A Reflexive Autoethnography of Doctoral Supervision: Lone Mother, Lone Researcher

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Abstract

This article traces elements of the learning of a doctoral student. It concerns attempts to bridge a number of gaps between supervisor and student in the process of studying for a Ph.D. In particular, it portrays differences in culture, gender, family, age and experience and how those differences influenced the thinking of the student. A layered discourse of readings, misreadings and re-readings is developed, drawing on the substantive literature on 'lone motherhood', on studies of doctoral supervision and on anthropological insights into the nature of cultural differences. It is a case study in finding the 'missing' (or not yet known) person who is the lone mother and the lone researcher who 'reveals' herself to herself through interaction with her supervisors. The supervisors are also 'rewritten' in their situated self-understanding during this process.

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This article has been written collaboratively by a Doctoral student and her Supervisors and elaborates the parties as 'colleagues engaged in a shared, unequal and changing practice' (Kamler and Thomson, 2008) rather than a master/protégé relationship. The student has personal knowledge and experience of the substantive subject (lone motherhood) that her supervisors lack, as well as a reservoir of cultural knowledge as an insider. However, as this account makes clear, the student herself was in some ways not known to herself as a lone mother, this not being a cultural category she could readily encounter in her home country. The notion of insider/outsider not only distinguishes between supervisors and student but also marks further complications within the student's status of 'insider'. The notion of 'inside', then, is fragmented.

Overall, we aim to unearth some of the hidden uncertainties of supervised researching, thinking and writing, as well as making more explicit the relations that accompany such knowledge construction. Thus the aim is to develop a focused kind of intercultural understanding that brings issues of 'difference' into play in an extensive way and where reflexivity from all parties is drawn upon in order to form successful supervisory relationships (Robinson-Pant, 2005). In that sense the 'layers' of the text aspire to an emergent and iterative interpretation, whereby successive readings, mis-readings and re-readings allow data to be re-interpreted and put in a broader, deeper and more reciprocal context. In doing this we are shifting away from the "orthodox model of distance and separation" on behalf of the researcher, to the disclosure model of interactive interviews (Ellis and Berger, 2003, p. 469). Such 'disclosure' should not be seen in a confessional light, and we would prefer 'dis-closure' as a different marker of 'opening up'. The dangers of

contaminating subjectivity, self- indulgence and narcissism are never very far away from a reflexive approach (Etherington, 2004) such as autoethnography (Sparkes, 2000). And this kind of multiple reflexivity (one Doctoral student and three supervisors) perhaps multiplies these risks. Where the student 'speaks' alone, the first person is employed. Other sections of the paper were written collaboratively and employ the collective pronoun 'we'.

Extract from first Interview session with supervisors

"Supervisor 1: Ok, can I ask you a…Is there an expression in Urdu for single mum…lone mother? Does it translate at all?

Student: No, not…I have never even thought about it, to be honest with you, did not come to my mind that there is…that if there is any expression about it. There is something which is most common expression… is about divorce. In our culture there is that…but not about single mother. There is no concept about single mother in our culture, no, not that I heard of, no.

Supervisor 1: Ok, Why would that be? If you had to…

Student: Because, probably…. Probably in Pakistan there are... single mothers. By single mother we mean that she is actually taking the responsibility on herself. But in our culture, when I was like back home, two years ago, when I had… my son was born in my dad's house and I stayed with my dad's house for almost 2 and a half years and was working there. So I never thought of being a single mother because it's a family - my mum, dad, sister and everyone is around. So it's not that I am going to be alone in a house with my son and me. No, it did not come to my mind and I have never seen such circumstance. It is common in divorce that once you get divorce you come back to your mum and dad and stay there for the

rest of your life and if you have kids, your kids stay with your mum and dad for the rest of their life.

> *Supervisor 1: So the extended family means that there can't be single or lone?*
>
> *Student: Yes, there is no such thing as single or lone, not that I know of.*
>
> *Supervisor 1: That's interesting.*
>
> *Student: "Either, she is going get married again and move to husband's house and stay with him, otherwise… that how it works. Even if mum and dad… may God bless every mum and dad, even if they are not around - the brother- he is the one who is going to take the responsibility of the sister and the kids".*

Preliminary Methodology

It is the Supervisors' view that exploratory dialogue in doctoral supervisions is a necessary component of meetings. This dialogue begins an important process of exchange in the meetings and can begin to build a sense of relationship between the supervisors and student – a key component in students' evaluations of effective supervisory practice (Wong et al., p. 2013). Supervisors of international students need, most particularly, to learn about the context within which the student and their research topic has developed. This 'grounding' of the project is an early first step in avoiding any 'separated' notion of data and interpretation: the approach is consequently hermeneutic (Gadamer, 2004). At the same time, it would be antithetical to the singular and situated notion of 'relationship' to try to prescribe how such a thing might be built or what its characteristics might be. It requires, of course, 'improvisation': responsiveness to the 'other' as described by Grant (2010). "Its dialogical expression may be reflected in forms of quotation (of self and others), commentary and imitation (Berliner, 1994), but good improvisation is also understood to be original.

