Reflection, reflexivity, reconceptualisation: Life story inquiry and the complex positionings of a researcher

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Abstract

This paper employs an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon my personal doctoral research journey. Methodological, ethical and social justice issues emerged from the doctoral study which used a qualitative and narrative research methodology – the life story approach – are examined in this paper, highlighting the complexity, messiness and subjectivity of this approach and the key role of reflexivity in research. The doctoral study utilised life story individual interviews conducted with ten Chinese immigrant parents to investigate their involvement in their children's early childhood education. The participants' stories have now become part of my life story. Personal reflections on the doctoral research journey are used as 'findings' – as a site for analysis by reinterpreting earlier interpretations. These reflections illuminate the importance yet complication of relationships between the researcher and participants, the fluid nature of the insider-researcher, and the complexity of meaning co-construction in qualitative and narrative research.

Key words: narrative, life story interviews, insider-researcher, subjectivity, reflexivity

Introduction: Why am I doing this?

After a restless exploration of possible research methodologies during my doctoral research proposal writing stage, I settled on a qualitative and narrative methodology, specifically a life story approach, because it appealed to me as I reviewed a wide range of methodological literature. I had read that stories generated from in-depth qualitative and narrative data are particularly relevant when investigating immigrants' practices and their contexts (Levitt, 2001; Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec, 2003). I also noted that a life story research methodology generates data that are not exclusively about the storytellers since everyday life stories usually involve other people related to the storytellers (Harrison, 2009). This methodology, therefore, seemed to be well suited for my study, because while it aimed at investigating Chinese immigrants' parenting practices and aspirations, their children, family members and wider communities were all implicated. The use of life stories as a methodological approach thus served its purpose in terms of completing the doctoral thesis[1], answering the research questions, and disseminating the findings.

Qualitative research can be used for social justice purposes, for example by placing the participants' voices "at the centre of the inquiry" (Denzin, 2017, p. 9). It is particularly relevant to the doctoral study which provided an opportunity for the rare voices of Chinese immigrants to be heard within the mainstream New Zealand research and academic communities. This paper will reflect upon my experiences in relation to the application of life story methodology and how I 'treated' the voices of the participants during the research process. Some of the critical theoretical perspectives, such as critical multiculturalism (Chan, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010; McLaren, 1995; Rhedding-Jones, 2010) and the politics of identity (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000), that were used to conceptualise the doctoral study are again applied in this paper to analyse methodological tensions, in terms of power relations and social justice issues that emerged during data collection and interpretation. Some of these important concerns were less visible to me as a doctoral student, since at the time I was blinded by the urgency required to complete the thesis. As an early childhood education teacher-educator, I promote the use of self-reflection to improve teaching practices (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). As a critical researcher, I am aware of the value of adopting critical reflection as a research methodology to evaluate whether the participants' voices have been heard, and the values and beliefs of both the researcher and the researched have been recognised (Hickson, 2016). Now that my doctoral thesis is 'out of the way', I want to draw upon my learning from the study, and to use this autoethnographic process as a post-thesis reflective critique, to highlight social justice and ethical issues in research, to offer alternate possibilities, and to reconceptualise my researcher's positionality as well as several key features of the life story approach.

Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015) state that "autoethnography is a method that allows us to consider how we think, how we do research and maintain relationships …" (p. 8) and that autoethnographers "intentionally try to contribute to, extend, and/or critique existing research and theoretical conversations" (p. 37). Using personal experiences from my research journey as primary data, this autoethnographic piece serves as a means to reflect, rediscover, reanalyse and relearn (Chang, 2008; Lake, 2015). Autoethnography also has the potential to both inform and transform readers as they engage with the narratives, and consider and reconsider multiple options for 'doing research' (Chang, 2008). It emphasises personal experience, relationships with self and others, complex meaning/sense-making, the nuanced insider-outsider status of researchers, and reflexivity (Adams et al., 2015). These key features similarly characterise an ethnographic life story research methodology. Whilst they were initially conceptualised in my doctoral thesis, I will reconceptualise them in this paper, using some of the critical theoretical lenses, such as critical multiculturalism and identity theories that framed my doctoral study. These lenses will now be revisited in order to challenge some of my decisions and actions during the study and offer some new possible meanings to the key features of the life story approach.

