

Article

Letters to Those Who Dare Feel: Using Reflective Letter-Writing to Explore the Emotionality of Research

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Abstract

Using reflective letter-writing as a method of generating data, a group of four researchers embarked on a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry into the emotional dimensions of researching social aspects of HIV & AIDS. In this article, we use the medium of a narrative dialogue to represent and re-examine our reflective letter-writing method. The dialogue draws attention to key features of reflective letter-writing as a collaborative autoethnographic research method and, in so doing, highlights and explores the nature, potential significance, and challenges of this method. Our discussion points to the value of a collaborative process of reflective letter-writing as a way for researchers to access and portray emotional aspects of their research experience, to deepen their engagement with these emotional dimensions, and to gain insight into their own and others' lived research experiences.

Keywords: letter-writing; collaborative inquiry; autoethnography; narrative dialogue; reflexivity; emotional aspects of research; HIV & AIDS research

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Introduction

A growing body of work on the emotional dimensions of health and social sciences research (see, for example, Blackman, 2007; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008; Holland, 2007; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001; Malacrida, 2007; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008; Rager, 2005a, 2005b) draws attention to the significance of researchers' self-reflexive inquiry into the interconnections between research and emotions. Such interconnections can include the emotional relations between the researcher and the researched, the emotional impact of the research on the researcher and the researched, and the impact of the emotions of the researcher and the researched on the research process. Much of this work (for instance, Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Malacrida, 2007; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008; Rager, 2005a, 2005b) also suggests that it is critical for researchers who study topics that can be particularly sensitive and emotionally challenging, such as cancer, disability, mental health, sexuality, violence, and HIV & AIDS, to pay explicit attention to the role of emotions in their research.

We are two doctoral students (Lungile and Catherine) and two recently graduated postdoctoral scholars (Kathleen and Mathabo), who have all been involved in conducting research into social aspects of HIV & AIDS in our home countries of South Africa and Lesotho. The study of social aspects of HIV & AIDS is a key research priority in southern Africa. This is evidenced by the number of research programs, conferences, and academic journals that are dedicated to such study (see, among others, the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health research program, Human Sciences Research Council; the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance Conference; the *Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS*). However, even though this area of research is infused with emotionally sensitive and often taboo issues such as illness, grief, death, stigma, sexuality, and sexual violence, the scarcity of published work on the emotionality of *researching* the social aspects of HIV & AIDS in southern Africa suggests that this issue has not received the attention it deserves.

Our shared interest in the emotional dimensions of HIV & AIDS research stems from our diverse experiences of researching social aspects of HIV & AIDS in South Africa and Lesotho with teachers, schoolchildren, and volunteer home-based care workers. While the emotionality of research was not an initial focus of any of our studies, we have all found that it has emerged as a significant aspect of our research (see also Khau, Masinga & Pithouse, 2008; Khau & Pithouse, 2008) for which we, as novice researchers, felt underprepared. Having had some informal conversations about our experiences, we decided to undertake an exploratory collaborative inquiry into the emotionality of our own research experiences.

In this article, we open with a discussion of the collaborative autoethnographic methodological stance that informed our inquiry. We then explain our research process. Next, we turn to our data, using the medium of a narrative dialogue to describe the three phases of our research collaboration and to portray our collective findings grouped into three broad themes: accessing and portraying our emotions, intensifying our engagement with our emotions, and, deepening our empathy and self-reflexivity. Finally, we return to the research questions that we constructed to

guide this inquiry: (a) *What is the personal and scholarly value of paying attention to emotions when generating and interpreting research data in the area of HIV & AIDS?* and (b) *How might an increased awareness of the emotional dimensions of such research enhance the preparation and supervision of novice researchers?*

Our collaborative autoethnographic research stance

To study our experiences of the emotional dimensions of researching social aspects of HIV & AIDS, we have drawn on collaborative inquiry and autoethnographic approaches to researching human experience and interaction. We understand collaborative inquiry as a scholarly process in which co-inquirers work together to share and study aspect(s) of their lived experience in relation to a research topic that is of common interest (see, for example, Bass, Anderson-Patton & Allender, 2002; Coia & Taylor, 2009; Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992; Lapadat, Mothus, & Fisher, 2004; Lapadat, Black, Clark, Gremm, Karanja, Mieke, & Quinlan, 2010). Collaborative inquiry (also termed co-operative inquiry) can be a powerful pedagogic or professional development approach that may have practical rather than scholarly aims (see, for instance, Bray, 2002; Reason & Heron, 2001; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Further, it can also manifest as a form of collaborative scholarship that involves “a mutual understanding and public acknowledgement of the positioning of those involved as *co-scholars*” (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2009, p. 26). For us, what distinguishes collaborative inquiry within the broader area of collaborative scholarship (see Pithouse et al., 2009), is its self-reflexive focus on examining, questioning and theorising the lived experiences and selves of the co-researchers (England, 1994; Kirk, 2005).

