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Alex McDonagh is a lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies at the University of Salford. His research interests are broadly based in heritage and culture, with particular focus on the ways that heritage and culture are formed in everyday and subaltern contexts and how digital media may affect the perception or agency of dominant cultural discourses.

Reflexivity, doubt and social tensions in collaborative research as positive research impact

In this reflection I aim to tell you about how my PhD research has impacted on both me and on the participants involved. I first highlight some of the early anxieties related to my role as a researcher and my anticipation of what was to come in my research project. I then go on to address some of the impact the research project has had on myself through the development of relationships and my growth in confidence as a researcher. The impact on the participants is then discussed in terms of their reaction to the project. As well as acknowledging my own doubt as a researcher, I share some of the ways I was able to overcome these doubts and maintain self-confidence throughout the research process. I conclude with some of the ways that the project has demonstrated the potential for wider impact and the significance of my anxieties and reflective approach as integral to that impact.

My PhD project looked at the impact of developing a digital heritage interpretation and explored the impact on heritage meanings as communicated in a digital object, but also the impact of the digital development process on users of heritage sites. Often there are traditional heritage meanings that receive primary attention; for example, historical narratives associated with heritage sites. Smith (2006) identifies these meanings as part of an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). My research project aimed to engage with non-Authorised Heritage Discourses in addition to AHD. The heritage focus here is Towneley Park in Burnley, Lancashire, which contains a number of traditional heritage aspects as well as everyday leisure and heritage aspects. Along with the AHD meanings in the park, I have aimed to illuminate some of the different ways that we engage with park heritage spaces. I have used a phenomenological methodological approach (Tilley, 1994; Bender et al., 2007) which embraces the role of our bodies and emotions in understanding landscape meanings. This has consequently involved interviews and field visits to the park with park users. Taking a grounded theory approach, the interviews were open-ended and I left the field visits open for the participants to choose a route through the park. Key to the research approach has been to provide the participants with the freedom to communicate the park to me from their own point of view.

Based on the narratives gathered, a digital representation of the park, called *Digital Towneley,* was developed in collaboration with the participants. Feedback interviews with the participants helped to highlight the impact of both the research process and *Digital Towneley* itself.

My early anxieties

In the early stages of the research, I had several anxieties linked to my role as researcher. My initial contact with participants through telephone and face-to-face conversations caused me some anxiety, similarly identified by Trussell (2010), related to the potential unknowns

involved in ethnographic work. I was apprehensive about how I would come across to the participants and ultimately how well I would handle the unscripted interviews. My own emotional investment in the project was therefore clear from an early stage. Trussell's approach had highlighted to me the importance of acknowledging the researcher's positionality as a way of understanding ethnographic research more fully. In the context of park heritage, I also adopted ideas which embraced both emotional and corporeal factors (de Certeau, 1984; Smith, 2006; Bender et al., 2007). My role as a researcher would be to perform heritage narratives in the park space alongside the participants.

The 'data' I sought were the meanings most significant for the participants in relation to Towneley Park and the ways in which the participants interacted with the park. To this end, I tried to avoid imposing my own epistemologies on the participants in order to minimise my influence on how they communicated the park to me. This meant that the purpose and form of *Digital Towneley* remained unknown for much of the research project as it relied on what the participants would tell me and show me. This caused me some anxiety as I found it difficult to explain this concept to the participants and as a result I was concerned at times that I was not projecting a convincing research identity. In response to this I drew strength and confidence from the literature that had inspired me, leaning on ideas that supported the potential of my approach to illuminate under-represented heritage voices (Waterton, 2005; Smith, 2006).

As a researcher, I felt that I had a responsibility to accurately represent these heritage voices. I knew well from my research that heritage issues can be emotional and important for the people involved, and so I began the project with an awareness of how heritage issues may be emotional and important for the participants. I was nonetheless surprised by how passionate the participants were about the park and their use of it. From the beginnings of the interviews, it was clear that the park space extended into many aspects of the participants' lives. Although this felt overwhelming at times, I kept a reflective diary to track my own feelings and agency in the research process. This followed the approach of Bender et al. (2007) and helped me to understand not only my own feelings but also some of my interactions with the participants.

Impact of the project on me

I turn my attention now to participants Helen and Gareth, both of whom I interviewed and visited the park with. Helen is a member of a voluntary group that cares for the park space. I became a member of the group because it is a significant part of the running of the park. I also felt obliged to attend the group meetings because: (i) I did not want to offend Helen; and (ii) I wanted to foster a good relationship with Helen and other park users to recruit participants for the project.

During the start of my field trip around the park with Helen and Gareth we had open-ended conversations about various aspects of the park, but also about our lives more generally. My research journal captured some of the concerns I had about my perceived role as researcher:

> We made some small talk about what I might do after my research - I felt it necessary to mention the possibility of continuing the research at Towneley; I have become aware recently about the potential offence that may be taken if I suggest that I will just move on afterwards.

