

# Invade Your Own Privacy: Self-truth as the First Step Towards Discovering ‘Other’ Truth in Educational Research

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## Abstract

The identity of self is understood as a plurality, seeking integration to allow a fluidity of informed, responsible choice to guide our behaviours. With an increasing emphasis on reducing human identity to cognitive styles and pre-packaged personality trait clusters, emotions and spirituality can fade from awareness when engaging with our own identity, or that of others. This paper discusses the concepts of identity in the context of an accepted research proposal for a study on mental health nurses delivering psychological therapies. While the study is just commencing, the literature review offers discussion points on identity and the use of self with the research process. Through a focus upon constructs of existential psychology, emotional intelligence and spirituality, all grounded in self-awareness and self-conduct, the idea that both critical thinking and feeling on self are required steps in the research process is offered.

## Introduction

When a contribution to this theme journal issue was being considered, a personal awareness of self-doubt arose, combined with thoughts of “Where do I start?”. Positioning and relatedness to research, interplays between values and methodology, and researcher identity were all topics intense in appeal, challenge and complexity. The constructs of the self and identity eventually appeared fundamental to all topics of this theme issue. To position self one must know where one is, to reflect one must know what to reflect upon and to have an identity one must know self as it temporally evolves. Learning about our values, attitudes and engagement with an external research topic demands an internal engagement with the totality of self. Such engagement is itself potentially bound by cultural and societal influences. Within a contemporary western context, self-engagement is most frequently dominated by cognitive reflection, with the emotional self relegated to a secondary identity, and the spiritual self kept quarantined from all academic pursuits (Pfeifer & Cox, 2007). This narrowing of self-reflexivity fails to respond to the requirements of engaging with others, often culminating in stressful and disharmonious human relations resulting in conflicting needs and values (Szasz, 1983, pp. 21, 23). This paper initially provides the context of the proposed research and that of mental health nurse (MHN) identity. Approaches for researchers to consider and explore their own identity, as well as those whom they investigate, are then offered. What is highlighted is the challenge of developing the authentic and comprehensive level of researcher self-awareness required when engaging with others within a research process.

## **Research Context**

The research is an investigation that seeks to explore the relationship of MHNs' engagement with the delivery of psychological therapies. Recent reviews of MHN across the United Kingdom indicated the need for an expansion of the delivery of psychological therapies by MHNs (Department of Health, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006). An imperative for maintaining MHN professional identity is to ensure a distinctive discipline specific contribution to this expansion, rather than simply being assimilated by the powerful and politically placed psychology and medical professions. It is envisioned that through drawing on the experiences of MHNs the initial development of an emotionally intelligent curricula for nurses can be commenced. Consequently, the study aims to explore the experiences of nurses working at the interface of psychological interventions. This exploration seeks to describe the lived experiences and perceptions of MHNs in preparing for and delivering psychological therapies, as well as identifying perceived needs or barriers for future training in these roles.

The overarching conceptual framework for the study is social constructivism, focusing upon a socially constructed nature of reality and explorative emphasis towards perceived reality within social contexts (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006). The importance of this conceptual framework with regard to MHN identity is that the profession's identity standards are being socially altered through policy, evidenced-based practice and role expansion, consequently altering what it means to be an MHN. These discourses of managerialism and evidence-based practice dictate what can be considered as valid professional identity and, by implication, what is not. The normally temporally changing MHN professional identity can therefore be seen as being shaped in the absence of voices from participants within the profession. Social constructivism that places explicit emphasis on human interaction for generating meaning and on the meaning-making process consequently places significant demands upon the researcher interaction and data analysis (Gergen, 2006). To be successfully enacted, researcher self-awareness and self-reflexivity are clearly called for and yet the means of achieving this end can be opaque, transient and comparatively little considered within research design.

