Encounters of life and scholarship: Opening to transformations, inquiries and vulnerabilities

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Abstract

Close encounters with research participants and collaborators invariably involve more than formal meetings. We argue in this paper that for research that aspires to living educational theory, vulnerability needs to be experienced, encountered and reflected upon as part of the research process. Our insights in this paper emerged from our work on equity and inclusion in higher education, and on the impacts of 'aspiration-raising' initiatives promoted by universities and governments. We explored these through case studies of the trajectories of individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. In the midst of this work, it became apparent that our inquiry into the experiences of these students touched our own lives. It drew attention to points of vulnerability in ourselves, as researchers. Together, we came to recognise the importance of the 'living 'I' (Whitehead, 1989a; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) in our research because 'I' am a part of each of the stories told by our participants. 'I' am a part of the research and 'I' am part of the learning. 'I' am therefore enmeshed in 'my' relationship to the experiences of each of our participants. As researchers, each of us is also an 'I' who is culturally constructed, shaped by lived experience, and entangled in the contextually based stories and experiences of each other. Central to this was our desire to gain perspective on our embodied ontological values and commitments to living epistemological standards of critical judgment (Whitehead, 2005). Further, we sought to communicate this through theory based explanations accounting for the lived experience of our learning, the learning of others and the 'education of social formations' (Whitehead, 2005).

Keywords: Living Theory; i~we; Liminality; Transformation; Vulnerability; Aspiration.

Moving Towards 'Radical Openness'

This paper represents understanding that emerged as a consequence of inquiries into student aspiration. The representation is a shared endeavour and speaks of collective experience. Individual understanding is evident in the personal learning stories of each of the interviewees and interviewers involved; however access to those learning stories is a consequence of the relationships fostered during the process. Whilst our study focused on the trajectories of our research participants into higher education, our analysis expanded to include our own memories, feelings and experiences of aspiring to higher education. During our inquiry into our research experience, intellectually and emotionally based insights and the learnings derived from these came to be discussed. Acceptance and trust were pre-requisites for the vulnerability each of the researchers found themselves negotiating in this experience. Rifkin (2009) describes vulnerability as, 'being open to communication at the deepest level of human exchange' (p. 158). He argues, 'if the measure of one's life is the intimacy, range and diversity of one's relationships, then the more vulnerable one is, the more open he or she will be to creating meaningful and intimate relationships with others' (p. 157). And while meaningfulness and intimacy were not the intent of this research, they emerged as a consequence and their emergence required consideration: how much meaningfulness, how much intimacy, how much vulnerability? And if meaningfulness, intimacy and vulnerability do emerge, how or when can discretionary judgements about that emergence be made? These became major considerations in the 'living theory' (Whitehead, 1989a) that emerged.

The negotiation of relationships between individual group members involved in this holds resonance with the i~we experience discussed by Whitehead and Huxtable (2006). It is a 'relationally-dynamic and collaborative form of research' and the collaboration is 'an expression of embodied meanings': i am because we are, and we are because i am (Huxtable 2016, 1). It emerges from bodies learning through experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Thompson 2007) and is communicated in writing here to represent the *languaging* and *emotioning* (Maturana & Varela 1987) through which we came to know and speak of our process. We developed a collaborative mode of writing, an 'i~we' that allows for an oscillation between individual and collective, a collective space 'in-between' (Wyatt, Davies, Gannon & Gale, 2018) that emphasises resonance and 'mutuality' (Dyke & Hutchison, 2017) without obliterating difference and particularity.

In this paper we draw attention to moments where we, as researchers, sought to provide descriptions of and explanations for the transformation of embodied responses into standards of critical judgments (Whitehead, 2005). The context was research into the aspiration of education scholarship holders from marginalized communities. In this respect we are drawn to the writings of Pryer (2011) who notes:

> My research is necessarily liminal in nature, and as a scholar, I have consciously positioned myself as a liminal Other… In refusing the centre, the intellectual liminar has chosen, as bell hooks (1996) might put it, 'the margin as a site of radical openness (p. 48).

The term liminal, foregrounded by van Gennep (1960), then later by Turner (1982), refers to an experience of 'transition between' (Turner, 1982, p. 41): an 'ambiguous state'

that invites criticism and speculation (p. 47). 'Play' in a liminal space creates opportunities for new, imaginative structures: new ways of thinking about and understanding structure. This requires a 'radical openness'. Vartabedian (2015) describes such a process as the pursuit of an 'intersubjective relationship, a process of learning and cognitive exchange that includes the reflectivity of the research as much as the subject-other' (p. 578). Merrill and West (2011) extend this in their description of inquiries into relationship as a 'major turn' towards the telling of personal stories in academic inquiry: 'a response to a long-standing omission or marginalisation of the human subject in research, under the banner of objectivity' (p. 4). In constructing a base for auto/biographical narrative research they argue 'we cannot… write stories of others without reflecting our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values' (p. 6). Accordingly both write of themselves. West focuses on how his training in psychotherapy influenced his academic work. 'If I was mad, there were others equally mad: moreover I came to see psychotherapy as a form of biographical inquiry' (p. 10). Later, West (2014) expands upon Dirkx's work on self-referential transformation. Drawing on Winnicott then Honneth, West argues the power of relational dynamics in transformation and values: of bringing 'the "me", or the subjectivity of the learner, into academic inquiry – in interaction with the "me" of the researcher – to broaden the understanding of knowing' (pp. 171-2). Within such processes opportunities for 'the role of love and wider cultural recognition' (p. 176) provide social systems for the facilitation of transformative learning.

