**In what ways can a researcher respond when faced with empathy? Reflections from interviews with migrants to Australia**

**Introduction**

Empathy is often understood as an awareness and understanding of the emotions of another person. This article explores empathy in the research process. It focuses on the empathy felt by two researchers – Laura and Harriet - undertaking research about the experiences of migrants to Australia. This experience of empathy was novel because both researchers were migrants, hence, their emotions were triggered in relation to their own migration as well as that of their participants. Whilst the researchers were working on separate projects, there were significant areas of overlap. They had both interviewed skilled or professional migrants about their perceptions of life following migration, exploring issues of: friendship initiation; language and cultural challenges; and, the emotional consequences of moving to a new country. Both researchers found that on occasions the stories of participants resonated at a corporeal and cognitive level, generating a feeling of solidarity which they defined as empathy. This paper explores how these feeling of empathy could be triggered by the commonality of an experience, such as the shared difficulty of accurate language expression that was articulated by a migrant during an interview. Empathy could also be generated by a deep understanding of the participant’s predicament, even when the researcher had no first-hand knowledge of the specific scenario being described. This paper will discuss the ways that the researchers were challenged on a personal level with the difficulty of how to act on their empathy both during and after the interviews, and the concerns that they had about the ways that their emotional responses might impact on the objectivity of their analysis. This paper concludes that both researchers found that some interviews generated moments of understanding leading to empathy and which was valuable to assess the experiences of migrants in our work, and in relation to our own experience.

**Migrant researchers interview migrants**

The use of interviews to learn about migrants’ experiences of migration is well established as a method (Baldassar, 2001; Bell, 1997; Clarke 2005; Conradson and Latham, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). Yet despite providing rich insights into migrants’ lives in a new country, there is little mention of the feelings of the researcher in their role as interviewer or in context to their research. Reflexivity in research has been highlighted by some feminist researchers. Whilst her experience interviewing first time mothers lead Oakley (1981: 30) to highlight that in general interviews can have personal meaning as a social interaction, migration scholars have tended not to consider the reflexivity of the researcher. For Laura and Harriet, migrants to Australia from Mexico and the UK respectively, the process of interviewing migrants about their experiences of migration lead them to explore their own subjectivity and understanding of their participants.

Both researchers set out to hear the views of their participants in their own words using semi-structured interviews which investigated a range of themes about the experience of migration. Although these projects were separate and distinct, there was much commonality in the areas that they investigated. Laura’s sample interviewed 30 participants who were solely from Mexico. Whilst Laura did not actively seek professional migrants, most of those that volunteered fell in this category. Harriet interviewed a sample of 20 skilled migrants from a range of countries of origin[[1]](#endnote-1). Both researchers were interested in the ways that migrants experienced friendship initiation following migration, and their feelings about living and working in a new country in comparison to the old. Aspects such as language and cultural challenges, and the emotional impacts of migration such as loneliness were teased out during interviews, in order to explicitly uncover migrants’ perspectives in their own words (Esterberg 2002: 87; Patton 1990: 278). This approach focused on the everyday interactions and perceptions of migrants as a consequence of their migration. Insights into migrant’s experiences generated feelings of empathy for both researchers during and after the interview process, as this paper will discuss.

**Understanding the feeling of empathy**

The literature highlights that the term empathy can be ambiguous, so for the purposes of this paper we situate how we understand this term (Wispe 1986: 317). Our starting point is that empathy is an emotion, and in this respect it can be shaped by social and cultural factors (Lupton 1998: 2). As with other emotions, empathy can be felt, performed, and managed on deep and surface levels (Hochschild 2003; Laurier and Parr 2008: 98). A key point was that the interviews and research process generated to varying degrees an emotional response for both researchers. Whilst the participants’ emotions were diverse, ranging from annoyance and sadness through to loneliness, their stories stimulated Laura and Harriet’s empathy. This empathy manifested due to their cognitive “awareness in imagination of the emotions of another person” (Wispe 1986: 316). We describe empathy as both a bodily sensation and a concomitant thought that triggered solidarity with the participant and which arose from the researcher’s inter-subjectivity. Rather than feeling sorry for the plight of the participant, as with sympathy, or living through the participant vicariously, the researchers simply felt a connection at a deep and personal level which manifested through a mental connection at the experiential level (Kligerman 1984: 326; Wispe 1986: 316-7).

