7 Voice Centred Relational Method

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What is the Voice Centred Relational Method?

The Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM) is an analytic approach that attunes the researcher to the different voices present within the positions and practices of participants (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). 'Voice' refers to the stories and perspectives within a person's communication (Bright & Bevin, 2019). This approach holds that people have multiple ways of thinking about and understanding situations. These voices can co-exist, and may be contradictory (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). What, and how people speak[1] of their experiences, themselves, and others provides insight into their perspectives and into the sociocultural influences which surround them (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1993), reflecting that one's self is intimately entwined with a person's relationships with others and the society and cultures that they live in (Gilligan et al., 2003).

The key analytic tool is the Listening Guide. This is a systematic, flexible, principle-based approach to analysis that helps the researcher: (a) attend to the different voices within data; (b) understand how, when and why the voices arise; and (c) explore the relationships between these voices, and between the voices and the context (Gilligan et al., 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). The Listening Guide involves a series of four sequential Listenings of the data. These sequential Listenings help the researcher attune to different voices within the data which they might otherwise miss (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). These are then constructed into written narratives which function as case studies, facilitating exploration within and *across* participants and context (Gilligan et al., 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Explicating the voices through the Listening

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1 The word 'speak' refers to people's communication through whatever modalities they use or are the focus of inquiry. This can include verbal, nonverbal and written communication.

Guide helps the researcher develop deeper, more nuanced understandings of a phenomenon; reveals tensions and complexities which may be taken-for-granted or not-yet-realized; and identifies how different stories and perspectives come about and how they relate to each other.

Why would you use the Voice Centred Relational Method?

A VCRM analysis recognizes that people and their knowledges and perspectives are inherently relational, and research is relational in nature. If you wish to understand the different perspectives that people have and how these are influenced by their relationships with others and the world that surrounds them, then the VCRM can help you attune to the perspectives they hold (i.e., the 'voices') and understand these relationships. A VCRM analysis helps you to hear different aspects of experience that might otherwise be missed, or to identify voices that are silenced or suppressed, and to explicate how and why these voices and experiences come about (Gilligan et al., 2003). For these reasons, it is particularly useful when researching with people who are commonly silent or silenced, or when seeking multidimensional understandings of people and their lived realities.

A VCRM analysis requires and facilitates researcher reflexivity. Through the Listening Guide, the researcher is supported to attend to their reactions and consider how this influences analysis. The Listening Guide helps you be transparent about your own role in the research process and it positions you as an active 'party' in constructing an analysis and, indeed, in the research process overall. This reflects the view that research involves a relational encounter between the researcher and the participant through the data (Kiegelmann, 2009).

The VCRM originated as an analytic approach in narrative feminist research, but it can be used in a range of different methodologies (Hamer, 1999). When using The Voice Centred Relational Approach as a *methodology* (see Bright & Bevin, 2019), it is a natural analytic tool. It is most commonly used in narrative research (e.g., Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1991), and has been used in different forms of ethnography such as autoethnography (Pourreau, 2014) and institutional ethnography (Walby, 2013). This approach is best suited to research situated within a relational ontology or understanding of being, which holds that people exist within relationship, that selfhood is developed through relationships, and knowledge is created through relationships (Bright, Kayes, Worrall, & McPherson, 2018).

How would you use the Voice Centred Relational Method?

The Listening Guide

At the heart of a Voice Centred analysis is the Listening Guide. This is an analytic tool that helps the researcher attune to the different voices in a narrative, and to unpack how these voices sit within and are shaped by social and structural contexts. The Listening Guide takes the researcher into a series of Listenings with the data, listening for different voices. It is flexible and can be tailored to the research question and the theoretical positioning of the study (Bright & Bevin, 2019). The first two Listenings consistently focus on two areas: (1) listening for the story and the researchers' own response; and (2) listening for the self (the voices of the participant). The subsequent Listenings focus on different areas depending on the research question and underlying theory (Gilligan et al., 2003) as I illustrate below.

Listening One: Listening for the story and the researcher's own response

The first Listening is designed to bring the researcher back into relationship with the data. In listening for the broad story, the researcher asks, 'what is going on here?' as they read. This is not dissimilar to the process of familiarization that you would see in a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This Listening stays close to what people say and the words that they use and the stories that immediately rise to the surface (Gilligan, 2015).