## **Mental Health Nurse Identity**

MHN is experiencing an escalating 'identity crisis' with the profession unable to articulate a coherent and uniquely defining professional identity (Clarke, 2006). This identity struggle fluctuates between emphasising realistic paradigm evidenced interventions and emphasising nursing as humanistic caring (Ramsay, 2006). It is precisely such debate and ambiguity that influence MHN participation in delivering psychological therapies, arguably one more field of conflict following on from preceding issues such as nurse prescribing and nurse counsellors. The diversity of the MHN epistemological stance towards their own profession is possibly reflected in the breadth of roles that they have assumed, and the capacity of many to perform a multiplicity of roles ranging from relationship formation to complex psychological or pharmacological interventions (Fitzpatrick, 2005; McCabe, 2006). Indeed, such reflexivity may in itself be the defining professional characteristic of MHN.

These identity issues are exacerbated when considered within the context of self and professional identity. Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002) clearly identify the dichotomy of self as inherent within the professional worker through an extensive and robust research undertaking. Professional self, itself a term peppered with competing constructs (art and science being common in nursing), is often polarised between increasing technocratic and bureaucratic influences upon a knowing, and consequently autonomous, professional. Additionally, professional self-identity is easily obscured by what Stronach *et al.* (2002, p. 112) call a collective professional where the individual nurse's identity is bracketed into categories such as competent practitioner (Benner, 1982). Policy and politics dominated by frameworks and guidance externally direct professional behaviour, at times generating 'dis-ease' with an authentic professional self. Whether considering self as researcher or perhaps nurse or teacher, that self-identity can easily be considered as a coherent and ultimately stable construct, an extension of the stable self that we call 'me'. Stronach *et al.* (2002) propose that such identities, far from being stable and coherent, are in fact transient, conflictual and influenced by external politics or policy. Identity consequently ceases to be a grounding of self but rather a vehicle towards uncertainty and confusion. Such conflict is easily manifested as medicalised depression and stress, often culminating in experienced nurses exiting the profession while recruitment diminishes (Holmes, 2006). This 'McDonaldisation' of professionals, while seeking efficiency, predictability and control, can equally generate irrationality and inflexibility through over-rationalisation (Ritzer, 1983). Ironically, such over-reliance upon the rational self is then adopted by individual professionals seeking to make sense of the environment in which they work and seek to function. Within such a landscape of role confusion, self-conflict and disharmonious relating between individuals and organisations, as well as the inherent ethical and moral challenges surrounding all research, an imperative is for the researcher to seek a certainty of self, so as to enhance principled application of values as well as clarity of investigative vision amid endemic confusion.

### **Pathways to Enhanced Researcher Identity**

Research is a person driven endeavour, whether this is a distancing of that researcher self in randomised control studies style investigations or an immersing of the researcher self in qualitative approaches (Walker & Evers, 1988). Each polarised stance, and those adopting varied positions upon the research spectrum, require/s movement of self from our current position of 'now' to the position of the research. Hence our personas, cognitions, emotions, perceptions and consequently behaviours are moved towards that research, where we choose which parts of self to adopt and which parts to repress. Pivotal here is not only to consider how to achieve this end but also how to minimise any self-deception that we have reached that end. This dichotomy of adoption and repression first requires self-awareness to make that choice, and then the authenticity to avoid self-deception. Self-authenticity is central to researcher requirements to be effectively reflexive and reflective. Jung (1928) first introduced the concept of the persona or mask that humans adopt as we undertake our social roles. These roles are predominantly, but not entirely, congruent with our true 'inner selves', allowing an emotional ease and fluid behaviours within our adopted masks that are mutually understood by those around us. However, when emotions and behaviour are in conflict with those personas, or when the inner self has become lost within the multiplicity of adopted masks, authenticity with self and others is challenged. This challenge is complicated when the myth of consistency or

permanency is pulled back to reveal that self is characterised by constant change with each contact that we have with both ourselves and the external environment (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1973. p. 282). A core consideration is how to reach self-congruence, a thematic consideration throughout the fabric of the research study where health disciplines compete and therapy approaches seek dominance over others so as to ensure primacy in MHN practice. While being far from all inclusive, mainstream psychology, experiential psychology, emotional intelligence (EI) and spirituality thematically dwell in the context of the research study and offer potential paths for researchers to explore and enhance their self-awareness and self-congruence.

