Why familiarise?

BARLEY, Ruth

Published version

BARLEY, Ruth (2011). Why familiarise? Social Research Update (62), 1-4.

Issue 62: Winter 2011

social research Update

Why familiarise?

Ruth Barley

Ruth Barley is a Sociology lecturer and part time PhD student at Sheffield Hallam University. Ruth's research and teaching interests are around cultural diversity, identity and equality.

<R.Barley@shu.ac.uk>

- **Becoming familiar with the field location is a topic within anthropology that has been widely discussed over the years and is thought to aid the quality of ethnographic outputs.**
- **Components of familiarisation are also at times used as good practice within other research strategies.**
- **This *Update* will explore how familiarisation can aid a range of research strategies to enhance the quality of data that are collected.**

Becoming familiar with 'the field' is a natural and important part of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Berg, 2009). However little has been written about how this concept can be used to aid the quality of data collected by other research strategies. By drawing out key components from a range of literature and reflecting on the experience of familiarisation within the context of an ethnography with a group of young children, this *Update* will explore how these components may be used to enhance research practice both within ethnographic work and when using other research methods.

This *Update* draws on an ongoing PhD project exploring how young children conceptualise and operationalise identity. The ethnography is set within a reception class (aged 4-5) in the North of England. Prior to starting fieldwork in the 2010-11 school year, a period of familiarisation was conducted. The aims of this period were to map the setting, learn the routines and rules of the school, locate and build relationships, and negotiate a researcher role within the classroom.

'Entering the field'

'Entering the field' and becoming familiar with the research context is a topic within anthropology that has been widely discussed over the years (Malinowski, 1922; Schensul et al., 1999; Berg, 2009). While 'entering the field' is commonly understood as the first logical step in doing ethnography (Leedy and Ormrod, 2009), the components involved that can aid other research strategies have not been made explicit although some aspects are currently thought of as 'good practice' by researchers working within other methodological spheres.

Within the field of ethnography 'entering the field' is viewed as a complicated process where ethnographers must learn to juggle a number of different aspects at the same time. Schensl et al. (1999) highlight four elements that ethnographers need to become familiar with. These are: 'mapping the setting', becoming acquainted with the norms, beliefs, rules, rituals and 'language' of the field location; learning how to locate and build relationships; and unobtrusively collecting and recording data. These elements, however, should not be viewed as separate stages but rather as aspects which all feed into each other.

Mapping the setting

By becoming familiar with the spatial dimensions of a new location the ethnographer can learn to structure and focus observations efficiently taking into consideration how and when specific spatial areas are commonly used and by whom (Berg 2009). This was a useful tool that I initially employed when starting my familiarisation period. Mapping the indoor and outdoor play areas that the class used on a daily basis helped me to structure my observations and focus on specific activities and events to observe. I initially mapped the setting before meeting the children and explored the different activity stations in the classroom. I then used this initial exercise to map how children explored their environment, specifically noting which activity stations were used by children as social areas, e.g. the role play corner, and which were employed as individual areas of learning, e.g. the computer stations. This mapping stage allowed me to observe how and when gendered play was or was not an important dimension of play negotiations.

When using observation as a method of data collection, mapping the setting is an essential first step in familiarisation. This element can also be a useful tool for all studies that are working with a specific community or researching a particular place irrespective of the methods that they are employing. Drawing on participatory rapid appraisal tools (which developed out of ethnography), Salway et al. (2007:97) 'undertook pre-planned, purposive walks' (otherwise known as transect walks) in local communities as an initial mapping stage of a mixed methods study exploring long term ill-health amongst ethnic minority communities. Transect walks aimed to identify key characteristics of the community as well the daily routines of inhabitants and subsequently informed the development of in-depth interviews and sampling procedures. Mapping can also be used to inform the design of other research tools such as survey questions and focus group topics.

Norms, beliefs, rules, rituals and language

Becoming familiar with the norms, beliefs, rules and rituals of a field location as well as the group's argot (or specialized language) are key to gaining an understanding of the location and the social rules it abides by (Schensul et al., 1999). These aspects are important during the whole fieldwork period as the ethnographer makes sense of what they have observed for an external audience (Emerson et al., 1995).