The stories collected during qualitative research processes are not only the participants' stories, they are also reflective of the researcher's social and cultural positioning. Hence it is proposed that the role of the researcher should be a part of the data to be analysed (Harrison, 2009; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Rogers, 2004; Roth, 2005, Subedi, 2006). As an immigrant to New Zealand from Hong Kong when my son was two years old, I shared with the Chinese participants in my study, to a certain extent, similar cultural and language backgrounds, as well as migration and parenting experiences. I assumed that these similarities would grant me an insider-researcher identity (Liu, 2009), support me to tell 'truthful' stories of the participants, and contribute to the findings being 'legitimate' (Subedi, 2006). Whilst along the research journey, I began to question this assumption of similarities and sameness regarding the semi-shared backgrounds, the discursive power of institutional research protocols, both with and without my knowing, also constrained my ability to fully enact my insider-researcher role, and possibly also influenced aspects of the findings. These assumptions regarding similarities are complex and not straightforward. They have played a key role in the study and are key areas for reflection in this paper.

This paper will first provide a contextual understanding of the life story research methodology before re-examining its suitability for the doctoral project and reflecting upon methodological and social justice issues emerged during the study. The role of reflexivity in promoting ethical and just research practices will be scrutinised. Several reflective questions are presented in italics, and they will be discussed in light of the critical theoretical perspectives mentioned earlier, constructing new 'findings' for the doctoral study. The doctoral research journey and the participants' stories have now become part of my own life story.

A literature review: A life story methodological approach

The doctoral study used a life story methodological approach to explore Chinese immigrant parents' participatory experiences in their children's early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand. "Life story offers a way, perhaps more than any other, for another to step inside the personal world of the storyteller" (Atkinson, 2007, p. 224). A qualitative and narrative life story inquiry which utilised individual interviews in the research process, therefore, enabled the participants to share in-depth their experiences and stories, as well as their personal beliefs and values regarding the learning and socialisation of children. The following discussion examines several key features of the life story approach and the complexity of its application.

Doing the ground work: Relationship-building and co-construction

Life story research is often perceived as a joint action and a collective enterprise (Atkinson, 2004; Plummer, 2001) in which findings are co-constructed and co-negotiated between the researcher and storyteller, rather than being 'discovered' by the researcher (Pring, 2000). This collaboration requires a relationship between the researcher and the researched that is as close as possible to 'equality' (Harrison, 2009). Yet, the issue of power has always been central in research (Scott & Usher, 1999), and the researcher often has more influence and motivation than the researched in driving the research process.

Without a close and trusting relationship and if participants feel that they are being 'researched' during life story interviews, they are likely to simply provide 'standard' answers to satisfy the researcher in order to bring the interviews to an end (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). The meaning of stories collected in such a manner usually reflects the researcher's subjective interpretation, rather than having been co-constructed by both the researcher and participants. Relationality is believed to be particularly important in research involving Chinese participants, many of whom respect social harmony and are likely to provide positive responses to avoid confrontation and negativity (Liu, 2009). Establishing trusting relationships between the researcher and Chinese participants would be more likely to provide an opportunity to co-construct meaning for stories from non-dominant voices.

The rare voices

Academic communities are often dominated by the voices of the dominant group, whilst the knowing and being of 'others' go unheard or unnoticed (Atkinson, 2004, 2007; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Erel, 2009; Plummer, 2001). Early childhood education in New Zealand is dominated by a range of dominant discourses, such as the notions of 'learning through play' and 'parent-teacher partnership', with which some immigrants may be unfamiliar or with which they may not be in accord (Chan, 2011). These discourses are also seldom scrutinised and their application is often ritualistic and inauthentic (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). Narrative research provides immigrants with opportunities to share their stories and experiences. Their collective stories have the potential to challenge dominant discourses, transform knowledge and construct new understandings (Erel, 2009).

