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Emotions and transcripts after a while: An interview with a 'parachute kid'

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of returning to 'old' interview data many years later and asks what can be learned from the different emotions that such revisiting can invoke in the researcher? It considers the significance of emotions in the process of analysing interview transcripts and how a researcher changes over time. It calls on researchers to 'revisit' past data for another look.

KEYWORDS

emotions, interview transcripts, old data, revisiting research

For the last five months, I was by myself in this house. I was pretty alone and scared for the first half month ... I usually go out ... with my friends. And then I just come back and then go right in my room. I was by myself, and I was in the bedroom, and I was sleeping ... and they [burglars] came in the basement and they took the computer, and they were gone. Luckily, they didn't, like, harm me or anything. Well, the first year I don't really miss my parents because I have a lot of freedom, right? So, I quite enjoy it. Because when I was in Hong Kong my parents were really strict The last five months I spent by myself [and] I quite miss them now. All of my friends is like: 'Oh! You're so lucky! You have a big house and you are by yourself.' But I also think, it's not that lucky when you, like, when it actually happens to you ... If your parents and your family are away from you, it's really not that great. Really lonely and sad. If you want to talk to someone, you can't. No one [to] support you or anything. I never talk to anyone about, like, really sad stuff. Yeah, I talk to my friends, but I never talk about sad stuff. Last Friday I just got broken in, right? The house. So, actually, it's not a big thing, but I am thinking it's unfair. It's happened to me twice already. And I'm really sad and I think of all the sad stuff, like, [that has] happened since I come to Canada and stuff. Like, I was really sad last Friday. I was really, really sad ... And then I called my friends to talk to them ... But I can't! [Laughs]

1 | INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Above is a short extract from a much longer transcript of an interview with a teenage immigrant. The interview was conducted in 1999 as part of a larger research project (Waters, 2000), carried out by me, a lone researcher in her early 20s studying for a two-year Master's degree. This interview was with Paul [pseudonym], aged 15, conducted in his house in West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I interviewed 15 immigrants under the age of 18, in total, about their experiences of living alone (or with a sibling) without direct, daily adult supervision. The interviews were part of a larger project on transnational families living *between* Hong Kong/Taiwan and Vancouver. During the 1990s and

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early 2000s, tens of thousands of families migrated from East Asia to Canada in response to a number of factors, including: the expansion of a wealthy middle class throughout East Asia, the Canadian government's roll out of a 'business immigration program' with a view to 'attracting' East Asian capital, China's contentious relationship with Taiwan (in the case of Taiwanese migrants) and Hong Kong's imminent 'handover', in 1997 (in the case of Hong Kong migrants) (Ley, 2010). These multiple factors combined to result in a 'wave' of relatively wealthy migrant families emigrating from the two territories and 'mass' immigration to countries on the Pacific Rim such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Within this new community of Chinese immigrants, however, it was widely understood that they would not leave their life in East Asia behind, but they would become 'transnational' (Basch et al., 1994). One parent – most usually the husband and father – would continue to work in Asia, pursuing the family's business interests there. Women would 'stay behind' in Vancouver and the children would go to school there. Remittances would be sent in reverse (i.e., from the home country to the new country). After 3 years, a passport for family members could be sought.

As it happens, my original intention was to interview only the immigrant women, who were taking care of children and running the household in Canada (Waters, 2002). It only slowly emerged (this fact was not widely reported or known) that, within some of these families, *both* parents had returned to Asia, leaving children behind and without daily adult supervision. By word of mouth, I established that this was an increasingly popular option for these heteronormative transnational families (allowing wives and husbands to be together, preventing marital discord and illicit liaisons), whilst children could continue to 'reap the benefits' of going to school in Vancouver. Consequently, through local schools and other contacts I became aware of, and put in touch with, some of these 'lone' children – the so-called 'parachute-' or 'satellite-kids'. They became part of my research project for the insight they afforded on the nature of contemporary transnational families and the intergenerational and gendered relations, therein.

