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Nel Glass
Southern Cross University

Ruth Walter

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Creating a safe environment to talk about sexuality: Nursing educational research as the empowering strategy.

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Nel Glass

RN; Dip Neuro Nurs; BA (UNSW); MHPEd (UNSW); PhD (UNSW); FCN (NSW) FRCNA.

Associate professor

School of Nursing and Health Care Practices

Southern Cross University

PO Box 157

Lismore, NSW, Australia 2480.

email: nglass@scu.edu.au

and

Ruth Walter

RN; B Nurs(SCU); MRCNA

Registered Nurse

Northern Rivers Health Service

Lismore NSW 2480

email: rwalte10@scu.edu.au

Introductory words

This paper puts forward some aspects of a qualitative research project conducted in 1995 at a rural university in Australia. The overall research project aimed to explore the concept of peer mentoring in a nursing educational context to ultimately extend our current knowledge in this area. In general, the issue of mentoring was explored with the seven women nurse participants by creating discussion regarding any personal and professional issue which was predominating in their lives at a particular time. As well, an interwoven explicit theme was to explore the emotional health issues of self awareness, self growth, feeling in touch with self and others and, empowerment.

This paper specifically explores two interwoven issues which arose in the research those being, the nature and effects of female friendship and exploring one's sexuality.

Research design: empowering aspects

This research was informed by ours and other's epistemological belief that women and nurses are oppressed, and, that both nurses and women can become empowered by supportive and caring environments which foster self growth and self awareness. Specifically, we drew on the work of Anderson, (1991); Campbell & Bunting (1991); Crane (1991); Delaclour (1991); Mason, Backer & Georges (1991); Speedy (1991); Green (1987); Hedin (1987); Short & Sharman (1987); Webb (1986); Roberts (1983); Ashley (1980). It was for these reasons that this research was situated in the emancipatory paradigm of critical social science and feminist theory.

Embedding the research within this type of framework created opportunities to recognise oppression and develop emancipatory solutions. As Cheek & Rudge attested (1994:59), critical theory allows :

the possibility for a process of enlightenment by which individuals can recognise their social situations as a dynamic relationship between the individual and the social conditions that constitute social reality for that individual.

As well, an integral component of emancipation is that of transformation. We strongly believe that one cannot transform oppressive experiences and subsequently become empowered without a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical frameworks of oppression. Lather asserted that emancipatory critical social science research must empower those oppressed to change and understand their world (1991:3). Davis asserted '[E]mancipation ... is dependent on enlightenment and the ability to act freely to change oppressive social systems which in turn enables the realisation of human potential' (1993:78).

Further, another empowering aspect of this research design methodology involved a desire to give the women nurse participants their own voice. Several current feminist writers are writing of the silencing of women as a pervasive phenomena that perpetuates women's oppression (Fine 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986). The process of women reclaiming their voices, whilst involving many emotional 'ups and downs', marks the beginning of empowerment for women as they acknowledge their oppression (Glass 1994:190, Davis 1993). Mason et al (1991:74), wrote of the importance of nurses realising their oppression and beginning to speak out - indeed that self esteem and belief in one's ability are vital if nursing as a profession is ever to achieve effective political action.

Critical/feminist theoretical decisions such as these promote consciousness raising and encourage women nurses to feel their own value as women and as nurses, and create an environment / climate in which it is possible to consider how our social relations are structured, our involvement within them and to consider how things could be different (England 1994:81). As Henderson stated (1995:63), dialogue that is critical and emancipatory can reveal personal distortions that support and sustain social oppression

Research Method: Source of participants

There were seven women participants in the research. These comprised six students enrolled in the second year of a three year Bachelor of Nursing degree and the coordinator of the degree. The participants ages ranged from 26 to 42 years. All of the participants real names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Research Method: Selection of participants

As the degree coordinator had prior knowledge that this group of students were friends and were supportive with/of each other, she approached the group to discuss the possibility of conducting this research with them. She

was primarily interested in assessing their receptivity regarding involvement in a potentially empowering research project and discussing the proposed methods. A meeting was held with the six women to discuss the project. After the initial meeting and prior to the commencement of the research, the women were given several opportunities to discuss whether they were willing to participate. As well, they were able to subsequently withdraw from the research at any time if they had any concerns or issues regarding the development of the research.

