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Insider research: The implications of conducting research in your home locale.

Abstract

Conducting research in your home locale can be a risky business. This paper examines the implications of conducting research in a small community where the researcher and the project respondents, know or know of each other.

An examination of an ‘insider approach’ to qualitative research is undertaken based on a study using the medium of oral history. Established or hearsay relationships between the researcher and the project respondents had bearing on the research methodology. Local, prior knowledge affected how the project respondents were accessed and the type of information given. ‘Insider research’ has its advantages and disadvantages and unexpected outcomes are a certainty. The paper provides strategies for maintaining credibility when conducting research interviews in one’s home environment.

Introduction

Undertaking research in a small, familiar environment, such as within the family, the workplace, or in one’s home community has its advantages. Being familiar with the local culture and customs and having already established a relationship provides the opportunity for the researcher to gain participants easily and to be privy to ‘insider’ information that would not be trusted to a stranger. Yet being known has its shortcomings. Prior knowledge, underlying personal bias and preconceived ideas can render disadvantages to this intimate type of ‘insider research’. This paper is an analysis of ‘insider research’ based on my experience of using the medium of oral history to collect, collate and evaluate data gathered in a small country town, where I have resided on a long-term basis.

From the outset my research was based on my own experience and ‘insider’ knowledge. I identified the paucity of material available on the lives of country women in Australia, let alone the everyday lives of ‘ordinary’ women living in remote and isolated areas. I undertook an interdisciplinary research on the experiences of women, who like myself had made a remote locality home (Rabbitt, forthcoming). To find potential participants prepared to tell their stories of migration and settlement, I relied heavily upon my extensive local network. Over 26 years I had developed extensive networks within the community, both personally and professionally. A sample of 24 women, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, communities, towns and length of residency in the area were sought through personal contacts or local women’s groups.
Selection of Participants

My own situation as a long-term resident in the area shaped the methodology of the study. Having initiated a project that would rely on friends, colleagues, acquaintances, family members and women I did not know, the importance of ethical conduct came to the fore. I understood the challenge of the dual role of researcher and community member. I took extensive precautions to ensure that the balance between my personal/professional networks and my researcher role albeit as an ‘insider’ were maintained.

To ascertain which women were to be interviewed I considered the types of women that lived in the locality. I considered many possible alternate groupings of women according to length of stay in the area, race, class, age, occupation, marital status and religion.

The context then of establishing the project was one in which I initially contacted women I knew personally. Rather than advertise for potential respondents I choose to approach women who I considered would be willing to be involved in my study, on the basis that I had worked with them in professional paid employment or as a volunteer in community groups. These contacts generated further interest in my work with some of these women suggesting other women, as potential participants. I relied upon my extensive network of friends and colleagues to make the necessary introductions to successfully complete this project. The ensuing contacts then became a dominant feature in shaping the direction of the study.

My aim was to gain multiple perspectives of women’s experiences of relocating to and living in a remote area. The process selection was multifaceted as I considered the many types of women that had made the area their home. While it was possible to gather a broad cross section of experiences from women who had both been born in the area and from those who migrated, I chose to narrow the scope of the study. The focus was to be upon creating a history of the lived experiences of women, who like myself had migrated to the area. This is not to say that the stories of the women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, born in the area are not valuable or intrinsic to the study. On the contrary, in all the stories of the participating women, were tales of their social and professional relationships with locally born women. I acknowledge that their presence has been a significant influence upon my life and the lives of many women who migrated.
In my attempt to be ‘inclusive’ rather than ‘exclusive’, I focused on interviewing a sample of women whom I perceived had varied life experiences. I considered the many types of women living in the district. Within the selection process determining the categories of women to interview took several steps. Numerous ways of grouping the women across previous location and class were possible but complex. I considered the easiest way to categorise the women was by ethnicity and then broken down into sub groups. I am not intending to imply that ethnicity is a major factor or surpasses the other categories.

There were to be eight women from each of the following:

- Indigenous women, who were not from the Kimberley
- Overseas migrant women
- Anglo Australian women
In addition to the above categories these women’s lives also depicted many other variables relevant to the study. I also wanted a cross section of women of different ages and length of residency. The women interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 73. The first arrived in 1956 and the most recently arrived women I interviewed relocated in 1997. They were re-categorised according to number of years of residency – less than 10 years, between 10 and 20 and over 20 years.

