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ABSTRACT

This article presents our experiences of conducting research interviews with Australian academics, in order to reflect on the politics of researcher and participant positionality. In particular, we are interested in the ways that academic networks, hierarchies and cultures, together with mobility in the higher education sector, contribute to a complex discursive terrain in which researchers and participants alike must maintain vigilance about where they ‘put their feet’ in research interviews. We consider the implications for higher education research, arguing that the positionality of researchers and participants pervades and exceeds these specialised research situations.

POLITICS, REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCHING WITH ACADEMICS

That research is never theoretically or politically neutral is hardly a novel observation. As Yvonna Lincoln and Gaile Cannella succinctly put it, ‘Research is not only political, it has never been more politicized than in the present’ (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004, p. 197). While this poses particular quandaries for researchers with an interest in matters overtly political, even seemingly mundane or routine objects of research inquiry can, at times, prove far more political than might be anticipated by either researchers or participants. According to Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘…all research findings have political implications’ (2005, p. 6), and others have argued that ‘even research that does not set out with expressly political aims and orientations is political in its capacity to imply, suggest and/or initiate change’ (Saltmarsh, 2009).

This is particularly the case when researching in a politically charged field such as education, where ‘public sector reform… has been ongoing and relentless’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002). In the global higher education sector, the seemingly endless raft of neoliberal reforms in recent decades continues to result in changes—whether mandated, recommended or tacitly implied—to all facets of academic and administrative practice. ‘Politics situate methodology within and outside the academy’ (Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina, 2006, p.771), and researching the practices and viewpoints of academics takes place against this backdrop of competing disciplinary and professional interests.
and agendas that shape, and are shaped by, national and institutional policy contexts. Researching in higher education ‘is to engage in an immensely complex arena with significant variation between and within institutions and ever-increasing demands on those institutions to deliver across a number of externally and internally driven agendas’ (Hammersley-Fletcher & Qualter, 2009, p. 372). In such conditions, researching university policy and practice can present complex challenges to researchers and research participants, each of whom are simultaneously subject to, and implicated in, the ongoing re/production of the conditions and practices that formulate the object of higher education inquiries.

In this article we reflect on our experiences in a number of recent, collaboratively conducted higher education studies, during the course of which we have interviewed early career academics, department heads, research leaders, and senior faculty executives, across a wide range of Australian universities. Some of our interviews were conducted face-to-face, and involved a degree of coordination with administrative staff and participants in order to arrange multiple interviews during relatively brief site visits. On other occasions, interviews were arranged on our behalf by a research assistant and conducted by telephone. In some cases interviews were conducted with academics working in institutions where we were currently, or had been previously, employed, whereas in other cases participants were located in universities about which we had little or no prior institutional knowledge. Some participants were known to us personally prior to volunteering or agreeing to be interviewed, and others we met for the first time when the interview was conducted. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent, using hand-held digital recorders, and all were transcribed using professional transcription services. In accordance with ethical guidelines concerning the need to ensure that the identities of participants and their institutions were not disclosed, interview transcripts were subsequently de-identified through the use of pseudonyms for individuals, and care was taken to refer to departments and institutions using general terms to minimise the potential for participants or their workplaces to be identified by an informed readership.

We acknowledge here certain problematics associated with team-based research in which interviews may be arranged by some and carried out by others, where site visits may be possible in some instances and not in others, and where members of a research team may be separated by considerable geographical distances. Factors of this sort add additional layers of complexity to the task of interpretation and analysis of data. As Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet observe of team and collaborative research:

[T]here is a tendency to decontextualize, reduce and objectify fieldwork into textual transcripts, with researchers engaging in limited explicit reflexive processes to ‘put back in’ and take into account the contexts, subjectivities and research relationships through which these texts and knowledge are produced and made meaningful (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008, p. 977).

