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Walking into the unknown: a research journey through abuse, trauma, motherhood, poverty and the covid pandemic

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Forthcoming in *Cultural Studies* ∩ *Critical Methodologies*.

Abstract

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

Key words, 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 UK 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 methodology 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 that first research showed, actual lives don't follow the stereotypical caricatures. With the high performance athletes it was an unexpected turn to find so many stories of abuse and trauma (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2009). At other times, it may be those we least expect to inspire us – for example women 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) civilised 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-centred ethic, we might provide materials for critical reflection. As an auto-ethnographer, 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, 2016a). 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. 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 walking¹.

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, 2016). 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, though never voiced at the time.

Following Bryant and Weems, who ask in their collaboration entitled “Collaborative spirit writing and performance in everyday black lives” (Alexander & Weems, 2020) “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. (5.24 mins)

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,
he got 3½ years.
It's not enough for what he's done.

Why should I live with it?
Why should other women live with guilt
and not sleeping at night?
Three years ago and I still have nightmares, anxiety in my sleep.
I wake up and have a full panic attack.

I did have counselling after I was raped,
it let me look at my anxiety levels, my depression levels.
but I had to wait 9 months. Still self-harming, still in a bad way.
taking forever. It was meant to help you get through it,
but I was waiting, all that time.

I have no idea what it's like to not receive love from your dad,
held in warm arms that feel secure
That aren't asking me to do anything to prove my worth
I have no idea what it's like to be bullied at school
Or not be believed

Who doesn't want to feel love
Receive compliments, gifts
feel special?

Do I have a right to write your life
To imagine your body as you speak it,
As not your own?

I have no idea what it's like to be taken to a police station,
Asked to undress
unbutton, unzip,
You said they were kind, but still
proof, evidence
blood, skin, bruises, swabs,

Can you cover yourself? Did they take pictures?
Were their fingers cold, clad in rubber gloves?

We didn't talk too much about it,
My body gathering more than a recorder ever could

We pass the nursery school, the police station, a row of shops. Cracked black tarmac, giving way to tree roots, road works forays leaving badly patched surfaces. Past the park, over the railway bridge, round the corner across the pelican crossing. More crumbling tarmac, the pram becomes unwieldy, pavements crowded with cars parked half off-road, refuse bags and bins refusing to make space for pedestrians, we separate and file past - she carries on talking.

I met my new partner at college. I didn't really trust him to begin with.
I kind of had to tell him what was going on with me.
He's helped quite a lot.
We've been together two years

When I get anxious, I start freaking out.
So I play music. If I don't have that I try to ignore it.
But it don't work really.

But now I call my partner, *I'm freaking out can you stay on the phone?*
And he just talks me through it.
Goes, *Calm down, slow your breathing*, and everything like that.
It normally helps quite a bit.
It's good because sometimes he gets it as well.
He's just got to text me, and I come up, if I'm not busy.
I cuddle him and make sure he's alright. Calm him down.

The baby came last year in October.
It wasn't planned but I'm happy with it.
As soon as I found out I was pregnant I gave the counselling up.
Before I was pregnant, now and again I might have a relapse, but I haven't since.

We live with Sheila, his mum – I get on well with her
We all support each other.
If you don't support each other, there's no point living together is there really?

she helped quite a bit after Dan was born
Then I done everything by myself.
Once I got used to it, I done it.
I'm used to it now,
all the crying and punching!
My partner's always around, but he's on his games.
A lot of people say I'm more like his mum!
I've got to ask him to do anything.
So, I do it myself.
Some days it's hard,
Some nights he sleeps, some nights he doesn't.
It's hard to get enough sleep. I'm up at 5
and if I take the antidepressants late,
I can't get to sleep until about 3 or 4 in the morning.

Today we are walking to the food club, we pass two Pizza bars, two fish and chip shops, the post office, and a tiny local supermarket - which looks ill-equipped to serve this large community - then a barbers, a kebab take-away, a tattoo studio, a closed local value supermarket, and yet another (this time advertised as "value") chip shop, a bakery, a boarded-up sandwich bar and a salon.

Lockdown was hard
It went quite bad.
phoning my nan or mum all the time
Before lockdown I'd see my family every other weekend,
go to the Young Mum's groups,
play with other children,
meet other mums.

It gets him active and there's toys for him to play with,

The Children's Centre people are nice.

I talked to one last week,

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

(6 mins to here only stanzas)

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 towards 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 stops, tells me this is where she takes a little break. She lights a cigarette, a treat and moment for herself, and exhales the smoke. 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 centre 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

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