Then they were re-grouped according to their ages – under 30 years, under 55 and over 55. Categories of potential women’s occupations and class were considered such as workers in the region’s major industries such as mining, pearling and tourism. Then there were government workers, mothers at home, grandmothers and retirees to be considered. Other variables included identifying as an Indigenous person, a migrant, a ‘coloured’ person, or a ‘white’ Australian. Each category was further separated into women from the city or the country, the main language they spoke, their level of education and prior knowledge of the Region. Further groupings ascribed were identifying as a single or married women, the number of children, whether the woman was married to a person of the same race and class or a cross-cultural marriage.

The following discussion outlines the logistics of initiating and implementing the contacts with the women who shared their stories.

**Initiating the Interviews**

The women in this project were approached according to their accessibility. Although it may be argued that any woman would have been suitable to interview as each life history is exclusive and offers a perspective on the area, I was led by my need to fill the categories I had ascribed to potential participants. Thus, I did not take up all the suggestions of potential participants I received through my networks.

In the majority of cases, I met potential narrators in an informal situation as we were going about our business, down town, at the hospital or at sporting events. For the women I knew, a personal invitation was made initially to gauge their level of interest. Friends introduced the five women interviewed whom I did not know personally. I outlined the project to each woman, giving her time to consider whether she wished to be involved, and if she had the time to commit herself. Follow up phone calls were made and formal letters introducing myself as a university researcher and the nature of the research were sent. Several women who were approached declined the invitation to be interviewed.
Another aspect to be considered was 'cultural sensitivity'. The researcher must be familiar with the correct 'cultural' protocol when approaching potential participants from different backgrounds. For example, the researcher is aware that in the local Filipino community, the matriarch or head Filipina must be approached first, before approaching any other Filipina or asking their husbands for permission.

Much consideration was also given to the type of letter that was sent to potential participants and in particular the language used. For most of the women, knew me as a long-term resident, from my associations with community groups and as a former representative of the media, not as an academic. I wrote to them as researcher stating my intentions and requesting the taping of their stories. Letters were only sent to women who had confirmed their interest with me verbally. Further phone calls were made to arrange a meeting time and place. Explanations of ethical considerations regarding confidentiality of data collected, anonymity of subjects, informed consent to participate in the study and any effects that participation in the research may have on the participants was fully disclosed in the ethics application.

Issues of Confidentiality and Ownership

Prior to the tape being turned on, and commencement of the interview, a verbal explanation of the introductory letter and parameters of the research was given. As each woman agreed to be a part of the study, she signed a consent form and her verbal consent was put on tape. She understood that her story could be withdrawn from the project at her discretion, at anytime.

At the introduction to the interview an explanation was given of my intention to present a copy of the transcript to ensure that information had been accurately noted. This gave the women the scope to change any of the material. I was aware that this was beyond the necessary university, ethical parameters but felt that a transcript would not only protect confidentiality and privacy, it would be a useful historical resource for the participant. It was a way of giving the stories back to the women.

Each narrator was given the option of being referred to by a pseudonym of her choice. Only one of the narrators chose not to be identified, so her privacy has been maintained by using a pseudonym which she selected. A masking of descriptive data, which might identify the individual, has been undertaken. Two other women placed conditions on the use of their stories. One woman agreed to be interviewed only under the premise that I did not interpret her stories in a derogatory manner. When given her transcript to peruse, she did not make any alterations or request any of her stories to be omitted. After being interviewed and receiving a copy of her transcript, another woman stated that her story could be used to help me gain my university
qualification but not for any other purpose.

The other women I interviewed were not concerned with masking their identity and were not alarmed at the thought of their words being used as a part of research on women in the area. I consider the women trusted me as an ‘insider’. As a member of the community, rather than a researcher arriving in town, collecting information, leaving town and publishing a book. Most of the women knew I had written stores and articles about the area in the past. I had interviewed some of them previously in other professional circumstances. I mixed socially with some of them and we could recall how long we had know each other, where and when we met. The importance of the skills of the researcher in carrying out the interview and the reward of social exchange were integral to this process.

The Interview Process

The interviews were conducted on an individual basis; tape recorded, and transcribed using the editorial guidelines recommended by the Oral History Association of Western Australia. Predominantly open ended questions, which were flexible and subject to change were asked, because, as Janice Raymond argues, this "maximises discovery and description" (Reinharz, 1992 p.18). In this study a conversational approach was undertaken.

Most of the interviews were completed in the day and the majority of the women preferred to be interviewed in their own homes when their children and partners were otherwise occupied. They preferred the privacy, convenience, comfort and security of being interviewed at home. Some of the interviews were held at the university during the week and also on the weekends. Several of the women were interviewed in my own home.