In the case of our collaborative projects, we see some of this fragmentation at work, and hope that through reflexive engagements of this sort we might contribute to the broader conversations about the richness and complexity, as well as the political conundrums that we continue to encounter in team-based research. Of particular interest to us are the subject positions and power relations at work in our research encounters as both individuals and collaborators. As researchers both employed within and researching the Australian tertiary sector, we acknowledge what Sumathi Renganathan describes as ‘the blurred boundaries associated with being neither a complete insider nor outsider’ (Renganathan, 2009, p. 11). Whilst ‘outsiders’ in the sense that we are not necessarily employed within the institutions that have comprised our research sites, we nonetheless occupy subject positions of informed observers who are likely to have ‘insider knowledge’ of particular groups, situations and organisations. Like other researchers investigating issues in higher education, we also occupy subject positions as discursively situated interpreters of, and contributors to, broader institutional and policy debates.
We understand the research approach of interviewing academics about their views on various aspects of higher education policy and practice as an example of how ‘[t]he discipline of the research method itself has reproduced the disciplined researcher, and the researcher has reproduced the discipline’ (Beer, 2005, p. 48). As members of a highly mobile network of others similarly positioned, we–like the participants in our research–are enmeshed in collegial, institutional and sectoral hierarchies where positions and roles change frequently, and within which there is general anticipation of advancements of status, responsibility and privilege associated with research output and career progression. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that researchers of higher education potentially stand to gain substantially—in terms of our knowledge of the sector within which we work, as well as enhancing career status and opportunities for advancement associated with publication—from information shared in research interviews with colleagues, peers, competitors and powerful leaders.

Participants in higher education research tend to occupy similar discursive locations, particularly with respect to having detailed, expert knowledge of research processes, the issues under investigation, and the political implications of these. The relative comparability of positionality between researchers and participants in these circumstances can lead to complex, albeit often unspoken, negotiations of subject positions and power relations in research encounters such as interviews. As Patricia O’Connor observes of her own research experience:

I learned that insiderness and outsiderness were neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive positionalities but rather that they could simultaneously co-exist and alternate within the same interactional event, with factors such as intersubjectivity and context shaping which positionality emerged at any given time (O’Connor, 2004, p. 175).

We recognise a similar dynamic in our own research interviews, and concur with O’Connor’s point that neither outsiderness nor insiderness should be seen as an ‘absolute positionality’ (O’Connor, 2004, p. 174). What we also observed in our studies was that the complex, fluid and politically charged nature of both researcher and participant positionality extends beyond the immediate encounter of the research interview.

Thus while much can be gained from the contribution made by higher education research to the broader debates that shape its conditions of operation, we are mindful of the need for reflexivity in analysing our conversations with those who have been willing to speak into and from research spaces. We acknowledge that ‘the power relations—past, present, and future— that structure the positionality of researchers and research participants alike require an ongoing commitment to the politics of writing as an ethical and potentially transformative encounter’ (Saltmarsh, 2009, p. 139). This has particular implications for research in higher education contexts, where participants and their colleagues are likely to engage professionally with the published findings of research in which they have taken part, and to recognise themselves, their peers, their managers, their (and others’) institutions, and the situations therein described. We therefore take seriously our ethical undertakings regarding safeguarding participant anonymity, which must in turn be balanced against the responsibility for respecting, and representing accurately, participant views about the national and institutional policies, situations and conditions that circumscribe their working lives.

We see the above concerns, often discussed between ourselves and those who have participated in our studies, as shaping the academic interview process, research findings and the representation of these. As Renganathan puts it:

Both the researcher and the research participants are actively engaged in the process of producing knowledge. This active process involves reflection, examination, scrutiny and interrogation of the whole
research process, which includes the researcher, the research participants, the data and the context of the research itself (Renganathan, 2009, p. 4).

To that end, we turn the following sections into a discussion of how we have observed the research process being shaped by researcher and participant positionality. We make use of metaphors about where to ‘put one’s feet’ to explore the ways that some participants (and we as researchers) attend to the business of being overtly mindful about managing research encounters in ways that will leave a positive impression about selves and institutions. We also consider how other interviews open up a space for critique and commiseration between researchers and participants, as shared frustrations are voiced and political tensions discussed. We consider the implications for higher education research, arguing that the positionality of researchers and participants pervades and exceeds these specialised research situations.