Paul lived with his 17-year-old sister. They had moved with their parents to Canada, from Hong Kong, and had subsequently been left on their own, in a large newly built house. Their dad and, shortly after, their mum, had returned to Hong Kong. They visited roughly three times a year and spoke on the telephone on most days. The children's house in Vancouver had been burgled twice in the past few months (the last time was only days before the interview), but they had initially been forbidden from alerting the police (in case their parents lost their immigration status). Paul and his sister were part of a phenomenon initiated by the migration of wealthy Chinese families to North America in the late 1990s and early 2000s, known as 'parachute kids', described here in a ground-breaking book by anthropologist Aihwa Ong:

Among transnational Chinese subjects, those most able to benefit from their participation in global capitalism celebrate flexibility and mobility, which give rise to such figures as the multiple passport holder; the multicultural manager with 'flexible capital'; the 'astronaut' shuttling across borders on business; '*parachute kids*', who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute; and so on. Thus while mobility and flexibility have long been part of the repertoire of human behavior, under transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of maneuvering and positioning. Flexibility, migration and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability (Ong, 1999, p. 19, emphasis added).

In interviewing the children in these families, I was interested in investigating this idea that 'flexibility' and 'relocations' were somehow desirable and to be celebrated. I wanted to understand the extent to which the children were engaged in 'capital accumulation' and whether the strategy of being 'dropped off' in an unfamiliar country actually 'worked' (whatever that meant) (Waters, 2015). I was struck, at the time, by the emotional burden that the children were taking on through this migration (see Hoang & Yeoh, 2012).

This piece offers reflection on what it means to *come back* to research data years after the original project was conducted and 'concluded'. In the words of McDowell (1992), it 'aims to raise a number of issues ... to be provocative and wide-ranging, and to suggest questions rather than provide answers' (p. 399). Consequently, it asks questions about researcher positionality and how and why a researcher's positionality will have changed over time. In relation to this, it suggests that the emotional responses that a researcher may have to the data they have collected are likely to be different at different points in the researcher's life. Finally, it poses the question: is there value to returning to an old ('done and dusted') project? In the next section, I provide some reflections on emotions within the transcript, before discussing my emotional response, as a researcher, both 'at the time' and 'now' (when revisiting this transcript over 20 years later).

2 | THIS TRANSCRIPT: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EMOTIONS AND POSITIONALITY

For many years, emotions were neglected within discussions of migration (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). The migrant family was perceived as a seamlessly functioning ‘unit’. Interviews such as this, so heavily *emotional* in content, conversely suggest a fracturing and fragmentation of family life – rife with distrust, uncertainty and loneliness. The importance of emotions within academic life has been highlighted over a number of years by feminist scholars, for example, who have asserted the impossibility of an objective and ‘emotion-free’ research process (Holland, 2007). Holland (2007) has specifically argued that emotions are important in the production of knowledge and Ahmed (2014) has reflected more broadly on the ‘work that emotions do’ within society. Emotions have been discussed in reflections on newer research and novel methodologies (see the journal *Emotion and Society* for some examples of this) but less is written on more traditional methods of research (such as interviews) and how emotions may impact, in some way or other, the research process in relation to these.

There is also the related issue of researcher positionality. Tarrant (2014) reflects on the experience of being a ‘younger’ woman researcher studying ‘older’ men. For her, the ‘multiple positionalities’ in play include differences in age, gender and generation *between the researcher and the research subjects*. There is a long feminist academic tradition that recognises the partial nature of any ‘knowledge production’ (Haraway, 1988). As researchers, we never approach analysing a transcript objectively but our partial perspective is a consequence of where we are in our lives at that given moment.

Here, however, I wanted to reflect specifically upon the role that emotions played when revisiting old transcripts and how this intersects with positionality – how ‘present day’ emotions enable the researcher to ‘see things’ differently. There are potential links here to debates outside geography on ‘inter-coder reliability’ (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020) – relating to the fact that two or more researchers may analyse the *same transcript differently* depending on (among other things) how they are feeling at the time. But what about the *same* researcher coming to the *same* transcripts at *different* times, when emotions will all too likely also be differently felt? This could be a valid and valuable question to pose, for example, in the context of longitudinal research, undertaken over many years (even decades) or where research projects may span whole careers.