Improvising, then, requires certain capacities including an empathic ability to engage in intense listening (Bailey, 1992), an ability to be fully caught up in the moment, a tolerance for ambiguity, and courage in the face of risk (Berliner, 1994). It also requires a kind of flexible, in situ resourcefulness through which players take chances, provoke each other to play beyond their current vision (Barrett, 1998, p. 617), and rework errors and messes to make musical selves (Barrett, 1998, p. 610) on behalf of fellow players and the music itself. Sometimes what comes out of a save[1] may then become part of the knowledge base" (p. 273/4). As Grant goes on to claim, this is an apt analogy for doctoral supervision, and some of what we describe here are the fruits of our improvisations.

After early informal conversations about S (Author 1) and her work, the Supervisors suggested they tape record a further, more formal, interview with the student. She was researching lone mothers in higher education; what might they all learn if they explored in more detail *her* experiences of being a lone mother in higher education? This interview was to include plenty of interaction, as the supervisors responded to the student's stories and contributed their own. Once this data had been transcribed it formed the basis for a series of further conversations and analysis. The data informed our thinking about reflexivity in the doctoral supervision process. We here develop a series of layered reflections on that data, as an ongoing deepening of understanding. In particular we see the concept of 'lone motherhood' coming into and out of focus for all participants in the conversations. As we developed the account, further data was generated and some of that – including diary entries – are included here.

Reflexivity is usually held to be an obligation on the doctoral student (Robinson-Pant, 2005). Yet, especially in cases where the supervisors and the student come from disparate cultures, the ignorance and prejudice of supervisors can be glossed over (Robinson-Pant,

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[1] A 'save' in improvisational jazz is exactly as it sounds – when an improvisation goes well, it is 'saved' for another occasion and a musician may draw on this 'save' again.

2005). This research is thus an attempt towards a deeper understanding of the researcher's cultural and social background which places her differently in the UK culture (both in respect of lone motherhood and the research culture) and of what it means to carry out 'successful' Doctoral supervision in such an instance. In order to develop a better understanding of the complexity of the lone motherhood category and its existence in UK culture there was a need, on behalf of the supervisors, also to be reflexive. These reflections on everyone's part raised 'self awareness' (Jupp, 2010) which, we believe, in turn allowed for further cycles of reflection and understanding. The ongoing interactions, then, called for Lather's '*reciprocal reflexivity and critique*' (Lather, 1991, p. 59) (our emphasis). Yanagisako (1979, p. 98) argued that anthropological accounts are a social process which works 'from outside in' (meaning: such accounts are not descriptive and are conceptualized on the basis of authority or knowledge already in the public realm). Knowledge of what lies in-between different experiences and values is hard to come by, and is easy to miss (Rosaldo, 1980). We hope to address something of that gap here. In the case we present here, we made a preliminary inventory of what seemed to be obvious differences that were likely to structure *mis*understanding. We believe this initial, superficial, identification of obvious possible differences later allowed us to delve more deeply into these themes – it was as if this list somehow helped to make legitimate the discussion of what might have seemed insensitive or taboo.

Female/male: In this scenario there may be gendered power relations or cultural differences regarding the roles of males and females in each of the cultural backgrounds of the researchers.

Young/old: Here, assumptions may hold true for the researcher that the 'older' supervisors offer a more knowledgeable background to researching.

Muslim/agnostic: The fear of exhibiting ignorance of other religions may prevail and this may prevent open debate or the holding back of views in case they offend.

Pakistani culture/UK culture: Ignorance of cultures creates misunderstandings of norms within a given society. Language terms one culture uses may translate very differently in another. This binary is muddied by the diasporic elements of the student's identity, as we later discuss.

Novice/expert: There is a structured imbalance in any 'apprentice' / student relationship that distributes authority and deference in ways that contradict attempts at 'equality', 'empathy' or 'valid interpretation' and so on.

Inexperienced/experienced: Mismatches in experience may likewise distort or impede emergent understandings, especially where life experiences are so different.

Extended family/nuclear family: The workings of extended and nuclear families are another ripe field for misunderstandings, especially in relation to the location and status of the 'lone' or 'single' mother.

Insider/outsider: The student researcher is of course in one sense the 'insider' (it is her story) yet in terms of methodology and interpretation it is the supervisors who are the insiders (it is their 'academy' and they, to an extent, police the qualification that the student aspires to).

The student researcher now outlines her background in order to facilitate understanding on the part of our readers.

Background of the Student Researcher

As an insider, I (the student researcher) am a 'lone mother', one who is solely responsible for a child under the age of 16 without a spouse or a cohabitant (Kiernan et al., p. 2004). (The terminology of lone motherhood is considered at a later stage in this article.) Along with other lone mother students in the UK I face similar problems in bringing up my

child, relating to caring issues, financial constraints and poverty of time. At the same time, lone motherhood is not a cultural category I am familiar with (Pakistani culture does not register such a category) and my present status as an international student also places me outside some of the norms of this (UK) society. There are, therefore, different shades and intensities to the notion of 'loneness'.

In terms of my background and that of my family, I am Pakistani and have six sisters and one brother. My Dad and Mum brought us up in Dubai. My son is five years old and we live in Liverpool with my sister, Noreen, who is undertaking her PhD in Science. Abi (sister) and Taab (brother) reside in London. The rest of my family along with my Mum and Dad are now in Pakistan.

