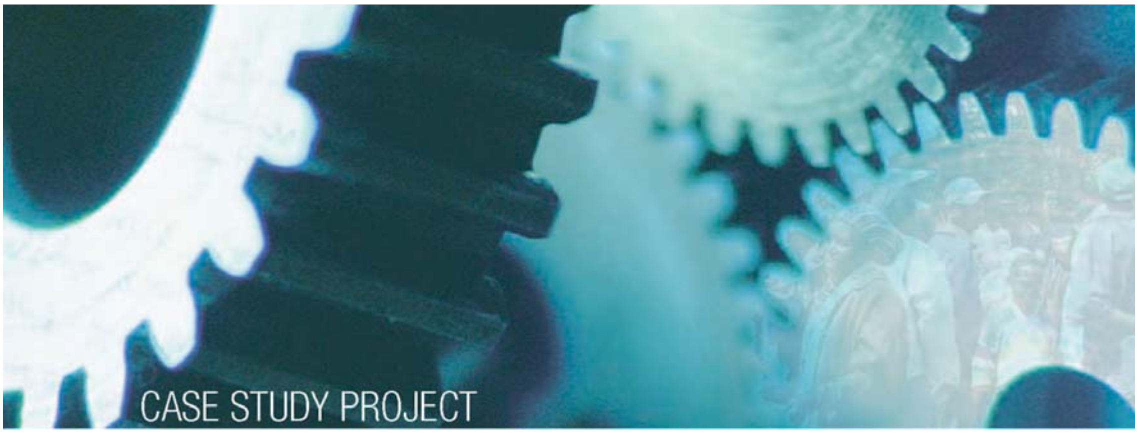

CASE STUDY RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Melanie Rein, PhD

This essay is part of a series of papers commissioned by The Partnering Initiative through its Case Study Project to develop insights into the process of researching/writing partnership case studies as tools for change.

Introduction

In many areas of enquiry in the Social Sciences, case studies can be used to analyse and understand complexity. This applies to partnerships just as to any other topic that one may wish to research. Since it is clear that what Yin describes as "complex social phenomena" [1] may not always be readily reduced to cause and effect, a case study can be especially valuable when the focus of attention is not confined simply to the results and outcomes of a partnership activity. In the latter case, a survey with specific questions on outcomes may be capable of yielding the type of information and data required. On the other hand, if one is aiming to acquire a more subtle and nuanced understanding of processes, events and situations, the case study approach is particularly helpful. A case study approach enables the researcher to explore, more readily, the relationship between factors, such as context, organisational behaviour and individual roles, all of which may affect the results or outcome of an activity.[2]

Because case studies explore the complexities of social phenomena from a number of different angles and perspectives, a variety of research tools, instruments and approaches are used to gather information and data, the combined analysis of which provides an understanding about the complexities of the partnership under study.[3]

The case study approach is not an easy option and is not necessarily appropriate for those new to research.[4] When it is carried out effectively, the case study research process can be illuminating for all concerned: for example, it may be a catalyst for change and it may provide a learning and knowledge generating experience. Done badly, case study research becomes a flat narrative which neither illuminates nor explains, and more often than not is never referred to again.

This paper will explore the roles and responsibilities of the case study researcher in the specific context of partnerships.[5] Where relevant, examples will be given to illustrate particular points. While it is not possible to address all the issues which are likely to be of concern it is hoped that the chapter will encourage the researcher to develop and enhance his / her skills and knowledge.

The roles of the partnership case study researcher

How a researcher perceives and undertakes his / her role is dependent on a number of factors, among which the following three are, possibly, predominant: firstly, the relationship s/he has with and towards the partnership under study; secondly, the specifications of the contract or commission; and thirdly, the expectations of all those involved, which may be different from contractual specifications. Indeed, because of the complexities involved in undertaking this form of research with a partnership, there is more likelihood that there will be a number of conflicting expectations. This issue is explored in further detail later.

