White, Anglo-Celtic male - Black, Melanesia female: a valid research situation?

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Abstract

The issue of power relationships and power gradients between researcher and researched are significant considerations in the conduct of qualitative fieldwork. The validity of responses to questions asked as well as the possibility of the appropriation of information gained are areas for serious consideration. Personal relationships are another area of concern for some researchers as objectivity can also questioned. Personal relationships, cultural and gender difference need not be obstacles to good qualitative research. Indeed they can work to ensure truthfulness and objectivity to the responses of the researched person in some situations.

Introduction

Ethical issues and research fieldwork into development issues regarding the *other* are inseparable; the *other*, being someone different to the researcher in ethnicity, race, creed or gender or any combination of these. What risks might the person or persons being researched be exposed to when the researcher belongs to a different culture, a different gender and seeks to inquire into the life of someone so different? Fieldwork can expose the researched person to intimidation and exploitation due to power relationships that exist between the researcher and the subject (England 1994). There is an assumption that the researcher has more control over the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In relation to women, there is an assumption that when women in developing communities are researched, the ethical sensitivities are intensified and, this ethical sensitivity is further heightened when the research is cross-gendered (Scheyvens and Leslie 2000).

My research into issues regarding Melanesian women has required women to determine from their own perceptions and experiences, whether they feel that the Diocese of Aitape, which occupies the eastern half of Sandaun Province, in the north-west of mainland Papua New Guinea and/or the Catholic Church has provided an environment where women can be empowered. This research involved asking the women to reflect on their lives and to reflect on what they knew of the lives of their mothers and grandmothers, and to decide if their own lives were different. Are their lives better, and if so can this be attributed in any way to the Diocese of Aitape and/or to the Catholic Church?

The research was conducted independently of the Diocese of Aitape and the Catholic Church and was initiated and conducted by myself, the author. My experience, as a white, Anglo-Celtic, Australian male inquiring into the lives and experiences of Melanesian women, on face value could be described as a

problematic situation. I believe, however, what has occurred has been a mutually beneficial experience based on reciprocal trust and respect resulting from familiarity and friendships developed during my extended period of close association with, and commitment to the people and to their community prior to the research, during the field work and since.

Before conducting my fieldwork I lived and worked for over two years with the people who subsequently became the subjects of my research. With my wife and my nine-year-old daughter and eleven year old son, I lived in a remote location of Papua New Guinea where my children were the first white children that the majority of the population had ever seen and our family was the first white family of father, mother and children to live amongst these people. We were parents and children rather than religious missionaries, priests and nuns and brothers, or lay missionaries who were the previous 'whiteskins' that these people had known. In this respect we, as a family, were more like the locals than our white predecessors. During this time my children interacted freely with the local children and my wife and I developed close relationships and friendships many of which remain some ten years on. All of us have been able to return in the years since to renew our friendships and relationships.

My fluency in Melanesian Pigin, Tok Pisin, the lingua franca of Papua New Guinea has also added to the validity of my research. The fact that I can speak directly to non-English speaking participants without the need for an interpreter helps to build and to maintain a relationship. Because I am familiar with the local situation I also understand much of the colloquial language and nuances, which I could and did often use thereby making the interview a more comfortable and conversational event.

Positionality, Subjectivity and Reciprocity

In the relationship between a researcher and the person or persons being researched, positionality, subjectivity and reciprocity are issues which are two-way in their action. By this I mean that the relationship is, and should be, a dynamic relationship, dependant upon the two parties interacting with one another during the research. Consequently I will discuss the three issues together.

A white-skinned male of Western cultural origin researching issues pertaining to women in Melanesia could be problematic. It could be difficult gaining the confidence of women and the acceptance of both the women and the men to allow me to have time to spend with women asking questions and gathering information. Interaction with women could raise suspicions and jealousies amongst the men. I would have to obtain not just the acceptance and consent of the women but also where necessary, that of her husband, father, brother or candre, whichever was applicable for the individual female participant. It is the candre who benefits from the bride price received when a girl marries hence he has a particular interest in whom the girl has relationships with as her worth in terms of bride price can be based upon interest shown in her as well as what knowledge and abilities she is known to have.

The important reciprocal, obligatory and responsorial relationships between men and unmarried women are not a simple father to daughter or brother to sister relationship (Mantovani 1990). Such relationships can extend beyond the immediate family and the predominant 'candre' relationship in the Diocese of Aitape is between an unmarried woman and her mother's eldest brother. A male researcher researching women would need to be mindful of these issues, not just for his personal well-being but also for the consequences that contact with him could potentially have for the women with whom he was involved.

The social structures and relationships of a Melanesian community are well known to its members but can easily be offended by the unknowing outsider. My situation as a white-skinned male was mitigated by my awareness of the complexities of existing social relationships. Even though I did not necessarily understand the intricacies of these relationships I was at least aware of them and of the need to 'tread' warily.