In 2004, I was the first one in my family to get married. It was arranged by my parents and uncle. To me the forthcoming wedding was more of a great chance to shop and buy lots of new glittering stuff, getting dressed up as a bride and so on. Getting married to someone who is not my cousin also pleased me. It seemed an 'adventure'. I was focusing on the shopping and also planning to enjoy getting to know him, his family and so on. Also, since he was approved by my parents and uncle it never occurred to me to peep into my future and think, realistically, about what if he is not the right one? Or what if things don't work out between the families? I was 23 and must say was naïve enough to not ask myself 'what if'? The basis of the marriage was on trust between the heads of families, my Dad and uncle and his brothers and Mum. After the marriage everything went well for the first couple of months, but then it did not work out, as my in-laws had started to back off from their previous agreement. I can recall the words 'All that we said was just BY THE WAY' (meaning: without true intentions) uttered by my brother-in-law in response to my Dad inquiring of him, 'What about your promise to let my daughter continue with her Master's

degree?' My innocence was apparent as I had not looked beneath the wedding's glitz and glamour, which subsequently came at a higher price than I could ever have imagined.

My father had always been very progressive about our education and all my sisters and brother were born and brought up in Dubai. Although we belonged to a village - Mohaal - we had never lived there. At this time my (ex) husband was living in Spain while his family remained in rural Pakistan. The women in his family used to work in the fields and were mothers rather than waged workers. In contrast our up-bringing was very different. We were kept 'like a hair in butter' as the Urdu expression goes (wrapped in cotton wool).

The paper now considers a series of themes that were raised during the subsequent meetings between the student and her two supervisors.

Lone Motherhood as a floating concept

I had assumed that the interview conducted by my supervisors would be based on my experience as a lone mother *student*, given that my PhD topic was on that subject. However, it was not just about my recent experience, it was more than that. I seemed also to be learning about me and about me being a lone mother in the broadest sense. My interview opened me to my supervisors as I narrated my past, present and anticipated future.   It was emotional: there were tears. As I now realise, it may be difficult for a researcher to understand part of one's own experience (in my case as a lone-mother-student) without revealing a lot more about many other interconnected issues. Indeed, it is part of the hermeneutic approach that there should be an ongoing 'dialectical tacking' (Geertz, 1980, p. 69) between the details of local circumstances and more global understandings which give the local its meaning. Kohler realises this during her research on infertility and its consequences for women in South India (Kohler, 2003): her participants resisted fragmenting their stories into 'thematic (codable) categories' and so would 'digress'. For example, she

notes that one of her participants, Gita, would not give a clear answer and had gone 'on and on' and always used to drag the talk back to politics - which she enjoyed talking about as she had been an active politician. Later during her talk the participant referred to her niece and nephews as her 'big family', challenging Riessman's 'bipolar notions of parenthood' (Riessman, 2002, 2003). A new dimension of relational understanding was thereby opened up. Hence it can be useful to allow a 'long story' in response to an interview question for which the researcher expects a 'long list', as in the case of Gita.

Thus the need may be to 'give up communicative power and follow participants down the trails' (Riessman, 2002, p. 696) that they open up in interviews, to 'improvise' in ways analogous to the process we were going through. This also points to the danger of constructing two separate worlds: a world of research interviewing and the natural world of social interaction/conversation (Riessman, 2003). Research may not bring a holistic understanding, but rather isolated bits of information. Feminist researchers (amongst others) have certainly worked to move away from more 'dominating' forms of interviewing in pursuit of more relational forms of interviewing which recognise and acknowledge respondents' ways of organizing meaning in their lives (Reinharz and Chase, 2003).

Once conversations had begun in the supervisory meetings, my supervisors expressed continuing surprise at the stories that emerged. Supervisor 1 writes 'Just when I'm thinking that I've begun to understand what kind of story she presents, I get a further surprise' (email 29.03.10). At that point Supervisor 1 is surprised to find out some details about the student's sister. This sister seems at first sight to be more of a Western-oriented individualist; she places great importance on her job/career/qualifications and seems to put a stress on 'me' rather than 'us', in the sense of the wider family group. She is also reluctant to help with the upbringing of the student's son. However, one day, she made a kind of rescue attempt to protect him by telling him that a 'princess' will be waiting for him in Pakistan "if you are

really good". This surprises the supervisor but also reveals a facet of himself to himself; he is happy to talk about fragmented identities in one context but was prone, in this instance, to expect greater coherence in the student's sister's identity.

The term 'lone mother' is mostly used in British academic writing and is intended as an 'inclusive' marker referring to all mothers whether they are divorced, separated, widowed or single (never-married) (Standing, 1998; Kiernan et al., 2004). In the United States the term widely in use is 'single mother' which has replaced the word 'unwed mother' which was in turn considered a better term than 'illegitimate mother' (Winkler, 2002). However, a limited number of feminist scholars also use the term 'solo mother'. One of these is Winkler who, as she describes, uses it on the advice of her students (Winkler, 2002). Standing (1998) abandoned the use of the term 'single mother' in favour of 'lone mother', in order to gain a wider definition. To me, the term lone mother strikes a pejorative note, and implies loneliness, or the isolation of the 'lone ranger', while 'single' is a much more neutral term. This is especially the case in coming from a culture where 'lone motherhood' does not exist as a cultural category, making it difficult for me to overcome the connotations of overwhelming loneliness in the term. Standing's (1998) term may be technically more inclusive, but I find it rather excluding, shutting me into a more affective and negative register. May (2010) also finds the category 'lone mother' helpful in relation to the diverse experiences of women, based on a variety of social positions, such as class, culture and ethnicity. She makes the point that it is difficult to 'homogenise' or 'totalize' the diverse group into one category, which often does not share common elements (May, 2010).

