

## ‘Good’ things take time: A living story of research as ‘life’

### **Abstract**

#### Purpose

Although the process of fieldwork is often characterised by dis-order, the requirement to adhere to a tightly defined methodology and produce timely research outputs often leads us to present our findings as though the research has been the product of a linear process. In this paper, we unmask this paradox, by documenting the dis-order and development of a research project 15 years (so far) in duration.

#### Design/methodology/approach

The approach used in this article is one of autoethnographic reflection, drawing on aspects of Boje’s living story approach, incorporating not only the ‘linear’ narrative of the research process, but also fragments of ante-narrative, themes running above and below the dominant. Within the study we are reflecting on, we employ a range of qualitative methods, including interview, focus groups, memory work, and living story (ante narrative) methods, within a critical management research methodology

#### Findings

Our experiences show that although ‘messiness’ may be an inherent part of qualitative research, it is this very dis-order, and the consequent opportunities for time and space, that allows the research, and the researcher, ‘time to breathe’. This reflexivity allows for methodological development and refinement, and ultimately rigorous and participative research, which also honours our participants. We argue that although this approach may not align with the current need for prolific (and rapid) publication, in allowing the dis-order to ‘be’ in the research, and allowing the time to reassess theoretical and methodological lenses, the resultant stories may be more authentic - both the stories gathered from participants and the stories of research.

#### Originality/value

The paper highlights the intertwining of stories of participants and stories from research, which is a significant addition to understandings of the ‘messiness’ of qualitative research. This paper adds to the growing call for the inclusion of ‘chaos’ and authenticity in qualitative research, acknowledging and valuing the humanity of the researcher, and giving voice to the paradox between the time to methodologically develop, and the requirement for timely research.

**Keywords:** Fieldwork, stories, disorder, research risks, reflexivity

## **Introduction**

Although, in practice, the process of fieldwork is often characterised by dis-order (Donnelly et al., 2013), the desire to adhere to a tightly defined methodological and theoretical tradition often leads us to present our findings as though the research has been the product of a linear process (de Wet and Erasmus, 2005; Ganesh, 2014). Moreover, a desire to be seen as legitimate within disciplines which still often privilege positivist quantitative research as inherently rigorous (Sarma, 2015), sees qualitative researchers attempt to mirror descriptions, and turnaround times, of quantitative studies. Indeed, Hermann (2012) reminds us that the nature of research traditions is historically bound, and argues that qualitative work, which foregrounds subjectivity, is subject to a process of ‘maturing’. Could it be that in the desire to present qualitative research as rigorously ‘academic’ and ‘legitimate’, we may be ignoring an important part of the unique process of gathering and assembling qualitative research, and missing an opportunity to develop as researchers, and indeed as a research community?

The current context of business education is firmly focused on the rapid turnaround of research outputs, and increasingly the employment of the researcher is incentivised, or contingent, on adhering to a programme of frequent publications (Dowling, 2014). Hermann (2012) terms this process academic capitalism, requiring ever increasing researcher ‘productivity’, measured largely through publication number. Within this context, the priority for many researchers, often through pragmatic necessity, is on methodological approaches which offer a quick turnaround (Mingers & Willmott, 2010). Similarly, the institutional processes governing research, such as the ethics process requires the researcher to detail a tidy, systematic methodology and design, with any dis-order relegated to discussions of contingency, and oftentimes contain a time limit for the research to be completed. However, as described by Donnelly et al (2013), the research process of qualitative research is rarely without a degree of chaos.

This paradox renders, according to Donnelly et al (2013) ‘hidden stories about telling stories of the organizational, and about doing knowledge about the organizational’ (p. 6). For Van

Maanen (1988), the telling of ‘confessional tales’ involves first-person accounts of research experiences, both as a reflexive tool, and a form of cultural critique {Cunliffe, 2010}. Reflexivity in research is emphasised as central to interpretive and critical research, aiming to narrow the distance between the researcher and ‘researched other’ (Day, 2012, p.62). Indeed, Cunliffe (2010, p. 226) highlights that ‘whether we recognise it or not our tale is as much about our “room” and “view” as it is about the world of others’. Moreover, there is an acceptance that the process of research reflexivity often involves the passage of time, and perspective gained with periods of distance from the project. Indeed, these ‘pauses’ in the research process enable a stepping back from the work, and often a return to the work with a new perspective (Day, 2012). However, filling dual roles of ‘researchers’ and ‘employees’, particularly within the neo-liberal university, often requires a trade-off between research output, and the time and space for maturity of the research and the researcher.

However, for Van Mannen (1988), the confessional tale is not without its critique, and indeed, he describes how in many cases the confessional tale is aimed at legitimising the researchers work, ultimately to ‘demonstrate the competence of the fieldworker’ (Ganesh, 2014, p. 449). In doing so, the researcher is often more concerned with the notions above of appearing scientifically ‘rigorous’, than exploring the role of fragmented, personal and relational aspects of research on the production of ‘knowledge’ (Ganesh, 2014).

