

The 'gift' relationship – an ethical dilemma in small-scale qualitative longitudinal research

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Research context

This very brief contribution to the knowledge bank highlights just one of many 'ethical dilemmas' confronted in conducting a small-scale qualitative longitudinal (QL) research project. The project; *'Irresponsible citizens? The lived experiences of welfare reform'*, involves following a group of benefit claimants over an eighteen month period. Fifteen individuals are being interviewed three times, with each interview providing an opportunity to explore how the welfare reforms are affecting research participants as well as discussing their own attitudes to the reforms that the Coalition government is undertaking. The research includes aspects of participatory practice, with research steering group meetings enabling participants to help guide and inform the direction of the research.

The research is ongoing, and the final wave of interviews is currently being conducted. It is hoped that the findings from this QL project will contribute new knowledge on the experiences of welfare reform and whether the government's rhetoric actually matches the lived reality.

The ethical dimension

As far as possible, ethical decisions and issues were considered and explored in the design of the research project. Before proceeding with the research, it was necessary to obtain full ethical clearance and this involved carefully outlining every stage of the research project and detailing how ethical considerations would be negotiated and addressed. Particular ethical decisions taken at this stage included a commitment to elements of participatory research, as well as deciding to provide a £10 gift voucher 'thank you' after each interview.

In considering the relationship between the researcher (who is also a qualified welfare rights adviser) and the participant, as well as the central subject matter, it was recognised that there might be instances where participants were ill-informed or unaware of their benefit rights. Thus, it was decided in advance of the interviews that should some welfare advice be both relevant and appropriate – as part of the reciprocal relationship between participant and interviewer — the researcher would provide this advice in the course of the interview. Evidently, this may have affected the eventual outcome of the participants' progress through the benefits system but it was felt important that such advice be provided should it have the potential to be helpful to the interviewee.

An ethical dilemma

Importantly, though, every ethical aspect of a research project cannot be predicted and it has thus been necessary to negotiate ethical dilemmas as the research progresses. QL research brings with it heightened ethical concerns, associated with the repeated and sustained contact between researcher and participant (Holland, Thomson et al. 2004). Considerations for how the relationship between interviewee and interviewer will be 'managed' become both particularly important, and inevitably more complex due to there being more than one interview.

In this research, during the first and second wave I was pregnant, in the second wave heavily so. Many of the participants took an interest in this, and asked me about the pregnancy, my plans for the birth and so on. While keeping the focus on the interviewee and the research area, I was comfortable sharing some of this personal information, and informed the participants via text message of my daughter's safe arrival.

In between the second and third wave of interviews, as part of my efforts to retain contact with the participants, I spoke to a number on the telephone and dropped in to visit a few of them, occasionally bringing my baby daughter along as I was still on maternity leave. In one instance, the participant who I had dropped in on presented me with a gift for my daughter. This inevitably presented an ethical dilemma as to whether it would be appropriate for me to accept such a gift, especially given our relationship and the fact that our contact is linked to a research project rather than a friendship which is what an exchange of a gift might suggest.

Sometimes in research one has to take decisions in the field, without the luxury of being able to discuss the dilemma with colleagues or reflect upon it away from the research case. This was the case in this instance, and I chose to accept the gift, thanking the participant for her generosity and (of course) sending her a thank you card when I had returned home.

Deciding whether or not to accept such a gift is a personal, subjective decision which needs to be individually negotiated, and grounded in one's own values and judgement. In this case, I felt that it would have caused offence to refuse the gift which had been made to welcome the new baby into the world. Nonetheless, I still sometimes feel uneasy about the decision and wonder whether accepting the gift was the 'right' thing to have done. The participant is reliant on out-of-work benefits, and talks in her interviews of the struggle to survive on benefits. Was it right for me to take a gift from someone who is evidently living below the poverty line? And how should I respond to that gift? I could buy her daughter a Christmas present, but that might then begin a constant reciprocal giving and receiving of gifts which is not sustainable for either of us.

Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, I made a difficult ethical decision 'on the spot', based on the participant's evident pleasure in giving the gift, and my own feelings that I should accept it. Others may think that I made the 'wrong' decision. In a cross-sectional qualitative research project, it is unlikely that such a situation would arise as it was due to my sustained and repeated contact with the participant that we had formed a more lasting relationship. Discussing and sharing such an ethical dilemma is not easy, particularly as one can feel that one is opening oneself up to criticism from others who might have resolved this question differently. However, it is critically important that we are open and transparent researchers who are willing to confront and discuss these difficult decisions. By doing so, we can help build new knowledge and understanding about the difficulties of navigating the ethical plane in QL research.

Reference

Holland, J., et al. (2004, October 2004). "Feasibility Study for a Possible Qualitative Longitudinal Study: Discussion Paper." Retrieved 19/12/10, from:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/researchfunding/Qualitative_Longitudinal_Study_Initiative.asp