

A RESEARCH JOURNEY TO "RE-MEMBER": A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON DOING RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS' LIFE SITUATIONS IN HONG KONG

Wai-fong Ting, Ph.D., Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Situated in the positivistic paradigm of scientific research, the researcher is often expected to keep an aloof position in relation to the research subject and the research process in order to maintain objectivity and validity. This researcher's experience has informed her of an alternative. Rather than keeping a distance, research on the life situation of a group of adolescent girls has sparked a journey of reminiscence during which the life of the researcher's deceased mother was remembered and their lives 're-membered'. In this narrative, the author uses this personal narrative as evidence to support her call for the revocation of the artificial 'divide' that is imposed upon the researcher, the research participants, and the research process.

It All Began With 'Dreams' ...

Like most young people, I once wrote an article in my secondary school days entitled "What I want to be in the future." I was fifteen and I wrote down 'film director' as my first career preference. I no longer recall the reason for making this choice; most likely it was because I had just finished putting on a stage play in school. For the sake of contingency, I stated 'journalist' as my second choice as I always had a passion for reading, not just novels but also social, historical, and cultural writings that have a message to convey and something to teach people about. I didn't have a third choice then, but this, alas, is where I have finally landed – social work, first as a social work practitioner and then as an educator. It took me almost thirty years to author a story which gives a coherent and succinct articulation of the relationship between these choices. This paper is that story.

Looking back on the past thirty years in which I found an identity in social work, I am becoming more and more convinced of the power of words, whether verbal or written. Put more precisely, it is the power of the presentation of feelings and thoughts about social phenomenon and human lives through language that attracted me to the idea of being a film director, a journalist, or a social worker.

I have never been a film director or a journalist, but the involvement in social work practice and teaching allows me to experience the same, if not greater, power of presentation of feelings and thoughts through language. Finding the connection between the three career options is only part of the story; the other part lies in the impact that these words can bring to effect changes in human lives and society as a whole. I now also know that underpinning the three careers is my intention and commitment to work for the betterment of human lives. This is the dream that I am still dreaming, but what is its origin? This part of the story will unfold in the writing that follows about a research project that I undertook some years ago. I never anticipated that a research project could be so powerful as to link up the many loose pieces of my life, and, most importantly, connect my life to that of my mother who had passed away years before I undertook the research. So, this is a story about my search for my roots and my identity, and it all started with a research project.

The Life of a Social Work Academic

Due to the historical, social, and professional development of the social work profession in Hong Kong, many of us did not have a doctoral degree when we began our

careers as social work educators in universities back in the late 1980's. Many of us, however, gradually felt the pressure to obtain a doctoral degree in order to stay in the university education profession and thus embarked on the Ph.D. journey in the 1990's. I was no exception. I did not think that this was a dream but just a necessary step for me to sustain or to further my career. I began my Ph.D. study in 1993.

Having been in academia for some years, I knew that the research that I was about to conduct had to follow some 'rules' which I learned during my undergraduate and graduate studies. In particular, I learned that a 'good' piece of research has to comply with the four regulatory principles of positive sciences – the four Rs – reactivity, reliability, replicable and representative (Katz, 1983, cited from Burawoy, 1998). These rules prescribe how a 'scientific' research study is to be done. Specifically, they stipulate that the researcher-observer should keep an aloof and detached position throughout the research process, as any emotional or value involvement would 'contaminate' the research findings and sabotage their validity and reliability. These were hard and fast rules that were taught in almost all social research methodology courses I had taken over the past several decades, both locally and overseas.

