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Abstract
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Prelude
My pace was fast and rhythmic as I followed the smooth cement path towards the school office nearing my fate. My gaze scanned the new red brick buildings towering above me and then fell across the lime green grass that glistened in the sun. I was immediately transported back to my own high school years. Simultaneously I shivered and shook the thoughts out of my mind. Inside the office I went into autopilot, politely introduced myself and asked to see Genevieve. Listening in anticipation I followed the instructions of my respondent and neared the door that would dispel my youthful enthusiasm. I pushed the heavy door as it tried in vain to protect me. I smiled, introduced myself, and eagerly edged closer extending my hand. She mirrored the formalities, except her hand was cold, and her lips held tight. Then with a dismissive glance she turned opting to continue her conversation with another. I was immediately disregarded.

I stood motionless and shocked. Emotions flooded me. I wanted to rewind the tape, to melt into the ground and disappear. Her words echoed around the hall and penetrated my mind, I wanted to block them out, I wanted to leave, but I was trapped. My face was turning red. Her words continued. I felt like a naughty child waiting obediently for the wrath of an angry teacher. My legs rooted to the ground, feet together, back straight, hands pressed to my sides, waiting quietly. She was a cat observing her prey. Poised ready to pounce and eyes daring me to move. Her ginger tail slashed the air with rhythmic force. Her words were cutting, instructions to a child. She snaked down the hallway and I scampered after her. What did she think of me? I felt guilty for wasting her time. Time that could be better spent helping a child learn their multiplication!

Introduction
Like every ‘becoming’, the process of becoming an educational researcher is complex and demanding; it is also different in different situations. The new educational researcher produced in and through the PhD process is positioned very differently in the field of educational research from the new researcher constituted as such through years of classroom experience and investigation into practice ‘on the ground’. When the novice researcher enters this field straight from an Honours degree, she has no teaching experience to badge herself as ‘credentialed’ in the eyes of her research participants. And with her youth marking her immediately as different from both the participants and their notions of other educational researchers, methodologies that might be taken for granted as appropriate can suddenly come into question as problematic and ‘not quite right’ for the researcher. For her supervisor, however, these differences and tensions are both important and interesting problematics for the field, worth consideration and reflection on, in their own right.

This paper reports on a number of what we are calling ‘ethical dilemmas’ that are emerging in the research process as Natasha Wright has begun to collect interview data for her doctoral research. She is studying the experience of teachers, parents and sufferers of a range of disabilities currently classified as
Autistic Spectrum Disorder, as these children are integrated into mainstream classrooms. An earlier study (Wright 2001) indicated that teachers perceived their support needs for children with autism as extremely high, and her current project attempts to investigate how integration is working for those affected in a range of cases. As Wright is finding, educators, psychologists and medical practitioners are presently witnessing and facilitating the construction of a new discourse of disability around autism. This is occurring as the condition is variously described, specified, measured, and diagnosed (Foucault 1987), and professionals are making efforts to treat and deal with those disabled by it in school settings on this basis.

For Wright, planning an interview study with parents, teachers and sufferers of ASD about their experience in classrooms, and the sorts of teacher approaches and strategies that make life easier for them, was an appropriate methodological approach following a quantitative analysis of teacher support needs in her Honours project. Interviews, we thought, would be far less threatening to teachers and students than classroom observation, could benefit participants by encouraging reflection and evaluation of their own experience and would allow a multi-perspectival account of the problem to be produced from a range of variously expert positions. In Dorothy Smith’s (1987) terms, the findings of this research are more likely to be of value to the field if they are constructed from the point of view of those who experience the problems and effects of ASD in their everyday lives.

In planning and conducting the interviews to date, Wright has followed well-established and exemplary research and ethical practice. Her interview questions are derived from a substantial literature review, all participants have been recruited as volunteers, and all interviewees have had a full list of the questions that could be covered in the interview well beforehand. All parent interviews have been conducted in the homes of the participants, on their own turf, and all have received transcripts of the interviews for approval and modification if necessary. These are rich and detailed accounts of the disappointment, determination and desires that these parents have for their socially-disabled children. These interviews raise problems for Wright because of the depth of feeling and sympathy they create, and they raise questions about interview relationships that bear markedly on the later process of analysis and review. These, however, are not our focus here.