The data collection

The research was conducted by a qualitative method following institutional ethical approval. In determining the method for this research two main issues were drawn upon. The first issue considered was that, as the research was embedded in feminist theory and epistemology, the method chosen had to be integrally related to women's experiences and be identified as feminist method or methods. The second issue focused upon the credibility of method: that is, the research method had to accurately reflect a methodological approach that had considerable strength in the current social science literature. Given careful consideration to the above issues two qualitative methods were combined, these were: reflective journalling and focus group/interviewing whilst embedding the method in a feminist process. The group met for one hour weekly for twelve research sessions.

As well, deliberations regarding the sensitive nature of the research and what process could be employed to minimise any discomfort for the women throughout the interviewing process were taken into consideration. The research process reflected honesty, respected confidentiality, and validation of each woman's stories. Any of the participants were able to withdraw without any penalty from the research should they choose to. In terms of the role of research leader, she openly acknowledged her role as participant/researcher (Walter, Davis & Glass). Taking on this role provided necessary opportunities to be part of the ontological creeds of seeing 'how things really are' and 'how things really work' (Guba, 1990:19). This further, opened the way forward to interpret the complexities of human nature and transform individuals from oppressive situations (Glass, 1994:91). As well, she continued to be reflexive regarding her own beliefs and assumptions about the research and the interview process which unfolded.

Further, by being a researcher/participant this added dimension created further opportunities for awareness of the realities of this research (Walter et al). Such a process thereby generates 'a discourse that represents the real, un.masks domination in the real, without .introducing new forms of domination' (Poster, 1989:4).

Results: Coming out and the women's journeys

Exploring one's sexuality was an implicit ongoing theme interwoven with self growth and improving one's emotional health throughout the research. Rhiannon, who was the group facilitator, was already 'out'. Two of the women, Maddie and Em, explored issues 'around' their sexuality. They discussed issues such as: attraction to women; and how they felt about coming out as a

lesbian with several women on an individual basis, but they did not feel ready to be 'out' with the whole group at the time of the research. However, they clearly articulated that the research provided opportunities for them to feel safe to explore some of their related issues. Miriam's deepening inner strength, combined with the mutual group support was enough for her to come out to the whole group about half way through the research sessions. The following comment expands on this point.

Miriam: "[There's] a real freedom to be where you're at... a real acceptance you know... What really strikes me about that freedom is that it has really enabled me to take some giant strides along my own road of personal discovery. The comfort, the acceptance, the fact that I don't feel judged for just being me has provided an atmosphere or an environment that has been great in allowing me to put energy into my own stuff".

Women's friendships in a mentoring context

The results from this research have shown strong links between effective and personally challenging mentoring (Glass, Siddle & Walter; Glass, 1994; & Madison, 1992) and the positive characteristics of female friendship (Porter, 1996 & Raymond, 1986). The identification of, and consistent demonstrations of the commitment to shared caring, shared learning and reciprocity were clear examples of the mentoring experiences this group encountered. This combined with the unique characteristics of their female friendship created a challenging, exciting and enriching experience for the participants.

As indicated above Janice Raymond was one of the scholars to write about female friendship. She discussed in meticulous detail, the value of female friendship (1986) and some of her ideas are paralleled in this research. With regards to the links between feminist theory and its ontology: the personal is political, she ardently believes that one's being in the world and therefore one's political activity should focus on more than just struggles with male supremacy, rather it does also encompass the critical features of understanding self and other women (Raymond, 1987).

According to Elisabeth Porter (1996) the expression of female friendship involves more than just emotivism. Friendship amongst women is characterised by sharing, for example shared participation in a common world, sharing of personal and political aspects of life; (as well as) shared intimacies which results in mutual support and gives women's friendship its strength. (Porter, 1996:56,64). Furthermore, she claims women's friendships typically are characterized by a 'concerned responsiveness to particular special relations' (Porter, 1996, p56). Friendship therefore, 'requires not only strong notions of relationality, but of individuality, notions which require self trust as a basis for trusting relationships between women' (Porter, 1996:56-7).

It is these aspects of female friendship written in the current discourse, which are strongly interwoven with the literature on mentoring and known as characteristics of effective mentoring (Glass et al; Glass, 1994; & Madison, 1992). Moreover, and not surprisingly it was these characteristics which featured in this particular research. According to Glass et al (1994) mentoring

relationships should be natural relationships and it is, therefore, not unexpected that such relationships should develop from friendships for many women. The main characteristics of these relationships are based on honesty, a strong belief in each others' worth and the development of collaborative survival life skills.

