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Researching from Within: External and Internal Ethical Engagement

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This article examines the superficial and deep ethical and moral dilemmas confronting 'insider' researchers which we term external and internal ethical engagement. External ethical engagement refers to the traditional, easily identifiable ethical issues that insider researchers attend to by submitting their application for ethical approval to their institution's internal review board. Internal ethical engagement relates to the deeper level ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with once 'in the field' linked to on-going personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles, and anonymity. By reviewing the literature in this area and drawing on the authors' experiences of undertaking interpretive studies at institutions where they were members of staff, we explore these concepts and examine the implications for insider researchers.

Keywords: insider research; ethics; professional relationships; anonymity; access

Introduction

An increasing awareness in recent years of the moral and ethical issues surrounding educational research (Cohen *et al.* 2007) has given rise to several authors reporting on the key ethical issues that need to be addressed (see, for example, Newby 2010; Punch 2009; Walford 2001). These issues include minimising potential physiological/psychological/emotional harm to participants, ensuring that informed consent is gained from the participants before embarking on the research and ensuring anonymity of the participants throughout the process. Coupled with the increasing awareness and growing body of literature dealing with these issues, there has also been a significant growth in the ethical regulation of social science research in the UK (Hammersley 2009).

While we agree with Sikes (2006) who points out that all research has implications for those involved, both directly and indirectly, and Simons and Usher (2000) who contend that ethical judgements in educational research cannot be generalised but need to be made in relation to the context within which the study takes place, in this paper we argue that undertaking interpretive insider research within your own institution or organisation, where participants are colleagues and are seen as co-researchers, where the nature of the data can be very personal, and where self reflection is a key feature of involvement, makes these implications even more acute. Furthermore, many of the ethical issues and dilemmas that arise when undertaking insider research are not covered or thought out fully during the ethical review application, a bureaucratic undertaking which often ‘represents the practice of research as an ordered, linear process with objective principles/rules that inform/direct ethical decision making and moral action’ (Halse and Honey 2007, 336) rather than acknowledging the more nonlinear and ‘messy’ process which typifies qualitative educational research (Lichtman 2010).

Building on Tolich’s (2004) idea of external and internal confidentiality, in this paper we put forward the notion of external and internal ethical engagement for insider researchers. In his work, Tolich describes confidentiality in insider research as being like an iceberg with the tip above the water relating to ‘traditional’ confidentiality (which he terms external confidentiality) – ensuring that the participant remains anonymous. Below the surface lies internal confidentiality – the risk that people involved in the research may be able to recognise each other – which he argues goes ‘unacknowledged in ethical codes’ (Tolich 2004, 101). By extending these ideas to cover ethical issues beyond confidentiality, we class external ethical engagement as the superficial, easily identifiable ethical issues, such as informed consent and anonymity, which insider researchers attend to by submitting their application for ethical approval to their institution’s internal review board (the tip of the ethical engagement iceberg). In contrast, internal ethical engagement relates to the deeper level ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with once ‘in the field’; the below surface, murky issues that arise during and after the research process linked to on-going personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles and anonymity.

With the proliferation of taught EdD research degrees in the UK over the last few years (Stephenson *et al.* 2006), when students are often encouraged to research

their own practice and so become insider researchers themselves, it is reasonable to suggest that such internal ethical issues are being faced by a growing number of relatively inexperienced researchers. In addition, where doctoral students are employed by the institution at which they are studying, their academic supervisors are also ‘insiders’ adding a further layer to these complex ethical issues. Consequently, we would argue that there is a need for notions of internal ethical engagement to be highlighted and explored in more detail in the research methods literature. Indeed, Mercer (2007, 14) claims that there is a ‘pressing need’ to investigate this type of research. An increased knowledge and awareness of these dilemmas may help neophyte researchers to understand better some of the challenges they may have to face that are not necessarily covered in introductory research methods textbooks or indeed by the process of gaining ethical approval. Gaining such approval may, in fact, veil some of the more challenging ethical and moral dilemmas that the researcher may face; novice insider researchers may be lulled into a false sense of security by quite literally ‘ticking’ the ethical review box (external ethical engagement), rather than thinking more deeply about some of the ethical issues that they may face with their participants once their research is underway (internal ethical engagement).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to discuss the notions of external and internal ethical engagement for insider researchers by drawing on our experiences of undertaking interpretive studies in institutions where we have worked as full time members of staff. Alan’s research study investigated academics’ career trajectories (Floyd 2009), while Linet’s longitudinal study focused on a merger between two higher education institutions (Arthur 2010). It is hoped that this article will provide an insight into some of the complex issues we faced and offer some examples of how we tackled them in order to help other insider researchers address similar challenges. Following this introduction, we clarify what we mean by the term ‘insider’. Next, we discuss the key notions of external and internal ethical engagement for insider researchers and then conclude by discussing the implications of these for future research.

