

Creating emotional spaces in biographical interviews

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Most biographical researchers are familiar with the difficulties of talking about intensely painful or traumatic experiences with their interview partners. Many of us will also recognize the sensation of leaving an interview with a feeling that the most important part of our interview partner's experiences has been left unsaid. In this paper, I will explore ways in which otherwise neglected feelings about intensely emotional biographical experiences involving loss, loneliness and exclusion can be expressed, embodied, and, ultimately, narrated. Drawing examples from biographical interviews with passionate tango dancers, a case will be made for exploring less conventional ways of doing biographical research, ways in which researchers and their interview partners together create spaces for sharing and making sense of emotional experiences which are biographically relevant, but difficult to put into words.

Most of my research has been in the field of medical sociology. I have done biographical interviews with people who have had painful or traumatic experiences – for example, serious illness, disability, problems with their appearance, and eating disorders. I expected that these interviews would be emotionally charged. I remember worrying how to help my informants talk about their difficult feelings. Often, at the end of the interview, I suspected that, as an interviewer, I had failed and that much of what made their experiences most important for them had, in fact, been left unsaid.

Many years later I decided – in part as a reward to myself – to do biographical interviews with people who are passionate about dancing tango. Dancing tango is my own passion and I imagined that doing this research would be fun to do. I did not expect to have any problems talking to people about their lives and the thing they most love to do – dancing tango. However, in these biographical interviews, much to my surprise, more of my informants became emotional and even started crying while they were talking about tango than any of my informants in my previous research where I would have expected strong emotional responses. Almost all of the tango dancers I interviewed told me stories about things that had been painful in their lives: parents who had died, messy divorces, alienating work situations, being lonely or missing their homeland.

Today I want to reflect on this surprising occurrence and speculate on why it might have happened. Then I will make some suggestions about what we as biographical researchers who are working on topics involving painful or intense emotional experiences can learn from this.

Let me start with an example from one of my biographical interviews with a passionate tango dancer who I will call Rose. I interviewed her in my living room in Amsterdam. She was 42, an artist, divorced with two sons. She had been dancing tango for more than 15 years. I had been playing some tango music when she arrived and she asked me to leave it on ('it will make things easier,' she said). During the interview, she explained that she had always been a 'dancing girl' even as a

child. As we talked and she kept jumping up and moving around, demonstrating a dance step or showing what her partners had done on the dance floor.

For Rose, tango music always made her think of immigrant men living in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century who were the first to dance tango. There they were, missing their families ('you are in Buenos Aires, your grandmother is in Italy'). She imagined that there was always this piece of yourself that you couldn't share with your own children. 'It's something that everyone has,' she added. Then she began to cry. Through her tears, she explained that 'tango is a space where you can find your sadness and try to dance it away.' Still crying, she began a biographical narrative which continued for the rest of the interview. Rose had a Spanish father and a Dutch mother. When she was 10, her mother remarried and moved to Amsterdam. Rose was sent to a school where 'all the children had blond hair and blue eyes and I was the only one who looked different.' The children were always asking her 'where she was from' and she was always treated like an outsider. She never felt she belonged. Rose left home at a young age and she continued to deny her ancestry until she started dancing tango many years later. Recalling her first experiences learning to dance, she started to laugh. 'You know, tango was just perfect for me. I felt I didn't have to hide who I was any more. I didn't have to hide my origins and I didn't have to hide the loss either because that's all in tango anyway, that you have a family and that you have lost them.' She started to cry again and said: 'But you can still dance. This music – it just gives you a feeling of home when you have been uprooted.'

How can we make sense of Rose's crying during an interview about dancing tango?

As Enrique Santos Discépele, a well-known tango composer put it, 'tango is a sad thought that is danced.' When people listen to tango music, sadness almost always comes in. The music is beautiful and full of the longing of the immigrants who composed it, sang it, and danced it. The lyrics are about all of the things that can go wrong in life, the things that you lost and might never find again. Even if you don't understand the lyrics, tango is a dance where you can be sad, where there is a space for sadness. You do not have to talk about your sadness, but neither do you have to be alone with it. You can share it – at least for a moment – with someone who will take you in their arms and move with you, together in the music.

I remember once many years ago being in a tango salon in Buenos Aires. I was feeling very sad because my mother was suffering from dementia and I was losing her, bit by bit. Many of you will recognize this experience and know that it is a very cruel way to lose someone you love. One of my dance partners noticed that I had tears in my eyes. He didn't ask me what was wrong and, in fact, we couldn't have talked about it anyway because at that time I didn't know much Spanish. Instead he just opened his arms and said: '*Ven. Vamos a bailar.*' 'Come. Let's dance.' And that's what we did. I didn't lose my sadness about my mother, but I found a space for it at that moment and for that moment, in a beautiful tango song, moving together with someone who was taking care of me.

What happened in the interviews with tango dancers was similar to what happened when they danced. They re-enacted feelings that were deeply embodied, but hard to put into words. When they wanted to listen to tango music during the interview, it was to help them talk about what they felt. They got up and moved around during the interview because it was the only way to share what they were feeling. They would gesticulate or use facial expressions to indicate feelings of joy or amazement, often reaching over to touch my arm in the process. Some even hugged me in order to demonstrate what they meant by a good (or a bad) embrace.

This re-enactment of the dance in the interview opened up a space for them to feel an emotion that they had in their everyday life – the feeling of sadness about a loss or the despair about being alone. The tears sprung up spontaneously and it was only then that they could begin to tell me about painful events in their lives. It was in other words not I the interviewer who helped them to express strong feelings, but they who seemed to know what needed to happen before they could tell me about how they felt.

Obviously, our informants do not all dance tango and maybe they don't even listen to music. Many of us as researchers, however, are quite conventional in the way we do interviews. We sit in chairs with the tape recorder planted firmly between us and our informants. We take notes, we make listening noises and provide the occasional prompt in the hopes our informants will tell us about what is meaningful in their lives.

But perhaps we are being too conventional. Based on my experiences with these tango dancers, I would suggest that we might let our informants' create spaces for themselves where they can express even their strongest feelings and tell their stories about emotionally charged events in their lives. We could ask our informants to draw map-like pictures of themselves to explain who they are and how they became that way. Or we might use photographs as a catalyst for a biographical interview. (This is something Roswitha knows a lot about). Or, to borrow an idea from the Hungarian oral historian Andrea Peto, one could ask informants to bring an object or artefact from their childhood that has a special meaning for them and let them talk about that in the interview. Informants might sing their favorite song as a way to remember – something I saw done effectively in a beautiful biographical project in which elderly Jamaican immigrants to the UK were asked to sing popular songs from their past. Or we might ask informants to read a poem as the Peruvian-Dutch filmmaker Hedy Honigmann did. She asked elderly Brazilian women sitting on the beach to read from a book of erotic poetry by the famous Brazilian writer Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Amidst much laughter and tears, this became a way for them to talk about their own sexuality, their relationships, and their disappointments in love.

These were just a few examples, of course. But I hope it will be sufficient for starting a discussion here about how we might re-think the ways we do biographical research so that spaces can be created with our informants for sharing and making sense of intensely emotional experiences which are biographically important, but difficult to put into words.