Although narrative research can give immigrant participants a voice that may not be heard otherwise (Elliott, 2005), participants are able to express their views only via the institutional researchers and academics who decide on the content and form of the narratives to be shared with wider audiences. Hence, Mazzei and Jackson (2012) describe "letting participants speak for themselves" (p. 746) as a naïve claim, since an "assemblage" (p. 747) of voices: those of the participants, the researcher, of theories, research protocols and many more, is implicated in the research process. Insider-researchers who share with their participants a similar language and cultural background are, however, considered to be more able than outsider-researchers to 'hear' and 'decode' the participants' voices (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012).

Insider/outsider-researcher

Each personal life event happens within wider historical, political, sociocultural ideological contexts (Denzin, 2014; Harrison, 2009; Stivers, 2009). The intended meanings of stories are often lost, in particular during cross-cultural interpretation in situations where the researcher and participants do not share the same cultural and contextual understandings (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). Researchers who share the participants' cultural identity and have a conventional academic background possess a dual perspective that might enable them to consider both the needs of the participants and the expectations of the academic research community (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). Trusting relationships with participants, however, are a pre-requisite for researchers to be considered as insider-researchers (Gregory & Ruby, 2011).

Insider-researchers from the same community as the participants are believed to be in a better position to apply contextual knowledge to deciphering the (often implied) cultural meanings of the narrators' responses, to analysing the narratives in detail, and to minimising misinterpretations of life stories (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Identities are multi-layered, and sharing the same cultural identity with the participants may still only grant the researcher a "partial-insider" status (Subedi, 2006, p. 580). The benefits, challenges and dilemmas of being a partial-insider researcher in the doctoral study will be reflected upon later in this paper, in the 'findings' section. Nonetheless, even such a positionality does not necessarily lead to the collection and generation of 'truer' findings due to the subjective nature of narratives.

Subjectivity and complexity

Narratives of each life event are, at least, double-interpreted by the storyteller (Cortazzi, 2001) – interpretation began when the event was first experienced and then re-interpreted when it was narrated to the interviewer. It is even possible that each time a story is revisited or discussed with others, it is altered and its meanings reconstructed (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Hence, stories are the subjective, interpreted version of accounts remembered by storytellers (Atkinson, 2004, 2007; Denzin, 2014; Plummer, 2001; Stivers, 2009; Wolcott, 2010). Each storyteller decides how s/he wants to remember the events and how and what to share with the researcher. There is no absolute or single truth in life story inquiry, and the stories are considered to constitute the "narrative truth" (Plummer, 2001, p. 401) or "subjective reality" (Atkinson, 2007, p. 239).

In contrast to naïve objectivism, which is the belief that our practice or our world view is isolated from theoretical or conceptual influences, the researchers' philosophical and theoretical beliefs always explicitly and implicitly shape their practice of inquiry (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Pring, 2000; Scott & Usher, 1999). Researchers inevitably apply their epistemological expectations to the interpretation of narratives, and their assumptions, contextual knowledge and personal life experiences further mediate the interpretation (Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012;

Stivers, 2009). Life stories, therefore, are the results of subjective and contextual interpretations of both storytellers and researchers (Erel, 2009; Harrison, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; Stivers, 2009).