As Miriam said:

I can feel the bonds of our friendship really starting to strengthen ... how ironic that through sharing parts of our vulnerable selves something really strong and real is starting to emerge.

Raymond talks of the continuum of female friendship which she calls gyn/affection (1986:15). Porter claims that the continuum gives '.. an idea of movement, of personal growth and development' (1996:66). Raymond claims it is the 'power of female friendship.. drawing forth a dynamic response. that sets free and enhances movement of all kinds. To attract is to cause a movement toward (1986:41). This is an attraction where women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power (1986:229). Maddie discusses her journal entry about being attracted to women, 'one on one' with Rhiannon. She says:

Maddie: I'd like to give you some credit for the mega changes going on in my life at the moment. Not only because of the research but because you were the woman who made me realise that I was attracted to women... I have been journaling heaps about it and I feel very clear about it and very clear that I had to tell you... The attraction I feel is... the trigger for a whole lot of feelings that I have been denying for quite a while. So in a way I should say thanks for helping me, especially through the research, to know myself better and to have confidence to be able to steer my life in the direction that I really want it to go.

Held (1987:118) talks about responsive particularity. This concerns a supportive passionate affection for other women and it requires a sensitivity to the domain of particular others where the self is closely intertwined in relations with others and the others are not something one can universalise. This is exemplified in the words of Miriam.

[The] issue for me [was] being understood... People were listening and taking the time to understand what I was saying ... in my world view, not just in theirs..

Understanding dualisms: Performance and sameness/differentness

Understanding dualism's and the associated dialectical tension with what might be perceived as opposing 'views' was also strongly apparent within the research. One of the dualistic relationships which emerged concerned performance issues, that being the dualism of performance for self/performance for others. In the research this involved both personal and professional issues. It appeared that some of the participants were really struggling with the (dialectical) tension related to the forces between others,

that being to be something that is acceptable to others, and the forces within, believing that it is okay to verbalise how I see myself (to an extent) and ultimately wanting to show and share with others who they really were. This dualism had to do with letting go of other's perceptions of self and defining and in some cases re-defining self. The performance dualism was brought out by Em when she said:

Em: I'm such a ...have to be so in control type person, black and white... when I think I'm hearing my own voice ... immediately something steps in and says 'you're not allowed to think like that you're not allowed to speak things like that you're not allowed to express feelings like that that's not right and it shuts down.

As brought out above exploring one's sexuality was an issue which emerged for three of the participants with one of the women feeling confident to 'call it' and come out. Even so, it was clear that the three women concerned were affected and aroused by the energy in the group to the point that they were all able to speak out. There was movement in their attempts to understand self and the other women were there to support each other. An example comes from Em who was working through her process of understanding self and performance for self She reflected on her journal entry and said:

Em: "I'm Okay, I want to feel good I need to talk, I'm Okay, I'm Okay, I'm Okay. Where am I at, why does this hurt so much? I want to feel good about this, I want to feel good and write about this. Shit I'm not [Okay], I want to be Okay, I want to be Okay, I want to be Okay, I want to be Okay. Help yourself, Help yourself, Help yourself. Do it, Do it, Do it Okay?"

Rhiannon showed her support by reflecting upon similar experiences, she said:

Rhiannon :[My experiences have been about] pain and joy together, feeling empowered, but scared shitless at the same time. [It's] like going forward and going back at the same time. And where are [your] feelings? Out there, out there 'floating'?

Feeling safe to speak out was clearly identified by Glass in 1994. She identified a process of becoming where women moved from silence, to de-silence to speaking out. In this research the participants became strongly aware of societal forces upon them as women, and the strong support from each other to ultimately speak out. As Luke stated:

[I]n feminist theory the concept and practice of 'voice-speech-speaking' has always been counterposed to 'silence': the historical silencing of women's voices and experiences by patriarchal discourses ... and the re-presentation of 'women' as other (1992:1).

