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Research as relationships: Bringing our humanness into research

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Introduction

One of the most enjoyable moments in my experience of being involved in research took place in 2015 at a research project planning workshop in Cape Town, South Africa. I was part of a research team that included Prof. Leslie Swartz, who was meeting with potential participants to discuss a new research project on sexuality and physical disability. At some point in the morning, I was in the process of explaining the proposed use of photovoice as a method for collecting data. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that invites research participants to create images that symbolise or reflected aspect of the topic in question, in this case their experience of themselves as a sexual person (see Hunt et al. 2020). Sexuality is typically regarded as a 'sensitive' research topic, requiring a thoughtfulness about the potential intrusive and shaming aspects of enquiring about matters of sexuality, and it was felt that inviting participants to set the agenda of a research interview prompted by the photographs they generated, would be a good way to proceed in exploring something personal and 'sensitive'. In an effort to calm what we thought may be potential anxieties or insecurities of some of the participants about what they were being invited to photograph, I reassured everyone that we were not asking them to take images of a sexual nature. There were some nods of understanding. And then we heard one participant ask, 'but why not?' in a lovely, curious, ordinary way. Everyone laughed. 'Yes, why not?' another one said. This sparked a long, lively and enjoyable conversation about sex, sexuality, disability and representation, and created a bond between us all. It humanised a 'sensitive' topic, an experience of self, which is so often dehumanised.

Relational aspects of research

The one thing I have learnt above all else in doing research is that research is about relationships. As research students, we first learn about research in terms of different epistemological positions and methods of collecting and analysing data, about the ethics and management of research projects, how to frame research questions and hypotheses, inclusion and exclusion criteria for study participants, and so on. The nuts and bolts of research. All of that is important, but none of that really matters, if you do not have good relationships to start with. Not just good relationships among researchers, but with participants too. As a psychotherapist, I know how part of what makes good relationships is the space for a range and depth of feelings, the capacity to compromise and meet one's own as well as others' emotional needs, mutuality and reciprocity. The American psychoanalyst, Jessica Benjamin (1988:19) stresses the importance of *recognition* for the development of the self and establishment of relationships. She states that 'the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects', but for that to happen, the individual needs to be recognised by the other as a unique subject, an individual with their own subjectivity, and, in turn, the individual needs to recognise the other as a unique subject. We internalise the recognition (and misrecognition) from others to form part of our sense of self.

There are also different forms of relationships. We might speak of vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical relationships involve a hierarchy, a top-down relationship, with one in position of relative authority over another, such as a parent–child relationship or teacher–student relationship. A good-enough vertical relationship facilitates the healthy development of the one in the 'lower' position. A vertical relationship that involves domination over the other is damaging. A horizontal relationship involves some level of equality, such as friendship relationships. However, in horizontal relationships, there may be differences that inevitably come in to create potential hierarchies. For example, in a friendship, differences in gender or socio-economic status may create some dynamic of inequality.

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Research is not psychotherapy, but it often involves a relationship between the 'researcher' and the individual 'subject' being studied. When it comes to research, there are assumptions about what kind of research generates 'proper' knowledge, and what gets relegated as inappropriate and less 'proper' (Chamberlain 2015). 'Proper' research is often understood to be research that is positivist in its epistemological position, emphasising the importance of objective observation of the subject of research. This tends to be a vertical relationship. Here the researcher is objective in his or her observation of the subject being studied. But it can so often be the case that the human 'subject' of research ends up not being a subject at all, but rather an object. They become the object for the researcher, an object with little or no recognised subjectivity. In research on people with disabilities, research is often conducted as an oppressive 'clinical gaze' that focuses only on impairment and 'abnormality' (Condrau 2007; Garland-Thomson 2009). While medical research is necessary, some of it can be conducted in a manner that can be dehumanising; research *on* people with disabilities, rather than research *with*. Furthermore, the idea of an 'objective' researcher has been contested. We can never really be fully objective. If we are human, we have feelings, a subjectivity with a history, and we cannot keep that 'outside' of any research activity. Research that follows more social constructionist epistemology tends to break down some of the authoritative top-down forms of research (Chamberlain 2015) to involve more humanising ways of working. One might say aiming to achieve both vertical and horizontal forms of research relationships. That is not to say that more 'positivist' research cannot attempt to do this too. Even though most research encounters are short-lived, involving only one interview, such encounters do involve relational aspects.

In the project, we utilised participatory research methods. Participatory research is an approach to research that emphasises inclusion and collaboration (Kagan, Burton & Siddiquee 2008). It aims to promote research where researchers work 'alongside the primary sources of knowing' (Goodley & Lawthorn 2005:136), which promotes change and empowerment and not just the generation of knowledge. However, when it comes to implementation in practice, 'participation' can mean many things, and can include minimal consultation on an advisory board, or just sharing information, or activities of greater participation such as deciding and acting together on a project. Participation research might have elements of inclusion, but it does not necessarily mean that relationships that involve recognition, respect and reciprocity are at play.

Personal reflections on the supervisory or mentor relationship

The relational aspects of research cannot be learnt through textbooks, nor by going on a training workshop. It partly, of course, depends on the personality characteristics of the individual. But a key factor here, I think, is the supervisor or mentor of the student of research. This is an important relationship, a vertical relationship, and one, like many other mentor–mentee relationships, that becomes internalised to form part of one's way of being. It is through my relationship with Prof. Leslie Swartz that I learnt the importance of forming good relationships in research.