Each life story contains a multitude of voices which include the individual perspectives of the storyteller and the researcher, as well as the collective perspectives 'represented' in the voice of the storyteller by using the collective pronoun "we" or "us" (Erel, 2009). It can become problematic if researchers assume that they have facilitated the collection of a non-distorted single voice from the participants (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012) or if they are too keen to provide the generalisation that the participants, collectively, are victims who need support and advocacy (Beverly, 2008). This multi-layering of voices and interpretations highlights the need for researcher reflexivity throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key component in research (Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Suárez-Ortega, 2013; Subedi, 2006). It involves the researcher reflecting upon and acknowledging one's positions, involvements and subjectivities in the research. Researchers are strongly implicated in the collection, analysis and theorising of data, making these processes highly subjective (Atkinson, 2007; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). They need to be self-conscious and aware that they are also narrators during the research process (Elliott, 2005; Plummer, 2001). The role of the researcher should therefore be part of the data to be analysed (Harrison, 2009; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Rogers, 2004).

Narrative researchers particularly need to reflect upon their identities, motives, cultural expectations and subjectivities in conducting interviews and in interpreting the interview transcripts as they hear the stories during interviews and then listen to them again in recorded form (Cortazzi, 2001; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Plummer, 2001). The values, biases, assumptions and intentions they bring to the study need to be acknowledged and recognised (Bryman, 2004; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Pring, 2000; Rogers, 2004; Scott & Usher, 1999). The decision to report and highlight certain findings, but not others, reflects the researcher's beliefs and values that are shaped and informed by discourses (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). My Chinese identity and experience of being an immigrant, and my role as a New Zealand ECE teacher-educator were significantly implicated throughout the doctoral research. They have influenced the findings of the study and will be reflected upon, analysed and discussed after the next section in which the research process of the doctoral study is described.

Research Process

After gaining access to three different ECE centres in the New Zealand city of Auckland, ten Chinese immigrant parents were recruited and participated in two phases of life story interviews which will be elaborated upon in the upcoming section. I visited each potential ECE centre on a date arranged by the teachers who introduced me to possible participants. At this very first meeting with the possible participants, each was provided with an information letter, written in both English and Chinese, detailing the purpose and process of the study, a consent form and an interview schedule with standard interview questions. Expectations from the participants, including the time required for their involvement, and assurance of voluntary participation and confidentiality were all explained verbally in either English or Chinese, and in the letter as well. These potential participants were encouraged to take this information away to consider their participation, and to contact me if they were interested. The study was approved by the ethics committees of the institutions involved, and the research process therefore adhered to institutionalised research protocols. While the ethics approval might have protected the participants, it might also have compromised the richness of the findings and given rise to implicit social injustice issues. These concerns are now treated as new

'findings' of the doctoral study and presented in the form of reflective questions to be analysed in the following section.

Reflection: 'Findings' and discussion

A qualitative inquiry allows flexibility and accommodates the unexpected (Bryman, 2004), and my experience has affirmed that a qualitative life story approach was an appropriate choice as several unpredictable events happened during the research process, and consequently, alterations to the research design had to be made. To illustrate: while the initial research proposal suggested the use of individual interviews and a focus group discussion as data collection methods, the fact that most of the immigrant participants could not drive was unanticipated, which meant inviting them to a focus group meeting venue that was not within walking distance of their home proved to be problematic for many participants. The focus group meetings were therefore cancelled and replaced by an additional stage of individual interviews which were carried out at a venue chosen by the participants.

Flexible arrangements and alterations reflected not only practical needs, they also highlight the importance of ethics of care, which is to be examined in this section, to be at the forefront throughout the research process. I was also mindful of the other key features of the life story methodology, such as the importance of relationship and reflexivity, but translating them into practice was not always straightforward. Within this 'findings' section, I will revisit some of my experiences of the doctoral research journey, and question some of the decisions I made during the research process. This has enabled a reinterpretation of my earlier understandings of these experiences as well as the participants' stories. I will ask a few reflective questions which are presented in italics, and they will be discussed in light of the critical theoretical perspectives that were used to conceptualise the doctoral research.

