Perspectives of volunteer practitioners in a community of practice: analysis of interview transcripts and preliminary findings

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Abstract: The presentation will focus on the analysis of interview transcripts and discussion of the preliminary finding. The context of this study is breastfeeding education in the community. The objective of the research is to understand an under-theorised area of adult education in the community that is, to understand the role of volunteers through an exploration of their experiences and perspectives in the private everyday world, a space of collectively shared meaning making.

Through an interpretive, social constructionist methodology, this insider study interviewed twenty volunteer educators, including the researcher as a co-participant in the study. Traditionally, an interpretive study uses an inductive analysis. However, this insider study requires reflection of researcher assumptions. The issues of design for analysis will be discussed, the doubts, the dilemmas and the processes. Reflexive analysis will be adopted from a ‘voice-centred relational method’ (Mauthner and Doucet, 2000). Results of the analysis method and effects on preliminary findings will be discussed.

Key words: Methodology, reflexive analysis, preliminary results

The analysis of interpretive research data has undergone critique over the last decade. For instance, there is within feminism a new understanding of a non-unified subjectivity rather than unified identity. In terms of positive representation in the interview data the position accepts the “fragmental, conflicted, fluid and in flux” accounts of the story as it unfolds in the context the interaction (Bloom, 1998). Also, within recent times New Ethnography has articulated issues of researcher position as elitist, asking ‘are we exploiting participants in our studies’ (see Wolf, 1992). Further, there are issues of presenting an analysis that is fair, firm and friendly, towards the participant, and the other stakeholders in the study. Reflexivity is considered one way forward in this era of critique of interpretive studies.
Introduction
Assumptions of reflexivity suggest the written thesis can communicate alternate views of the social world depending on its presentation. Thus, it is accepted that the production of a written thesis is a social artefact influenced by researcher biography and her research culture. This study aimed for variation rather than consistency in the findings, in order to privilege the ‘voice’ of participants in line with the approach by British feminists Mauthner & Doucett (2000). The authors argue interpretation is fundamentally a political activity and, in this thesis, the researcher is not positioned as having a neutral position as in objectivist studies.

My research is an insider interpretive study with volunteers in a national self-help breastfeeding association and the participants are my peers. The aim of the study is an exploratory investigation of the experiences and perceptions of volunteer breastfeeding educators in community education. Currently, within the national self-help association there are 1,180 volunteer breastfeeding educators and 162 community educators attached to 370 local groups. Local groups provide meetings for mothers who wish to breastfeed. The volunteer educators also provide per year, 275,000 estimated free help-line telephone calls answered from their homes, across Australia. The national self-help association operates within a hierarchical model of association, in contrast to other self-help associations that develop local groups, modelled on democratic principles.

The insider study is a ‘study up’ rather than as typically in social science of ‘studying down’ as described by ethnographers Lofland and Lofland (1984) (Essed, 1992). This paper presents the interview data as researcher and participant as interdependent. The interviews are thus are co-constructed between the participant and researcher. The co-construction of data is interpreted during the interaction by drawing on the many ‘voices’ from the past of the participants and is thus a reproduction of reality. For example, culture in the interview is what is described through the many ‘voices’ the participant draws on that mirror the values of any community or society (Crotty, 1998).

Data analysis cannot be a discrete phase of the research and for this study analysis began as the transcripts became available. Thus, those things learnt at each interview were taken up in subsequent interviews. This would suggest that the data cannot be confined to the textual representations of transcripts and divorced from the situated ness of the participants and the conceptualisation of the study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Mauthner & Doucet, 2000). Finding ways for women to speak for themselves I have been inspired by feminist researchers Ribbens & Edwards, 2000 who write of the dilemmas for researchers of presenting the private and personal social worlds of women.

The dilemma of qualitative analysis for an insider study is how to be holistic to each participant’s text, adding variation in the findings. Adopting the ‘voice-centred relational method’ developed Mauthner and Doucet (2000) is an approach that is holistic and compatible with a comprehensive realist perspective which itself was inspired from workshops by Brown and Gilligan and their colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which has its roots in the interpretive and hermeneutic traditions (Mauthner
& Doucet, 2000). In contrast to objective or survey research that fragments the data/story and does not allow for drawing out deeper understandings. The individual phases of each transcript are read and marked to gain a holistic understanding rather than coding that would fragment the data. The authors note that the method is similar to qualitative analysis such as, ‘narrative analysis’ (see Riessman, 1993) and ‘grounded theory’ (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Thus, the approach articulated below is holistic and is compatible with a comprehensive realist perspective.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the method and to evaluate it in terms of an insider study. First, I summarise the method. Second, I present the method in phases with transcripts from participant Sally. Following, I present discussion of my brief analysis. Finally, I will offer some evaluation from the perspective of the current study. Further, I will touch on issues of interview data for a study of volunteer educators’ experiences and perspectives of their role in breastfeeding education in the community.