There was a surge in adolescent suicide in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, and I wondered why these young people chose to end their lives prematurely. I reckoned that if I understood their motives, I could perhaps identify the at-risk young people earlier and thus prevent tragedy through appropriate professional intervention. I then launched an extensive literature search and review with the intention of developing a list of risk factors – those that were scientifically proven to be true – to help me identify suicidal youngsters. Having read through hundreds of articles published in many first-class psychological

journals containing the most up-to-date knowledge derived from scientific research, I was able to draw up a list of risk factors. Ironically, I never used this list because the more I read, the more perplexed I became. I was intrigued by the lack of voices from the youngsters. This was evident in most research-based (using experimental or survey design) literature in which young people participated in the research as objects of study. Usually, their participation was confined to providing information that was deemed pertinent to the research hypothesis. Moreover, these studies just reinforced what was already known, without adding much new knowledge or new insight. Furthermore, I found these studies unable to provide an insider view on why the young people chose to harm themselves and what they thought could be done to prevent these tragedies. I then asked, "Are there any alternative ways of knowing other than the positivistic/scientific kind of research?" Finally, as a social worker, I recalled my practice experience of the use of self in my work with clients. I then asked would/should/could I have any emotional involvement when researching young people and their families on an emotion-laden topic?

It was these queries and concerns in the research methodology and research process that drove me to adopt a mode of inquiry informed by social constructionism in which insider views are not only explored but treated with great respect (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2000). I could never have imagined that this shift in the mode of inquiry could have such a profound impact: not only on the research process and the findings, but more importantly, on the life of the researcher.

The Stories of Adolescent Girls' Lives

I located my study in a secondary school and invited a group of twenty adolescent girls aged twelve to fourteen to participate. Instead of asking them to fill in a pre-developed questionnaire about why young people commit

suicide, I started by engaging the girls in a series of story-telling sessions about their general life situation in school, at home, with peers, etc. Girls came either in groups or individually to these story telling activities in which I was often invited to tell my stories as well. After months of engagement and relationship building in which the girls got to know and trust me, I invited the girls to tell me about their life concerns. Specifically, I asked the girls to tell me what was bothering them most in their daily living. In order to cultivate my sensitivity in listening (McCracken, 1988), I asked myself the same question: What was life like and what had bothered me most when I was their age? I was quite blank and could only remember I wanted to be a career woman when I was fifteen.

Over a period of two years, the girls told me about the many concerns that they had. They were bothered most by the relationships they had with people around them. These included the girls' same sex friends, boyfriends, mothers, fathers, siblings, and teachers. By 'bothered' the girls meant that their emotional and general sense of well-being were being affected by the quality of their relationships with these people. They mostly agreed that engaging in these relationships was like riding a roller coaster in which there were predictable and unpredictable ups and downs, happy and sad moments, as well as satisfaction and frustration. Among the various relationships, the girls said their sense of well-being was particularly tied to the relationships with their mothers and their same-sex friends (Ting, 1998). "Ah ha!" I thought. "I can empathize with the friendship bit as I was once very much bothered, or indeed in fear of being rejected by my friends." However, I could not resonate with their concern over their relationships with their mothers. "Why," I wondered, "do I not have much memory of my mother and of our relationship? What's wrong?" My mother was

alive until 1990; where had all those memories of her and us gone? This was no small astonishment; in fact, it was big enough to send me on a journey that lasted many years that I describe later in this narrative as "remembering mother and re-membering mother."

Stories of the Girls and Their Mothers

These girls told me many rich, touching, and sometimes distressing stories about themselves and their mothers. On a normal day, many girls and their mothers just enjoyed being together doing something like tending household chores, watching television, eating out, shopping, etc. At the heart of these activities it was the talking, or verbal communication, that many girls enjoyed most. It was through these talks that the mother-daughter dyad could tune in to each other's inner world.

Many girls expressed that they had very positive feelings towards their mothers. They could deeply appreciate what their mothers had done or, in one girl's expression, 'sacrificed' for them and the family. They did not take for granted their mother's service at home. Instead, they felt that if not for the family, their mothers could have had their own careers outside of the home. The girls from divorced families were particularly appreciative of their mothers' unfailing care for them and their siblings amidst the mishaps in the marriage. They also thought that if not for them, their mothers could have developed an intimate and rewarding relationship, which they longed for and deserved, with another man/partner. A girl who had been abused by her father felt heavily indebted to her mother's incessant protection throughout the years and vowed that she would do whatever she could to give her mother a life that was free from worries and violence and full of happiness and love.