Whilst reading for the story, the researcher should at the same time attend to their own response, which Mauthner and Doucet (1998) describe as reading for yourself within the story. This helps make the researcher's role in knowledge construction explicit and helps promote reflexivity. You might note what aspects resonate with your own personal experiences, and which confuse or surprise you. I remember once writing "I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS HAPPENING" at one point in a Listening process. This brought my response to the surface and prompted me to unpack why I was having this reaction and how this might influence my own ability to listen more deeply to understand *why* this happened. You might note questions that this first Listening raises for you. These observations can all be helpful in shaping your analysis, perhaps

identifying data which require closer examination, and data where you might be at risk of making assumptions.

Listening Two: Listening for the self

The second Listening prompts the researcher to attend to how participants speak of themselves, their actions, meaning-making, thoughts and feelings. This Listening is intended to attune the researcher to the other person, becoming intimately acquainted with how the person speaks of themself and the voices which might be present in their narrative. When listening, you highlight the sentences where people are talking about themselves, guided by the presence of the personal pronouns the person uses when speaking about themself; for instance, 'I', 'we', 'you' (when referring to themselves). If pronouns are not present because of aphasia for instance, these can be added in brackets (e.g., "[I was] a bit apprehensive"), if this is known to the researcher. After highlighting these sentences, researchers using this method commonly create i-poems to help them tune into how the person speaks of themself. These are an analytic device that helps the researcher identify the different voices that are embedded within the person's narrative. Gilligan and Eddy (2017) suggest this helps the researcher recognize patterns and unconscious processes which might not be apparent to the person speaking. To construct an i-poem, identify the phrases that contain personal pronouns and organize them into stanzas in the order in which they appear in the transcript. An example is provided in the Case Study. Looking at the different ways the person speaks of themself across their narrative can help illuminate the different voices they speak with, and the contexts in which they speak with those voices.

Listenings Three and Four: Listening for specific material

In Listenings Three and Four, the researcher can choose to listen for specific people or concepts, theories and/or contexts within the data. This can be done in two primary ways. In one approach, the researcher may listen for other 'factors' such as listening for the 'other' in Listening Three (specifically, how the participant spoke of 'others' and their relationship, often evident in phrases using pronouns such as 'they' or 'we'), and for 'context' (i.e., visible

and invisible factors beyond the individual) in Listening Four (Bright, Kayes, McPherson, & Worrall, 2018; Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

The alternative approach is to use these Listenings to more closely attune to the different voices identified in Listening Two, listening for 'contrapuntal voices' to understand how the different voices within a person's narrative relate together (Gilligan et al., 2003). When listening for contrapuntal voices, researchers identify the different voices they are interested in (usually just two). They may be guided by sensitizing concepts from the specific theories such as listening for voices of 'care' and 'justice' (Mikel Brown, Debold, Tappen, & Gilligan, 1991), or voices of 'resilience' and 'distress' (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). They identify when these are present, separately and together, and consider how they relate to each other, perhaps how they contrast or support each other. They might underline the data that specifically refer to these voices, each in a different colour, to see the relationship between them. This reflects the interest in unpacking the 'multiplicity of voices' within a person's narratives (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008).

These different approaches to listening demonstrate how the Listening Guide is a flexible tool that can be tailored to the individual study, its theoretical framework and methodology (Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018). What is key is to be explicit about what you are listening for and ensure that this is congruent with the research question and broader research process.

Constructing an analysis

After completing the Listening Guide, you can find yourself with lots of 'bits' of analysis and may struggle to know how to bring these together into a cohesive analysis. You may draw on several techniques to help you understand and analyze the data. Start your analysis by focusing on an individual participant. One helpful strategy at the end of completing the Listening Guide is to organize the material from the different readings into a written narrative (Gilligan et al., 2003). It may be most helpful to start by constructing a narrative from Listening One, and then bring in material from the other three Listenings. Integrating data into this narrative helps you to stay connected with the data and helps substantiate your interpretations (Mikel Brown et al., 1991). This narrative may be restructured as you progress with your analysis. It serves as a tool to help organize and reorganize material thematically as the analysis progresses (Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018; Gilligan et al., 2003).

