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"Using Reflexivity as a Tool to Validate Feminist Research Based on Personal Trauma"

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Feminist Legal Studies

Using Reflexivity as a Tool to Validate Feminist Research Based on Personal Trauma

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Abstract

This essay explores social science researchers with ‘insider status’. This term describes a researcher who is a member of the population they are studying. The research in question involved a birth mother studying the impact of compulsory child adoption on birth mothers. Research that grows from traumatic experiences may involve a researcher revisiting painful memories through her interactions with participants. She may hold unconscious biases and preconceptions. If not exposed or addressed, this raises ethical implications and can negatively affect the reliability of the findings. Personally motivated research can be validated with the use of reflexivity. Often used in feminist methodology, it demands that the researcher examines her own feelings, reactions, and motives and how these influence the interactions with participants, the analysis and findings. This essay shows how these philosophies behind reflexively operate in practice. By reflexively aligning my own personal journey alongside birth mothers’ narrative, I was able to recognise and validate the role of myself in my research. This allowed me to face up to and challenge my biases and to avoid hierarchy that commonly exists between researcher and participants. For me this process went beyond simply being ethical practice, opening up opportunities for both creative and personal transformations.

Key words: Insider research. Feminist methodology. Personal experiences. Reflexivity.

Background

Across the global research community, academic research is regularly motivated by personal experiences. I carried out research into the impact of compulsory child adoption on birth mothers because it has personal significance for me. As well as being a researcher and a teacher of law in higher education, I am a birth mother.

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At the age of 34, after a lifetime enduring a dysfunctional childhood, domestic abuse, and mental illness leading to involvement with both mental health and children's services, I lost the fight to care for my four children. The two youngest were eventually placed for adoption by the local authority while I was being treated in a mental health unit. Although I was devastated and numb with grief, I was comforted by the news that my sons had been adopted together by a loving couple who could give them a secure family they deserved. Believing my children were safe and happy gave me strength to overcome my illness and become stronger and resilient. However, my children's security was short lived, two years later, I learned that their adoption had broken down, resulting in them being permanently 'looked after' by the local authority who originally placed them for adoption, with no hope of being placed with a new family.

After several years of therapy and in the process of rebuilding my life, I spent the next five years fighting a legal battle in the family courts to try to ascertain my children's wishes about contact with their birth family, at the same time as studying for a degree in law at university. With the tenacity of a dedicated solicitor who persuaded a family judge to allow me permission to apply under the Children Act 1989, I was eventually able to argue successfully for contact with my children, something I discovered they had been asking social workers for since they returned to care. Ten years after we were separated, I met my sons. Meeting two teenagers who I had given birth to was impossible to comprehend at first, because in my mind they were still the little boys I said goodbye to a decade earlier. I felt emotions that I did not recognise. I smiled politely and asked them careful questions when I just wanted to hold them and not let go. The fantasy I had been nurturing that we could slip back into the closely bonded union that we had when they were small boys proved to be untenable, I was a stranger to them that day and for many subsequent meetings. It has taken a long time to rebuild the tenuous

1 relationships into something more solid, but the years apart will always shape our lives and we
2 will never be the mother and children we once were.
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5 Over time, the paradox of my emotions began to crystallise. I felt relief that my children
6 were in my life-regret for the lost years-guilt for failing them and anger at the system for
7 allowing the situation to drag on for so long. I decided then that I needed to channel my anger
8 and sadness into something positive to avoid becoming toxic with bitterness.
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11 Two years after that painful first meeting with my sons, I was at the beginning of my
12 doctoral research. I immersed myself in theory of public child law, an institution that facilitated
13 the enforced removal and adoption of my children so easily despite my desperate opposition.
14 For long while I was unable to understand the power of the law, which empowered an authority
15 to separate my children from me, potentially for the rest of our lives, whilst I was not consulted,
16 involved or supported. At some point in the research journey, I realised why this happened; the
17 welfare of the child demands no less than the ability of the state to override parental objection
18 to permanent removal of their children; in adoption, parental consent is not required.
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36 I may have understood the law on an intellectual level, but I still struggled to reconcile
37 the trauma of adoption with the textbook theory, which presented a one-dimensional and
38 problem free solution to children in care needing ‘forever families’. The legal impact of
39 adoption was something I could research; I could compartmentalise my experiences through
40 study of child law and legal theory. What academic study could not do was reconcile the shame
41 and stigmatizing I had experienced both as an external force in society and as an internal aspect
42 of my identity, as a ‘bad mother’. I worked quietly on my research alongside colleagues with
43 a sense of imposter, fearing if my secret was revealed I would be judged and rejected. It was
44 some time before I began to challenge the belief that I was not worthy of my position as an
45 academic. Eventually I came to realise my past was part of who I was, with all the failures and
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1 successes. I need not justify my experiences or myself. I could use the experience of being
2 stigmatised to empathise with women who like I once did, find they are marginalised in society
3 and labelled as bad mothers.
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7 **The Research Project**