Throughout the paper we refer to ourselves as DW, SG, MM and DS. All four are scholars in a School of Education. Within this school one of the four (DW) works in an academic program that asserts itself as one of 'radical openness'. Programs in Social Ecology have been taught at Western Sydney University for 30 years (Wright, Camden-Pratt & Hill, 2011). The current iteration, the Master of Education (Social Ecology), stands at the creative edge of adult education. In the university handbook it claims to examine:

> Recent developments in inter-relationships between the personal, social, environmental and spiritual domains. It works with an understanding that everything we do as individuals affects others; that we are parts of the systems in which we live and take responsibility for. (http://handbook.westernsydney.edu.au/hbook/course.aspx?course=1723.1)

Units taught in the program include *Ecopsychology and Cultural Change, Applied Imagination, Engaging Communities, Ecopedagogies, Social Ecology, Transformative Learning* and *At the cultural interface: learning two ways* (contrasting Western and Indigenous knowledge systems). These units do not seek to teach epistemic formations. Rather they apply critical attention to the epistemologies that individuals and communities bring to their learning, in the social construction of Education. This resonates with the work of Indigenous scholars like de Sousa Santos (2014) and Smith (1999). Their critique of the dominance of Western Epistemology and the denial of Indigenous knowledge systems forms the basis of a 'counter story' from the vantage of the colonized. Central to an Indigenous research paradigm is, Wilson (2008) asserts, 'how we view the world around us through our whole lives, not just in the research process. We cannot remove ourselves from the world in order to examine it' (p. 14). This aligns with a social-ecological perspective upon the relationship base of knowing and establishes pre-conditions for the depth of inquiry required for learning to be radically challenged, understood and articulated in terms of Living Theory research (Whitehead, 1989a).

Central to the Social Ecology program are considerations upon the forms through which participants gain and communicate insight into their experience. Combinations of cognitive, affective, creative and otherwise embodied processes are utilized and valued (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Thompson, 2007; Rifkin, 2009). In this regard, staff teaching in this program promote the notion that students and their responses to the ideational foundations of each unit contribute significantly to its unfolding. Staff shape the reflective process around an appreciation of knowledge arrived at through participation in learning relationships. Such qualities as individual and social experience within learning, critical reflection, dialogic relationships with self and others, personal and sociocultural context and 'holistic' considerations upon learning are open for discussion (Taylor & Laros, 2014). These arise in the context of considerations upon what a social-ecology is and how individuals act within and through such considerations.

DW brought twenty years of teaching in Social Ecology to this project and there came a point in conversations when this learning began to shape research processes. From early in the work DW interpreted the project in relational terms. He began talking about 'our' learning in part because, he says: 'the dialogue we shared, rather than my specific history, made this perspective appropriate'. Others were implicated because of the experience they brought to the inquiry and because of the form their participation took. Gradually i~we came to see that our contributions both created and shaped the inquiry. This led to a pattern of research where questions and concerns about our collective process emerged as of significance: as creative constructions in a newly liberated research environment. This brought with it some uncertainty. As a consequence, much of this work had (and has) a self-referential component. Subjectivities emerged. Researchers concentrated within themselves – within their subjectivities – the complexities of their encounters with the experience of collective inquiry. Concentration of this sort includes but involves more than personal story telling: stories have contexts. Here, they take the form of accounts of moments in ideological development that involve conflict between a range of constructions of 'self' - selves that exist at the intersection between 'the personal' and larger networks, structures and systems. This led to some of us, at various times, experiencing ourselves as 'living contradictions' (Whitehead, 1989b), as epistemological forms and ontological encounters came into conflict.

We begin this text by outlining the research project and the context that helped us to think through the inter-subjective encounters that arose in our process. We then present our research participants, and document some of our reflections in response to their stories.