As these participants progressed from de-silencing to reclaiming their voices, they became aware of, changes within themselves, and, that evidence of empowerment was surfacing. However, this was not a linear point of 'arrival'; it was an enduring complex process in which they began to realise, through pain and sorrow and, simultaneously, joy and pleasure, that change was possible. It was clear that they were moving towards a belief that speaking out regarding their experiences was an important point to reach. As Carmen Luke strongly asserted:

[V]oice has always been equated with a politically positive and empowering move: a statement of assertion of one's position on an issue, or the 'naming' of one's identity. (Luke, 1992:2).

Sameness/difference was another dualism which was identified in the research. Within the sociological literature sameness/difference is recognised as a politically crucial debate integrally linked to the deconstruction of sex/gender (see for example, the work by Wearing (1996), Gunew & Yeatman, (1993); Lloyd, (1989) & Gatens (1988). Parallels can be drawn here in this research regarding both women's perceptions of self and others, and also, sexual preference.

In regard to sameness and differences amongst women it is argued by the writers, that for second wave feminists, and post modernists, that the 'struggle' is centred on attempts to equalise power, by validating difference amongst women, and simultaneously recognising the importance of unity concerning transforming oppressive states. As Gunew and Yeatman claimed, '[the debate] concerns being able to deal with differences among women without losing the impetus that derives from being a coherent movement for social change' (1993:xiii).

Specifically, it is clear throughout this research that the data is reflective of the participants interest and deep commitment to equalising power relations amongst this group of women by recognising sameness and difference amongst women. Moreover, the commitment extends to more broadly, embracing the sociological constructs which define women, yet, we as authors of this paper, strongly acknowledge that as women are social constructs, we would agree with Lloyd (1989) that feelings as women, ourselves, are often in 'flux'.

Rhiannon reflected in the following comment, upon the notion of equalising power through the dualistic theme of sameness/difference. She said:

I am attempting to not struggle with the notion of difference, yet knowing it is an issue which will surface from time to time. As Michelle Fine says... I do not sit where they do, so part of it is that I am leading the research, I initiated it, and the group is looking for direction but part of it is that I am like them too. I am a woman trying to achieve just like they are so it is differentness yet sameness.

Em reflected upon an experience when she attempted desilencing regarding her sexuality, but again was held back by the sameness/ differentness dualism. She said:

Some heavy stuff went down and it was really good. It was strengthening for me personally to think that we could share those sort of things and when I got to that space when I thought maybe I can start to talk and feel safe about what I wanted to say suddenly it was gone again... I know why I couldn't do it.

Miriam through her coming out process also struggled with the same dualistic theme. As you will become aware she struggles with the commonalities and simultaneously feeling hers and maybe their anxiety regarding difference. Her story unfolds:

There is something I would like to share with you... and I hope it's not going to shock you all too much... [reflecting on an earlier journal entry] super day with the [women] today , another one of those magic spontaneous outings. I love the certain element of decadence and deviousness associated with them, not that there's anything that deviant about going to the movies and on the pub but it does hold something I think its got to do with doing stuff for us.

Initially she reflected on the sameness when she said:

"I love the connectedness and unity I feel with the [women]".

And in response to disclosing her journal entry regarding sexual difference, it was clear that she was concerned with the differentness component of the theme and the potential for altering the connections and the unity discussed above. She claimed:

[Today] I imagined telling the [women] that I'm lesbian, wondering about their reactions individually. I think the girls will accept it when I tell them, I don't think they will outwardly reject me, but I am worried that may be there will be subtle changes, distance stuff.

It seemed that one of her biggest concerns was touch and affection which had been common in the group may now be mis-perceived. So, a behaviour which had been common and 'the same' may now be perceived as different. She continues:

yeh the biggest way I see it changing the group is like ... you know the way that we touch each other and stuff, that would be my major concern that [we would not] touch because you thought I was different or something or that it was like I was making advances or something on you... and also the way Maddie or Em and I always share a bed when we stay away somewhere that maybe they won't want to they would think I am after them or something and [the same] with playing with Cas' hair suddenly I they would read them as sexual actions or something. I am aware that the girls may need time to digest it and talk amongst themselves about it. I guess I am just concerned that it

would change the dynamics of our friendship. They will see me as different all of a sudden"

However, it was obvious by the responses of the other women that they were there to support her in any way that they could irrespective of whether they were lesbian or straight. Comments such as these were responses to this situation:

Em: I've always thought you were anyway so what difference does it make?... And I'll still fight over bed partners anyway so don't let that go right out of your system because I enjoy sleeping with you... [It] hasn't altered me...its not even a surprise This is a great personal growth issue for me too and as Maddie knows I am just getting to the stage where I am feeling comfortable with touch. So please don't stop just because you might think I think differently of you because I don't...so please don't stop because it is important for me.