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10 It is not unusual for personal experience or trauma to motivate the need for deeper knowledge.
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12 As Glenda Russel points out, “Good research springs from a researcher’s values, passions and
13 preoccupations” (Russell and Kelly 2002, 3). Interviewing birth mothers was a natural
14 progression for me to gain knowledge about how the law had affected the lives of those who
15 had similar experiences. Prioritising women’s discourses in research is suited to feminist
16 methodology (Harding 1987, 6). A feminist approach is applicable to research in any discipline
17 that aims to critique or challenge a system that has a bearing on the lives of women. Feminists
18 argue that social science has long focused its’ analyses from a male perspective and has sought
19 to answer only questions men require answers to (Harding 1987, 11). My aim was to present
20 stories of adoption purely from the perspective of women who are known as birth mothers,
21 whose perspectives and memories would be presented to create a unique collective voice. A
22 subjective contrast to objective theory.
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41 As I began my research, I questioned whether it was ethical for me to research birth
42 mothers given my personal involvement with adoption at such an emotive level. The answer to
43 this question was found within research literature, where personal experiences as a basis for
44 academic study are validated. According to Kim Etherington (2004, 180),
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51 “Our personal history, when it is processed in ways that allow us to remain in
52 contact emotionally and bodily with others’ whose stories remind us of our own,
53 can enrich our role as researcher. Our empathic resonance allows us to hear
54 others’ experiences without the need to defend ourselves against that knowing”.
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1 I have what researchers call ‘insider status’ this term describes a researcher who is a member
2 of the population they are studying (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 54-63). Having personal and
3 sometimes negative lived experiences that echo their participants’ stories places strain on a
4 researcher’s ability to stay neutral. Bias, whether conscious or unconscious, is a human trait.
5
6 Those of us who wish to use research to convey the impact of the law on ourselves and others
7 are not required to remove our identity from our research to the point where we become
8 dispassionate observers. There are ways we can integrate our own experiences with our
9 participants to create research that is meaningful and expresses the painful narratives of others
10 with compassion and candour. We can do this by being open and transparent about our biases.
11
12 Underpinning a methodology with reflexivity demands that a researcher examines her own
13 feelings, reactions, and motives and how this emotional lexicon influences the analysis of the
14 findings. Reflexivity is commonly adopted in feminist research as a way of exploring complex
15 power dynamics of research relationships (Bondi 2009, 327). Ann Oakley was influential in
16 adopting reflexive methodology when interviewing women (Oakley 2015, np). She argued in
17 favour of practice that carefully considered the undercurrents of interview relationships
18 (Oakley in Roberts 1981, np). This approach can reveal biases and authenticate data by
19 promoting transparency during interviewing, analysis and dissemination of the findings.
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42 It can be challenging to face up to our individual biases. When I began my research, I
43 harboured anger and bitterness towards the institutions that were involved with my family. I
44 experienced empathy with the sense of injustice expressed by the women I interviewed. I
45 related to their helplessness and sadness on a profound level. With a strong sense of ethical
46 responsibility¹, I wondered if it would be possible to make myself transparent within my
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57 ¹ Before the study commenced ethical approval was obtained in accordance with the University of Plymouth
58 Research Ethics Policy, see <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/governance/research-ethics-policy>.
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1 project. This was with the desire to address the uneasiness I possessed about my biases
2 affecting the validity of the project. The essence of the study was rooted in my own experiences,
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4 so surely it was counterproductive to deny or hide my own position. DeVault (in Hertz 1997,
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7 222) suggests that there *is* room for personal reflection in social research,

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10 “Social scientists are trained to think analytically, but we are less prepared to
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12 apply our analytical skills to our own experience. We are not taught to write
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14 about whatever self-analysis we achieve; rather we edit these insights out of our
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16 text. I suggest that we need to become more sophisticated and reflective writers
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18 in order to consider where our personal stories lead and what they convey”.