It would not be exaggeration to call it an irony of fate that I had to travel thousands of miles to meet and fully experience the loneliness of my motherhood. Supervisor 1's first question in our interview (as quoted above) was: 'Is there an expression in Urdu for single mum… lone mother? Does it translate at all?' I respond 'No, not… I have never even thought

about it. To be honest with you it did not come to my mind that there is…that if there is any expression…' Although I was technically a single or lone mother when I was in Pakistan, I lived within an extended family. I was a mother to my son, daughter to my parents and sister to my brother and sisters and so the thought of being alone never occurred to me. I was never a 'lone' or even in many senses a 'single' mother. The extended nature of Pakistani family life made sure of that. Later, when I moved to London in 2007 and started living with my brother and sister I came across the term 'single Mum'. At this stage I was still insulated from many of the realities of what that meant. But then I embarked on undertaking research on 'lone mothers' when I moved to the north of England and gradually began to feel the 'loneliness' of the term. It is interesting that I had to cross all those cultural and geographic distances in order to become a "lone mother" in terms both of the concept and its emotional loading.

Such background helps to contextualise my supervisors' struggle to locate my 'lone motherhood', culturally. This struggle carries on as we try to unearth other assumptions. One of my supervisors senses an element of 'fate' in my account – "something unrepairable has happened", he says, and, S (student) 'does not feel that new relations are possible", and that a "sense of fate is carried over into pessimism about other relationships".

Supervisor 1 adds more in a later interview session "What are my thoughts about this? First, the husband story: I assumed he had deserted her at the time of the interview. Spain/bright lights/girlfriends. It fits UK cultural norms well enough. The second story does not deny that interpretation so much as deepen it in relation to values and gender issues. They are both caught between discrepant things…And we get a glimpse of where her heart is when she says that she thinks of herself and her child's predicament and cries. But she has no tears for the break-up of her marriage and loss of her husband. So the absent father is a cultural rather than a personal loss. It's not 'personal' in the Western way (if there is such a

thing); it's just something that should never have happened, to paraphrase the data from the

first interview".

Supervisor 2 feels. on the one hand, that this is quite different to many accounts of lone motherhood in the UK. On the other hand, she cites similarities in UK household experiences, drawing on her own family. The 'absence of father' has a parallel in the death of a missing relative (grandfather): "in my childhood death or a disappearance was dealt with by not talking about the person … when my children experienced this we tried to answer these questions in a way which would give them some truth, but satisfy their curiosity on why they were now gone". At this stage in the process, these stories were emerging, but clearly not in chronological order. The stories were formed as social narration: either as responses to questions, additional stories to make connections, filling in the gaps of previously told stories and so on. It felt more like building than telling. Hence supervisors who were not familiar with my culture were trying to understand that culture and my particular predicament, examining the location of lone motherhood, providing an insight into UK culture, and also exchanging reflections on their parallel experiences, insofar as they had any.

Floating Metaphors: Purity/ Impurity/ Contamination

On another occasion we gather to discuss progress on the draft of this article and as usual we end up bringing more data into our discussions. In the first interview I told a story about my ex-husband living in Spain, and returning to Pakistan no longer 'pure', as I put it at the time. We began to play with notions of 'purity' and 'impurity' and their connotations - one anthropological, associated with contamination and one moral. 'Purity' triggered one of my supervisors to recall Douglas's 'Purity and Danger' (1996). I then added to the story in ways that say much more about a different but not entirely unrelated clash between 'traditional' and 'modern' cultural mores and the sort of 'contamination' that might result. This was my inability to accept village life and to follow a traditional married woman's role -

probably as a result of my education in Dubai and experience of different family values. In this sense I was going to find it difficult to play the role of the 'pure' Pakistani woman. At the same time, my (ex) husband was living in Spain, in a western culture, and I could also therefore cast him as impure in my eyes. Why then should I live a village life as a 'proper' Pakistani woman? I feel sure this made me seem impure to his family's eyes. I had in mind at first 'purity' as only a notion of moral 'purity', but I subsequently found myself close to Mary Douglas's sense of purity as contamination since I do not fit into a 'pure' version of a Pakistani woman's life. Douglas (1996) notes that impurity means different things to different groups of people, cultures or societies. Purity essentially refers to moral symbols, based on people's concept of what should be the case and what should not be the case. Defining what is polluted, people classify their social life into opposing categories of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. And so our notions of 'purity' and 'impurity' are not isolated notions but are products of our social life, as Murray suggests: 'Narratives do not, as it were, spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations. We are born into culture which has a ready stock of narratives which we appropriate and apply in our everyday social interaction' (Murray, 1999, p. 53).

