Nancy Stevenson - Critical Tourism Studies Conference

Stream: Critical Tourism Research Practices.

Theme: Positionality and the emotional dynamics of research - working paper

Title: Coming in from the cold - The immersive dynamic of shared experience

Introduction

In this paper I discuss my experience of conducting longitudinal qualitative research. I consider the changing relationship with my interviewees and the implications for methodology, method and engagement with my research questions. Drawing from researchers including Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 2011), Evans (2012), and O'Reilly (2009), I reflect upon the theoretical underpinning of my methodology, the emotional and immersive dynamics that have arisen as the project has progressed, and the gradual shift away from grounded theory and towards ethnography.   I explore social relations, considering the implications of blurred boundaries between outsider and insider, and my transition from an observer to a participant-observer.   Finally I consider the likely outcomes of this change on my critical engagement.

The research project is on-going and involves a study of peoples' experiences of the changes associated with a mega-event (London 2012 Olympic Games). It focusses on experiences of creating and participating in cultural interventions and events that were staged in the 4 years preceding and during the Olympics. In its current phase I am exploring the experience of cultural events that have been staged since, or are planned this year, in the areas around the Olympic Park.   The study is local, in-depth and has resulted in shared experiences as I have become more engaged with my research subjects. The study has a tourism aspect, as many of the cultural events are designed to attract people. More people are attracted to the area as it starts to regenerate and cultural activities become more outwardly focussed. The project crosses many fields and reflects the need to read across

disciplines (Richardson, 2006) in order to develop wider vision and understanding of social action.

Evolving methodology

At the start of this study in 2008 my intention was to develop a study using an approach which was influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) and the subsequent refinements and clarifications advocated by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1993, 1998). This approach supported research into the multiple experiences and perspectives of people in a locality. It enabled consideration of context and the emergent (fluid/evolving) nature of experience. The research process was designed with periods which were devoted primarily to the collection of data followed by periods for reflection and analysis.   During these reflective periods I started to consider my findings and my changing relationship with the research participants. The act of interviewing people over a period of 5 years has led to closer relationships, and a two way dialogue has developed. As the reciprocity of these exchanges developed, so did the nature of my findings, my approach to collecting data, and my understanding of the subject.

When the project was devised my intention was not to undertake an ethnographic study. I was not seeking a sufficient degree of immersion into peoples' lives, experiences and values to warrant a claim to be an ethnographer. However the practical engagement in the research project led to a collection of networks and relationships which has shifted my perspective. As it now stands my research is closer to Evans' (2012) definition of an ethnographic study - as a study 'of human interaction collectively differentiated and understood from an insider's point of view' (2012: 98)**.** As I have participated in events I have made an 'embodied, visceral journey into the socially and culturally distinctive way of life' (Evans, 2012:98), of my research subjects. This has involved a range of social

practices: talking, eating, drinking, listening, looking, dancing and, most recently, contributing.

Exploring the emotional and immersive dynamics of longitudinal research

1. Observer to Participant Observer

O'Reilly (2009) claims

"A participant is a member of a group, joining in activities, sharing experiences and emotions, contributing to debates, and taking part in the very interactions on which social life is built. An observer is an outsider, watching and listening, not always fully taking part, and rarely being a fully-fledged member of the community. An observer intentionally joined the group and will leave at some time; her participation is instrumental" (2009:151).

At the outset my intention was to observe – I would speak to people about their experience and participate in events that they had organised. As a researcher my life would not be affected in the same way as theirs by the unfolding changes associated with the Olympic Project. The role of observer appeared to be the logical and ethical position and to this end I advised all participants that as a researcher my intention is to observe and then write up my findings. However as my research progressed I have increasingly become a participant observer. Engagement in events and attendance at meetings has created shared experience and empathy. For example, studio events are often small scale, and held in private/intimate spaces (peoples work and living space).   My interactions with people led to emotional entanglement (Chok, 2011), as I became embroiled in the stories about the challenges and possibilities brought about by changes in the environment.

2. Outsider to outsider/insider

I was able to approach the study from the 'legitimate periphery' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as I am a funded researcher and have experience as a town planner in the study area. Both provided 'privileged' insight, contacts, experiences, historical perspective and a way in. However I am an outsider as I do not live in the study area, and I do not produce cultural events there. While I live approximately 4 miles from the main subject area, it usually takes an hour to get there due to its isolation and limited transport links. Before the research commenced it was not a place I visited often.

As the study progressed I became more familiar, and thus engaged, with the people and place and realised the extent to which locality is a relative concept. I discovered that my own personal and professional networks have a much wider reach into the area than originally anticipated. As I started to write and talk about my research, more connections emerged with neighbours, friends and colleagues. So rather than there being *6 degrees of separation* there are usually 1 or 2. As these networks become denser they entangle me in the wider social relations of the place – while it is geographically 'other' it is becoming socially 'local'.