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23 Ruth Behar (1996, 273) argues that openness in research can blur the lines of power play
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25 between the researcher and the researched; she explains, “We ask for revelations from others,
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27 but we reveal nothing about ourselves; we make others vulnerable but we ourselves remain
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29 invulnerable”. These arguments validate personal involvement in research, especially with the
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31 use of reflexivity- but the idea of exposing my vulnerabilities in my study was unsettling and
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33 a step into the unknown. It was therefore important to me that I fully comprehended the
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35 theoretical framework of reflexivity to avoid being ‘carried away’ emotionally by the process.
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38 I would willingly incorporate my birth mother identity- but I felt the need to remain grounded-
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41 with the recognition that it was the birth mothers’ stories and not my own which must take
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44 centre stage.
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47 ***Using reflexivity in feminist research***

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51 Gilbert (2008, 9) places reflexivity as “ethically important because it prompts us to ask
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53 questions about what we are doing as researchers”. Etherington (2004, 27) believes that
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55 “[reflexive] research encourages the inclusion of the researcher’s story thus making transparent
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57 the values and beliefs that are held, which will certainly influence the research process and its
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1 outcomes". During the research planning stage, I knew instinctively that I should declare my
2 birth mother status if I intended to work with others in the same situation. I felt that hiding my
3 position would influence the authenticity of the work; it may taint reliability by concealing the
4 primary motivation behind the research. During a meeting with a colleague who was
5 experienced in feminist research, reflexivity was suggested as a way of providing a
6 methodological foundation for transparency about my insider status.
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15 I immediately saw that a reflexive approach meant I could legitimately include myself
16 in my study. There was no need for me to remain invisible; I could become an integral part of
17 my research. It also meant that I could justifiably disclose my insider position to my
18 participants, avoiding unreliability by being transparent. Telling participants that I was a birth
19 mother transformed the dynamic of my interactions with them. Many commented positively
20 upon my disclosure. One woman commented when she offered to tell me her story "how could
21 I not [take part] you are one of us".² Sara Evans (in Reinharz 1992, 27) believes that a great
22 rapport can be achieved between researcher and researched where personal experience is
23 common because we can comprehend what they have to say in a way that no 'outsider' could.
24
25 Women who have lost their children through the care system are routinely labelled as deviant.
26
27 Discriminatory practices and stigmatization are a regular occurrence in the family courts
28 (Kennedy 1992, 27). Helena Kennedy observes that women with children in care always
29 encounter unmatched prejudice (Kennedy 1992, 73). Although I had never taken part in a study
30 myself, I knew that prejudice meant marginalised women tend to avoid participating in research
31 through fear of being judged and misinterpreted. Sharing my identity as a birth mother
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57 ² Excerpt from interview with Karen. 'Karen' was a pseudonym so that the birth mother's identity was protected
58 in accordance with Ethics Policy and research with vulnerable subjects.
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1 alleviated their fears and helped to build trusting relationships where women felt free to speak
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3 openly.
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5 Reflexivity as a concept simply means “consciousness about being conscious and
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7 thinking about thinking” (Hertz 1997, 49). Reflexivity required that I reflected carefully on my
8
9 aims and objectives at all stages of the study. Being reflexive involves risks both academic and
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11 personal. It cannot be denied that incorporating personal reflexivity as an integral part of a
12
13 study made me vulnerable. Sharing painful feelings on paper and in conversations with
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15 participants brought to the surface ‘relived’ memories that I had buried to avoid feeling painful
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17 emotions, for example, the agonizing sense of emptiness that I felt when my children left.
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19 Where there has been stigmatizing, being transparent can be intensely unsettling because those
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21 of us who have been stigmatised invest in hiding the cause of the stigma, to avoid being
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23 discredited (Goffman 1963, 9-13).³ Sharing my identity with birth mothers was the first step I