Relationship: An ethics of care

To ensure the integrity of life story narratives, honest and trusting relationships between the researcher and the participants are required (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). Yet, it takes time to develop a relationship. Developing trusting relationships with a researcher who the participants hardly knew was difficult, and expecting the participants to share in-depth personal stories with me when we had only just met was also challenging. Having two phases of individual interviews over a period of 18 months during which there were many additional informal conversations seems to have enhanced my relationship with the participants. Realising the importance of relationship-building in narrative research and how "unearned trust raises questions about research ethics" (Charmaz, 2016, p. 45), I was keen to reassure the participants that they were not simply a means to an end.

The notion of "an ethics of care" that involves demonstrating "attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 123) was adopted throughout the research process. For example, being introduced to the participants via the teachers and conducting most of the interviews at the ECE centres, an environment with which the participants were familiar, positively impacted on their sense of safety to participate. I also picked up each participant from the ECE centre for the interview, if it was to be conducted out of the centre. I listened to their stories attentively and expressed empathy and understanding on many occasions when they talked about their experiences and frustrations. Furthermore, I engaged with them in many casual conversations outside the 'official' interviews, such as when I rang them to arrange the interviews, and I believe such conversations contributed positively towards relationship-building. Some participants who were relatively new to the country seem to have trusted me to be 'an expert' in the New Zealand education system and chose to ring me and ask for my advice regarding their children's education

issues, such as the quality of different ECE services, primary and secondary schools, sometimes long after the interviews were completed. I shared my knowledge and experience in these areas with them and offered as much information as was possible and professionally ethical.

Finally, since I wanted to minimise subjective interpretations of the participants' narratives, I revisited the audio recording and transcript of each interview before carrying out each follow-up interview in the second stage. These follow-up conversations provided opportunities for the participants to authenticate findings and transcripts, with statements like "last time you told me …" and "did you mean…?" The participants were also surprised that I remembered so many details from their stories and told me they felt they were being treated with respect. This unanticipated outcome enhanced our relationships. The second phase of interviews therefore not only provided opportunities for the participants to clarify, but also to open up more when my relationships with them had become stronger, and to go deeper into their explanations.

Conceptualised with critical multiculturalism (Chan, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010; McLaren, 1995; Rhedding-Jones, 2010), the doctoral study aimed at providing a platform to hear voices that differ from mainstream ideologies, to challenge institutionalised discourses, and to legitimise varied forms of epistemologies. Yet, due to the politics of knowledge and a professional association with a university, the participants were likely to have considered my knowledge to be more legitimate than theirs (Subedi, 2006). *With trusted relationships and an 'expert' image, had I adopted an authoritative voice and reinforced the power imbalance in research, preventing the participants from challenging my interpretations of their stories, and hence possibly injecting subconsciously my institutionalised perspectives into the findings and perpetuating dominant discourses?* Not only were the implications of relationships complex, my role as an insider-researcher was also nuanced.

A fluid role: Insider/outsider-researcher

Cortazzi and Jin (2006) claim that the integrity of a study is more likely to be compromised when the researcher is an outsider to the participants' community, and "gaining entry" to the participants' world is considered as "much less of a concern" (Padilla-Goodman, 2010, p. 318) for an insider-researcher. However, previous research by Liu (2009) suggests that Chinese participants only consider those who share something similar with them as insiders. When I shared with the participants my personal experiences of migration and parenting, they related to these experiences instantly. With these shared experiences and our similar social, cultural and language backgrounds, I assumed that my insider-researcher status would naturally be granted by the participants.

Sharing similar language and cultural backgrounds with the participants was definitely an asset for me and contributed towards my insider-researcher role in this project. For example, all the interviews were conducted in the spoken language each participant preferred, either Mandarin or Cantonese, and quite often some English was integrated into their responses. Using the participants' preferred language ensured that they expressed themselves precisely, confidently and comfortably. My contextual knowledge of the participants' experiences, such as my understanding of the dominant parenting, teaching and learning discourses in Chinese societies, was also often readily available during the process of data collection and analysis, demonstrating the advantage of being an insider-researcher. Yet, as the data gathering progressed, I gradually realised the impossibility of being fully an 'insider'.

