

Ethical Considerations when Carrying Out Research in One's Own Academic Institution

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Abstract: This particular kind of research brings about a series of ethical considerations that may be quite unique to this scenario. One needs to mention the dual role of employee and researcher held by the person carrying out the research. There will certainly be ethical issues that one needs to consider when carrying out research on the institution where one's colleagues, superiors, students, administration, and support staff, etc are found as they will form part of the research itself. This may ultimately lead the researcher to face conflicting values and beliefs that may affect the objectivity of the researcher and ultimately the validity of the research process itself.

Keywords: higher education, insider research, gatekeepers

Carrying out research in the academic institution where one is employed poses specific issues. The main point is that the researcher is an 'insider' within the Higher Educational Institution (HEI) itself. This is often referred to as 'endogenous research'.

Trowler outlines the main issues when engaging in endogenous research in HEI.¹ These are:

- The characteristics of this kind of research;
- Strengths and weaknesses of this research;

1 P. Trowler, 'Researching your own institution: Higher Education', British Educational Research Association online resource. Available online at: http://bera.ac.uk/files/2011/06/researching_your_own_institution_higher_education.pdf.

- Conceptualizing the nature of HEIs;
- Ethical issues;
- Issues about value and robustness.

This study will focus upon some of the ethical issues arising, taking into account the political, social, and economic contexts of the selected HEI, the University of Malta (UoM).

Between 2007 and 2011, 2892 persons graduated from the UoM.² The majority of these graduates will eventually form part of the local workforce and they are expected to take up posts of responsibility and leadership in the near future.

However, employers and other sectors in Malta are somewhat sceptical as to the actual contribution brought forward by the graduates to Maltese society in general.³ The main bone of contention is that most graduates are ill-equipped to enter the world of work and employers spend considerable amount of time and other resources to provide them with the right set of skills to cope with the responsibilities associated with the roles designated for them.

This research seeks to investigate whether the actual take-up of ‘soft skills’ by graduates during their academic years is adequate and that once in the workplace, they are able to take advantage of the skills acquired and be in a position to contribute towards the development of Maltese society. In order to do so, the research process will involve interacting with present and past students of the UoM and staff, both academic and administrative, which in turn was the cause of specific ethical issues that might require further investigation.

2 Malta National Office of Statistics, Education Statistics 2010/11 (Valletta, 2013). Available online at: http://www.nso.gov.mt/statdoc/document_file.aspx?id=3780

3 *Times of Malta*, ‘Maltese SMEs healthy but employment at a standstill’, 9 October 2011. Available online at: <http://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20111009/local/Maltese-SMEs-healthy-but-employment-at-a-standstill.388264>

Ethical Issues – Being an ‘Insider’ Researcher

For the past 15 years, the present author has been an employee of the Higher Educational Institution – the UoM – that has been used as a case study for this research which involved engaging with present students, recently graduated students, academics, and administrators of this university. It is quite plausible that the different groups may hold different views that may be in contrast to each other. Another aspect to consider is that some of the groups identified may hold the position of gatekeepers to access to other groups⁴ and, as a consequence, need to be negotiated with carefully.

Trowler suggests that there are advantages and pitfalls if a researcher is an insider,⁵ who should be able to have very good access to both naturalistic data and respondents, while there is a higher probability of having an impact, in particular if the research questions address implications for policy. On the other hand, Trowler cautions against losing the ability to produce culturally neutral accounts. What is unusual may actually be ‘normal’ for the insider researcher and hence not given the due importance. Moreover, conflicts may arise between the role of a researcher and that of a professional within the institution. Trowler also indicates that knowing the respondents may cause the respondents to reply/ behave in relation to researcher’s alignments and preferences – the researched may actually change responses/behaviour to ‘help’ the researcher (‘Interview bias’).⁶

Rooney⁷ discusses the issue of the bias of the insider researcher and how this may affect the validity of the entire research process. Rooney looks at a series of case studies and comes up with a series of questions:

4 L. Cohen, L. Manion, and K. Morrison (2007), *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed.) (Abingdon, 2007).