In this paper, we unmask this context which many of us work within, and highlight the benefits of allowing the research ‘time to breathe’, and in doing so we render our (imperfect) position in the research process explicit (Daskalaki, 2012). In doing so, we go beyond the confessional tale, and provide an example of pushing ‘the boundaries of powerful and dominant publication norms’ (Tracy, 2012, p. 113) . We describe our experiences over the past 15 years, designing and redesigning a single research project, all within the context of our own ebb and flows of career, fluidity of research team, and personal life. This story is told as an auto-ethnographic adaptation of Boje’s (2008) ‘living story’ approach. Rather than a focus on the tidy ‘Beginning, Middle, End (BME)’, living story researchers focus on the complexity of ante narratives which occur before, after, and simultaneously to the ‘narrative’. For Boje and Tyler (2009, p. 173), the living story “recognises the plurality of selves that constitute our identity, and our

reflexivity that is out of time, more upon what lies below and above”. Boje (2008, p. 1) further describes ante narratives as involving “a form of repackaging – where new characteristics are recognized and old characteristics are minimized”, involving chaos, not in the sense of a “neglect of order” (p. 2), but whereby “order is hidden, subterranean, preconscious” Aligned with such an approach, Daskalaki (2012) highlights how autobiographical and autoethnographic studies help us to ‘understand how our academic “characters” fit the plot of our personal life and how our experiences as practitioners in/transform the plot of our academic scenarios’ (p. 431). Therefore, in this paper, we document the living story of this research project. We concur with Peticca-Harris, deGama and Elias (2016) that the process of gaining and interacting with participants is often more than simply a pre-requisite of the ‘real’ work of research, but can significantly shape the research. Our experiences have taught us that although messiness may be an inherent part of qualitative research, it is this very dis-order that provides spaces for methodological and theoretical reflexivity and growth. We argue that although this admission may not align with the need for prolific (and rapid) publication, in allowing the dis-order to ‘be’ in the research, and allowing the time to reassess theoretical and methodological lenses, the resultant outcome is more robust research. In doing so, we provide an example of what Day (2012) and Spry (2001) consider a performative praxis of research, which, aligned with our critical management background, has transformative and emancipatory potential. Day argues that this praxis, ‘making explicit the processes by which we come to know’ (p. 62) holds significant benefits both for the researcher, and also has significance to the collective understanding of the process of methodological development, as we adjust our practice to respond to ebbs and flows in the research process. Additionally, the unmasking of the subjectivity of the research process renders the power structures embedded in the research process explicit, in doing so having the potential to transform the nature of ‘research’ both for the researcher and the ‘researched’.

## **Research Background**

Our story begins in late 2002, five days before Christmas, when a large scale redundancy announcement was made at a Pulp and Paper Mill in a town located just 1-hour from our University (Thompson, 2003). This town, once the fastest growing town in New Zealand, had experienced systematic downsizing of the local industry, and associated socio-economic

decline, over the past 20-years. The lead researcher initiated the research through an interest on both a personal and research basis, as someone with personal attachment to the industry (growing up nearby, her brother worked in forestry), and as a critical management researcher interested in the way in which global forms of organisation impacted at a local level. A second researcher joined the project as an enthusiastic research assistant, about to enter postgraduate study, with little knowledge of the context and no personal attachment to the project, but a strong interest in critical management studies and industrial relations.

The resultant 3-month strike action which resulted from the redundancy announcement led to one of the longest strikes in NZ history. However, this industrial action was set within the context of a general lack of support for industrial action within the wider New Zealand community, and wider public vilification of striking workers and unions. With this contextual backdrop, we were curious; what about this town sustained such action? Tokoroa is a single industry rural town in central New Zealand, founded in 1947 on land owned by New Zealand Forest Products, New Zealand's largest privately owned company at the time (Healy, 1982). Tokoroa is situated 3 hours south of NZ's biggest city (Auckland) and in close proximity to the large-scale central north island forests. The Kinleith Pulp and Paper Mill, built 8km south of the town is a dominant presence on the landscape and in the community. The company and government had a collaborative approach to town development, in a New Zealand first, and by the time Kinleith Mill opened in 1954, the company housing project was the largest private housing scheme in New Zealand.

The town was largely made up of mill workers and their families, and as such had a large proportion of young people. The mill workforce peaked in 1980 at approximately 6000 (McCaw and Harbridge, 1990). However, as with many industry towns, the global shift to outsourcing aspects of production has seen activities once performed locally being exported off-shore. These include the processing of logs into pulp and the production of paper. Resultant large-scale redundancies have characterised the workforce, and by 2013 it stood at approximately 300 workers. The impact of this downsizing was not only on the direct employees of the Mill, but across the many supporting occupations within the Tokoroa workforce. The town of Tokoroa has been in a state of population and socio-economic decline

since the mid 1980's – the period also when a programme of neo-liberal structural adjustment was implemented in New Zealand.

The town, being a single industry town, is also entwined with previous research on single industry towns (often called 'resource-based communities' in North America). Most of this writing has come from the North American experience, and particularly the Canadian experience (Barnes & Hayter, 1992; Behrisch et al., 2002; Leadbeater, 2004; Lucas, 1972; Parkins, 2003; Randall & Ironside, 1996). In the New Zealand context, single industry towns were a primary target of employment in-migration (Chapple, 1976), a term which describes the moving into a community or region. Many of the towns were state-planned and developed directly as an instrument to control unemployment in the post WWI and WWII periods. Migration from the cities to the developing towns was encouraged and the towns became characterised by high levels of population growth, high wages, and a highly skilled workforce. During the 1960s and 1970s, due to full employment and high demand for workers from industry, New Zealand began a planned employment migration programme from the Pacific Islands (Kelsey, 1997). Many of the positions offered were in regional industry towns, where demand for workers was high.