Due to differences within each layer of social, cultural, language and educational background between the researcher and the participants, a researcher's positionality is fluid, constantly shifting between insider and outsider roles (Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Subedi, 2006). While I shared to a certain degree the same identity as the participants, we were also different on many levels due to our

dissimilar education and social backgrounds. This dissimilarity led to complex multi-layered situations. During the interviews, the participants often recognised my insider identity and treated me as one of them by giving me implicit responses, assuming that I was capable of understanding their views and feelings without explicit explanations. Yet, as a Hong Kong-Chinese, a lack of certain contextual understandings, such as the colloquial terminologies used in mainland China, meant I sometimes had to awkwardly ask for clarifications. On some occasions, the participants withdrew their inclusivity intentionally. It seemed that I was particularly considered to be an outsider when they talked about practices and policies in China since they pointed out that I had grown up in Hong Kong while it was still a British colony, or when they highlighted my privileged social status in New Zealand due to my English ability and academic career. During these occasions, they were not keen to go into details regarding their experiences and perspectives, perhaps assuming that it would be unlikely that I would understand.

Liu (2009) suggests that Chinese research participants are reluctant to discuss sensitive topics and that they are likely to provide only brief and vague responses to avoid revealing their real feelings, unless they consider the researcher to be an insider. In my own data collection, I noticed particularly short responses were given by the participants when I asked about the practices of their children's teachers. To indicate their reluctance to engage in the topic, some participants occasionally gave brief verbal responses, such as 还好吧/hai hao ba (not bad) and 还可以吧/hai ke yi ba (okay), along with implicit messages, such as by using gestures, providing a long pause, or remaining silent. Whilst these responses were respected, I had to later politely ask for clarification in the follow-up interviews to confirm my interpretations, when our relationships had become stronger.

On reflection, these responses indicate that the participants might have treated me as an outsider and did not want to discuss the practices of their children's teachers. My doctoral study was conceptualised using identity theories which argue that identities are fluid, hybrid, socially and politically constructed for inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000; Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016), and I was also aware that a researcher's insider status is "conditional and unstable" (Subedi, 2006, p. 580) and requires negotiation and renegotiation. *Why did I assume that I had a fixed and constant insider-researcher identity? Why did I not pick up the participants' subtle signs of exclusion?* Additionally, "there are different ways of saying things, - or indeed, certain things that should not be said at all" (Fontana & Frey, 2008, p. 131). *Was it appropriate for me to ask for clarifications when the participants had already given implicit responses and indicated their reluctance to engage in the topic?* It is possible that I had not taken their reluctant utterances seriously and considered them as part of an "agentic assemblage" of voices (Mazzei & Jackson, 2016, p. 2). *To ensure the validity of findings, which is a dominant institutionalised research practice, by asking for clarifications, had I further inadvertently positioned myself as an outsider? How often had I wrongly interpreted the participants' stories, particularly when I was an outsider and was unable to seek clarification from the participants?* During these occasions, I must have inevitably applied my epistemological expectations, personal life experiences, and institutionalised knowledge to the interpretation of narratives (Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; Stivers, 2009), and thus perhaps compromised the integrity of the participants' stories.

Reflexive practices: Subjective imagination and refrained co-construction

The impossibility of detaching from one's subjectivity highlights the importance of reflexivity and meaning co-construction in life story narratives. It is vital for the researcher to be aware of the "politics of interpretation" (Denzin, 2014, p. 82) and to critically reflect upon, interpret and reinterpret the range of possible interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), hence as mentioned above, ongoing clarifications of my interpretations were sought from the participants in this study, thinking that this would do the narratives justice.