5 Trowler, 2

6 Ibid., 3

7 P. Rooney, ‘Researching from the inside – does it compromise validity? – A discussion’, Dublin Institute of Technology. Level 3, Issue 3. Available online: <http://level3.dit.ie/html/issue3/rooney/rooney.pdf>

1. Do the researcher's relationships with subjects have a negative impact on the subject's behaviour so that they behave in a way that they would not normally?
2. Did the researcher's prior, tacit knowledge distort results by leading to misinterpretations or false assumptions?
3. Did hidden politics, loyalties, and other agendas lead the researcher to misrepresent or disregard important data?

With reference to such a study, one can question the relationship of the researcher with the various research groups. Will there be a bias in the selection of academic staff and administrators, faculties, and students representing the faculties, employers, and other persons representing other interested parties. The same arguments can be applied to the mode of research, the questions posed, the soft skills selected for further investigation, the ICT tools used, the modes of assessment, and accreditation. Rooney concludes by saying that, while there is no definite answer, it is extremely important for a researcher to be aware of his historical, social, and cultural backgrounds, as indicated by Hammersley.⁸ For example, the researcher's philosophical stance (liberal, critical, etc.) is just one aspect that requires consideration.

Bell provides a checklist to negotiate access, ethics, and problems of 'inside' research:

1. Clear official channels by formally requesting permission to carry out your investigation as soon as you have an agreed project outline.
2. Speak to the people who will be asked cooperate.
3. Maintain strict ethical standards at all times.
4. Submit the project outline to the head/principal, senior officer, or ethics committee, if necessary
5. Decide what you mean by anonymity and confidentiality.

8 M. Hammersley, *Taking Sides in Social Research. Essays on Partisanship and Bias* (London, 2000). 18.

6. Decide whether participants will receive a copy of the report and/or see drafts or interview transcripts.
7. Inform participants what is to be done with the information they provide.
8. Prepare an outline of intentions and conditions under which the study will be carried out to hand to participants.
9. Be honest about the purpose of the study and about the conditions of the research.
10. Remember that people who agree to help are doing you a favour.
11. Never assume 'it will be all right'. Negotiating access is an important stage in your investigations.
12. If you have doubts about the ethics of your research consult your supervisor and what action to take.⁹

Bell concludes with a simple yet stark warning. If the researcher is not willing to devote the same amount of time and effort as he would be asking for, then he is asking for too much from his colleagues.

Homan issues another warning. Insider researchers should not be their own gatekeepers.¹⁰ This is very pertinent to the scope of this research study. As a member of the academic institution where the research process will be carried out, this researcher may happen to have access to data owing to his own position within the organization and owing to the personal relationships established with other gatekeepers over a period of 15 years. It is therefore imperative that the appropriate procedures for acquiring data and informed consent be followed prior to any enquiry or research process being initiated.

Gronn illustrates another aspect which is relevant within the context of this study which is that of interviewing leaders.¹¹ He refers

9 J. Bell, *Doing Your Research Project* (3rd ed.) (Buckingham, 1999). 44-45.

10 R. Homan, 'The Principle of Assumed Consent: the Ethics of Gatekeeping?', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35 (2001), 3. Available online at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9752.00230/pdf>

11 P. Gronn, 'Interviewing leaders: penetrating the romance', in A. Briggs & M. Coleman (eds.), *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management* (2nd ed.) (London, 2007). 183.

to Meindl's idea of 'Romance of Leadership' (RofL) which refers to 'reverence' that some persons may have to leaders and leadership. Meindl argues that RofL highlights leadership in explaining social and organisational causation.¹² When discussing the construction of leaders Gronn refers to early adoption of social psychological writings whereby through the measurement of influence within a particular group such as clubs or gangs led to the identification of leaders and followers.¹³ Literature cemented further the conventional view of 'leaders' and 'followers'. Gronn argues that this simplistic approach was adopted for more complex organisations in a somewhat superficial manner. Moreover,

Additional difficulties are that commentators who take either of these dualistic templates for granted rarely, if ever, make clear how it is that leaders get to be leaders and followers get to be followers. The normality of each category is simply taken for granted.¹⁴

Gronn cites Meindl¹⁵ in that the social networks of the followers and other related settings are employed by the followers themselves to negotiate and construct the images of the leaders. It is therefore extremely important to be aware of the various social networks within the UoM as these may help the insider research to be aware of his own views of the leaders within the institution itself.