Levels of ‘insiderness’

Being an insider means being embedded in a shared setting (Smyth and Holian 2008), emotionally connected to the research participants (Sikes 2008), with a ‘feel for the game and the hidden rules’ (Bourdieu 1988, 27). Insider status may confer privileged access and information, but the researcher’s position in an organisation may also act as a constraint, limiting who is willing to participate and what is revealed (Smyth and Holian 2008).

Working at the same organisation as research respondents does not necessarily mean a shared repertoire, however. Alvesson (2002) argues that organisational culture may be contested by individuals and groups and that diverse sub-cultures co-exist in organisations. One department of a university may be very different from another, as Alan discovered when interviewing heads of department, while Linet’s research into two merging organisations meant that she was seen as ‘inside’ one organisation (Parkview University) and ‘outside’ the other (River College) before the merger. These experiences support the notion that researchers have multiple identities (Mercer 2007) and may be simultaneously insiders and outsiders (Adler 2004; Bridges 2002), challenging the concept of an ‘inside/outside binary’ (Thomson and Gunter 2011, 18).

External ethical engagement

As previously discussed, external ethical engagement refers to the easily identifiable ethical issues, such as informed consent and anonymity, which insider researchers attend to by submitting their application for ethical approval to their institution's internal review board. Although such issues may be easily identifiable by the researcher at the outset, it is worth briefly exploring this review process further, as it has become far more regulated and bureaucratic over recent years and is not without its critics (see, for example, Hammersley 2009; Tierney and Corwin 2007). From our different experiences of being insider researchers, and in line with the growing literature surrounding this topic (see IJRME 2010 33/3 for examples of lived experience of ethics review), it is clear that ethical procedures have become more stringent. As an example, for Linet's insider study (Arthur 2010) which was granted ethical approval in 2000, the researcher completed a simple ethics form and the research was granted ethical approval by the department's Research Ethics Officer. In contrast, in 2006, before embarking on data collection for his insider study (Floyd 2009), Alan was required to write a comprehensive application for ethics approval to the case University's Research Ethics Committee. This application included details of the proposed research aims and justifications of the research; the proposed method; the investigator's qualifications, experiences and skills; when, how and to whom the results would be disseminated; participant details; means by which participants would be recruited including the wording of the email; potential risks to the participants; how the potential benefits of the research outweighed any risk to participants; the debriefing and feedback that participants would receive following the study; details of the participant information sheet and consent form that participants would receive; and how the confidentiality of data and anonymity of the participants would be preserved.

While it could be argued that these more robust procedures are appropriate to safeguard participants' interests, we feel that an over-emphasis on box ticking for researchers may, at times, be at the expense of engagement with deeper ethical issues. This increasingly bureaucratic approach could lead to novice insider researchers avoiding, or not engaging fully with, what has been termed the 'ethic of care' (Gibbs and Costley 2006, 244) once they are 'in the field', because they may feel that by gaining ethical approval at the start of their project they do not need to be concerned about such issues any further.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, however, that it is not sufficient to assume that an agreement of informed consent reached at the start of the research relationship covers the whole study. An example of this is the concept of anonymity:

What we are trying to make clear is that anonymity is a concern throughout the inquiry. As researchers, we need to be aware of the possibility that the landscape and the persons with whom we are engaging as participants may be shifting and changing. What once seemed settled and fixed is once again a shifting ground. (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 175)

Ethical commitments are not usually time-limited, but in most research projects the nature of an outsider's involvement means that once the research has been completed and written up, ethical concerns fade naturally into the background. This is not the case for insiders particularly, as in Linet's case, with longitudinal research. Current practice in organisations often depends on historical precedent, so even after

time has elapsed, sensitivities still exist about the historical record, not least regarding who may be blamed for what. Linet's longitudinal research indicated that even seven years after the merger, managers were still dealing with some of the personal issues that had arisen at the time which suggests that insider researchers need to maintain ethical commitments into the long-term future. This example leads us on to the notion of internal ethical engagement, to which we now turn.