BEST FOOT FORWARD AND WATCHING YOUR (AND OUR) STEP

Researching university policy and practice in the context of neoliberal imperatives for increased research productivity and economic efficiency can create challenges for both researchers and research participants. In our most recent study, for example, we interviewed Australian academics to explore how university research policy is implemented through leadership practices. Although interviews often included discussion of how policy may be implemented and understood in ways that differ from ‘official’ institutional discourse about research, both the researchers and research participants as active researchers are nevertheless implicated and situated within the production of this neoliberal research culture. Whilst the interviews provided evidence that this culture was being contested in various ways, there were also cases where interviewees put their ‘best foot forward’ and ‘watched their step’ in order to leave a positive impression of their institution and its research management. In the following interview excerpt, the interviewee, Petra, outlines what she sees are the values needed to sustain a quality research culture.

Petra: …we sort of have a very strong sort of commitment to some values which underpin what we do and it’s around things about excellence and that we really want to strive to be doing the best research and provide the best quality training environment. We also really have a strong commitment to being innovative and actually really to sort of pushing the boundaries and trying to develop new knowledge that does improve patient care and we also–the other thing that we try and really promote is integrity in what we do.

For this interview participant, the commitment and integrity of the researchers within her department ensure that quality and innovative research takes place. Later in the interview, she reiterates this positive assessment of her staff and links it to the environment that they work in.

Petra: I do really think it’s the commitment to–or having an agreement on–those values that are really important to successful research that makes a difference and I think that’s just so important and you know I just think we’re really lucky here in this environment that I’m working in at the moment I think I feel really fortunate that we have got a group of staff who really are all committed to those same sorts of views–that we really do want to do good work but it really does have to be a good quality so I think that’s one thing.

In these excerpts, the interviewee moves between stating that the staff ‘are all committed’ to saying that they ‘promote… integrity’, they ‘do good work’ but that work has ‘to be… good quality’ (our emphases). There is a conflation of the qualities ascribed to the research staff and the work environment as they operate now with the desired qualities the staff must have sometime in the future. Values such as ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ are inscribed and reiterated– not just in Petra’s institution,
but in every other Australian university as well—in numerous policy documents, mission statements, graduate attributes and the like.

In her work on the anti-racism policy documents authored by universities, Sara Ahmed (2004, 2006) argues that such documents utilise a form of non-performative speech: that is, ‘speech acts that authorise and describe an institution as being diverse and committed to equality… work as if they bring about what they name’ (Ahmed, 2006, para. 1). Thus if universities claim to promote tolerance and anti-racism, this claim, as it is enunciated in policy documents and directives, is evidenced as action, ‘as if… [these claims] have brought about the effects that they name’ (Ahmed, 2006, para. 3). Likewise, Petra’s interview evinces a rhetorical slippage between saying that her researchers are committed to quality research and articulating what is required of them, suggesting that institutional directives to produce quality research are simultaneously happening and will happen. To put one’s ‘best foot forward’ metaphorically recalls the physical motion of walking forward and discursively suggests a corresponding action. However, institutional directives to achieve quality research deploy a form of non-performative speech in that research managers are expected to take up this speech whilst the actions for implementing research policy can be ambiguous or non-existent. In this sense, putting one’s ‘best foot forward’ rhetorically, to leave a positive impression of an institution and its research management, comprises one of the ways academics constitute themselves as aligned to, and fulfilling, the performativity requirements of the neoliberal university (Archer, 2008a, 2008b). These requirements are fulfilled non-performatively, that is, through rhetorically putting one’s best foot forward, rather than performatively or actively putting one’s best foot forward by implementing strategies to achieve what is required by institutional research discourses of ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’.

Watching Your (and Our) Step

Putting one’s ‘best foot forward’ also takes place in the context of managing the formal and informal protocols of research interviews. ‘In the interview context, power is multifaceted and sometimes difficult to assess. Interviewees often perceive the interview as both an “opportunity” but also a “threat”’ (Hoffman, 2007, p. 321). In reviewing our interview transcripts, we find numerous examples of both researchers and participants being mindful of treading carefully, particularly at the beginning of the interview, in order to maintain these discursive protocols. Interviews often commence with the interviewer and interviewees putting their best foot forward and minding their step so that the appropriate parameters for discussion can be established. The following interview with another academic, Denise, begins with the interviewer fulfilling a formal research protocol by outlining the background and context for the research project.