Our collaborative inquiry approach is autoethnographic. Ethnographic research usually explores behavior against the background within which it occurs, with emphasis on how those involved make meaning of their situation. *Autoethnography* can therefore be understood as researching one’s own life or self within a particular culture or social group (McNeil & Chapman, 2005). Ellis (2003, p. 37) defines autoethnography as “writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness.” Hence, in this autoethnographic inquiry, we view academic research as a culture and ourselves as participants in that culture.

Numerous authors have identified autoethnography as a potentially provocative new way of approaching writing and thinking in the social sciences (see, for example, Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2003). In autoethnographic writing, the researcher sets her story within her unique and complex everyday context. However, as Denzin (2003, p. 26) argues, these stories can also be “reflexive, critical, multimedia tales and tellings”. The authority for the story begins with the body and memories of the autoethnographic writer at the scene of lived experience. Autoethnography therefore enables the researcher to journey back in time to recollect past experiences that have shaped her life and destiny, and to share these with an audience (Eisner, 1997a). Thus in autoethnographic research, the researcher’s own experiences constitute the data.

Ellis (2003, p. xix) further adds that autoethnography “usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection”, while Spry (2001, p. 710) defines autoethnography as “a self narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context”. Thus, by engaging in autoethnographic exploration of our emotional experiences of

researching about and within the context of HIV & AIDS, we were aiming to critically reflect on and write about the researcher self within a culture of academic research. Our choice of autoethnography was also driven by the belief that our embodied experiences of HIV & AIDS research could enhance understandings of social life by moving the emotions and intellect of the readers, thus encouraging readers to question and take action. It is not surprising therefore that Holman Jones (2005, p. 765), believes autoethnography to be a blurred genre which is characterized by “believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating auto-ethnographic texts is to change the world”. Thus, we aimed to give context for and balance our inward focus by “simultaneously pointing outwards and towards the political and social” (Mitchell & Weber, 2005, p. 4).

Our research process

Collaborative inquirers (for example, Bass et al., 2002; Lapadat et al., 2004) and autoethnographic researchers (for instance, Coia & Taylor, 2009; Ellis, 2003) make use of a variety of usually qualitative methods to generate, represent, and interpret research data. In collaborative inquiry, the methods that are used serve to elicit and bring into dialogue the co-scholars’ varied voices, experiences and perspectives to facilitate “polyvocality” (Blair, Filipek, Lovell, McKay, Nixon, & Sun, 2011, p.149). In this article, we represent and examine a collaborative autoethnographic research method that evolved as we embarked on our self-reflexive inquiry into the emotionality of researching HIV & AIDS. We have termed this method ‘reflective letter-writing’.

Letter-writing has been used as a qualitative method for self-reflexive, collaborative research by a number of scholars to generate data through which to re-examine their selves and their lived experience. For instance, Allender and Allender (2006) each wrote a letter to their grandson as a way of exploring the influence of their early education on their later development as teachers and teacher educators. In another example of self-reflexive letter-writing, Ciuffetelli Parker (2006) positioned “collegial letter writing” as both research subject and method for her doctoral study of literacy teaching and learning. This collegial letter-writing occurred over a four-year period and took the form of a regular exchange of extensive letters with a grade six teacher with whom Ciuffetelli Parker had a pre-existing working relationship. Additionally, as beginning professors of teacher education in two different universities many miles apart, Knowles and Cole wrote letters to each other in which they shared “the dilemmas, frustrations, and joys” (1994, p. 27) of the shift from being doctoral students to becoming academics. Years later, Knowles and Cole came back to these letters and used them as resources for making meaning from their first year as beginning professors. Through re-reading and analysing their letters, they raised critical issues and questions concerning the induction and mentoring of new academic staff in higher education institutions.