Internal ethical engagement

As defined earlier, internal ethical engagement relates to the ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with once 'in the field' linked to on-going personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles, and anonymity. In this section, we will explore each of these issues, drawing on our experiences as insider researchers.

On-going relationships

Insider researchers have to live with the consequences of their actions (Drake 2010), possibly for many years if they and the research participants continue to work for the same organisation. Insiders cannot 'unhear' what they have been told (Drake and Heath 2008, 137) and it may be hard to predict how that knowledge will impact on them in the future. For example, insider researchers may be trusted with very personal information, which can become problematic for them as they continue to work with participants during the research project and after it has finished. In his life history research investigating academic department heads, Alan felt that he was gaining access to some privileged information, and that people were opening up to him more as an insider because he was aware of the cultural situations in which they were operating. Several times, respondents would use phrases like, 'you know what it's like' or 'as you well know'. Additionally, some participants would talk in depth about a colleague in quite a derogatory way and then say things like, 'this is anonymous, isn't it?' or, 'can that be off the record?' Relatedly, certain names came up in different interviews, each time accompanied by the assumption that, as an insider, you must agree with the participant's perception of the colleague being discussed. When undertaking insider interviews, there is a feeling of pressure to show some verbal or visual cues of agreement with the participant's viewpoint, otherwise the respondents may begin to shorten their answers and curtail the rest of the conversation. What should an insider researcher do in such a situation? Should they pretend that they agree with the participant's comments and values even if they are diametrically opposed to their own?

Mercer (2007, 8) identifies a danger of distortion linked to insider research caused by the need to continue professional relationships after the research: 'pragmatism may outweigh candour'. This appeared to be the case in Linet's research, where the final round of interviews revealed that the interviewees in management positions had previously concealed some of the difficult issues they had faced at the time of the merger. It seems clear that some interviewees were constrained by the need to preserve a façade of management unity at a time of conflicts within the management team. Although the research interviews were confidential, there was still a barrier to openness for managers. They were still managers, Linet was still a staff member, and those positions influenced the level of frankness in the interviews.

Furthermore, as an insider researcher, the personal knowledge gained through research interviews can cause problems in the workplace. For example, attending cross institutional meetings or seminars when a research participant is present, it is difficult to answer questions from other colleagues such as, ‘how do you know John?’ In situations such as these, the insider researcher has to mask the fact that they know the participants, sometimes even making up alternative stories to cover the truth. These situations present on-going moral and ethical dilemmas for the researcher: Are these ‘white lies’ warranted? What happens if the insider’s integrity is questioned in such situations, because the cover stories do not quite stack up? Other issues can arise, particularly when discussions become thornier. For example, some of Alan’s close colleagues made comments such as, ‘Why is he being so difficult?’ or, ‘What is up with her?’ In these situations, insider researchers have to rein themselves in from replying with comments like, ‘Ah, well, you see, John is having a hard time at home and in an attempt to escape his home life he is applying for promotion at another University...’ or, ‘It’s because she doesn’t think you are very good at your job I am afraid.’

As Alan’s research continued, and he heard more and more personal accounts of his colleagues’ life histories, he became increasingly aware of the need to think about the ownership of the data being produced and its eventual destinations, particularly as at work he would still be in regular contact with some of his participants and colleagues mentioned in their interviews. Cresswell (2007, 57) identifies some of the problems that arise around the ownership of data in narrative research, which become even more sensitive if co-constructed by an insider researcher:

Mutiple issues arise in the collecting, analyzing, and telling of individual stories...Who owns the story? Who can tell it? Who can change it? Whose version is convincing? What happens when narratives compete? As a community, what do stories do among us?

It has been suggested that the notion of ownership should be re-conceptualised in terms of relational responsibility, with researchers acting cautiously at all times in order to protect participants (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 177). In an attempt to combat these problems, Alan sent each participant a copy of the interview transcript electronically and asked them to make comments and clarifications. Participants were also invited to add any further thoughts they had had since the meeting. However, taking these steps did not extinguish the feelings of worry that Alan felt throughout the project, and beyond, in trying to ensure that he represented the data as fully as possible, while still ensuring anonymity for his participants and other colleagues mentioned in the data.