The discourses of 'the single industry town' have significantly changed since the growth period of the post-war era, and are now dominated by descriptions of decline and meritocracy, as embedded in neo-liberalism. Where once the state played an active role in the very early development and recruitment of citizens to these often remote locations, now notions of individual responsibility and effort (or perceived lack thereof) characterise the rhetoric. The current popular construction of 'Single Industry Town' is of a town that is poor, dirty, slightly out of date, and somehow unable or unwilling to adapt to the new necessities of the global marketplace.

### **Theoretical Positioning on Project Commencement**

This research was initially framed within a critical management tradition (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) and particularly a concern about the exploitative tendencies of global business within a framework of neo-liberal capitalism. Of particular interest was the widespread adoption of neo-liberal policies and practices, and the concurrent spread of global corporate activity and adoption of new work practices. From the perspective of critical scholars such as Alvesson & Willmott (1992), this adoption is concerning, as neo-liberal policies seem to represent unfettered capitalism; capitalism in potentially its most exploitative and destructive form. This concern seemed reasonable to us, evidenced by global and national changes in income inequality and rates of over under and unemployment. Further, the associated processes changes in the nature and structure of work, in particular the global division of labour, adoption of flexibility and concurrent human resource management practices, seems to have moved corporate control over workers from the workplace to every part of life, and even to the self (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). From this position, the town of Tokoroa appeared to be an example of a community formed in the company's interests under a Keynesian political agenda, now rendered responsible for its own 'destiny' in a world of individualised neo-liberalism. Aligned with a Critical Management Research partial ethnographic methodology (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), we decided that the first phase of our research would be a deep historical and contextual analysis, carried out using secondary sources.

### **Phase 1: Deep Background Study**

The background study consisted of a 6-month historic and contextual analysis of the period 1920-2002, of the development of the N.Z. forestry industry, the town of Tokoroa, and subsequent changes occurring in the NZ political, economic and employment landscape. These developments were set against a backdrop of increased international business activity and global political change. Key findings from the deep background study seemed to reinforce our suspicions that single industry towns, embedding notions of community, work and organisation, provided specific micro-level examples of macro global changes. The scope of this initial phase was not only decided due to the methodological choices we had made; it was also scoped as appropriate for a Masters dissertation, and was carried out by the junior team member as such. The junior team member, although not personally connected to the case study, nor with any particular interest beyond a broader interest in Critical Management Studies, was

attracted to the proposition as it provided a well-defined topic, which generally take some time for postgraduate students.

### *Secondary Study Conclusions*

Our background study of the context of Tokoroa concluded that it could be usefully conceptualised as a micro-example of changes in the global political economy. This conclusion reinforced our initial critical positioning, and left us feeling optimistic about the future of the project. The discourse embedded in the report of the initial phase reveals a strong tendency towards this critical structural analysis.

*As indicated by the findings of this investigation, events that have occurred at the Kinleith Pulp and Paper Mill have been broadly reflective of changes occurring in the wider social, political and economic context.*

*The development of the forestry industry in New Zealand was a government welfare mechanism – a deliberate effort to provide employment during the Great Depression. Therefore, government ideology was key to the very first stage of development of the forestry industry. After the introduction of Keynesian principles into New Zealand government policy, the development of the forestry industry was largely based around government social policy – with increases in activity during times of potential high unemployment. The timing of the first pulp and paper license was also significantly intertwined with social objectives – in order to provide diversified employment during the post-war period.*

*From the opening of the Mill, until the programme of structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, the mill was an organisational level representation of the Keynesian ideology. In this sense, even though the Kinleith plant was (in theory) privately owned, the national-level ideology transferred to the private sector ideology. The Mill represented a self-sufficient site, with each section viewed as contributing to the overall economic well-being of the plant. Similarly, under this ideology, the workforce held a*



*role of significant importance. New Zealand's egalitarian history had long valued production workers alongside 'professionals' and business owners, and this followed through to the employment relations strategy at the Mill. Up until the 1980s, the workforce held significant power, the power to work or not to work, the power to exert pressure if working conditions were judged to be unfair, and generally received majority support for these decisions amongst the surrounding community.*

*Through viewing the Kinleith case in light of the historical, political economic and social context, it becomes possible to observe developments, which over time have become embedded within society. The reforms of the 1980s and 1990s introduced a radical form of neo-liberalism into New Zealand, containing themes such as individualism, meritocracy, and narrow economic notions of 'efficiency' and 'productivity'. Today, these themes are normalised within societal ideology, and form part of the basic framework upon which societal values and practices are formed. An example can be seen in the response from Tokoroa when plans for temporary employment during the modernisation programme were announced. The town was grateful for this employment, which was a marked contrast to the full-employment philosophy of a decade earlier.*

*The globalisation of companies further removed the decision-makers from the site of production, leading to increasing commodification of individual production sites – as individual plants are reduced to costs on a global balance sheet. An example of this is given in relation to Kinleith:*