When constructing the analysis, you should always remember this is a *voice* centred approach that seeks to foreground and understand the different voices of the participants. When returning to the data and the narrative, and in particular the i-poems, you should ask "what voices is this person speaking with and in which circumstances?" Focusing on the i-poems and the short stanzas that contain personal pronouns can really help the voices stand out. You can then tease out the characteristics of these voices, considering when and how they come about, and identifying what happens when someone speaks with that voice (Gilligan et al., 2003). You may summarize each voice in a short paragraph to capture your emergent analysis. Together, these strategies of writing the narrative and exploring the voice allows for in-depth exploration of the voices of the individual participant.

In many studies, you will have multiple participants and want to explore different voices across different people and different contexts. This process can centre on the voices you identified while analyzing individual participants. You can look for similar voices across participants and look for what voices are different and why they might be different. Grouping these voices involves a process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014), moving across analysis and raw data to explore the characteristics of different voices and ensure these voices are grouped appropriately. Within this process, you will work to further develop understandings of these voices – their characteristics, when and how they arise and in what contexts, how they are associated with other elements (e.g., understandings of a particular phenomenon).

How the analysis is presented in its final written form can vary. Decisions about how best to present findings will be informed by both the analysis and the original question that you sought to answer. It might be appropriate to present the different voices. However, you might take a different approach. Examples from the literature include:

- Presenting a sequential analysis of each Listening in an unfolding presentation of the participant's voice (Fairtlough, 2007)

- Focusing on the relational aspects of people's voices and experiences (Mauthner, 1998)

- Presenting the different practices evident in people's work (Bright, Kayes, McPherson, et al., 2018).

What are the challenges in using the Voice Centred Relational Method?

The VCRM has not been widely used so it requires the researcher to work out how to operationalize it in their particular study. Of course, all approaches require the researcher to grapple with its practical application, but this is one method which does not have many guides or examples to draw on. This may make it challenging for people who are new to qualitative research.

Analysis takes significant time, especially the sequential Listenings. While it is common for qualitative analysis to take a reasonable amount of time, there are several strategies you might use to manage the analysis process, including:

- Purposefully select *some* data for a full analysis (Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998)

- Conduct research with small participant numbers to allow for deep analysis (Mikel Brown et al., 1991)

- Do a full Listening One (listening for the story and your reaction) for all data; then, based on this strong understanding of the broader story, do Listenings Two, Three and Four on selected data that you anticipate is likely to provide rich understandings of the voices of the participants (Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018).

The Listenings might be completed sequentially (i.e., read through the material listening for the self, then read through for the other) or simultaneously (i.e., read one paragraph listening for first the self, then the other, then the context). Constructing narratives after completing an analysis of an individual participant's data can help inform ongoing analytic decisions.

Moving from the Listening Guide to analytic representation is another challenge. There is no 'right' way to present a VCRM analysis. However, it is important to ensure that voices and relationships are clearly represented, given these are central to this analysis method. It is also important that this representation allows you to clearly answer your research question. Reading published papers (see for example Bright, Cummins, Waterworth, Gibson, & Larmer, 2018; Mikel Brown, 1997; Proctor, 2001) and theses (see for example Bonia, 2007; Bright, 2016) which have used this approach can help your decision making about representation.

How would you ensure rigour using Voice Centred Relational Method?

Reflexivity is a core component of rigour (Tracy, 2010), and reflexivity is at the heart of this approach. The VCRM requires and assists the researcher to make their own reaction to the data visible, acknowledging that research involves a relational process. Gilligan et al. (2003) encourage the researcher to continue to attend to, and make visible, these reactions throughout the research process, through recording these in Listening One, and through processes of reflexivity including memoing and noting these reactions within the written narratives. Data analysis has been described as "as a point where the voices and perspectives of the research respondents are especially vulnerable" (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.23). The first Listening, which prompts the researcher to listen for the story and for their own reaction to this, is critical in this process, and for facilitating a relational and respectful analysis process.