3 | APPROACHING THE TRANSCRIPT THE ‘FIRST TIME AROUND’

It is hard to recall, in detail, what I had thought when reading this transcript for my project at the time. Memory fades and is unreliable. It was the year 2000, I was in my early 20s (not too far from childhood myself) and far away from home and my own parents (as an international student) – to that extent I was an ‘insider’ within the research process (although different from my research participants in many other ways, of course, too). I could relate to them on several levels. I also felt lonely at times and missed my parents, but I additionally felt I had a degree of control over my situation and perhaps had assumed, erroneously and sub-consciously, that they did too, despite the fact that they had told me otherwise. I remember feeling that I needed to maintain a degree of researcher impartiality (Haraway, 1988). It was important not to get too close to the research participants, and certainly not to intervene in their lives in any obvious way. I recall this was a research convention: at this time, participatory methods within geography were still quite ‘new’ and innovative, although feminist scholarship was influential in making the researcher consider the power dynamics underpinning the research process (Pain, 2004). My methods, utilising interviews, were more ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ (Hitchings & Latham, 2020). I chatted to the children and offered my ear, and they all were very open and willing to talk, but I also sought to maintain a distance from their lives and tried not to engage too closely with their feelings. I had views, of course, but kept them largely to myself and I tried to ensure they did not ‘seep’ into the research outputs in any tangible way. Obviously, of course, they will have but I have little doubt that had I carried out this research ‘now’, when my positionality is somewhat different, my interpretations of some of the findings would also have been different. That is not to invalidate what I concluded at an earlier date, but just to highlight the difference that the life-stage and emotional response of the researcher may have on the research process.

4 | COMING BACK TO THE TRANSCRIPT

Old age is a fluid, diverse life-course stage ... in which individuals adopt various subject positions, including generational ones such as parent and grandparent (Tarrant, 2014, p. 494).

Often, transcripts are treated as material removed from the raw emotion of the interview scene. They have been transcribed and, consequently, a 'distance' has been achieved between the researcher and the research 'subject'. A barrier has been put up. Distance can also be achieved through time spent away from the research project. However, there is very little discussion, in the academic literature on research methodologies, about 'old' data: what do we do with old data (if anything?); is it appropriate or valuable to *return to* data collected a while (years, even decades) prior and to look at them again (through fresh and, as I explain below, changed eyes)?

Here, I reflect briefly on my experience of *coming back* to my transcripts many years later. I came back to them a different person (now a mother myself whose own mother had passed away) and, consequently, was surprised to find that these transcripts, discussing familial relations and children's experiences, both upset and unsettled me in what I saw in them now, despite the many years that had passed. The extant academic literature discusses the positionality of the researcher and how this may influence the research process: as Lareau (2021) reminds us, 'who you are shapes what you see'. But the identity of the researcher is in flux. The researcher will *change*; perhaps even as a consequence of undertaking the research. And, of course, we change over time and with the accumulation of life experiences, as the quotation from Tarrant (2014), above, intimates (although Tarrant is discussing the research subject and not the researcher themselves). Who 'you are' at one point in the process of research may not be who 'you are' later on. Consequently, can it be interesting and informative to return to 'old' data and revisit past transcripts and to ask, what do I see *now* (and why) compared to what I saw *then*? What difference does this revaluation and returning make to the process of analysis? Does it expose the fragility of qualitative research or emphasise its richness and humanity?

Paul's emotions, exuding from the interview extract, invoke a reader's emotional response. Despite living with a sibling, Paul felt profoundly *lonely* most of the time. He 'could not talk' to his friends about his feelings and predicament. He projected an outwardly confident and bubbly persona and, without a doubt, kept his feelings of loneliness to himself. In his own words, he had 'no-one' to talk to. He also experienced *fear*. When his house was burgled for the second time, he was very afraid. He was in bed and felt completely helpless. Thankfully, nobody was harmed, physically, although undoubtedly Paul carries the mental scars of this ordeal around with him even now. We can also see, in this extract, a teenager's *conflicted* feelings – a cognitive dissonance. His friends think he is 'lucky' – he has a big house to himself, his parents are away, he has no-one around to tell him what to do. And yet, he feels so sad. He was struggling to reconcile these conflicting emotions. He also reveals a dawning realisation around his situation. At first things were good. He had freedom – it was exciting. But *over time*, he understood, it's really 'not that great' to have your parents away from you for most of the time. Having no-one to talk to about his feelings likely heightened Paul's sense of anxiety around his situation. This is my brief analysis of the extract *now* (from the vantage point of middle-age).