The problem with empathy, as we both discovered, was what to do with it in relation to the participant and for ourselves. Although empathy was felt at different times and in varying intensities as part of the objective process of understanding the migrant’s predicament (Wispe 1986: 319), the standard format of the interview does not generally allow for the researcher to express or to act on it. Indeed, both researchers had commenced their interviews with the aim of seeking objective material, and had chosen to consciously ignore the fact of their own migration. It was with some surprise then, as the interviews progressed, that Laura and Harriet both grappled with these feelings of empathy, and being touched and moved by it, have set out after the event to understand how it was triggered. We are both reticent about our own emotional responses because on one level they seem to be self indulgent. Yet, our research work has required a prolonged commitment of our time (3-years respectively), and an intensity of our thought. Our own migration experiences have evolved simultaneously, and at times it can be challenging to separate these two components of professional and personal life. Whilst in most respects our empathy is peripheral to our research, we argue in this paper that it is still a significant factor that has shaped our understanding of migration on a range of levels. The following section explores our empathy in relation to migrant’s stories about language difficulties, loneliness and friendship initiation.

**Language expression by migrants who spoke English as an additional language**

Laura interviewed numerous migrants from Mexico who recounted considerable obstacles to expressing themselves among Australians; despite the fact most of the migrants interviewed had a solid command of the English language. For instance, Guadalupe, a highly educated 31 year old with professional experience prior to migrating to Australia in 2004, found it very difficult to find her first job in Australia, a difficulty she attributed to a reticence Australian employers exhibited towards applicants who speak English as an additional language:

He told me that my accent was super strong and he practically fired me in the first week … For me that was devastating … since that day I’ve kept in the back of my mind that I could be fired at any moment. It traumatised me. It traumatised me for the rest of my life. Till today.

While interviewing Guadalupe, Laura felt strong empathy towards what Guadalupe described as an emotionally traumatising experience, despite not having shared similar experiences of discrimination for her foreign accent. That is, Laura was confronted by the raw emotions of her interviewee so she was consciously drawn towards understanding the subjective experiences of Guadalupe (Wispé, 1986: 314). No matter how competent in English language, because Guadalupe’s strong accent ran counter to the norm of local pronunciation, she found herself in a position of vulnerability which impacted on her employment prospects. Laura empathised with the way that Guadalupe’s had been discriminated against, and these sentiments were long lasting in Laura’s imagination and aided at better understanding the interviewee’s experiences of migration.

Just as Guadalupe’s experience left Laura feeling a sense of injustice, several other of Laura’s interviewees also confessed that they felt language was a barrier to fully express themselves or to be taken seriously, particularly in the work place, and therefore a source of difficulty and sometimes anxiety – something that Laura fully identified herself with. For instance, Eduardo, a 30 year old migrant who had been in Australia since 2008 said,

Sometimes in my job I have had difficulties expressing myself adequately, or making my point clear in English. That’s been difficult. [Socially] I have also been in situations in which I had not been able to make myself understood.

Laura had found it difficult to express herself satisfactorily since becoming a migrant and hence was able to ‘reach out’ and to understand Eduardo’s experience (Wispe 1986). Academically Laura has had to explain her ideas in English – her second language – and such situations have recurringly brought up linguistic challenges, regardless of her strong command of the language and her bilingual formal education since commencing primary school. Laura felt deeply cognitively attuned to Eduardo’s unarticulated feelings of frustration for not being able to adequately convey meaning when expressing himself in English, however, despite feeling the urge to act and express her empathy, the formal situation of the interview constrained her to an extent. Laura attempted to convey her understanding by using empathetic tone of voice and allowing the pace of the interview to slow down to allow the participant to collect his thoughts. Laura also felt empathetic emotions again during the write-up of findings. In the case of migrants experiencing language challenges, Laura often felt strong empathy, regardless of whether she had or had not experienced a similar difficulty. As both a researcher, and a migrant, one of the main obstacles for Laura was balancing her emotions with her objectivity when analysing and writing-up her research.

**Feelings of loneliness**

Harriet interviewed Ignacio, a migrant who had been in Australia for about one year. In this excerpt, Harriet is clarifying some information that Ignacio provided on a pre-interview form that collected background information.