The interpretation, then, by my supervisors, of the initial version of my story was that it was a clash between 'traditional' and 'modern' cultural norms, some of it expressible in terms of purity and danger. But there were other nuances. I was the most highly qualified woman in my ex-husband's village and, in addition, I was also better qualified than him. Initially, this meant I was given much prestige by his family members across the village. They offered me the best chair, which during my interview I call the 'sweet chair' which can be interpreted as an expression of 'great reverence and kindliness'. I went on, however, to somehow 'betray' that respect when I suggested dissatisfaction with my own engagement with village life. I felt a fear of being trapped in the village, bearing children year after year,

alone and putting my qualifications in a box.   A more critical evaluation of my wedding

would be that it was in itself a clash of at least two cultures. On the one hand we have a

village culture embedded in the groom's family, as opposed to the more modern Spanish

cultural context of the groom's working environment. On the other hand I presented the

values and mores of a modern city, and of a socialisation based on Dubai. The diaspora

offers clashes in values, shifts in meaning and crucially, in this instance, a marriage

conceived by a woman in 'modern' terms, but reconceived by the equally 'modern' husband

as a proper incorporation into 'traditional' customs. This latter split divides the husband, as

well as the couple and the families.

Telling the Story of Lone Motherhood

My own experience is a story of ending up as a 'lone mother in voluntary exile' after

separation from my husband but never being able to contemplate filing for divorce for fear of

custody problems. These constitute a kind of 'chaos narrative'. Such a concept refers to

those stories which are never meant to have an audience because they are culturally and

personally 'not tellable' (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p. 218). Smith and Sparkes write of the

'two-sided notion' of tellability. One is the 'lower bounding side' which comes with the

guarantee of being heard/listened to by the listener while the other is 'upper bounding', which

is not perceived as *possible* as a narrative, perhaps because they are not 'success' stories and

are 'failure narratives' (Stronach, 2009, p.149); they are 'too personal, too embarrassing, or

too frightening' (Smith and Sparkes 2008, p. 218) to express. My story of 'exile' also relates

to being part of a diaspora: "displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from

their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration or exile" (Braziel

and Mannur 2003, p. 4). The emotions involved are not referred to, in this definition.

As a 'chaos narrative', a story of divorce is not welcome in either eastern or western

culture and so does not have a receptive cultural audience, does not bring forth 'solace' or

'restitution' for future settlement. Such a 'failure narrative' remains 'tellable' for the insiders (within the extended family) and is not taken as 'failure' perhaps due to the 'restitution' of undertaking doctoral studies, which suggest an independent future life. It is not, however, 'tellable' for the outsiders – who note the unacceptable nature of the event in Pakistani culture. The UNHCR (2007) suggests that the return of a divorced daughter to the family home creates the potential of stigma for both parents and family and is 'tantamount to being a social pariah, while the husband's ill conduct is not questioned generally' (cited online). In this scenario women face social criticism within society, thus ensuring that single women often have to forego any support.

Thus the upper bounding of 'tellability' needs to be increased. So if we were to make a preliminary analysis of my story of lone motherhood, both anthropology and auto-ethnography could explain some of its 'untellable' features. But perhaps such theory cannot do justice to the harsh realities of the experience.

As we saw, Sparkes introduced the notion of 'restitution' and of course this kind of doctoral study in itself has elements of what we might call 'self-rescue'. But my son also had his version - using the cultural resources of the fairy tale to fashion a kind of resolution for his problems. This attempt on his part showed me another limit on 'tellability', this time within my own (reconstituted nuclear?) family.

Diary Entry:

Last week when I was putting my son to bed and was pulling out the story books to read to him he asked me 'Mama, Abu jee (Urdu: meaning father, he is referring to my father) is not my Dad' and Taab (my brother in London) 'is not my Dad'. 'Where is my Dad?' I did not know what to say and went quiet. After a little while, when my son did not hear a voice he said 'Mama, it's your time to talk' which he often does when I take a pause before answering him. I do that to make sure that what I tell him is hopefully correct in its complete sense. So

there I was silent and tears started rolling out of my eyes. My son suddenly comes up with a response "Mama I know, my Dad is up in the sky and I need a magic carpet to fly up in the sky and bring my Dad, but you do not have to come with me you can stay here and I'll bring him all by myself".

For the last few weeks we have been watching 'Aladdin' episodes - the idea was introduced by my sister Abi when we visited her in London during half term. I thought it would be nice if he was to watch the same cartoons we watched when we were growing up: Aladdin, Ghost busters, Popeye the sailor man, Donald duck, Duck tales etc. So just a day or two before he inquired of me (about his dad) we were watching 'Aladdin and the King of the Thieves'. In this episode Aladdin's wedding with Jasmine (the princess) is being planned and Aladdin is missing his Dad. Later on he flies on the magic carpet to rescue his Dad. My son is 5 years and 4 months old and I always had that thing in my mind that the questions about his Dad will come to me around his 7th birthday or so and that by seven he will be old enough to understand it all by himself and so would never ask me in such straight, plain words. Maybe I never want to reveal the truth to him because I am afraid that he may end up saying that it's my fault, maybe because I never want him to ask me about his Dad and to believe that I can take on both roles - Mum and Dad - which I did say to him but he refused to take that as a possible fact.