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[1] Yin (2003a), p. 2.

[2] See Yin (2003a), p. 3-10 for more discussion about the application of appropriate research methods to particular situations.

[3] Yin (2003b), p. xvii. While Yin does not refer specifically to partnership case study research, the methods he suggests are relevant to partnership case study research.

[4] Yin (2003a), p.58.

[5] For the remainder of this paper, the term 'researcher' will be used to refer to the partnership case study researcher).

The role of the researcher, both as subject in the research process and as its facilitator, has been documented in co-operative enquiry research.[6] It has been recognised that a researcher using a participative approach can act as a catalyst or facilitator in knowledge generation and as "sensitizer, broker, resource persona and 'peer' in the process of shared knowledge production".[7] Additionally, a researcher can legitimise knowledge other than expert knowledge and provide training for future professionals whether directly or indirectly.[8]

Situations which structurally require the researcher to take on the role of facilitator include evaluative case study research. These may mean facilitating a collaborative process in which various partners and stakeholders are directly involved. in such situations, clearly care has to be taken to ensure that the role of researcher does not become confused with that of facilitator. To ensure that this confusion is guarded against, careful negotiation and agreement is recommended at the outset, with all parties concerned, in order to identify both the needs and expectations of the partnership. As has been mentioned, the relationship which the researcher has with and towards the partnership, may also be a critical factor in the researcher's ability to carry out his / her role, whether it be as researcher or facilitator or both.

Varieties of organisational structures

There are potentially many different types of organisational structures involved in partnership case study research, each of which may affect the relationship between the researcher, the partnership and its stakeholders. The diagrams below provide some examples of such structures.

Organisational Structure 1: Partnership as funder with external researcher

The first diagram illustrates an organisational structure in which the researcher is external to the partnership. Here, the partnership funds and contracts or subcontracts the researcher (perhaps through a research organisation) to carry out the case study research. Even though the researcher has been outsourced, the fact that the partnership itself is the contractor is crucial, since this determines the power-relationships underlying all aspects of the research.

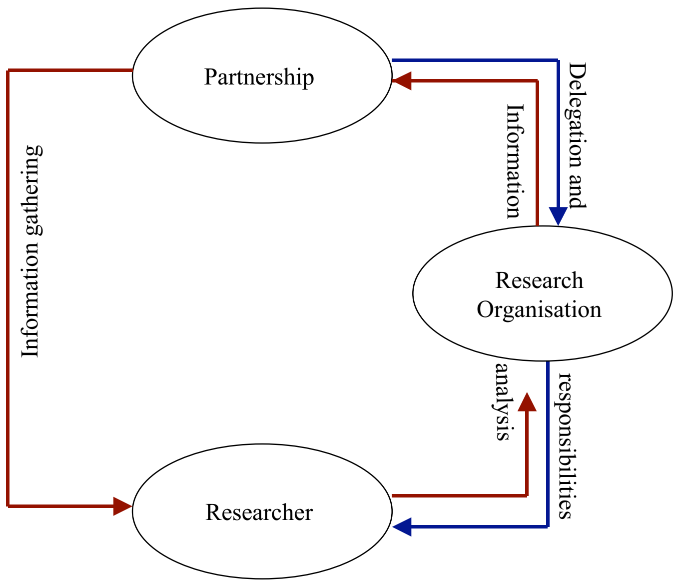

Diagram 1

[6] Reason (1988), p. 27-33.
[7] Hordijk & Baud (2005), p. 17.
[8] Ibid, p. 18.

In the diagram, the flow of information in the entire research process is represented by the brown anticlockwise arrow. Here, the information flow starts from the partnership and returns again to the partnership. Source and target of information are the same organisation. The downward brown arrow represents information-gathering and retrieval by the researcher during his / her investigation of the partnership. The upward brown arrow represents information-analysis and findings, all of which are presented back to the partnership by the researcher through the research organisation. Let us call this cycle the 'research relationship'.