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25 had taken in challenging this personal stigma. The process was circular because in sharing their
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27 stories with me, participants were facing their own fears around stigma, as many had never
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29 spoken of their child’s adoption before.
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37 Reflexivity can create a dynamic interaction between the researcher and the participant.
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39 It challenges us to become aware of our own ideologies, it creates transparency around ethical
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41 issues, it promotes reflection on the role of an insider and it validates the study by informing
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43 the reader of the context in which the data is located (Etherington 2004, 19). Watt (2007, 82)
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45 explains that using reflexivity makes the researcher more aware of that which they may have
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47 unconsciously failed to see in their data. This was an important factor because I was mindful
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55 ³ Stigma was defined by Erving Goffman as ‘the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social
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57 acceptance’ and ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting, something unusual or bad about the moral status of the
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59 person’.
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1 that some of the realities of the findings might be difficult for me to acknowledge, for example,
2 it was unspeakably painful to listen to birth mothers talking about feeling suicidal following
3 the adoption of their children. I was forced to recall the time when I felt like life was no longer
4 worth living. This resonance allowed me to express their depth of sorrow effectively while
5 reflexivity ensured the lines between their feelings and my own were not blurred.
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12 I was committed to avoiding any form of power imbalance between my participants
13 and myself, because feminist methodology seeks to empower women, and places no value on
14 hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. Lather (in Punch 2005, 135) argues that
15 feminist method should be action based and researchers must, “Engage in feminist efforts
16 which empower through empirical research designs which maximise a dialogic, dialectically
17 educative encounter between the researcher and the researched”. I sensed that the participants,
18 as I once did, would have felt disempowered by the adoption process and would avoid any
19 suggestion of authority. According to Etherington (2004, 227) reflexivity can remedy potential
20 disparity between researcher and participants,
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35 “When we enter into relationships with our participants’ issues of power will
36 inevitably come into focus. We are required to constantly scrutinize and
37 interrogate our own positions, views and behaviours, turning back onto
38 ourselves the same lens through which we examine the lives of participants”.
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45 Although it was clear that reflexivity is a valid and principled approach I still felt as though it
46 must be exercised with careful consideration of my motives, because as Watt (2007, 94) notes,
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51 “We researchers should be wary of the desire to justify our own experience. It
52 is important to be interested in the topic, but we cannot allow emotional
53 attachment to preclude the open learner’s attitude that is necessary for good data
54 collection and analyses”.
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1 I reflected on these observations for some time before I realised that I had progressed or ‘got
2 over it’ enough to be certain that I was conducting this study for no unconsciously covert
3 reasons. This was not research carried out based on personal grudges; I wanted to provide a
4 platform for the voices for women who are rarely heard in academic discourses on adoption
5 where the focus is usually placed on adoptive families. This thought process, which I wrote
6 down, demonstrated the power of reflexivity; no stone was being left unturned in my quest for
7 transparency.
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Reflexivity operates on different levels. It can be applied to research in various ways, from ensuring that subjective bias is not becoming an issue to being used as a principal methodology (Etherington 2004, 31). Etherington (2004, 21) believes that reflexivity will have different meanings depending on the person who is applying it as a method. Wasserfall (in Hertz 1997, 151-152) characterises the use of reflexivity by defining it as both ‘weak’ and ‘strong’. Weak use of reflexivity suggests an ongoing self-awareness, which is not necessarily made evident by the researcher; rather it is used as a personal tool to monitor relationships between them and participants. Strong use, on the other hand, promotes ‘the deconstruction of the authority of the author’, which effectively removes the power difference between the researcher and the researched. I felt my reflexive approach fell somewhere between the two, with a greater leaning towards strong reflexivity, because it was impossible for me to ignore the birth mother part of my identity that I shared with my participants. The fact that I was an academic researcher placed no bearing on hierarchy; there was no authority to deconstruct. I was an integral part of my research by default.