At the time of embarking on our inquiry, we were located at three different academic institutions (two in South Africa and one in the United States of America) and we had very limited opportunities for face-to-face meetings (indeed, we have not yet been able to meet together as a group since embarking on this inquiry). Hence, letter-writing seemed to offer an appropriate medium for our “long-distance collaboration” (Lee & Gregory, 2008, p. 32) and we decided that each of us would write a letter to the others about an emotionally challenging research experience that we would like to explore. Thus, our email conversations about our inquiry, our emailed letters to each other, and our subsequent emailed written reflections on these letters became our data sources or “field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 1318).

In thinking about how to re-present our reflective letter-writing process and what we learned through this process, we were influenced by work done in the genre of “alternative forms” of data re-presentation “whose limits differ from those imposed by propositional discourse and number” (Eisner, 1997b, p. 5). This work is situated within several complementary areas of study that employ visual and language arts as modes of representing and interpreting data in qualitative inquiry (see, among others, Eisner, 1997b; Richardson, 2003). These approaches have at their core personal and shared processes of creative engagement and reflexivity, which are made public in order to contribute to scholarly conversations about key social issues and about how we might take action in our social world (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Weber, 2009). Such alternative forms include a range of arts-inspired modes such as poetry, letters, story, photography, collage, drawing, and drama.

We decided to use the medium of a “narrative dialogue” (Anderson-Patton & Bass, 2002, pp. 102-103) to give a polyvocal account of our collaborative inquiry. The design of our narrative dialogue was influenced by the creative, collaborative methods developed by scholars such as Anderson-Patton and Bass (2002), who produced narrative dialogues to inquire into a teacher education process, de Lange and Grossi (2009), who constructed a play script to explore a doctoral thesis writing process, and Lapadat et al. (2004), who represented their inquiry into research role relationships through a written conversation. In each of these examples, the creative piece constructed by the co-scholars serves the data representation function for their chapter or article, taking the place of a more traditional way of presenting qualitative data through a thematic selection and arrangement of quotations from data sources.

We constructed our narrative dialogue using excerpts from our email conversations, letters, and written reflections. As lead author, Kathleen worked with the field texts to create an initial framework for the dialogue and many drafts were then emailed back and forth among us in order to construct the final version. In creating this dialogue, we edited some of the extracts slightly in order to make them more succinct or more accessible to a broad audience and to weave them into the narrative flow of the dialogue. However, we endeavoured to remain true to the substance and tone of the original field texts. Thus, the dialogue is a representation of selected pieces of our field texts that appeared the most significant in the light of our guiding research questions. We are, nevertheless, conscious that because representing data involves making decisions about what to leave out and what to put together, the representation that we offer through the dialogue is partial and that it could have been constructed in other ways (Eisner, 1997b).

The dialogue presents a conversation among the four of us, in which we recount the story/ies of our reflective letter-writing process and consider how the use of this method has facilitated our collaborative autoethnographic inquiry into our lived research experience. The dialogue draws attention to what we understand as key features of our experience of reflective letter-writing as a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry method and, in so doing, highlights and explores the nature and potential value of this method, as well as some challenges of using such a method. We have arranged the dialogue to communicate various phases and features of our letter-writing process. The dialogue is interspersed with brief explanatory notes (presented in italics) to guide the reader through our conversation.

A narrative dialogue on our reflective letter-writing method

Phases of the reflective letter-writing process

Phase One: Beginning the collaborative autoethnographic inquiry process

After some initial informal discussions, we began our research with an email conversation in which we agreed on two guiding questions to focus our shared inquiry. The questions we constructed were: (a) What is the personal and scholarly value of paying attention to emotions when generating and interpreting research data in the area of HIV & AIDS? and (b) How might an increased awareness of the emotional dimensions of such research enhance the preparation and supervision of novice researchers?

Over the next few weeks, we discussed via email how we might work with these questions to share and explore our varied experiences of the emotionality of researching HIV & AIDS. Kathleen, Mathabo, and Lungile (who are based in South Africa) met to continue this discussion in person and then emailed Catherine (currently based in the USA) with their suggestions.