Supervisor 2 sympathises with me on hearing this account and wants to advise me but does not comment at the time. Later she writes: "The issue for me is that what if I say something or advise on something that may be constructed as culturally insensitive? In this situation my response would be to give some motherly advice but because we are in this supervision mode I hesitated and instead reflected that similar situations can be found in most households". This Supervisor also later sympathises with my decision to not move to the

village and with the situation I was facing with my son, who had been questioning me about his father, and says she can see it has created an 'inner turmoil of conflict' within me.

On the other hand, Supervisor 1 tries to unfold the connections between the 'troubling absence of father' and the complicating business of a 'double divorce'. 'The 'father' becomes a troubling absence for both parties - not as 'real' father but as an absence that lacks explanation or resolution'. For me, the absence of his father is not a loss to cry about, but my son asking me about his Dad and finding no answer did bring tears. I feel it as a loss for him, and I feel the need to try to fill that gap by suggesting that I could somehow be two people.

My first Supervisor also suggests that I might be in some sort of exile in the UK. In my understanding, the term 'exile' is connected to the concepts of 'shame, taboo and stigma' written into my data such as 'my Mum and Dad were trying not to reveal it to other people (in Pakistan)', and feared questions being asked such as: 'Are the other sisters to be trusted as successful wives?'. This provoked me to explore the notion of stigma and whether I should see myself or my family as being stigmatised. Goffman (1986) states that when a person comes into our presence we tend to 'anticipate' his/her category and 'attribute' his/her 'social identity' which is a 'virtual social identity' and if the person does not 'fit' we consider him less desirable (in its mildest form) and in the more extreme form a 'handicap', 'dangerous', 'weak' and 'thoroughly bad' and such an attribute is called stigma (Goffman, 1986). For me, moving to the United Kingdom was my choice for a better life for my son and also to be tucked, 'out of sight, out of mind' (as Supervisor 2 put it) in order that the whole affair does not pose any further challenge to my family's reputation. In that sense I was 'sensing' a possible stigma for my parents, without naming it as such.

The Wider Social Context of My Lone Motherhood

A family may provide support for a lone parent and that was certainly the case for me. According to McMurray (1963, p. 56) 'There are few things that I desire to do which do not depend upon the active co-operation of others. I need you in order to be myself'. In my case my son has enjoyed staying with my family - Mum, Dad, brother and sisters and I must say that we were pampered by them (which I did not realise as much as I do now). I used to study and even started teaching while my son used to stay with them. I remember returning from work and asking if my son had had his dinner. Sometimes I'd be sitting on the couch, having dinner, watching TV shows while he was either sleeping or playing with my family members. Those were the days when I did not perceive myself to be a lone mother. Being in an extended family my functional isolation was very minimal, as they were there to help me with everyday chores and a strong sense of solidarity.

In my first interview with my supervisors the key construct marked by one of them was 'family' and a strong dependence on it. They noted my deference. It is unusual for a UK-born white woman aged 29 to say – 'even today if my Mum and Dad say something, I would just blindly follow…' or: 'they are going to think right for me'. I am reminded of Matthew Mc Conaughey in the movie, 'Failure to Launch'. Matthew's parents hire a woman to take their 35 year old son out of their house in order to socialise. This suggests that staying and relying on your parents beyond a certain age needs a push-out. And it was a lot harder for me as I could not envisage it: it was not a cultural possibility. As we saw 'lone', 'alone', 'single' are not culturally 'tellable' positions in female Pakistani culture. Beginning my PhD was my unwitting 'push-out'. Day to day life with my son continues to provide other challenges including ones which 'pull me out' into British culture.

Diary Entry:

It was another day off to the kids' park and since the weather has been good for the last few days me and my son visited the park quite often. I was walking a few yards away

from him and was watching him come down the slide. A few boys of around 10-12 were also playing there. My son went up to one of the boys and the boy sweared at him F… Off. After realising that I must say something, I went to the boy and said 'Did you just swear at my boy'? He was like 'Yes because he was going to throw a stone at me' and I responded 'No, he was not, he just came and stood next to you to have a go at the slide after you are done''. Another boy who was also standing there came to me and said 'Listen, you cannot tell him not to swear because he will, it's his life and you cannot stop him'. I very quickly responded 'Yes, you are right he can swear any time, anywhere, but he cannot swear at my son'. Perhaps the boy did not like that and so he went on swearing at me and saying 'We do not care what you say so you can just shut up'. I said my boy is small and we do not swear. If you swear at me I wouldn't mind that because I know you are kids and I can ignore it but a small child like him will absorb it and I don't want that. We all are living in this country, together just like a big family so we all need to take care of one another. At this he aggressively responded 'Which country are you from' I said Pakistan. He quickly responded 'You are not our family (putting his arms around a black boy - his friend). We English and black are family, not you'. Another English boy (from their group) responded 'Hey, you cheeky racist! You can't say that'. By this time this little incident had gathered an audience of 8 other children, all between the ages of 8-12, and of a variety of ethnicities. I repeated my sentence that we should all try to take care of one another and since you are big so you should take care of small children at least not to swear'. They said sorry and I called my son to shake hands with all of them and be friends. The boys left after a minute or so.

After 5 minutes or so we came back home. The thought of those boys going back and bringing bigger boys for a fight scared me and so I could not stay there any longer. This was the first fight I had ever experienced and I just saw my self standing and defending my son

just like a Dad. A flash of my son's future passed through my eyes and I realised how strong I'll have to be.

