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Separately Together - Working Reflexively as a Team

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Introduction

This paper reports on an attempt to work reflexively as a research team doing qualitative research. Reflexivity is widely recognized as an important feature of research, and is discussed extensively in the theoretical literature on qualitative methodology. In contrast, strategies and suggestions for reflexive research *practice* are not as fully articulated.¹ In trying to work reflexively as a research *team*, we encountered the further issue that existing discussions of reflexive research practice speak primarily of and to a lone researcher. The assumption that reflexivity is a solitary activity is a significant limitation as teamwork is a common research mode, and is becoming more so in qualitative work where the interest in engaging in reflexive research practices is particularly strong. To help address this, we offer our experiences of and thoughts about building reflexive research practices into team-based qualitative research. We focus on how reflexivity can be used as a team-based interpretive resource in the construction of the research subject/object, and we highlight reflexive possibilities unique to research teams.

Our experience of qualitative research teamwork comes from a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada entitled 'Social Citizenship and the Transformation of Work'. The central question of the project is how inequality is

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implicated in the capacity people have to manage change in their work profiles. The principal investigator and two graduate students (the three authors of this paper) formed the on-going core of the research team.² We interviewed individuals in the city of Ottawa who had experienced some form of work change since the mid-1990s. We conducted just over one hundred semi-structured interviews in three phases between 2001 and 2003. We were committed to working reflexively from the outset of the research project, and built into our research practices a number of organizational and other tools for reflecting on the research process. However, our understanding of reflexivity – what it means and how it might be achieved in practice - has been significantly reshaped by our experience of team-based research. We came to characterize our particular practices of team-based reflexivity as working 'separately together'. This means that we worked reflexively, as individuals and together as a team, to forge from separate and partial perspectives a common understanding of our research subjects/objects.³

Three main sections make up this paper. In section one, we clarify our use of the concept of reflexivity, focusing on a meaning of reflexivity which identifies it as an embedded research practice integral to the construction and interpretation of research texts. We identify the self-other relationships within the research team as a reflexive resource unique to team-based research, and suggest that the defining feature of working 'separately together' as a reflexive research team is a set of orientations and practices that foster an 'interpretive us'. In section two, we identify the orientations and practices that facilitated our reflexive teamwork,

1 See, for example, comments made by Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000; Breuer and Roth, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Richards 1999; Rose, 1997.

2 Over the course of the project, the full research team included four faculty members and ten graduate students. We would like to thank Hugh Armstrong, Wallace Clement, Bruce Curtis, Andrea Doucet, and Fran Klodawsky for their helpful comments on this paper. Thank you to Andrea and Fran also for supporting our exploration of reflexive practices.

3 We use the term “common understanding” with reference to the formulation put forward by Taylor (1995), and drawn on by Calhoun (1992, 1995), concerning the possibility of intersubjectivity and shared understanding across situated or partial knowledges. This is discussed further in Section 1.

and highlight particularly those that supported a collective interpretive process. We offer these as a contribution to developing a practical repertoire for team-based embedded reflexivity. To help identify this process in practice, we include transcribed excerpts from one of our team analysis meetings that give some feel for the ‘interpretive us’ in action. Finally, the paper closes by noting some of the challenges and obstacles to working reflexively as a team within an academic context and raises questions for further consideration.

Reflexivity in research and the difference a team makes

When thinking about reflexivity in team-based qualitative research, two issues are central. What is meant by reflexivity and is there anything distinctive about reflexive teamwork? The purpose of this section is to set out briefly the answers to these questions that we arrived at in the course of doing our team-based research.

There is an important argument, in feminist and other post-positivist writings on methodology, that shifts our understanding of reflexivity away from seeing it as a form of meta-analysis about the researcher’s relation to the research process, and toward regarding it as a continuous and fundamental feature of research practice.⁴ In the strongest interpretations, reflexivity is seen as being ‘constitutive’ of sense-making research practices and of the selves involved in these activities (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Breuer and Roth, 2003; Calhoun, 1992; Findlay and Gough, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Marcus, 1998; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Such ideas about reflexivity shift its role in research from that of an occasional tool for reflecting on the research process, to an always-present aspect of all interpretive practices. This shift is something we experienced in the conduct of our team research.