**Interviewer:** …so we’re sort of interested in the broader research leadership, but we’re only focusing on professional fields that I named. So that’s sort of the background.

**Denise:** So you named accounting?

**Interviewer:** Business management, which covers accounting and management and marketing.

**Denise:** So I may not be within your field of interest then, because my area is nursing?

**Interviewer:** No, that’s right, I said teaching, nursing and business, nursing was the second one, yeah, so no, no, you are firmly in my sights with nursing. So that’s where we’re at with where we’re coming from. Did you have any questions you wanted to ask about that?

**Denise:** No.
The interviewer is careful to ensure research protocol by allowing the interviewee to ask questions once the research project has been explained. The interviewee reciprocates by maintaining this protocol, simultaneously clarifying her suitability as an interviewee and confirming the appropriateness of our research conduct with regard to selecting participants who fit within the stated parameters of the research. Other interviewees seek similar assurances that we are ‘minding our step’ by seeking assurances that we will follow ethical guidelines and anonymise the names of interviewees.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any questions at that point Derek?

**Derek:** No that’s fine.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So my first question would be…

**Derek:** And of course I’m assuming that everything I say will be anonymised?

**Interviewer:** Absolutely, yes.

Despite these conditions of anonymity, the interviewees in the following excerpts are mindful of ‘watching their step’ by speaking in ways that will not identify their institutions or departments.

**Laura:** …and hopefully you can change the names of these faculties or call them faculty x or whatever.

**Interviewer:** Of course.

**Laura:** Because otherwise people are going to know who we are.

**Interviewer:** No, the usual ethics protocol will apply of course.

**Laura:** And fine, people can read between the lines, but at least we don’t name them makes it a bit easier.

As an experienced researcher, Laura demonstrates her awareness that the identification of participants and others, as well as of specific departments and institutions, can take place in many ways. Later in the interview she is critical of some colleagues and institutional practices, and thus we read her seeking of assurances as collaboratively working to build a climate of trust in the research interview. Pete, on the other hand, reminds himself of the inherent risks associated with research participation, and this functions as a reminder to the interviewer of the responsibility of the research team to minimise such risk:

**Interviewer:** …we’ve been looking at the policy discourses of raising quality in research leadership at a national level and how that sort of permeates down through institutions and how that’s interpreted and read by different–

**Pete:** I just have to remember that you’ve actually got this recorded…

**Interviewer:** Oh look, some of the comments we’ve had have been absolutely fantastic, so please don’t hold back it’s all under ethics so it’s all anonymised and all that sort of thing.

In these excerpts with Laura and Pete, the interviewer puts their ‘best foot forward’ by assuring the interviewees that ethical protocols will be followed. Both interviewer and participants are thus involved in a ‘situated negotiation of ethics within a specific research context’ (Levinson, 2010, p. 193). Once both parties are satisfied that each has fulfilled formal research protocols, by alternately watching one’s step and putting one’s best foot forward in relation to ethics guidelines and research criteria, discussion can commence.
As well as ‘minding our step’ in terms of observing ethical protocols for the interviews, we also sought to put our ‘best foot forward’ by beginning almost all of the interviews with a brief overview of the project, our backgrounds and research interests, as well as the aims and outcomes of the specific project. This overview served a legitimating function in that it allowed the interviewers to be presented as academic researchers with an established collaboration history. For example, one interview began with an explanation of the research partnership:

**Interviewer:** This is a project that I’m doing with [Author 1], who is [Author 1’s position and institutional affiliation], and has been a long standing grant partner of mine.

Putting our ‘best foot forward’ when outlining the institutional funding and support for the project, as well as the professional credentials of the interviewers, also elicited complimentary affirmations about the worth of the research at the beginning of some of the interviews.