Gilligan and Eddy (2017) recommend keeping the question in the foreground to help the researcher focus on the relevant voices, to stop them "getting lost in a cacophony of orchestral sounds" (p.79) as it is recognized that *many* voices may be present in a person's narrative but they are not necessarily all related to the research question. Maintaining a particular line of enquiry and engaging with particular data, or particular voices, more than others is quite appropriate and helps the researcher maintain focus. Which data and voices are attended to depends on the specific research aims (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002; Gilligan et al., 2003).

Listening to people's stories and hearing their voices before moving to classifying or labelling is vital (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). Prolonged engagement with the data through the sequential Listenings is key to this process. These repeated Listenings help the researcher hear voices that they might otherwise miss in a briefer engagement (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008).

Researchers are encouraged to stay close to the data and the words of the participants. The sequential Listenings help with this. Staying close to the data is also aided by physical techniques such as underlining phrases to help the researcher stay focused on their words. Within the process of constructing the analysis, the process of writing analytic narratives and revising these as the Listenings progress within and across participants helps the researcher stay attuned to the participants, developing rich understandings and representations of their narratives (Gilligan et al., 2003). People's words and phrases should be brought into the interpretations and constructed narratives (Mikel Brown et

al., 1991). Staying close to the data is important in the final stages of analysis, ensuring that the claims made in the final research product are well-supported by evidence.

Analysis should be iterative. As voices are named and defined, these must be checked and fine-tuned. This helps ensure that these voices are distinctive and that the definitions and characteristics are clearly presented (Gilligan et al., 2003). This is akin to the process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014; see also Chapter 4) comparing and contrasting voices *within* individual datasets before then comparing and contrasting voices *across* participants. This helps to identify similarities and differences within and between participants and to develop more comprehensive, nuanced understandings of participants' voices.

The final product should produce an interpretive account of the voices and the relationships between them (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). This should not only detail *what* voices are evident (the content) but should consider *how* these are conveyed (the form) and the interaction between these voices.

Case study

This case study discusses one study within my PhD which explored how rehabilitation practitioners worked to engage people with communication impairments after stroke (Bright, Kayes, McPherson, et al., 2018). I used the VCRM for several reasons:

- A preliminary literature review had highlighted that relationships were important in engagement and I believed the relational focus of this method would help me look closely at relationships

- The Listening Guide provided a structured approach to consider not just relationships, but how these were influenced by the surrounding context

- The focus on listening for often unheard or suppressed voices was consistent with my desire to foreground the experiences of people with communication impairments whose voices were often missed in research.

The data for the case studies in this chapter were a series of focus groups and interviews with 14 practitioners. Four participated in individual interviews and 10 people participated in two focus groups. Data were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The study was underpinned by a multi-layered methodological framework:

- A relational ontology (theory of being) which holds that humans exist within interdependent relationships which influence how we see ourselves (Gilligan et al., 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998)

- A social constructionist epistemology which holds that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and communication (Berger & Luckmann, 1967)

- The Voice Centred Relational Approach as the methodology, the 'roadmap' for how the broader research should proceed (Bright & Bevin, 2019; Bright, Kayes, Worrall, et al., 2018; Crotty, 1998)

- Symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework which focused on how people create meaning through action and interaction (Charon, 2010).

This methodological framework influenced how I conducted my research and my analysis.

The Listening Guide

My Listening Guide was tailored to my broader methodological framework. This influenced both the broad focus of the four Listenings, and the questions I asked of the data as I listened. The Listenings centred on:

1. Listening for the story: What is going on here and what is my reaction?

2. Listening for self: How does the person speak of themselves?

3. Listening for other and relationship: How does the person speak of others and what is the relationship between them?

4. Listening for context: How does the person speak of the context?

When I say 'how does the person speak of ...' I did not just focus on what they *said* but what was unsaid and what was implicit or silently 'hanging around' their narrative, reflecting the interpretation that occurs within analysis. I constructed the Listening Guide on a Word document and analyzed the data paragraph by paragraph as shown below in Figure 7.1.

This was painstaking at times, but the process meant I had an in-depth knowledge of the data and by the time I completed the fourth Listening, I was tuning into things I would not have picked up on during the first Listening.

Listening (black = Listening One, red = Listening Two, green = Listening Three, blue = Listening Four).