Drawing On Transformative Learning

The principles that inform our approach to research and scholarship are underpinned by a belief in the importance of educational research, not simply in terms of its utility in the generation of propositional knowledge, but crucially, by virtue of its transformative potential for ourselves, our students and the wider social and professional context within which we live and work (Whitehead, 1989a). In Living Theory research, practitioners transform their embodied values into epistemological standards of critical judgment (Laidlaw 1996, Whitehead, 2005) by providing descriptions and explanations to account for the influence of their research and scholarship on their learning, the learning of others and the education of social formations (Whitehead, 2005). Whitehead provides three reasons for focusing on living critical standards of judgment in educational theorising: 1) as a form of understanding

that carries hope for the future of humanity; 2) to transform the hegemonic power relations that sustain the dominant standards of judgment and 3) the growth of understanding that demonstrates a critical engagement with the ideas of others (Whitehead, 2005, p. 5-7). Key to the contribution of Living Theory research is its transformative potential. A contextual, functional or emergent understanding needs to be favoured. Necessarily, this emerges in conversation with the discourse. Maturana, in conversation with Poerksen (2004), describes this as the domain of constitutive ontologies: 'all Being is constituted through the Doing of observers. If we follow this path of explanation we become aware that we can in no way claim to be in possession of the truth but that there are numerous possible realities' (p. 42). Central to such realisation is individual experience, and necessarily, individual understanding of individual experience. The collective experience of individual understanding explained through the i~we perspective draws on systems of communication. Here language(s) and learning co-mingle and knowledge arises as a consequence of reflection upon ways of negotiating experience.

As Teacher Educators, we create opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop critical and analytical skills to help them make clear and reasoned judgments that go beyond 'common sense' understandings. We want them to do more than design activities that work towards pre-determined outcomes. We want our students to be able to interrogate and disrupt discourses and practices that impede the pursuit of equity and fairness. Accordingly, we draw on a range of critical theoretical perspectives characterised by their sensitivity to power relations and their critique of ideologies that sustain the notion that social practices and commonsense categories are an objective representation of social reality (hooks, 2003; Giroux, 2011); for example, the idea that equality of opportunity necessarily leads to equitable outcomes. While these commitments guide our teaching and research, we encourage our students to develop their own original social and cultural critiques. The teaching practices we use are informed by dialogical pedagogic approaches that encourage students to develop an academic voice, through critical engagement with a broad range of perspectives. This engenders mutually respectful pedagogic encounters where controversial issues are debated in constructive and supportive ways. Communication of this kind can aid in the appreciation of the liminal quality of such experience. It can invite visceral responses and creative considerations upon representation. DW has attempted this previously (Wright, 1989):

> I am reminded even more importantly of a physical sensation that arose at (this time) …. I remember I felt a flush, a tingle, a frisson …. It rushed through me for only a second or so, then for a few seconds more I felt the afterglow, but it marked that time for me, as I recall it, as both a physically and intellectually memorable moment. I had, at least momentarily, seen through an illusion. I had shifted my perspective and gained a … more   penetrating vision... Words can only approximate the sensation. It is this approximation that makes the determination of language as something that so strictly defines experience, problematic. Whatever value my insight may have, in that moment back then, and on occasions now when I recall it, it carries significance, in the immediacy, in the moment, in the body, for the sensation that marked it (for me) as an experience of learning.

While addressing how the subject experiences liminality, Malkki and Green (2014) touch on who the subject is: in effect, drawing attention to the 'becoming' of the researcher(s). We extend that discussion by incorporating the i~we perspective.

Imagining Educational Futures

Our involvement in this issue arose through research into the effects of aspiration-raising initiatives to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend university. We formed a research team initially because of the conditions of an internal small grant scheme, and had not previously researched together. We focused on the Jim Anderson Award, an Australian education-department scholarship, named after a deceased Member of Parliament, to support students from local high schools to attend their local Western Sydney University. One of the researchers had been a selection panel member for most of the first decade of the scholarship scheme and saw it as an ideal case study in which to examine the complex educational trajectories into higher education of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and locations (Gannon, Moustakim, Stoilescu & Wright, 2018). Western Sydney is a region characterised, in comparison to other parts of Sydney, by a population with lower incomes and standards of living, higher unemployment, higher numbers of recent immigrant arrivals, greater ethnic diversity and other similar markers of disadvantage (WESROC, 2016). It is a region that has systematically extended the boundaries of the greater urban area, thus repeatedly creating new 'borderlands' of experience and learning (WESROC, 2016). In the process it has emerged as a region with strengths that have the potential to sustain it apart from, and in a different manner to the centre, which it was originally established to serve. But that potential is still to be realized. The consequence is a region housing a diversity of inhabitants many of whom are struggling to find their place in the social, economic and cultural mainstream. The scholarship was envisaged as providing opportunities to a small number of promising but disadvantaged students to learn in ways they might otherwise not have been able to.

From 2003 -2013 students from the area were invited to submit applications. In their initial written scholarship application students were asked to describe what they wanted to achieve through tertiary education. In effect, they were required to describe the transformations through learning they anticipated from a university education.