⁴ The meaning and importance of reflexivity are contested matters in both feminist (Campbell, 2004; Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002; Fonow and Cook, 2005) and other post-positivist discussions (Findlay, 2003; Holland, 1999; Marcus, 1998).

Our understanding of reflexivity changed in the course of our research together. To start, we understood that our research texts (interview field notes and transcripts) were constructed through the research process, and that our personal experience, reactions, and perceptions were a significant feature of how these texts were created, interpreted and presented. Practically, in the early stages, we approached reflexivity as requiring time away from face-to-face encounters with respondents and away from interpretive engagement with interview transcripts. Our efforts to be reflexive involved interrupting our regular research routine to consider how we were individually responding to, and potentially influencing, processes of data construction and analysis. Initially, we did this reflexive work in formally scheduled team-meetings, called for the explicit purpose of “doing reflexivity”.⁵ We recorded and transcribed these meetings. We brought in a peer facilitator to help us think about our relation to the research process, and to add her perspective as a non-team member. These were interesting, dynamic events and yielded good insights. However, as our research progressed, we realized that reflexivity was happening more informally in the daily course of doing our research work in each other's company. We had interviewed in pairs, and as a consequence were constantly comparing and contrasting what each of us had seen, heard and understood in our conversations with respondents. This more routine and on-going reflexive togetherness constantly brought the differences and similarities in perspectives within the team to our attention. We were always made aware that our own understanding of what respondents had to say was sometimes shared and sometimes not shared by our interview partner. In other words, we were routinely reminded of the specificity of our own interpretations, and needed routinely to negotiate the specificity of interpretations made by our team members. Drawing on Haraway, Marcus (1998:403) captures this experience well

⁵ A similar form of team meetings for the purpose of reflexivity as meta-analysis are described by Barry (2003).
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when he writes of a "nomadic, embedded analytic vision constantly monitoring its location and partiality of perspective in relation to others".

To fully capture our experience, however, we need to consider how *multiple* individual reflexive visions can function together as a research team. In considering the difference a team makes to working reflexively as an embedded practice, we shall discuss two main issues: the interpretive opportunities created by reflexively addressing the *other within* the research team, and the possibility of forging a common understanding of the research subject/object.

Fawcett and Hern (2004) highlight the self-reflexivity of the researcher as a strategic resource in addressing 'otherness' within the researcher-researched relationship. In research teams, elements of this 'otherness' are present *within* the team, and here too, researchers' capacities for reflexivity can be significant resources for recognizing, understanding and interpreting diversity of experience. We suggest that doing reflexive team work in an embedded, routine manner involves *three reflexive relationships*: with oneself as situated individual and as researcher, the self-other relationship of researcher and researched, and the self-other relationship between team members. *The self-other reflexivity between team members is a unique ingredient of reflexive teamwork*. In our embedded reflexive activities, we endeavoured to use the similarities and differences in our own experience of the issues investigated, and similarities and differences in our perceptions of our encounters with respondents, as interpretive resources in the construction of our research subject/object. This involved team members being willing to share extensively and openly not only their interpretation of respondents' situated knowledges, but also their own experience, as a means to understand the issues investigated and to develop explanatory accounts. For example, in our reflexive work during team analysis meetings, we often offered details about our own

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experiences of negotiating work change as a way to explore and assess developing interpretations. Using knowledge about ourselves helped us to refine and consolidate our understanding of respondents' accounts of their struggles to negotiate and re-configure their employment and personal life. We agree with those who warn against turning research into an exercise about the researchers (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). But, the positioning of researchers as active subjects in the construction of research knowledge suggests that interpretive creativity and strength can be gained though explicitly acknowledging and using the researchers' own subjectivity and personal history as an interpretive resource. Indeed, authors have argued that researchers' personal biographies are an inevitable presence in the construction of the research subject/object, and that part of good research practice is to be aware of and accountable for this presence (Breuer and Roth, 2003; Doucet, 1998; Fawcett and Hearn, 2004; Findlay and Gough, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; McCorkel and Myers, 2003; Russell and Kelly, 2002). In our experience, the interpretive benefits of an embedded reflexive process are enhanced many times over when all team members offer their own experience of the research issues, as well as their perceptions of the experience of others within and outwith the team, for inter-subjective exploration.