**Interviewer:** That’s sort of where we’re coming from.

**Amy:** Interesting project yes.

**Interviewer:** We think so.

**Amy:** A great project actually.

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**Interviewer:** …did you have any questions Belle at that stage?

**Belle:** No, I think it’s a really good project.

**Interviewer:** Oh thank you.

The interviewees confirm the legitimacy of the project and the interviewer’s research credentials, putting their best foot forward by praising the project, and in so doing positioning and constructing the researcher as an ‘academic insider’ (Gunasekara, 2007, p. 468) with whom they share an appreciation of the research project. There may be both formal and informal implications of such praise. A positive reception of the project’s aims and outcomes can influence the way the interview is conducted, potentially shaping the ways that semi-structured or follow-up questions are conceptualised, framed or phrased by the researcher; or constituting an informal reminder that the interviewees’ comments should be used in ‘good faith’ given their support of the project. Further, the observation of informal research protocols indicating that the participant is positively inclined toward the project can also have implications beyond the immediate project, co-constructing rapport that may positively contribute to a future collegial relationship or further networking. In the following section, we discuss how one particularly positive interview led to further research contact after the interview was completed.

Managing the research encounter between the interviewer and interviewee involves a complex negotiation of both formal and informal research protocols. These protocols are negotiated by the interviewer and interviewee through minding one’s step and ensuring that research criteria and ethical guidelines are followed. As Mauthner and Doucet put it, ‘research methods and practices are performative in that they help to generate the realities that we study’ (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008, p. 973). In the examples cited above, researchers are careful to put their best foot forward by presenting the research in its best possible light and referencing credentials and funding support. Participants generally reciprocate, at times affirming the worth of the research. In this way, both researcher and participant invest a form of emotional labour that minimises potential emotional risks and costs that
can be associated with qualitative research (Sampson, Bloor, and Fincham, 2008). In contrast to the non-performative speech acts deployed by institutions to describe ‘quality research’ and which influences interviewees in putting their best foot forward to leave a positive impression of their research staff and environment, negotiating research protocols and ‘minding one’s step’ can function to move an interview forward and even open up space for more personal or qualitative statements about research culture. The following section discusses how this type of encounter can take place once the business of putting one’s best foot forward and minding one’s step has been accomplished.

Jumping in with Both Feet and (Maybe Even) Sticking Your Foot in it

A researcher’s participation in a context ‘can set the stage for a deeper connection with interview participants than simply initiating an interview without a “common ground” foundation’ (DeTurk & Foster, 2008, p. 24). To this end, many researchers try to establish some connection with their research participants and build rapport in situations such as research interviews so that interviewees may respond more fully, perhaps even more openly to questions asked. We see this as desirable whether interviews are conducted in face-to-face or electronic modes, such as Skype and telephone. One way to establish such connections involves interviewers and interviewees sharing accounts of similar experiences, values or ideals during an interview, and in so doing, working towards shared understandings of key points of concern. However, as Gavin Melles warns, such processes may be ‘a form of cultural reproduction rather than cultural critique’ (Melles, 2005, p. 22). It is essential to be aware, in analysing the interview data, that:

Analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding or collating data. It is not simply a question of identifying forms of speech or regularities of action. Most fundamentally, analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena. We do not simply ‘collect’ data; we fashion them out of our transactions with other men and women. Likewise we do not merely report what we find; we create accounts of social life, and in doing so we construct versions of social worlds and the social actors that we observe (Mutch, 2006, p. 61).

As Mutch calls to our attention, understanding research as an encounter with others necessitates reflecting on the ways in which researchers as well as participants are active in the co-construction of the social world. Here we present excerpts from our research interviews in which complex positionalities are played out while, simultaneously, connections are being formed or strengthened, and meanings co-constructed. We observe ourselves ‘jumping in with both feet’ and at times maybe even ‘sticking our feet in it’ in order to establish and navigate our positionalities within the research interview context.