Weaving together the analysis from the different Listenings gave the analysis its depth. After constructing these narratives, each of which could be five to eight pages long, I then asked analytic questions of the narrative. This often required me to return to the raw data. These questions were informed by several things: a conceptual review on engagement that I had published, the methodological framework for the study, and the emergent analysis. These questions included:

How did the person define or speak of engagement?

Did they describe a process of engagement? If so, what did this process involve?

Did they speak about disengagement? If so, how?

How did practitioners speak of the patient's role?

How did practitioners speak of learning about engagement?

How did practitioners talk of engaging people with communication difficulties?

What roles did they describe for themselves and for patients?

What was spoken of and not spoken of? What appeared to be taken for granted?

What tensions were evident in their data?

It was at this point, when I had really grappled with the data and looked at it from different angles, that I moved to more formally labelling the voices. I first labelled the voices within each individual participant and summarized them in a paragraph, making sure descriptions of the voice were connected to the research question (how do rehabilitation practitioners engage people with communication impairments in stroke rehabilitation?). This is one example of a summary:

> **In control, doing the work**
>
> The 'in control' therapist was one who valued their knowledge, the expertise that they brought to the encounter and the feeling of knowing what they were

doing, comfortable with the rehabilitation process. This could appear as the 'technical' voice, focused on 'doing the work' of rehabilitation. Engagement was viewed as the patient doing and participating, following the rehabilitation process, showing engagement as the clinician expected them to show it. When patients failed to do so, this could result in the therapist using their knowledge and skills to 'move' and 'shift' them to where they needed to be. If this did not happen, it could result in the patient being discharged and sometimes 'dismissed' from the therapist's mind. The clinician was somewhat engaged because they had the knowledge and process in mind. There was frequent use of 'I'. Much of the talk was about what the clinician thought, prioritized and did.

To develop different voices *across* participants, I collated the emergent voices from each individual participant and the associated raw data. I grouped all the data from each participant that seemed to talk of the same voice. I noted the voices I had proposed, the notes from the Listening Guide analysis and the raw data. I gathered together my diagrams I had made while analyzing and memos that I had written which explained each voice for each participant. I printed all these out and put them on a whiteboard, allowing me to move them around as I refined my analysis. In the example illustrated in Figure 7.3, I looked across the named voices (listed as 'Expert', 'In control', 'Teacher', 'In control' and 'Power') and after looking at similarities and differences between them, I came to propose that these voices could all be represented by the voice 'In control'. This process is illustrated in Figure 7.3.

To further refine understandings of each voice, I asked further questions of the data related to each voice, examining both the voice and how this seemed to influence how they worked to engage people in stroke rehabilitation. Questions included:

- What is the voice?
- What do people value when they speak with this voice?
- How do they speak of themselves?
- How do they speak of the patient?
- How do they view engagement?
- How do they work to facilitate engagement?
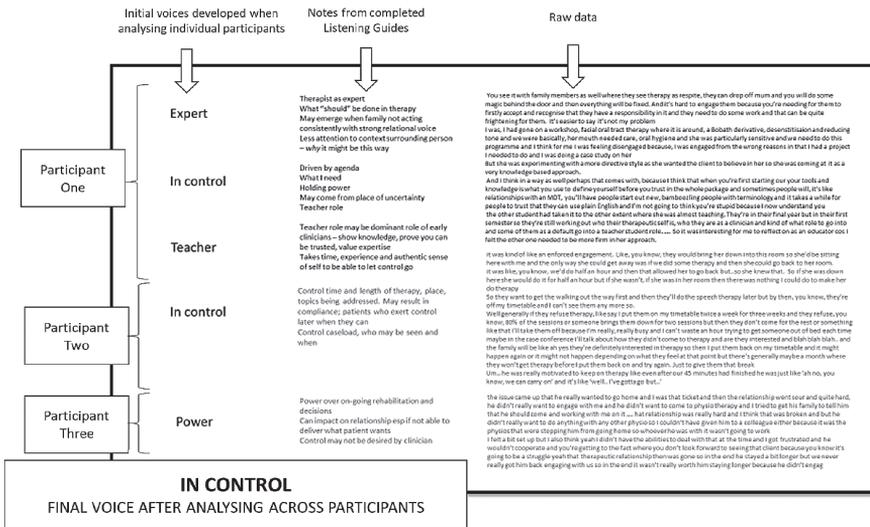
Figure 7.3 Comparison of different, but similar, voices across participants.

