a second-person perspective and a first-person plural (We). Although I was aware Oliver still held different views to me and he was aware I held different views to him, the attempt to engage was present. Interview 3 saw Oliver coaxing me into playing a computer game, attempting to draw me in, even though he knew I did not want to; this we were both aware of:

Oliver: Mum do you want to play it?
Kellyn: No I’d like you to play against the game
Oliver: Ok
Kellyn: Because that is what you normally do
Oliver: Yes I get annoyed when I am playing two player as well because it’s two people that can be on the same team or not
Kellyn: Pardon
Oliver: It’s two player so 2, 3, or 4 player so you can be on the same team or against each other against 10 other computers
Kellyn: Ok (Int 3, 7–16—adapted for clarity)

I agree to Oliver’s request.

Oliver’s encouragement for me to play may be to fulfill one of the goals he set out at the beginning. That if I enjoy playing computer games I may then want to play with him:

Kellyn: Oh well that was quite fun
Oliver: Yes it was. It is fun isn’t it. That was funny where the shock wave came and hit you into the bush. (Int 3, 361–363—adapted for clarity).

Here there are negotiations taking place. Oliver is aware I have a different view but still attempts to persuade me this activity is enjoyable by identifying moments we both found fun.

Both Oliver and I wanted to understand the differences between us. This was enjoyable and dialogue flowed with an openness that was different to all other times. We were able to question the other person with ease. We were beginning to negotiate a mutual understanding. An example of this is when I questioned Oliver about the activities he enjoys taking part in, attempting to understand the role and importance computer games have in his life:

Kellyn: So today is Tuesday so therefore
Oliver: I can play my DS
Kellyn: So what if you don’t want to play it
Oliver: I would go outside or play the Wii or do something else
Kellyn: But you don’t often do that
Oliver: No (laughs)
Kellyn: So would you say that you prefer to play the DS than other things?
Oliver: Erm I don’t if it was like either play your DS or go to rugby I want to go to rugby
Kellyn: Mmm (Int 4, 98–106—adapted for clarity)

When in the first-person plural (We) position it felt as though a real understanding was taking place. Oliver’s responses would be animated, much longer and in greater detail than the usual turn taking question and answers and I would respond by becoming excited by his answers feeling as though I was gaining a deeper knowledge not granted in everyday life:

> "If I had the choice to play my games console or on a bright sunny day play rugby out in the back garden I would play rugby or read a book which is really exciting or play the games console. I wouldn't know what to do then because I would really want to finish off that book but then I'd like to if there's this really erm good bit on the game that I'm at I would like to do that as well so I would kind of split it half an hour there and half an hour there." (Int 4, 107–112—adapted for clarity)

The first-person plural (We) seemed to happen if words were spoken that were of interest to Oliver or were surprising to me. This may suggest different levels of communication were unfolding within the interviews. There were impersonal meanings that would transmit the same message if spoken by any other person but also subjective meanings in which the word spoken spontaneously ignited interest and curiosity in the other person. This engagement would not only produce new knowledge but also transform that knowledge into a mutual understanding.

Engagement was also visible on the video recordings. A change was identifiable by intonation changes, length of answers and Oliver's body movements. He would change from lounging in his chair pulling at his socks or playing with his trousers, generally appearing quite bored with my line of enquiry to all of sudden sitting upright, turning to face me, maintaining eye contact and becoming excited and animated both verbally and physically.

Looking in on Myself

It was in the first-person plural (We) moments that we were experiencing each other intimately. We were attuned to each other. I cannot say that our experiences were identical but I can say that they were very different from any other interaction that took place. An active emotional engagement between us was developing, and something much more than simply providing the transfer of information (see Reddy, 2008). However, being aware of each other could not be intentionally maintained and at times no sooner had it been achieved it was lost. If I changed the conversation, gave an answer suggesting I was not listening or signs of disinterest, the first-person plural (We) position would be lost. This position was based on an unspoken reciprocal agreement of openness, curiosity, and engagement.