The union between participants and myself developed during the pre-interview process, where I disclosed my birth mother identity. In most cases, this facilitated a breakdown in self-protective barriers that stigmatised people often erect when they talk about their experiences. Women were willing to accept they would not be judged, demonised or misquoted. I told them

1 I understood how it felt to be stigmatised. I spent time building trusting relationships with
2 women, making it clear that the information they gave me would be handled carefully and
3 respectfully and that they would be fully anonymised.⁴ During interviews, the lack of hierarchy
4 was strengthened because I was able to say ‘yes I understand’ with genuine empathy when
5 participants talked about the adoption process and their feelings or how they had been treated.
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7 I did not get the sense that the women who spoke to me saw me as an academic or as a
8 researcher; but rather they saw me as a birth mother. This equality between us demonstrates a
9 key value of reflexive feminist research.
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20 I had concerns about an unstructured approach to interviewing, as is the feminist
21 tradition (Reinharz 1992, 18). I was seeking specific information about the legal process of
22 adoption but at the same time, I wanted to give participants control over their narratives. Taking
23 time to build trust with women before the interviews resulted in them being willing to be
24 ‘guided’ with open questioning. Their answers gave important observations about their
25 children’s adoption whilst conveying the personal and emotional impact of that process.
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35 Insider research raises issues around interpretive conflict, particularly where the
36 researcher’s voice overpowering the voices of participants is concerned. For this reason, it is
37 crucial to maintain a neutral stance during data analysis. Katherine Borland (1991, 63) suggests
38 that the researcher must seek to find a balance between, “Respecting the speaker’s ownership
39 of her words as well as the researcher’s commitment to scholarship, to achieve this, we must
40 maintain equilibrium between the production of our text and our relationship with our
41 participants”. To ensure ‘commitment to scholarship’ it was important to analyse and present
42 the data sympathetically but with a level of objectivity. Despite taking a reflexive approach in
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58 ⁴ All of the participants’ names and personal information was removed from the transcripts in accordance with
59 the ethical policy. They were identified by way of numbers and in the finished work were given pseudonyms that
60 were not connected to their identities.
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1 the methodology, I decided not to include my personal responses to the participant's narratives
2 in the finished work⁵. This was despite the argument that reflexive feminist research
3 encourages us to display in our writing the full interaction between our participants and
4 ourselves (Etherington 2004, 32). The research was about the birth mothers who came forward
5 and shared their stories; therefore, it was their voices and not mine that took precedent. To
6 ensure authentic voice, the actual words of the birth mothers were included verbatim (Gilbert
7 2008, 340)⁶. Overall, the analysis respected the method of Field Belenky et al (1986, 16) who
8 'adopt a stance of trying to honour each woman's point of view'.
9

20 *Recording thought processes: the reflexive journal*

23 In relation to the commitment towards making any potential biases visible, I was keen to reflect
24 on my own research journey. After each interview I conducted, I recorded my thoughts about
25 interactions with birth mothers in a reflexive journal. Etherington (2004, 127) suggests that the
26 researcher should use their journal entries to "monitor their growth and develop their own
27 internal supervisor". Janesick (in Denzin 2000, 385) encourages the keeping of a journal,
28 suggesting, "The researcher owns up to his or her perspective on the study and will track its
29 evolution by critical reflection of the entire research process". Watt (2007, 82) suggests that
30 the journal can potentially become a,
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43 "Personal narrative highlighting the value of reflexivity both during and after a
44 study. It helps to demystify the research process and teaches one to reflect on
45 their behaviour and thoughts as well as the phenomenon under study, it creates
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53 ⁵ Excerpts from my reflexive journal were included as appendices in the published study to allow the reader to
54 access the reflexive process.
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57 ⁶ Verbatim responses are a valid method of presenting data in the text where the intention is to avoid reducing
58 responses down to numerically coded categories.
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1 means for continually becoming a better researcher by catching the dynamic
2 nature of the process”.

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5 This view is shared by Ellis (1996, 152) who, in writing her own personal narrative, states that
6 journal accounts must “candidly portray events and bring readers evocatively into what it felt
7 like to go through the experience. This will mean revealing flaws, and bad decisions as well
8 strengths and good judgments”. I did not appreciate the value of my journal until I had
9 completed the data collection and read it properly for the first time. Whilst I was immersed in
10 the interviewing process, the thoughts and feelings about the interactions that were recorded in
11 my journal would have remained invisible. Sometimes these thoughts were triggered by stories
12 about the harsh way birth mothers were treated; being able to communicate my empathy and
13 resonance in my journal meant I could disseminate women’s voices candidly but objectively
14 in the study- untainted by hidden biases. My journal provided a powerful and grounding means
15 for self-reflection. It is, as Ellis (1996, 157) says, “an honest account written from the heart as
16 well as the head”. This is not an easy concept in academic writing, but I believe it is a vital
17 component of insider research, insofar as there would be a significant risk of undisclosed bias
18 without it. At the end of each entry in my journal, I wrote the words ‘their stories are not your
19 stories’. This sentence, written many times, helped to ground me when I found I was blurring
20 my own experiences with those of the participants.