In the present study, learning the classroom rules was an important first step in understanding the field location. Staff and children alike understood that the (often unspoken) rules of play within the classroom were spatially rather than temporally situated. For example the carpet area was always considered to be a quiet area of the classroom where guided, whole class activities were conducted and children were allowed to read or work in pairs using the interactive white board during continuous provision sessions. Therefore children were not allowed to take part in more active games, such as role play, in this area in the same way as they were allowed to in other areas. As an outsider the nature of these rules were not at first apparent but needed to be extracted through observations and conversations with participants.

Within other research strategies piloting stages are often used to ensure that the research strategy as a whole and the specific research tools are appropriate to the norms and rules of the context (Bryman 2008). Steering groups (or project advisory groups) are also commonly employed in projects to aid this aspect of familiarisation and support the design of appropriate research tools.

Locating and building relationships

Learning how to locate and build relationships in the initial period of fieldwork is crucial to ensure that initial and ongoing access is granted (Burgess 1991). Focussing on developing key relationships also allows the researcher to become familiar with norms and rules. To do this, gatekeepers, who allow initial access to a community, and guides, who can facilitate the development of relationships within the community once initial access has been granted, need to be identified (LeCompte 1999).

Once initial access has been granted, guides can help facilitate the development of relationships with potential participants. In some cases gatekeepers can also take on the role of guide, as was the case with the Early Years co-ordinator in the present study. As a member of the group a guide can help the ethnographer make sense of their initial observations and access potential participants. While the present study focused on gaining children's perspectives, school staff, who acted as research guides, were able to confirm whether I was observing typical behaviour or if children were acting differently due to my presence.

Some children in the class also self-selected to become research guides, 'helping me with my project,' and encouraged other children to take part in my study. Adhering to participatory principles that are intrinsic to both ethnography (for methodological reasons due to ethnography's inherent exploratory focus) and childhood studies (for ethical reasons) (Cheney 2011) the children who acted as research guides were involved in developing the focus of the study, the design of research tools, and later on in data collection and analysis. During familiarisation I was able to build up relationships with children that facilitated this approach of doing research with rather than on children. While gaining initial access to my fieldwork location needed to be done via gatekeepers, i.e. the Early Years co-ordinator and deputy head teacher, the children who acted as research guides facilitated my ongoing access to their own and peers' social worlds.

Care should be taken when selecting individual guides as certain individuals may restrict access to some group members, for example, if they are disliked by others or are members of a particular sub-group (LeCompte, 1999). Ensuring that guides are able to commit the time needed to the study and that they do not have an agenda of their own are also important points to consider. Taking time to become aware of school politics during my familiarisation period helped me to map staff relationships to ensure that my choice of adult guides did not limit my relationship with other participants or limit the scale and scope of my study as a result of the guides' own commitments.

While locating and building relationships with research participants is an ongoing process, initial relationships built on rapport and trust can form the foundation of a study. This also allows participants to familiarise themselves with you, the ethnographer, enabling them to consent to and access your project, which in return allows you (as fully as possible) to access their social world. Allowing time for participants' to familiarise themselves with the researcher is also highlighted in other research as being an important part of locating and building research relationships for qualitative researchers. For example, McLean and Campbell (2003), drawing on research using qualitative interviews, suggest that a range of recruitment methods should be employed including the use of guides, social networks and 'link-tracing methodology' such as snowball sampling. They conclude that a variety of strategies are needed, stating that at times gatekeepers who can formally legitimise the research project may aid recruitment more than guides who can personally vouch for the researcher, and vice versa, depending on the norms and rules of the community.

The work-break game

By building up relationships with guides the researcher also establishes rules of working that allows participation in activities and the collection and recording of data. Breglia (2009:129) describes this process as the 'work-break game' where the researcher and participant co-construct the rules of collecting and recording data. In my field context, learning how to play this game was particularly important as the children that I was working with had not encountered a researcher before. When introducing myself to the children I explained to them that I was doing a project at university and related this to their own project work at school. I positioned myself (as Mayall (2000) advocates) as an adult who lacked knowledge about children's worlds and needed them to teach me. Aspects of Mandell's (1988) 'least-adult role' were also important allowing me to join in children's games, when invited, and (as far as is possible) experience classroom life from their perspectives.

Learning, with the children, how to record their actions and words in a culturally sensitive way not only taught me how to collect and record my data effectively but also how to negotiate ongoing informed consent as I was repeatedly questioned by the children about why I was writing and what I was writing about. Children soon started to direct the activities that I wrote about making sure that I understood what it was that they had been doing and why they had been doing it. While this negotiation started within my familiarisation period it was also part of my fieldwork, allowing children to negotiate their participation in the study as an ongoing process.

