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Douglas, Kitrina (2022) Walking into the unknown: a research journey through abuse, trauma,
motherhood, poverty, and the Covid pandemic. *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, 22 (4).
pp. 378-382. ISSN 1532-7086

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/15327086221090661>

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Walking Into the Unknown: A Research Journey Through Abuse, Trauma, Motherhood, Poverty, and the Covid Pandemic

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
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DOI: 10.1177/15327086221090661
journals.sagepub.com/home/cscKitrina Douglas^{1,2} 

Abstract

Researching the lives of mothers with children under five from the most deprived areas of a major city in the United Kingdom during a pandemic was never going to be easy. In this performative reflection, I explore how walking and the side-by-side-ness of our interaction facilitated conversation and understanding, between one young mother and myself. I also consider in this performative text, the way a researcher's thoughts whirl around and respond to what is being shared, although never voiced at the time.

Keywords

research, conversation, Covid, interaction, trauma, grooming

Researching the lives of mothers with children under five from the most deprived areas of a major city in the United Kingdom during a pandemic was never going to be easy. But, as I've learned over the past twenty years, each research project brings its own peculiar challenges, introduces its own pitfalls, calls for its own methodological recipe, and creates its own soup.

Since entering academia twenty years ago to learn how to “do” research, I've listened and talked with many people. My research journey may have begun with high-performance athletes who often appear on top of the world, and at the peak of their physical prowess. But, as the research showed, sometimes it's the people you expect to be healthy and well who tell stories of abuse and trauma (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009). And sometimes, it's those living at the sharp end of poverty, disadvantage, injustice, trauma, and abuse, who teach us the most about caring, resourcefulness, dignity, and hope.

On this occasion, my existing understanding surrounding the “grooming” of young women, bullying, abuse, and disadvantage, forewarns me about some of the mined terrain that potentially lies in wait. While I'm not aware of feeling shock or surprise becoming, as Amia Lieblich (2014) writes, a container for the “other's” story, I am deeply saddened. I question my role as a researcher. I question what we are doing to allow this to happen in a (so-called) civilized country in the C21, *am I here to help, who should I be helping, am I being naive to think I can make a difference?* I question how proactive I should be and what

“we” might do as a culture and community. And I continue to take heart from Denzin's (2003) call to reanimate life and that through enacting a dialogic performance-centered ethic, we might provide materials for critical reflection. As an autoethnographer, I am aware of the challenges of balancing what we write about and where we write from, knowing I have a position of power during commissioned research and the research is not about me (Carless, 2018).

Voices stick with you, don't they? Even without a recorder, it is still possible to remember the rhythm of someone's talk, how their words are placed, the unexpected pauses and emphasis (Carless & Douglas, 2016b). I have in my head now the voice of a young woman. As I listen to her with my eyes on the horizon, I wonder if the sadness and anger I feel as I digest our conversation should be put to more use. As I ponder these things an invitation arises, an opportunity to write again, to perform, to raise our voices, and to tell a tale of how our paths interconnected, for a few moments.

Brydie (pseudonym) is a twenty-year-old woman with a two-year-old son, who allowed her details to be passed on to our research team, saying she wanted to tell her story.

¹University of West London, Ealing, UK

²Leeds Beckett University, UK

Corresponding Author:

Kitrina Douglas, University of West London, Ealing, London W5 5RF, UK.

Email: kitrinadouglas@gmail.com

From our first meeting, she made it clear to me she wanted others to hear about what had happened to her. Specifically, she wanted to warn other young women about the danger of being beguiled, or more specifically, the term commonly used now, “groomed,” by someone who she thought loved her. She wanted other young women like her to watch out, but she didn’t want to go into too much detail, and she didn’t want to be known. But, make no mistake, she wanted these issues to be raised in some way. Yet, importantly, the young woman I met was more than this, more than the event that had shrouded her life.