I came back to these transcripts as an adult and a parent and for the first time saw the jeopardy this particular child was in, alone with their one sibling and no parents around. Of course, I had thought 'this is a dangerous situation for these children' and 'they must be frightened' but I had failed at the time, somehow, to feel the fear, palpably, viscerally. Rereading the transcript brought tears to my eyes. I felt so sorry for these children (now adults, I hope living happily somewhere, their experiences a distant memory – although see Ngan & Chan, 2022, who have recently completed interviews with parachute children *as parents* about their reflections on these experiences). I also saw the much deeper emotional impact of feeling abandoned by your parents. Perhaps abandoned is too strong – after all, children were in daily (or at least weekly) contact with parents via telephone. Many parents had organised a cleaner to come around, once a week, and during the summer months, a gardener. Children admitted that their parents cared about them – what they were up to, what they were experiencing, but they found it surprisingly easy to hide their true feelings from them. As Paul had said in a different part of his interview, he wanted his parents to be 'happy' in Hong Kong. He did not want them to worry about him. Nevertheless, several of the children interviewed talked about having been 'abandoned' by their parents. Paul did not mention abandonment specifically, and clearly still loved and greatly missed his parents, but there was a sense of broken trust in what he said (Waters, 2000).

I am no closer to understanding, fully, the parents' decision-making, although the parents I did meet cared deeply about their children and felt transnational migration was a small price to pay to secure their futures. Parents were faced with the prospect of their children's educational 'failure' in Hong Kong or Taiwan. Most of the children (or their siblings) were not doing too well in school and were likely to 'fail' (their words). Parents were also concerned about their political futures and sought the security of a second passport. This passport (a Canadian passport) would enable their children increased future mobility, as adults.

5 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

So, to conclude. As Hitchings and Latham (2020) observe, although geographers are renowned within the social sciences for deploying innovative research methods, interviews remain a ‘taken-for-granted way of generating empirical data’ within human geography (p. 391). Rarely do methodology textbooks and papers discuss the prospect of returning to ‘old’ data in the form of transcripts, and what we might see differently (not to mention how we ‘see’ things in data at all). Once a project is ‘finished’ (whatever that means), it tends to gather dust, in boxes in our offices as cassette tapes (artefacts from a different era) or metaphorically in our minds. But returning to old transcripts can be a valuable exercise in a number of ways, some of which I have touched upon above. It is possible to be alerted to different things in the transcript. Some things may jump out that we may have previously missed. But we can also have a more emotional response to parts of the dialogue – emotions triggered by our own subsequent life experiences. It complicates the notion of researcher positionality, when we realise that the researcher’s identity is shifting and malleable over time. *When* (in our lives) we come to the data matters as much as *how* we come, in terms of our analysis and interpretation. Coming back to old data is also, perhaps more simply, interesting. It allows us to reflect on our own trajectory as a researcher – where we were and where we are now. It allows us to *reconnect* (in a way) with our research participants, rather than leaving their words behind. These individuals (young people in this case) gave their time to me; many poured their hearts out, for me to analyse and dissect. Coming back to their words and breathing new life in them has been a humbling, reflexive, reflective and worthwhile experience.

What might be taken from this reflection? What lessons might be learned? I would first encourage researchers to go back to old projects and look at them again. I appreciate that the pressures are on winning ‘new’ grants, presenting ‘new’ ideas, having something different to talk about. But it is possible to extract new things from old. My sense is that these ideas link to feminist reflections on ‘slow scholarship’ (Mountz et al., 2015) in resistance to the neoliberalisation of the university and, by extension, academic research. Second, I will be more attentive to *my* emotions in analysing transcripts, not just the emotions of my research participants. I will spend more time asking myself why I have responded in this way – why this upsets me, unsettles me, why I agree or disagree with a point being made; why a particular point excites me and causes that giddy feeling you get, occasionally, when reading a transcript and ‘seeing’ or ‘feeling’ something. Let us try bringing emotion into the research process a little more overtly. By thinking, in a fuller sense, about the role that emotions can play in the process of analysing transcripts, whilst at the same time acknowledging that a researcher’s emotions will change over time, we can perhaps achieve a more accurate sense of the role researchers play in qualitative knowledge production.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for this project are not publicly available as it exists only in hard copy. Please request this from the author.

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