*CHH wants the mill to stay open but, as he stresses several times during the interview, only if the company can run it how it wants. If not, CHH and its American-based parent company, International Paper, will walk away from the mill and Tokoroa. He says there are too many mills already around the world and more than 60 mills have closed in North America since 1999. Only profitable mills survive, and he claims Kinleith has lost money for the past two years. (Thompson, 2003 May 10).*

*Finally, related to the themes discussed above, critical theorists hold that capitalist structures require a 'cadre of docile functionaries' – individuals to carry out its work, without questioning. These individuals become docile through the hegemonic embedding of the capitalist ideology. This case clearly illustrates the docility of large sections of society –from the workers, to the surrounding community, and the wider New Zealand society. For example, throughout the workforce reduction of the 1980s and 1990s, the continuous change and restructuring, and increasing intensification described above, although there was occasional questioning of the detail in relation to these changes, there was a marked lack of questioning with regards to the fundamental nature of the changes. The current changes were accepted with an air of resignation, as though they were fundamentally inevitable, as displayed in the following:*

*But workers too have to accept that sometimes a business has to bite the bullet and shed staff to stay in business. CHH says it has got to that stage with Kinleith. It says there is no alternative to the restructuring plan. That is something the workers and the town have sensed was going to happen. And that's probably why Tokoroa has accepted the announcement with a sense of dogged determination to survive, rather than despair. The residents have been through this sort of thing before and have come through it. They know the company and the workers have to make the restructuring work (Mill Changes Have to Work, 2002 May 30).*

*The process of institutionalisation of change at the mill can be related to the analysis provided by Deetz (1992), who describes how continuous change works to destabilise structures which may challenge the organisation. Through the process of 'deinstitutionalization', workers become detached from all but the organisation, resulting in a loss of other forms of 'meaning', and community values. Essentially, the organisation becomes the overarching focus. Part of this process involves the 'management of culture', which can be seen in the Kinleith case during the recent round of redundancies.*

Moreover, through the course of the dissertation, the junior researcher had developed a real interest for the case town and the wider forestry industry, surprising even herself! Upon concluding this study, we set out to conduct an initial small-scale collection of primary data, to facilitate development of the future research focus, and also to (hopefully) lead to opportunities for quick-turnaround publications. We framed this initial empirical phase as a pilot study, aware of the methodological limitations to conducting a small-scale study on a limited sample.

## **Phase 2: Pilot Study**

Our pilot study, conducted in 2004, was based on a set of interviews of young people who grew up in the town, based around a set of themes which emerged from phase one above:

- What are the understandings of the townspeople of the restructuring?
- What are the implications of the firm restructuring for the employees that have lost their jobs?
- What are the implications of the restructuring for the township?

Justification for the choice of sample lay in the prevalence of youth moving away (out-migration) from such towns, however, in pragmatic terms, we used a convenience sample by interviewing students at our university. We conducted six semi-structured interviews, our participants being a mix of men and women. We thematically analysed the verbatim transcripts, initially with an open coding approach, then coalescing around key groups of themes.

Among the issues the young people detailed were the changing role of the union in both the workplace and the town, important changes to demographics and the impact on friendships and informal networks, impact of unemployment and growing income polarization on social services, and the impact of restructuring and downsizing of the major employer on the career paths of young people in the town (Dyer & Hurd, 2004).

Participants also revealed that restructuring of the company impacted the home environment, including reduced family income, increases in family violence, serious health concerns, and the loss of friends moving to find alternative employment. These were unexpected disclosures, and we conceptualised these as relational issues, because individual interpretations of events might reveal wider relationship issues and concerns within the community. Consistent with a critical structural analysis, at this time we framed these relational issues within a backdrop of neo-liberal political economy, reinforced by global neo-liberal hegemony. For example, an extract from the paper published from these results notes that:

*Interestingly, although all participants linked changes in the town to wider contextual issues, there was also a significant gendered aspect to the participant's reflections (self-disclosing reference). As an example, the women tended to refer to changes relating to families and community, whereas the men referred to changes in work opportunity. For example, one of the women noted:*

*Well, like with this job, unless I had blinders on before, I never realised how many problems there are in the town, like the amount of domestic violence, people that have no food, you know, kids that go to school without lunch, and just the condition of some people's houses.*

*In addition, a strongly gendered division of labour became apparent, as illustrated in the following excerpt:*

*Well in the past, I thought the working environment was pretty lax – like men would go out there and sleep all night during their shifts if they were on night shift.*

*In this respect, we concluded that men and women occupy different public and private spheres within the community, positioned as 'expert' in different contexts.*

We were energised by the willingness of our participants to reflect on the changes experienced within the town. Two participants in the pilot study offered to help us gain access to the town and become key informants. Our initial study had provided us with the justification needed to

embark on a longer-term research agenda. Additionally, the recruitment of informants meant the future phases could be more closely guided by participants, which aligned with critical research aspirations. The next phase would be to go to the town, and recruit participants who currently resided in Tokoroa.

### **Phase 3: Going to the Town**

At the beginning of our planning for Phase 3 in 2005, we decided to forgo the interview method used in the pilot study in favour of a group-based research method. We felt that a group-based method would generate richer stories from the combination of personal experience and interaction among members in the group setting (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Additionally, we had a change in research team at this time, with the junior researcher taking maternity leave from the project, and a new colleague joining, with a particular interest in group-based methods.