As best as I could discern, she understood the project I was part of was exploring physical in-activity, poverty, and mothers with children under five, but what she also seemed to grasp, and wanted to make use of, was the opportunity for her story to be included.

How do we sensitively work with young women like Brydie? How far off course should we go during a research project? And what do we do when the covid pandemic disrupts the normal ways we learn about other’s lives? There was a possibility, an opening—We could take exercise with another person outdoors, and so we went walking.¹

In the usual course of events, when we have conversations with participants, we sit opposite them, perhaps over a coffee and cake with the recorder between us. But this was not a face-to-face encounter, with two women observing each other. Rather, this was two women walking side-by-side.

Reflecting on my time with Brydie, the side-by-side-ness of the encounter seems important. I am aware we were looking into the same horizon, walking in the same direction, moving at a similar pace, navigating the same hurdles, and our footsteps traced the same tarmac. For an hour, maybe two at the most, on three occasions, we walked and we talked, allowing the motion of the movement to open up conversation (Carless & Douglas, 2016a). The following is a brief representation of some of the talk on those walks. But perhaps too, it’s also a reflection of the way a researcher’s thoughts whirl around and respond to what is being shared, although never voiced at the time.

Following Bryant Alexander and Mary Weems (2021), who ask in their collaboration titled “*Collaborative Spirit Writing and Performance in Everyday Black Lives*”, “do the terms poetic and performative speak to form, or do they serve as a function of doing,” my stanza-inspired form facilitates the emotional connection between Brydie and I (see also Carless, 2011; Diversi & Moreira, 2009) as we walk together.

I held my recorder between us
 Capturing words, sounds, birds
 Footsteps on the pavement,
 her son in the pushchair, out front
 not making a sound
 just two women out with the pram,
 a very normal sight

My earliest memory is when I was 4 and my Dad getting me a teddy bear
 I was a bigger child and had hearing problems
 Loads of appointments and hearing aids, behind at school
 always picked on

fat, ugly,
 kicking my bag, trying to pull my trousers down and video me.
 stuff like that. Got strangled in the girl’s toilets.
 No one would believe me
 I didn’t want to go to school.

Found loads of different ways of hiding
 self-harming
 when I was 13
 One day a teacher noticed,
Was this on purpose?
 My whole arm was covered
 I can’t hide it anymore . . .
 the teacher went, *Do you want me to call your mum?* I went, *Yeah.*

Dad called me everything under the sun.
 put me down. He was living in the house, had depression I think.
 I didn’t really get much time with my dad at all.

I was diagnosed with depression at 15
 first boyfriend used to head butt me
 I did like him, it was just the fact he kept hurting me
Why do you like him? friends asked, I thought, I don’t like him.
 I’d had enough of . . .
 I found the power to break up.

I’d just turned 16 when I went out with this guy,
 he was nice and friendly.
 We were off and on for three months,
 then it was,
If you want to be with me you’ve got to sleep with my mate.
 I didn’t want to do it.
 He forced me
 It felt like I didn’t own my body.

Mum phoned
Where have you been?
I’ll tell you when I get back, I need to get home now.
Hello, is that the police,
we’ll come round.
 I got interviewed,
 examined in town
 It was hard, to go.
 My mum came with me, but she had to sit outside
 women who specialise in stuff like that
 taking swabs, like a smear test.

And they had to make sure for bleeding
 and everything like that.
 And bruising.
 I had evidence on my clothes, still haven’t got my clothes back.
 He’s done it to other women as well,

can't remember her name,
and we were talking for a half hour,
Just talking about college, just chatting.
then I said *I better get home!*
Sometimes I don't take Dan along with me so I can just chat normally.