At times the mother-daughter pair would fall out on matters mostly related to the

daughter's self-care, boyfriends, and studies. These could be seen as routine hassles which did not escalate into big conflicts that were harmful to the relationship. However, a few girls disclosed that their mother-daughter conflicts were very real and severe. According to them, their mothers' "nagging, scolding, criticizing, and even beating" of them was really annoying and, in many instances, the girls retaliated. Starving or skipping meals was a popular and effective strategy that they used to bring their mothers to their knees, as few mothers could bear to see their own daughters starve. A common belief, held by both lay persons and scholars/researchers of adolescent development, views parent-child conflict as normal, given that adolescence is a period when young people strive for freedom and independence. However, Apter (1990) asserts that mother-daughter conflict, the most common sub-type of parent-child conflict, rather than symbolizing separation, represented the adolescents' wish to stay connected with their mothers. In engaging with their mothers in conflict, adolescent girls were sending messages that they would not give up on the relationship and that it was their hope that one day their mothers would understand and change. In other words, adolescent girls, in addition to needing to seek freedom and autonomy, also badly needed their mother's recognition and validation.

Rather than keeping an aloof position when listening to these stories, I was deeply involved in the whole process. The notion of scientific research was rather distant to me as I was attending to human lives and the stories that they unveiled. What perturbed me most, however, was the vague memory that I had of my own mother. I could not recall having any intimate talks or fights, not to mention what Apter referred to as recognition and validation. Nor could I find any mutuality in my relationship with my mother that could be characterized by mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment (Surrey,

1993). I must admit that the research which started off as an exploration into the lives of adolescent girls had developed an important side line - a search for the missing relationship between me, the researcher, and my mother.

The Stories of the Girls in the Early 1900's Shun-te, Kwangtung, China

As I listened repeatedly to the girls' stories about their relationships with their mothers and friends, I started to search for literature that could update my knowledge of female friendships and mother-daughter relationships. Not much literature on this topic was available in the mid-1990's, and I was overjoyed to find an anthropological study entitled "The Evolution of the Sisterhood in Traditional Chinese Society: From Village Girls' Houses to Chai T'angs in Hong Kong" by Andrea Sankar (1978). The importance of this particular literature to me, my mother, and our lives has been so immense that I think it warrants a detailed description.

Done in 1970's Hong Kong, this research tells of the emergence of sisterhoods, or jimui, which were formed "among groups of adolescent girls living in girls' houses in the Canton delta of Kwangtung Province" in the Southeastern part of China, in particular the Pun-yu, Nan-hoi and Shun-te areas. Sankar describes how, in the past century and a half, the sisterhood has been transformed "from a traditionally sanctioned bond" to a "concrete form of association which, in many cases, came to replace the family" (Sankar, 1978). I was astonished by the fact that Shun-te was my mother's birthplace and that the girls that Sankar so vividly portrayed reminded me of many of my aunts and close friends of my mother whom I used to get along with when I was a child. My immediate response was: "It is about my mother, a piece of 'her-story' that I don't know." Needless to say, the curiosity that was aroused in me far exceeded that of an ordinary academic. "It is personal, familial, and something between me and my

mother . . .," I remember telling myself.

Being an anthropologist, Sankar was not only interested in the micro relational dynamics that existed in these sisterhoods but also keen to examine the historical, cultural, religious, social, and economic milieu in which these girls/women could afford to choose their way of life, whether it was delayed marriage, interrupted-residence marriage, celibacy, or spinsterhood (*sou hei*). In this voluminous book, Sankar wrote **vivaciously** about how the young women in that region of China in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (i.e., 1870 – 1935) had gained freedom and independence in ways that had never been enjoyed by their predecessors in Chinese history. Sankar attributed this possibility to the alluvial lands of the region that provided a fertile ground for the booming silk industry. The growing prosperity of the silk industry in turn provided the girls abundant (job) opportunities to gain not only financial independence but also an influential status at their maiden home and an egalitarian relationship with their male counterparts.