The blue arrow, on the other hand, represents the flow of delegation and responsibilities within the contractual relationship between partnership and researcher. This cycle indicates that the partnership, as both employer and manager, delegates certain duties and responsibilities to the researcher, which the latter is obliged to fulfil. Let us call this cycle the 'contractual relationship'.

As the diagram clarifies, the partnership is both the object (i.e. 'phenomenon being examined' and 'source material') and the 'owner/contractor' and 'target recipient' of the research. Thus, the partnership ultimately has control of both the contract and the research.

In this type of situation, the researcher clearly has to tread carefully, delicately and indeed warily in his/her provision of information and evaluation, for there could be a gulf between what the partnership may *want* to hear as owner/contractor, and may *need* to hear, yet find difficult and indeed unpalatable, as target recipient.

Organisational Structure 2: One partner as funder with external researcher

The dynamics shift and become more complicated if one partner in a partnership becomes the funder of the research (see diagram 2).

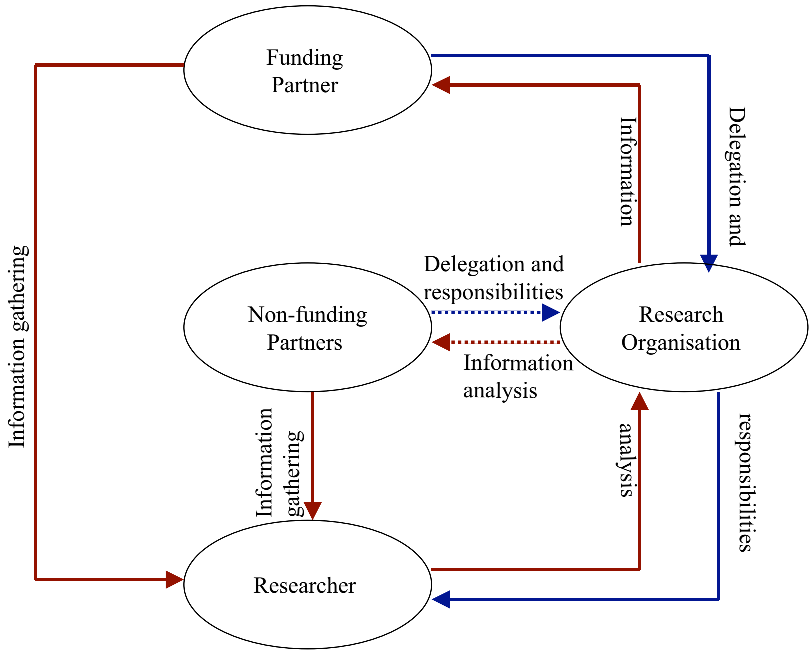

Diagram 2

In this diagram, one of the partners, because it is directly funding the research, has control over the decision-making process. The other partners have minimal input into management of the research, as indicated by the broken blue line. However, information gathering will flow from both the funding partner and the non-funding partner as indicated by the downward brown line. Information analysis is likely flow to both the funding partner and the non-funding partner as indicated by the brown upward arrow and the brown broken arrow. While the contractual relationships illustrated here may be a reflection of a partnership dynamic which the researcher will need to be aware of, s/he may also run the risk of being compromised because of the implicit and explicit control held by one partner.

Organisational Structure 3: Partnership as funder with internal researcher

The dynamic is complicated further when the researcher is no longer external to the partnership but internal to it (see diagram 3).

