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'Working with different values: extremism, hate and sex crimes'?

Malcolm Cowburn, Marian Duggan & Ed Pollock

Introduction

This chapter addresses dilemmas and conflicts in research with people who hold different opinions and values to the researcher. The chapter draws on three research experiences: a female researcher directly and indirectly interacting with members of a recognised group targeted for identity-based victimisation who do not necessarily identify as 'victims'; a male researcher indirectly interacting with people of undisclosed or 'virtual' identities demonstrating extremist ideologies; and a male researcher directly interacting with convicted male sexual offenders. There is a tension in each case between researcher standpoint (interpretative framework) and research participant standpoint. In each case the viewpoint of the research participant presents problems for the

researcher in acknowledging 'whose side' she or he is on, whilst also retaining a commitment to listen to and present data from participants in a way that respects their own 'truth'.

Qualitative research with marginalised people can allow the expression of 'difficult' or sensitive issues; on occasions this is problematic. According to the epistemological standpoint of the researcher the purpose of empirical investigation may be to obtain the objective 'truth' about particular events or it may be to understand how researchers and research participants co-construct and interpret their stories (Franklin, 1997). Data from qualitative research may be construed as more or less accurately representing the experiences under examination, or as a current narrative *of value in itself* (Miller, 2000). Whatever standpoint is taken, presentation of data involves choices and is inevitably some form of *interpretation*. However, choices about presentation are not value-free.

'Values' is a problematic concept; Banks (2006, p. 6) offers this working definition: '"values" can be regarded as particular types of belief that people hold about what is regarded worthy or valuable'. This brings together issues of both ethics and epistemology – 'good' conduct and 'good' knowledge underpin the values that orientate a researcher to her/his research task (of course issues of what is 'good' in either case may be contested). 'Values' however, often initiate and drive qualitative research; in this chapter feminist values influence the shape and the conduct of the homophobia and sex offenders studies, anti-racist values underpin the Internet study. Moreover all of the studies share values that consider interpersonal violence and the threat of interpersonal violence to be morally wrong.

The chapter outlines the three areas of research. In each case issues relating to *preparation,* and the *process* of research are explored. Preparation addresses issues that need consideration prior to starting empirical work. Process considers the management of the dynamics of the empirical activity. The final section of the chapter considers issues of interpretation and dissemination; it considers the challenge of giving voice (in publications and presentations) to 'difficult' attitudes and experiences. This sharply brings into focus, again the issue of taking sides in research.

Researching homophobia in Northern Ireland (Marian Duggan)

This section considers research into homophobia in Northern Ireland, particularly during the thirty years of violent ethno-political conflict known as the 'Troubles' (1968-1998) period (see McKittrick and McVea, 2001). Using a feminist-inspired, grounded theory approach, 24 lesbians and gay men shared their stories of growing up gay during the conflict (Duggan, 2012). The analysis illustrates the value-based tensions involved in discovering and presenting how lesbians and gay men interpret their experiences of homophobia without enhancing their feelings of victimisation.

The premise driving the research was that the life stories would unwittingly provide evidence of the ways in which biblical, moral, legal, social and political discourses construct ideologies of homosexuality as negative, harmful, and dangerous. However, there was a presumption that these experiences, at the time, may have been minimised or normalised by the participants and those around them in line with the wider culture of anti-homosexual sentiments. Yet, as a result of significant socio-legal changes, it was

envisaged that these stories may have been reconceptualised in the intervening period as evidence of discriminatory experiences (aided by awareness of legal, social and political advancements in sexual minority rights). Thus, a specific approach was taken which gave weight to the reassessment of previously unremarkable experiences as 'evidence' of naturalised, or hegemonised, socio-political homophobia. In effect this was taking an anti-homophobic 'side' in conducting the research. However, Becker's (1967) suggestion that researchers take 'sides', is particularly complex in Northern Ireland, where there are continual attempts to 'place' people in relation to identity and affiliation: republican-loyalist; nationalist-unionist; catholic-protestant (Mitchell 2006). However, in relation to these 'sides' the researcher is not from Northern Ireland and therefore issues of allegiance did not arise.