**Methodology**

“Voice-centred relational method” Mauthner and Doucet (2000) data analysis - reading with multiple purposes:

1. reading for the plot and for researcher responses to the stories
2. reading for the ‘voice’ by pronouns ‘I’ ‘we’ ‘you’
3. reading for relationships
4. placing people within cultural contexts and social structures

As mentioned there had been little time for analysis during the interview, as it was on the run, so to speak, and the reflective stage had to come later, when the transcript had been reduced and ‘read’ from various points. The ‘voice-centred relational’ method directs the researcher to ‘read’ from various points of the transcript looking for elements as per each phase shown above.

**Findings**

- Reading 1 has two elements to consider. As suggested by Mauthner and Doucet (2000) the first is a reading for overall plot to the narrative. Second, the researcher her own background, history and experiences as they relate to the participant (p. 126). I have to ask myself if there is dissonance in the account as I interact with the text that relates to my assumptions of my own practice and as I relate to how she relates to her practice.

**Sally’s transcript**

but yeah I don't have my kids with me anymore either
so I feel a little bit out of place sometimes.
But yeah no it is all right, I enjoy the day,
but I sometimes feel a bit disappointed I haven't been able to say hello to everybody I suppose.
Discussion

* The workload is becoming odious and Sally feels unsupported but not wanting to attribute blame.
* I am concerned Sally expects too much of herself
* I see her competence as a barrier to honest dialogue with her peers

There are cultural differences between us, we have experienced different training, and we live in different states of Australia. I have experienced her role but not recently, the context of the role has changed over time that adds to differences between us. Am I being more concerned than I should be as an older peer?

- **The second reading** - at this early stage of analysis is the “reader-response” phase that identifies the researcher in the text, which gains an understanding of how her own biography and background in relation to the participant is reflected in the interview (Mauthner and Doucet, 2000 p. 126). The reflexive element of the analyse is a vehicle for self examination of researcher assumptions and views such as personal, political or theoretical that will impact on the interpretation and presentation of the participants words (p. 127). Mauthner and Doucet (2000) suggest drawing on reflexive skills of ‘listening’ to the narrative to draw out the recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in the interview transcript (p. 126).

In terms of ‘listening’ to the participant’s voice to identify the space that is between the researcher and the words in the transcript the authors quote Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggesting, “…how she speaks of herself before we speak of her” (Mauthner and Doucet, 2000 p. 27-8). Highlighting the pronouns aims to identify how she perceives and experiences herself, which is the essence of a voice-centred relational method. In this phase I ran through or scanned the transcript and highlighted the ‘I’ ‘we’ or ‘you’ as personal pronoun statements in the transcript.

**Sally’s transcript** –
Natasha is the other one who is pregnant and everything is just too hard for her which I can appreciate, but when you have got three people saying oh when you have got a second can I have a word and you’re sitting on the couch talking to someone already and it just feels a little bit overwhelming and you can sort of think, and then as you are leaving someone says good bye and you think I haven't even said hello to her yet, so you feel a bit thin I suppose, a bit spread too far when it is such a big group,
Discussion

* Caught between two ‘voices’ of opposing positions, different viewpoints
  - 1. expectations of herself
  - 2. values of the organisation
* believes too much is happening and she is not meeting needs of all mothers
* trying to be non-judgemental of her peer and her behaviour

The aim of reading two was to identify how the participant “experiences, feels and speaks about herself” and how multi-layered voices, views and perspectives are identified rather than slotted into our own or the research literature categories (p. 130). I have highlighted the pronouns (I you we) Sally has used in this section of her story. There are shifts between the pronouns that show us Sally is struggling to say what she believes is a difficult situation for her role. Reading for pronouns was valuable for identifying the conflict Sally has in her role as a group leader that reflects on her commitment to being a volunteer. Sally is contradicting herself that highlights the emotion over the complexity of the role. I was able to concur with the authors that this method drew attention to the meanings, processes, relationships and contradictions which are central to the volunteer educator’s role (p. 130).

- **Reading 3**: reading for relationships
  This reading shows how the participant experiences the relationships. It is the relationships that frame the nexus or connections for volunteer educators in their roles. Using a pencil I traced the words about her peers and the mothers in the large group meeting.

Sally’s transcript –

“Natasha is the other one who is pregnant and everything is just too hard for her which I can appreciate, but when you have got three people saying oh when you have got a second can I have a word and you’re sitting on the couch talking to someone already and it just feels a little bit overwhelming and you can sort of think, and then as you are leaving someone says good bye and you think I haven't even said hello to her yet, so you feel a bit thin I suppose, a bit spread too far when it is such a big group” …

Discussion

* the story describes the dynamic context for her voluntary role. She has given herself a large workload which she conscientiously organises
* she is ambivalent in explaining her frustration at the situation she finds herself in
* she feels unsupported but not wanting to attribute blame

The plot of the story alerts me to her feelings about this encounter? Listening now to Sally identifies changes as she describes her relationships. Behind the story is a critique
she is not trained to express. The culture she comes from, the ethos of the self-help association does not critique peers. Some might say there is a tyranny or culture of empathy and niceness rather than training for conflict resolutions. The implications for the self-help association may be loss of a trained and active volunteer if not identified and accounted for in the volunteer work force.

