Maintaining Ethical and Professional Relationships in Large Qualitative Studies: A Quixotic Ideal?

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Abstract: Conducting qualitative research using a feminist research methodology requires a high level of personal ethical commitment from the researchers, particularly regarding the time required to establish and maintain social networks between the researchers and the researched. This paper raises questions to the feasibility of researchers adhering to those ideals for each participant when conducting large qualitative studies.

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1. Introduction

BLODGETT, BOYER, and TURK (2005) provide an overview and highlight the key ethical and professional issues associated with large quantitative studies. Their paper details the legal and required aspects and constraints of ethical standards and also professional and personal considerations. The ethical issues they discuss range from the soliciting of study participants who are typically under-represented in research, and the lack of voice and power for selected groups of participants such as children, the infirmed or elderly. The issues discussed in the paper and the solutions proposed are ones that are also relevant to qualitative studies with fewer participants. [1]

2. Comments

The overview provides a comprehensive summary on the issues impacting social science researchers conducting qualitative studies, but the authors do not highlight unique ethics and professional issues researchers should consider in studies with numerous participants. Are there additional or different considerations that researchers need to address when conducting larger qualitative studies? What are the unique sampling problems and ethical issues that researchers encounter when engaged with large qualitative studies? One aspect is the scalability and logistics of establishing and maintaining social networks and capital when the number of participants increases. For example, BLODGETT et al. (2005) note that researchers need to establish social networks with key personnel who can act as guides and/or informants to and within a community. In their study, they connected with guides through formal channels

such as recognized administrators as well as silent partners or influential parents. This strategy has limitations and raises questions regarding the practice of ethics in large studies. First, to conduct qualitative research that is cognizant of ethical issues, researchers need to build social networks and accrue social capital with key informants and participants. One critical aspect is the human resource of time, the total amount and continuous commitment of by individuals to establish these relationships. Second, they suggest that ethical researchers connect with disenfranchised community members but the authors do not suggest strategies that researchers could use to connect with these potential participants? What strategies can researchers use to develop the social networks and capital to establish relationships with individuals who are typically not involved with research? [2]

The authors acknowledged the power differential that exists between the researchers and the researched in some aspects of the study. They enacted protocols to ensure that participants with less power are given voice within the research. However, they failed to acknowledge that they used their power as the researchers to define and maintain boundaries between themselves and participants. The researchers had a clear understanding of the boundaries they established and used when conducting the research. They described their roles as "friendly researcher not curious friend." But by dictating these boundaries the researchers assumed the participants should adhere to these same "rules." They do not describe that these boundaries were reached through mutual consensus between the researchers and participants. [3]

As researchers, we often enact our power on the researched to build boundaries, to establish authority, and to direct the meaning of the research relationship. By drawing the boundaries, the researchers established the participants as "others." Feminist research methodology suggests that researchers may benefit from instituting reflexivity as part of their practice. Reflexivity is a critical aspect of feminist research methodology that identifies the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process (RAMAZANOGLU with HOLLAND, 2002). Reflexivity has four levels for reflection in the research process: (a) the identification of power, power relationships and its effects; (b) theory of power relations (hidden and explicit); (c) ethical decisions in the research process, and the politics and interests of those that make those decisions; and (d) accountability for knowledge production. [4]

BLODGETT et al. (2005) noted that one of their first steps in the study was to identify the power hierarchy within the community by connecting with gatekeepers to establish their social networks and build social capital. From the perspective of a feminist research methodology, several questions arise from enacting the community's power hierarchy to identify study participants. For example, who introduced the researchers to the silent partners and influential parents? What are the implications for the study in using these power relationships? Who are the potential participants that were not included because of the researchers' decision to develop certain social networks and not others? Are there strategies that researchers could use to minimize these differences? [5]

BLODGETT et al. (2005) provide details on how they arranged their data collection to minimize participant's anxiety, reluctance, and time commitment. As researchers, we can be cognizant of issues to ensure that the participants feel comfortable, are valued, and appreciated. But there is a power differential existing in the direction of most research, unless an equal partner in the research team, participants do not usually have control over the questions, research directions, modes of inquiry, or the knowledge that is produced. In the research project described, the only influence on the study that a subject had was to withdraw her/his participation. Participants were not involved in the design, direction of the research questions and/or other aspects. [6]

BLODGETT et al. (2005) do not discuss the ethics and professional relationships involved with the reporting of the study results, that is, the knowledge production. How can researchers maintain an ethical and professional stance when they wield such power and privilege over a study's participants? Is it reasonable to expect that in large qualitative studies researchers will collaborate with participants when reporting results? [7]

Are ethical and professional relationships in qualitative studies a quixotic ideal? The dictionary defines quixotic as being "*caught up in the romance of noble deeds and the pursuit of unreachable goals*" (dictionary.com). If qualitative researchers conduct their studies while considering issues of power, voice, participation and status for ALL of those involved or potentially impacted by the study, can the research be conducted, completed, and reported? Are these ideals unachievable for large studies but attainable when the research involves fewer people? [8]

3. Conclusion

BLODGETT et al (2005) raise critical issues related to ethics and professional issues in conducting social science research. A major issue is the time and human resources that are needed to ensure that all participants are equally empowered, while also accomplishing the goals and objectives of the research study. Feminist research methodology provides a strategy that researchers can use to establish and maintain professional and personal ethics when conducting research. However, a limitation of large qualitative studies are the human resources needed to establish, maintain and nurture the professional relationships between the researchers and the researched which may mean that incorporating feminist research methodology is too idealistic. [9]

References

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