'Tick the Box Please': A Reflexive Approach to Doing Quantitative Social Research

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the value of reflexivity in relation to a quantitative research project which we worked on as contract researchers. Reflexivity in the research process has been discussed by social scientists for over three decades. However, many quantitative researchers continue to avoid explicit forms of reflexivity, especially in relation to data collection. We discuss our specific experiences and also raise general questions about the application of reflexivity to quantitative methods. In addition, we outline the difficulties of being reflexive given the financial and time constraints of contract research. We consider this article a timely contribution to current discussions about the continuing growth of contract research and debates about the relevance of quantitative research methodologies for social scientists.

KEY WORDS

contract research / qualitative and quantitative methods / reflexivity

Introduction

The experience of carrying out social research, especially research involving face-to-face encounters with participants, encompasses numerous complex and shifting boundaries. Research that requires a communication of knowledge, opinions, feelings and experiences from the participants to the researchers needs to overcome, at least temporarily, any boundaries that may

inhibit that communication. These boundaries may be, for example, physical, temporal, ethical, socio-cultural or religious and thus will be influenced by the gender, age, ethnicity and social classes of participants and researchers. The demarcation and negotiation of these boundaries has been well discussed in relation to qualitative research, in particular feminist research, but quantitative research seems largely to avoid the issue of how social boundaries are defined, contested and negotiated. In this article we discuss issues of boundaries in relation to a quantitative study we worked on during 2002–3.[1] In seeking to understand how we and the respondents actively participated in a dynamic of boundary constructions we have applied a reflexive approach to our experiences of the research. While acknowledging that reflexivity may be applicable to all stages of the research process, in this article we focus on the data collection phase of the project which we carried out as contract researchers. In discussing our experiences we also raise questions about the application and usefulness of reflexivity to quantitative methods and the difficulties of being reflexive in the context of contract research. This is a timely contribution to ongoing debates about the growth of contract research and the role of quantitative methodologies in the social sciences (see *Network*, 2004).

Reflexivity and Research

Reflexivity in the research process has been discussed by social scientists for over three decades. As well as the important contributions made by feminist theorists, social researchers from hermeneutics and critical theory have also considered the importance of being reflexive. From Oakley's path-breaking work in the 1970s through to Harding's 'standpoint methodology' in the 1980s, an entire school of social research has developed where reflexivity, and indeed sometimes a highly critical self-reflexivity, has become the norm. However, that is not to imply that reflexivity has been successfully applied to all aspects of research. Reflexivity has been used primarily in relation to the collection of qualitative data, usually interviewing, and has provided a fascinating insight into the experiences of doing research.

Reflexivity involves honesty and openness about how, where and by whom the data were collected and locates the researcher as a participant in the dynamic interrelationship of the research process:

> Reflexivity can be used in varying contexts and with different aims, to enhance the credibility and rigour of the research process as well as make transparent the positionality of the research. (DeSouza, 2004: 474)

Reflexivity has helped to reveal the complex dynamics which underpin the research relationship and much has recently been written about multi-layered power dynamics, shifting boundaries, self-censorship, fractured selves and unsympathetic inter-subjectivities (Luff, 1999; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Millen, 1997; Puwar, 1997). The difficulties involved in 'interviewing up' and

in interviewing across divisions of sex, class, ethnicity and age, etc., have all been discussed in detail (Cotterill, 1992; Phoenix, 1994; Turnbull, 2000). However, while many qualitative researchers have bared their souls about the difficulties of doing social research, most quantitative researchers continue to avoid explicit forms of reflexivity.

Divisions continue to exist between qualitative and quantitative methodology, and for many feminist scholars, in particular, quantitative research is viewed as inherently flawed and beyond any hope of redemption. However, Mary Maynard (1994) is critical of what she sees as the unhelpful dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods. She argues that there has been a tendency to dismiss all quantitative research as rather problematic. Nonetheless, there is often a contradiction in attitudes to quantitative findings as qualitative social researchers are quick to cite and use statistical reports on topics such as domestic violence or breast cancer. Thus, Maynard claims that quantitative research is useful in providing information about large-scale social trends and the polarization of quantitative and qualitative methods simply impoverishes social research (1994: 14).