It is also important to consider the narrator's motives or intentions, often implied, in order to better understand the 'true' meaning of narratives (Beverly, 2008; Cortazzi, 2001; Plummer, 2001). Erel (2009) claims that the use of 'I' and 'we' interchangeably in life story narratives highlights the intentions of immigrant participants in proclaiming their individual and collective identities. Immigrant interviewees often use an individualistic identity when they are only partially integrated and accepted by the dominant ethnic group, but use 'we' when they want to create an (imagined) community, claiming their individual opinions as representative of collective perspectives of the community (Erel, 2009). One participant, Katie[2], expressed what she perceived to be the 'Chinese' cultural understandings of schools and kindergartens:

> Katie: With this, I believe *we* really think differently from 洋人/yang ren[3]. To us, *we* feel that schools and kindergartens are places where children learn, not communities that *we* have to integrate into. In China, families see schools and kindergartens as places to learn, and when children come home, *we* stop our connections with the learning institutions. *We* don't believe that *we* [parents] have to participate in kindergarten or school activities, or to know each other in the kindergarten very well. *We* don't consider schools or kindergartens as communities [emphases added].

The above narratives were originally expressed in Chinese. The frequent use of 我们, translated as 'we' in the above excerpt implies the binary perception of Katie who placed 洋人/yang ren and Chinese at opposing ends. She might have intended to represent the Chinese community to proclaim her/their sense of difference and disagreement with 洋人/yang ren. I had chosen not to challenge the generalisation that she made, but only to highlight it in the thesis. *What are the consequences of my silence? Had I perpetuated Katie's or even the readers' binary perception when critical multiculturalism emphasises the risk of reinforcing binary differences* (Chan, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010; McLaren, 1995; Rhedding-Jones, 2010)?

Not only was the interpretation of what was said by the participants subjective, but what was *not* said was also subjectively 'imagined'. While some participants told me they felt that parent support was not needed in the kindergartens, the organisation policies that I reviewed have indicated that these kindergartens encourage parents to be involved as parent-helpers. It is possible that due to cultural differences as highlighted above by Katie, the participants felt weird or uncomfortable to participate in the kindergartens. Again, the accuracy or 'truthfulness' of the participants' narratives was not challenged during the interviews; instead their perceptions and perspectives were analysed and reported in the thesis. For another example, as an ECE scholar, I am aware that in most 'western' countries, play is considered to be beneficial to young children's learning. When the participants raised their concerns regarding the lack of 'work' they observed and that too much time was given to 'play' in New Zealand ECE, they expected me to understand and agree with them because we shared a similar cultural background. On these occasions, I had chosen to remain 'neutral', to not inject my personal perspectives into the findings, and to respect the participants' beliefs.

I have questioned if I should have shared my institutionalised knowledge of the benefits of parent participating in kindergartens or the value of play because after all, the meanings of life stories are recognised as being co-constructed (Atkinson, 2004; Plummer, 2001). Nevertheless, researchers are often reluctant to share their viewpoints; instead they prefer to remain impartial to avoid alienating the participants (Subedi, 2006). *Should I have adopted a dialogic approach and co-constructed the meaning of these ECE discourses with the participants? What would the consequences have been for the study if the participants had felt intimated when I had told them about the value of play that is informed by research, or they had felt that I was imposing my values on them? Would they have withdrawn my insider status and become reluctant to share their concerns with me?* On reflection, I might have been alerted by identity theories (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000) that the participants were

likely to treat me as an outsider and exclude me if they had felt that we did not share similar perspectives. Perhaps I had decided to remain neutral out of self-interest, so that I continued to benefit from an insider status.

My personal subjective interpretation was inevitably applied when I analysed the participants' voices, and I found that separating their voices from mine was not always possible. The translation process in this study, using English as a medium to present interpretations narrated in Mandarin and/or Cantonese, further added another layer of (the researcher's) interpretations to the final findings presented in the thesis. While the danger of misinterpretation by using an outsider-translator is explicit, having the researcher as a translator can still be problematic (Temple & Young, 2004). The researcher-translator role is "inextricably bound also to the socio-cultural positioning of the researcher", and hence the interpretations by the researcher-translator should not be implied as "nearer the truth" (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 168). *By proclaiming my researcher-translator role in the thesis, had I subconsciously made that implication?*