Gronn concludes that these prior assumptions about leadership affect data-gathering. If not appropriately addressed, they may influence the interviewing process such that it is will not be a neutral data-gathering mode.

12 J.R. Meindl, 'On Leadership: an alternative to conventional wisdom', in B.M. Straw and L.L. Cummings (eds.) *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, Vol. 12 (1990), 159–203.

13 Gronn. 188.

14 *Ibid.*, 190.

15 J.R. Meindl, 'The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: a social constructivist approach', *Leadership Quarterly*, 6 (3) (1995), 333–5.

Basing on his personal experiences as a researcher, Gronn goes on to outline two factors that may increase the likelihood of romanticizing leaders. These would be status and age, both of the researcher and the informants.¹⁶ In the case of this research, the researcher dealt with senior academics and students at the UoM. That is, dealing with current leaders of the researcher himself and with students who in turn see the researcher as a leader. Some former students by now hold leadership positions, which are always a source of pride for any teacher! This may create barriers for effective communication and neutral gathering of data, unless adequately addressed through awareness, experience, and training, where necessary.

Cohen *et. al.* bring up the issue of sensitive educational research.¹⁷ They refer to the definition by Lee¹⁸ that defines such research as that which may potentially pose a threat to those involved in the research itself. They argue that one instance of sensitive educational research is that which deals with powerful people. These persons would occupy key positions and have a direct say in policy-making and leadership issues within a particular organization. As the proposed study would touching upon implementation of policies and mechanisms of quality assurance with a series of undergraduate programmes, this is certainly a pertinent comment. Cohen *et. al.* go on to state:

Academic educational research on the powerful may be unlike other forms of educational research in that confidentiality may not be able to be assured. The participants are identifiable and public figures.¹⁹

Thus, if one were to indicate that the deans of a university were interviewed, it would be quite easy for anyone to find out who they are as there is only one university in Malta. This is even more evident if, for example the rector was interviewed!

16 Gronn, 194.

17 Cohen *et. al.*, 123.

18 R.M. Lee, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London, 1993), 10–11.

19 Cohen *et. al.*, 128.

Within this context of sensitive information, the issue of whistleblowing may come into play. The research may deliberately or inadvertently come across information that may point malpractices within the institution being research, with dramatic consequences not only for the research process itself but also for the researcher. The Research Ethics Program at the University of San Diego provides a summary of various considerations²⁰ that any insider researcher should be aware of when carrying out research within his institution. These are:

- **Necessity**

Because of the nature of most research environments, misconduct will only come to light if someone close to the project blows the whistle.

- **Obligation**

‘Someone who has witnessed misconduct has an unmistakable obligation to act.’²¹ While this obligation might be met by formal reporting of the alleged misconduct, this is only one of many paths that might be open to the potential whistleblower.

- **Consequences**

Both whistleblowers and those accused of wrongdoing typically suffer whether or not the allegations are ultimately sustained.

- **Perspective**

To avoid the mistake of an inappropriate allegation, potential whistleblowers should begin by asking questions and seeking perspective.

- **Questions**

A whistleblower, as well as his case, is best served by asking questions rather than drawing conclusions.

- **Documentation**

As with good research, the integrity of an allegation of research

20 M. Kalichman, *Whistleblowing Summary. Resources for Research Ethics Education* (San Diego, 2001). Available online at: [http:// research-ethics.net/topics/whistleblowing/#summary](http://research-ethics.net/topics/whistleblowing/#summary)

21 National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, *On Being a Scientist: Responsible Conduct in Research* (Washington DC, 1995). <http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/obas>

misconduct is best served by keeping clear, defensible records of what happened and when.