Kathleen: Mathabo, Lungile, and I met to chat about the inquiry and possible ways of eliciting and engaging with our data. We were talking about how helpful it can be to share an emotionally challenging research experience with peers or “critical friends” (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and then we thought that it might work well for us each to write a letter to the others about an experience that we would like to explore through this inquiry – as a form of peer discussion. We thought that in the letters we could: (a) describe the emotionally challenging research experience; (b) explain how the experience had made us feel; (c) discuss what we have learnt about ourselves as researchers and/or practitioners through re-visiting and engaging with this experience; and (d) discuss what we have learnt about our individual research topics through re-visiting and engaging with this experience. We borrowed from the title of Paulo Freire’s book, *Letters to those who dare teach* (Freire, 1998), to name our inquiry “Letters to those who dare feel”!

Phase Two: Writing our letters

We agreed to try out the letter writing approach and each of us wrote a letter that she emailed to the other three.

Lungile: My letter was about an emotional experience that came when I was doing my Masters Research (Masinga, 2007) and also working as a teacher in a township school in South Africa. In my school-based Masters study, I worked with 54 learners in my grade 6 class, attempting to integrate sexuality education within other learning areas offered in the school. The research involved issues that were of a sensitive nature, such as, HIV & AIDS, sex, and dealing with relationships. The process was designed to allow the learners to have some control over the issues that they wanted to discuss and promoted a lot of learner participation through discussions and other forms of interactive learning.

The incident I described in my letter happened after the learners and I had been through the process of integrating sexuality education for many weeks. As part of the lessons, we dealt intensively with issues of rape and of alcohol abuse. In my letter, I wrote, “Then one morning a 14-year-old girl in my class came up to me to inform me that the previous weekend she had gone out nightclubbing with her friends. Because of the amount of alcohol they had taken, they ended up leaving with some men who had promised to take them home in the morning. In the end she was raped by one of the men. She could not even remember what he looked like. She informed me that she had gone to the local clinic and was undergoing some treatment.”

I went on to write about the emotional effect that this news had on me: “I was devastated by the news. I felt such despair and slowly started to question the authenticity of my own study and findings. Still, I was really not aware of the true nature and extent of my despair until I had to relate the issue to my two academic supervisors. The intense emotions that came over me were unexpected and I had no idea where they came from. I was close to tears and could not really tell

how that intense need to cry came about. I was not psychologically prepared and did not expect such emotions to occur. It felt as if I had somehow failed to affect the behaviour of the learners when they had to make correct judgments.”

Mathabo: I wrote my letter about challenges that I faced when conducting fieldwork for my doctoral study (Motalingoane-Khau, 2011). I titled my letter, “Is there a place for dreams in qualitative research?” My doctoral study explored women teachers’ experiences of teaching sexuality education in rural schools in Lesotho in the age of HIV & AIDS, with the aim of finding out how the gender dynamics characteristic of rural communities play out in women teachers’ facilitation of sexuality education. One of my data generation strategies was the use of drawings to find out how women teachers position themselves and are positioned as women and as teachers within rural communities, to understand how the ‘woman self’ and the ‘teacher self’ influence and shape each other.

I described this process in my letter as follows: “I asked the women teachers to make drawings of how they saw themselves as women and as teachers and to write explanations of their drawings. They had to explain why they had drawn those particular pictures and what they meant to them. Several interesting drawings came up which showed very strong metaphors of how the women teachers saw themselves. I had planned that after the drawing session we would have a focus group to discuss the drawings and the explanations provided by the teachers. On the day that we discussed the drawings, I came to realize that I had ‘opened a can of worms’. The women argued that the exercise of drawing had forced them to reflect on their lives in a manner in which they had never before had the chance to do. They stated that what they had excavated from their reflections were things that they would never have ordinarily brought to the fore, or had a chance to share with other people.”

My letter highlighted the emotional impact of this process on my participants and on me: “As we discussed the drawings, the women teachers were all crying. They talked about the dysfunctional state of their marriages and the oppression they were living with daily, as women within a rural context. Because of my divorced status, they wanted to know how and when I had known that my marriage was over. I related my experiences of the trauma I had endured during my short marriage and how I had eventually found a lawyer and applied for divorce. Having to tell them about my failed marriage forced me to relive my own experiences. As I told the stories, I felt as if my shoulders had a big load on them that was knocking the breath out of me and making it difficult to breathe. However, I was able to tell them all they wanted to know and also listen to their stories. At that moment, I had no idea of the impact that the re-living, remembering and re-telling was having on me. I only came to realize the emotional impact of my fieldwork when I started having nightmares in which I saw myself being physically and sexually abused or in very compromising situations.”

