Researching the researchers: Comments on the experience of doing research in universities.

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Abstract

The qualitative research literature provides practitioners with a plethora of advice about how to recruit subjects, gain informed consent and collect data. Much of this literature assumes that the research subjects will know relatively little if anything about the process of doing research. Some steps in the process, such as gaining approval from a research ethics committee are predicated on the assumption that the research subject may not be able to recognise and protect themselves from unscrupulous and unethical researchers.

When doing research that involves academics as subjects however, many of the usual characteristics of the researcher-subject relationship may be reversed. Where the researcher is a student or a new researcher, the subjects may think they know more about research than the researcher. They may critique the research design, interrogate the researcher around validity and give all kinds of advice. This may be done with the aim of helping or educating the researcher, but it may also be a way of exercising power over the researcher. Unlike many research settings where the subjects would defer to the researcher’s superior knowledge, in the academic setting, the researcher may be the one who has less knowledge and experience.

This paper will report on a recent experience where one of the authors undertook interviews with senior academics in Schools of Management (or equivalent) across Australia. It will describe the issues that arose and discuss the impact that undertaking research in academia had on the researcher and the research.
Researching the researchers:

Comments on the experience of doing research in Universities

Introduction

This paper discusses some of the more interesting issues that face researchers who choose to undertake qualitative research projects that involve collecting data from faculty in Australian Universities. The paper begins by identifying some of the reasons why there has been an increasing amount of research being undertaken on Universities and academic staff. Next, some of the ways in which these research subjects are different from usual research populations are articulated, along with a brief discussion of the ways in which selection, recruitment and gaining informed consent may be quite different when the potential subjects are academics. Drawing on the experience gained from a current research project, the authors then discuss some of the researcher-subject dynamics that may emerge and discuss the possible implications these may have for the researcher and the research project. The paper ends with a brief discussion of how these findings may be useful when considering recruiting subjects from populations normally considered out of reach to most researchers.

Why is there increasing interest in conducting research about Universities and their staff?

In Australia, there appears to be increasing interest in doing research on Universities and their staff. This interest has arisen for a variety of reasons, some of which will be described below. The sector continues to undergo significant change and the impact of this change has been of interest. Universities, along with other institutions have come under the scrutiny of researchers drawing on critical, feminist and postmodern thinking. There is an increasing tendency for researchers to study the behaviours of elites (such as
academics) when in the past they would have studied students. Finally, as part of a more reflexive approach being adopted in some disciplines, researchers are beginning to explore and describe their own and their colleagues’ experiences, rather than the experiences of others.

The Higher Education sector has been subject to wide ranging reforms since the Dawkins era (Aitkens 1997; Coaldrake & Stedman 1998; Winter, Taylor & Sarros 2000). Although the current government has adopted different policies, the rate of change has not diminished. Researchers have been interested in the impact these changes have had on the nature of the educational experience for students and the structure and governance of Universities (Taylor, Gough, Bundrock & Winter 1998). There has also been growing interest in studying the impact of these changes on the work experience of academics and various studies have focused on issues such as job satisfaction, workload and work/life balance issues and academic freedom (Winter, Taylor & Sarros 2000; Taylor et.al 1998).

Scholars working in paradigms as diverse as feminism, queer theory, post modernism and critical theory have also shown a growing interest in understanding elite institutions. They have problematised both Universities and academic labour (Parker & Jary 1995; McCollow & Lingard 1996; Doyle & Hind 1998), exploring the ways in which these institutions and professions develop and use power. This interest in Universities and academics is part of a more general trend to ‘researching up’, where the researcher engages with subjects who hold greater power and status (Bartunek & Reis 1996). Thus, some academics are now choosing to do research which focuses on their own institutions or their peers, rather than on their students (Gardner & Boucher 2000; Winter, Taylor & Sarros 2000; Miller 1996; Cassidy 1998; Taylor et al. 1998).

Another factor that has contributed to the increasing amount of research being undertaken on academic staff is the growing tendency for researchers to include their own experience as part (or even all) of their data. This trend is variously referred to as insider research
(Bartunek & Reis 1996), confessional tales (Marcus 1998) and autoethnography (Ellis 1999; Reed-Danahay 1997).

Many reasons may motivate researchers to include data collected from academic staff in their studies. The involvement of academics as subjects is of particular interest to those doing qualitative studies because of the nature of the interaction that often occurs between researcher and subjects. This will be discussed below.