A number of discussions recognise the interpretive value of multiple voices within a research team.⁶ Whether and how multiple voices can speak together is an important question. We are suggesting that working reflexively as a team brings a unique dynamic to the construction and interpretation of research materials. There is a dynamic that flows between the reflexivity of separate individuals and the 'reflexive togetherness' of the team that can be used as a creative interpretive resource. We identify how we worked reflexively as a team as working 'separately together' – a working process that highlights collective reflexive

⁶ There are instructive discussions of the pitfalls and pleasures of team research in Backett-Milburn et. al. 1999; Erickson and Stull, 1998; Jackson, 2001; Olesen et. al. 1994, Richards, 1999, Russell and Kelly, 2002.

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generation of research interpretations. A key aspect of working ‘separately together’ is creating interpretive accounts to which all team members contribute and are committed.

We do not see the practice of encouraging and using multiple-subjectivities in the research process as one that embraces a relativist epistemology.⁷ Rather, we see this as a process that aims to speak to and across interpretive variation within the research team to create a common account among team researchers of the diversity of experience. Many commentators are trying to establish multi-vocality, or polyphonic discourse, as a foundation for a post-positivist form of objectivity, and as a process able to produce usable, meaningful social science knowledge (Calhoun, 1992, Haraway 1991, Flyvbjerg 2001). Naples’ (2003:198) advocacy of interpretations “achieved in community”, and Flyvbjerg’s (2001:139) argument for “dialoguing with a polyphony of voices” are examples of important attempts to establish the significance of collectivity in new protocols for creating and recognising ‘good’ research. We would argue that such processes are equally valid *within* research teams, and that the routine embedding of reflexive practices in a collective analytical strategy is a process that creates the possibility of producing shared, meaningful interpretations.

Our sense is that the interpretations we achieved together were not ‘compromise’ understandings that shaved the edges off our different views, nor ‘parallel’ understandings where we each separately happened to arrive at the same view. They did represent a consensus, but one arrived at by drawing on a broad range of collective endeavour through all parts of the research process. We engaged in interpretive work together, committing to working with and across our different situated knowledges until we arrived at what Taylor has called a “common understanding”. As Taylor (1995:139) explains: "Common understandings are undecomposable. That is...it is essential to their being what they are that they be not just

⁷ As should be clear from our discussion here, neither do we commit to any form of realism. Gough (2003) has a useful discussion of realism and relativism as they relate to reflexive practices.

for me and for you, but for us. That we have a common understanding presupposes that we have formed a unit, a "we" who understands together...". Working separately together was a working process that produced undecomposable understandings by collectively engaging in practices of self, and of self-other, reflexivity. We believe that by doing so, we became an 'interpretive us' and created an understanding of the researched world that was common to us as a team.

It is important to note that claiming we achieved a 'common' understanding does not imply fixity or comprehensiveness. We understand it to mean that we achieved insights through collective interpretive work that would not have been possible working individually. While we achieved together more than we would have done separately, our interpretations are still bound and limited not only by our collective vision and context, but also by what it was possible for us to see and appreciate during the research process. As Mauthner and Doucet suggest (2003) there are limits to what is reflexively available to researchers during the conduct of research. Despite these limitations, we suggest that through research orientations and practices designed to support working separately together, we approximated what Calhoun (1995:91) has called a "processual approach" to research in which multiple voices engage in a "discourse in which intersubjectivity grows" and through which common understanding are forged. We turn now to a discussion of these orientations and practices.

Working Separately Together: Orientations and Practices

As mentioned earlier, work on reflexivity has tended to focus on theory rather than practice, and guides to working reflexively in teams are particularly scarce. In order to go some small way towards rectifying the situation, this section concentrates on the orientations we adopted, and the practices we followed, in order to work separately together. These orientations and practices helped to create the interpretive working conditions within which

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we could engage reflexively as a team to construct a common understanding of our research subject/object.