My dual role as mother and researcher was difficult to balance at times. Although in the interview hour I thought of myself as a researcher, my parental role came in when something was amiss or when a response triggered a physical reaction within me. I had insider information and it was for me to decide whether to use this information or whether to bracket the thoughts. If I decided to bracket the thoughts I would write these down in note form and consider it further when alone. Identifying whether to use the information or not was a spontaneous action. If it produced an emotional response I would bracket the thought; if the information did not seem true to what I thought I knew I would use this information to draw some depth and clarity (See Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Following each interview I would immediately watch the video recording in order to verbatim transcribe the data. I also included notes of my recollection of what had happened whilst it was still fresh in my mind. The ability to view myself and Oliver interacting allowed me to take a step back from the research. Revisiting the interviews enabled a more objective and detached viewpoint, adopting a position similar to that of a relationship counselor mediating between couples, in a sense looking in at me and Oliver. What I had not expected was to feel as though the recording did not portray the situation as I had experienced it. The fourth interview was particularly perplexing. It felt as though I was watching something far removed from the interview I had just been part of. I appeared to interrogate Oliver' desperate for him to answer the questions I wanted answering. It was not only surprising to watch but quite uncomfortable. I could remember feeling exasperation when Oliver had difficulty answering my questions, but I did not think I had been interrogating him. Watching myself conducting research also provided an opportunity for reflexive practice. This is something not only helpful in the craft of interviewing techniques but has also had positive effects when used as a therapeutic tool introducing people to a different perception of themselves (see Vik & Hafting, 2009). The ability for me to view our interaction helped me to understand my position, Oliver's position, but also to visually capture those moments in which Oliver and I achieved the first-person plural (We) position.

A personal method combining practices such as the psychoanalytical interview and academic qualitative research alongside reflexive video recording technique resulted in qualitative research with a deeper and meaningful understanding of human action and reactions. I also respectfully suggest that Kvale (2003) may have underestimated the ability to ethically use what he saw as long-lasting therapy-like techniques within academia. As I mentioned earlier, it only took around 8 weeks to generate our data but of course our relationship was already established. This does suggest that when conducting research with a person where a pre-existing relationship exists, a genuine collaboration can take place.

What is problematic is how to evaluate the worth of such academic endeavors; but this alone should not be reason enough to reject the method. It may be that an evaluation should take place sometime after the project; for example a reflection on whether or not the research process transformed those involved and if so how. What should not happen is that qualitative researchers become impatient with their craft and follow the insecure path of much experimental work, rushing to secure a "scientific" standing and in doing so sell out to step-by-step guides. In essence it is the openness and exploratory nature of qualitative work that allows it to be so interesting. Diversity undoubtedly adds to problems in demonstrating intellectual integrity and the value that qualitative methods hold; but it is also the innovation, creativity and impact that this work has that should refute any call for rejection. Oliver was given all the transcripts of our interviews to check; had there been anything he wanted to remove or change this would have been done. I also presented Oliver with the findings in order to check he was happy for me to use the quotes I had selected and that they were suitable in the context they were used. Evaluation of this qualitative work is feasible providing research uses sensitivity to context, transparency and coherence, commitment and rigor and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000).

Ethics

Despite the unconventional nature of working with my own child, obtaining ethical approval. was surprisingly straight forward. As noted previously, two concerns were identified, the first being the matter of coercion. Would Oliver feel coerced to take part in this study because I am his mother? To resolve this issue, it was deemed appropriate to appoint a third party to obtain consent. The ethics board suggested the third party in this case, amusingly, should be Oliver's father.