Harriet – And you have described yourself as neither happy nor unhappy?

Ignacio – Yeah I don’t know – I feel like – I feel like kind of lost – like not lost but kind of like…

Harriet - How do you mean?

Ignacio – Because I only moved here … because I don’t have that many mates and everything is completely different. I speak the language you know but I really don’t speak it at the same time. Because it is not just the language it is all the cultural references and stuff that you don’t know. So you might be having a conversation but you can understand them but you don’t know what they are talking about. So…

During his interview Ignacio expressed the emotional loss of his old friends, and the challenges that he faced communicating using English language with new friends instead of speaking in Spanish. It was Ignacio’s reference to feeling ‘lost’ which Harriet found touching. Ignacio has found himself in position of ‘unrelatedness’ to the culture in Australia (Duttman 2000: 70). The exact nature of Ignacio’s feeling, which may lead to homesickness, or nostalgia, remains implicit or unarticulated in his account, as he both acknowledges and immediately denies that he is ‘lost’, suggesting an emotional ambivalence. Later Ignacio told Harriet that he had welcomed the chance to talk more about his feelings as a migrant.

Ignacio - Like before – [this interview] I was like “yes” I would like to talk about it – because I feel that I don’t have like – like it takes years – but I feel like I don’t have any friends. Real friends. So. I don’t know – I think that is maybe why I feel a bit like – what is happening, you know?

Harriet - Is that why you were feeling a bit lost do you think?

Ignacio – Yeah maybe. Yes because I don’t have like real friends. I don’t have real friends. So.

The interview can be a cathartic experience for the participant. Ignacio’s comments highlight that for him, there was a therapeutic aspect to taking part in the research that has been previously acknowledged in the literature (Corbin in Pahl and Pahl 1971: 300, Oakley 1981: 37). The experience of migration has been identified as one that can uproot an individual from their home, and yet, in the case of skilled migrants, this process is undertaken willingly (Malkki 1992). However despite this willingness to migrate, there are still emotional consequences on the migrant’s ability to maintain relations with old friends and family outside Australia. For Harriet, a similar feeling of being ‘lost’ was something that she shared with Ignacio, although unlike him, this was a feeling that had crept up slowly over 10 years spent living in Australia, and which was an unexpected outcome of migration. Sharing Ignacio’s experience of being ‘lost’ triggered Harriet’s empathy. This caused her some unease as an interviewer because despite reading of similar scenarios occurring during interviews as part of her literature review, she had not considered what she might do if this circumstance actually arose. Harriet attempted to mask her unease by using ‘emotion work’ - actively seeking to suppress what she was *actually* feeling in favour of what she thought she *should* be feeling - to generate a thoughtful yet attentive professional demeanour which seemed fitting, and hence to continue with the ‘performance’ of the interview (Goffman 1971; Hochschild 2003; Oppenheim 1992: 69).

**Friendship initiation**

A recurrent topic among migrants interviewed both by Laura and Harriet was that they find it difficult and slow to establish friendships with Australians. For example, when Laura asked Mauricio, who arrived from Mexico City in 2006, to talk about his social life, he said:

It is difficult to enter social circles here. They are very much ‘closed’ ... For example, someone could be the friend of your work’s friend, but that someone is not your friend … Also, they don’t invite you to a lot of things. It is a very cold atmosphere. That is how they are. They are not like the Mexicans … Here everything is with an invitation and they even tell you ‘you can bring someone along but you can’t bring more than one’. That is ‘I invite YOU’. It is not like it is in Mexico ... So, yes, it is hard to make good friendships here.

Mauricio expressed his difficulty making friends in Australia and the frustrations he has dealt with when trying to enter social groups. Laura’s emotions were triggered when Mauricio referred to people in Australia being ‘closed’ and the social atmosphere being ‘cold’. Interviewing a migrant whose stories resonated, both at a corporeal and cognitive level, to some of Laura’s own migration experience not only lead her to feel solidarity towards Mauricio, but also lead her to explore her own reflexive responses to such anecdotes. Like Mauricio, Laura had also found it challenging to infiltrate Australian social circles. Mauricio’s stark juxtaposition of social life in Australia as ‘cold’ and ‘closed’ compared to Mexico’s, is an expression of not only of the difficulties of making friends in a new and foreign place but also of his feelings of nostalgia for an idealised social life that he had left behind. Further, nostalgia may be compounded when one is in the company of a fellow compatriot, such as in this case where both interviewer and interviewee shared common backgrounds as migrants and as Mexicans.

