

WALKING THROUGH UNKNOWN TERRAINS: A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH OF BEING AN OUTSIDER QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER ON BOTH ENDS

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ABSTRACT

I did not really fit into the villages where I did a deep insider research. This appeared uncharacteristic given that the villagers' native language was the same as mine and I was studying the culture that I already knew in part and had experienced. Despite being part of the Western PhD practice at Deakin University (Australia) where I still maintained primary residence in Botswana, I was not fully acculturated to Australian academe culture-I still was not Western. Premised on this multi-layered experience, this paper is devoted to discussing the processes and outcomes of doing a deep insider social constructionist research by a researcher who is an outsider on both ends. Written in the first person narrative, the main objective of this study is to share methodological insights, challenges and other related experiences of being an "outsider" doing a deep insider PhD qualitative research and offer advice to other researchers who may find themselves in the same situation as I was.

Keywords: Deep Insider Research, Insider Researcher, Outside Researcher, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Despite being privy to Razavi's (1993) contention that even when anthropologists work in their own communities they are seldom complete insiders, and my supervisors' insistence that I was not a complete insider researcher, I was not convinced that I was not a complete insider researcher. How can I not be a complete insider researcher when I am studying people who have the same nationality as me, speak the same language as me, and whose culture overlaps with my own? I wondered. However, once I was in the field, reality started to confront me. The events and experiences of my first two weeks in the field copiously made me understand and appreciate the fact that indeed I was not a complete insider researcher. I was doing a qualitative social constructionist research studying the communication processes of diabetes health promotion practitioners in two remote villages in Botswana. My study followed the completion of initial readings and design of a PhD research project which I was doing with Deakin University in Australia.

Two main issues prompted the inception of this study. The first problem concerned the differences in cultures, ways of communication and lifestyles between diabetes health promoters and the villagers. Diabetes health campaigns in remote villages were planned, organized and implemented by the Diabetes Association of Botswana (DAB) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) officials. The MoH is a government health department, while the DAB is a not-for-profit, voluntary, apolitical and autonomous Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) registered with the Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (Diabetes Association, 2012). As such, diabetes health promoters comprised mainly urban-based educated Batswana (Batswana means people of Botswana), foreigners and some educated village-based health professionals such as local nurses and Family Welfare Educators (FWE).

The second problem was that while diabetes health promoters were the social and educated elites, and had varied and advanced means of sharing and acquiring information, including having access to modern communication systems which afforded them social and economic advantages, remote villagers on the other hand were illiterate, poor and mainly acquired and shared information through interpersonal means of communication. Given the problems that usually occur when people from different social backgrounds communicate, I speculated that the socio-cultural differences between diabetes health promotion practitioners and remote villagers could serve as major hindrances to the successes of diabetes campaigns. Because of their relatively higher social, academic and economic statuses. I speculated that those diabetes health promoters could be disseminating diabetes campaign messages from the ambit and assumptions of their own cultures, as well as their relative and apparent expert and elitist positions with little regard for the villagers' unique characteristics and lifestyles. In the light of this, I decided to study the communication processes of diabetes campaign information through a research that Edwards (1999) describes as "get in-get the data-get out or a deep insider research; that is, I used a participant observation method.

The Insider/Outsider Researcher

According to Unluer (2012), an insider researcher studies a social group to which they belong. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) concur with Unluer (2012) when they posit that an insider researcher shares characteristics, roles or experiences with the participants who they are studying. Furthermore, Greene (2014) submits that an insider researcher is a researcher who is doing a research in an organization or social group to which they are members. There are notable similarities and correlations between by Unluer's (2012), Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) and Greene's (2014) explanations of an insider researcher. For instance, all of them posit that an insider researcher is a researcher who is doing a research study in a cultural group to which they are members. In that kind of research, the researcher shares cultural traits and experiences with the research subjects. In some cases, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) confirm, there may be commonalities in roles played by the researcher and the subjects. On the issue of outsider researcher, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) postulate that an outsider researcher does not share any commonalities with participants in the study. If an insider researcher studies a socio-cultural group to which they are members, and an outsider researcher studies a cultural group with which they do not share roles, characteristics and statuses, it then begs the question: What is an insider research? Edwards (1999) posits that an insider research is a participant observation or variation of the same where the researcher is part of the group for some extended period of time.