However, distrust and suspicion continue to operate on both sides of the divide between these two traditions of social research. Knowledge gained by what might be called 'positivistic' methods continues to be classed as more valid knowledge than more experiential information. The positivistic model of the 'neutral' researcher is reinforced by computer-aided programs for data analysis which confer 'an air of scientific objectivity' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 415). In quantitative research most published papers focus on statistics and report the results of computerized data analysis with very little discussion of how, where or by whom the data were actually collected. Quantitative research has been criticized because it includes but rarely acknowledges 'the researchers' hidden and unexplicated cultural agenda and assumptions' (Harding, cited by Maynard, 1994: 19). There continues to be a resistance to reflexivity among a large section of quantitative researchers (Millen, 1997).

Of course, it is logistically very difficult to apply some of the ideals of qualitative studies to quantitative research. For example, the relationship one can achieve with a small number of participants who are interviewed several times is very different from the sort of relationship one has with 500 respondents who are interviewed only once. Nonetheless, some research techniques may translate from qualitative to quantitative methods. In this article we apply reflexivity to our experiences of 'data collection' in a quantitative study. However, this approach may not be without its critics.

Reflexivity in the research process is likely to be seen by many quantitative researchers as a challenge to the validity of the research. An open discussion of the complex dynamics between the researcher and 'researched' may be seen as weakening one's research findings. Quantitative text books continue to emphasize the importance of controlling the research environment and minimizing any factors which may intrude on the research process (Argyle, 1994; Gilbert et al., 1998). We suggest that, far from undermining the research findings, reflexivity

adds a necessary insight into the complex dynamics that do exist between researchers and participants in quantitative research. Another obstacle to reflexivity in large-scale quantitative research relates to time and budgeting constraints: 'musing on reflexivity can run counter to the aims and time lines of the institutional organisations that fund research projects' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 415). Recent statistics indicate that the number of contract researchers in British universities is continuing to grow (Allen Collison, 2003, 2004). The pressure of deadlines and the need to secure further research contracts means that there is little time for the scholarly reflection and theorization traditionally associated with academic research (Allen Collison, 2003: 410–11). In writing this article we seek to discuss the importance and, indeed, the necessity of carving out time for reflexivity despite the constraints and demands of our employment.

The Researchers

We begin our reflexive journey with some self-reflexivity and locate ourselves in relation to the research topic. We were both born in Ireland and migrated to Britain in the 1990s. Having left Ireland as university graduates, we both pursued academic careers in Britain. This background information is important because we believe that our backgrounds helped to shape our encounters with the participants. The negotiation of boundaries between ourselves as researchers and the participants was particularly apparent in relation to our ethnicity and our accents.

However, as well as our personal biographies, our professional training is also an important factor in influencing how we approached this research project. Louise is a sociologist with a particular interest in feminist theory. She had previously worked on a qualitative study of Irish migrant women using a life narrative approach. Anne is a health psychologist who had previously worked on a health-related quantitative study within a department of epidemiology using advanced statistical modelling to analyse large data sets. Thus our academic training, research skills and experience were very different. One way we could successfully work together was to be reflexive about what we did and how we did it and writing this article together is a culmination of our efforts.

The Participants

This was a quantitative study of Irish-born migrants living in London, investigating the differences between those who had been identified as potentially depressed (cases) and those who were not (controls). The 442 participants who took part in this study were very varied. They ranged from 18 to 80 years of age and included older men living in hostel accommodation, successful professionals, retired people, busy housewives and mothers, gay men and

lesbians, etc. The only thing that all these people had in common was that they had all been born in Ireland and migrated to Britain.

As this study was health related, all the participants were identified and initially contacted through their local doctor's surgery. The first phase of the study involved a short postal questionnaire, followed up with a longer, 14-page questionnaire administered by the researchers. This strategy of data collection minimized missing data and errors in comprehension by participants, as well as permitting on-the-spot checking of particular responses where necessary. The questionnaire covered demographic information, health status, a psychiatric screening instrument, current social support, and experiences of childhood trauma, as well as asking about migration to Britain. The questionnaire took between 45 minutes and one hour to administer. Participants were offered a choice of venues including their doctor's surgery but most chose to be interviewed in their own homes.