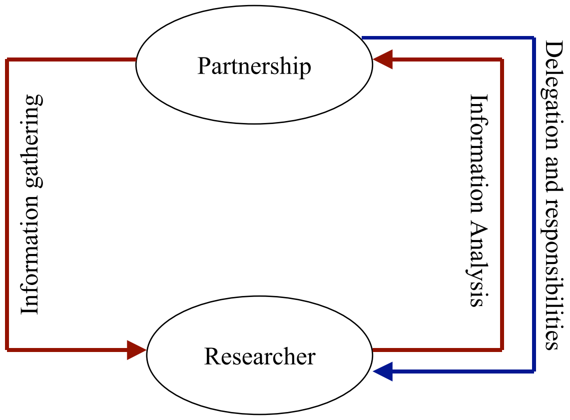

Diagram 3

Although this diagram appears simpler than the previous diagrams, in fact the dynamic is just as intricate since here the researcher is attempting to undertake some form of 'neutral' research while also being employed by, or working in, the partnership which s/he is trying to research. The two structural elements involved, working in contrary directions, are likely to result in stresses on the researcher, and conflicts of interest. Thus impartiality may be threatened as the result of pressures exerted on the researcher. Whether the researcher is able carry out the research effectively is likely to depend on factors such as his / her position in the partnership and his / her support network outside it. It could be argued that however good a researcher's skills, the fact of being directly employed or working in a partnership without proper support networks will affect the way in which s/he operates.

Organisational Structure 4: External Funder and External Researcher

Different sets of research relationships are encountered when a funding organisation becomes involved (see diagram 4).

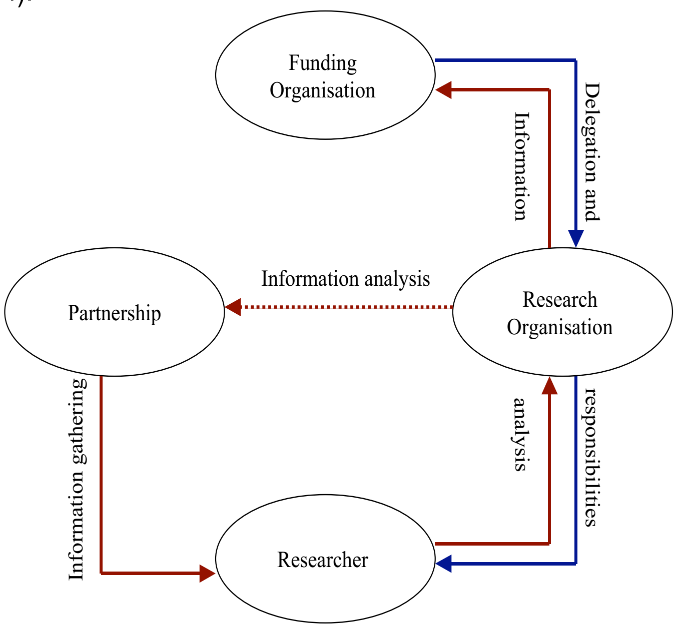

Diagram 4

In this diagram, the contractual relationship shifts from the partnership to a funding organisation, which may have very little or no contact with the partnership itself. In this particular example, the researcher is directly employed by a research organisation which manages the researcher's work. The research organisation itself has a contract with the funding organisation. The broken brown line between the research organisation and partnership represents information analysis which is fed back to the partnership. Although this information flow is not necessarily contractually required, it should be considered as an ethical requirement for the research organisation. While the complex dynamics of the previous structures, between the partnership as both contractor and research subject, have been removed, other problems or issues are likely to arise for the researcher. Examples include concerns about the priorities for research which may have been set by an external organisation, even though the latter may have little idea of the specific needs of a partnership. In addition, difficulties may be generated by specific bureaucratic requirements. These are of particular concern when sophisticated and international funding organisations support research in developing countries, where organisations on the ground may not have the resources or structures to maintain the complex reporting systems required. In such a situation, the researcher may be placed in the dual role of attempting to do quality research while also fulfilling the bureaucratic expectations of the funding organisation. The two goals may, at times, be incompatible.

Organisational Structure 5: External funder and internal researcher

Diagram 5 illustrates the shift in relationships when a funding agency funds a partnership directly to undertake research.