From the fifty recipients of the scholarship over its first decade, our research team was able to contact and recruit eight participants. Their original applications for the scholarship, written while they were still at high school, and their university academic records were also accessed (with appropriate ethics clearance). Each scholarship recipient was interviewed via a semi-structured format for 60 to 90 minutes. During the interviews – undertaken by various combinations of two members of the research team - students' original scholarship applications were reviewed to draw attention to their patterns of thinking and aspirations at the time of application. This helped us to open conversations about changing perspectives. Our focus was the transformative effects of higher education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable communities. As researchers, none of us had considered how these stories might resonate with our own experiences and our thoughts and feelings about those experiences. However, in early group discussions each of us quite unexpectedly began to describe ourselves as 'drawn to' the transcripts of particular interviewees, among the eight. Those resonances and the ways in which they influenced our considerations of our interviewees - Kerrie, Omar, Keshi and Douglas (all pseudonyms) - are crucial not only to the project but also to our own immersion: our encounter with the values, attitudes and vulnerabilities of ourselves and the manner in which these encounters provide insight into our encounters with others.

In this section we sketch how Kerrie, Omar, Keshi and Douglas articulated their desires to enrol in university and the futures they anticipated. For this we draw on their applications for the scholarship, written during their final year in high school, then on the interviews conducted as part of this project.

In their scholarship applications, all of the participants demonstrated an awareness of and a desire for the sort of transformation they imagined would be afforded by a university education. However, to varying degrees, most identified obstacles to those imagined futures.

Kerrie wrote of a longstanding 'dream to go to university', while acknowledging difficulties standing in her way: 'Coming from a sole parent background… I am not able to afford this.' The scholarship would, Kerrie imagined, eliminate the financial and emotional stress of relying 'on my mother like I have for so many years'.

By contrast, Omar wrote little about his own disadvantage. Instead he wrote of his leadership qualities and his character: 'my character… has received utmost respect and trust.' His evidence for this relates primarily to religious observance. 'I have established a unique balance between my religious and secular spheres. I attend the Mosque regularly, and am an excellent student of a Quran class.'

Keshi points directly to her difference. 'I am a Nepalese born Bhutanese refugee who came to Australia… (7 years ago, after) living in a refugee camp… for 15 years.' The identity of the refugee fascinates her, as does the responsibility that comes with the opportunity to start a new life. 'It is youth like us who are the future… it is our responsibility to… spread the light all over the darkness of refugee camps.' She nominates 'this dream' and 'lots of hope' as direct consequences of her new life.

Douglas, who like all our participants was first in his family to attend university, does not write of being challenged. Instead he writes of his achievement. "Although I have received numerous awards I do not gloat about my achievements. [I use my success] to motivate myself to achieve better in the future". He projects a sense of purpose, and incorporates the scholarship into his career plans.

While the scholarship applications were completed during their final years of schooling, our interviews took place three to seven years later, after all had completed or were close to completing their degrees. The interviews enabled both the interviewees and the researchers to reflect upon ways in which each individual's perspective upon learning had changed over the intervening period. Those were not only changes in circumstance but in ways of thinking about learning.

Kerrie was interviewed seven years after completing high school. By then she had graduated with a BA in Psychology, had completed a fourth honours year and been employed for a year as a research assistant… "and after that [I've found myself] … a little bit directionless… I've taken a job … as a receptionist. So, yeah, it's not really where I want to be in life but …". She told us, "my main interest was non-conscious mimicry… social psychology says that in interaction between two people there will be a higher affiliation between people who non-consciously mimic than people who don't. So, my research was whether that happens with robots." She was invited to do a Ph.D. in this area but, "I wasn't sure if I was up for that". At the time of interview, she was living in the family home while supporting her

mother and her sole parenting sister. Here she feels unchallenged but connected to a familiar community. A lack of confidence in response to challenge is a recurring theme in Kerrie's interview. Of her future, Kerrie says, "It's scary. I'm not sure… I feel like I have strayed from the path I was on. I'm not really sure… I don't know. I'll see where I go".

During his interview, Omar reported he was making progress towards his goals. This has occurred despite difficulties. These upset the family relationships that had played a significant part in the imagining of Omar's educational pathway. The strength of this influence is indicated by his decision to change his study focus from English Literature to Economics and Law. He describes his father as 'the determining factor'. A recurring theme in Omar's narrative is the importance of having a good reputation and of gaining approval. A reputation worthy of honour and respect in Omar's view does not derive solely from being an exemplary student and a good team leader, Omar believes that piety and disciplined religious practice is the best indication of a good person.

At the beginning of the interview, Omar referred to a personal problem. As the interview unfolded, it became clear that the problem, which in his view marked the undoing of his reputation and led to his father's disappointment in him, was a relationship with a girlfriend. Despite his father's opposition, Omar consciously chose to maintain this relationship and relinquish his earlier wish to be seen as a devout Muslim. This created considerable strain in his family. Three years after applying for the scholarship, Omar's reflections on his academic experience do not echo the certainty evident in his scholarship application. While he continues to earn high grades and make good progress, now, he says, "I haven't got a specific aspiration in mind... I'm keeping my options as open as possible".

Keshi's scholarship application details her pathway to Australia as a Nepalese-born Bhutanese refugee. She describes how life in a Nepalese refugee camp afflicted by outbreaks of preventable diseases including malaria, typhoid and diphtheria, and deaths from cancer and accidents, sparked her desire to become a doctor and to work to, "avoid premature deaths and abnormality despite caste, gender or class". At the time of our interview, Keshi is completing her second year of a Bachelor of Nursing and working part time as a Nurse's Aide. Financial autonomy and making a contribution to household income are important to Keshi. Both her parents are on welfare and there are nine people living in her home.