Preparation

The qualitative methodology employed was underpinned by a poststructuralist feminist approach to research (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralism involves questioning, dismantling and problematising socially constructed identities (Shütz, 1962). Feminist research eschews claims to neutrality and objectivity, favouring instead a research paradigm, which exposes and explores gendered power relationships (Roberts, 1981; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). Amalgamating these two approaches allows the researcher to question the social and power relations involved in research design, conduct and outcomes (Reinharz, 1992).

Feminist research situates the researcher in her study in order to account for the relationship between the researcher and the researched and how this affects the findings (Alcoff and Gray, 1993; Reay, 1996). The underlying reasons for such considerations are transparency and reflexivity in critical social

research (Harvey, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1990;). These issues are all important for the present research given that the interviewees involved were describing personal experiences, which at times may have been particularly difficult to discuss, especially with a stranger. Therefore, the poststructuralist feminist insistence on the primacy of interviewees' interpretations of their experiences was particularly relevant to the analysis.

In identifying people to interview it was important not to appear to be seeking 'victims' of 'homophobia' or hate crime. This was too limiting in a society where many homophobic responses were (and in some cases still are, see Duggan 2010; 2012) normalised as hegemonic responses to expressions of sexual difference. Instead, men and women were recruited who had been aware of their sexual orientation for a significant amount of time and were able to illustrate how living in a society openly opposed to homosexuality during a specific time period impacted on them. Potential participants were made aware of this requirement so that they were able to provide life histories that illustrated the impact of their sexual orientation on the shape of their lives, and how homophobia was informed and sustained in Northern Ireland during the 'Troubles' period.

However, it was also important to ensure that the sample was balanced by gender and faith in order to reduce inferences of (political) bias. In giving voice to this group of people, it was important to ensure that research participants were not characterised as speaking *for* their particular demographic (i.e. Catholic lesbians or Protestant gay men) but as speaking *from* that specific background in theorising their own experiences.

Feminist, sensitive and ethical research methodologies strive to ensure that those involved in the research process do not come to harm as a result of their participation (Lee, 1993). Efforts were taken to ensure that informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality processes were explained, understood and adhered to. However, Northern Ireland is a small society with a population of fewer than 2 million and only two major cities. The interpersonal nature of traditionally close-knit communities is still the norm in Northern Ireland. Whilst this came up as an issue in many interviewees' stories as constraining what they could do with whom and where, it also proved problematic in ensuring anonymity among participants. The snowball sampling method adopted meant that many participants knew of others involved in the research. Some participants had advertised it among their social networks, so were aware of potential or actual interviewees in the research process. Furthermore, at times references were made to other interviewees, as they had been involved in pivotal events (particularly concerning the campaign for decriminalisation of homosexuality). Interviewees often recommended their partners as potential participants, and in one case, a couple requested to be interviewed in a joint session as they had spent three decades of their lives together so many of their experiences were shared.

Process

Process issues in this project are primarily concerned with avoiding causing harm to the research participants. The potential tension between the researcher's standpoint in relation to homophobia and participants' need to tell a story with which they were happy was constantly managed during the interviews. Key to this were the efforts taken with the language used and

awareness of, and sensitivity to, power dynamics within the research process, where measures were taken to respect the power dynamics involved and not infer a victimised identity where it was not acknowledged.

Allowing research participants to determine what stories they wish to tell (within the remit of the brief they had been given regarding the nature and purpose of the research being undertaken) shifts the power relationship in their favour during the data collection process. Some direction was given regarding specific moments which may have demonstrated similarities in terms of importance for participants (the 'coming out' process, meeting a partner, moving in with a partner, negotiating childcare, etc), but the overall narrative was decided by the person him- or herself. Recollections of key definitive moments in their life histories where they were made uncomfortably aware of the non-conformity of their sexual orientation were used as the basis for determining how, when, where and by whom homophobia was demonstrated and used as a tool of oppression in people's lives.