However, as we worked to apply such methods to our research context, we realized that these methods were inherently very risky for participants from this particular town. We neither anticipated nor were prepared for the scope of these risks to the participants and the possible impact on their wider social and community networks, an issue we revisit after a brief description of the design of this phase.

#### *Memory-work as a Method of Inquiry*

Our initial research design for Phase 3 used the Memory-work method, a collective method developed by a group of feminist scholars (Haug & Others, 1987). Memory-work uses experience as its empirical base to theorize how our lives are shaped by the meaning that we, in relationship with our self, others, and the wider social structures of our lives, ascribe to our experiences. Building on a framework of Marxist and feminist theories, the original group of researchers addressed issues concerning the division of labour, power, and social subjugation in methodological emphases on the collapse of subject and object, collectivity, reflexivity, and personal emancipation. Memory-work has the capacity to deal with issues of power, and also requires special attention be paid to the ‘silences’, rather than just the explicitly stated (Markula & Friend, 2005; Ryan, 2009).

The method was appropriate for our research for several reasons. First, developed to give voice to women ignored by prevailing cultural and research protocols, Memory-work fitted our aim to explore the experiences of Tokoroa residents as a particular group of people who, to some degree, are likely to have been socialized into silence through the process of repeated redundancy and community decline. We anticipated an element of silence as our group of pilot participants had placed an emphasis on power dynamics in the town, for example, the way in which the power of the union had been exerted during the process of downsizing, rendering some non-union members reticent to identify themselves. Additionally, the fact that the pilot participants had maintained specific roles in their expression of events (for example, the role of ‘expert’ worker, or ‘union family member’) further led us to anticipate the influence of power relations in the town.

Second, because Memory-work is broadly narrative, the method seemed appropriate for eliciting full, rich stories as opposed to small, superficial bytes of experience. Third, it was critical to us that the residents themselves identified the most salient aspects of their experiences rather than follow an agenda of inquiry topics pre-set by a researcher. Memory-work ensures saliency through the use of trigger topics, which are agreed upon by the group of participants rather than the researcher. Fourth, because we were investigating shared experiences, the collective nature of the method was important for establishing the common social patterns in their experiences. Additionally, and perhaps most appealing for us, Memory-work was flexible. Haug cautioned against rigidity in method: “What we need is imagination. We can...say quite decisively that the very heterogeneity of everyday life demands similarly heterogeneous methods if it is to be understood” (Haug & Others, 1987, p. 71).

In general, the method of Memory-work comprises several distinct phases. First, each participant writes a narrative (or ‘memory text’) on a topic chosen by the group memory. In the second phase, the participants come together as a group to reflect on and analyse the set of narratives. The spotlight at this stage of the research is on meaning and meaning-making. Participants question and comment to get more details and fuller descriptions of aspects of each

narrative, working also to analyse and interpret the narratives for the ‘common’ sense or the social aspects of the experiences that are common to the group.

However, as we set to designing the research based on the Memory-work method, a number of issues relating to participant risk became apparent. The original developers of the method recognised that Memory-work has the potential to be “disruptive and destabilising” for individuals’ (Haug & Others, 1987, p. 45) because it requires that participants unravel the social conventions and patterns they have used to make sense of their experience; in other words, participants work to deconstruct their realities. Destabilisation effects at the individual level are not uncommon in qualitative research into sensitive topics. However, after discussion with a key informant, we felt that the potential for harm in this situation went further than those risks to the individual participant commonly highlighted in the literature and covered in our university’s ethical approval process. Examples of potentially traumatic events were contextually specific, and would have been difficult to anticipate as an ‘outsider’ to the context, and thus difficult to mitigate for in the formal ethics process. One example is the deep historic sense of individual and collective trauma from the 1970s and 1980s strike action in the town. Local and national media focused on the way in which the community ‘pulled together’ during this time, and although there were stories of picketing strikers and strike-breakers, the majority of depictions of these events, some 20 years prior, were of a unified community – and judged from an informed researcher perspective as low risk of significant destabilisation. However, when the subject of the 1980 strike was raised with an informant, her response was deeply personal, bordering on distressed. Her stories of long-term divisions in the town between those striking and the remaining workers/local business owners still had significant impact on her personally, despite having left the town some 15 years previously.

We came away from that meeting feeling a significant degree of discomfort. Reflecting, we realised that if we were to use Memory-work, participants would be asked to detail events in their lives that possibly had been very traumatic, and then, as a group, deconstruct the meaning that they had individually made of these events. We also realised that we, as relative ‘outsiders’ would not necessarily be able to pre-empt, or fully comprehend, which issues might cause destabilisation for our participants. We recognised both that the interpersonal issues that

emerged in the pilot study posed another layer of risk for our participants, and that there was also risk that these relationships could become destabilised further through the Memory-work process. Moreover, destabilisation in the interpersonal domain could lead to destabilisation of the perceived 'self' (Dehart et al, 2010), resulting in potential risk to our participants at the individual level.

At this point, our duty of care as researchers would need to go beyond standard ethical research practices in order to safeguard these participants from possible longer-term risks. Safeguarding the participants from the risks of individual and interpersonal destabilization is outside our skill-set as business researchers and we were not in a position to offer long-term counselling support to participants, apart from suggesting possible avenues for help if required. Given the sensitive nature of the research and the practical reality that we could not guarantee re-stabilization for individual participants, we decided that Memory-work was not appropriate. The potential risks to a participant at the individual and interpersonal levels were too great.