Having established a climate of rapport in which researchers and participants alike had ‘put their best foot forward’ in the interview context, a number of participants thereafter engaged in frank discussion of general concerns or experiences of dissatisfaction relating to a specific question. We use the metaphor of ‘jumping in with both feet’ to describe how both researchers and participants openly shared similar experiences or concerns, blurring the positionalities of ‘interviewer’ and ‘interviewee’. At times, both engaged in dialogues more reminiscent of collegial conversation than exchanges between strangers meeting for the first time at interview, intertwining positions of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ (O’Connor, 2004, p.175). The following excerpt illustrates a sharing of concerns expressed, initially, by the interviewee, Laura, about trying to balance the competing areas of teaching, administration and research in the busy life of an academic. While both the interviewer and Laura are Early Career Researchers (ECRs), their career trajectories have taken somewhat different paths, with Laura’s current position being one that involves little teaching, and the interviewer’s involving a teaching-intensive workload.
Laura: …you would have heard this from your participants I’m sure but, in terms of the nexus between teaching and research, a lot of that is because getting the exam results in on time, or the mark results in on time is not really rewarded or appreciated in the way that, say, getting your grant in on time is.

Interviewer: Yeah, it’s certainly the getting the marks in on time is just an absolute expectation and one that, it’s not so much even a question of being rewarded, it’s more a question of being punished if you don’t, whereas if you don’t get a grant application in on time, the only person that you punish is yourself, but there’s no actual, there’s no spill out, there’s no flow on effect from that, it’s an individual sacrifice, whereas, if you don’t get your marks in on time, clearly students, your colleagues, the second semester units that follow from the first semester units, all of those things suffer, and so then there’s a punitive regime that comes into play.

Laura: It is interesting, I mean, for me particularly because I’m on the other side of the fence, I do worry about, because it’s very interesting, a lot of our research is involving post-docs and full time researchers as well, and it’s kind of, I guess it depends on which, who’s wearing what shoes, and on what side of the fence you sit…

This part of the discussion takes place about half way through the interview. As discussed in the previous section, the early part of the interview sees Laura ‘watching her step’ as she is careful to confirm protocols and re-check that she is really an appropriate person to be interviewed or that she has something to contribute to the research project. However, as the interview progresses, she talks openly about some of the tensions she observes, pointing out that one’s perspective regarding the internal politics associated with teaching and research are shaped by positionality—‘who’s wearing what shoes’. The interviewer shares her own observations to make connections and to focus the discussion on specific instances where deeper reflection on key points of concern might be elicited. But the interviewer also speaks from a position in which, at the time the interview took place, she was struggling with issues of teaching workload within her own place of employment. Thus, while Laura raises the issue of teaching and its associated administrative responsibilities generally being under-rewarded in comparison to research activities, this prompts the interviewer to elaborate in ways that reflect some of her own frustrations. As Douglas Ezzy has recently pointed out in an essay that considers the embodied emotional performance of the qualitative interview:

It is not only the interviewee’s cognitively articulated sense of self, and the story they tell, that is co-created, but it is also the emotional framing of the story that is co-created, shaped by the emotional stances of the interviewer and the interviewee (Ezzy, 2010, p. 168).

Laura responds with empathy to the interviewer’s elaboration by discussing at greater length her concerns about the problems encountered by many early career academics, whom she sees as ‘burning the candle at both ends’ in order to get recognition and promotion. In what Ezzy describes as ‘a moment of recognition of simultaneous sameness and difference’ (2010, p. 164), she also raises concerns about the ways that early career academics like herself—who are seen as ‘fast track researchers’—are perceived by those with heavier teaching responsibilities as being unfairly privileged, and therefore unwilling to ‘take the grunt load’. In this exchange, we can see how:

… interviewing constitutes a specific setting for the dialogical production of personal narratives and social life. Within such a perspective, interviewing should not be seen as a channel for tapping the subject’s own viewpoint. The central analytical unit is not a bounded and static self but rather the diverse discursive repertories spoken by persons within particular social settings; that is, interviewing provides a context for revealing how language ‘makes’ people, produces and changes social life (Tanggaard, 2009, p. 1499).

