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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing a collaborative methodology for research with community groups

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This 'short communication' considers four different methodological approaches for ethnographic research projects that engage community groups when the research topic is contested amongst group members. I locate my comments in the context of a proposed project on concepts of gender in the 'mythopoetic' men's movement, and on feminist responses to these concepts; however, many of the points raised are applicable to a range of community projects. I discuss benefits and drawbacks of the following candidate methodologies: participant-observation (in this case, with a male partner researcher who is an 'insider'); participatory-action research; reflexive ethnographic interviewing; and a collaborative documentary that incorporates aspects of video ethnography. A key consideration throughout is the positioning of the researcher and participants. I make a case for the uniquely collaborative potential of video when quite diverse perspectives are part and parcel of a proposed research agenda.

Keywords: ethnographic methodologies; men's movement; gender studies; collaborative research

Introduction

Ethnographic methodologies have become increasingly collaborative in recent years (Lassiter 2005). Gone are the days when a participant-observer can presume neutrality about her or his own stance. The positioning of, and power relations between, researchers and participants is now routinely considered part and parcel of ethnographic projects. However, as Phillips (2011) argues, it is all too easy to assume that, when one adopts a collaborative approach to research, tensions and disagreements amongst participants (including the researcher) will automatically lessen. In this short communication, I suggest that diverse perspectives and relations of power in ethnographic research require ongoing attention; specifically, I argue that different collaborative methodologies carry with them different and consequential implications for researcher and participant positioning. I focus here on research with community groups, using an example of a proposed project in Aotearoa New Zealand on concepts of gender that circulate in and around

the 'mythopoetic' men's movement (MMM). After briefly introducing the MMM and the shape of some debates about its gender constructs, I consider the benefits and drawbacks of four different collaborative methodologies for researching this topic: participant-observation with a male partner researcher who is an 'insider'; participatory-action research; reflexive ethnographic interviewing; and a collaborative documentary that includes some video ethnography. I make a case for the uniquely collaborative potential of video for a project such as this one that encompasses quite diverse perspectives. My overall aim is to provoke debate and discussion about the implications of different methodological approaches for collaborative research, considering in particular relations of power and positioning amongst participants and researchers.

Background

For a number of years now I have been interested in designing a collaborative research project to

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examine contested concepts of gender surrounding the MMM. Briefly, the MMM is a relatively progressive strand of the men's movement engaging Jungian and/or 'tribal' archetypes of masculinity and seeking to create intimate communities of men. Feminist critics charge that the movement depoliticises gender inequality (Hagen 1992; Kimmel & Kaufman 1993; Gremillion 2011). While the MMM peaked and waned internationally in the 1990s, it is still alive and well; the movement is small, but arguably influential in Aotearoa New Zealand's relatively small-scale society.¹ It is important to examine concepts of gender within the MMM; this community has helped to codify ideas about gender that are widespread today in popular culture,² and particularly in a growing set of 'New Age' self-help, environmental and spiritual circles (Smith 2008).

As an anthropologist, a gender studies' scholar, and a feminist activist who has recently moved to Aotearoa New Zealand from the United States, I bring a particular and somewhat 'outsider' perspective to this topic. As I argue in an article that explores some theoretical groundwork for this proposed project, important feminist criticisms of gender constructs within the MMM often unwittingly reproduce underlying assumptions that inform these constructs—assumptions that, for instance, masculinity and femininity are fundamentally different (even 'opposite') qualities of personhood (Gremillion 2011; see also Richard-Allerdyce 1994). Heated disagreements here belie similar root concepts of gender difference and, as a result, many feminists and members of the MMM talk past one another in spite of their broadly shared goal to shift culturally dominant gender stereotypes.

I am therefore keen to develop a collaborative research project that will help deconstruct and reconfigure the meanings of gender that are at work in these movements. It has been a struggle to formulate a methodology for this project that will at once: align with an extensive body of international scholarship about gender as a poly-vocal and sometimes contradictory phenomenon that requires a deeply contextual understanding (Hooks 1984; Johnson & Pihama 1995; Butler 2004); promote collaboration between two groups that have experienced a fair

degree of conflict (including intra-group disagreement); and respect participants' varied and often passionately held understandings of gendered social life. I now turn to discuss the benefits and challenges of four candidate methodological approaches to this project.