Insider knowledge

Although an insider researcher may benefit from a deeper knowledge and understanding of the organisation within which their research is based, there is a danger that their assumptions are misleading. Drake (2010), for example, describes how as an insider she positioned a research respondent in ways that resonated with her own work, but might not have reflected the respondent’s self-conception. At times, the researcher’s inside knowledge may be at odds with a respondent’s views. For

example, one interviewee in Linet's study who she knew had experienced some difficulties during the merger stated categorically that there had been 'no low points'. What should a researcher do in these circumstances? Probing further during the interview may undermine the respondent's psychological defences, as well as creating a degree of awkwardness. Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 45) construe 'both the researcher and researched as anxious, defended subjects.' Unlike outsiders, insider researchers have to consider to what extent they should use their inside knowledge to question or discuss an interviewee's account. Internal ethical engagement would suggest that whereas challenges to facts are acceptable, drawing attention to possible face-saving devices should be avoided due to the potential harm to participants.

Insiders' professional and research roles

There are likely to be tensions for insiders between their role as a professional practitioner and as a researcher. A practitioner is actively engaged in an organisation whereas a researcher needs to stand back and survey the evidence – the difference, Drake (2010) suggests, between building sandcastles and looking at a coastal map. A researcher's critical stance may undermine expected loyalty to the institution (Sikes and Potts 2008) and at times, professional duty may conflict with the ethical aspects of the research, for example, if the researcher is told in confidence about activities which may be detrimental to the organisation. Insider researchers need to consider whether it is appropriate to act on the information they have obtained through their research. Linet's post-merger survey revealed that some staff felt that the wider university had failed to acknowledge the trauma experienced by those directly involved in the merger. Linet decided to pass on this information and as a result a personal letter was sent by the Vice Chancellor to all staff in the merged department, thanking them for their work. This did not present any ethical dilemmas. It was more difficult when interviews with some respondents revealed what Linet knew to be misinterpretations of other interviewees' actions. It was not possible for Linet to 'set the record straight' without revealing the other interviewees' identities. In these circumstances she felt obliged to allow misunderstandings to continue rather than compromise the confidentiality of the research interview.

Anonymity

Institutional anonymity is problematic for insider researchers. Even if they do not identify the institution where they carried out their research study, by publishing under their own names they inevitably reveal its identity (Smyth and Holian 2008). Indeed this is an issue we have faced while writing this article, which has meant taking extra care to protect the identity of our participants when discussing the dilemmas we experienced. We would argue, therefore, that institutional anonymity is meaningless for insiders. Whatever efforts are made to preserve anonymity, a simple on-line search will allow the most novice investigator to identify the institution. For example, Sikes (2008), writing about her 'insider/outsider' experiences of working as a Visiting Reader with the Education Department of a different university than her own, takes great pains to ensure that its name is not revealed either in the article or her CV or present university website, but a google search reveals the name of the university within a matter of minutes. For this reason, we would argue that internal ethical engagement should require researchers to work on the assumption that the site of their study cannot be anonymous. As Trowler (2011, 3) suggests, 'It is normally

best to assume that the reader will be able to identify your institution, should they wish to.’ As a result, the insider researcher’s efforts should be focused on ensuring that research participants are not identifiable. Existing approaches to achieve this, such as changing participants’ details (gender, age, background etc) are, by their nature, problematic for interpretivist researchers, since these aspects are often crucial to an understanding of a research participant’s perspective. In any case, disguising research participants may not be enough: when Linet shared her draft analysis with the respondents, one person pointed out that a detail had been included that might reveal his/her identity. Although Linet subsequently removed this detail, the draft had been circulated to all the research participants. Tolich (2004, 101) rightly argues that researchers should avoid enabling ‘research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research’. Linet’s experience indicates that such mutual recognition may also be possible at a draft stage if copies of the analysis are circulated to participants. The utmost caution is needed to prevent respondents from recognising each other. Such safeguards are also important when researchers are undertaking their doctoral studies at their own institutions, where doctoral supervisors may be able to recognise respondents. As a last resort, to protect respondents’ anonymity, insider researchers could publish under a pseudonym and doctoral students could decide to make their thesis confidential. Obviously, however, these solutions would prevent appropriate recognition of the researcher which could prove problematic for academics under increasing pressure to claim publications for internal and external research assessment exercises.