Research Orientations

From the outset of the project we were committed to feminist-inspired research approaches, including a commitment to work reflexively (as we originally understood it). This commitment was expressed in three orientations highlighting the relational character of our teamwork. First, all team members had to be willing to reflect on how the experience of doing research affects and is affected by their personal experience (*orientation 1*). Second, we each had to be willing to share our personal experiences and responses with the group (*orientation 2*). Third, in terms of our orientation to the general practices of the team itself, there was a commitment to working collaboratively, supportively, and non-hierarchically (*orientation 3*).

As the research project developed, we faced important moments when implicitly, and often explicitly, we had to decide how much interpretive work we wanted to do collectively as a team. In deciding to work together very closely, two further orientations emerged along with a deeper understanding of the operation of reflexivity within the research process. Important for working separately together as a team was the ability to see the diversity of situated knowledges within the team as an interpretive resource (*orientation 4*). That someone else saw things in a different way needed to be regarded as a source of interest and potential creativity. The final orientation was a commitment to build within the team a common understanding of the research subject/object (*orientation 5*). These latter two orientations were made possible by the initial orientations, which supported the relational quality of the team, but also extended the team dynamic to cover collective interpretive commitments.

While each of the five orientations required individual commitment, their impact on research is only made manifest at the group level and only through the development of interpersonal practices that support them. Although we believe these five orientations are

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essential to working collectively in a reflexive manner, the practices developed in line with these orientations may be specific to the character of any particular project. We provide the following discussion of the practices we used as an example of how these orientations might be implemented in a project but do not propose that these are the only ways to work separately together.

Research practices supporting the relational quality of the team (orientations 1, 2 and 3)

Our research methodology centred on the production and interpretation of semi-structured interviews, and our commitment to the first three orientations led us to structure the interviewing in particular ways. Central to our fieldwork, and we would argue to our ability to work later as an interpretive unit, was the policy of having all team members participate equally in all aspects of the research. To this end, we found four research practices especially helpful in generating and maintaining constructive and creative working relationships between the members of the team.

First, we structured interviewing practices so as to level the academic hierarchy, and to build shared experiences within the research team. Producing the interviews and interpreting them involved the entire group without any designated division of labour between group members. We accomplished this by having the principal investigator participate equally in the production of the interviews, and by having the research assistants not only interview but also participate in all aspects of the interpretive process.

Second, we interviewed in pairs. The individuals making up the pairs rotated so that we each had opportunities to be in an interview pair with every other member of the group. There was a division of labour within each pair, with one interviewer and one note-taker. The interview was also tape recorded, and keeping this running smoothly was the responsibility of

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the note-taker. However, this division was not rigid, so that while the interviewer took the conversational lead, the note-taker was free to ask new questions or follow-up on anything within the interview. All team members took roughly equal turns at interviewing and at note-taking. After the interview, note-takers would type up their notes from the interview and put them on file for additions from the interviewer, and eventually for all of us to read.

Third, as a preface to our field notes for each interview, we recorded the thoughts and immediate impressions of the interviewer and the note-taker. The format for our typed fieldnotes included a comment and summary section, which the interviewer and note-taker were expected to generate jointly. This meant that the reactions, thoughts and comments of both members of an interview pair were identified as important and put on record for further use.

Fourth, we all shared a large open concept research office and worked there together on a regular basis. In the room were work stations for each of us and, in the centre of the room, a large meeting table. All the interview tapes, reference materials and other project documentation were also housed in this space. The ability to be physically together, with access to individual work areas, was an important part of our team experience. The physical layout of our workspace facilitated both individual and group work, and reflected spatially our separately together research approach.

These four practices were important in terms of “team building”. They created a strong sense of equality in our collaboration by encouraging the recognition of individual contributions to a common endeavour and facilitated open lines of communication between us. Beyond contributing to the relational quality of the team, these practices also laid the foundation for a collective interpretive process. Throughout the interviewing phases, we reflected on and discussed the interviews, expressing reactions to them and developing ideas

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not just in conversation with the interviewees and the field-notes, but also in conversation with each other. Personal responses, experiences, and interpretive ideas were mulled over during informal discussions held between various pairs and subsets of team members while waiting for interviewees to arrive, while car-pooling home, or over coffee and lunch in our shared workspace. These informal discussions created bonds between team members that helped build a supportive environment which in turn enabled the disclosure of experiences and responses during our more formal scheduled, and often taped, group meetings. In addition, since we had all interviewed in the company of another team member, we accumulated and reflected on a large amount of shared fieldwork experience.