Although this phase represented a significant 'stumbling block' in the research process, theoretically, however, it served to reinforce the underlying assumption of the project that the systemic processes embedded in neo-liberal capitalism work to compromise the 'self', and significantly shape the relational sphere. Therefore, although we were methodologically reflecting, we were not yet theoretically reflecting. We sought a new research design.

### *Focus Groups*

Mindful now of the growing complexity of risk to participants, we reconstructed the research design on focus groups (Carson et al, 2001; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). We felt that focus groups would provide us with the group-based interaction that we originally sought, but without the destabilising risks inherent in Memory-work. So, with the help of our key informants, we brainstormed the selection criteria for eight focus groups comprised of participants sharing certain characteristics that we regarded would help establish a sense of personal safety for group members. The sample groups included four mixed gender groups



comprising: people who had worked at the mill but were made redundant, people who still work at the mill, people who had never worked at the mill and people who have relations who had worked at the mill/made redundant. We also devised four groups to be made up of women, comprising of: Women who worked at the mill, women who had never worked at the mill, women who were partnered with someone who worked at the mill, and women whose partners had never worked at the mill. In the case of female participants who may correspond with more than one of these groups, we were to give the individual the option of whichever group they felt most comfortable participating in. The rationale for having female groups was supported by our gendered findings in the pilot interview phase, and the specific experiences of women in the town.

However, at the end of a fieldwork planning session, one key informant asked how we intended to ensure the safety and anonymity of the participants. This question, raised without prior knowledge of our previous reservations during the Memory-work phase, was prompted by her concern about the potential for backlash at the Mill worksite and also within the community. She pointed out that certain redundancy 'stories' were sanctioned within the community; participants who told stories that did not conform to these sanctioned versions could face violence in their homes and the workplace and/or eventually lose their jobs. Unsolicited, yet another key informant confirmed these concerns and emphasized the risks that casual conversations about participation in the research could have on informal networks and friendships within the town.

Thus, we now began to understand that not just deconstructing events, but even the voicing of some experiences in a group situation was going to prove destabilising for some participants. At each phase there were aspects of risk that could not be foreseen without ongoing exploration of the research context. For example, the nature of the single industry town, having been constructed rapidly around a single employer, has led to a particular community identity based on paternalism and the importance of the Mill. Therefore, the very complexity of the community dynamics and the associated potential for community-level risk could not have been anticipated prior to uncovering critical aspects of the community history and identity during the initial secondary phase.

As the complex risk dynamics became evident to us, we reverted to the interview method. However, we struck a significant barrier to access, and despite our key informants introducing many participants to us, we experienced many ‘no-shows’ and marked reluctance to talk in those participants who did attend interviews. We struggled to gain a meaningful sample and paused the project after interviewing just four participants. We felt dejected, de-motivated, and could not identify the nature of the access barrier. Moreover, the remaining two members of the team were initiating new projects in an attempt to fulfil performance obligations, and as a ‘problematic’ project, this research was shelved.

#### **Phase 4: Re-entering the field**

We began revisiting the project in 2009, after the return of our junior researcher from extended maternity leave, with the intention of embarking on doctoral study. However, this project was not her first choice of topic, as she too, after 4 years away from research, had developed interests well beyond a topic she initially felt she had ‘outgrown’. However, after a 6month period of developing alternative topics, she kept coming back to unanswered questions about Tokoroa. Had this revisiting not happened, the project would likely have remained confined to our research history.

The break had given us the chance to reflect and separate ourselves from previous preconceptions about the project. Importantly too, during this time, we had each developed individual research and career interests. Additionally, each of us had encountered significant challenges personally over this time, including relationship break-ups, illness and changes in our family structure. We came back to the project with altered perspectives. Significantly, the research team re-entered with a new purpose and redefined roles; the junior researcher became doctoral student leading a re-focused project, and the lead researcher became supervisor. This was significant, as the project was subjected to the theoretical and methodological ‘journeying’, and enthusiasm, which accompanies the first phase of doctoral study.

In reflecting on the issues we encountered in previous attempts to enter the town, we realised that the university students in the pilot study who were so forthcoming with information were interviewed in a private place, individually, and all had moved away from Tokoroa so they were also geographically separated from the town. Additionally, we recognised on reflection that although they all identified with the town, they did all position themselves as having 'moved on'. We had not previously realised how important this locality and identity positioning would be to the participant responses. Applying our conceptualisation of multi-layered risk, we realised that these risks are likely to be higher for those who are positioned within the community, or still have active links with the community. Additionally, our use of key informants may have also contributed to the access barriers in this case, representing a direct link between us, the researchers, and participants. It seemed participants were uncomfortable with this level of association, perhaps regarding us as quasi members of the community by association with the key informants.

Methodologically, we remained committed to a critical management agenda, although the junior researcher was increasingly drawn to Boje's living story methodology (Boje, 2001), and the acceptance of 'fragments', of stories running over and under the dominant narrative. We began to see that for us, our conceptualisation of life in a 'globalised single industry town' could be seen as a dominant narrative, and in some ways an attempt to neatly frame this project, and to ensure timely research outcomes. This was a difficult reflection to come to, as it contradicts our intentions to conduct inductive, participant-focused, and emancipatory research. However, we were honest enough with ourselves to provide voice, albeit in private, to the paradox between our research intentions, and the requirements of a neo-liberal academic 'career'.