Four methodologies for collaborative community research

My own ethnographic training in the United States in the early 1990s emphasised participant-observation, the signature methodology for cultural anthropologists, which is designed to uncover subtle logics of everyday practice. For my proposed project, I could partner with a male 'insider' ethnographer who would collect data on MMM gatherings and retreats, while I interviewed feminist critics. For the ethnographic data collection, we could emphasise the participatory aspects of participant-observation to enhance collaboration. The key benefit of this approach would be a rich account of interactions and micro-practices within the MMM. On this point, it is important to note that feminist critiques of the MMM—including my own, and those written by men—are based on an analysis of key movement texts, not on experiential accounts and effects of MMM workshops and retreats. In the only insider study of the MMM of which I am aware, Magnuson (2007) shows that lived experiences of gender in MMM contexts are complex and multi-layered, with the potential to transcend some of the generalised ideas about gender that appear in MMM foundational texts (such as Bly 1990; Keen 1991). As an anthropologist, I embrace the idea that embodied experiences 'on the ground' can reconfigure understandings of apparently status quo constructs in ways that are difficult to articulate in words (see Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2002; Bissel 2008). Participant-observation for this research project, supplemented by interviews, could draw on cultural studies' scholarship to examine both 'fit' and gaps between ideology (or stated discourse) and practice (lived experience) (Barker 2003). However, there are significant drawbacks to participant-observation for this study: the observational component necessarily maintains a social distance between 'researcher' and

‘researched’. Academic, authorial ‘insight’ is privileged. Also, the need for two researchers in this case, who would be involved with different participants—and would then need to confer—would highlight this social distance. Collaboration would thereby be compromised.

Participatory-action research (PAR) would solve this problem of social distance because it engages participants as co-researchers in a process around current problematic issues with the overt aim of change and improvement (Wadsworth 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). PAR is explicitly designed to challenge conventional distinctions between researchers and participants; it is not only a collaborative but also a transformative methodology that transparently seeks the knowledge and preferences of participants regarding new directions for practice. But PAR for my proposed topic area could not engage the experiential content of the MMM directly, because this group does not exist for a research purpose. A new research context could be created, one that is gender mixed and is legitimately a shared interest for all parties, as required in PAR (i.e. a research forum designed to explore mutually agreed upon problems and goals). However, a problem arises here that is almost the ‘inverse’ problem arising with participant-observation: in a PAR framework, how would I position my own engagement with academic gender studies? What place would this particular set of knowledge have in the research? Such knowledge seems important for the topic at hand, considering decades of feminist research that demonstrates the non-conscious reproduction of gender norms in everyday life (Butler 2004). But if, in keeping with the ethics and politics of collaborative inquiry, I am fully transparent about my views along these lines, I think I would risk the introduction of hierarchy into the PAR research group because of the social contexts and effects of academic discourse (Bourdieu 1988).

A third option would also be distanced from the experiential content of the MMM: I could facilitate interviews and focus groups with interested participants, positioning myself as a reflexive ethnographer in the process (Davis 1999). In 2009, I organised an informal and preliminary

discussion along these lines in Taupo; there were about 15 attendees, including several MMM participants, and a number of grassroots feminist activists (see Gremillion 2011). The conversation was invigorating, and the group articulated many points of agreement as well as conflict. I was told by several participants that my relative ‘outsider’ status, both as a newcomer to Aotearoa New Zealand and as an academic, was helpful for the group in its efforts to render visible participants’ assumptions, frustrations and hopes. In keeping with a form of narrative interviewing in which I have been trained (White & Epston 1990),³ I adopted a stance of curiosity to draw forth insider knowledge, while also identifying (minimally) my own perceptions and understandings of issues discussed—not as a way to move towards conclusions or particular lines of thought, but rather as a way to scaffold aspects of the conversation. I was transparent about the contexts and content of (some of) my own views, and I was also relatively decentred but influential during the discussion (see White 2000). In these ways, reflexive ethnographic interviewing for my proposed project would allow for both a diversity of views and collaboration, and would also situate academic knowledge as unique and important, but neither distant nor central. However, with this methodology, it might be a challenge to codify collaborative research outcomes. The Taupo discussion opened up space for critical awareness, but a shared sense of the deconstruction and reconfiguration of gender constructs was not apparent. Also, a write-up and theorising of interviews and focus groups along the lines of such a deconstruction could again mark ‘researcher’ discourse as distant from that of participants. As Sillitoe (2002) notes, reflexive ethnography using interviews or focus groups can produce knowledge that sits uneasily between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’.