These ongoing informal discussions created a culture of reflexivity, generating expectations on team members to be aware of their responses to interviews and how these responses related to their own experiences and to share these insights. This shared culture moved reflexivity from being an individual practice conducted solely in dialogue with the self, and possibly a research journal (cf. Backett-Milburn et al. 1999) into a multi-vocal conversation within the research team about the subject matter of our research. We turn now to this aspect of our research practice.

Research practices consolidating an interpretive 'us' (orientations 4 and 5)

We have argued that a hallmark of working separately together is the creation of an 'us' that has both shared research experience and a commitment to engage in collective interpretation of the research material. While the quality of research team relationships is significant, it is the latter two orientations discussed above that are essential to enabling the team to draw on its constitutive multi-vocality while acting as a collective interpretive unit. As stated previously, these orientations involve considering the diversity of situated knowledges within the team as an interpretive resource, and a commitment to building a

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common understanding of the research subject/object. These orientations developed in tandem with three research practices: meta-analysis reflexivity meetings; team analysis meetings drawing on routine embedded reflexivity; and joint conference presentations and publications.

Early on in our fieldwork, we held and recorded a reflexive “meta-analysis” meeting during which all team members shared their experiences of and reflections about the topic and the conduct of the research. At this meeting we addressed two key questions: how were our own experiences of work and change affecting our thoughts and perceptions of the interviews; and how were the interviews affecting us and our thoughts on life, planning, and work change? While these questions reflected our initial (and common) perspective that reflexivity requires time out from the main research tasks to engage in critical reflection on the researchers relation to the research process, the experience of answering them in the company of other team members drew our attention to the possibilities of self-other reflexivity within a team setting. During this session we found our conversation drifting from self-reflexive "I" statements to reflexive comments about our positionality in relation to the interviewees and to other team members. The following excerpt from our reflexivity meta-analysis meeting illustrates the inter-relation of these three reflexive relations as we compare and contrast our own experience to that of the respondents and each other.

WS--While we were doing the interviews, absolutely everything in my life changed on a very personal level. And I think that while I was listening to people talk about their lives and the decisions they were making and the things they were struggling with, I was taking that home and thinking about it and then bringing back my own questions to the interviews - questions about how people negotiate big life decisions and life partners. So, I could see an exchange happening.

JS--Those things also affected me a lot. When I look back at my own work change and strategies, it's been mostly opportunistic, you know taking what's come along, rather than planned, except for this last change which was very purposeful and very traumatic in many ways. So I found I was quite strongly affected by how

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knowledgeable people were about themselves and where they wanted to go, and...like Willow, that sense of ...opting for a happy life.

AW--I'm like Janet. I've never planned my job changes at all. I've been very opportunistic. And actually in contrast to Janet, through some of the interviews I felt kind of validated in my approach to not do any planning because a lot of people have planned things and then they haven't been happy with where they've gotten. What I picked up from the interviews is that it's not necessarily going to achieve happiness - to go forth and plan your steps - because once you reach that step you might not be where you want to be.

During this session, similarities and differences in how each of us experienced the research process came to our attention. Even when we'd interviewed together, we found our responses and interpretations differed, and we also became aware that each constellation of interviewer/note-takers was producing different interview texts through their differing positionalities in relation to each other and to the interviewees. We began to understand more fully that each of us was seeing and hearing our interactions with respondents in a particular way, and that consequently to produce a richer understanding of the research subject/object we needed to know and engage with the other team members' experience. It also revealed the breadth of the situated knowledges embodied in the research team and the importance of having these multiple partial perspectives included in the interviewing process itself.