Edwards (1999) calls this kind of research a "get in-get the data-get out" or a "deep inside research". It is worth noting that in the insider research, the researcher could be an insider, outsider or both. What is paramount for this type of research, is that the researcher lives in the case study community for an extended period. According to Edwards (1999), the period the researcher can live with the research community can be weeks, months or years. In the light of the above, in my PhD research, I employed a participant observation method and lived in my research sites. As a result, it could be argued that my research was purely a deep insider research or a "get in-get the data-get out" if Edward's (1999) expression can be borrowed. Also, based on Unluer's (2012), Greene's (2014) and Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) theorising of insider researcher, I considered myself a complete insider researcher when I began my PhD research in the two villages. As indicated in the background section, I derived the conviction that I was a complete insider researcher from the fact that I was studying people who have the same nationality as me, speak the same language as me, and whose culture overlaps with my

own. Unluer (2012) postulates that researchers take on diverse member roles when they are in the research field. These could be a complete membership of the group being studied (insider researcher) or a complete stranger (an outsider). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) on the other hand categorise member research roles into three-complete membership, complete stranger or partly both. They theorise that the characteristics and statuses of the researcher in relation to those participating in the study is an important aspect of an investigation. This is the case because the researcher's membership in the group being studied has a direct influence on both data collection and analysis (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Because of the relationship between the status of the researcher in the collection and analysis of data, it is important for a researcher doing ethnographic studies to clarify their roles in order to make their research credible (Unluer 2012). It is in consideration of this fact that I sought to clarify my statuses relative to my subjects' before I embarked on my PhD research.

In the Field: Participant Observation Fieldwork

Upon completion of the preparatory phases of research design, study, supervision and a successful colloquium, an official approval to conduct field work research was granted. In the field, I employed participant observation method to study the communication processes of diabetes health promotion in terms of publicity and advertising of diabetes health messages, involvement of the villagers in the communication processes, levels of verbal and non-verbal interactions between health promotion practitioners and the villagers, and indeed other related communication processes. I conducted participant observation fieldwork in two phases, with each phase running for two months. All in all, I did participant observation over a period of four months. Based on Devereux and Hoddinott (1992), Brockington and Sullivan's (2003), suggestions on the roles of a participant observer, I participated in daily activities, interactions and events in the communities and watched what the villagers did in all their communicative and interactive actions such as talking, laughing, dancing, joking and much more. I also observed the villagers' social and economic activities, including their physical activities, smoking, drinking and eating habits, the food they ate and the way they cooked. The villagers' gender roles, religious beliefs, and power relations in families and public institutions such as churches were also observed. Generally speaking, I observed all the political, economic, and cultural processes in the villages in order to learn about the communities' cultures and worldviews.

Most importantly, diabetes health wellness talks in the local clinics were observed. Given that culture (traditional customs and values) can play a big role in the spread and or prevention of diabetes, I was interested in finding out how the cultural activities and orientations of the villagers contributed or could contribute to the villagers' health behaviours. The primary aim of observing diabetes health wellness talks was to study the communication processes of diabetes health promotion practitioners. Those communication processes were studied in terms of whether or not they were aligned with the socio-cultural and political contexts of remote villagers in the paragraph above. One of the foci of my research was Intercultural Communication which itself was born out of the realization that remote villagers had socio-economic and political circumstances which were different from those of the people who communicated diabetes health messages to them. I therefore used participant observation to enable me to find out how the ways in which diabetes health promoters engaged remote villagers in dialogical processes and presented diabetes education messages rhetorically and in writing, were embedded in and influenced by the cultural codes, meanings, and values of remote rural area people. Learning from Lupton (1992), these cultural codes included: communication practices, community rules and traditions, health beliefs, socio-economic

practices, gender roles, and many other factors that made up the framework of their everyday living. Participant observation enabled me to acquire knowledge about the cultures of remote villagers, and that knowledge proved to be useful during the interpretation and analysis of data. It was instrumental in determining whether or not the communication processes of diabetes health promoters were situated within remote villagers' socio-cultural and political contexts. It also helped me to determine the appropriateness of the communication approaches, strategies and the main campaign issues for diabetes health promotion in remote villages. Observation centred around the health talks that were held in the local clinics every morning, and some campaigns by the Diabetes Association of Botswana. Observing a number of health talks and the campaigns helped to unveil multiple truths about the social, cultural and political circumstances of remote villagers, their communication processes, and the communication processes of diabetes health promoters in those villages.