Keshi consistently addresses her current experience through reference to her past. Her aspiration to attend university started in the refugee camp and while her family supported her in terms of developing her desire for academic achievement, structural opportunities for learning were limited. Even people like her family who were relatively well educated, didn't have the, "courage to aim to become a doctor (or)… nurse". Inside the camp, it was only, "people with money" who could aspire because of the need to leave the camp for further study.

The pivotal story Keshi shares is about soccer. In Australia, Keshi joined a sports program for disadvantaged young people, run through an Intensive English Language Centre network. She made rapid progress and was selected to travel to South Africa as a member of an Australian team for the 2010 FIFA Football for Hope Festival. "It was a fantastic experience, and I didn't even know how to speak English at that time". Sport was the conduit through which she improved her English and made friends beyond ethnic networks. And her family and community were very proud of her. The, "scholarship for football, it was

me, the first person to receive one… and they posted it in Facebook … You make (the) Nepalese community happy. You are a model for everyone".

Early in his interview Douglas commented on how the aspirations he reported in his application for the scholarship are consistent with his experience since gaining it. When interviewed, Douglas had recently graduated with a Bachelor of Electrical Engineering, an experience that, "was supposed to take four years, but… took five and a half" because of an overseas student exchange and deferral following employment at a high level in his field of study. This was a part time academic position that helped him to complete his Honours year, to present at international conferences and to publish in academic journals. At the time of interview Douglas was employed by his university as an engineer. His sense of his future resonates with what he wrote of in his scholarship application. Most recently he has been approached to work as a researcher at a university in the USA and another offer of employment has been received that, "pretty much said if the stuff … (in the US) … falls through, to give them a call". Douglas did not mention his family in the interview nor any doubts he had about his progress. He was confident, focused and self-assured. Any disadvantage he, his family or community might have experienced was not mentioned, neither was any ongoing sense of connection to the community that enabled him to pursue his career goals.

Encountering Researcher Vulnerability

The subject-matter of our research - on aspiration and learning - required that we question the subject matter and the process systematically. One effect we discovered was that as we listened, then listened again and again to the recorded interviews, and as we read and re-read the transcripts, interviewees' stories drew our stories of our experience into the research. In effect, we began to place ourselves under the researchers' gaze.

As we move between joint authorial voice and individual reflections on connections, encounters and histories in this section, we use the i~we to generate dynamic relational standards of judgment (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2006) to account for our learning and the new theoretical insights we developed into emergent aspirational change. Like Whitehead and Huxtable, through i~we, we seek to create something that is, '…beyond the individual but is in the space between ~ it is what is formed at the inclusional boundaries between us, a place of meeting rather than separating, a space for co-creation rather than a void' (p.3).

Early in one of those conversations i~we decided to record our discussion. As moments from our experiences arose in relation to those of our participants it seemed important to follow this emerging interest in how the stories of our research subjects connected with our own. In terms of research design, transcripts of our discussions as well as the interview transcripts with our research participants, and our subsequent written reflections, became part of the research data.

These were at times difficult conversations. DW described the commencing phase as a nervous experience of, "waiting to see if others would be open to me speaking about my response. I couldn't pretend to be detached. It seemed a disservice to the students… and fundamentally dishonest. I had to speak my mind." SG noted that talking about the process was 'a bit tricky'. MM recalls feeling anxious about talking about his own experience. He said he was not sure how much to reveal, but was encouraged by the openness with which

others described moments in their lives. Despite these hesitations, collectively i~we came to realise that the aspects of our research participants' experience that resonated with our own also provided insights into our own learning pathways.

Upon re-examining the recordings of this discussion, i~we agreed that evidence of researchers' 'involvement' in the stories of interviewees can be found, firstly, in the reflections of individual researchers, in their responses to specific people or perspectives and secondly, in the transcripts themselves, where, during the interviews, researchers can be heard being drawn into a deeper sense of engagement with interviewees. DW commented on his interest in, "what's happened to us as (we've) entered into this". He observed, "we've entered into a relatively … formal procedure … But (we've found) it touches us… as human beings as well as researchers".

Extracts from the interview with Kerrie demonstrate this. Encountering an apparent lack of confidence in Kerrie, the interviewers feel empathy for her. The transcript gives a clear sense of the interviewers seeking to draw Kerrie out of her equivocal state, to recognize and work with her academic potential:

> Kerrie: As for the future, I'm not really sure. Yeah, it's scary to think about. Yeah, I don't know. I'll see where I go
>
> SG: How old are you?
>
> Kerrie: I'm 26 so…
>
> DW: I didn't have a job when I was 26. There's a lot more time.