Catherine: My letter described race and class challenges in conducting research as a middle class, white woman working with working class African volunteers undertaking low or unpaid carework for AIDS orphan projects. My letter described an emotion-laden encounter between myself and Lihle¹, a childcare volunteer; and her two colleagues Mpume, a volunteer, and their manager Thandi, all working for a non-government organization, Child Rights Now (CRN), based in an urban low income neighbourhood in South Africa. This encounter took place during an early stage of my two-year ethnographic study of AIDS orphan policy in South Africa (van de Ruit, forthcoming). I had been observing the daily work rounds of Lihle and other colleagues in her organization. Additionally, I had been attending organizational workshops and meetings attended by volunteers to understand how they described their situation in collective meetings.

In my letter, I described an interaction with Lihle, Mpume and Thandi at CRN's offices as follows: "The meeting was still in progress when Simlindile, my research assistant, and I arrived and I stepped into the offices. Thandi looked very tense. She greeted me abruptly, 'Yes Catherine.' Feeling as if I had intruded, I said I was just there to work with Mpume and I would wait for her outside. Thandi said we could take some chairs with us. We sat under a tree further away from the office but still within earshot. The volunteers were talking angrily in Zulu – too rapidly for me to follow. Simlindile translated, saying they were talking about me – asking Mpume where I came from. One person told Mpume that she must choose whether she wanted to stay with them or go with me. Mpume said that she would stay with them but would ask me to wait until the meeting ended. At that point, Mpume came out and said we would connect later after the meeting. We had bought lunch for Mpume anticipating that we would undertake some family visits with her and then break for lunch. Since the meeting was in full force and we were likely to wait a while longer, we decided to have our lunch break in the car. Lihle came out (the volunteer with whom I had worked on two previous occasions) and I waved to her as she went past and when she returned, she very abruptly and angrily asked me if I had food for her. I said no and she looked meaningfully at the bread rolls that we had saved for Mpume. I was so confused and worried about Lihle's reaction and the evident conflict in the group that I suggested to Simlindile we leave and reconvene a meeting with Mpume another time."

My letter explained the emotional impact of this experience in this way: "This encounter made me feel by turns deeply uncomfortable, anxious, and ashamed. I had a profound sense of anxiety that my mere presence in the organization was causing conflict and suspicion. As we drove away, I experienced feelings of shame about my research practice: the awkward way in which I had interrupted the meeting and my thoughtless introduction of food outside a meeting where the volunteers were being subjected to a long meeting for which I suspect neither their time was being compensated nor were they being offered lunch."

Kathleen: In my letter, I focused on an experience from my doctoral research in the area of teacher education in South Africa (Pithouse, 2007). As part of my research, I designed and taught a Masters course that involved my nine students (all experienced schoolteachers) in studying their 'teacher selves' in relation to issues of HIV & AIDS and sexuality. One of the learning activities that I designed required each student to write a short "lived experience description" (van Manen, 1990, pp. 64-65) of a personal experience that related in some way to HIV & AIDS and/or sexuality. The students wrote their descriptions at home and then brought them to share with the group at our next weekly class. The stories they told centred on emotionally weighted issues such as sickness, fear of infection, denial, death, bereavement, and sexual violence.

My letter drew attention to my embodied response to my experience of listening to the students' stories: "I remember that I came away from that session with one of the most oppressive and immovable headaches I have ever had. The physical sensation that stayed with me for days after the experience (and that has returned forcefully as I am writing this letter) was one of being crushed and simultaneously gathering all my strength to resist that crushing. I felt as if I were painfully hardening and compacting. Perhaps the experience would have been less physically painful if I could have let myself dissolve in tears in response to the students' heart-breaking stories. However, I resisted that with all my strength during the class. I think this was because I felt that I would be abdicating my responsibility for the students and also maybe I was afraid that the whole class would dissolve and there would be chaos. Perhaps I felt that because these were not *my* stories I had no right to cry about them. What I realize now is that I did not allow myself to cry even when I got home. For a week after the class, I painfully resisted that flood of tears until it slowly subsided."

Phase Three: Reflecting on our letter-writing

After we had written and sent our letters, Lungile, Mathabo, and Kathleen met to discuss how we had experienced the process of thinking about and writing our letters. Again, we emailed Catherine with our thoughts.