- **Role**

It is the responsibility of the whistleblower to appropriately report or respond to possible misconduct; however, it is not the whistleblower's role to further investigate the misconduct or mete out justice.²²

While by no means exhaustive, one can argue that, by retaining objectivity, keeping accurate records/transcripts of all the data being gathered certainly offers the insider researcher some form of protection. Acquiring access to data and data subjects through established ethical guidelines is another, rather than just using the insider's leads. The UoM has its own university ombudsman with a clear mandate to 'to investigate grievances, concerns, or disputes about alleged acts of maladministration, including decisions, omissions, procedural, or administrative errors or wider systemic issues that are referred to the Office by the entire community in these institutions and resolve complaints by an informal and confidential conflict management system based on the key values of integrity, impartiality, transparency, equity and justice'.²³ This part of the mission statement paraphrased should provide a degree of comfort to any potential whistleblower.

A final consideration is that some academics, administrators, and other persons who may be asked to participate are also the gatekeepers to other research participants, such as students or to documented data. It is therefore absolutely vital for the proposed research to take into account the issues discussed in order to the right level of confidence between researcher and participants. This would form the foundations for the appropriate level of communication between all the parties involved to ensure a successful endeavour. Clark provides a very simple yet significant definition for gatekeepers: individuals, groups,

22 M. Kalichman, *Whistleblowing Summary: Resources for Research Ethics Education* (San Diego, 2001). Available online at: [http:// http://research-ethics.net/topics/whistleblowing/#summary](http://http://research-ethics.net/topics/whistleblowing/#summary)

23 University Ombudsman Homepage, Mission Statement (2009). Available at: <http://www.ombudsman.org.mt/uo/index.asp?pg=missionstatement>

and organizations that act as intermediaries between the researcher and the research groups.²⁴

Working towards getting an informed consent from both gatekeepers and research groups becomes a fundamental issue towards validating the research process itself as the various concerns indicated above may be negotiated with the gatekeepers prior to the initiation of the research process.

Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that an insider researcher is in an advantageous position in terms of access to the various research groups that may eventually take part of the research process. Knowing the inner workings of the organization will certainly help the researcher to achieve access, particularly in getting around the various bureaucratic procedures as the researcher would be familiar with them already and he would be aware of the key persons to contact. On the other hand, this familiarity may be counterproductive as an element of bias could creep in. The choice of the participants within the research groups (students, academics, etc.) and the selection of individual members from each group (student A from faculty B, staff member C from faculty D, etc.) may result in the selection of members that are predisposed in favour or against the proposed intentions of the research process. This would compromise the validity of the research.

Nevertheless, with effort and training, it is possible to achieve an awareness of the problems that may arise from bias and take the necessary steps to try and avoid them as much as possible.²⁵

The issue of dealing with gatekeepers is somewhat fundamental towards the success of this research proposal. It focuses on one institution, the UoM. It is somewhat evident that there are key gatekeepers that can ultimately determine the outcome of the research

24 Clark. 50

25 Rooney, 16.

itself by providing/withholding access to specific research groups identified within the institution. Being an insider should again help in identifying and accessing the gatekeepers and being aware of any initial stances or value that they may have in relation to the type of study being carried out. However, he may also have a bias towards individual gatekeepers that may affect the initial contact and outcome. Neutrality is of paramount importance. It is therefore extremely important to take up Clark's recommendations to ensure that gatekeepers are thoroughly informed of the scope of the research in order to view it as an opportunity rather than a threat to their existing status quo.²⁶ To do so, one has to go around the issue of informed consent in order to engage effectively with the gatekeepers but also with the research groups themselves. One has to be able to strike the right balance between having feedback about the research process from these groups in order to improve without being forced to modify the research process for the sake of 'pleasing' gatekeepers.

There is no doubt that, after working in an institution for a good number of years, one will have one's own set of values and biases in relation to the institution itself, the staff and the students (present and former). An exercise in becoming aware of one's own values and biases is fundamental towards increasing the validity of the research itself. Moreover, rather than being potentially shot down by one or more of the various groups and gatekeepers involved, it is hoped that their active engagement will help to achieve the ultimate aim of the entire research proposal; that of providing an opportunity for the institution under scrutiny to improve the quality of its programmes.

26 T. Clark, 'Doing Qualitative Research With People and Organisations: How Do Researchers Understand and Negotiate Their Research Relationships?', Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the University of Sheffield in 2009. Available online at http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/934/2/tom_clark_phd_final.pdf.