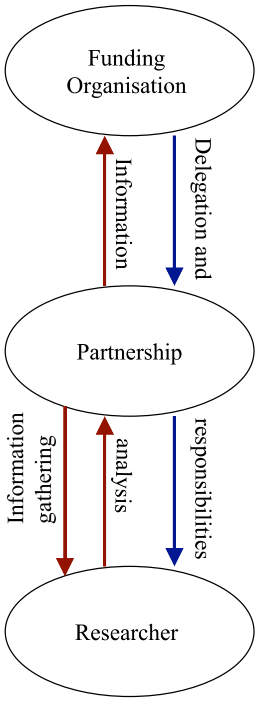

Diagram 5

In this structure, both the partnership and researcher may still be obliged to fulfil the bureaucratic requirements discussed in diagram 4. Here too, the researcher once again is in the position of researching a partnership which itself has management responsibility, and the researcher may find that s/he needs to work according to two different, and possibly contradictory, sets of expectations and requirements.

Summary

The five examples explored here illustrate ways in which the structure of relationships surrounding the research can directly affect a researcher's working practice. Since each structure brings with it its own limitations, it also implies a likely set of potential pitfalls and difficulties which a researcher needs to be mindful of during the research process. In all of these situations there is the potential for the lone researcher to become isolated in his / her work. To mitigate this isolation and to facilitate a professional approach, it is therefore advisable for the researcher either to work as a member of a team or, if this is not possible, then to have access to an external peer supervisor who can guide and support the researcher on all aspects of the research, including structural influences.

The task of the partnership case study researcher

The researcher's task in the case study research process is multifaceted. S/he not only undertakes the research, (i.e. collects and analyses the data) but throughout the process, s/he also reviews and assesses, the direction of the case study, deciding when more information is needed and the type of information required.[9] Finally, these intricate and complex tasks result in the researcher collating and analysing all the information in order to present a case study report.

Flood's "four windows" metaphor is particularly helpful in shedding light on the complexity of the researcher's task. He says:

> The 'four windows' metaphor in a sense facilitates the painting of a lifescape of an action area. It works rather like the following general illustration. Imagine you are in a four-sided room, each side with a window. One window affords views over farmland, another pans over a forest, another looks out to sea, whilst the remaining window frames a port and a busy dock. Each window opens up your vision to one aspect of a complex activity surrounding the room. In concert, the four views come together in a panoramic picture of the lifescape. A holistic perspective of the interrelationships between farms, forest, port and sea is formed in this way. Another person positioned in a different room will see a contrasting lifescape. Exploring the contrasting views may lead to generative learning."[10]

For the partnership case study researcher these "four views" involve the following aspects: first, *context*, that is, the political, social, economic and geographical environment; second, *membership*, that is, those organisations and individuals that make up the partnership; third, *structure*, that is, the mechanisms which have been set up to support the partnership's work; and, finally, *activities*, that is, the projects or enterprises which the partnership is implementing.

As Flood's metaphor of "windows" clearly indicates, the "view" of any individual depends on both position and perspective; and these will differ from one person to another to the extent that the description of the overall panorama may itself be open to marked differences. In a partnership case study, widely varying, divergent and even contradictory views may be held by all those involved in the partnership, such as, for example, the individuals who represent the

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[9] Yin (2003a), p.59.
[10] Flood (1999), p. 178.

partner organisations, those who work for the partnership and the stakeholders involved in the partnership's activities. Furthermore, quite different views may also be held by those who are not directly involved: for example, other members of staff of the partnership organisations and government officials who may have a vested interest in the partnership's activities.

Thus, the task of the researcher is to describe the varying views out of all four windows by accessing and analysing factual information and documentation; and by obtaining the thoughts, experiences and opinions of all those involved, in order to present a panorama of the partnership landscape, that is at once coherent and all inclusive, and also just and fair to all concerned.