The second problem for consideration was that Oliver and I were living in the same home and it was important for him not to feel under permanent observation. We needed to set boundaries. Oliver and I needed to be clear when we would and would not be "working." It was imperative to protect our existing relationship outside of the research project. This was a relatively simple process to remedy. Oliver and I agreed timeslots for when work would take place and that we should each kept a diary of any queries, questions, thoughts, or objections that arose outside of the agreed timeslots. The viewing or discussing of the diary was strictly prohibited outside of the allotted timeslots. Whilst I made various entries in my diary, Oliver did not keep a diary; therefore diaries were not discussed. This suggested he gave little thought to the research project outside of the agreed timeslots. My diary was used as a method of catharsis; it also helped me identify the thoughts I had as Oliver's mother and the questions I wanted to explore as a researcher.

This was a project in which the researcher *and* participant had an explicit existing relationship. However, the only person considered vulnerable or at risk of harm was Oliver in his role as participant. At no point in the ethical evaluation was my position as Oliver's mother considered. Seemingly as the "detached researcher" I would not be at risk of any harm. No consideration was given to how I would manage an interview situation of a personal nature which was particularly odd especially in view of my limited experience of conducting interviews. Similarly no questions were raised about how I may feel towards Oliver should he fail to co-operate or withdraw from the project. No questions were raised about how both Oliver and I would manage our thoughts and feelings about each other or whether this personal journey could have a negative consequence on our relationship. This evidenced the resounding failure of psychological research ethics to take the matter of relationships in research seriously.

Possible Problems with Being Textually Objectified

Another matter which failed to be identified as a potential problem was how Oliver might feel about seeing himself described in print or how I might feel writing about him. The final write-up could lead to feelings of embarrassment or hurt if Oliver did not like the findings. Clearly he could withdraw consent but the damage would have already been done. If there were things that portrayed him or me for that matter in a negative light, this may have resulted in conflict or had a detrimental impact on our relationship in the long term. Would I be able to reconcile including data that I may find uncomfortable whilst at the same time remaining faithful to the study? The fundamental ethical question of whether the findings of the research project would outweigh any possible harm to those taking part simply did not surface. It began to dawn on me that this research could have long-term negative effects and potentially cause problems in our everyday mother and son relationship. To take part in a study is one thing; to be textually objectified by a person with whom a personal relationship exists or has developed is something very different and could have far reaching negative consequences (see O'Connell Davidson, 2008). The recollection of what happened in a study and the language used in the final written article, especially if the situation has been reconstructed and sanitized in a manner deemed acceptable to APA conventions, the text may appear to convey something very different to what was believed to have taken place (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). I do not believe that these ethical inadequacies were an intentional act by the ethics board, but perhaps a reflection of how psychology views itself.

How the Obsession for Mechanical Rituals Pose Ethical Problems

It would appear from the lack of concern shown for our existing relationship that academic psychological research does not expect the research situation to produce anything that could be considered transformative. It is merely a mechanical data gathering process which provokes no personal consequence to those involved. The obsession for objectivity which supposedly banishes any personal involvement has produced widespread unthinking mechanical rituals. The accepted statistical methods that seemingly offer the objectivity psychology so anxiously desires have become what Gigerenzer (2004) calls "mindless statistics," processes which are carried out as habitual routines rather than thoughtful examinations. We may also consider that these "mindless" habitual routines are being played out in the ethical process whereby detachment is considered a given, even when it is clear that human research can have a long-term impact on those taking part, including the researcher (see Cohn, 2008; O'Connell Davidson, 2008).

Since the 19th century the idea of objectivity has been dominated by aperspectival objectivity. This concept is based upon the belief that understanding another human being is objective when it relies less on "the specifics of an individual's makeup and position in the world, or the character of the particular type of creature he is" (Daston, 1992, p. 599). Aperspectival objectivity is also congruent with APA guidelines whose aim is the communicability across continents. Of course it is an important part of gaining knowledge to share findings with the larger scientific community. There is no doubt that this all fits very neatly together. But the ethical process needs to get serious about viewing the researcher as part of the process and refraining from viewing the participant as something different from us as all this has created is a desensitized ethical perspective which may pose a risk to those it is there to protect.