However, exploring uncomfortable experiences brought with it potential for repeat victimisation of those sharing their experiences through recalling them within a framework of identifying pejorative attitudes. For example, one interviewee recalled how he struggled with whether or not to continue teaching music to children in his neighbourhood once he realised what his sexual orientation 'meant' to those around him (at the time, homosexuality and paedophilia were incorrectly linked). He had to make a decision then as to whether other elements of his life (not having a female partner, appearing - in his words - 'quite effeminate'), coupled with his close proximity to children and teaching of a 'softer' subject such as music, would enhance his exposure to

victimisation. Thus, his 'choices' were founded on self-preservation but determined by the wider social culture around him. In recalling this, he had to relive the negative emotions he went through at the time.

Qualitative (observation) research with Far Right racists (Ed Pollock)

This section concerns ethical dilemmas and values in conducting observation research of racist hate speech in internet newsgroups. Newsgroups, one of the oldest components of the internet, are open discussion areas that allow like-minded individuals to discuss topics of shared interest. Newsgroups are provided by Internet Service Providers (ISP) via news servers, which contain a list of every newsgroup that a given ISP offers. Messages sent to newsgroups are termed 'posts' and listed for anyone who enters the newsgroup to read. When a 'post' is clicked upon and 'opened' it is downloaded from the news server to be read in the same way as an email. Members can then reply to any message in the same way as if they are replying to an email, knowing that all newsgroup subscribers may read it. However, it is relatively easy to conceal a contributor's identity and it is very difficult to control the content of material posted to newsgroups. Consequently, some newsgroups have become a means for generating and disseminating material that some people find harmful, offensive or obscene (Mann and Sutton: 1998). The present study concerns such newsgroups.

This discussion draws on a study of three Internet newsgroups where contributors posted racist messages and disseminated racist hate speech. The suggestion here is that the nature of research renders irrelevant or unnecessary

many of the ethical and emotional dilemmas associated with traditional qualitative research.

Although observation, as a research method, has been employed to examine the behaviour of individuals or groups in a variety of social settings (see, eg, Ditton, 1970; Humphreys, 1970; Parker, 1974;), Covert, Invisible Non-Participatory, Observation (CIN-PO) is a qualitative research method that can be used to observe subjects in any 'virtual' setting (i.e. a setting where a researcher has no physical presence at the scene they are observing) such as newsgroups, chat rooms and web forums. The method is *Covert* because the researcher does not disclose their role to the researched, *Invisible* because the researcher is not in the same space or social setting as the researched and so is not visible to them and N*on-Participatory* because the researcher does not engage in any activity, such as 'posting' messages to the newsgroups, or conversation with the research subjects. In research where CIN-PO is used, the researched are not aware they are being studied, this enables research on groups or individuals that are, usually, hard to reach or whom, typically, may not allow 'outsiders' to infiltrate their social world.

Preparation

Key issues in preparing for qualitative research are informed consent, confidentiality and the minimisation of harm. Traditionally, the management of these issues has to be resolved before identifying and recruiting participants takes place.   However, the British Society for Criminology (BSC) notes that in all but *exceptional circumstances*, researchers must gain the freely given informed consent of their research participants (British Society of Criminology,

2006). In CIN-PO research this is not possible. However, the BSC guidelines state that *exceptional circumstances* relate to the importance of the topic rather than difficulty of gaining access to participants. Despite the ethical challenges posed by the research methodology, the research was considered to be necessary for the purpose of academic advancement and contribution to knowledge of a previously largely under-researched social world (Pollock: 2010). The University Research Ethics Committee thus approved it.

In relation to confidentiality, newsgroups are publicly accessible and as such their conversations are already in the public domain. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity are not relevant. All newsgroup participants are aware that they should not post messages that they would not like another member of the public to see and that anything posted to the newsgroup can be viewed by anybody else at any time throughout the period it is posted online.

The selection of the newsgroups was, therefore, based solely on demographic rather than ethical issues. The aim of selecting newsgroups to study was not to identify specific research *participants* as the source of data but to choose *settings* (i.e. newsgroups) that could be observed over a long period time in order to collect the required data. The *settings* (i.e. newsgroups) were chosen according to the number of contributors and the number of messages. However, additionally, in order to collect rich and useful data, the selected newsgroups needed to be 'actively racist'. Three newsgroups were chosen; two hosted hate speech towards a variety of racial and ethnic groups and the third was largely advertising forum for racist merchandise such as racist podcasts broadcast on racist websites, subscriptions to racist magazines and meetings of hate groups

like the British National Party or National Front, clothing which endorse a particular racist ideology (eg links with Nazism), racist computer games and racist literature.