In order to achieve this result, the researcher needs to be knowledgeable in three distinct areas: first, in the theory and practice of partnerships; second, in the complex relationship between a partnership's dynamics and a partnerships' intended objectives and outcomes; and third, in the relevant methods of data collection.[11]

It is not always possible for one researcher to have all the skills and knowledge needed for a particular piece of research and, in such situations, a team approach can provide the best solution especially if its members have been selected for their varying and complementary skills. In situations in which the researcher has to work alone, the fact of at least having access to others who can offer particular skills, peer supervision and supportive critical understanding of the issues involved, can be invaluable.

The responsibilities of the partnership case study researcher

Further factors make the researcher's role and task complex. At each step the researcher is liable to be confronted by a number of ethical and moral dilemmas which may well affect him / her personally, as well as affect the research itself. Both the research process and the ethical and moral concerns that are implicit in it means that the researcher bears a responsibility to all those involved in the research, both individuals and organisations.

Being responsible not only means following broad ethical guidelines,[12] it also involves at least five other dimensions: firstly, understanding the complex issues raised by research and taking responsibility for the ways in which information is collected and analysed; secondly, being aware of one's own potential and actual role in the research process; thirdly, acknowledging one's own limitations; fourthly, being aware of effect and expectations; and finally, providing a case study which both illuminates the partnership and informs the recipients of the study.

The remainder of this chapter will explore some of these factors, in particular those concerning effect and expectations; and those to do with subjectivity and emotional responses.

Effects and expectations

Case study research can have effects in several ways. Some effects are intended, while others may be unintended – and even unwelcome, for example, when expectations have been raised

[11] For discussion of the importance of theory and the interaction between theory and methodology see Yin (2003), p. 31 & 58.

[12] Although ethical guidelines are not discussed per se in this paper, it is recommended that all those embarking on social science research should give due consideration to relevant ethical research guidelines.

by the research and these prove impossible to fulfil. This situation was apparent in a research project in which members of a community were invited to take part in a focus group. The very fact that they were invited raised expectations as to how they might benefit from the research, especially in developing contacts with the partnership. However, these expectations could not be fulfilled through the research itself. Raised expectations were also apparent when, during a site visit, a member of a local community group in South Africa assumed that the foreign researchers could access funds to help her set up a project of her own. Because neither of these expectations could be met, the researchers were left in difficult positions in relationship with the communities.

It is not always possible for a researcher to foresee what may happen during the course of a research project and therefore s/he may not always be able to anticipate the types of situations described above. However, it is the researcher's responsibility, morally and ethically, to be aware of these dangers, and to take steps wherever possible to minimise unwelcome and detrimental research effects.

Whether intentional or not, a researcher affects the system s/he is researching purely by entering the situation. It is not possible to be an invisible observer no matter how low a profile one may take: asking questions, however innocuous they may seem, creates a response. This can be illustrated positively in an example of an interviewee who commented that the research results, and in particular the questions she had been asked, had helped her to reach some important personal decisions. A further example was in a partnership case study research which was being funded by a donor agency. When representatives of the partnership were given their case study to read in order to check on information and interpretation, they said that just reading the case study had helped them to recognise areas of weakness and strength.

The difference between these two positive results is that in the first example it was not the intention of the research to 'help' the interviewee to reach important personal decisions, while in the partnership case study research, one of the explicit intentions had been to provide a review process which the partnership might use to support their ongoing work.

Subjectivity and emotions in research

Objectivity and subjectivity in research have been hotly debated within the social sciences since the end of the 19th Century, when a move from the positivist scientific paradigm took place, resulting in the development of hermeneutics and qualitative research.[13] Positivist research, "where knowledge is considered to be objective and value-free" and where the researcher is considered to be providing "neutral" knowledge[14], may be compared and contrasted with qualitative research where the subjectivity of the researcher is acknowledged to be part of the research process and is therefore managed within it.[15] Through the explicit acknowledgement of subjectivity, a dialogue is encouraged concerning those aspects of the research which 'belong' to the researcher, i.e. his / her own projections and assumptions, and those aspects which 'belong' to the research.