All teacher interviews have taken place in a school setting, in classrooms or staffrooms, depending on the preference of the teacher or the STLD (Support Teacher: Learning Difficulties) participant. They have raised different issues during the conduct of, and reflection on, the interview process, and again as Wright transcribes them. Wright has been continuously and consistently uneasy both with what she is finding reported in the school interviews, which will be substantively reported in her dissertation, and also with the ethics of the research relationship as they play out in the school setting. Her dilemmas have arisen around the question of informed access to teachers, and then, as described above, dealing with the surprising effects of her youth when she actually gets down the corridors and into the interview situation itself.
As we talk about the interviews in supervision meetings, it is clear that this is highly significant for her work, and for her construction as a young researcher. The fact that “very few sociologists who employ interview data actually bother to describe in detail the process of interviewing itself” (Oakley 1981, p. 31), may be because there is much in this process that is difficult to describe. We go on, below, to re-read the critical incident that occurred with Genevieve, on Wright’s first teacher interview, from two perspectives - both of which caused us much discussion and concern about how best to write about the meaningful detail that would otherwise be lost to the analytic process. We ask whether the sorts of information that Wright has been gaining from teachers has emerged primarily because of her youth and her positioning as new to the normal assumptions that teachers share about schools and teaching. We ask, related to this, whether the gate-keeping processes at the schools where the interviews have taken place may have resulted in teachers being less prepared and ‘informed’ than Wright is comfortable with, as she conducts each interview.

In every account of a research interview, there will be much more that went on than is told in the transcript. We seldom record the emotions and physical conditions that contextualise the interview, as in the incident recorded in the Prelude, above, where Wright is positioned as a novice, and ‘ignorant’ of the school setting. Nor do we account for what occurs when, only minutes later in the staffroom, in discussion with her teacher informants, she is positioned as expert and ‘knowledgeable’ about ways of dealing with children suffering from. And as these teachers leave the staffroom talking about the interview to other teachers, another conventionally ‘unspeakable’ feature of the interview situation occurs when several of them come back, asking if they, too, can talk to Wright.

The methodological literature on interviewing sees both novice and expert positions as beneficial to the research process, but also warns of the dangers of both. Wright finds that she is never sure, and cannot predict how she will be ‘cast’ in each new research performance. In the interests of keeping ourselves honest about research interviewing, we use our reflections here to illustrate the sorts of significant silences that often characterise much research writing about data collection. As Oakley (1981, p. 31) writes: “Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is … and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets.”

I’m young, not ignorant: reading one

Interviewees are people with considerable potential for sabotaging the attempt to research them. Where, as in the case of anthropology or repeated interviewing in sociology, the research cannot proceed without a relationship of mutual trust being established between interviewer and interviewee the prospects are particularly dismal (Oakley 1981 p. 56).
With little ‘mutual trust’ established at her very first interaction in the school setting, thoughts of power relations continually entered Wright’s mind throughout the interviewing process. Often, on first greeting a new interviewee, she was met with a critical gaze or a look of surprise fleeting across the faces of her participants. Each time she waited patiently for the comments to come and they always did. “My, don’t you look young!” Generally there is a dichotomy of power relations in the interviewee and interviewer relationship. However it wasn’t until she turned up for this first interview with Genevieve that either of us realised the full impact that her youth would have on the interview process itself. Not in our pre-interview supervision session, the night before when she lay seeking even a restless sleep - as possible scenarios ran relentlessly through her mind like a never-ending story. However, her wildest, fondest anticipations proved nothing like what actually happened.