I would also urge a re-think of *when* ethical considerations should be carried out. If it is widely accepted that research evolves, is it not strange to believe that ethical considerations will remain static? For this reason alone, it is imperative that ethics are to be reviewed throughout the lifespan of a project rather than a procedure only carried out at the outset. It is not my intention to talk myself or anyone else for that matter out of conducting research that acknowledges relationships and is full of human judgment. On the contrary, I believe this to be a vital part of any methodological toolbox if we seek to understand human beings. I just wish to point out that ethical considerations must acknowledge relationships are ongoing within human research if they are to do what they are supposed to do.

Conclusion

Taking my first steps into psychological research, choosing to take a personal approach, working in a true collaboration with my son and acknowledging our relationship throughout the research in hindsight does seem a little reckless. It may also be noted that it could have an effect on my long-term career simply because I have broken a taboo. Many psychologists, even qualitative psychologists, may not approve of my very personal collaboration but I do hope they will give some careful consideration to the empirical evaluation of the scope and limits of this approach as it did deliver on many counts. The ability to explore the motivations to take part which was driven by our existing relationship not only enabled me to make sure my son was co-operating because he wanted to, it also challenged my theoretical assumptions from the outset, something that is much needed for any researcher whether qualitative or quantitative. It also taught me that psychological research can be transformative. Had I followed the general path of recruiting anonymous participants and gaining the usual written consent this would have led us down a very different path. It would have been less rewarding both personally and professionally and I believe it would have only sought answers about Oliver's emotions, continuing with a line of enquiry that suggested Oliver had a problem with computer games. I would have learnt little about our situation. I would even go as far to say I may have ended with a self-confirmatory paper supporting the vast amount of findings that show links between aggression and computer games. But we did not. By understanding the motivation to take part, openly engaging in dialogic interviews and encouraging the ability to object, we identified the underlying currents allowing the "problem" to manifest. I discovered that computer games were not the problem, it was my implicit assumptions about computer games and how I reacted to them, that was the issue. Working with Oliver has produced knowledge of him that was previously absent due to us achieving a first-person plural. What was also interesting was how the perspectives changed throughout the researcher process involving the first-person plural (We), a second-person perspective with first-person reflections.

This project has had a positive impact on our relationship and provided an empirical assessment which suggests working with a close relative can provide insight into a human situation. I now try and really listen to Oliver and when at times I do jump to conclusions or intervene on impulse, I am reminded of this project. I feel that working together has brought something to our relationship which is incredibly special and we are better for it. This shared experience has changed the way we are with each other. An active emotional engagement between us has created the minds that we have come to have (Reddy, 2008). I can say this with confidence. Around three months after the project had finished, Oliver was playing his computer game in the lounge; I could hear from the kitchen that he was raising his voice at the computer, the same emotional outbursts that had triggered this study. Only this time I felt no urge to save him. I walked slowly to the door of the lounge thinking to myself this was not a problem. He was just frustrated with the game. At that moment I realized what we had achieved within the project; the active engagement creating a mutual understanding had not only developed within the timescale of the project but transformed our lives in the long term. It also occurred to me I could not recall as many emotional outbursts since the project had ended. Perhaps I had just not noticed. When I asked Oliver about this he commented that he tried not to react to the computer as he now knew how I felt about it. We had changed as a result of the project. We had achieved pragmatic validation, when verbal communication goes further than an agreement through dialogue, when "actions speak louder than words" (Kvale, 2003).

Had the logical positivistic approach been followed underpinning the use of the "scientific" method, actively taught in contemporary universities, this project would not have been life-changing. It may not have produced anything meaningful. It would not have developed me as a researcher. However, this project was successful. The risk *did* pay off. Even if I do still question at times my supervisor's reasons for encouraging me as this may always be a risky paper to have written, particularly so early in my career. However what it shows is that psychology can get personal and that if this is what can happen by taking a risk on research, I would recommend everyone should try it, if only once.

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