[13] von Wright (1993), p. 9-12.
[14] Hordijk & Baud (2005), p. 5.
[15] Jupp and Norris (1993), p. 43-44. While Jupp and Norris discuss subjectivity within the 'Traditions of Documentary Analysis', the quote they provide from Plummer (1983) are relevant other forms of qualitative research.

The issue of *projection* is of paramount importance in understanding the dynamic between the researcher and an interviewee, as well as between the researcher and the research. The concept of projection underpins any discussion about subjectivity.

Projection is a psychological phenomenon or "mechanism"[16] whereby an individual unconsciously imparts an aspect of his / her own personality to objects, animals or people. This happens without conscious will or intention and may often not be recognised by the subject as taking place. It may even be hotly denied, even though it may cause a number of emotional responses and behavioural reactions. Moreover, a projection is not necessarily 'dissolved' through 'understanding' or 'explanation'.[17]

Projection has been categorised into two types, "passive" and "active".[18] Passive projection enables the "act of sympathetic feeling", that is, the ability to have "empathetic compassion for another".[19] Active projection, on the other hand, is its opposite. It is that attitude which tends to see another as being "like" oneself and, perhaps for this very reason, wants to alter the other to be even more like oneself. This means that whatever one believes is right for oneself, must also be right for the other:

> "When unconscious identity operates negatively it causes us, naïvely and thoughtlessly, to take for granted that the other is like us and that what is valid for us is also valid for him so that we feel justified in 'improving' him . . ."[20]

While projection is obviously an aspect of the human condition, if unacknowledged it can lead to potential problems in the research process. In particular it can affect the ways in which one approaches a piece of research, relates to fellow colleagues, undertakes, manages and analyses an interview, and arrives at a research interpretation.

The situation of a negative projection influencing an interview is illustrated in the example of a female researcher who was asked to undertake an in-depth interview with a woman who was a senior employee in a large organisation. The interview focussed on a difficulty which the interviewee had had with one of her male colleagues. The researcher was particularly impressed by the interviewee and sympathised with the problems the interviewee had to face. Having written up the interview with an initial analysis, she was then castigated by the interviewee who was invited to read through the transcript and notes. While the interviewee agreed with the interview transcripts, she felt that the researcher had misunderstood the interviewee's experiences and made inappropriate interpretations. Upset by this conversation, the researcher, in discussion with a colleague following the second interview, began to recognise that she had over-identified with the interviewee and as a result had tried to 'help' rather than being analytical about the content of the interview.

This anecdote exemplifies the general point that projection may not be recognised at the time by the individual concerned, even though it may set in motion a number of responses and reactions. The effect of emotions in research is becoming more widely acknowledged within the field:

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[16] Jung (1977), p. 137, paragraph 131.
[17] Ibid p. 137, paragraph 315.
[18] Von Franz (1980) p. 15.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, p. 16

> . . . however 'scientific' sociologists may claim their methods to be, the researcher is not merely an instrument to facilitate data collection. We can and do react. And while we endeavour to ensure that our data are unsullied by our personal feelings, can we ensure that our personal feelings are unaffected by the data? Our own personal experiences of fieldwork tell us that we cannot.[21]

One of the methods for ensuring that the data and information generated by the research are "unsullied by our personal feelings" is to include the emotions, so that they become capable of contributing towards a positive and beneficial experience which can assist in the generation of knowledge. This kind of knowledge is called "emotionally-sensed knowledge".[22] According to the approach posited by this idea, the emotional responses of the researcher are not only articulately gathered into the research process but are far from being ignored and are explicitly considered in the analysis.