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45 As Watt (2007, 83) points out with her analysis of her reflexive journal, “writing these
46 notes permit researchers to discover things in their heads that they did not know were there”. I
47 shared excerpts of my journal in the finished study. By sharing these entries with readers, it
48 allowed them to evaluate the findings with my own honest accounts, leaving no room for lack
49 of transparency. It is the keeping of the journal that Maxwell (2012, 45) suggests allows
50 subjectivity to become ‘critical subjectivity’. This means that the researcher validates
51 subjectivity by, “such quality of awareness where primary experiences are not suppressed, yet
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1 we do not allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by something that is now part
2 of the inquiry process". Quite the contrary, the journal provided a secure anchor point into
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4 which all those thoughts and feelings that should not be suppressed can be poured. This ensures
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6 that the researcher does not become overwhelmed by stories that remind her of her own painful
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8 emotions that risk being projected onto the women she interviews.
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12 At the end of data collection, my journal seemed to be a confused jumble of outpourings
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14 that should never be exposed in an academic study. However, with critical contemplation of
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16 the reactive feelings and emotions that had been recorded, I found that it was possible to
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18 transform the entries through reflection into critical subjectivity, which contributes something
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20 extremely valuable to the study (Mayer et al 2004, 197) . The use of reflexivity resulted in an
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22 authentic piece of research that does not attempt to hide the fact that my painful experience of
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24 adoption have played a key role in my ability to present the voices of birth mothers. Without
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26 reflexivity, I believe that the research would have presented as one dimensional with too many
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28 hidden truths that represented my own experiences. Working with birth mothers within a
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30 reflexive framework meant I was able to be open about my responses to their stories. This two-
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32 way dialogue resulted in depth and quality of data that surpassed my expectations. As I grew
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34 confident with reflexivity, I allowed myself to respond to the participants in a natural
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36 conversational manner rather than within a traditional interviewing technique. For example,
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38 Jane talked about her grief following her last contact with her children. She described how the
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40 social worker who brought her children to visit was eager to end the meeting despite this being
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42 their final goodbye before the adoption. Jane's anger at the social worker and sadness for the
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44 loss of her children were tangible. Both she and I were in tears, and I shared that I had
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46 experienced a similar event with my own children. During interviews such as Jane's, my biases
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48 were not only evident but were integral to the process of data collection. My own sense of
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50 injustice on the behalf of birth mothers is therefore expressed through the dissemination of their
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narratives, which I was able to convey without fear of unconscious bias distorting the results.
The result is an honest and unique insight into the experiences of birth mothers communicated
by a researcher who identified and empathised with their stories on a deeply personal level, see
(Deblasio 2020).⁷

Those who believe in more orthodox methodology may argue that the subjectivity of
the data I collected fails to illustrate the reality of legal adoption. I argue that for the birth
mothers who spoke to me-their narrative represented their truth and their reality-and as such
contributes something of value to our understanding of this area of law. My position of ‘insider’
meant I was able to relate to their experiences in a way that other researchers may not.
Arguments about validity and bias can be defended with the reflexive journal that lays the cards
of partiality on the table.

Being reflexive supports the personal and professional growth of researchers who can
transcend their assumptions and their biases into something that is transparent and constructive.
Using reflexivity also follows the feminist tradition of calling on researchers to reflect on the
impact of unequal social relationships with participants. Being reflexive can reduce the risk of
exploitation or disempowerment of those who are being studied. Reflexive approaches are not
yet commonly adopted in legal research but it is hoped that this essay will inspire those who
would like to study lived experiences to realise that subjectivity and bias should not discourage
them from doing so.

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⁷ The research project is available as a monograph.

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