I first met Leslie (if I may address him here informally) in 2001, when I came to do my Psychology Honours degree at Stellenbosch University, and he became my personal tutor. We were both new arrivals at a university, which historically would have likely not have been our scholarly 'home'. For various reasons, I felt like I did not quite fit in, but they offered an evening programme that suited my circumstances. Leslie too found himself in a new, different environment. As he became my personal tutor, I felt he recognised something of the 'outsider' in me, and I think I recognised something of the 'outsider' in him. Years later, we mused that we 'found each other' that year. I remember the first day meeting in his office, an office full of piles of papers and books. He was warm, colourful, interested, enthusiastic, and encouraging. His empathy and deep interest in what it means to be human are reflected in the depth of his work in disability studies. In the subsequent year, I stayed to do a research Masters, and he became my supervisor. Thereafter, I went to a different university to complete a training in clinical psychology, but remained in contact, and returned to do a Doctorate at Stellenbosch University, with him as my supervisor. I combined my interest at the time on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexual health with his interest in disability studies, doing my PhD on HIV and people with disabilities. We also worked as colleagues on a different collaborative education research project. I like to think that we also became friends. He met my partner, came to our wedding, and even after I left South Africa, we remained in touch, and continued to work together. This is because he fostered a good relationship, one that encouraged me to overcome my initial anxieties around confidence, which contributed to me feeling more at ease with myself and what I had to give, because he was interested, and I felt recognised. As a student, I could observe that this was, and is, his strength. As busy as Leslie is, he made sure to carve out time to really speak with you, not just about work and what had to be done, but about *you*. He was encouraging without pushing or demanding; patient, but eager to also try and move you into gear. Here was a vertical relationship, without domination, where there was the creation of some horizontal ways of relating, without loss of authority and experience. However, it wasn't all one way. After all, a good relationship is reciprocal and involves mutual recognition. I felt Leslie wanted to bring out the best in others, and in turn, he allowed it to bring out the best in him. This was also not an idealised observation. There could also be some irritations and frustrations expressed, even anger. Nevertheless, humaneness involves a range of feelings. I never saw him 'talk down' to anyone. As a researcher, for Leslie, people were not objects, they were real subjects, subjects who had interesting lives, often difficult ones, who had experience and views that mattered. It was not only in observing these

relational qualities but also experiencing it in our relationship as it evolved over the first few years, that I came to learn how to do research differently, and to internalise a way of working.

The development of such a relationship, and in turn the fostering of relational qualities that might facilitate a more humane and thoughtful research practice, requires time and an academic environment that nurtures such relational qualities. However, in many, if not most, universities, academics are increasingly overloaded with work, and pressed for time, and there exists a corporate culture of student satisfaction metrics. Such practices may discourage the development of quality relationships.

Collaboration on a disability and sexuality project

In our disability and sexuality research project, the workshop was the start of a 4-year journey of creative collaboration on a project that evolved along the way, which generated different stories about the sexuality of men and women with physical disabilities in South Africa (see Hunt et al. 2021; Rohleder et al. 2021). In the initial workshop, when the one person asked 'but why not?', they made an important intervention to invite recognition and visibility of something, which is always often unrecognised and made invisible. That is, people with disabilities have sexual bodies and have sex too. The unequal and dehumanising treatment of people with disabilities is well-documented (World Health Organization [WHO] & World Bank 2011). One of many ways in which people with disabilities may be dehumanised, is in the area of sexuality. People with disabilities have so often been subject to denigrating attitudes that frame their sexuality as potentially dangerous or as non-existent (e.g. Milligan & Neufeldt 2001; Nguyen, Liamputtong & Monfries 2016; Rohleder et al. 2018). People with disabilities may be vulnerable to sexual abuse (Mueller-Johnson et al. 2014). Societal dictates about the body and attractiveness, may result in some people with disabilities being perceived as undesirable and 'undatable' (e.g. Hunt et al. 2018; Marini et al. 2011). These sorts of attitudes not only represent social barriers that exclude people with disabilities from full participation and enjoying fully sexual lives but also have negative implications for sexual and reproductive health (Carew et al. 2017). These attitudes have the effect of oppression of people with disabilities as intimate citizens; that is, where 'intimate citizenship' concerns our rights, agency and responsibility to make personal and private decisions about when we share intimacy, how we are intimate and with whom (Ignagni et al. 2016; Plummer 2001). These are the sorts of issues of social justice that Leslie cares deeply about, and that he brought out further in me. In our research project, one of the key pillars of the work was the formation of collaborative relationships that enabled us to explore these 'sensitive' personal topics in more humane and creative ways. Good relationships were formed, not only among the research team but also between the 'researchers' and 'participants' and between some of the participants themselves. These relationships enriched the project and our experience in it. Leslie's involvement and enthusiasm inspired much of this direction. As with any research project, the work came to an end, but the people are not forgotten.

The fact that this journal has created this special issue is testament to the enormous contribution that Prof. Leslie Swartz has made to research on the African continent and beyond. His career contribution leaves a legacy of excellent, important, capacity-building research, but more than that, a legacy of lasting relationships formed and nurtured, which continue to do the work that is much needed.

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Data availability

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