We want to argue that for Wright as a young researcher, interviewing can be characterised as a performance that takes place on a theatrical stage full of facades. As she learns her research role, and takes up a new and more authoritative position on stage, she is aiming to become ‘word perfect’ as an interviewer, so that her study will be based on rich and reliable evidence. She needs this evidence to be presented by the participants in the security generated by their sense of ease and trust in the research relationship. All researchers approach interview situations with varying degrees of ability. It seems to Wright that the art appears to lie in the ability to present oneself like an actor on stage shaping a persona to fit the character outlined in the conventional, and anticipated, research script – a script designed to produce a well-detailed and nuanced performance. However, all it takes is one moment in time, one mishap, a wayward glance, or an overt reaction to plunge the participants out of their ‘part’ in the performance, and back into their own reality. The game is up and the performance fails.

After the shock of the incident with Genevieve, Wright was pleased to review the words of methodologists such as Weiss (1994), who writes that “It is also possible for the interviewer to take the role of the respectful student, awaiting instruction” (p 66). This role of watcher and asker of questions is the quintessential role of the student, and in this way “the investigator who assumes the role of socially acceptable incompetent is likely to be accepted” (Lofland & Lofland 1994 p. 56). This seemed particularly true in the school setting, where it transpired that Wright’s ethically-approved research procedure was often subverted by the school administrative structures. This occurred when teachers were requested to take part in an interview study by their Principal, who had agreed that the School would be involved, had approved the list of questions and decided who should best answer them - therefore leaving moot the question of how consensual each teacher’s participation actually was. In some cases, the pre-sent questions were not passed on to participants, and it is understandable on reflection that they were thrown off guard by the appearance of a young, visibly inexperienced researcher, with a research agenda about which they were not clear.
Weiss (1994) advocated taking up the novice position as a mindful strategy when she wrote that “disguising how much she knew and how perceptive and sceptical she was disarmed her respondents”. Lofland & Lofland (1995 p. 40) also believe that “one tried and true strategy for getting along in the field is to adopt a ‘learner’ or even ‘incompetent’ role” (see also Stebbins 1987, Cassell 1987). But for Wright, this strategy, initially, was not her choice to make – it was one that was made by the research participants in several locations. And it brought the immediate difficulty for her of needing to establish herself as credible ‘enough’ with interviewees like Genevieve, before the interview began to achieve a worthwhile level of exchange.

Age and other personal statuses may also affect how much prior knowledge is ‘enough.’ […] However, in some settings (highly technical ones, for example) younger researchers may need to demonstrate more knowledge than would their older counterparts in order to appear competent because youth itself may be taken as a negative indicator. […] Researchers who are young and female and therefore ‘unthreatening’ are often granted easy entrée to research settings. […] if ‘unthreatening’ translates into ‘unserious,’ one may find oneself merely humoured by participants, resulting in one’s data collection efforts being seriously hampered (Gurney 1985 cited in Lofland & Lofland 1994 p. 41).

Reflecting on the position of ‘ignorance’ that her appearance constructs for her, Wright considers that she has often felt as though she has gained more information from participants who see her as ‘young and ignorant’ than in other sites where this assumption has not been made. Having all the details spelt out for her has sometimes resulted in some surprising and revealing information that has not been forthcoming in interviews where she has initially been able to demonstrate a greater level of knowledge. We both believe that the ease with which she was able to achieve this disguise is a strength that is particularly attributable to her age. In interview situations where she has, like Weiss, mindfully ‘played’ the ingenue, she worries about using such a technique to her own research advantage. But as her supervisor, Reid is convinced that, as Bourdieu (1992) notes, information people offer as data are always selections from what they have available to offer, and as adults, their choices may be modified by her youth, but they are still their own.

What we are both less sure about, however, is whether the people who made these choices actually chose to participate in the first place. In the next section we explore this second tension, which again places the young researcher in a difficult ethical position, constructing her research practice as more complex and contradictory than it would at first appear, or, indeed, than it was planned to be.