**Peculiarities of academics as research subjects**

Papers discussing qualitative research studies which involve the use of university students as subjects often go to great pains to describe how using this cohort influences the research outcomes (Stevenson & Bodkin 1998) and the steps that were taken to ensure that participation was voluntary and that the academic staff do not influence the student’s responses (Sjostedt, Schumaker & Nathawat 1996). However, studies of university academic staff make little or no mention of the issue of working with this unique group (eg. Dorman 2000).

But they are different and it appears that at least some researchers treat them differently. Taylor et al. (1998) received back 411 questionnaires they had sent to 1142 subjects at three Australian Universities. Of these, 12 subjects ignored the questionnaire and sent back written responses. Would other subjects respond in this way and would the researcher think it worthy of reporting? Winter, Taylor and Sarros (2000) reported that they trialed a survey form by interviewing twelve academic staff and getting their opinions, not only on the content of the instrument, but also on whether the instrument was well constructed as a research tool. Do qualitative researchers commonly ask their pilot subjects to comment on the technical merit of their instruments?
The qualitative research literature provides practitioners with a plethora of advice on how to go about recruiting subjects, gaining informed consent and collecting data (Van Maanen 1983; Patton 1990; Golden-Biddle & Locke 1997; Gubrium & Holstein 1997; Cresswell 1998; Denzin & Lincoln 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Weis & Fine 2000). Much of this literature assumes that the research subjects will know relatively little if anything about the process of doing research. Some steps in the process, such as gaining approval from a research ethics committee are predicated on the assumption that the research subject may not be able to recognise and protect themselves from unscrupulous and unethical researchers.

However, when studying academic staff the researcher (and particularly graduate students or novice researchers), may be dealing with a subject who is very knowledgeable about such issues. The subject may be aware of flaws in the process of subject selection and informed consent of which the researcher is unaware. The subject may be more proficient in the use of particular data collection tools such as conducting interviews, or taking fieldnotes. It is also possible that the subject may know a good deal about the topic being studied. For instance, the subjects in Gardner’s study of teaching staff in a post graduate management degree included experts in reflective practice, which was one of the main interests of the study (Gardner 2001).

In the case described below the research subjects are the Heads of Management Schools (or equivalents). The research is studying aspects of performance management in Universities and it is known that some of the potential subjects are experts in this area.
An example: A qualitative study of the formal performance management practices for academic staff currently used by Australian University Management Departments

**Brief Description of the research project:**

The Report of the Review Committee on Higher Education Management (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs 1995, p. 86) recommended that every Australian university should ‘…phase in a comprehensive performance management system for both academic and general staff.’ By September 1996 only 8 out of 28 Universities represented in a forum on this topic indicated any system had been implemented (Dickensen 1997, pp. 113-114). Despite interest across the sector, there is an apparent lack of knowledge of what is actually happening, in the area of performance management activities in Australian Universities

For the purposes of this study the term ‘performance management’ follows Lonsdale’s description (cited in Dickenson 1997), in that it incorporates appraisal and goal setting and emphasises not only the work, performance and development of individual staff, but also of teams and of management’s ability to enhance institutional performance. The definition that will be used is drawn from Lansbury (1988, p. 46) and refers to ‘…the process of identifying, evaluating and developing the work performance of employees in the organisation, so that organisational goals and objectives are more effectively achieved, while at the same time benefiting employees in terms of recognition, receiving feedback, catering for work needs and offering career guidance’.

This example of collecting data from academic staff is drawn from the experience of collecting data during Phase One of the study, rather than describing any findings that may emerge from the research data. The research questions in Phase One of the research project were:
What performance management practices are currently being used in public Australian Universities?

What are the similarities and the differences in the approaches being taken?

What key issues of concern are commonly expressed by university staff regarding these practices?

**The initial plan and action:**

The plan for Phase One, was to use a 30 minute, semi-structured interview to identify the range of performance management practices and key issues associated with their use in public Australian Universities. Rather than approach Human Resource Managers or senior administrators, who were likely to provide data only on the official performance management practices within their Universities, Heads of Schools of Management (or their equivalent) were targeted. Staff occupying these roles were expected to be knowledgeable about both formal performance management practices and those that were actually being utilised in their systems, the historical background and the issues of concern for staff and organisations regarding such practices. Because many management academics teach about performance management, it was felt that they would have a particularly well-developed understanding of the issues involved and be uniquely placed to reflect upon their experience from both an individual and institutional perspective.