Kathleen: One of the things that came up during our discussion was a kind of ‘archaeology of emotions’ – that once you start reflecting on an emotional experience, it leads to thinking about interconnections with previous emotionally significant experiences that you might not have thought about for a long time or even recognised as emotionally significant at the time. We also talked about how the emotionality of a current experience can come about because it triggers a reliving of previous emotionally significant experiences. In addition, we talked about the ‘physicality’ or embodiment of emotions and of reliving emotional experiences – how sometimes we experience emotions as a very strong physical sensation. We also discussed how the process of thinking about and writing the letters actually played out – how long it took us, how slowly or quickly the actual remembering of the emotions of the experience took place, and what physical responses we had.

As a consequence of this discussion, we decided to each write a reflection on the process of writing our own letter and on the experience of reading each other’s letters. We then wrote these reflections and emailed them to each other. These reflections are represented in the following section of our narrative dialogue in which we identify and discuss significant features of the letter-writing process.

Key features of the reflective letter-writing process

Accessing and portraying our emotions

Writing our letters brought us into direct contact with the complex emotions that give life to research experience and yet are frequently overlooked or downplayed in public accounts of research. Each of us struggled with revisiting and writing about an emotionally challenging research experience. However, we found that the medium of a letter to trusted peers who were committed to undertaking the same task provided us with a stimulus and means for reliving and communicating emotions that we would perhaps rather have avoided thinking or writing about.

Mathabo: Writing the letter was very difficult for me. I did all I could to delay the process. Even after I started, I had to stop writing at some point and fill myself up with coffee so that I could be able to face another page of my story. Even having to write about the dreams I had had as a result of my fieldwork was problematic because they became real again and I could feel all the emotions that I had felt then. My chest was tight and I could not breathe. I could not see my computer clearly, because my eyes filled with unshed tears. I wanted to cry but I could not. I wished that I could shout out and cry aloud but it did not happen.

Catherine: I shied away from making what I think is a necessary inward journey. Every time I began to write, I immediately thought, “How can I explore the inner turmoil that my interaction with Lihle created? How can I find the words to share my feelings without laying myself bare?”

Kathleen: To start with, my writing went slowly as I was aware that I was writing for an audience and I wanted to ‘get it right’ and make sure that I would articulate this complex experience in a way that would be clear to my readers. I found that revisiting my experience through the letter-writing process was physically painful for me and this physical pain surprised me because I

thought that I had already ‘dealt with’ this experience through writing about it in my research journal and in my doctoral thesis. However, as the letter took shape, the sense of being able to write to friends who were engaged in a similar self-reflexive process made the complex and private subject of my own emotions somewhat easier to tackle.

Lungile: I started out in a state of confusion. I knew the experience that I intended to share, but words failed me. I had a day when I had the computer on for the whole day trying to put my thoughts onto paper. I worried over how to approach the writing of the letter. I started to panic when I felt as if I could not reconnect with the emotions that I had experienced during the research process. I felt it would not come out as I had experienced it. What I found rather difficult was the expression of the emotions that I went through. I was trying to find the right words that would make it easy for everybody to understand what I went through at that time. However, when I reconnected with the emotions, they seemed to flow from me. The memory of the emotions came back. It came to me that for the first time I had a safe space to be unprofessional and un-academic about my expression of those feelings. Once I had reconnected with the memories, it was easier to write about that specific event. In addition, the details of the experience were so defined, it was as if I had just had the conversation with the learner that day.

Intensifying our engagement with our emotions

In reflecting on the process of writing our own letters, we found that this task again evoked complicated and often painful emotions. Yet, tempered by space and distance, and in the awareness of writing to empathetic readers, we were able to look more closely at how these emotions might have arisen and what they might enable us to learn about ourselves. In writing our reflections, we found that over time our feelings had evolved in different ways. Some of us felt our private terrors and sorrows afresh through the act of reliving our memories. Others were concerned about forgetting and losing touch with our initial stark reactions. And possibly each of us realized there were deeper reserves of emotions we had not yet made ‘public’, afraid of the assumptions that even our compassionate readers might make about our vulnerable selves.