Informed consent? A second reading
Allied to the ambiguities around her positioning as a novice researcher, noted above, is the sense of an ethical dilemma in the school situation that is not
parallelled with interviews with parents and children. Our second reading of the Prelude, above, clearly suggests that Genevieve, as coordinator of the Special Education program in this particular school was unprepared for Wright’s youthful appearance and lack of immediate credibility in the school setting. Even though Wright had contacted the school prior to this occasion, and talked with the Principal, passing over the consent forms and interview questions, it was clear that several of the teachers she went on to interview had not been prepared. Of more concern, though was the fact, noted above, that other teachers who were not on her interview schedule (as prepared by the school administration) also approached her in the staffroom to ask if they were ‘supposed’ to be being interviewed. These teachers had not been scheduled for interviews, but thought that they were appropriate informants for her study, and asked to be included on an ad hoc basis, as additional informants to the ‘official’ school spokespeople.

The dilemmas for Wright as a young researcher here are obvious. Minichiello et al (2000 p. 204) discuss the role of gatekeepers in restricting researchers’ access to certain participants. Even though gatekeepers can prove useful in protecting their employees from unnecessary intrusion or potential harm, questions may surround the motives underlying their final decisions. In regards to the current study, Wright became aware, after entering this research site, that the Principal had clearly decided to limit several teachers’ participation in the research project. This decision to exclude and include only certain people leaves us both deliberating the Principal’s presuppositions, criteria and justification for such actions. Apparently, certain people’s perceptions were not intended for Wright’s analysis. Immediately images of deception and secrecy conjured in her mind. But how could she be sure? “How do you decide if the end justifies the means? What if the gatekeepers are in ‘the right’ and safeguarding some people from harm?”(Minichiello et al. 2000 p. 204).

Further, Wright felt torn by the situation where the two teachers offered to be interviewed after hearing about the research from their colleagues. These people had certainly not yet signed consent forms. They certainly could not have known fully what the project was about. And yet they were eager and well qualified to talk about their experience with dealing with children suffering from Asperger’s Syndrome in their classrooms. Should the unscheduled interview be arranged? How ethical is this? Would the Principal approve? We consider the questions raised by Minichiello et al. in this regard: “What sort of methods are you prepared to use to gain access to your informants? Will you be overt or covert in your approach? How ethical are these methods particularly when your research is jeopardised by transient gatekeepers?” (Minichiello et al. 2000 p. 204). Wright’s use of the research strategy described by Power (2002) as ‘deep hanging out’ in the staffroom meant that the Principal’s decision to inform only certain subjects failed to limit her access to those additional teachers who were able to express interest in being involved in the research project.

Ethical procedures afford participants the right to withdraw from the research project at any time. Subjects are entitled to determine their own level of participation. However, the power relations often evident within school structures
leaves us deliberating over how much freedom teachers actually have to decide their own level of participation in the project. In this instance, all of the principal's initial selections proved willing to participate after Genevieve's initial dismissal and rudeness. But the question is there, all the time: are the teachers participating out of obligation to the Principal rather than the self-fulfilment gained through advancing scientific knowledge and devoting their already scarce time to help others in need?

And of more concern to Wright – what about other teachers who may have a desire to participate that may never come to fruition? How can we understand the reliability of data collected under these circumstances – and what sort of research practice is being constructed as normal in this situation? As she comes to understand this façade, how long does it take the young researcher to disregard the bitter taste it leaves in her mouth?

Minichiello et al. (2000) note that the notion of “informed consent”, drawn from the medical profession, aims first to ensure that researchers do no harm, and seeks to uphold individual privacy and dignity through an ethic of care and a guarantee of confidentiality of research data. They too know this feeling of unease around consent, as they ask:

However, how much do you wish to tell the informant about the nature of the research project, particularly if you feel that it will influence their discussion of the area which you are examining? In many cases, to provide full information would destroy the research project. In other cases, it may be the only way to secure access (Minichiello et al. 2000 p. 205).