Even if the researcher shares a similar language with the participants, "this does not mean that the researcher can easily translate what is learned in fieldwork" (Subedi, 2006, p. 588). Certain beliefs of the participants, for example, had to be explained using Chinese epistemologies, such as Confucian ideologies, and it is often impossible to provide a direct equivalent in English. While I had the contextual understanding of these epistemologies, providing concise translations or explanations for complex ancient philosophical concepts was no easy task. Much embedded meaning can be lost during the translation process (Temple & Young, 2004). *Had I done enough to support readers, outsider-readers in particular, to understand and appreciate these epistemologies and to make sense of the interpretations? By using modern English to explain ancient Chinese ideologies, had I reinforced the dominant status of the English language and "the invisibility of the source language" (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 166)? What are the possible alternatives to resolve this political and methodological issue?*

Finally, the findings gathered from the doctoral study indicated that the participants were resourceful and agentic in supporting their children's learning. The work of Beverly (2008), which claims that some researchers are too keen to generalise participants as victims in order to advocate for support, reminded me not to portray the participants simply as a disempowered collective, but to suggest that teachers need to understand this specific community and to develop culturally responsive pedagogies to work with these families (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). *How many of these suggestions represented my personal concerns and agendas? By portraying the participants as active agents, had I perpetuated the 'model minority' image of Asian children?* The 'model minority' paradigm generalises Asian learners as a homogenous group who does well academically and needs no support from teachers and policy-makers (Yang, 2004). Yet, central to a critical qualitative inquiry is the aim "to change the world and to change it in ways that resist injustice" (Denzin, 2017, p. 9). *Has my thesis implied that Chinese immigrant children and families do not require support and therefore nothing has to be changed?*

Conclusion and final thoughts

This autoethnographic reflective process has examined my personal experiences of the doctoral research journey and produced new 'findings' to illustrate the complexity and subjectivity of the qualitative and narrative life story approach, highlighting some of the methodological, ethical and social justice issues of this approach and the importance of reflexivity in research. Narratives from the doctoral study have provided opportunities for rare voices to be heard amongst the dominant 'mainstream' research. Nonetheless, enacting key ideas of the life story inquiry, such as power-sharing, establishing trusting relationships and being an insider-researcher, is easier said than done. Researchers hold a great deal of power (Scott & Usher, 1999), and frequent reflection upon and

recognition of the multiple ways in which we influence data gathering, interpretation and presentation are essential (Harrison, 2009; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). My social, cultural and language backgrounds have granted me a "partial-insider identity" (Subedi, 2006, p. 580), and they have left "distinctive imprints" (Lake, 2015, p. 684) in the doctoral thesis.

While life story interviews had served their purpose with regards to the gathering of data and the completion of the thesis, the multi-layered messiness of narratives was particularly challenging when trying to present findings according to the prescribed and institutionalised protocols of thesis writing and presentation. Further challenges also emerged when the findings from the study were reported in manuscripts submitted for peer review. Reviewers often questioned the subjectivity involved in data interpretation and the validity of findings, highlighting the importance of reflexivity and the need to 'de-messify' for the readers or at least to acknowledge the mess. Yet, Jackson and Mazzei (2008) remind readers to be "wary of the neatness and tidiness of meaning" (p. 307), and Subedi (2006) advocates using a "rigorous mode of reflexivity" (p. 576) to challenge and transform institutionalised research practices. Perhaps academic and research communities need to embrace the beauty of messiness and fluid research protocols. Finally, it is inevitable that self-reflection is discursively constructed, and thus further reinforces and reproduces certain research discourses. Research usually tries to find answers, but this reflection has raised more questions than answers.

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[1] Some of the content of this paper is drawn from the author's doctoral thesis.

[2] This is a pseudonym.

[3] This literally means westerners. It was broadly used by the participants to describe any 'white' people with European descent.