Finally, I have considered creating a collaborative documentary that incorporates aspects of video ethnography. Video data has the advantage of vividly externalising representations, which can then be viewed and re-interpreted by audiences. In addition, multiple interpretations of a given topic or event can be made visible within the visual product. Socially critical documentaries often achieve this goal by

juxtaposing contradictory and provoking evidence, so that audiences (which can include participants) are invited into new realisations and/or social action (Rabiger 2004). All interested participants could be co-researchers (Pink 2001), deciding together what would be appropriate to film. Considering ethical issues around privacy and the likely negative effects of cameras during MMM activities, video footage of MMM gatherings is probably not viable; instead, a documentary that is composed mostly of interviews (with participants and feminist activists) could suit. I would be interviewed as part of the film, along with other academics and activists. For an ethnographic component, it may be that MMM participants would agree to the filming of selected MMM activities (e.g. opening or closing ceremonies). In addition, some of the principles of video-reflexive ethnography (Carroll & Iedema 2008) could be part of the process—participants would view footage, and then reflect critically on the content. These reflections could themselves be filmed and incorporated into the visual product, and they may also lead to further outcomes (e.g. proposed shifts in MMM and feminist language when describing gender identity, academic articles or reflections in MMM newsletters). This methodological approach encourages layers and cycles of critical readings, situated and transparent reflections, the shared production of a research outcome (the film), and a range of ‘spin-off’ outcomes, such as academic writing and social action projects. Challenges include the fact that such a project could be unwieldy and time-consuming, and would require technical expertise. Also, the question of how the film would be directed and edited could be difficult to negotiate.

Conclusion

When considering the pros and cons of four different collaborative methodologies for a community research project—when divergent and contested views of the research topic, including those of the researcher, are apparent—a collaborative documentary with ethnographic components appears to be the most promising choice (in spite of technical and logistical challenges). It allows not only for shared

decision-making about which data are gathered, but also group ‘ownership’ of the main product for dissemination (the film). Additional outputs for multiple purposes and audiences would also be well-supported. Perhaps most importantly, a visual medium used in a reflexive way allows for highly recursive and critical reflection on the views of all parties. The various social positions of participants, including the researcher, can be made available for examination as part of the content of the research.

Writing about the concept of positioning in relation to counselling practice, Winslade (2005, p. 353) suggests the following:

At the same time as we establish a discursive position for ourselves in making an utterance, we also offer [other persons] ... a position (or a choice of positions) from which to respond. They are called into particular positions not just in obvious terms like agreement or disagreement, but also in more subtle ways as affiliating with, and implicitly giving support to, whole frameworks of meaning.

Considering the institutional power of researchers who are in the academy, the positioning of all participants, particularly for collaborative projects, is a key concern. ‘Whole frameworks of meaning’ are at stake. As Lassiter (2005) argues, collaborative ethnography raises fruitful questions about where theory and interpretation lie. Our methodologies must be able to grapple with them in helpful ways.

Notes

1. Essentially Men, Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest MMM organisation, has engaged about 3000 participants in experiential workshops and retreats since its founding in the early 1990s.
2. See Gremillion (2011), where I suggest that certain key premises about gender in the MMM—if not the ‘surface’ content of MMM gender constructs—are reflected broadly in contemporary neoliberal social contexts. Debates about gender ideals in the MMM can therefore serve as a ‘case study’ for examining assumptions about gender that extend well beyond the MMM.
3. While this form of interviewing was developed as a key part of narrative therapy, a non-pathologising and constructivist approach to counselling practice, it is

applicable to ethnographic interviewing and indeed draws on ethnographic theories.

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