The current circumstances of the narrator, such as family commitments, health and workload also impinged upon the interview process. An older woman may be lonely and have the time and desire to relate her life story whereas a younger woman may also be lonely but family responsibilities may make her time more limited. The onus, whatever the relationship between the two parties, was upon the researcher to ensure that the narrator was comfortable with the interview process.

The interviews usually took approximately two hours. Most of the women let the tape run freely and did not request it to be turned off. In some cases when we were having a cup of tea after the interview, I asked the storyteller if I could turn the tape back on to record that interesting tale. In contrast, one older woman asked me three times to turn the tape back on again as she had recalled something else she would like to tell me.
Due to prior knowledge of the women’s lives, some questions were not asked out of respect for their privacy and personal sensitivity. Sometimes within the community and family, the ‘insider’ relationship is disadvantaged. Particular pockets of information may not be elaborated upon, or conversely over emphasised. An ‘outsider’ anonymous in the community may be made privy to a differing rendition and provided with another perspective (Smith, 1999, p. 66).

Both the researcher and the narrator hold positions of ‘power’ in the interview process. The researcher has initiated the project and has specific information or a theme to be explored. At times the researcher may guide the narrator by interjecting with questions. This ensures the direction of the interview and that the dialogue recorded is pertinent to the interview. This is necessary to draw out the inter-active nature of oral history. This means that the researcher not only controls the flow of information but interprets the dialogue into a written text, the transcript, which highlights interpretations and biases relevant to the research topic (Ferrier, 1990, pp. 134-139 & Bauer, 1993, pp. 519-547). Conversely, the narrator has the information and the ‘power’ to choose how to respond and may give a ‘socially desirable’ answer (Fontana & Free 1994, pp. 364-376)
However, from my perspective as the researcher, I viewed my knowledge of and friendship with some of the women as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A further benefit was being introduced to the women I did not know by people whom they trusted. Yet, despite my ‘insider’ perspective, at times, with no prior knowledge or warning, questions asked, with all good intentions, hit on sensitive issues that the women did not wish to deal with or discuss. There was really no common denominator as to the topic or type of question.

As demonstrated in the above discussion, a major effort was made to understand the needs of the narrator and to recognise the potential for subjectivity and bias, when conducting the interviews.

Relationships - the politics of prior knowledge or preconceived ideas

“We are engaged in a direct social interaction, a mutual relationship. And that means we have to confront two subjectivities – our own and that of our narrators” (Gluck, 1994, p. 82).

In a small community there is a high probability that the researcher will personally know, or know something of the women who agree to be interviewed. That was the situation in my study. Being a long-term resident of the area, playing an active role in the community and being a member of numerous clubs and committees, I am a researcher on the ‘inside’. I found that with the women I did not know personally, I usually knew other family members or mutual friends or colleagues.

Previous knowledge or hearsay between the narrator and the interviewer runs the risk of creating expectations and preconceived ideas. The process of remembering and how the story is told may also be affected by ideas of each other. As the researcher, I was aware that I am in an advantaged position to be able to research the lives of other women. I am privileged by my acquaintances with these women and by my education, which has allowed me to undertake this research (Weiler 1999, p. 43).

I share mutual interests with most of the women in the study. We are women in a small northern community; this is our common and over riding bond. We either know each other or know of the other. Referred to as “cultural likeness”, Gluck (1984, p. 227) advocates that a higher rate of success will be achieved in the interview process if both parties can find a common bond (Gluck, 231-234). Thus where trust and respect are established, tensions and apprehensions can be alleviated, which may ensure a more in depth interview.
Transcribing the Interviews

The transcribing of the interviews was completed at my own home on. It was my privilege, as a researcher to have in my possession the women’s voices and their stories on tape. Transcribing the tapes was a lengthy process.

I became familiar with the women’s stories over time. Sections of some tapes were replayed and the transcripts were revisited numerous times, as I carefully undertook a scrutiny of the women’s stories. As part of the interpretative process, I have drawn on my own experiences where appropriate to assist my analysis. I used contemporary international, national and local debates as stating points to explore some of issues the women have grappled within the process of making the area their home. Just as the women in this study chose which information they would narrate to portray their stories for the purpose of my academic investigative study, as the researcher I have divulged selected information on my own perspective and experience. An example of this is the exchange of memories about specific places or events. This accentuates the multilayered interrelationships of residents of a small town.