University internet sites were used to identify the names and contact points (e-mail, telephone and facsimile) of the Heads of Schools of Management (or equivalent) in the population of 36 public Australian Universities (and ANU). For Universities with more than one School of Management (eg. with a separate Graduate School), the decision was taken to contact both potential points.

In October 2000 the initial introductory letter (including a plain language statement) was e-mailed to the 46 Heads of Schools who had been identified as potential subjects. The
letter explained the nature of the study and requested participation in a 30 minute telephone interview about the formal and informal performance management practises at the subject’s university. Each letter was tailored to match the terminology associated with the different levels at the particular university, (eg. Faculty, Division, Department, School, etc,) which the internet research identified. An informed consent form was also attached and subjects were asked to complete and return this. The letter stated that agreement to take part in the phone interview would also be taken to constitute informed consent.

The response and the response to the response!

The response from initial e-mails was gratifying! Within the first week, over 50% of those contacted during that week had replied in one way or another, the majority by return e-mail, a handful by faxed return of the informed consent form and some by telephone. Overwhelmingly, respondents were interested and happy to help. Comments included, “it’s about time someone looked at this;” “most happy to help;” “all the best with your studies;” “let’s make a time”, etc.

The researcher’s reaction to this swift response was one of surprise and thankfulness that her study was of interest to such a senior group of academics and that they had been so quick to reply and so willing to help. Her unexplored and unstated (even to herself!) assumptions to that stage were that there was a strong possibility this group may find her topic (or worse her), boring, not worthy of investigation, and/or of little direct relevance or interest to them. She was also concerned that they may consider the topic to be too narrow or perhaps even too contentious a subject to be able to respond to openly.

It was at first quite a daunting experience for the researcher to pick up the phone to call subjects, despite many years of interviewing, lecturing and consulting experience. This attests to the operation of a strongly perceived power differential when one is in the role
of a researcher seeking the cooperation of an elite group of subjects. To discover that such senior academics were ‘human’ and responsive was a relief – albeit something the researcher rationally knows, given her immediate circle of friends and network. The dynamic of researching the researchers appeared to engage many deeply felt, and mostly hitherto unarticulated, personal and professional insecurities.

Further responses dribbled in over the next few weeks then a period of no responses and no activity ensued. Those who responded at this stage were no less positive, and often apologetic about their tardiness citing overseas commitments and workload as reasons for slow responses (perhaps one of the drawbacks for a researcher choosing to engage with such a senior group).

Follow up telephone calls were made to non-respondents during December 2000 and January 2001. Initiating interview appointments by directly phoning the individual concerned was definitely a more effective means of achieving an interview.

To date there has been only one refusal to participate and one referral to the Human Resources Department as an alternative interview source. Discussions with some of the larger Graduate Schools of Management are ongoing, regarding their participation. One Head of School expressed the opinion that inclusion in the study may ‘just constitute noise’, although he is not adverse to participating in an interview. The researcher sees the inclusion of Graduate Schools of Management as highly relevant, in identifying some of the different performance management factors that may operate when award, reward and salary structures differ to the conventional university environment.

Most of the individuals interviewed during Phase One data collection have indicated that they are also willing to be re-contacted for possible inclusion in Phase Two (in-depth case
studies of a number of sites). Some are in fact keen to participate, given the stage of implementation of their university’s Performance Management practises.

**Responses of senior academics when approached to be research subjects**

The range of responses has been varied and some concerns or reactions reflect what one might expect of any research subject. Prior to taking part in the interview, most subjects have required a brief reiteration of the context and purpose of the study. The researcher also felt it was good practice to reiterate the confidential nature of the data.

Unanticipated responses that would seem peculiar to this group of subjects included:

- Appreciating the problems of recruiting subjects.

Many subjects were keen to know who (by name) was participating, to whom the researcher had already spoken and two Heads of Schools offered to use their own personal network to ‘rev’ up some Heads of Schools yet to respond and thus assist in the recruitment of subjects. One of these individuals was previously known to the researcher, one was not.

Curiously enough, this willingness was not always aligned with interest in the specific topic. Whilst the researcher would have been very flattered were this so, a strong theme that emerged is best summarised as ‘uninformed agreement to participate’.

- Uninformed agreement to participate.