A little later the researchers even suggested career opportunities. DW suggests Education Psychology. SG adds, "We can introduce you to people around here." In similar ways, the interview with Omar periodically 'veered from script' as the interviewers became absorbed in Omar's story. At one point the conversation moves into a discussion of Omar's community leadership as having a political dimension. In response to Omar's assertion that, "I don't think I have those qualities of sympathy with my fellow human that I should have" the interviewers seek to elicit such sympathy. They discuss civil conflict in Lebanon and Bangladesh (the homelands of Omar's parents) and invite him to comment on his emotional involvement in these. Only when this is not forthcoming do the interviewers, somewhat reluctantly, return the interview to Omar's experience at university.

Clearly, at various times i~we found ourselves identifying with dilemmas in the stories of interviewees. As researchers practiced in presenting insights in 'objective' terms, we have written about these participants in a distanced scholarly mode (Gannon et al., 2018). However, the transcripts demonstrate us highlighting our own experience, which are often suppressed in academic contexts. The result of turning to the resonances amongst ourselves and our research participants was a group of researchers, drawn together initially through structural rather than personal affinities, becoming vulnerable to and with each other. Stories of hardship and disadvantage were told. Self-doubt and suffering were revealed. Individual ordeals, previously guarded and sheltered, were shared and socialized. We learned to know each other differently, and in the process the workplace, as a system defined by its participants, changed.

Enacting Critical Living Standards Of Judgment In Educational Research

In what follows, we provide descriptions and explanations for the transformation of our embodied values into living epistemological standards of critical judgment to account for the influences on our learning, the learning of the research participants and our wider professional and social context (Whitehead, 2005). As teacher educators, we bring to this research a diversity of experiences and perspectives, but we have shared commitments to equity and fairness and a common belief in the transformative potential of education.

Once the decision was made to subject our responses to critical conversation we, the researchers, tried to capture those responses. While recognising that our individual responses were a consequence of personal learning histories and the assumptions and perspectives derived from this, we agreed that the discussion of those individual responses enables shared understanding. Vettraino and Linds (2015, p. 3) describe this as a particular sort of reflective practice, a 'house of reflecting mirrors' in which the group process refines the subject matter through mirroring the insights of contributors, thence calling up further insight: 'mirrors reflecting mirrors, traces of traces'.

The transcripts of these discussions provide evidence of moments when our own lives were called up in response to those of our research participants and each other. SG spoke of Kerrie's tentativeness. SG recalled growing up in a family without previous experience of university education, in a rural area with a high level of poverty. She says she was motivated to study by a desire to, "get out of this place and not just die here". And while she did well and topped the final year group at her school, "every time I had an achievement I didn't believe it". She then expanded on her interest in Kerrie:

> This young woman has done an Honours thesis in an extraordinarily difficult area. She still doesn't believe she has the capacity to do a PhD even when she's worked as a research assistant on a… high level funded project… (and) she's (gone and) got a job as a receptionist… I wanted to say 'You can do it! Believe in yourself'.

SG continues:

> It's not that other people don't believe in you, your mum, your dad, the people around you. Your teachers all say yeah you are clever, but you don't quite believe it yourself. You always find some way to undermine yourself…. No one… around you is university educated. What would the teachers know? They're… (working) at this rural school where there's hardly anybody who's any good. So… you know what I mean?

SG's openness eased the way for others to address their vulnerabilities and MM began to speak of his relationship to the experience of Omar:

> I understand lots of sorts of Islamic practice … (or) how they are practised by some (and) the sort of negotiations that… people have to make, particularly when they are faced with contradictions in their life... In this case, Omar… having a… girlfriend.

And then MM spoke of his early life in Morocco:

> My father died when I was six and we were six in the family - six of us - and my mum. My mum was completely illiterate. When my father died she didn't know anything about how to deal with the world… so I (was sent) … to stay with my aunt … I stayed… for seven years… (but we) didn't have a very good relationship… so there was the option of going to a children's home and I did that and that was very interesting. I stayed there for (another)… seven years. This is completely different to Omar's experience…but (I mention it) really … to illustrate that for me, (like Omar) my way out of disadvantage was education … I've always placed (great)… value on education.

He continues:

> I've come across situations like that (of Omar before) … At one point he wanted to use his faith - or his commitment to his faith - to belong, to be part of his community … to be accepted… (and) that served him fairly well, up to a point. But complexities arise when a new community is encountered through education.

Despite his confidence in education as an escape from disadvantage, MM describes himself as very familiar, like Omar, with the experience of feeling disconnected as a consequence of education. Then as if speaking directly to Omar, MM said emphatically, "Culture is what you do, it's not what you are!"