A second point that Mauricio made was that Mexicans and Australians enact friendship differently. When he says ‘everything here is with an invitation’ he refers to a common frustration that some Mexicans experience with what they perceive as a certain social rigidity among Australians. This was reflected by the majority of interviewees who expressed varying degrees of disenchantment with the lack of social spontaneity here, whereas many Mexicans place even greater value on social events which come together at the last minute, as somehow adding to the authenticity of an occasion or celebration. Whereas, by comparison, they find themselves inhibited in a milieu where social plans need to be organised in advance. Similarly, Eduardo who migrated from Monterrey in 2008 also commented on the social reserve prevalent among Australians:

I think that people in Australia are more reserved ... we [Mexicans] enjoy randomness; we enjoy chance; the unexpected ... And I think in Australia people like to have things more under control. When you go to a party in Australia, it seems like people that have been invited have been chosen meticulously ... throwing all the marbles at the same time is what works in Mexico; then you see where they have landed. Here, it is, like, ‘let’s organise all the marbles in line, one after the other and then they start queuing neatly’.

Eduardo’s account of the lack of spontaneity in social environments provoked a strong emotional response in Laura. On the one hand, she aimed to remain neutral over the course of the interview in order to collect objective material. But on the other hand, Eduardo’s interview created moments of subjectivity as Laura became aware of her experiences as a migrant in a foreign country. Eduardo’s words suggest his understanding of the differences in enacting social life between Mexico and Australia and his frustration at the ways Australians attempt to keep things ‘under control’. In her personal life Laura has often reflected that whilst it is impossible to be accepted into every social situation, when there is a common language this is a facet of social life that can be managed. Yet, when speaking in the host rather than the native language, this can present an additional layer of social inadequacy, which is compounded when a migrant needs to adapt to different codes of social interaction as used in an Australian context. When considering these barriers, Laura felt in a better position to understand migrants’ perceptions of social life following migration.

**Conclusion**

As this paper has highlighted, one of the challenges for these migrant researchers was to deal with the tension of objectivity versus subjectivity when investigating the migration of others. Despite aiming from the outset to maintain neutrality in order to best analyse their interview findings, both Laura and Harriet had their own migration experiences which they became aware of during the course of their interviews. The interview as a social encounter generated moments of understanding during which emotional empathy occurred for the researchers. This was not an occurrence that either researcher had given a great deal of thought to beforehand, hence, Laura and Harriet felt challenged by how to act on these feelings in the interview and afterwards.

The researchers found that empathy sometimes arose as a consequence of a common experience with the participant, such as the specific difficulties of communicating in a second language. This was the case with Laura, when interviewing Eduardo. However, the researcher did not need to share the particular experience of the participant in order to empathise with them. For Harriet, it was the generality of the migration experience in terms of being ‘lost’ which Ignacio indicated in his interview that triggered her empathy, even though the particularity of their contexts was different. Both the researchers found that acting to express their empathy during the interviews was challenging. They sought to manage their emotions and maintain an appearance of neutrality towards the participant. Simultaneously they attempted to positively acknowledge the participant’s feelings through a range of ways, such as slowing the pace of interviewing and softening the tone of voice, and using verbal sounds such as ‘mm hmm’, along with body language such as nodding kindly to indicate their empathy.

Perhaps inevitably, our own migration has shaped our research. Both Laura and Harriet have reflected on their feelings of empathy towards their participants to conclude that the experience of migration and of undertaking migration research has changed and shaped our relations to our participants. These feelings of empathy are ongoing long after interviews have been concluded, and are directed not only towards those loved ones that we have left behind, but also to new people that we meet in our professional role as migration researchers in Australia. In conclusion, we consider that rather than compromising the objectivity of the analysis, our empathy adds to the richness and understanding of the participants that we represent in our work.

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1. America x 1, Bulgaria x 1, Canada (Quebec) x 1, England x 6, France x 1, Hong Kong / China x 3, India x 1, Ireland x 1, New Zealand x 1, Norway x 1, Slovakia x 1, Sri Lanka x 1 and Venezuela x 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)