Also I have started to reflect upon the implication of a range of relational aspects outside of the researcher-researched relationship. Yamagishi (2011) suggests that this exploration provides a more critical and richer reflexive assessment. For example my family relationships provided opportunities and created constraints. The opportunities arose through research assistance and the decision to attend some events together. Attending events with family provided more naturalistic/social experiences of those events. It also meant that some people saw me in a different light (as a person not a researcher). This had the unintended effect of affording wider access e.g. one community activist was unwilling to be interviewed until he met me with my son at a community event. Social engagement/enjoyment of the area also changed the 'tone' of my relationship with several other research subjects. The constraints arose around the need to deal with diverse needs and wishes of my family during the event.

By engaging in events it became impossible not to become part of the phenoma being studied and my role evolved to "both an insider and outsider" (Sandercock, 2012:142). The implications of this are outlined by Fontana and Frey (2011) who warn;

> "Although a close rapport opens the doors to more informed research it may create problems in that the researcher may become a spokesperson for the group studied, losing his or her distance and objectivity, or may 'go native' and become a member of a group and forgo his or her academic role."(2011:132)

My research memos contemplate the challenges posed by increasing dialogue and shared experience with members of the local community. While I have developed an increasing empathy and sense of belonging, I have not become a spokesperson for that community. I am not in a position to 'go-native' as my research is a small part of my life. My wider responsibilities and commitments connect me to other places, experiences and communities, and enable me to retain critical distance. So for example I have not experienced the shift from participant observation to political action, identified by Chok (2011) when she is 'drawn into the battlefield' (2011:62), intervening as she uncovers intimidation of workers in the tourism industry. My immersion in the experience of the event has created social networks, opportunities and spaces for people to tell their stories. However, I am still essentially an outsider – visiting regularly, making contacts but inhabiting another place. There is always a degree of disconnection from the experiences I investigate which although resonating with me, are not my own.

Evolving interview practice

The changing relations outlined above have resulted in changing interview practice which in turn has affected my findings. At the outset of the project interview data was collected using a semi-structured approach, with interviewees being given some opportunities to bring in wider topics of discussion. As I am the instrument of data collection I need to ensure that I am sensitive, reflexive, intuitive and receptive (Leedy and Ormarod, 2001; Patton, 2002).

Writing memos after each interview and while evaluating interview data has enabled me to reflect upon my practice and helped to identify subtle changes over the 5 year interview period.

Initially I noticed that familiarity with the interviewees and subject meant that my style became more 'empathetic' (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Although I still have broad themes to explore the interviews have become more unstructured and dialogical (Schram, 2012). Discussion frequently touches on shared experience, and the sense of collaboration and mutual exchange has increased. A two layered approach emerged when I began to attend meetings of a local group (Cultural Interest Group). During and after these meetings I encountered a wider group of people with an interest in cultural production in the area. I started to record exploratory conversations with these people with the idea that I would interview some of them later. These interactions were characterised by 'normal' social conventions, with more laughter, gossip and asides and yielded particularly rich data around our ability to explore ideas together and to develop empathy. This feminist interview practice (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) is more "collaborative, reciprocal, trusting and friendly" …"participatory and democratic" (2003:96) and as the project has progressed this approach is being used with increasing frequency.

Reflections on this study's wider objectives and the implication of an evolving methodology

This research is designed to develop understanding about local experiences of culture in regeneration and aims to inform policy and practice. It reflects work by Flyvbjerg (2001), Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius & Rothengatter (2003) and Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram (2012), endeavouring to develop "*Phronesis*" which is "practical wisdom on how to address and act on social problems in a particular context" (2012:1). It is focussed on emerging practice at the local level and is grounded in the idea that "knowledge that grows out of intimate familiarity with practice in contextualized settings" (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012:2).

This quest for practical wisdom reinforces the decision to become closer to the people I am studying. Closer relationships uncover a broader and more subtle range of power relations that underlie and shape decisions. Deeper dialogical engagement has uncovered several informal 'gatekeepers' who have access to, and therefore control of, information (Clegg and Pitsis, 2012:84). These relationships are not easy to unpick as an outsider but they define the scope for action, and the actions of different people. Thus they are key to developing an understanding of local experiences of cultural events and the role and place of such events in a rapidly changing place.

Conclusions

This paper is underpinned by reflection and wider reading about the experience of research. My experience in the field for 5 years led to shared experiences with my interviewees and closer more trusting relationships. This has changed the nature of our interactions which have become more dialogical and reciprocal.

My approach increasingly recognises that my social interactions with the people I am studying are fluid, negotiated, and reflect myself. Rather than fighting a rather inevitable development of closer relationships, I have started to embrace those changes, reflecting upon their implications for my research. My findings to date suggest that the evolving approach has uncovered information which is privileged and was largely 'hidden' in my initial research. Many ideas that emerge as the project progresses are less tied into the formal community structures, and more difficult to uncover and unpick. The inclusion of those voices and ideas exposes some of the contradictions and tensions around the experience of cultural events in a rapidly changing area and has an impact upon the understanding of practice.

As I reflect upon the changes in my methodology and methods I acknowledge that these appear to enable me to engage more critically. They have the potential to offer

a deeper perspective, leading to theoretical and practical insights of relevance to the academic community, policy makers and practitioners engaged in cultural activities.

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