Wright notes that from the outset she tried to be totally truthful about the research project. She wanted to let her participants know that she did not wish to exploit the information they were prepared to share with her in any way. All the logistics of the research were clearly explained to very participant. She asked her subjects for their permission to tape record the interview, she explained the methods used to ensure confidentiality and told them about the role of the Ethics committee. Like Oakley (1981), she believed that this genuineness would help her to develop a good rapport with her participants. She approached her research site respectfully - asking permission of the Principal to interview people whose knowledge would be valuable. How was she to understand and respond to the desire of those whose voices were officially excluded from the process - and yet who subsequently asked to be heard?

Re-reading one
Wright’s initial foray into her interview data collection was premised on her concern not to take advantage of participants and treat them merely as ‘subjects’ under scrutiny. Rather, she wanted to develop a friendship based on trust, believing that this relationship would help participants to become more open and truthful with her. Furthermore, because of the nature of the study, Wright was explicit about the benefits she wanted participants to gain from the interview
process. She aimed to become the sort of researcher whose practice evidences Oakley’s (1981, p. 49) reminder that “the interviewer role has changed dramatically from being a data-collecting instrument for researchers to being a data-collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched”.

In this way, instead of working with the belief that the research subjects are the participants for the interviewer, who uses them to ‘prove’ her thesis, her interview practices have aimed to endorse the view that the researcher is also an argumentative device used to extrapolate the lived reality of those under study. Her youth and associated ‘ignorance’ functioned as an asset to this end. However, as she notes, even with this as a complicating factor, normative notions of educational research relationships appear to be strongly established within school settings. It surprised her how firmly interviewees seemed to hold on to the (mis)conception of the researcher being more knowledgeable, and in some way superior to them. As Scheurich (1997, p. 62) notes: “the researcher has multiple intentions and desires, some of which are consciously known and some of which are not. The same is true of the interviewee.”

Wright’s assumption of the subject-position of a young researcher, a student whom participants could literally ‘inform’ from their own more-powerful positions, was a conscious aspect of her research design and approach to the teachers she interviewed. Yet at the same time, as represented in our first reading of the Prelude text, she was affronted and diminished as a researcher when this position was fixed, in practice, by Genevieve. Her position as researcher is therefore neither fixed nor reliable. Hers is not a secure position – it can shift in a second, as our second reading indicates, to a place where she is powerfully positioned to overrule even the Principal’s decisions about what she can hear and whom she can speak to.

Wright also experienced cases where teachers openly expressed their self-doubt. Therefore, occasionally another research position was constructed for her in the practice of interviewing, as she became a source of clarification and self-assurance for participants. The metaphor of the interview as scripted drama became inadequate – and in what was often a far more ad hoc improvisation, she could never be certain how she would be positioned from moment to moment. As Scheurich reminds us, outside of a normative notion of research practice, this insecurity is both productive and expansive. Traditional views of research, he claims, produce “A startling lack of discussion about the unresolvable ambiguities of consciousness, language, interpretation, and communication” (Scheurich 1997, p. 64).

As we argue here, these ambiguities are, in practice, integral to the research process itself, though they are not a matter of conscious planning or manipulative response. They ought not be ‘edited out’ for purposes of control and the appearance of authority. As Wright found, the dynamics of the interview process were complex, involving her as researcher reading the participant and conversely the participant reading the researcher. She notes that the investigator can never erase past interactions, withdraw questions once levelled or revoke
time passed. Controlling the impact of the researcher and the researcher’s questions on the lives of the participants is something she also found hard to achieve, though the normative view of research interviewing procedures has a correct procedure:

One piece of behaviour that properly socialised respondents do not engage in is asking questions back. Although the textbooks do not present any evidence about the extent to which interviewers do find in practice that this happens, they warn of its dangers and in the process suggest some possible strategies of avoidance: ‘Never provide the interviewee with any formal indication of the interviewer’s beliefs and values. If the informant poses a question … parry it’ (Sjoberg & Nett 1968 cited in Oakley 1981 p. 35).