It was surprising to the researcher how few respondents had actually read (or digested) the content of e-mails outlining the purpose of the study. Those who responded in the first week were the exception, in that they were clear about the purpose of the study and what was required of them. To date the only informed consent forms that have been faxed back and signed were received from amongst these subjects.
Many of the subsequent respondents had received the introductory e-mail information twice (at their request), as well as had the purpose re-iterated in phone contacts arranging the interview. One wonders at the inherent paradox of a process where senior people without exception stated that demands on their time were voracious, yet many agreed to participate in a research interview when they were essentially unclear as to why they were doing so. Is this the norm amongst research subjects?

It left the researcher speculating about what this indicated, either an inordinately high value being placed on research (any research) or that as researchers themselves, these subjects were confident in their ability to be able to contribute positively to any research project and withdraw at any time they felt it necessary.

- Experiencing a form of professional nostalgia.

The role of being a subject seemed to remind some of these senior academics of the time when they were starting out as a ‘new’ research student themselves and they were keen to assist the neophyte. A number of respondents spent time talking about their feelings as a beginning researcher, asked how the researcher was experiencing the process thus far and encouraged her to both persist with a topic they felt to be of great importance and also publish as she went along rather than await the end findings.

- Concerns with confidentiality and being seen as presenting their organisation in a negative light.

As well as the usual requirement to reinforce confidentiality, it did seem that this issue was particularly crucial for some Heads of Schools where there were ongoing negotiations about the Performance Management system or it was felt to be a ‘politically hot’ topic. Several subjects double-checked whether they would be directly quoted or their university in any way identified in data analysis. One Head of School withdrew agreement to be interviewed when the researcher was clumsy in describing the exact
manner in which data was to be reported. It took a number of subsequent approaches to regain agreement to participate from this person. Despite assurances that it would be by aggregated data only, there were obviously concerns that the individual university (and thus subject) may be identifiable. This seems indicative of a climate of great uncertainty and some insecurity for senior academics in the current university environment (Coaldrake & Stedman 1998).

Several subjects started their interview with a good deal of reserve and caution in the replies they offered. As the conversations progressed and sometimes quite negative aspects of their organisation’s performance management activity (or inactivity) were revealed, concern would be reiterated about confidentiality. A couple of respondents jokingly stated that they could lose their jobs if this sort of material (being audio taped) was played publicly. There was a strong theme of needing to contextualise information by stating that either this was a new and evolving system, their university was no better, no worse they expected than others, or that it was necessary to proceed slowly with any performance management initiatives given their potential for polarising management, academic and union positions.

- Advice giving and interrogating the researcher around validity and research design.

None of the respondents were overtly critical of the research approach but without exception they were very interested to know what methods were being used and why these had been chosen. For example, one subject commented upon the sample selection and suggested that the researcher should “…consider the representativeness of Heads of Schools of Management to comment with authority and knowledge upon the performance management practises across an institution as diverse as a university’.
Some subjects inquired about the researcher’s credentials and these types of questions would be expected from lay subjects as well. This group of subjects also asked about the methodology, the data analysis process and the intended presentation of the data. These are not questions that most subjects would ask.

At all times advice offered by subjects was benign, although the underpinning assumption appeared to be that the researcher had little or no research experience. In fact she does hold a Masters degree and is not a neophyte researcher.

Critical comments and advice were constructive and they may have been provided with the aim of helping or educating the researcher, but it may also have been a way of exercising power over the researcher. The researcher was asked questions and offered advice around other subjects she should speak to, publishing early, attending certain conferences where she could meet potential subjects as a captive audience and ‘corner’ them around engaging in her research, articles and books she should read, going international with her research, etc.

**Implications of this experience for research being undertaken with University Faculty as subjects**

Three themes emerged from the experience of recruiting and interviewing these Heads of Schools of Management. First, the researcher needed to put more than usual time and effort into managing her own anxiety and collecting data in an environment where there was a clear power differential. Moreover, this differential was the opposite of that usually experienced when collecting data. In this case it was the subjects who had the power. Second the researcher did not in this case, have credibility with subjects because she was a researcher. Therefore, gaining credibility quickly was important. Third, the subjects in this study, unlike most subjects, were not always content to let the researcher
decide the direction of the interview. The researcher therefore had to develop ways of directing the interview without offending the subjects.