In ethnography Morse and Richards (2002) claim that because culture has so much assumption, belief and behaviour embedded in it, researchers must be from outside the culture if any comparisons they make are to be valid. The researcher must have the etic (an outsider's) perspective and explore the phenomena within the cultural context by obtaining information from members of the culture. The information is obtained via the emic (an insider's) perspective. This methodology is also valid when comparing sections within a predominant culture (Morse and Richards 2000). When I asked the participants in my research to compare their lives with the lives of their mothers and of their grandmothers, I was asking them to compare changes in culture and to provide the emic perspective while I as the researcher from outside of the culture and the gender, could bring the etic perspective.

The power relationship between the researcher and the researched was a very real concern for me in the conduct of my fieldwork interviews. This potential power relationship could be expressed through several sites including gender, education and ethnicity. In Melanesian society power is vested very strongly in the male, and women rarely have an opportunity to voice an opinion or to be seen to be in a position of holding knowledge that could be useful (Mantovani 1990; Mandie 1983; Beben 1990). A power gradient between myself as the researcher, and the participants could also be a problem in the manner in which Melanesian people in this area defer to white people as being more knowledgeable and indeed superior beings (Scheyvens, Scheyvens and Novack, 2003).

If informants agreed to be informants simply because they felt they could not object to being such, this could jeopardise the integrity of the data. If a woman felt threatened or intimidated by being interviewed by a white male and/or if she felt unease due to the reaction which others may have to her close proximity to a white male, then the quality of the data gained may be questionable. Overcoming the potential problem of my gender and race could be achieved by having someone other than myself, perhaps a Melanesian

woman, interview the informants. This, however, would mean me surrendering ownership of the fieldwork process, an option that did not appeal to me.

Alternatively I could invite participants whom I felt confident would not feel threatened by me in the role of interviewer and whose communities, families and spouses (where applicable) would also see my presence and investigations, after explanation of the activity, as a non-threatening activity. To merely adopt a supplicant role in relation to the participants as suggested by Cotterill (1992) would be insufficient in this situation to overcome the perceived difference in power. Besides, as Cotterill (1992) points out, the real power in a research relationship is beyond the fieldwork.

The real power in research is in the writing of the research result. The writing must fairly and accurately reflect the data as well as the research relationship. This aspect of the research is not dependant upon gender, race or ethnicity but upon the integrity of the writer. When writing the research results, the essence of the interview and the circumstances in which the interview and data gathering took place must be preserved intact. Drafts can be returned to participants to check if what is written is how they recall the data which could also be seen to be a reciprocal act, and also ensure that what England (1994) calls textual appropriation does not occur. Another way of ensuring reciprocity in research is to use quotations and provide attribution of specific data (England 1994). England also says that whatever steps are taken to ensure the integrity of the end product, it is ultimately the construct and responsibility of the researcher. For my part, I asked the participants if they had any concerns about me writing and perhaps publishing my findings from the research. The only response I received was that I should do so. For as one woman said to me, '*Em tingting na save bilong yu nau John*', (it's your thoughts/ideas and knowledge now John).

It was critical that the participants understood that I as the researcher only had my observations and my questions. They had the knowledge, the experience and the answers. A number of the women who participated in the interviews expressed their pleasure at the opportunity to speak about their lives and their reflections on the Diocese and the Church and indicated that they also gained from the experience. That a man would show an interest in the opinions of women was also something appreciated by many of the women and a number of them thanked me specifically for both the opportunity to speak and for showing the interest.

> '*Thank you for inviting me to speak with you John....I am very happy to help you with your work for women*' (a participant).

My gender in the interview situation was not so much a problem for, as Caplan (1993) explains, gender is not something in itself, but what is important in the research is the dialogical relationship. The previously established relationships between myself and the other participants in the research enabled the interviews to be very conversational, providing a two-way dialogue which in

most instances allowed both myself and the other person to hear themselves speak. A number of the women asked me for my opinion or asked me if what they had told me was similar or otherwise to how things are where I am from. An example of such an exchange is in relation to violence by men towards women. I was asked if men where I come from are violent to their wives. I was able to inform the participant that gender related violence is common in my culture and it is not confined to Melanesian culture. Such exchanges provided the opportunity for both reflection and for reciprocal benefit through the sharing of our own experiences.

Having lived within the Diocese of Aitape with my family for almost two and a half years and then later without my family for a further twelve months, I know many people. Many of these people are very close friends to myself and to my wife and children. Many are people with whom I have shared both sorrow and joy, who are the parents of children with whom my children spent days and weeks at a time in their villages being cared for by their friend's parents. These are people who have asked me to name their children and who have named numerous children after myself and my wife and my children. These are people who have been overjoyed to see my family members, as we have been to see them, on subsequent visits to their villages. It was therefore from this group of people that I chose my participants for positionality in research is not just how you, the researcher feels, but also about how the researched see the researcher (Cupples 2002).

