Ethnography and Practice Based Research

Alison White
University of Liverpool Management School. EMail:-Alison.White@liverpool.ac.uk
Phd student. Supervisors, Professor Laura McAllister and Dr. Michael Cole.

NB This paper is a work in progress as the author is undertaking ethnography and practice based research whilst completing a part time PhD.

INTRODUCTION

This paper enters the contemporary debate of ethnography and practice based research and the opportunities and challenges including political and ethical dilemmas encountered by those engaged in the process. Drawing upon a case study of the author's experiences whilst undertaking an employer- funded part time PhD in a field where the author has worked as a practitioner for a considerable period, it examines the design and conduct of the practice based research, assumptions made at the start of the journey and the sense-making that occurs along the way, seeking to critically reflect upon objectivity, neutrality and standpoint throughout.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES - Which is which?

Whilst perceived as an "opportunity" for the employee when an employer funds their research, the challenges that occur from the start of the process should not be overlooked and it is the responsibility of the researcher to adopt strategies to ensure their research methodology is robust enough recognises these issues, to allow critical reflection upon the objectivity of their findings and to deal with the political and ethical dilemmas that present themselves. This paper will explore some of these dilemmas and potential mechanisms for dealing with them.

The research topic undertaken is "Effective English Governance", considering what lessons learned from the devolution process could be applied to English Governance going forward. As a case study, the author has chosen to build on their earlier research on Metropolitan Transport Governance, given that the Local Transport Act of 2008 has triggered the biggest review of transport governance in twenty years. As a practitioner in the field, this allows unique access to data sets, professionals in the field and specific experience as the governance review on transport is taking place in "real-time".

The paper will discuss how "reality" does not end there. The governance review of transport, the research, case study and the practitioners employment do not exist in a vacuum, nor in isolation but in the context of a complex political dimension at many levels; a forthcoming general election, the potential political impact of a change of governance to local transport and the "politics" of employment. For with serious critical research underway which may

critically reflect upon the existing governance and practices within ones area of employment, renders the practitioner a very different creature to those around them.

POLITICS AND ETHICS - Can an 'insider' (aka ethnographer undertaking practice-based research) see either clearly?

During practice-based research when the practitioner considers the actions of their peers from a very different and critical point of view and under intense scrutiny, this can challenge their own perceptions as an "employee" from their watch as a "researcher" aiming for objective academic rigour whilst maintaining ethical standards. Yet can they see clearly or are their own perceptions skewed by their own experience? Just how critically reflective can they be?

The paper will further explore how "ethics" are especially challenging and double edged in ethnographic practice based research, as they apply not only to the academic approach taken to the subjects interviewed for example, but the "ethics" faced by an employee's "duty" to their employer.

Observation without participation is not possible as a practitioner, who still has a job to do which in this case involves interacting with those involved in formulating a process for a governance review and considering the findings objectively. This presents a dilemma in objectivity in itself for those involved in their own review - the "turkeys voting for Christmas" scenario, and becomes even more of an objectivity challenge for the researcher/practitioner to step back and perform a critical review of outputs, whilst still engaged with peers on a daily basis on more mundane matters.

Whilst an agreement at the start of the process can determine "ownership" of the work rests with the practitioner and there will be no intervention or advance view of the case study's findings, there is inevitably a benevolent "interest," retained by their employer in the practitioner's research - also seen as their investment, as they are in fact the "sponsor".

The paper will provide an analysis of the dilemmas encountered so far and the success or otherwise of the strategies employed to deal with them, whilst recognising a flexible approach will be required along with continued critical reflection to deal with the further inevitable political and ethical dilemmas that occur as the research continues.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES - What a difference a May makes.

The paper will explore the challenges faced when the initial trajectory of the planned research is influenced by outside political and practical challenges such as the general election, a change of government leading to a turbulent and uncertain economic, legislative and political environment. Methodologies and plans from the outset need to be flexible and adaptable to cope with changed approaches, whilst still focusing on the research problem - as a background, the research environment in practice based research is conducted may be subject to considerable change.

SENSE MAKING - Analysis - objectivity and explanation.

If "objectivity" is a theme throughout for the practice-based researcher, then so too is "explanation" and the notion of "reality". The paper will explore the challenges of analysis for the ethnographer and the approaches taken to "sense-making" of findings.

CONCLUSION - Insights and recommendations

The paper will aim to bring together the findings of the ethnographer during the course of their research and consider how far the methodologies chosen at the start have stayed in place throughout the work and whether strategies employed to deal with challenges along the way, ensuring rigour in sense-making and analysis have produced some fruitful inside into practice, to complement the primary aim of the research

References

Bailey, C., 1996, *Field Research.* Pine Ford Press, London.

Blaikie, N., 2007, *Approaches to Social Enquiry, 2nd edition.* Polity Press, Cambridge.

Brannan, M., Pearson, G., and Worthington, F., 2007, 'Ethnographies of Work and the Work of Ethnography.' *Ethnography,* Vol. 8, No. 4, pp.395-402.

Brewer, J., 2004, 'Ethnography,' pp. 312-322, in Cassell, C., and Symon, G., eds, 2004, *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisations Research,* Sage, London.

Cassell, C., and Symon, G., eds, 2004, *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisations Research,* Sage, London.

Clegg, S.R. and Rhodes, C., eds, 2006 *Management Ethics - Contemporary Contexts,* Routledge, London.

Deacon, R., 2006, *Devolution in Britain Today, 2nd edition,* Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Delanty, G., and Strydom, P., eds, 2003, *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings.* Open University Press, Maidenhead.

Devine, F., 2002, 'Qualitative Methods,' pp.197-215 in Marsh, D., and Stoker, G., eds, 2002, *Theory and Methods in Political Science, 2nd edition.* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Docherty, I., 2003a 'Transport and the impacts of multi-layered governance.' *Journal of Transport Geography*, Vol.12, No. 2, pp.169-170.

Ferdinand, J., Pearson, G., Rowe, M. and Worthington, F., 2007 'A different kind of ethics,' *Ethnography,* Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 519-543.

Goddard, D., 1973, 'Max Weber and the Objectivity of Social Science.' *History and Theory,* Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 1-22.

Hammersley, M., 1995, *Taking Sides in Social Research: Essays in Partisanship and Bias.* Routledge, London in May, T., 2001, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process, 3rd edition.* Open University Press, Maidenhead.

May, T., 1999, 'Reflexivity and Sociological Practice.' Vol. 4, No. 3. *Sociological Research Online.* Viewed 9th May, 2010.
http://www.socresonline.org.uk.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/4/3/may.html

May, T., 2001, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process, 3rd edition.* Open University Press, Maidenhead.

Weber, M., 1904, '"Objectivity" in Social Science,' pp. 107-120 in Delanty, G., and Strydom, P., eds, 2003, *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings.* Open University Press, Maidenhead.