DS also has experience with displacement. After growing up in Romania, DS migrated to Canada. One of the most troubling experiences since has been, DS says, "parenting three children while being an immigrant with English as a second language" and with strong though unrecognized teaching qualifications. He describes this as a 'toxic challenge', despite it arising while living in multicultural Canadian and Australian cities. DS also spoke, as a man of Eastern European extraction, of the challenge of the 'different degrees of whiteness' in Anglo-Saxon society. All of these factors contributed to his instinctive identification with the experience of Keshi:

> I admire the way she is not blaming her previous countries for any cultural or economic disadvantages and (how she is determinedly) … trying to adapt to (her) … new country… this was really … (familiar) to me. (Like)… me, she doesn't try to forget where she came from. She (tries to) … adapt to the new realities (keeping) her (history and) identity in mind. She is attempting to be part of Australian society by being different… by being from there (not here).

DW, who was born and educated in an Australian region he describes as privileged, said he found himself especially interested in Douglas:

> Even though he got a scholarship as a disadvantaged person Douglas has had a sort of golden run. His parents have supported him, he's known what he's doing, he's got good English, he's able to communicate. Straight away he's got certainty and confidence. I'm familiar with this sort of background. And what worries me is what this confidence obscures. Cause I'm familiar with that as well. And (the comparison is, for me) with the other people that we've talked to who carry much more troubled histories. Douglas hasn't had to think about his life in the way that these others have.

Then DW talks of his experience. He describes his background as, "white, Anglo Saxon, middle class, with educated parents… or an educated father". It was expected, he

said, that he would go to university. "So, I'm sort of apprehensive" DW says, "of people who have (privilege) and seem to be uncritical and unreflective simply because they've never had to be". While Douglas appears to be a high achiever, 'we never got any depth from him'. DW says, "The other people we interviewed have had to think about their lives in ways that Douglas hasn't. Their company was enriching in a way that I've never found the company of my… white male peers." Then DW's concerns shift. "Collectively we're… creating a culture and… circumstance made me need to know differently. I had to learn. Douglas has to as well. I want to see people like Douglas think about the culture they are creating. I want them to… feel like they're aware of and sensitive to others and able to incorporate that sensitivity into the way they live their lives." Whitehead (1989b) talks of this as a 'living contradiction', when practitioner researchers' values are negated in their practice, by themselves or by institutional structures. He points to the, 'fundamental problems of logic and values in the production of educational theory', and argues that a 'living form' incorporated in context and process 'moves us towards alternative ways of imagining our situation' and the 'education of social formations' (Whitehead, 2004). The dynamics of the i~we conversations that underpin this process are therefore the basis of their theorisation rather than any specific logic that was proposed.

Reflections

In our observations, our inter-relationship constructed a system of learning, a process in which, as Varela observes, 'subject and object determine and condition each other… knower and known arise in mutual dependence' (cited in Poerksen, 2004, p. 90). Stories of such learning offer opportunities for considerations upon transformation. They comprise, in Mezirow's terms, 'a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired frame of reference', that vitalises perspective, making it 'more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006, p. 124). It involves inquiry at depth: an 'extra rational' encounter (Cranton, 2006) that consciously interprets the world through subjective reference systems. It is, as Dirkx describes it, a pursuit of the inner world; 'of this subjective world that is fundamentally human and archetypal' (Dirkx et al., p.126). Social Ecology requires that such learning be considered in relation to the development of new stories for an educational environment capable of working with sensitivity to and awareness of 'the deep subjectivity and interiority of all aspects of reality' (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 40). O'Sullivan's (1999, p. 235) channeling of this into a, 'transformative ecozoic vision', is in keeping with the Social Ecology perspective and Pryer's thoughts upon liminality and, 'the margin as a site of radical openness'.

In his reflections upon the overall process MM made particular mention of the way the research built relationship. He positioned this in the context of, "an increasingly dehumanizing Higher Education sector". His experience of vulnerability he described as, "both unsettling and liberating… because laying bare one's thoughts, feelings and significant life events … transcends… boundaries". MM argued, "personal relationships emerging from formally situated research processes offer new ways of perceiving the workplace and participating in it". This process, he said, "enabled me to join the dots backwards, in terms of what shaped my conception of education as a site for transformation and aspirational change". Through its unfolding he came to appreciate, "transformation as shaped by an interplay of mutually constituted subjects and objects within a network of individual and

collective relationships and… that it is always in the making". It is socially constituted. It is a process, a, "distance travelled", that is captured in our own stories and those of our collaborators. He described this as, "a tool for understanding self-disclosure" and, "as a means for self and shared discovery": a site of engagement and learning.

SG wrote, "I think that the point about transformative learning being a process is really important. From my point of view the transformative opportunities emerging in any event are provisional, perhaps fleeting". They differ for each person. "They have their own temporalities and movements. They are not linear and not fixed in their effects or their arrangements. They are alive, 'mobile' and constantly 'opening towards possibilities". The process cannot be planned, SG said, "it never ends… It is deeply embodied and affectively charged, unpredictable and surprising".

In the final stages of working on this paper, SG went back to her old university to be interviewed for a job. This was a place she had not visited since graduation. "Like Alice" she said, "I felt like everything was out of place, the wrong size". The discrepancy between the experienced academic seeking promotion and the inexperienced 18-year-old entering a world that could change everything in her future could not be reconciled. Traces of her early tentativeness lingered. She asked, "how might living theory help frame the resonating effects of past experiences in the present, of encounters with research subjects and colleagues with different experiences, and their own relations with aspirations and educational trajectories?"