Preparatory work for participant observation involved making preliminary visits to the research sites. The main aim of those preliminary visits was to create social networks with the villagers so as to preclude or minimize tensions, anxiety and uncertainties that could potentially occur between me and the villagers during fieldwork. The importance of making a preliminary visit to the field is emphasized by Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Leslie and Storey (2003). Leslie and Storey (2003) and Lofland and Lofland (1995) posit that a preliminary visit to the field has practical and methodological advantages in that: it affords the researcher an opportunity to create social and academic networks, and make fieldwork logistics in advance. Indeed making preliminary visits to the research sites worked for my research study. The preliminary visits enabled me to learn about village life in advance, be formally introduced to the village leadership, and gain official permission to conduct research in the villages, make some initial observations, and generally become orientated to the villages. They also enabled me to explain my situation to the villagers during the formal introductions, and show the villages' leadership supporting documents from Deakin University and a letter of approval to conduct research from the Botswana government.

Furthermore, preliminary visits helped me to identify and negotiate with potential cultural brokers, commonly referred to as research assistants. The identified cultural brokers were local teachers who had some basic understanding about research and sufficient knowledge about the research communities. The choice of local assistants was based on Devereux and Hoddinott's (1993) assertion that local assistants have knowledge about the community and can facilitate access to research participants and identification of key informants. Most importantly, Devereux and Hoddinott (1993) argue that research assistants who are drawn from the research community help researchers become accepted into the community. However, Devereux and Hoddinott (1993, p. 27) warn that even though local assistants may be helpful in many ways, "they have local affiliations and interests to protect, of which the fieldworker as an outsider may not be aware of".

In an endeavour to take heed of Devereux and Hoddinott's (1993) warning and avoid problems that could be caused by cultural brokers 'unprofessional behaviours, I held open discussions with the cultural brokers on various research ethical issues and expectations prior to fieldwork. During these discussions, the need to avoid doing anything that would compromise the quality of the data was emphasized. I was aware of the fact that people can be fickle and have investments of many different kinds, and that this could apply to my assistants. I therefore considered that simply talking to the assistants about what was expected of them might not be enough. As a result, I closely monitored and supervised them throughout the fieldwork to ensure that they did their work professionally and did not compromise the quality of data.

Subjective Experiences, Insights and Challenges in the Field

In the field, important lessons were learnt. Some were positive and others were negative. As stated in the section above, fieldwork was conducted in a period of four months. At the time of designing the study and prior to conducting fieldwork, the question of the adequacy of the time allocated for fieldwork or lack thereof kept on nagging me. However, I realised while in the field that conducting participant observation in this time frame was appropriate because as a Motswana (a citizen of Botswana), I was studying a culture I already knew in part and had experienced. I did not need to spend time acquainting myself with the physical and social layout of my research sites. I also did not need to study nuances in etiquette as I already knew those from my encounters with remote communities in the past. Most importantly, I was studying people whose native language was the same as mine. Finding the research timeframe adequate confirmed Bernard's (2002) contention that "a lot of participant observation studies are done in a matter of weeks or a few months" and that long time fieldwork studies are in most cases caused by delays in studying the culture and language of the research community prior to actually starting fieldwork activities.