The choosing of participants from among those to whom I am known and many of whom are well known to me, raises the issue of friendships between the researched and the researcher. I considered the issue from the ethical perspective of whether I was taking advantage of a friendship, distant or otherwise, to gain easy access to information. Being known to each other at the beginning of the interview negated the need for what Cotterill (1992) calls *the art of impression management*. This is when people in unfamiliar situations and environments feel the need to manage their own conduct. Being known to one another helped to dispel this practice although the process of the interview still needed to be explained to participants. Oakley's (1981) point regarding reciprocity in research interviews may indeed be assisted by the absence of a artificial exchange that may occur when participants find themselves in unfamiliar roles with unfamiliar people (Cotterill 1992; Oakley 1981; Cornwall 1984). By knowing the participants and their environment, I was able to conduct the interviews in a relaxed manner for the comfort of the participant and in an environment of their choosing.

Cotterill (1992)) raises the issue of how the researcher is viewed when interviewing friends. Is the researcher a friend doing research or a researcher who happens to be a friend? She also questions if it is indeed possible to differentiate (see also England 1994; Opie 1992). For me the friendship enabled me to easily explain what the purpose of the interview was and how it fitted into the broader research of which this interview was a part. I could use words and phrases from the colloquial language if need be to explain that I wanted the participant to tell me about their life with the influence of the

Diocese and of the Catholic Church upon it. We both knew that the other knew the Church so we had a lot in common to begin with. Although the desire to be egalitarian in an interview situation can be enhanced by a good relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, the research relationship and friendship can become blurred (Cotterill 1994). In some instances the interviewee may divulge more to a researcher friend than they might otherwise have done had the relationship been more formal. When the researcher is able to walk away at the end of the process this may be problematic for the person who has 'told all'. In my case I do not believe this to be a problem because my relationship with all the participants precedes the interview, and in many cases continues on afterwards. Therefore there is no just *walking away* as referred to by Cotterill (1994).

Harvey (1985), Harding (1988) and England (1994) have demonstrated that neutrality and complete objectivity are unlikely to be achieved in social research and go so far as to say that, '... they should not be expected' (England 1994, 81). The decisions I made in choosing informants, locations for interviews and the start of each interview could be seen as lacking in objectivity and to be a less than neutral position displayed by myself as the researcher. However, when I first began my observations I was quite detached from the subject matter of the subsequent research but closely involved with the persons who became the informants. I do not believe this to be a problem for the validity of the results as I have clearly stated the reasons for all decisions and choices. To have done otherwise would have rendered the research not feasible and logistically difficult.

My familiarity with the participants and their physical and social environment could also act as a barrier to gaining information regarding some issues of life and relationships. Not being a stranger and knowing not just the participant but also their family and friends could mean that the participant is less inclined to divulge certain private information, whereas they may be happy to tell 'all' to a stranger (Cotterill 1992: 596). At no point did it seem that prior friendship, relationship and/or knowledge was a hindrance to the participant or to myself.

Truth of responses

Another issue for this research situation is that the researcher cannot be completely sure that the information given is completely true. When confronted by the interviewer a participant's answers to some questions may be what the participant thinks the researcher may want to hear. By choosing the participants I did, I felt I already had their confidence and I was confident that the information they would give me would be a true reflection of their experience and not just a version they may think I might like to hear, true or not. Cotterill refers to this as, 'The best face phenomena; giving responses to questions, or painting a verbal picture that places themselves, the respondent, in the best possible light' (Cotterill 1992: 595). Although I felt confident that this would not be a significant problem I judged that follow up interviews after some time had elapsed, could help to overcome the potential for inaccuracy. If I suspected this had occurred I would ask the same type of question in a slightly different

way at a later date and if the response I received was similar I accepted it as accurate.

Conclusion

In any sociological research that wishes to truly reflect reality it is impossible for the researcher to be completely neutral. The participants and the researcher are not objects and as such will form perceptions of each other, will form relationships during the research fieldwork (if not before) and will interact with one another as the research fieldwork progresses. It is how these relationships are managed that will impact upon the integrity of the research outcome.

This research demonstrates that being a white Anglo-Celtic male interviewing black Melanesian females is not necessarily an issue. In this role I was a person with much in common with the communities from which the direct research participants were chosen. I was a family man, a co-worker and friend who later became a researcher. I was seen by the participants as a researcher endeavouring to assist women and as a male who showed an interest in what women had to say. Research by people into the lives of other people cannot be devoid of perceptions, emotions and resultant opinions; to be otherwise would be impossible. The integrity of research depends upon the people involved and where there is direct contact between the researcher and the researched, the relationship between the two is critical. This researcher-researched relationship is also dynamic and liable to change. It is the responsibility of the researcher to judge the validity of the research situation, and in this case the relationship was not just valid but provided a much richer response.

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