In considering potential harms, the impact on the researcher of undertaking this type of research must also be considered. The researcher who conducted the research was a white, heterosexual, male without religious affiliation and so was, to some extent, detached from the personal emotional effect of the racist language disseminated in the newsgroups. However, the newsgroups also attracted those who appeared to have been targets of racist victimisation (emotionally and physically) and contributed to the newsgroup in order to attempt to reproach disseminators of hate speech and to also convey their experiences of abuse. So, although the researcher appeared, at first, to be detached from the impact of the discourse, he found he was not necessarily unaffected by the impact upon him of the lived experiences of the victims. Nonetheless, the virtual world of the Internet allows for the creation of a physical distance between those who use it, which does enable the researcher to be sheltered, somewhat from the emotional impact of what he was reading.

Process

The focus of the research is upon the organisation, structure and social dynamics of the newsgroups. The research process involves the collection and storage of data. Collecting data from newsgroups allows for the collection of very rich and unsanitised data because it is written directly by the research participants themselves.

Researching those who hold or engage in racially obscene, offensive or indecent views or behaviour is often difficult, largely because of the possible emotional impact upon the researcher. However, a CIN-PO methodology can reduce this emotional impact as the Internet provides spatial and physical distance between the researcher and the researched. Being in a dialogue with someone expressing hate is very different to seeing his or her words as script. So, if one reads a *transcript* of an *interview* with a contributor to a racist chat room then it is possible that the impact on the reader would be similar to if they were to read material written directly into that chatroom by a contributor. Hence, the emotional impact is not only dependent upon the *content* of what is heard or observed from respondents but the *process* by which the data is collected and transcribed. Similarly, the spatial and physical distance between the researcher and participant reduced significantly the need for consideration of the safety of both parties during the data collection stage of research process. As a complete observer (and not contributor) there was no risk of any respondents detecting that the researcher was observing the groups or determining the location of the researcher.

Preparing transcripts for publication of findings is easy because there is no need for the researcher to transcribe the data because the messages posted to the newsgroup by the newsgroup contributors represent the data transcripts (once the newsgroup data is saved electronically or printed and stored). Additionally, newsgroup data can be saved directly from source so, once recalled, its accuracy is relatively unquestionable and accuracy can be checked or confirmed by simply finding the appropriate conversation within the specific newsgroup again (Pollock: 2010). Therefore, there is little doubt that everything

seen by the researcher is authentic in respect of the accuracy of the data collected .

Qualitative research with male sex offenders (Malcolm Cowburn)

Qualitative research with sex offenders requires researchers to *engage* with men who have seriously harmed others. The researcher may be required to listen to accounts that may cause horror, anger and distress. Research participants may express attitudes and values that the researcher finds difficult to hear or to leave unchallenged. Moreover, the research participant may become unguarded in what he discloses or he may become very distressed as he looks back on the events of his life. These challenges are considered in this section of the chapter.

Preparation

Preparation for research with sex offenders involves consideration of the physical, psychological and emotional safety of the research participant, the researcher and significant identified other people. This involves thinking, in advance about how the following issues will be dealt with:

- the nature of the offences;

- the manner in which the offender attributes responsibility and recognises harm in relation to their offences;

- the disclosure of unreported offending by the research participant or other identified people;

- the intention to harm self or other people;

- the distress of research participants;

- the way in which the sex offender behaves towards the interviewer;

- the (cumulative) impact of hearing accounts of harms and distress (both

experienced by and inflicted by the offender) on the researcher; and

- the nature of support available to the researcher.

In relation to the offences, the researcher may be able to discover some details about the criminal convictions and the victims (age, relationship to offender) before the interview; this will help to prepare for hearing fuller details. The manner in which the research participant talks about his offences may present some difficulties. Dependant on how the researcher *understands* sex offending he or she may need to reflect on how he or she will deal with hearing repeated denials of responsibility and harm.