These insights inspired us to continue to work closely and collectively as an interpretive team towards developing a shared understanding of the research subject/object through subsequent reflexive group discussions. The team analysis meetings formed the core of our attempt to collectively reflexively construct our research object/subject. At these regularly scheduled analysis meetings, we came to the table as equals and conducted our discussion without formal facilitation, talking things through until we achieved consensus. The meetings drew heavily on our joint interviewing experience which had built trust and respect between research team members, and had already embedded multi-vocality in the actual construction of the interview texts (the field-notes). The proceedings of these meetings

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were recorded, either by hand or on tape, and a typed version was circulated so that the conversations that took place were available for the next meeting. We met frequently enough so that each meeting was able to begin where the previous meeting had left off. It was in dialogue with each other during these meeting that our most exciting insights and interpretive developments occurred.

Finally, the core group of one faculty member and two graduate students committed to jointly writing and presenting papers based on our research. This practice took our commitment to reach a collective interpretation that much further. It was in hashing out a consensus on the details of these presentations and articles for public consumption that both the “interpretive us” and “a common understanding” of the subject/object of our research were truly consolidated.

The ‘interpretive us’ in action

We'd like to close this part of the paper with an excerpt from one of our team analysis meetings which gives a feel for the ways in which embedded reflexivity supports a collective analytical team strategy. We were meeting at the end of the first phase of interviews to decide who to interview in the second phase. This required us to identify preliminary themes and patterns in the interviews. Thinking that the capacity to negotiate change, and the issues faced in trying to do so, might be contextualized by positioning along the life course, we had each taken away a sub-set of the interviews to see if we could categorize them accordingly. In the following transcription excerpt, the research team is trying to clarify the categories that we were using at this stage of the analytical process. We were using ‘launching’ to describe education-employment-household transitions in early adulthood, ‘solidifying’ to capture the development of more settled employment and household profiles among the working-age population, and ‘re-launching’ to identify individuals who, through choice or force of

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circumstance, were in the midst of significant change in their work lives. To start, team members express difficulty in using the categories to capture what is happening in the lives of the respondents. We try to deal with categorization problems by inventing two new categories – scrambling and extended launching. This excerpt shows exchanges between team members which involve the three forms of reflexive relations identified as possible within research teams, and illustrated in the meta-analysis excerpt above. However, in the context of our team analysis meeting, our purpose is to collectively construct a conceptual account of our research subjects/objects. In this excerpt, one member offers her own experience (WS[2]) in an attempt to clarify interpretive difficulties. Other team members comment on her experience (JS[2]), contrast it with the situation of two respondents (AW[1]), and compare it to their own (AW[3]). 8

JS[1]– We were talking about whether we liked using the launching, solidifying and re-launching categories.

WS[1] - I found that some of the people in my cluster of interviews didn't fit into any of these categories. The closest one was solidifying - but they were scrambling more than solidifying - just struggling to survive.

AV[1] - I found it necessary to add another category as well. I guess everyone seems to be needing to re-launch, but not everyone's doing it really successfully. So, they're not really solidifying, and they're not managing to re-launch, they're just ...scrambling.

WS[2] – But one thing that I'll just put out there is that I thought about where I would be and I don't know. I mean, am I solidifying or am I still launching, because I'm still in school, the sense of permanence that I have is very temporary. I was just trying to think about that.

JS[2] – I'd categorize you as launching.

WS[3] – Which is kind of depressing (group laughter), I don't have it together yet.

AW[1] – But you're not scrambling. This couple – Gary and Jane - they're scrambling.

8 There is a fourth person in the extract - AV - a male graduate student who was very active in interviewing and in our interpretive discussions. Unfortunately, we were not able to maintain contact with him after his academic programme finished. We address problems of team continuity in the closing section.

AV[2] – See, it's hard for me to tell. At the time the interview was taken, he's working part-time, he's writing. It's a picture of calm. The snapshot that the interview allowed was solid.

JS[3] – Well, they have no money. They are trying to solidify, but...

AW[2] – The money had run out at the time of the interview. I would almost say for them, it's an extended launching period. In part because of the field he's in. It takes a long time to develop a solid writing career.

JS[4] – That's...

WS[4] – extended launching? There are a few people in our study who are in extended launching.

AW[3] – Like perhaps Willow and myself.

WS[5] – Which is not such a bad thing.