Our methodological focus shifted again as we honoured this reflection, and renewed our desire to allow the project to honour participants, and in doing so incorporate 'identity' and 'community'. We investigated methods that would allow us to investigate the rich complexity of the context and the individual's perspective within the framing of community identity. Our interview design moved from semi-structured thematic to unstructured, aside from introductory prompting questions, for example 'How long have you lived in Tokoroa?' and 'What can you

tell me about the town?'. This format allowed participants to divulge whatever information they felt comfortable doing so, without us expressing our own assumptions about what might be important topics for discussion. Also, this lessened the risk that we might unintentionally probe issues that were sensitive to a participant, questioning that the individual might perceive as threatening.

We re-evaluated our entry approach, entering the field through publicly available community contacts (e.g., Lions Club, Public Library noticeboard, local newspaper), to disseminate information about the project, and invite potential participants to contact the doctoral researcher directly. We hoped this might result in less perceived 'exposure' by participants than using key informants.

In total, in Phase 3, we interviewed 32 participants, and gathered over 100 hours of interview data. The degree of access we gained surprised us, particularly given our previous experiences. We were introduced to key members of the community, for example, one of the first employment migrants from the Cook Islands, who was 85 at the time of the interview. In this case, his granddaughter was the first to approach us, and only after our interview did she disclose that the 'real' reason she made contact was to check that we were to be trusted before introducing us to her grandfather. However, even this highlighted risks, as although we gained participant consent, just after the transcript had been approved, the participant passed away. Although we gained subsequent permission from family to continue to use the transcript, of which they were grateful to receive, it reinforced the importance of personal accounts, not only for those being interviewed, but also for collective memory.

The resultant analysis, doctoral thesis, subsequent publications, and future planned phases, were not the result of a tidy theoretical framing of a discrete project, but rather the result of a time-consuming process of reflexivity and development of a project which, in many ways, mirrored our own development as researchers and scholars.

## Reflections of the Emerging Critical Researcher

As discussed, when this project began, the research team consisted of one full-time career academic, and a junior research assistant. The research assistant was beginning her Masters degree, brought into the team due to her desire to proceed to doctoral study, and the pragmatic need for a research assistant on the part of the other researchers. As her own study progressed through the duration of this project, from Masters student to doctoral candidate, and now to full-time academic, her reflections on the project become evidence of the impact of reflexivity on methodological practice:

*This research forms a part of my own living story as well as that of the participants and town of Tokoroa. Revisiting my researcher positioning, I am not only ‘researcher’ in the sense of conducting research as a functional task. By initiating conversations about matters that may or may not have been at the forefront of participants’ minds, and by my processes of interpretation and representation of their stories as variously entailing narratives and antenarratives, I am inevitably impacting on the living stories of my participants and myself through my representations of their lives.*

After spending considerable time with her research participants in their environment, she began to become aware of how her own story was merging with aspects of theirs’. She began to experience some of the sights and sounds reported by them, and was able to imagine her own reactions to events that participants had described. This process became a deeply personal experience for the researcher. For example, one evening, as she drove home from Tokoroa after a day of interviewing my mind was on a story told by a participant who described his experiences of a death of a mate in the forest.

*I [researcher] am driving [home through this densely forested region of the country from a day interviewing] and I’m struck by the majesty of the trees, and just... the endless forests... and I’m thinking back to [research participant] and his story of going into the forest to a fatality – the death of a work-mate on the job. I can imagine now - this vast, quiet place in the middle of the forest, and how lonely it must be to have been working alone up there, and how frightening it would be when something went wrong... it really feels like a different world out here.*

*The experience of driving these roads through dense forests, knowing the workers were there, has contributed to my research in a number of ways. Firstly, it gave me insights to contextualise the stories of my participants. Secondly, and perhaps just as importantly, it gave me an appreciation of how I was consciously and subconsciously, hearing my participants stories through my own life's filters. In particular, as a young mother, who's own mother had been heavily involved in social work and an advocate for marginalized groups in society, I came to reflect on how meaningful this family influence had been on forming my own research interests, and in particular, why the critical management agenda may have resonated so strongly. This also gave me cause to consider how these stories were the participants 'lives', not just research 'data'.*

*Through imagining what might have been my own reactions to the events my participants were describing, I had a moment of appreciation centered on how research is a co- construction. I noted also a caution that my interpretations may also be read as a projection that does not represent the experiences of my participants. The experience and reflection above led to me consider my participants experiences with a renewed richness of understanding. I found myself far more aware of the nuances of their experiences. That my participants cannot be thought of simply as functionaries to the corporation or servants of the global structures of neo-liberalism deepened in my appreciation. The participants in my research are complex individuals, experiencing complex issues in their lives. They express concerns about a complex set of priorities, values and reactions to their circumstances.*

At the time of her travelling to and from Tokoroa, and the immediacy of the reflections at that time, she came across Kincheloe and McLaren's (2005) *Pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason*. She was particularly influenced by the passage 'capitalist exploitation and relations of capitalist production [are just] one set of relations' (p. 321). For the researcher, this was a significant moment of re-positioning. She came to consider that whilst influential, the power relations entwined with globalisation and changes to work were evident in the conversations

with my research participants, these dynamics represent just one set of relations which may exist alongside many others, many of which are interconnected. We began to reflect on Zizek's (2000) call that in privileging this set of power relations over all others, the critical management community was further embedding these as the apparently all-powerful and singular dominant paradigm. Wray-Bliss (2003) and Gabriel (2009) extend this call by suggesting that many projects in critical management studies are embedded with power relations which could themselves constitute an alternative hegemonic grand narrative, potentially rendering some researchers to the margins. We began to reflect on these calls, and the way in which the position of a seemingly 'all knowing academic' had influenced our methodological choices.