This was then captured in Table 7.1.

I constructed narratives of each voice, drawing together data and analysis from across all participants when this voice was evident. These could be many pages long and served as the base for writing up my research.

This multi-stepped process resulted in an in-depth knowledge of the different voices evident when people spoke of how they worked to facilitate engagement. However, whilst the *analysis* focused on the voices of the participants, the final *product* of the analysis (i.e., how I presented my findings) focused on engagement *practices* (combined ways of knowing, doing, and thinking) (Kemmis et al., 2014), rather than the individual voices (Bright et al., 2017; Bright, Kayes, McPherson, et al., 2018). This saw me foreground the analysis captured in the sections 'how they view engagement' and 'how they work' in Table 7.1, and reflects Gilligan and Eddy's (2017) call to keep focused on the research question. The VCRM, and specifically the Listening Guide, was the way 'in' to understand the different practices and how these arose and were enacted.

Whilst my formal research products (my thesis and journal articles) focused on engagement *practices*, when I am presenting my research to clinicians, I often focus on the Voices themselves, as shown in some of the slides from a conference presentation in Figure 7.4 (Bright, 2012). The voices appear to

Table 7.1 Characteristics of the 'in control' voice.

Characteristics of the voice	
Voice	In control with a purpose (a "technical" therapy voice)
Values	Doing the work Sharing knowledge Fixing, finding solutions
How they speak of themselves	More engaged if seeing patient from the start Expert knowledge "I" dominant, clinician led
How they speak of the patient	Patient easier to engage if therapist feels in control
How they view engagement	Judge engagement as they expect to see it, through patient behaviours Following the process – goal setting, therapy tasks. Potentially less focus on engagement, more on doing, complying. Those who don't engage as expected – more likely to be discharged/dismissed
How they work	"Normal" way of working – challenging to work outside it. Get help from experts "shifting" patient expectations to align with therapist perspective Gatekeeper to services – disengaged are discharged Focus on what they're doing rather than how they're doing it
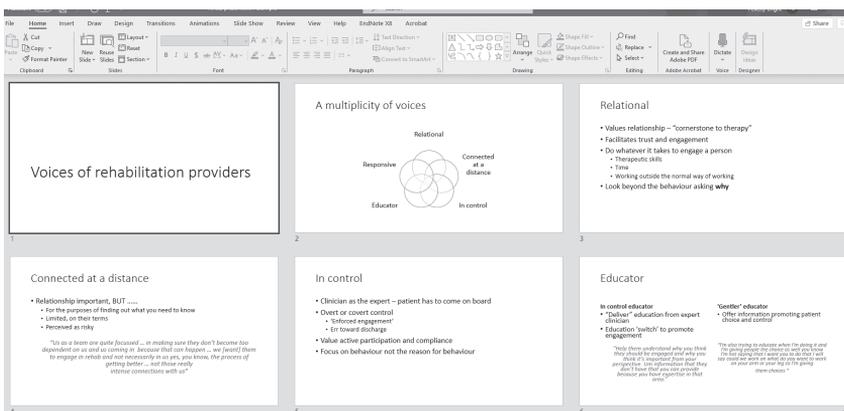
Figure 7.4 Slides from a presentation of the different voices.

resonate strongly with audiences and help them critically reflect on their own practices, reflecting on what voices were evident, when and why, and what these voices brought about in opening up, and in sometimes shutting down engagement.

Summary

The VCRM guides researchers through an active process of listening and hearing the voices of participants, and helps attune to voices which might often be unheard or silenced. This method, with the associated tools of the Listening Guide and i-poems, help researchers foreground the voices of participants while also being actively reflexive about their own role in analysis and constructing knowledge. The VCRM is a flexible yet systematic approach to analysis which can be tailored to the research question and underlying methodological framework. It can provide new insights into taken-for-granted phenomena and can help tease out the complexities which exist within people's experiences and knowledges. This method foregrounds and facilitates relationships and responsive listening and supports a respectful, relational approach to research.

Acknowledgement

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