Many of these girls who had tasted the freedom of independent living away from family in the girls' houses found it hard to return to a traditional marriage which required a woman to live up to the expectation of family rules, to satisfy their husband's demands, to submit to their mother-in-law's authority, to give birth, to take care of the daily household chores, and to contribute to the economic livelihood of the family. An interesting phenomenon—as pointed out by Sankar—was that the choice to lead the life of a spinster was socially approved, and as many as one in ten adult women held the *Sou Hei* or Spinster Ceremony to signify a vow of permanent virginity and a decision to lead a life of celibacy. It was into this historical, cultural, and social milieu that my mother was born. Understanding this enabled me to get to know where my mother came from. However, I was curious to know what kind

of a life script was written for her and her generation of women. What kinds of life choices were available to her as a young woman? How did all these weave into her life and identity? How did the way she saw her life and identity instill a sense of meaning and agency in my own life, and how did our two lives interweave, each playing a significant role in that of the other?

Remembering My Mother (1920–1990)

Right after the death of my mother, the following snapshots always came up when I tried to retrieve a memory of her:

I saw a woman worriedly carrying me on her back to seek treatment from the nearby family doctor for my illness. I was in primary school and she was in her forties and this was in the early 1960's.

I saw a woman of few words who, nevertheless, manifested tremendous strength and stamina in tending a home-based industry of hand knitting, capably bringing economic affluence to the family. I was in secondary school and she was in her fifties and it was in the early 1970's.

I saw a woman who was nearly speechless, lying on her sick bed at home and staring endlessly at the television. Occasionally she would sit up to take medication and attend to meals, but most of the time she was motionless. I was in graduate school and then working as a social worker and she was in her sixties and it was in the early 1980's.

Finally, I saw a woman who was almost lifeless, lying on the hospital bed and relying on the life support machine to sustain her through the last moments of her life. I was in my thirties, a social work teacher in a university and a married woman, and she was in her seventieth and last year of her life. Her death arrived on 4th September 1990, when I was into the fourth month of my first pregnancy.

When I listened to the girls during my

Ph.D. research—which took place between 1994 and 1996—I was rather envious to learn of the girls' closeness to their mothers. The above recollection subtly portrays a picture in which I was always on the 'watch' while my mother was living, working, falling ill, and vanishing. There seems to be very little connection between our lives. Indeed, my mother and I seemed to have met at a crossroads, passed each other while never having the chance to talk or walk together again. We walked across each other's paths when I was in my thirties and she was in her late sixties. We parted when I was busily indulging myself with the excitement of my newly found career in the university and the sea of love provided by a newly formed family, while she was fighting silently, strenuously, and helplessly with her decades' old illnesses: high blood pressure and diabetes.

After the crossroads, my memory of my mother had become increasingly hazy. I could not remember asking her questions like millions of daughters would ask of their mothers: What did you look like, Mom, when you were young? What did you like to do then? How many boyfriends did you have before getting married? Why did you choose Father as your husband? Silly but intimate questions between mother and daughter had neither been asked nor answered. No, we never talked like the girls in my research did with their mothers. I never told her that I had dreamt of becoming a film director first and then a journalist and then I ended up as a social worker. I never told her that I wanted to make an impact on society and to work for the betterment of human life. I never told her that although I am neither a film director nor a journalist, I am still making an impact on human lives through my vocation as a social worker and as a teacher of social work. Neither did I tell her that I am exceedingly delighted with my achievements and the fulfillments in my life. But above all, what I missed telling her most was how much I wished her to witness my

achievements as a woman, a mother, a social worker, and a teacher. I wish I had the chance to ask her how I came to have the will power, strength, stamina, and courage that were necessary for me to complete the Ph.D., to run marathons, to keep on having dreams, and to daringly instigate my students and children to have dreams.