The information was collated, similar and differing experiences noted, and then critiqued from a perspective that investigates ‘why’? Rather than reiterating what happened the events are placed in the context of the social climate and ideologies of the day. Upon analysis, notions of individual differences and experiences were apparent. The stories were explored to identify major themes of gender, identity, race, ethnicity, class and religion. In the main, these were placed in chronological order according to the decade the women arrived. For as Tuchman (1994, p. 306) said: "Any social phenomenon must be understood in its historical context".

Validating the Information

The following examples of practice demonstrate the ethical measures and the reciprocity arrangements made to give the best possible conditions for each woman to share her story and for protection of the individual. It became obvious to me that I needed to ask some of the women further questions to clarify and check points, names and spelling. This also provided an opportunity to change, delete or add any information they chose. It was also a way for me to give back something to the women. I did not offer the women copies of their tapes and no one has asked me for one. I posted most of the women their transcripts to give them privacy to read them.
Then I began the process of meeting with them again to check their responses and in some cases ask further questions. Most of the women did not make any changes to their transcripts. One non-English-speaking background migrant women must have spent many hours rearranging her story and her use of English grammar. Another Indigenous women deleted sections where she had referred to people that we both knew and maybe easily recognisable to those on the ‘inside’.

Although it has been recognised that oral history offers an alternative approach to accessing information that cannot be found in secondary sources, its validity has been questioned. The collecting of case histories using oral history is a controversial field of enquiry. Oral history is a subjective, interactive process between the researcher and the participant. The researcher takes a stance with the understanding that the process of gathering information, and the information received, is a representation, a version of the past, based on the narrator’s own experience and relationship to the past. The difficulty lies in interpretation, as each individual’s conception of the world is coloured by their view.

It is a methodological approach that has been scrutinised by some academics and historians who have raised queries relating to the reliability of the source (Gluck & Patai, 1991, Gluck, 1994, Thompson, Frisch & Hamilton 1994, Leydesdorff, Passerini & Thompson 1996 & Hamilton, 1996). This censure is based on the premise that many questions arise as to the validity of anecdotal evidence based on personal, subjective experiences. The narrators’ own biases, the validity of their accounts and the accuracy of their memory can all be questioned. Issues raised include the potential of narrators to rely upon memories, distort the truth knowing that the testimony will become a public document, tell the researcher only what they think the researcher wants to hear and include some information to the exclusion of other details.

Thomson et al (1994, p. 34) wrote of their concerns that the final product may not be what the narrator had anticipated and could be interpreted as being a breach of trust and confidence. They were also apprehensive about the use of selected sections of the transcript and argued that specific comments may be referred to and quoted but its use may differ from the narrator’s original intent. Such concerns have been alleviated in this particular study. I actually gave the women their transcripts and sought their comments and changes. As the researcher I collaborated with the women after the interviews to ensure their words spoken to me had been transcribed in the way they desired. I had a particular emphases or line of research which was the focus of the interpretive process. This was explained to the women, in that I was interested in recording their experiences of making a
remote locality home.

In my study it was ‘true’ that the women’s accounts of particular incidences and experiences of life in the area differ from other person’s accounts. It is also ‘true’ that there is no ‘simple’ or universal truth to a story. Stories are always from someone’s perspective; they are a personal representation. They are shaped, managed and modified over time. Some of the women’s renditions of events differed from my own memory of the same event. At times the tape was turned off as we discussed particular aspects of an event between ourselves, ‘off the record’ and then returned to the tape. These versions of stories have their place in the process of mythologising an experience as the stories are told and retold. This is the advantage of ‘insider researcher’
Conclusion

The women in this study were not treated as mere research objects or as a homogenous group. The researcher is a long-term resident of the area and the possibility of having day-to-day interactions with the women is not uncommon. These dynamics certainly place the researcher in an ‘insider’ position which would have differed if the women had been strangers or lived elsewhere.

I have examined my stance as a researcher in a small town and the complex web of interrelations I have with the women. The complexities of how stories are remembered, retold, relived and recorded have been outlined. This included the intricacies of being known and or knowing of the other, and the multifaceted layers that form relationships between the participants and the researcher working on the ‘inside’ in a small community. Techniques to maintain credibility when conducting research interviews in one’s home environment have been summarised.
References


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Bauer, 1993, pp. 519-547). Conversely, the narrator has the information and the 'power' to choose how to respond and may give a 'socially desirable' answer (Fontana & Free 1994, pp. 364-376)