Mathabo: It is scary that even the writing of the reflection on my letter affected me in a way that I never thought it would. I put off writing the reflection for some time, partly because of some unavoidable circumstances, but also partly because of my own unwillingness to engage again with the emotions that thinking about my experiences brings. Sometimes we try to pretend that things have never happened as a way of protecting ourselves from painful experiences. I think that when I wrote my letter about my experiences of the research I was trying to safeguard myself from being too vulnerable and therefore getting hurt even though I do not know who could hurt me if I talk about my own life.

Lungile: Through the reflection-writing, I had the chance to re-live and re-evaluate my emotions at a time when I could look at the emotions differently. I was able to find meaning in the experience and to learn something new about myself and how I deal with emotions of that nature.

Kathleen: While writing my reflection, I came to understand the experience I had described in my letter in a much more self-reflexive way. I became aware of how I had not allowed myself to engage in a necessary process of grieving over the emotional pain that my students had experienced. Coming to see myself as ‘denying’ the emotional pain of HIV & AIDS-related experiences was very difficult. I think that perhaps in order to do our work as researchers we tend to shield ourselves with denial – not denial of the facts and statistics of HIV & AIDS, but of really *feeling* the pain, fear, and sadness of lived experiences of HIV & AIDS. I do not think that I denied the emotional pain of my students, but I did come to see that I was denying my own pain

and I was able to think about the possible personal roots of this denial. However, beyond that, following the advice of Crawford et al. (1992) on moving beyond the self when studying emotions through collaborative memory work, I was also able to start thinking more broadly about why human beings might deny their emotional responses to experiences of illness and death.

Catherine: After I had sent my letter off, I had realized that the one piece of the narrative I had left out was *me*. Reflexivity and attention to emotions are a central element of this project but it begins with an inward journey. In my reflection on my letter, I began such a journey by revisiting the scene I had described, playing it again. This time, I paid attention to my emotions and why they were so powerful. At first, I felt as if I had confronted a wall of fear, anxious about the vulnerable feelings I would need to reveal. Once I was done, it felt like a release and my journey took me to places of deeper understanding. Self-study and attention to my emotions provided an important avenue to examine the relationships between identity and professional practice in my research. Reflecting on this emotionally charged encounter painfully brought into focus how identity shapes social interactions in the practice of HIV & AIDS research.

Deepening our empathy and self-reflexivity

By reflecting on our reading of each other's letters, we acknowledged how much this part of the collaborative inquiry process had affected us. We also realized that reading our co-inquirers' letters had afforded us deeper insight, not only into their research experiences and emotions, but also our own.

Mathabo: It was not so difficult to read the other letters even though they also forced me to take breaks in-between to absorb the shock and pain that was so vividly presented in each letter.

Lungile: While reading the letters I have to say I was unexpectedly drawn into the experiences that everybody went through. Interestingly, I found myself *being* the writer and reliving the experiences.

Kathleen: I felt honoured that you shared your letters with me. Although I had heard something about each of these experiences before in conversation, the letters allowed me deeper insight into your thoughts, feelings, and observations.

Catherine: Reading each of the letters, I was struck by your strength in sharing experiences that left you vulnerable to yourselves, your students, your supervisors, and your reading audience. Each of you shared shocking, disturbing, tragic experiences that I found very hard to read. I felt myself initially shielding my emotions. What helped me carry on reading was the ways in which each of you made the emotions and experiences safe for the reader – even in the act of writing were you not taking care of the reader's thoughts and emotions? Each of you in your writing style and the interpretation of your emotions helped me dare to place myself in the situations you describe. You also helped me take a very scary next step in thinking about how I was transformed by my encounter with Lihle. When writing my letter, I introduced an authoritative voice that pronounced certainty about the social world I observed. This voice was at odds with the uncertain and vulnerable emotions I described. Reading your letters encouraged me set aside this denial/expert voice to take one step to raw and painful places within me that better reflect the uncertain worlds we navigate in our work and everyday life.

Discussion

In this article, we have documented a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry into the emotionality of HIV & AIDS research. The article portrays our three phase data generation process, beginning with our initial agreement to collaborate, followed by our first exchange of letters describing an emotionally challenging research experience, and culminating with the exchange of written reflections on the inquiry process. In this final section, we revisit our research questions to consider what we have learnt through our reflective letter-writing process.