However, not only the individual researcher's emotions enter the research process, those of interviewee and other research participants do so to. Researchers therefore need to acknowledge and, where possible, articulate the many and various forms of communication which take place in research:

> Accessing 'experience' through statements we as researchers ask people to make is problematic. First of all, not all experience is verbalised. 'Experience' is affective and sensual and lived out in daily life without being intellectualised. We cannot therefore assume that valid articulations of 'experience' exist among respondents in verbal form for the researcher to take away through interviews or questionnaires. . .[23]
>
> The challenge and responsibility of the researcher is to capture experience without removing it from the flow of time and the situation and context where people have some control over its articulation.[24]

Thus, projection, subjectivity and emotions can all be acknowledged and creatively gathered into social science research. Hubbard et al recommend that research teams should be responsive to the emotions experienced at different stages and that note-taking and debriefing sessions can be a "validation of the emotional work in research".[25] This practice can be illustrated in an international case study research project, in which research team meetings and site visits were built into the process. The site visits to various partnership activities were essential to the research process because they enabled each member of the team to develop an understanding of the partnership and its context. However, these visits were often emotionally difficult for team members because the projects being visited had been set up to address poverty, sickness and deprivation. After the site visits, as part of the ongoing analytic research process, the teams' emotional responses were discussed and explored to help the researchers understand their experiences at a deeper level. Trying to understand complex emotional issues of this kind often led on to wider discussions which, ultimately, re-informed the research.

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[21] Hubbard et al (2001), p. 120.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Huby (1997), p. 1149.
[24] Ibid p. 1150.
[25] Hubbard et al (2001), p. 134.

This practice of including emotional responses, was extended to the interviewing process undertaken by country resident research assistants and researchers. While the interviews were translated and transcribed for the benefit of all the researchers, it gradually became apparent that aspects of information generated from impressions, feelings and emotions were not being included in the interview transcripts. Since it was vital for all the researchers to understand and have access to this rich material each research assistant was asked to provide a separate document outlining the thoughts, impressions and feelings that the research had generated in them. These documents were then discussed in the team meetings. However, it has to be acknowledged that encouraging researchers to do this type of recording, especially when they are not 'used' to such processes, is not an easy task and requires sensitivity to issues such as culture and gender.

Another method of counterbalancing projection in interviews is to conduct a follow-up meeting with an interviewee to discuss the interview itself and the researcher's findings. This technique is particularly effective when undertaking in-depth interviews. For example, as part of a research process, interviewees were invited to take part in a second interview, during which transcript and analysis of the previous interview were discussed. The rationale behind this approach was, firstly, to establish that the information was correct and, secondly, to give interviewees the opportunity to comment on both analysis and interpretation. Through discussing points of contention or disagreement, the researcher was able to establish whether certain interpretations might have been based on the researcher's projections or assumptions. Any disagreements which could not be resolved, were noted in the research findings. However, as was noted at the time, the researcher was concerned that discussing the findings with one of the interviewees might 'destroy' or 'injure' him in some way. As a result, the researcher discussed the issue with a colleague who turned the problem round by asking whether the researcher wanted to hurt or destroy this man. This question enabled the researcher to review the previous interpretations and to recognise that some of the material in the interview had elicited a negative response in the researcher which had led to a 'punitive' reaction. In this case the first set of interpretations had been based on projections. As a result, the interpretations were reworked so they were less reactive and biased, and more analytically sound.[26]

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the roles, tasks and responsibilities of the partnership case study researcher. One of the main issues that has arisen is the complexity which the researcher has to face. If this complexity is articulately appreciated and acknowledged and if it is approached in a respectful and nuanced manner, it can in itself provide the basis for interesting and vital research which will not only create a valuable set of information and insights for a partnership, but also provide new learning opportunities. Furthermore, such an approach enables the researcher to develop skills and knowledge.

While there can be no definitive guidance on how to approach the issues raised in this chapter, it is suggested that one of the main factors which can facilitate case study research is the 'support' available to the researcher. This support need not be uncritical. On the contrary, critical analysis can provide a learning experience for the researcher and also give a meta-analytic perspective, especially if the analysis comes from an external peer-supervisor. When members of a research team are working together on a case study, developing relationships in

[26] Rein (1998), p. 93.

which personal honesty and supportive critical analysis become part of the research practice, not only provides a learning experience for the researchers but ultimately generates a clearer and more analytic or detailed case study.

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