When I started the Ph.D. research, I never thought that relationship would be the girls' primary concern. If I did not defy the researcher-subject divide stipulated by the positivistic paradigm of scientific research, I would not have been led by the girls to explore relationships, and definitely would not have picked up an anthropological study on female relationships. If I did not immerse so fully in Sankar's work, I would never have gotten to know the historical and cultural roots of my mother's life. If I did not take these steps, I would not have been able to understand: Why did my mother marry at an unusually late age (like me, in our early thirties)? Why was she so skillful in managing her dual careers (even though she was a poor cook)? Why was it my father who cooked our meals and my mother who made vital family decisions such as buying our family flat? Why could all four daughters in my family enjoy equal status with the only son? Why could all five of us have so much freedom in choosing our own way of life? Why do all of us—despite having different lives and career development—still manifest the same kind of determination and strength that I later found to be so characteristic of my mother? And finally, why do all my siblings' love and care for each other and for our aging father and why does this love grow stronger by the day despite the physical distance that keeps us apart?

Re-membering My Mother

Having revived the memory of my mother through my research work with adolescent girls, I found it imperative for me to re-work my relationship with my mother. I want and

need her to re-emerge from the background and become a more conspicuous and forever living figure in my life. I do this with the help of the Narrative Therapy practice of re-membering (White, 1995).

The intention of narrative practice is to contribute to the thickening of preferred stories of identity which, in turn, enables a person to see what action they wish to take in their lives in relation to the problems they are encountering (Payne, 2000). Re-membering practice enables the person to stand "with significant others in this preferred territory of their identity, and these connections provide a great deal of support for the preferred actions they may wish to take" (Carey & Russell, 2002, p. 23). Following Myerhoff's (1982) expression, I see re-membering as a purposive unification with significant others. In this case, it is the unification of me and my mother.

Learning where my mother came from enables me to understand that she was brought up in a social environment where women were encouraged, or at least not prevented from having the determination, to carve out a life for themselves. She also brought me and my sisters up in an environment in which being independent women with our own free-will was the norm rather than the deviant; having the courage to dream, the strength to withstand hardships, and the stamina to live a full life is something expected rather than exceptional. This is not just a piece of history but the plot that my mother chose for her life story. This is a beautiful and my most preferred plot that she "emplotted" (Polkinghorne, 2004) in my life story. Although she did not tell me her plot in our minimal mother-daughter talks, I witnessed how she led a life that was so rich and rewarding. My memory has zoomed in, unambiguously portraying her living as industrious and fearless. I can almost hear her saying that if she ever had any unfinished business, it was not witnessing me, her

youngest daughter, living a life as rich as hers.

I think I now know where my strength and courage come from. It must be from my mother. I now know where my mother's dream is heading. It will come along with me wherever I go to. I now know how intensely and immensely I am proud of my mother and of being her daughter. I am also certain that she would be proud of me and pleased with my life. She would have gracefully endorsed my dreams. .

Back to Where It Started

I would not call this the end, but instead I would wander back to the beginning where it started. The research started with the positivistic mode of inquiry and eventually it was replaced with one that is more conducive to listening to life stories. It started with the life stories of the adolescent girls and their mothers a decade ago and traveled back into the life stories of the girls of a century ago in Southeastern China, before returning to the recent past in Hong Kong where the story of me and my mother was unearthed - stories that I hadn't heard before embarking on this research. It started with the memory of my mother very blurred and it has become crystal clear, not just my memory of her, but the very crucial role that she plays in my life and my own identify project. It started with me having a mission to make an impact on human lives but ultimately it is my own life that has been tremendously impacted. This is the story about me and my mother that I have told the girls in my research project in the hope that their lives will be enriched like they enriched mine.

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Wai-fong Ting, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Comments regarding this article can be sent to sswfong@inet.polyu.edu.hk.

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