In the interview with Laura, the experience of being ECRs with very different workplace requirements between interviewer and participant, positions each as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ within narratives of academic life. The social life of their workplaces is constructed, in different ways, as operating in tension with their constructed identities as researchers and educators. In the following excerpt, the interviewee, Erica, whose role in her workplace is more similar to that of the interviewer’s own, offers
a different sense of shared emotional investment in questions of teaching. The excerpt below is taken from towards the end of the interview.

**Erica:** I’m absolutely clear that students should be reading tough things, but my job is to support them in doing that, but that’s why we’re all here, really.

**Interviewer:** Yeah it’s very interesting you say that, because a colleague and I have just had a major stoush with the head of our particular department where we’ve been accused that our units are too academic, that we need to, that the readings are a bit too hard for undergraduate students, so that we really, I guess need to reconsider the sorts of things that we’re asking them to do.

**Erica:** That is outrageous. I mean, here with a colleague, I applied for a research grant and I was told by the institution that I shouldn’t use overly academic language.

**Interviewer:** Yes?

**Erica:** And we thought, fuck that for a game of soldiers, and wrote it in academic language and got it, you know, I mean what is an institution about, if it–well anyway, I can feel myself moving into a rant.

**Interviewer:** No it’s a very interesting observation, because there are a number of, I think little pods of people around the place, bashing their head against the wall saying, but isn’t a university about ideas and academic thought and, yes it should be hard, and it should be challenging, isn’t that what it’s all about?

**Erica:** Exactly.

In this exchange, the interviewer moves from a position of ‘outsiderness’ to ‘insiderness’ by sharing the interviewee’s sense of disappointment with the political nature of the broader intellectual climate in which both the interviewee and interviewer work (albeit in different universities in different states of Australia). Similar concerns amongst academics have been documented elsewhere in the higher education research literature (Jones, 2007; Potgieter & Smit, 2009; Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh, 2008). Concerns that teaching is often considered to have become increasingly instrumentalist at the expense of scholarly rigour, and that critical thinking and ideological critique are increasingly constrained, are the source of much commentary amongst those who work within the academy, hence they provide familiar discussion topics and points of commonality for both parties. The excerpt also illustrates how the interviewer ‘jumps in with both feet’, and in so doing co-constructs and reproduces perceived consensus on key matters of importance in the study, specifically, the politics of what counts as knowledge and work of intellectual gravity in contexts of research leadership. As Ezzy observes,

> Each emotional and evaluative framing of the research will produce different forms of knowledge. The challenge, I suggest, is to explicitly acknowledge that embodied emotional orientations always and inevitably influence the research process and to engage these in dialogue (Ezzy, 2010, p. 169).

It could of course be argued that by exposing her emotional investments and vulnerabilities within the research context the interviewer did not maintain vigilance in the research interview process. For example, sharing the story of her ‘stoush’ with her head of department potentially produces ‘interviewer effects’, which is to say, ‘the effects of the interviewer upon the interviewee, often characterized as “bias” in positivist methodologies’ (Aldred, 2008, p. 892). However, we share with other qualitative researchers arguing from within critical and poststructuralist traditions the view that the interview is ‘an interactive process in which information and interpretation flow between both parties’ (Rhodes, 2000, p. 521). In the interview excerpt above, we see how both researcher and participant take risks within the interview discussion, and each potentially ‘sticks their foot in it’ by revealing to the other unpleasant experiences with bosses and colleagues whose views differ from their own. There is swearing and expression of outrage between researcher and participant who, whilst unknown to one another prior to the interview, are prepared to risk making a potentially negative impression in what would be considered by many as a formal situation. Here, however, they open up a space for critique and commiseration, as shared frustrations are voiced and political
tensions discussed, and in so doing engage in the co-construction of meaning. ‘The dialogue that emerges is one that sees the researcher as having an unavoidable position in the stories produced from the research interaction’ (Rhodes, 2000, p. 521). The interview with Erica closes with the following exchange:

Erica: That was fun. That was really fun, and I really enjoyed that. I’m all catharticised, and, yeah good.

Interviewer: Yeah and I really enjoyed talking to you, and I hope I have the opportunity to chat to you again, at some stage.