At different times throughout the team analysis meetings similar exchanges occurred – researchers offered aspects of their own work and life experience in an effort to challenge and clarify interpretive distinctions, and other team members engaged with this experience by comparing and contrasting it with their own, and our respondents', situations. The more we did this, the more we began to see that despite generational differences between team members, there were similarities between us in terms of experiencing new starts, changed paths and needing to re-configure. We saw this also in our respondents – many of whom described their experience of work change as 'starting over again' and 'rebuilding from the bottom up'. This made us realise that the linear form that is often used to depict and analyse the life course was not a useful representation of what we, and our respondents, were experiencing. We became concerned with how static the categories seemed in contrast to the almost constant movement that featured in the lives of many of our respondents. We became

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engaged with challenging the linearity of life course analysis as well as the static notion of stages.⁹

While the entirety and feel of a group dynamic is difficult to represent, the following excerpt does capture the moment when the interpretive insight about the non-linear flow of work/household experience really took hold and is adopted as a “common understanding” within the team and an achievement of our collective interpretive efforts.

JS – So, everybody launches, you could get an extended launch, and then you get to solidifying, or scrambling. I was wondering about who re-launches? Is it only people who have solidified that move to re-launching?

AW – No, I think that people who scramble can re-launch, try to re-launch.

AV – There’s waves, like within the launch or extended launch, there’s waves of solidification that either coalesce or it falls apart. People don’t get into one track and stay there. That’s the value of the idea of circling.

AW – They could move from solidifying to scrambling, and then that could be the impetus to re-launch, because you could lose your job...

WS – Or your marriage dissolves...

JS - And from scrambling there could be a circling back here to re-launching or a circling back to solidifying

AV – I think that solidifying is just something that happens in bits. It’s not a stage, it just accumulates.

AW - You see, what we’ve done here is that we’ve made it complicated - instead of the normal life cycle thing where you just go in a straight line from the beginning to the end.

JS- So you go from launch, maybe from an extended launch, you go either this way to solidifying or that way to scrambling. If you go this way, to solidifying, you can either hold on or deteriorate into scrambling. And from either situation you could go to re-launching.

WS - And this is the circling pattern.

AW - Yeah and we have that captured because the scrambling, solidifying, re-launching is really making a circular movement.

⁹ Two substantive articles develop this argument, Siltaanen, Scobie and Willis (2006a and b).

Working Separately Together – Closing Thoughts and Further Questions

From a practical viewpoint, working separately together is perhaps best understood as an ongoing critical conversation between the self, the research subjects and other members of the research team with the goal of constructing ‘a common understanding’ of the research subject/object. Needless to say, there are many obstacles to doing this sort of work.¹⁰ Because our experience has been of a particular sort of team work on a particular topic, it is difficult for us to speculate on how this might translate to other kinds of teams or research topics. Nevertheless, we can offer some closing thoughts on things to think about when contemplating working in this way.

Research teams come in all forms. Divisions of labour and responsibility can be more or less differentiated. Team interaction can range from daily encounters to annual meetings. Collaboration can mean working separately on different parts of a project, to working together on each part of the project. Our core research team had little differentiation in terms of the division of labour and responsibility. For an extended period of time, we saw each other daily, worked from the same office often on the same tasks. We worked together on each part of the project. While incorporating reflexivity as meta-analysis is compatible with many different types of teams, working reflexively as routine, embedded practice requires, in our view, working ‘separately together’ on all aspects of the research – from design, to field work, to analysis, to writing up. This obviously is a time-consuming way of going about research – as everyone has to be available for all aspects of the process. How varied the working processes of reflexive team work can be is an interesting practical question. Speaking from our own particular experience, embedded reflexivity in the context of a team requires a deep and extensive core of shared activity. If we were pushed to identify our most significant shared

¹⁰ Challenges to working collaboratively on qualitative projects related to funding and other institutional contexts are discussed in Backett-Milburn et. al. (1999).

activity, it would be our experience of having all team members interviewing together in pairs. Again, interviewing in pairs is time consuming and means double the person-time required for each interview. But, in our experience of this practice, the benefits gained in the quality of interview texts and interpretations outweighs by far what might be sacrificed in terms of the number of interviews conducted.