-Reading 4: placing people within cultural contexts and social structures

Sally’s transcript with researcher question

Q. “So what do you mean they [the HP] could be too pro-breastfeeding?”

Sally …”I said I am just checking if there are any beds that don’t need a visit today, I asked just to check, she said oh don’t bother going to thirty one she didn’t even try, how pathetic and I thought oh you, I thought who is putting pressure on where here…”

Discussion
* Sally is discussing a topic that is taboo in terms of the ethos of the association
* Sally is giving an example of her frustration in a covert way of the system that constructs volunteers as pushy and of less status, feelings of powerless

Sally’s experiences are placed within broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts. This transcript shows the immediacy of the interview situation. This piece is from the end of the interview and we were obliged to finish then as Sally left to collect the children from school. I have to ask myself these questions, did she view the health professional in her story differently than I would, remembering that she has constructed this account for me a perceived peer, is this an accurate description? Behind the story is a critique Sally has been trained not to express. The culture and ethos of the self-help association does not allow critique of health professionals. Or is this a story telling us her feelings about this encounter? My own feelings are that Sally is finding this aspect of her role problematic. Volunteers are not accepted as part of the health system. They construct themselves as helpful but are not feeling supported in the wider breastfeeding community. Sally may believe that it is the volunteer who is given the heavy critique in breastfeeding education, unfairly.

Summary
* Privileges participants accounts
* Difficulties in terms of an insider study
* Emotionally involved with the participant
* Doesn’t allow for a step back from the data
* Attributions
Reflexive nature of the analysis is not easy but did offer one way into the data that for the researcher. I have found difficulties with this method in terms of an insider study. There is an issue of impartiality, of being emotionally involved with the situation or the participant that does not allow for a step back from the data.

Researcher concerns include the issue of “acceptable vocabulary” by participants. The volunteer research has been disproportionately driven by the variable ‘motivation’ in contrast to similar research with paid employee participants:

“interest in volunteer motivation is dominated by attempts to understand the volunteers’ choice to join organizations – with a virtual absence of concern for what motives volunteers’ actions once they are working (Pearce, 1993: 62 cited in (Dekker & Halman, 2003).

This situation has been identified in the volunteer literature (Bales, 1996) in terms of Attribution Theory. Attributions for volunteer literature are problematic however, as it is possible that being asked why one volunteer is not one single factor – there may be changes in the motivation over time and without reflexivity these may be deep and unacknowledged by the participant. For example the act of “being asked” why volunteer seems to “…drives attention away from general motivations to social networks” such as participating in church attendance (p. 5) that may be a socially acceptable answer.

Attributions however, can be understood in ‘Membership Categorization Devices’ (see Freebody, 2003) that are not consistent in interview data in contrast to cognitive psychology (p. 162). Freebody understands attributions are “structural relations between categories” (p. 162). Summarising the categorization of everyday talk Freeboy also understands people vary their categorical descriptions. Further, the research interview is where people draw on who they ‘are’ and who the other persons they describe ‘are’, relevant to using multiple categories. Last, cultural membership categories are most often maintained throughout the interaction orientated to the ‘here and now’ of the situated ness of the interview (Freeboy, 2003). It would seem that taking the interview data at face value may be problematic in terms of a feminist relational perspective focused on ‘voice’ of women.

Recent critique of interview data suggests a realist position cannot be maintained in interpretive studies. In terms of stories as they are told to researchers (see (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000) the hidden meanings in the stories may become part of the analysis for this insider study.

Conclusion
This paper has endeavoured to demonstrate the reflective method of the ‘voice-centred relational method’ of Mauthner and Doucet (2000) developed from Brown and Gilligan and their colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that has its roots in the interpretive and hermeneutic traditions. I was able to concur with the authors that this method drew attention to the meanings, processes, relationships and contradictions which
are central to the volunteer educator’s role (Mauthner & Doucet, 2000). The approach is holistic and is compatible with a comprehensive realist perspective. In contrast to objective or survey research that fragments the data/story and does not allow for drawing out deeper understandings. But, issues of researcher emotionality were identified in the summary of the method in terms of an insider study. Also issues of attributions that require a further theoretical perspective. Important for an insider study in the relational method and identified in the participant words is how she perceived and experienced herself that is, the emphasis on ‘voice’ of the participant, that has not been resolved for this current insider study.

Bibliography