**The ability to manage one’s own anxiety and power dynamics**

The researcher’s background qualifications and work history as a social worker, manager and consultant were invaluable in conducting this research. The early career experience of having to initiate contact with people in positions far senior to her own in a number of fields, including the shibboleth of medical specialists, was an enormous advantage in initiating contact and negotiating interviews with a senior academic cohort.

This involved largely disregarding the conferred power attributed to the roles of senior managers and treating them as individuals rather than their ‘position’. Despite confidence in her consulting role with senior managers in business settings, there was a felt difference in approaching senior academics (perceived as ‘expert’ in the research discipline), with ‘cap in hand’ seeking participation and information from them. Rather than operating from her own competence base of ‘expert’ as a consultant it was suddenly like being back at the beginning of a career – just as her subjects experienced professional nostalgia (and talked about their early research experiences), so did she! In the same vein, the researcher needed to resist becoming what many of the subjects thought she was, a neophyte researcher who needed advice, support and guidance.

**The need for personal and professional credibility**

Subjects were interested to know something about the researcher and more times than not, prior to the interview commencing, they would ask for a brief biography. Only after this would they ask about her reasons in studying this area. It seemed that establishing credibility swiftly was important to gaining their engagement. Whether it was the researcher’s perception or based in fact, it did seem that the power differentials lessened
as subjects learned that she was an owner/Director of her own small consulting business and was used to dealing with senior managers and also that she was familiar with university environments as a former academic staff member and current sessional lecturer at post graduate levels. The net effect of these disclosures was to establish a rapport with subjects where they would, as previously alluded to, discuss issues and offer opinions around their University’s performance management practises, which they considered highly confidential and in some cases detrimental to their professional career if traced back to them as individuals.

Establishing flexible control of the interview process

Without a considerable degree of sophistication in interview techniques it was felt that control could easily have been lost. Whilst there was an interview guide which had been piloted with a small group similar to that under study, it was common to find subjects would progress to the areas of interest naturally through the conversations which were occurring, without necessarily following the order as planned and directed by the researcher. The subjects seemed to react in two ways to being interviewed. Some appeared to act out their espoused beliefs about the importance of research and engaged willingly in it as a subject and allowed the researcher to take up her role and direct the interview. Others were less willing to take up the role of subject and were difficult to interview even though they had expert knowledge on what is expected of an interviewee. Another group agreed that the research was important, but were too busy to participate as a subject themselves. Again the issue of status and power would seem to be important here.
Implications for research with other elite groups

The findings from the experience of recruiting and interviewing senior academics can be extrapolated to provide some advice about choosing to do research with other elite groups such as senior managers. Two pieces of advice are offered below.

Initiating personal contact may be critical

It is the researcher’s belief that senior academics, like senior medical practitioners and to a lesser extent, senior executives in organisations, retain a measure of ‘god-like’ or revered status in public perception. The assumption, often unstated and not even amenable to conscious scrutiny (until one anticipates engaging them as research subjects), is that they will be too busy or that it is somehow ‘beneath them’ to be intruded upon by a lowly researcher seeking their participation as a subject. Paradoxically, it may be exactly this level of ‘intrusion’, making the effort to contact them personally or using a common acquaintance, that is most important in gaining their involvement.

The eagerness of this group of subjects to be heard once they were engaged, suggests that such groups may be under-represented as subjects because of largely incorrect concerns on the part of researchers that they will not want to be involved and also, a lack of persistence and boldness in pursuing such subjects.

Research that required a tight timeframe may be problematic with senior groups

The need to be very flexible but persistent in obtaining an interview time was paramount. The majority of subjects were difficult to contact but generous with their time once reached. The researcher’s available time had to be flexible, although once commitment had been obtained every subject honoured it, and most exceeded it. This researcher was only seeking 15 –30 minutes of time per subject, yet many subjects had to be ‘turned off’
after 45 minutes due to the researcher’s ever mounting interstate phone bill. The lead times to gain agreement and negotiate interview times with senior groups are longer than one would anticipate. This is particularly problematic in the modern university environment, where Heads of Schools spend considerable time overseas.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that there are some significant challenges for the researcher who chooses to research other researchers. The researcher may be asked to explain and justify her methods and she may be offered advice about research approaches, which would seldom happen with other subjects. The subjects may also try to take control of the interview and the researcher may need to work hard to get the data she needs whilst not appearing to control the interview and offend the subject. However, if the researcher is persistent and bold, it is possible to recruit senior staff for studies and rich and valuable data can be obtained.
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