This episode concerning my son has echoes in another paper (Stronach et al., 2013) about the process of developing doctoral work. I see myself and my son (and the missing father) as connected in ways which may be unfamiliar to Western eyes. As Stronach et al say: "This kind of reciprocal reflexivity may be part of an internal or external relation, as when a daughter talks of her relation to her father and then to her child" (292). When thinking about my own Dad I said: '. . . my Dad . . . in us he sees himself . . . so he looks for himself in us – we are his pieces, in us he exists. So from him, I have this, that whatever the kids are they are me . . . he (my son) is what I am". Here I find myself exposed to myself again – via my son – via the missing 'parts' of my son – his Dad – by my attempts to be both Mum and Dad to him – and by the challenge I know that will be.

From the outset, we collected data in the form of interviews and doctoral meetings and we also began to develop a relational identity. The transcribed data was interpreted and circulated and we put down further reflections to share. But while interpreting the data we all quoted one another and instead of just bringing out our personal reflections on the data we moved from 'I' to 'we'. 'We' had, in a sense, become a collective. Supervisor 1: 'Because it was intimate and emotional for S (student), I kind of think that it made me (and maybe the other Supervisor as well) get involved more personally ourselves, as a kind of reciprocal gesture…it just feels wrong that intimate disclosure should be so one-sided.'

We all belong to the academic world but are at different stages of our academic career and also at different levels in the academic hierarchy. We tried to break down the hierarchical structure and power relations between us to work collaboratively. For the last two years we have been working on collecting data through our interactive interviews, interpreting that data and then reflecting back on it. But as a supervisor reads my redraft, he

pauses before suggesting that although we are trying to work on a more reciprocal reflexivity, 'Perhaps there is something missing…an element of challenge from the student… the layers that we are trying to build are not being fully reflected… perhaps as academics we sound over-confident in interpreting your reality'. He was right to an extent that layers of reflection were not as obvious as they were envisaged to be. Perhaps the student has to 'write herself into that space and it would be premature to expect that process to happen so quickly'.

As far as I (Doctoral Student) have been able to ascertain, this is the first piece of academic writing based on 'autoethnography' in doctoral supervision. Research has been conducted on doctoral supervision: supervisors' dilemmas, doctoral supervision experience, cultural dilemmas in doctoral research, etc, but our attempt to work on reflexivity *in* doctoral supervision is an aspect which has not been explored by researchers such as Delamont et al. (1998, 2000), Robinson-Pant (2005), Holbrook and Johnson (2009), Barbara (2009) or Pollard (2009). I must say that it became difficult for me to write and create a suitable narrative when the data was changing as each account rewrote the previous one. We were in a continuous process of creating data through interviews, reflecting on the data and re-writing these reflections as more data was being generated. Each layer brought with it a deeper understanding and so it was changing and fluid, altering the previous account by adding further dimensions. This process produced a wealth of data which was complex and I felt at the limits of my abilities as I attempted to write up such complex narratives, trying to portray elements of the story by 'knitting' and 'weaving' together all the layers and also bringing in relevant literature.

Some Interim Conclusions

So what does autoethnography mean? For Mare'chal (2010) it is a "form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing" (p.43). Ellis (2004) defines it "as research, writing,

story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. xix). In this account we hope we have shown how this process may also involve others – in this case research supervisors – in the process of both developing and interpreting auto-ethnographic accounts. We have discerned elements of reciprocal reflexivity (Lather, 1991) as the supervisors were exposed to themselves, as well as the student researcher.

However, we do not wish to fall into some kind of utopian or Habermasian 'free speech' resolution (Habermas, 1979). The easy language of 'collaboration', 'participation' and 'partnership' is to be avoided (Frankham and Tracy, 2012). No doubt there are still enduring problems of cultural confusion and misunderstanding between us, and issues of expertise and authority as well: 'Cultural translation, which is what ethnography is, never fully assimilates difference' (Marcus, 1998, p. 186). Just as difference can never fully assimilate itself, come to that. Nor does it dismiss the 'authority' of unequal power. In fact 'authority' is an interesting concept in this context, power invested in the 'author', or in this case 'authors', whether they like it, want it, or not. Perhaps Rancière's insistence on an ongoing 'equality' is more helpful, as something that we need to start with, rather than hope eventually to achieve. He writes: 'Emancipation is the consciousness of that equality, of that reciprocity that alone permits intelligence to be realized by verification' (Rancière, 1991, p. 40). His commentary elsewhere is also helpful: 'Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection' (Rancière, 2011, p. 13).

But in trying to bring things to the surface, share understandings, travel dialectically and recursively between data, theory and interpretation, we feel that we made some progress in our attempt to 'breach the space between experience and analysis' (Panourgia, 1995, p. xxii). We have realised that these interactions are complex engagements

across divisions of gender, ethnicity, age, experience, religion and culture. Thus far, we have managed to unearth cultural in-betweeness resulting from the researcher's diasporic location (perhaps we should say 'illocation'?), including the role of the missing father and dilemmas of divorce, as well as narratives of redemption, from the son's magic carpet story, to the lone mother's attempt at a doctoral rescue. We also came to realise that lone motherhood (in the student researcher's case) was never fixed in emotional terms and had serious emotional swings. Nor is the journey simply an emotional, intellectual and hermeneutic one. As the 'relation' of supervisor/student changes towards a more socially defined 'relationship' we enable further reflection and deeper dialogue. It is not just a question of confession or disclosure. Forms of friendship begin to accrue. These dialogic acts free up both thinking and feeling, as well as the possibility of disagreeing.