Wright’s interviewing experience to date has included experiences where respondents turned the tables around and questioned her about her own perceptions. When faced with these situations she often remembered the advice suggested by authors like Sjoberg & Nett (1968) who opt to “parry it”. Trying to follow the framework of her new profession, she attempted to construct herself in the ‘correct’ way.

Panic invades my commonsense and one million alternatives to answering the interviewee’s question flood my mind. I scrutinise the interviewee’s nonverbal behaviour trying to read them like a magical book of answers. Everything around me is motionless, silent. The interviewee sits poised on the chair, leaning slightly forward waiting in anticipation for my response. Time is lapsing. Their eyes filled with self-doubt and a nervous laugh touches their lips. I try to remain calm even though I too, am filled with self-doubt. I pull my fingernail from my mouth and words fill the room, at first slowly, measured, like milk pouring evenly from a glass. With each word, my eyes dart across the interviewee’s face, trying to detect their reaction. Finally, their smile broadens the rapport is not lost. I read the right script.

Re-reading two
Wright is still collecting her research data – and we are still debating whether her researcher label and affiliation with this career will always predispose relationships, thus preventing her as researcher from ever developing a ‘true rapport’ with her participants. Essentially, she wonders, does the ‘researcher’ label superimpose a position of expertise that contradicts the age of the researcher? Or was it her interactions with the participants and her reactions to situations that heralded her into the status of researcher?

In regards to the current research project, I do believe that my age allowed for easy entry into the research site. Even though my participants initially regarded me as incompetent this perception changed by the end of the interviews. At the conclusion of the interview with Genevieve her initial icy reception had melted. Instead, a warm persona and caring nature emerged.
She was quite willing and prepared to help me with my research endeavour hoping that I would “get some good ideas for helping children with autistic spectrum disorder”. In my quest for this information, Genevieve was prepared to travel 40 minutes for her next interview. She was very considerate of my busy work schedule and impinging time constraints and believed that it was easier for her to travel to me. Yet Genevieve’s comment also signalled to me that she still regarded herself as the expert and me the student writing up the ideas gathered from her colleagues. I am positioned as both novice and expert, simultaneously, a strange figure, not quite one or the other.

However, as I have argued, looking at the dynamics of each interpersonal interaction within the research site inspires personal growth, knowledge development, understanding of oneself and a recognition of personal perspectives. These deliberations allowed me to recognise where I stood in relation to many issues previously unforeseen. One’s personal stance in relation to ethical difficulties has directed what themes, questions, and positions became the foci of my critical eye. Acknowledging these personal stances allowed me to monitor their impact on the research endeavour. All my critical reflections have fed my resulting data collection, driven inquiry and inspired further thought.

Maybe this meticulous reflection on the aforementioned ethical dilemmas is borne out of youthful idealism. Now I have begun to appreciate the full complexity that encompasses the world I live in. Entering the research arena has caused me to view our society through older and wiser eyes. Now these are eyes that can never be returned to their youthful ignorance.

Conclusion
Maybe too, as we continue our collaborative process of facilitating Wright’s becoming an educational researcher, she is constructing for herself a research identity that is able to work productively with this recognition of its own precariousness and polymorphic propensities. As Scheurich claims, interview interaction is always “fundamentally indeterminate”, and because of this, it “always exceeds and transgresses our attempts to capture and categorize” (1997, p. 73). Such a recognition places an obligation on us both to be vigilant and self aware of the ‘baggage’ we bring to the research act, whether in planning, data collection, analysis or representation – whether as student or supervisor.

‘Keeping ourselves honest’ is a matter of foregrounding the ambiguities and infelicities of the research process as part of its findings and outcomes. Nowhere is the construction of the research ‘self’ more obvious than in interaction with the research ‘other’, and while none of us able to shape-shift at will, deconstructing the process of the interview here is of considerable benefit. Not only are we able to examine and reflect on the unconscious and apparently immaterial aspects of the research relationship, but we make clear the imperative for educational research to call to question these relationships as part
of the research process itself. This seems to one of us at least, much more than
a matter of unlearning the idealism of youth.

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