The first research question that we constructed to guide our inquiry was: *What is the personal and scholarly value of paying attention to emotions when generating, collecting and interpreting research data in the area of HIV & AIDS?* In returning to this question, we realized that the experience of examining our memories and reflecting on their emotional impact has offered new insights into our emotional lives and better understanding of how we react to painful situations. Our scholarship too has benefited from this inquiry; writing reflections to supportive peers provided encouragement not only to look more deeply inwards, but also to look outwards from our own emotional responses and thus gain a more empathetic and social understanding of the emotionality of HIV & AIDS research. Our emotional research experiences surfaced the everyday worlds of southern Africans in the midst of the HIV & AIDS epidemic: the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and gender inequality, the complexity of denial of HIV & AIDS, and the ongoing legacy of racial and social inequalities. Our inquiry has heightened our awareness that these cultural and structural forces are not only the subject of or context for our research; they are also part of our lived, shared daily experiences as members of southern African communities. Thus, we realize that, as researchers, we cannot leave our emotional and social selves out of the picture of our research and indeed, that paying self-reflexive attention to our own emotional responses to our research can help us to better understand the emotional and social nuances of our research topics.

Our second question asked: *How might an increased awareness of the emotional dimensions of such research enhance the preparation and supervision of novice researchers?* By undertaking qualitative research into social aspects of HIV & AIDS, we exposed ourselves to powerful emotions, both from our research participants and our own responses to our participants' pain. Our inquiry revealed that we all felt underprepared for our encounters with the emotions of research. And, apart from Lungile, who was able to make some sense of her emotional experience in discussions with her academic supervisors, we realized that we had mostly grappled with this part of our research journeys on our own. We found that returning to these experiences in the company of trusted 'critical friends' helped us to make more emotional and intellectual sense of what we had experienced. Thus, we would advise novice researchers and their supervisors to make space and time for paying attention to the emotionality of research, particularly when studying emotionally laden topics such as HIV & AIDS.

Supervisors could support their students by encouraging them to share emotionally challenging experiences in the field and to reflect on their emotional reactions to these experiences. But, of course, the supervisors themselves would need to feel comfortable with bringing emotions into supervision meetings. Other possible strategies student researchers could make use of are keeping a journal, and attending individual and group counselling if these services are available on university campuses. Additionally, our inquiry points to the potential value of novice researchers building support networks among their peers and using tools such as reflective letter-writing to debrief and unravel emotionally painful experiences. We realize, however, that not all novice researchers find support in their academic or organizational environments (Vickers, 2002). Indeed, our collaboration was built upon working with colleagues based in different academic environments rather than only relying on our peers in our home organizations.

We feel that it is very important not to present a romanticized view of collaborative research as our inquiry has also drawn attention to the complexity and challenges of writing and sharing letters and reflections about such a sensitive topic. As evidenced by the narrative dialogue, we have found that close and self-reflexive engagement with and sharing of emotions through reflective letter-writing can be an emotionally and physically painful process and we believe that, if not underpinned by supportive research relationships, it could leave one feeling exposed and vulnerable. We would therefore agree with Samson, Bloor and Fincham (2008, p. 919) that “researchers and students committed to [self-reflexive and collaborative] research practices require more support than those adopting a more distant and objectifying stance in social research.”

Consequently, when using reflective letter-writing or other methods for collaborative, self-reflexive inquiry into sensitive and private topics, we would advise researchers and supervisors to negotiate some guidelines for “self-care” (Rager, 2005a, 2005b) and group-care (Ellis, 2007). Although we did not explicitly agree on such guidelines at the start of our inquiry and rather relied on a more implicit trust in each other, we have identified some working guidelines for collaborative, self-reflexive research. These include: not disclosing more than we feel comfortable with; upholding confidentiality; making time to talk about our emotional responses to the inquiry process; sharing information on how to access available counselling services should the need arise; and checking at each stage of our research that we are all still comfortable with what we are doing and with the process.

Concluding thoughts

In writing our reflections to each other, we shared how painful our storytelling had been; some of us experienced physical symptoms such as headaches or nightmares; while others were tormented by feelings of shame or disappointment in our initial response to the events we related. Yet, we all acknowledged how valuable the process had been. All of us gained new insights into the ways in which we were affected by painful research experiences and why they have such a powerful hold on us. Moving beyond ourselves, the reliving of these encounters with our research participants enabled us to build deeper, more nuanced understandings of emotional and social aspects of lived experiences of HIV & AIDS.

Notes

1. All names of people and organizations in this account have been changed.

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