### *Cognitive behavioural psychology*

Contemporary psychology places great emphasis upon cognition dictating behaviour, arguably leaving all other aspects of self occupying an under privileged positioning in developing self-awareness and consequently self-identity (Ehrich, 2003). Currently occupying the evidence-based high ground is the cognitive behavioural view. This view proposes that each person has a schema or map of herself or himself, the world and the future, which is formed from both real life experiences and attempts to impose meaning upon life events (Beech, 2000). Automatic thoughts and self-statements generated by our personal schemata directly influence emotional responses, and consequently our behaviours. Values are placed upon thoughts by ourselves and those around us as being rational or irrational and emotions as either positive or negative. Self-knowledge and change focus upon knowing and subsequently altering our faulty life schemata. This predominantly positivistic epistemological view of the self and of psychological therapies boldly proclaims accurate empirical measurement of human subjective experiences within a framework of humanistic principles (Beech, 2000). Certainly caution is indicated in adopting a solely cognitive behavioural framework of understanding self and others, with psychological approaches such as the Human Givens approach offering contrasting evidence that it is emotions and not cognitions that instigate human experience (Barrett & Hurley, 2007; Griffin & Tyrell, 2003; Holmes, 2002; Hurley & Barrett, 2006).

### *Existential psychology*

In contrast to cognitive behavioural approaches, existential psychology places primacy upon an experiential self that precedes cognitive labelling or categorisation of experiences (Clarkson, 1989, p. 13). In a view that is more congruent with phenomenological philosophy than with biological models, the self is seen as an integration of physical body, intellect and feelings, as well as perceptions within a social environment. Perceiving, feeling and behaviour are phenomenologically undertaken, rather than the emphasis being upon reinscribing existing schemata. This phenomenological approach allows a stepping aside from habitual thinking patterns, consequently allowing potential for enhanced existential perception of both self and the external environment (Idhe, 1977, as cited in Yontef, 1993). Consequently both subjective feelings and objective observations are considered to have real meaning. A powerful connectedness is evident here between a psychological approach directed towards self-discovery and a research methodology directed towards 'other' discovery.

The study of MHNs' identity adopts an explorative qualitative method through interviews that seek rich and in-depth accounts of lived experiences from those existing on the interface of psychological therapies (Titchen & Hobson, 2005).

Indeed, MHNs have been identified as a rich resource of unprocessed micro phenomenological informal studies gleaned from practice, further suggesting that a phenomenological method is indicated within the study design (Cutcliffe & Goward, 2000). Phenomenology has attracted multiple definitions, variously describing it as a philosophy and as an overarching view of qualitative research (Ehrich, 2003, p. 42). Shared existential psychology and research goals include attaining insight into perceptual fields through inclusive direct dialogue, consequently allowing understandings of significant realities, contextualised with respect to the whole (Heidbreder, 1933, as cited in Yontef, 1993). Also shared is a process rather than an outcome emphasis within a holistic field theory that rejects a mechanistic approach to human understanding (Yontef, 1979). Such congruence between a model of self-construct and conducting research offers a deepening of the relationship that exists between self-discovery and research discovery.

### *Emotional intelligence*

Focusing upon the cooperative relationship between emotion and intelligence Mayer and Salovey (1997) identify EI as being restricted to the following components: (1) the ability to perceive emotions accurately; (2) the ability to access and utilise emotions to assist cognition; (3) the ability to understand emotions; and (4) the ability to reflect on and regulate emotions to enhance both intellectual and emotional growth. Central within this view is that EI is an ability that enhances the relationship between emotion and cognition. Within this view, cognition and emotion have a mutually enhancing cooperative relationship, rather than a hegemonic relationship as in the cognitive behavioural model. MHNs require enhanced EI to perform their roles effectively and users of mental health services, as well as professional bodies, are demanding EI qualities from MHNs across the spectrum of clinical interventions. Indeed, it is the very construct of EI that may inform the identity standards of the MHN profession with relationship formation, empathy and self-awareness being central to the profession (Department of Health, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006).