On the threshold of new learning, we become aware that our current life is a composed life, one that requires continual effort to maintain its present configuration. In the moments i~we recount in our interviews, discussions and further reflections, SG says, "we let slip the composed selves that form our usual academic identities (and)… momentarily we lose habitual points of orientation, allowing new perspectives to emerge". The emotions or 'upheavals in thought' (Malkki & Green, 2014, p. 15) that were experienced opened us to what SG describes as, "a vulnerability that began to shift our constructions of ourselves as researchers and academics".

DS describes himself as a teacher of hard-science (Math and ICT). There are, he says, "exclusive meritocratic and positivist tendencies around teaching these disciplines … [and] these learning areas are generally perceived as without emotion". DS describes approaches to research through the lens of Transformative Learning, Social Ecology and Living Theory as very new for him. As a result of this project he has now spent time reading authors in each area. As a result, he argues, "transformative learning begins to have (for me) the potential to support the recovery of authenticity and deep meaning in research, professional and personal life". DS describes this project as, "mirrored by realism, reflection on self and ethical inquiry" and argues, "instead of assuming the self-righteousness of academics, we learnt from this study by positioning ourselves as learners and reinterpreting our personal and sociocultural roots".

DW wrote that when he started work in university he, "joined a staff group of fourteen people teaching Social Ecology" who, while professional educators, were all at the same time trying to understand and work through the principles they taught. He describes this as a deeply reflective and collaborative process. It is a process marked by a focus on,

"socially constructed knowledge rather than individual learning, which viewed teaching as an inquiry process leading to depth of insight through transformed perspectives".

"Unfortunately", DW says, this group was, "diminished by restructures, retirements and the incorporation of remaining staff into a faculty with no need to encourage its existence". This, DW says, "introduced me to a competitive environment of individuation, governed by political imperatives rather than social-ecological concerns". Working in this environment, and lamenting the loss of that which he once so valued, DW said he has, "sought to re-discover that sort of process". A process that, he said, "formed me" and "I realise that this project became an aspiration to align collegiality and scholarship... to build relationships and share depth of insight. Its greatest product was, I think, opening to the centrality of vulnerability to academic inquiry alongside greater considerations upon the character and processes of learning".

DW argued that this project, "aligns with my learning in Social Ecology". He points to its focus on the living relationships through which meaning is made. He then added, "the issue is not so much what something is, but how we are changed through our participation in the generation of learning about it".

For this reason i~we argue that the merit or otherwise of an inquiry of this kind needs to be assessed from the perspective of those who participate in it. Given that others can only perceive through their own experience, how do i~we, as researchers and inadvertent participants in our study on educational aspiration, experience anew our relationships to each other as human beings and to the circumstances of our workplace? How can this be known and if it can be known, how can its impact be identified? What are the critical elements that give it identity?

SG identifies important legacies. These are in the work i~we have done together as we puzzled through theoretical understandings of aspiration as a 'complex disposition', a kind of 'thinking-feeling' (Sellar, 2013, p. 246). 'Thinking-feeling' suggests more than a way of thinking about research into aspirations, but a way for researchers to think about themselves in research. The notion of the researcher as emergent, in relation to the circumstances that lead to the sense of what it is to research, is a powerful way of accessing the social-ecological relationships that determine knowledge. In this self-reflective project, we questioned ourselves both as research subjects and as researchers. That this was undertaken collectively is central to its significance. Varela argues there is an identifiable process in this sort of learning. 'We develop our self precisely to the extent that other people have already attained such a self: the reflection in the other makes the others' awareness our own awareness' (cited in Poerksen, 2004, p. 100).

Our concluding thoughts return to the scholarship program and the students and their educational aspirations. What difference did the scholarship make to their lives? How sustainable were the transformations in their lives that they imagined? To what extent was their potential realised? This encounter between academics and research participants provoked interconnections between different personal, societal and cultural dimensions by facilitating a merge in transcultural and wellbeing pathways. The interactions are complex and the paths of learning highly individual.

DS says that this project has helped him to value research for its formative qualities. This project has, he observes, helped him to experience an ecological approach to research.

DW argues likewise, "The opportunity to appreciate this depth of connection in intellectual terms offers multiple rewards" and while the relationships that construct learning are central considerations in education, the subjective vulnerability of the researcher is less frequently addressed. This liminal encounter is akin to that of the researcher struggling to capture and communicate the ways of knowing that have been determined by the learning experience brought to the investigation: the living-theory. It may not always be necessary to make such thinking overt, but it is important to be aware of its influence. Inviting others into that awareness and facilitating shared understanding, carries equivalent import. That flush, that tingle, that frisson may then be encountered anew. 'It rushed through me for only a second or so, then for a few seconds more I felt the afterglow, but it marked that time for me, as I recall it now, as both a physically and intellectually memorable moment."

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