### **Postscript: Realities, Reflection and Repositioning**

Day (2012) highlights the importance of reflecting on the roles played during the research process. Day describes how assuming a role of expert-researcher embeds a certain power structure to the research context. Similarly, a posture of the 'inexperienced, in need of clarification' (p. 70) will render different conditions to the research. Day also discusses the importance of researcher positioning, and how an explicit position of insider vs. outsider may also render differing results. These role-based considerations resonate, as we reflect on the past 15 years of this project, and the fluidity of the research team, both in terms of individuals, perspectives, and roles attributed. The response to the call of the outsider/'doctoral student' was very different to that of the 'insider'-connected/'expert-academic'. Peticca-Harris et al (2016) remind us that the processes of research we often view as administrative, such as securing and interacting with participants, can have a significant impact on the approach taken in the research, and indeed the research 'findings'. Our experience has certainly affirmed this position, as although the changes in approach can be seen from a conceptual and methodological perspective, they often occurred as pragmatic response to issues of process and personal circumstance arose.

Reflecting on our experiences in Phase 3, of designing a group-based research method, we have become keenly aware of the multi-layered risks and implications of our methodological choices for our participants. Changes in their community over the past 20 years have already

significantly tested formal and informal networks. For example, the conflict between union members and their supporters with those who were non-union members and non-supporters identified in the first phase of the research seemed to provide us with an opportunity to collect and present original data. We now understand that researching such issues through group methods carries significant risks at the community level through the potential de-stabilizing of participants' wider social networks.

The realities of working in the field, and our discomfort with the impacts on our participants, led us to pause in our research agenda. We had a long-held commitment to researcher reflexivity, yet we were now accepting that our efforts to reflect on our theoretical and methodological choices had been filtered through our favoured theoretical lens. In deep conversations within our research team and with others, we reflected on the impacts on the individual of a critical research agenda that tends to focus on the structural implications of individual experiences. We also experienced moments of humility in reflecting on our practice. For example, we began to recognise that we embarked on the first round of interviews as though 'informed' about the town, yet had yet to visit in person.

Our repositioning was not limited to our scholarly work, however. As researchers, we each had personal challenges to contend with at the time of our research. These challenges meant that at times the research was foregrounded, at times it was left to pause. The lead researcher was also fluid, as we each experienced times where we were unable to dedicate the time or motivation required to move the project forward. Life also happened for the participants. For example, in 2006, the people of Tokoroa had a major incident, the murder of a school teacher, to contend with, an event which significantly destabilised the community. In addition, each of those townspeople also had private challenges and changes in their own lives. Despite the seeming linearity of research, lives continue for our participants and for ourselves. Life seemingly adds to the dis-order of research, but can also result in unexpectedly rich data, as we have discovered from our experiences.



The resultant research was not the outcome of any specific formalised moment of reflexivity; rather, it was the combination of the events, the fluidity of the research, and our own careers and lives, which ended us with the positioning we assumed in the final phase. Although some of this repositioning was intentional and scholarly, much of it was due to moments of ‘chance’ and of life itself. Further, we found this methodological ‘journeying’ to be crucial to achieving quality research outcomes for both ourselves and our participants. We suggest researchers work to view research not as a discrete ‘project’, but a long-term relational process in which multiple levels of findings are made along the way. Some of these findings are publishable, others simply add to our development as researchers and people. Moreover, our own personal changes and considerations, the fluidity both of life *as* a researcher and the research team, need not be seen as barriers to ‘completion’ of a project, but rather as important aspects which bring new perspectives to the research.

This suggestion is, of course, at odds with the prevailing mandate to produce measurable, rankable results for our institutions, but there are growing calls to re-examine this emphasis and increasing criticism of the quality of the research outputs generated under this ideology (Mingers & Willmott, 2010; Ruth, 2011). We are heartened by these concerns and argue that the discussions at the heart of this conversation are indeed crucial to the transformation of the academic landscape. Indeed, Tracy (2012) urges us to push the boundaries of publication norms (p. 113).

In this example, the living story methodology provided for us a way to ‘unlock’ our own (unintentionally) fixed positions, viewing not only our participants stories as fragments of dominant and ante-narrative, but perhaps just as importantly, viewing our own theoretical and methodological ‘narrative’ as such. Our structural, dominant ‘narrative’ was interspersed with our own experiences, fragments from our personal lives, reflections brought on from hurdles in the field, weaving over, under the dominant approach. The resulting living story is one of research, but not of a sterile process which occurs while trying to minimise outside influences, but one which embraces the fragments, and becomes a living story of research *as* life.

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