From my contact with the participants, I had become aware of how important the park is to each of them. My research journal identifies that, from my perspective at least, I had developed an affective engagement with Helen and Gareth. Put simply, I cared about their feelings; how they viewed my intentions was important to me and, in this sense, my research participants had already impacted on my life and social connections.

I was mindful and wary of the potential for my academic interest to make me distant and insensitive to the participants' perspectives (Waterton, 2005) and I felt manipulative because I was aware that there was an unequal power balance. The participants had something that I wanted: their knowledge, experience and perspective. These thoughts highlighted for me my own motivations as a researcher and I was concerned that my own research narrative would override the heritage narratives of the participants.

On this subject, I was put somewhat at ease through discussions with my supervisor. Just by vocalising and articulating the situation with another person, I was able to break out of the mental loop that I had formed from my close attachment to my research. My supervisor provided me with a helpful perspective and I was able to see the value of my involvement in the voluntary group as a fair trade-off for participant involvement in my own research. This reduced my feelings of guilt and helped me to draw confidence that I was taking reasonable steps to gather research data.

Impact of the project on the participants

An aim of my methodological approach was to work towards representing the participants' varying uses and opinions about the park. However, while I aimed both to engage participants on their own terms and to avoid imposing my own epistemologies, my approach also appeared to have an impact on the relationships I developed with the participants. During the field visit with Helen and Gareth, we reached a pathway junction where some of the negative impacts were revealed. To avoid imposing my own perspectives, I had let the participants decide where we would go. For Gareth, this didn't work well:

> It is frustrating, he says, to have to think what the important parts of the park are. My impression is that I have irritated him.

It was evident that my approach here fell short of allowing the participants to use the park in their own way. Although I had left the decisions up to the participants, my role as researcher clearly affected the dynamic of our walk. Gareth felt a pressure to identify 'important' parts of the park and this was frustrating because I had not provided guidance on how to categorise such 'importance'. Despite aiming to be transparent and collaborative, my approach may at times have appeared to conceal a secret research agenda.

In contrast, two other participants, Ruth and Derek, expressed satisfaction with the project and appeared to show genuine appreciation of my approach:

> It was nice to have somebody take an interest

> It's like somebody taking an interest after years of being, you know, out there in the wilderness, cos we know it's here, but nobody else knows it's here

Here, Ruth and Derek were identifying the interest I had shown in their own narratives of the park in contrast to the traditional narratives put forward by the local authority custodians. These responses are representative of several of the participants' reactions to the project and they highlight some of the success that the project had in engaging the local park users.

Communicating views as starkly different as these versus Gareth's reactions was a challenge and this made me anxious that my research would be a failure; that my outcome would be offensive to the participants. Although there were positive reactions from participants like Ruth and Derek, by unwittingly irritating Gareth my anxiety had been magnified.

Here, my literature review provided me with guidance and I drew confidence specifically from the study by Bender et al. (2007). In putting together an exhibition of their findings, they explained how some local residents had become angered by the exhibition's interpretation of the local environment. It reminded me that the impact of my research on the participants may be positive or negative. It was a tangible example for me that things could go wrong even for the academics who we seek to emulate, and that this need not mean disaster.

Impact achieved by the project

The success of developing relationships was integral to the narratives that I was able to create and share with the participants. The *Digital Towneley* project was a product of those relationships and Ruth and Derek perceived *Digital Towneley* to have the potential to challenge the authority of the local council and to champion the voices of the local community. They felt that the project may have the potential to influence local government funding decisions. In one exaggerated example, a participant stated that *Digital Towneley* was "important for the whole country" since he felt that it communicated the benefits of park spaces to the nation.

Other participants saw the project as an honest reflection of their own feelings and experiences about the park. These everyday elements of Towneley heritage were impactful for the participants insofar as they communicated important stories of memory and experience within the park. For some participants, *Digital Towneley* was seen as a concrete object that represented a legacy of park experiences made accessible to friends and family. These participants felt they had left their mark.

Conclusion

The open-ended nature of the interviews and field visits did cause me to doubt my effectiveness as a researcher and presented frustration for some participants like Gareth. However, as the participant reactions of Ruth and Derek demonstrate, my approach also fostered trust and appreciation by engaging with participants on their own terms. As such, the project had positive impacts on the participants.

My concern for the participants' feelings was evident from my reflexive diary and this acted as a reminder of my responsibility as a researcher and my role as custodian of the participants' stories. This helped to prevent distancing myself from the human significance of the park spaces and so develop some accurate interpretations of the participants' park. This helped to develop the impact of Digital Towneley on participant's ideas of legacy and future

as well as the potential for political (local government) impact. It is therefore through my research project's impact on me that I was able to influence the impact of the project on others.

In relation to the above, I hope that the following points may be useful to you in your own Early Career Researcher journey: 1) Identify some reflective studies in your field that discuss openly the emotions involved in carrying out research (e.g. Trussell 2010) or that openly highlight mistakes and pitfalls (e.g. Bender et al. 2007); 2) Avoid the echo chamber of your own thoughts by ensuring that you discuss your research practice with your supervisor or other counsel; and 3) in light of the above, be prepared to be imperfect and to make mistakes.

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