Accents and Locations

Before we met the participants we usually had phone conversations with them during which we agreed upon a date, time and venue for our meeting. The phone conversation was an important part of the process of boundary negotiation. It was about establishing a rapport and a sense of mutual trust: after all we were each arranging to meet a stranger. During this initial encounter, the participants had plenty of time to detect our accents and establish our ethnicity. Hence the respondents, early on in the research process, usually commented on the Irishness of the researchers. In several cases they mentioned our accents and asked which county in Ireland we came from. In some cases they asked how long we had been in Britain. Our accents were also used to distinguish us: Anne from Dublin and Louise from Cork. By mentioning our accents and identifying our county of origin, the respondents were placing us within a localized Irish context. Drawing attention to our Irishness thus underlined its relevance to the relationship between us, as researchers, and the respondents. It is interesting to speculate how our Irishness may have facilitated recruitment and encouraged people to participate in the study. If we had English accents the respondents may well have made assumptions about our identity but perhaps these would not have been articulated so openly.

Shifting Boundaries

Once the information sheet was read and the consent form signed, it had been anticipated that the completion of the questionnaire would be relatively straightforward. However, the reality was often far more complex. Most participants wanted to discuss the questions and their answers with us. The section of the questionnaire asking about how and when the respondent migrated to

Britain often elicited a conversational story-telling element. Respondents felt that they had interesting stories to tell and the tick box format of the questionnaire did not permit them to record their experiences. The fact that a researcher is physically present seems like an ideal opportunity to share their stories. This usually resulted in us receiving far more detailed and nuanced information than we could record in the questionnaire.

One could argue that the data were successfully collected, all relevant boxes were ticked and the questionnaires were completed. However, that argument omits much of what actually happened during the research encounters and the ways in which the research process impacted on researchers and respondents. Although the boundaries at times became blurred and often shifted in the course of the meeting, both researcher and respondent were usually keen to negotiate the boundaries so that trust, confidence and a sense of social ease could be maintained. However, in some cases the boundaries became so blurred as to create a sense of unease. This tended to occur when respondents had particular needs and placed demands on us that we could not fulfil. Some respondents were lonely and socially isolated; a few were virtually house bound. They craved company and clearly wanted us to stay as long as possible. On occasion we felt manipulated by respondents who used delaying tactics, such as postponing signing the consent form, while they talked to us at length about their various health problems. Interviewing large numbers of depressed and unhappy people can be quite draining and distressing. Sometimes respondents became upset as they recalled memories of migration. We were keenly aware of the potential for exploitation in social research but we felt justified in our roles, firstly, by giving out useful information and contact details of organizations and service providers, and, secondly, by the hope that the research findings will help to identify the needs of Irish migrants.

Evoking Emotional Responses

For many migrant groups the question of returning to their home country is a regular source of discussion and, especially as they get older, a decision that needs to be grappled with (Leavey et al., 2004; Ryan 2003, 2004). We asked respondents firstly about their desire to return to Ireland and secondly about the likelihood that they would return permanently to Ireland. Some were confident that they would return to settle in Ireland, for example, because they had family members living there, or they had plans to purchase property there. However, for many respondents questions of return to Ireland and belonging in London were fraught with difficulties and dilemmas. For older people, in particular those who had lived in London for a long time and whose children and grandchildren were also in London, returning to Ireland would mean separation from immediate family. In addition, when parents in Ireland had died and the family home had been sold off, return to Ireland might mean a loss of net-

works and a sense of isolation. People also expressed their sense of alienation in modern Ireland. For migrants who had left in the 1950s–1970s, Ireland in the 21st century appeared to be a very different society to the one they remembered from their youth.

