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Researching from Within: Moral and Ethical Issues and Dilemmas (0108)

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Research Domain: Research Methodology

Part One Abstract

With the proliferation of taught research degrees over the last few years, the number of people undertaking research within their own institution is rising. This article examines the ethical and moral dilemmas confronting such ‘insider’ researchers. Although all research has implications for those involved, in this paper we argue that undertaking interpretive insider research within your own institution or organisation makes these implications even more acute. By reviewing the literature in this area and drawing on the authors’ experiences of undertaking two separate interpretive studies at institutions where they were members of staff, the article discusses key issues of gaining access, anonymity, researcher bias and power. Although undertaking insider research can be problematic, it is argued that researchers should be able to enter the setting with confidence, as long as the appropriate ethical boundaries are established at the outset and constantly re-visited throughout the process.

Part Two Outline

Introduction

With the proliferation of taught research degrees in the UK over the last few years (Stephenson et al. 2006), when students are often encouraged to research their own practice and so become insider researchers themselves, it is reasonable to suggest that the ethical and moral issues linked to undertaking insider research are being experienced by a growing

number of relatively inexperienced researchers. Consequently, there is a need for these issues to be highlighted and explored in more detail in the research methods literature as an increased knowledge and awareness of these dilemmas may help neophyte researchers to better understand some of the ethical challenges they may have to face. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to discuss some of the ethical, moral and methodological dilemmas involved with undertaking insider research by drawing on our experiences of undertaking two separate interpretive studies at institutions where we were members of staff.

Findings and Discussion

From our different experiences of being insider researchers, it is clear that ethical procedures have become more stringent in recent years. As an insider, there is a perception that access to participants is easier, but Alan found that these more rigorous procedures actually made the process harder. While it could be argued that these procedures (a ‘book-like’ ethics application form, an ethics committee consisting of a large number of cross university staff and several ‘conditions’ to be followed in order for the research to proceed) are appropriate to safeguard participants’ interests, it seems to us that things may have gone too far. This instrumental and institutionalized approach (Gibbs & Costley 2006) mirrors the new managerialist movement sweeping across the HE sector (Deem 2003), both nationally and internationally and, while perhaps well intentioned, appears to reflect a lack of trust in researchers from senior university leaders and, in particular, seems to penalise insider researchers. This approach also ignores the human ingredient present in all ethical considerations, and may lead to researchers avoiding, or not engaging fully with, what has been termed the “ethic of care” (Gibbs & Costley 2006, 244). As insider researchers, we found that we had an enhanced sense of trust and relational responsibility. We felt closer to our participants, therefore our sense of responsibility was arguably stronger than if we were

conducting research in an institution where we did not have any links. Also, as the case Institution is more easily recognisable, as insider researchers, we were particularly vigilant to ensure each individual's anonymity. Indeed, because we knew our participants, we went to great lengths to ensure they were "protected", more than any ethics form or university policy procedure could achieve.

We had contrasting experiences as insiders in relation to the revealing or concealing of information. Some of Alan's interviewees revealed personal information to him based partly on the empathy derived from shared experience, while some of Linet's interviewees concealed sensitive information which might have been inappropriate for her as a staff member to know. These experiences are linked to issues of truth and power.

It is sometimes assumed that there is an asymmetry of power in research interviews, with researchers seen as more powerful than interviewees (Kvale 1996): after all, the researcher sets the agenda, determines the parameters of the research, asks the questions and analyses what is said. Some researchers argue, however, that respondents also exercise power, which affects the experience and outcomes of the research (Munro et al. 2004; Thapar-Bjorkert & Henry 2004). For insider researchers, Mercer (2007) considers power relations to be an issue only if the researcher is in a more senior position than the participant. In our studies the power relations were complex, as we were both interviewing respondents who were more senior in the university hierarchy than ourselves. As researchers we could gain privileged information which might put us in a position of power; on the other hand, some of the respondents had direct influence over our careers.

Interestingly, neither of us felt consciously constrained by a potential threat to our staff positions, but it is possible that some of the respondents felt vulnerable to criticisms emerging from the studies. One view of the interviewees who confided difficult personal circumstances to Alan is that they were trying to ensure a sympathetic account of their

experiences. This could have undermined the “empathic neutrality” recommended by Patton (Patton 2002, 50), leading to a greater emphasis on empathy as opposed to neutrality. They were not using their positions to manipulate the outcomes, but were nevertheless playing a powerful role in influencing Alan’s feelings towards them.

Mercer (2007, 8) identifies a danger of distortion linked to insider research caused by the need to continue professional relationships after the research: “pragmatism may outweigh candour”. This appeared to be the case in Linet’s research, where it seems clear that some interviewees were constrained by the need to preserve a façade of management unity at a time of conflicts within the management team. Although the research interviews were confidential, there was still a barrier to openness for managers. They were still managers, Linet was still a staff member, and those positions influenced the level of frankness in the interviews.

Even if respondents aim to tell an honest story, they may not tell the absolute truth (Barone 1995). Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 45) construe “both the researcher and researched as anxious, defended subjects, whose mental boundaries are porous where unconscious material is concerned”. In addition to defending their inner selves, managers may censor information which they regard as confidential, particularly when relationships with an insider researcher who is not a member of the management team will continue after the research. Interestingly, this effect may be exacerbated in HE settings, where the shift to more managerialist cultures has changed the ‘collegial’ relationships between academics to an awareness of hierarchical positions between managers and staff. We would argue that power relations are more complex for insider researchers than Mercer (2007) suggests, and that the respective positions in the hierarchy of researcher and participant are likely to influence the research irrespective of which is more senior.

Conclusions

As the number of insider researchers grows, so does the need for further and continued research into this area. We hope that this paper will encourage other researchers to investigate their own organisations, because of the undoubted benefits of insider research in terms of access, rapport and shared frames of reference with participants, and an in-depth understanding of the organisation. Although a potential minefield, insider research can also be a rich pasture, from which important data can be harvested, with appropriate boundaries to satisfy ethical concerns.

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