Conclusions

While external ethical engagement is relatively straightforward, if perhaps overly bureaucratic, this paper argues that insider researchers are faced with much murkier waters involving ongoing relationships, privileged knowledge and tensions between their professional and research roles. Past recommendations for addressing the dilemmas facing insider researchers have included reflexivity and a clear chain of evidence (Sikes, 2008; Drake, 2010; Smyth and Holian, 2008), but both these approaches carry a risk of identifying research participants. In our view, there are no adequate checklists or boxes to tick to satisfy internal ethical engagement. Instead insider researchers need to accept the challenge of anticipating the moral and professional dilemmas they may face not just in the research design and implementation, but in the years following the research when personal and professional relationships will need to be sustained, and when research confidentiality may inhibit a frank and open exchange with trusted colleagues. They may also need to consider how much of their dilemmas they will be able to discuss with their supervisors if they are located within their own organisation. These aspects of external and internal ethical engagement for insider researchers are illustrated in figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – External and Internal Ethical Engagement

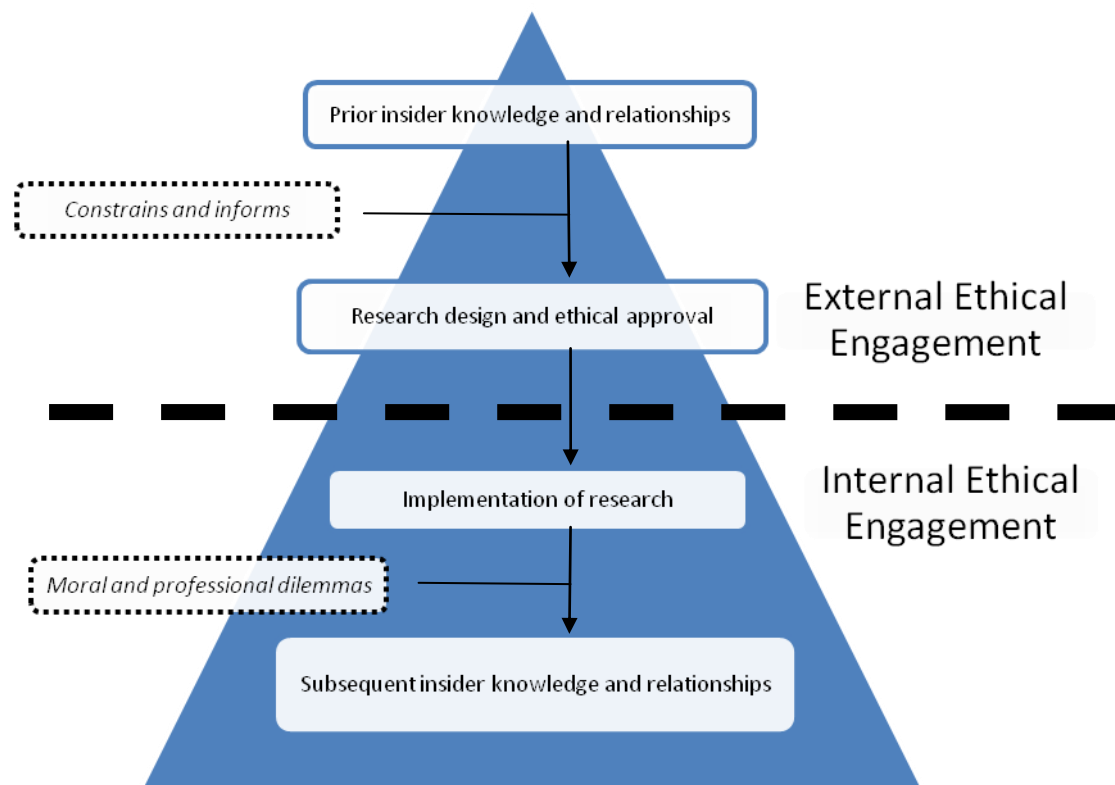


Figure 1 shows that there is a complex interaction between a researcher's prior knowledge through being an insider and its effect on their research design and implementation, and the subsequent knowledge gleaned through the research and its impact on their personal relationships and professional roles. Throughout there is a need to maintain personal integrity while resolving the dilemmas relating to relationships and professional priorities. At the tip of the ethical engagement iceberg, the researcher's prior knowledge influences the development of their research design and enables them to 'tick the boxes' for ethical approval of their research. Below the surface lie the 'rocks' of insider dilemmas which seem to be rarely acknowledged in the process of gaining ethical approval. Thus, we contend that the ethical issues for insider researchers which currently lie hidden below the waterline need to be brought to the surface. Consequently, we urge insider researchers to consider from the outset the issues which we have raised in this article, such as ongoing professional relationships, the acquisition of dangerous knowledge, and the need to protect the anonymity of respondents in the long-term future, thereby ensuring that potential moral and ethical dilemmas inform the whole research process. The insider researcher's moral integrity is paramount (Patton 2002; Pring 2001), but needs to be enhanced by a better understanding of what might occur once the research is under way and after it has been completed.

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