Disclosure of unreported offending or the intention to harm self or identified others is primarily managed through the nature of confidentiality that is offered to research participants; complete confidentiality, potentially, leaves a variety of individuals at risk of harm, as such, ethically, this is not an option (see Cowburn 2005). Key to managing these issues is the preparation of a clear 'participant information sheet' that outlines the boundaries of confidentiality and identifies actions that will be taken in response to disclosure of unreported offending or expressed intentions to harm self or others.

Managing how a research participant behaves during an interview, including becoming distressed requires preparation and planning. In relation to distress, before consent is given, the researcher can identify with the research participant sources of support that he or the researcher may contact should he become distressed. These should then be named within the consent form. Additionally, if the research is occurring in an institution (eg a prison or a hospital) the researcher will need to acknowledge, again on the consent form, that specifically identified people (agreed with the research participant) within

the establishment will be informed should the research participant become distressed. In relation to managing the distressed research participant, Cowburn (2010) highlights the importance of reflecting on how the epistemological underpinnings of the research approach may facilitate or inhibit a caring response.

Other behaviours that may occur in an interview that need considering *prior* to the interview are sexualised conversation and 'grooming' behaviour. Anticipating the possibility that a research participant may seek to sexualise the research interview by his answers to research questions and by body language during the interview, is the starting point for developing a response to such behaviour.

Interview based research with this group of people is emotionally demanding and may be potentially harmful; early recognition of this allows appropriate support mechanisms to be in place. This may involve the use of colleagues, co-researchers, counsellors or supervisors before during and after the interview has been completed.

Process

Understanding what is *happening* during an interview, rather than just what is being said is important both in understanding the dynamic of the interview and in recognising what feelings the process generates for the researcher. Three issues are highlighted; dealing with invitations to collude with offensive attitudes and behaviours; responding to offence accounts that minimise harm and offender responsibility; and managing disclosures of harm of harm to identified others.

In relation to dealing with offensive attitudes, to adopt an openly conflictual stance presents many problems: not least the termination of the interview and possibly the research project (see Cowburn, 2007). Moreover, to challenge directly the (implicit) attitudes and values of the research respondent is to shift radically the focus of the research interview. An alternative strategy of explicitly not colluding with offensive and following this with an ingenuous question *opens up* data collection possibilities rather than closing them. The research respondent is invited to express his views more fully, but without expectations of endorsement from the interviewer. Any information forthcoming is germane to understanding the wider social values of the particular research participant.

Listening to offence accounts may be problematic: the stark detail of offence is in many cases very difficult to hear. Additionally, in a long interview, continual denial of both responsibility for the offending and of the harm done by the offending can be very difficult to leave unchallenged.

Disclosure of harm to self or others is likely to occur unannounced in interviews with sex offenders. Despite carefully worded consent documents that clearly identify the parameters of confidentiality, research participants engaged in (long) interviews are likely to forget the conditions under which the interview is being conducted. It is essential that researchers remain vigilant to possible disclosures and forewarn participants of the implications of what they are about to say.

Interpreting and disseminating research

The studies in this chapter have outlined issues pertinent to preparing for and undertaking qualitative research where the researcher and the researched may view the world and their experiences differently. These differences require researchers to prepare for empirical work thoughtfully and regularly to reflect upon their practice. Two problematic issues remain to be discussed: interpretation and dissemination. It is in these two activities that the potential differences between researcher and researched become most marked. However whatever epistemological standpoint is taken at the outset of the research, presentation of data is inevitably some form of *interpretation*. Of the studies presented in this chapter Marian's work highlights most graphically the dilemmas faced by the researcher.

The aim of the research was to identify how homophobia suppressed individual actions or choices. Thus, data were analysed and coded to elicit where opposition to homosexuality was evident in the narratives, and how this indicated wider social, political and legal forces at work to suppress or disparage homosexuality. In order to assess how homophobia was informed and sustained, interviewees' experiences were considered within a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1976) theoretical framework, exploring how sexual subjugation was used as a tool to protect the interests of the powerful (in this case, politicians in a politically divided, conflict-torn society) at the expense of the powerless (homosexuals). This necessarily situated the interviewees and their experiences as disadvantaged. Analysis concentrated upon evidence of unequal power relationships, social control, identity subjugation and the construction and marginalisation of the demarcated 'other' in society. Thus, whilst interviewees

may not have seen homophobia as functioning in particular decisions or events, the analysis of the data may have considered this to be the case.