A danger is worth noting here. Some regard reflexive approaches as 'dead-end self-indulgence' (Marcus, 1993) or outright 'narcissism' (Davies, 1999, p. 179), but we would want to leave such final judgements to the reader: it is not for us to say. Recently, Westbrook has called for a more conversational approach to ethnography. Academic ethnographers should, he says, 'let go and be amateurs', in an ethnographic approach that takes 'the possibility of conversation as its premise' (Westbrook, 2008, p. 149/150). This we have tried to do, and we hope that the article supports that case. Of course, the parameters of any real conversation cannot be prescribed in advance - it will always be a matter of improvisation. Davies also notes that ethnography in its reflexive forms is always a business of 'self and other' (Davies 1999, p.183). Perhaps our interim conclusion should be that in the journeys between experience and analysis the supervisors travelled mainly in one direction – from analysis to experience, while the doctoral student travelled in the opposite direction – from experience to analysis. Did we meet in the middle? No, but we at least managed to wave to each other!

Our aim, it will be recalled was to 'unearth some of the hidden uncertainties of supervising, thinking and writing' in a cross-cultural context. A first move in developing a 'broader' and 'deeper' reflexive approach was to identify the sorts of difference that separated two supervisors and a doctoral student – ethnicity, gender, age, experience, culture etc. This done, the learning 'triangle' could draw on a growing knowledge of these shifting dimensions at an empirical level – the status of 'lone mother' in Pakistan as opposed to the UK, the role of *Abu gee* (father) in an extended family, the extended role of the mother (eg. as also 'father' and 'family' rolled into one) in relation to the child, the difficulties of relations with other parents, and so on. Both of these are a conscious kind of learning but are accompanied by a more unconscious performative dimension. We are not filling the gaps in our knowledge of the Other so much as we are shifting the grounds from which we think (reflexively, we hope) and from which we are thought (reciprocally, or so we intend) in new and unforeseen improvisations. These shift 'content, frame, and context' in themselves and in relation to the others (Stronach et al., 2013, p. 289). Such differences, then, are not just facts to be learned: they also initiate ways of understanding and misunderstanding that are ongoing. Such moves develop inductively, as we have illustrated, and also draw deductively on a literature whose relevance is relative rather than given. Concepts like shame, purity, danger, stigma are visited and revisited more like building blocks, rather than one-off 'tellings', and are in turn considered as part of broader narratives – such as the 'chaos narrative', which itself is expressed rather differently from Sparkes' notion – expressed not as personal tragedy but as a social disaster . In these processes of telling, retelling, revising, and extending, the work of reflexivity is never done, always underway, and never complete. It is in all those senses always a question of failure, whose 'success' is a question of its recognition rather than correction (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). And it reflects a philosophy of

difference and 'Becoming' much more than any representational claims the research process may from time to time feel able to make.

Postscript: Two years after we began to write this article I want to add a postscript to the piece. As I 'became' a lone mother (a title I now wish to 'own') – both by moving to the UK away from my extended family – and in perception as this paper developed, I experienced a double loss. Not only was my son going to have to grow up without a father, but I was not going to be able to 'replace' that father through surrogacy, or my attempts at 'being two people'. My continuing reading of work in the field of lone motherhood introduced me to another loss or deficit, that of the lone mother who is 'responsible' for lower academic achievement and for my son being at "greater risk" of "behavioural and emotional problems" (Amato, 2005). My thinking, however, has also since been reframed by the writing, by the redrafting, and by my continuing explorations of western literature on lone motherhood, the place of fathers, and the (Western) discourse of the nuclear family. Recently, I downloaded an article called: Ambiguous Loss Theory: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners (Boss et al, 2007). I happened upon the piece when continuing to search for literature on absent fathers. I realised as I approached the printout of the piece (almost as if peeping round the edge of a curtain) that it held a horrible fascination for me. I both wanted to look at it (to discover how the 'ambiguous loss' of his father might be psychologically damaging my son, so that I might try to protect him) and not to look at it for fear of what I might learn. As I began to read the piece, however, I sensed a 'new self' had developed (at least in part) as a consequence of my Ph.D. I looked at the litany of descriptors in the piece about loss: "traumatising" "freezes the grief process" "prevents cognition, blocks coping and decision-making processes" (105) and find myself, instead of grieving, feeling angry. I hope I am not deluding myself when I discern in my anger a new found 'freedom' in my lone parenting of my son. I find myself much better able (and more comfortable) to ascribe to a new identity, one I found described recently by Lisa Barry (2001) when describing the portrayal of lone mothers in film: "Hollywood has portrayed single mothers as prominent characters since the era of silent film but for almost as long as they have been portrayed, they have been characterised as socially deviant or at least responsible for their kids' troubles. In these recent films, the women who portray the characters are strong, courageous and willing to take risks."

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