As with existential psychology, the applications to both self-development and conducting educational research are clearly evident. From a qualitative research perspective, the capacity of the researcher to engage EI is palpably required to capture and understand the full context of people's experiences. Where the researcher is engaged in methodologies that require a distancing of self from the research participants, EI remains pertinent. Such distancing requires self-awareness of one's own experiences, how distancing impacts upon others and a bracketing off of parts of self to conduct the study successfully. Indeed, other authors such as Bar-On (2000) and Goleman (1995) offer a wider perspective on what constitutes EI. These broader interpretations include self-motivation and relationship skills (Goleman, 1995, p. 26), as well as assertiveness, stress management, self-awareness and flexibility (Bar-On, 2000, p. 365). Emotional competence, inclusive of an ethical component within the interaction between one's emotional skills and a situational context, is described by Saarni (1999). This competence places value upon the context in which emotionally challenging events occur. As this context alters within existential individuals and between differing contexts, it is argued that significant researcher reflexivity is required. Wider research application into ethical and moral agency in undertaking research has clear relevance with these EI constructs.

### *Spirituality*

Spiritual models of self-construct identify self-concept as the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings, creating a subjective phenomenon originating from and continually influenced by social experience (Bhugra, 2007, p. 126). This self incorporates factors such as characteristics (gender), roles, abstract identification (ideology), interests (judgements), physical self, personality and external references (judgment input by others). These characteristics are bound by systemic senses of self-worth, self-determination, unity and competence (Gordon, n.d., as cited in Bhugra, 2007, pp. 128-129). Our spiritual selves are frequently not considered when engaged in reflection, particularly within an academically focused activity such as research. Spirituality may be seen as constituting a broad faith or the values and ethics by which we conduct ourselves. Faith traditions offer enrichment to the mass driven formulations of philosophical ethics, in turn giving impetus to alternative ethical views such as virtue ethics and emphasising the emotional and contextualised self within character influenced decision-making (Cox, Campbell & Cox, 2007, pp. 20-21). Held values do not occur in isolation but are formed or at least influenced by societal and cultural influences heavily influenced by change. Arguably such societal change generates an increasing superficiality of self, dominated in our western society by presentation and style (Conway, 2007, p. 73). Our western society is also dominated by a break with extended family and clan, culminating in perceiving others and self as individual, separate from family influences and predominantly empowered by economic affluence alone. In turn, these influences impact upon the values that we carry into relating as both citizens and researchers with an increasingly complex world (Conway, 2007, p. 76).

Protection from self-delusion regarding our values necessitates self-knowledge to avoid an idealised self-view to take hold of our actions and self-perceptions. Such protection is particularly required when confronted with major decision-making, a time where established personal values can be challenged, requiring in turn an interrogation of motive and ultimate discernment of action (Atwell & Fulford, 2007, p. 90). The necessity of such awareness towards held researcher values is evident within the context of conducting research, especially where significant power differentials exist between the researcher and those within the investigation. Disempowerment and marginalisation can act as potential barriers to self-determination while by contrast the researcher's experiential level is comparatively bound by factors enhancing self-empowerment. Such hegemonic relating requires the researcher to have the empathic understanding of the other's position and the underpinning ethical and moral agency not to exacerbate such relating. Situated ethics, with emphasis on the ongoing interrelatedness between researcher and the entirety of the research process, and virtue ethics emphasising the ethical character of the researcher add a reflexivity and existential responsiveness to such encounters (McKie & Swinton, 2000; Pring, 2002; Roberts, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

The title of this paper offers an invitation for researchers to consider invading the privacy of their inner selves, to challenge the very basis upon which their own self-identity is constructed. This invasion is designed to enable an authentic self-position with regard to our own values, beliefs and being prior to, during and following research into the privacy of others' knowledge. The offered pathways to enact this,

while divergent, share a shift of emphasis away from the study of 'others' and towards studying ourselves. This look at the self can end with finding aspects of ourselves that imperfectly fit with our ideal self-identity, in turn generating neurosis that can quickly be denied or rationalised. The invitation to challenge self-identity is not a call to arms for all educational researchers to embrace undertaking self-discovery courses or to live their lives in total authenticity. Rather, through highlighting the resonance between conducting educational research and the influence that the self has within that research process, it is hoped that the necessity of questioning self-identity, and the pathways to undertake that questioning, have been highlighted. What is argued is that, regardless of the investigative topic or the methodology assumed, a position of self-understanding is a required step in the research process.

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