I didn't see my friends at all when I was pregnant,
Some go, *Oh you've come back after having a baby! How have you done it?*
A lot thought I wouldn't come back.
But I wanted to.
It's gonna help me in the long run.
When I finish college, I want to be working with old people in a care home.
It's something I've always wanted to do
It's fun, take them on days out, planning it all.
I've always liked looking after people.
Being back at college is hectic though,
eight pieces of course work every other week.
It's difficult to get it done

I admire your hope
And I dislike my cynicism
Moments looking after my own mother
are evoked in my body,
the shitty dimension of caring
I don't want to voice
Were my fingers cold, through rubber gloves?

I admire your lack of bitterness
How you are so at ease
So hopeful
So dignified, with so little

What is little, or much
What is finding love and hope
What is moving on and building your future
What is the admiration of your friends
What is the mental health support you give and receive
What medicine is there in a cuddle
In achieving parenthood
juggling a son, college, finances
negotiating medication
dreams and nightmares.

I wonder is the bar high? or is the bar low?
20 years old
Your horizon, helping people,
working towards a noble profession
I wonder why caring for our elders is valued so little?

More uneven surfaces, uneven finances, uneven society,
and she's pushing the baby with grace and strength, proactively working toward a hopeful future, for herself, her son, and her family. We stop at the main gates of the place where she picks up her food parcel each week. She tells me this is

where she takes a little break. She lights a cigarette, a treat and moment for herself. She exhales and the smoke lingers around us. There is no breeze and it lingers around us.

We're going to Butlins
Seven children, and my partner's aunt and uncle
staying in a caravan
we haven't had a holiday yet, ourselves
we'll take Daniel and just run away,
for the day.

I want to save up for Christmas presents next year.
I saved up £30 a month for his birthday
for 3 months we cut back on Cola
I have a box every two weeks
helps me get through the day.

They greet Brydie at the counter, smiles all round, and the staff jump to action. *We've some noodle this week, and sweet and sour*, says one of the children center staff. I watch the food being placed on the table, the white bread, a pack of chicken drumsticks, a pack of sauce, I calculate the nutritional value, and think about what I'll be cooking tonight. She stows her bounty in every square inch of the pram and we push off, heavy laden, for the journey home.

The children's centre are starting buggy walks,
but I do a lot of walking already,
up hills, down hills, everything.
I walk to college, there and back,
that's two hours.
I'm quite tired,
Sometimes, when it's raining, nan gives me the bus fare,
But it's that freedom of going out and being my old self
before I had Dan
I used to walk quite a bit, didn't really get tired then.
It's a lot different now, to how it was back then.

Gym is something I want to do
but it's the money
we have £300 to last the month.
we can live off it
We just have to be very, very careful

I've got all my old clothes from when I was 15.
We split the shopping.
We're on the food bank, that's an extra 100 quid a month
The food parcels save a bit of money too
And sometimes Sheila will get bits of food in
if we don't have much left
It all helps

Me working in a care home should be a grand a month,
so it should be a lot better then.
When I've got the money,
I will sign up for the gym

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all the women who took part in this research and shared some of their life stories with me, in particular I would like to thank the young mother we call Brydie. I would also like to thank Bryant Alexander and Mary Weems for both the invitation and enthusiastic response, finally I would like thank and acknowledge David Carless, for his ongoing interest, warm response and support for my work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was part of a larger project funded through Bristol City Council and Sport England.

ORCID iD

Kitrina Douglas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-9642>

Note

1. Each country introduced its own “lockdown” rules which often changed at different moments during the pandemic (and still continue to change).

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Author Biography

Kitrina Douglas is an award-winning researcher, video/ethnographer, storyteller, musician, and narrative scholar whose research spans the arts, humanities and social sciences. She publishes her research as films, documentaries, and musical theatre, as well as through written peer reviewed publications, magazine articles, online publications and books. With David Carless she produces the online qualitative documentary series “qualitative conversations”, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UcKWCTy8bNOY6JlvX_yg-Uig/videos, and co-author Sport and Physical Activity for Mental Health (Wiley-Blackwell) and *Life story research in sport: A narrative approach to understanding the experiences of elite and professional athletes* (Routledge).