Trying to put a team like this together, and trying to keep it together, in an academic setting poses specific challenges involving continuity and inclusiveness. The issue of continuity was primarily one of keeping the graduate students on board for the duration of the project. The project fieldwork and subsequent interpretive work covered a period of roughly four years. Inevitably, there was not a complete overlap between the duration of the research project and students' graduate programs. Consequently, although six graduate students were heavily involved in the fieldwork, only two were able to sustain an active relationship with the project to the end. This represents a certain attrition in the incorporation of the full diversity of situated knowledges represented by the broader research team.

The question of inclusiveness needs to be addressed both from the point of view of the research team, and from the point of view of collaborating with respondents. Working this closely with other researchers is not for everyone and in many ways we were fortunate that we were able to work so well together. It is easy to give lip-service to such orientations as committing to working non-hierarchically and to sharing responses and experiences honestly, it is much more difficult to actually carry through on these promises. In the end, our 'reflexive' research team was a small, women-only, sub-set of the full project group, and this suggests significant questions about whether and how it is possible to work separately together with a larger and/or more diverse group. Also, the main fault lines of diversity within our core group were of generation, discipline and life course positioning. For a time, we also had two male

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graduate students interviewing and one of them attended earlier team analysis meetings.

Had it been important to the research to include diversity of other sorts, we would have been limited to the pool of faculty and graduate students in place and available during the key four years of the research project.

While we set out to work collaboratively with each other, we had not intended to work collaboratively with respondents, in the sense of bringing them in to all stages of the interpretive process. Whether this is possible in a context of embedded, routine reflexivity is an important question to consider. There is a growing body of literature addressing collaboration with respondents that may help to provide some initial ideas of the practical issues and possibilities.¹¹ Within qualitative research literature the issue of power is often raised with regards to the relationship between interviewers and interviewees. Although our own experience of interviewing in pairs was extremely positive, it is possible that some respondents found this situation more intimidating or inhibiting. In setting up the interviews, we always informed respondents that they would be meeting with two people from our team. On no occasion did this seem to present any difficulty, however, we did not have a conversation with respondents about this issue.

Power relationships within the team also need to be addressed.¹² Multi-vocality is a precondition for collaborative teamwork, and yet the inclusion of many voices on a research team does not guarantee that all are equally attended to (Collins, 1991; Richards, 1999; Weston et. al. 2001; Yeatman, 1994). For a collective interpretive 'us' to emerge, there must be a participatory inclusiveness wherein the partial knowledge of each team member has a place. Fostering reflexive multi-vocality within research teams and being able to work toward

¹¹ See, for example, Fawcett and Hearn (2004), Findlay and Gough (2003) and Naples (2003).

¹² For a range of views on the significance of power in the conduct of research, see McCorkel and Myers (2003), Wolf (1996) and the commentary following Heckman (1997).

a common understanding of the subject/object of investigation requires commitments from all team members to facilitating orientations and practices. In addition, and to a very large extent, sharing the fieldwork helped to equalize our sense of the right to speak and be heard, and heightened of our sense of the importance of every member's view. At times, it was important for some division of labour to emerge, and different levels of experience, interests and institutional responsibility made this inevitable. Writing this paper is a good example of a case where the principal investigator has taken a lead role in producing the manuscript – though all have contributed to the substance of the argument – and where there was a division of responsibility between the two student authors. Finally, the topic we were investigating involved experiences we could all connect to, and this also helped to equalize the perception of 'expertise' brought to the table. Things might be different if the topic researched is of experiences more remote for some team members than others.

Despite these questions and possible obstacles, we hope we have conveyed the very real benefits and satisfactions of working separately together in a team. Doing so yielded two main insights concerning both the meaning of reflexivity and the difference a team can make in its realization. The first insight is the enhancement of interpretive creativity that comes from expanding the practice of reflexivity from moments of meta-analysis to a routine activity embedded in the research process. The second insight involves recognizing that reflexive relationships *within* research teams can be used as an interpretive resource in constructing the research subject/object. When tied to the goal of reaching a common understanding, the sense-making of reflexive multiple voices can have a strong and more inclusive resonance. As a work process aimed at the collective, reflexive generation of interpretations, working separately together engages the richness and variety of insights within a research team in ways that expand understandings of structured experience.

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