Exchanges such as these illustrate how ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ have been blurred in an interview where a degree of connection and rapport was established between researcher and participant, both of whom, in this instance, occupy similar positions within their respective universities. Despite irritations due to crackling phone lines, and the lack of visual and other sensory cues that might have constrained communication between the two, their sense of collegiality was continued beyond the interview, when, for example, the interviewer contacted Erica some months later with a request to review a third party’s manuscript for publication. Collegiality and reciprocity, rather than an artificially constructed boundary between researcher and participant as ‘other’, operate both within and beyond the space of the interview.

In this way, ‘unpredictable attentiveness and unexpected relationship’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 608) contest conventional boundaries of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’. Venturing away from the precautionary ‘minding of one’s step’ toward subject positions that risk ‘jumping in with both feet’, both researcher and participant reconfigure what it means to be an interviewer and/or an interviewee. In so doing, the research relationship potentially opens up an ongoing space of mutual reciprocity and reflexivity that exceeds the research encounter, thereby enabling ‘open and humble data interpretations, as well as study conclusions that avoid definite closure’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 608).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have drawn on recent interviews with Australian academics to consider how researcher and participant positionality are shaped by contextual and relational factors that precede and pervade scenes of research encounter. Utilising metaphors about where one ‘puts one’s feet’ in the process of conducting research, we consider how subject positions of researchers and participants in our studies of higher education policy and practice are shaped by and within a complex discursive terrain that blurs conventional distinctions between ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’. We see this blurring of distinctions and the taking up of multiple subject positions as indicative of Renganathan’s description of research, in which:

Both the researcher and the research participants are actively engaged in the process of producing knowledge. This active process involves reflection, examination, scrutiny and interrogation of the whole research process, which includes the researcher, the research participants, the data and the context of the research itself. Therefore, research is seen as a reflexive process, and the term reflexivity refers to this active process that is involved in every stage of a research project (Renganathan, 2009, p. 4).

We see this process at work in multiple ways in our research with academics, in which various forms of scrutiny and interrogation take place as both we and those whom we interview ‘put our best foot forward’ and, at times, ‘mind our step’. We are mindful too that research interviews at times resemble everyday collegial encounters, in which researcher and participant ‘jump in with both feet’, taking risks in unguarded moments that open up other spaces of engagement and reciprocity. In each case, we understand our research encounters to be active spaces in which knowledge and social life are
being co-produced. In reflecting on this process, our aim is to better understand how the politics of researching academic viewpoints is shaped by our own and participants’ positionality, and to explore the necessary conditions for ethical and reflexive research practice that extends beyond the immediacy of the research encounter.

NOTES

1 Interview excerpts discussed in this study are drawn from a study conducted in 2009-2010, in which we interviewed 32 academics from 16 universities in the Australian States of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. The study, Examining Mentoring and Research Leadership in Tertiary Professional Practice Fields, was funded by the Gippsland Small Grant Research Support Scheme, Monash University. The research team acknowledges with thanks the generous contribution of those who agreed to participate in interviews.
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sue Saltmarsh is Associate Professor of Educational Studies at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, Australia. Her research in higher education concerns the intersection of policy contexts, institutional cultures, and subjectivities. She is Reviews Editor for the Australian Educational Researcher, and founding co-editor of Global Studies of Childhood.

Email: sue.saltmarsh@acu.edu.au

Dr Wendy Sutherland-Smith is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Teaching and Learning at Deakin University. She has been actively involved in higher education research for over a decade with a particular focus in the areas of academic integrity, ethics, neoliberal discourses in education and technologies in learning and teaching. Recent publications span issues such as plagiarism in academic writing, ethical issues in research mentoring and leadership, technologies shaping online and neoliberalism in the face of future education policies.

Email: Wendy.sutherlandsmith@deakin.edu.au

Holly Randell-Moon teaches cultural studies at Macquarie University, Australia. She has published on race, religion, and secularism in the journals Critical Race and Whiteness Studies, borderlands, Transforming Cultures, and Australian Religion Studies Review, and in the edited collections Religion, Spirituality and the Social Sciences (2008) and Mediating Faiths (2010).

Email: Holly.randell-moon@mqw.edu.au

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