There was a tension in whether to present interviewees as 'victims' when they did not see themselves as such. This involved balancing values when reading interviewees' otherwise 'everyday' experiences as rooted in a deep-seated and dangerous prejudice. For example, some interviewees recalled moving from small, rural villages to larger, urban areas on the premise of enhanced educational or employment opportunities. In hindsight, they also recognised that they were more likely to be able to seek out same-sex partners with greater anonymity than if they remained at home, where they were reduced to conforming to heterosexuality or celibacy (which may also have raised suspicions). They did not see this as a constraint of a heterosexist, or homophobic, society at the time as that was the norm and they were the anomaly. At the time of the interview, however, many recognised that such constraints directly link to negative constructions applied to lesbian and gay identities, and that these may have impacted on life choices.

Plummer (1995) suggests that interpretation and presentation of data is primarily the province of the researcher. Interpretation of the participants' narratives, in Marian's study, shifted the balance of power to the researcher, who, in effect, reconfigured individuals' experiences as symptomatic of wider cultural responses informed by negative ideologies towards homosexuality directed by particular moral discourses. What a participant might perceive as a natural response to homosexuality was interpreted as an element of the culturally dominant homophobia.

Disseminating research that explores sensitive and controversial issues raises a number of issues that need consideration. Some of these issues require reflection on ethical issues, particularly relating confidentiality anonymity and the presentation of data. In Ed's study these issues presented no difficulties because his data was already available in the public domain and the 'participants' identities were not publically identifiable.

In this latter case, citing the pseudonyms of the chat-room participants did not jeopardise anyone's safety. In Marian's study, the issue was more complex but also easily resolved. Although, interviewees were informed that their identities would be anonymised in any publications, the activist nature of many interviewees meant that, among their social cohorts, it would be possible that they could be identified. Interviewees recognised this risk but consented to their data being included in publications, often citing the greater importance they placed on disseminating the information than adhering to a strict level of anonymity.   Malcolm's research with convicted sex offenders is more problematic; however all participants are given assurance that if their words are used in publications they will not be identifiable. This requires not only the use of pseudonyms but also changing any details that may enable the research participant to be identified (eg the town where they committed their offences, their employment or community position).

Another issue that requires consideration in preparing data for publication is the potential impact of the content of the material. This is most marked in Ed's and Malcolm's work.

The development of the Internet has increased the opportunities for racists to disseminate offensive, harmful and obscene racist material to a wider

global audience. Giving a voice to those with racist views or values both in publication and conference presentations is troubling. However, such views and attitudes are not presented without comment or in a favourable light. The views are in the public domain and by presenting them in academic publications and presentation they can be brought to the attention of a wider audience, who may be critical of the attitudes and values being expressed, and subjected to rigorous academic critique.

In relation to presenting material from research with sex offenders, there is a danger of presenting the words of the offender in such a way that the victim-survivors of sex offences may feel re-victimised. This is particularly the case where data from offence accounts may be used: without adequate explanation and justification explicit descriptions of sexual offences, may be experienced as offensive or distressing. The researcher has to balance what particular data says about the research participant, his offences and his victims; merely to reproduce an offender's account of his offences runs the risk of erasing the experience and pain of the victim-survivor(s).

Conclusion

In my experience it is possible to take more than one side seriously, to find merit in more than one perspective, and to do this without causing outrage on the side of officials or prisoners, but this is a precarious position with a high emotional price to pay (Liebling, 2001:473)

This chapter considers issues in undertaking research with populations that present challenges either because of how they their interpret their experiences, the nature of their offending behaviour, or their expressed attitudes. Each of the

areas illustrate that it is not only possible, but *necessary*, to take more than one side in researching difficult and contentious areas. However, the *sides* may not be clearly defined. It is important to understand the *detail* of the experience of research participants, but to represent this accurately without reproducing the harms described. This inevitably requires researchers to give due consideration to the various interpretative communities in which they wish to be heard.

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