Maddie: [Your coming out] doesn't make any difference at all. Still love you you're a special friend [and] you can still rub my arm!

Shannon: I'm not surprised either like no one really is... I think it has probably taken a lot of guts for you to come out and say it and good on you, glad you've got it out in the open.

and with regards to the demonstration of female affection Shannon validates Miriam's integrity and says:

Shannon: you're not doing it in a sexual way, it's not like that at all.

And by the following comment it is clear that the performance for self issue is also interwoven. Miriam says:

the hardest thing was admitting it to myself I completely blocked it for so long but I just feel so together about it [now].

Furthermore, it is implicit in the following comment that Em is not only validating Miriam's coming out but also as the lesbians in the group were acutely aware, she was also really bringing forward her own issue of sexuality. In fact Miriam's coming out is accelerating and strengthening the same issue for her in a discrete and dialectical way. She reflects and says:

Em: I've always been comfortable with [other's?] sexuality. It just has never ever bothered me... from the moment that I meet Miriam I thought she was anyway. I felt I had more of an insight... into who you were and where you were coming from... I just always had a feeling and it was a comfortable feeling.

Moreover, it seems that through the support of the group and the explicit and, implicit themes of coming out and celebrating lesbianism was enough for Maddie to share part of her process too. She said:

Maddie: I feel today has seen the beginning of something new and great for me. [F]or the first time I was able to look at aspects of my life that are not happy or are troubling me and realise that I don't have to go along pretending. I have the potential to change things for the better.

In response to Miriam's self disclosure it is evident that Rhiannon feels comfortable to raise an issue around the sameness/differentness as well. Her concern centres on how lesbians are perceived [as different] by mainstream heterosexual society as deviant and the associated impact of minimalising one's sexuality combined with one's knowing amongst lesbians [sameness] that they are not deviant and lecherous!

Rhiannon: I think one's sexuality is actually a really big issue and I don't think it is a small part of who [we] really are... I think it is really hard being a lesbian because most [heterosexuals] find it so deviant. I think it is really great that you are really accepting of Miriam so far... because it is hard to be yourself because a lot of people think that's [lesbianism] is a bedroom issue and its not. In terms of my own sexuality its my life . I have always felt that Miriam was a lesbian from the first time I met her it just like an intuitive knowing.

and at this point it is clear that she is also feeling the need to disclose her concerns with the heterosexual women in this group too, she says:

Rhiannon: For me [Miriam's sexuality] wasn't an issue... and in a way it is probably a weird thing to say but I actually felt I had to say that too, because it's all that stuff that [Miriam's] talking about around female affection and, how sometimes I feel like I might be perceived ... if I touch someone, that they might think that I want to fuck with them or something it's really frightening.

Yet despite the difficulties and tensions around the sameness differentness Miriam's being true to self was accelerated by her inner strength and the supportive nature of the women, she completes the remainder of her story at this stage by saying:

Miriam: I can't believe I am moving through this so quickly it is like know I have a level of consciousness on it --it is like I will keep going to feel I am being true to myself and to start living the honest and open life I want to lead. It is really very important to me.

Final reflections

In summary, the results clearly indicated that an environment was created to discuss and explore issues concerning female friendship and sexuality. The research method in its own right was empowering as 'it' allowed for a difficult sensitive subject to be exposed without judgment. The percussor for these disclosures were premised on the safety, support and group strength consistently shown in the process.

Moreover, it was clearly apparent that the women's journeys in this research and ultimately their mentoring of each other, was characterised by a safe path

and group members attained deep levels of trust and commitment to each other and ultimately grew to love themselves.

Once nurses have reclaimed their voices and feel safe to speak out, they can effectively listen and value each other in their own right. Support of each other becomes possible through the engendering of mentoring relationships. This is a strong political survival skill necessary to improve their position in nursing not only as students but also as registered nurses. Nurses and women obviously have more power together than separately. The joining together of like-minded nurses who will assert their constructive viewpoints, will assist in altering their position(s) and ultimately contribute to advancing nursing.

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