Pearce and Croven (2009) argue that people live in pluralistic worlds and construct multiple truths rather than a singular one. Indeed participant observation helped me to unearth a number of truths about the social, cultural and political circumstances of remote villagers and their communication processes. Those were a stark opposite of my experiences and they showed me that I was not a complete insider researcher. My experiences about the pluralistic words of the villagers showed me that I was some kind of a hybrid researcher who was both an insider and outsider. I was an insider because I was studying people who had the same nationality as myself, and spoke the same language as me. I was also an insider because I had some prior knowledge and experiences about remote villagers and was studying a culture that overlapped with my own. As observed by Unluer (2012), some of the advantages of being an insider researcher include speaking the same insider language, understanding local values and taboos and knowing the formal and informal power structure. Even though I enjoyed all the perks of being an insider, my social status relative to the villagers' made me an outsider.

Being an outsider presented me with some serious challenges. For example, during the initial stages of fieldwork in all the research communities, the villagers were visibly suspicious and uneasy about my presence in the villages. They avoided verbally interacting with me and were always staring at me. This made me very uncomfortable. However, after some time, they started accepting me and even socializing with me. It seems that the situation could have been worse if I had not done preliminary visits to the research sites and if I did not have cultural brokers. By not being only an insider despite my existing knowledge of the communities and speaking the same language as them supports Razavi's (1993, p. 160) argument that "even when anthropologists work in their own societies, they are rarely complete insiders". My study confirmed the importance of using a cultural broker for an outsider researcher. Having local assistants who were always seen with me especially at the start of the fieldwork helped me a great deal. They facilitated my access to research participants and identification of key informants. Most importantly, and as Devereux and Hoddinott (1993) would attest, my research assistants helped me to become accepted into the community. As a man, I did not experience any difficulty hanging out with other men and being accepted by them especially after the initial stages of the fieldwork. But because the cultural brokers were females, they had a natural role to hang out with women. As a result, I used them as informants within the setting and they helped me to gain access to the women in the setting; that is, in situations where as a man I could not work with the women, cultural brokers worked with them women on my behalf. Even

though I had intended to only do participant observation, I made an important discovery while in the field. It suddenly occurred to me that there were some aspects of the culture of the villagers that I could not learn through observations such as beliefs and health practices. I therefore decided to hang out with key informants such as community leaders, teachers, civil servants, traditional healers, church ministers, traditional healers, herbalists, diviners, and civil servants in order to learn unobservable cultural aspects through interpersonal communication. I also hung out with key informants in communicative events such as weddings, pubs, public assemblies, churches, local clinics, concerts and other events. During such times, I observed and listened to what they said about various issues, including health in general and diabetes in particular. Because I was not a complete insider, I was unable to identify key informants to learn the unobservable aspects the cultures of the villagers. As a result, the cultural brokers helped me with the identification of those key informants.

As observed in the section above, I lived within the research sites for the entire period of fieldwork. Living within the research sites satisfied and confirmed Bernard's (2002) observation about the advantages of the researcher living within the research site. Just as Bernard (2002) notes, living within the research sites enabled me to spend a lot of time observing and recording everyday events and interactions, hanging out with the villagers, being fully involved in community activities, and becoming conspicuous. In fact, I was able to collect research data any time and any day, something that I would not have achieved if I did not live within the research sites. Also, as Leslie and Storey (2003) observe, living within the research communities put me in a position to appreciate all the communities' cultural issues and contexts for data.

CONCLUSION

As subtly shown in the discussion above, this study confirmed that people have distinct sets of personal and social viewpoints about the way the world works or should work, and that those viewpoints provide frameworks through which they make sense of the world as they experience it. To put it differently, and as Lock and Strong (2010) opine, people's personal ideas about how the world works determine how they behave; how they relate to each other; what information they consider important; how they live their daily lives; and generally how they fit into the world. This study has also confirmed Pearce and Croven (2009) pronouncement on the role of a researcher conducting research based on a qualitative social constructionist approach. They opine that social constructionist researchers see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. They further argue that the curiosity of such researchers emanates from the fact that they deal with individuals acting out their lives under ever-changing conditions. It also originates from the fact that they are participants rather than spectators. Indeed during fieldwork, I was curious because I became alive to the fact that the people I was dealing with devised multiple truths rather than a singular one. As such, I could not predict with accuracy what next they would say or do; hence my curiosity.

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