The complexity of emotions around return to Ireland is demonstrated by the example of two men interviewed separately, but on the same day, in Kilburn. The first man had left Ireland in the 1950s, while the second had left in the 1960s. One had been married and had children, while the other had remained a childless bachelor. Although these men were different in many ways they both voiced very similar emotions about the questions of belonging and return. Both men had wanted to return to Ireland, never having intended to stay in Britain permanently. The married man had actually returned to Ireland for a year but found it hard to settle back into Irish society and so returned to Britain. The single man had recently inherited a house in Ireland and expressed a great longing to return 'home', but was worried about how he would cope with living alone in a very remote part of rural Ireland with no family members to care for his failing health. Both men concluded that they would probably stay in Britain, a country where they had lived and worked for most of their lives but which they would never call home. While completing the tick-boxes on the question-naire both of these men, like so many others, felt a compelling desire to explain their dilemma about returning to Ireland. In their stories there was a palpable sadness, a sense of loss; Ireland was their home, but they now felt unable to go back and settle there.

We heard these stories not just as researchers but also as Irish migrants for whom the dilemma of return was also a real issue. It is noteworthy that these questions on belonging and return were the only questions that the respondents ever turned back on us. No respondent ever asked about our medical history. Those sorts of questions were clearly defined within the boundaries of research etiquette, 'the researcher asks the questions, the respondent gives the answers'. However, when we asked questions about belonging and return we seem to have touched a nerve, crossed a line that went beyond the boundaries of aca-demic research. This is hardly surprising as questions about returning to Ireland form a regular part of conversations between migrants. In asking that question we were perceived as one Irish migrant asking another Irish migrant if they wanted to go home and so it was not unusual for respondents to turn the ques-tion back on us and ask if we planned to go home to Ireland. By inviting us to share our own sense of belonging and dilemmas of return, the respondents were clearly crossing an accepted boundary in social research, particularly in quanti-tative research, but they were also highlighting the ways in which the research subject matter touched on us as Irish migrant researchers. We could not stand back and totally detach ourselves from the nature of the topic because many of the questions applied to us and to our own sense of ourselves as migrants. This was often unsettling and could, at times, be quite upsetting for us as we found it all too easy to empathize with the sorts of experiences and dilemmas that the respondents were reporting.

Concluding Thoughts

Two questions emerge from our experiences as contract researchers on a quantitative study. Firstly, what happens to the additional 'data', the stories that are not part of the formal questionnaire? The data from the completed questionnaires were analysed using an advanced statistical package. The analysis was guided by our original hypothesis as set out in the research protocol. We used logistic regression and conditional logistic regression analyses to compare depressed cases and non-depressed controls. We evaluated the results by likelihood ratio tests and presented our findings as odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals (Ryan et al., 2006). There was no space within the tight parameters of this methodology to explore issues that had been beyond the scope of the formal tick-box questionnaire. The personal stories that participants had told us, and our reactions to them, had not been recorded in any systematic way. They had not been part of the original research design and thus were not included in analyses of the results. However, that is not the end of the story. The research team decided to develop a qualitative arm of the depression study, to go back and interview a sample of the participants so that personal stories and experiences could be explored in greater depth. Thus, the insights that we had gained through our experiences of carrying out the quantitative study were not lost or wasted; instead they provided the basis for a qualitative research project.

But this raises the second question, what is to be gained by adopting a reflexive approach to quantitative research? Based on our personal experiences, we have indicated the need to recognize and reflect upon the emotional cost of research, especially on sensitive topics. The complex dynamics of the human interaction and communication involved in that process need to be explored and the emotional impact on the researchers needs to be taken seriously. If these issues are to be explored as part of quantitative methods they need to be included in the project protocol and research design from the outset. Such a reflexive approach would not undermine the value of the research study but would add a depth of understanding about how, where, when and by whom data were collected. During the course of data collection we increasingly felt the need to set aside time to talk to each other about issues raised by the participants. Our colleagues were supportive and offered various tips on how we could cope with the demands of the study. We decided to write down our reflections and present them to the department's weekly seminar series. This process of writing and talking about our experiences 'in the field' proved invaluable and colleagues encouraged us to prepare our presentation for publication. After completing this research both of us went on to new projects at different institutions and Anne has returned to live in Ireland. Writing this article has given us space in which to stand back and reflect on our research experiences. However, within the constraints of contract research, we are fortunate in having the time to undertake such reflection. The pressures of contract research, in particular the prevalence of short-term contracts, discourage the kinds of reflexivity we have attempted in this article.

Note

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