However negotiating the 'work-break game' also raises some important ethical questions. In the present study, through conversations with adult research guides, it became evident that the boundary between informal interviews and 'off the record' conversations can become blurred. Setting boundaries and markers to indicate when a conversation is not part of the project was an important part of building up relationships with research guides. The inclusion of a familiarisation period created time and space for these boundaries to be established.

Establishing the 'work-break game' has also been used within other research contexts such as Stiell and Tang's (2006) mixed method research design, incorporating analysis of Census data, documentary analysis and art based workshops with women from ethnic minority groups. The collaborative nature of the workshops allowed participants to present their life experiences and stories to researchers in their medium of choice (both verbal and non-verbal) as well as facilitating the co-construction of the rules and norms of data collection.

Conclusion

The above examples show that key components of familiarisation extracted from the ethnographic concept of 'entering the field' are at times used as 'good practice' within a range of research strategies. Principles of familiarisation and participation are not only useful in research with children but can also be relevant to research with adults, particularly when working with so-called 'hard to reach groups.'

While many studies do not have the luxury of time and resources to undertake a full ethnographic study, familiarisation can be employed in a range of research strategies, both quantitative and qualitative (for example link-tracing methodologies, participatory rapid appraisal tools and evaluation work), and when using a range of methods (for example, surveys, interviews, focus groups, art-based methods etc.) to inform research design and enhance the quality of data that is produced in later stages of the project.

Bibliography

BERG, B. (2009). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston, Pearson Education.

BREGLIA, L. (2009). The 'work' of ethnographic fieldwork. In: FAUBION, J. and MARCUS, G. (eds.). *Fieldwork is not what it used to be*. New York, Cornell University Press, 129-142.

BURGESS, R. (1991). Sponsors, gatekeepers, members, and friends: Access in educational settings. In: SHAFFIR, W. and STEBBINS, R. (eds.). *Experiencing fieldwork*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 43-52.

BRYMAN, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford, OUP.

CHENEY, K. (2011). Children as ethnographers. *Childhood*, 18(2), 166-179.

EMERSON, R., FRETZ, R. and SHAW, L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

HAMMERSLEY, M. and ATKINSON, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London, Taylor & Francis.

LECOMPTE, M. (1999). Researcher roles. In: LECOMPTE, M., et al. (eds.). *Researcher roles and research partnerships*. London, Altamira Press, 1-83.

LECOMPTE, M. and SCHENSUL, J. (2010). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. London, Altamira Press.

LEEDY, P. and ORMROD, J. (2009). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.

McLean, C. and Campbell, C. (2003) 'Locating research informants in a multi-ethnic community: ethnic identities, social networks and recruitment methods'. *Ethnicity and Health*, 8(1), 41-61.

MALINOWSKI, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London, Routledge.

MANDELL, N. (1988). The least-adult role in studying children. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 16(4), 433-467.

MAYALL, B. (2008). Conversations with children. In: CHRISTENSEN, P. and JAMES, A. (eds.). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*. Abingdon, RoutledgeFalmer, 109-124.

SALWAY, S. et al. (2007) *Long-term ill-health, poverty and ethnicity: a mixed methods investigation into the experiences of living with a chronic health condition in the UK*. Bristol, The Policy Press.

SCHENSUL, S., SCHENSUL, J. and LECOMPTE, M. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. London, Altamira Press.

STIELL, B. and TANG, N. (2006) Ethnic Minority Women and Access to the Labour Market in Newcastle. Sheffield Hallam University [online] Last accessed April/2 2011 at http://www.shu.ac.uk/_assets/pdf/ceir-S4BMEWomenNewcastle_180706.pdf.

social research UPDATE is distributed without charge on request to social researchers in the United Kingdom by the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey as part of its commitment to supporting social research training and development.

Contributions to *social research UPDATE* that review current issues in social research and methodology in about 2,500 words are welcome. All UPDATE articles are peer-reviewed.

social research UPDATE (ISSN: 1360-7898) is published by the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey
Guildford GU2 7XH, United Kingdom. tel: +44 (0)1483689450
Edited by Nigel Gilbert (n.gilbert@surrey.ac.uk)