Ethnography Versus Case Study

Positioning Research and Researchers

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we narrate a story of working on a large project funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant—the 'Keeping Connected: Young People, Identity and Schooling' project.[1] The purpose of the study is to consider the social connection and schooling of young people who have experienced long-term chronic illness. While the research involves both quantitative and qualitative elements, the qualitative component is the largest and involves the most researcher time and diversity. At the early stage of the project, three of the researchers working on the qualitative team consider why the study was framed as a series of case studies rather than as ethnography. The second issue considered in this paper is the different approaches to data collection, data analysis and truth claims we might take.

Keywords: Ethnography, case study, funded research, methodology, narrative.

Allocation of funding reflects judgements being made as to what is, and is not, acceptable research or research worthy of being funded. Funding thus involves a series of choices being made, all of which have consequences both for the qualitative research itself and for the qualitative researcher. (Cheek, 2005, p. 387)

At an early stage in this large and complex study, three of the researchers paused to investigate emerging methodological issues related to case study and ethnographic approaches. The project involves a large number of elements and a range of approaches including focus group interviews with parents, health professionals and teachers, surveys of young people with chronic illness and quantitative analysis of existing databases. The design also allows for 30 young people to participate in a qualitative research component: to be interviewed and to produce their own visual material (photographs and video) over three years. To promote continuity and rapport, the project researchers each met with several 'assigned' participants over the course of the project. Early in the project we consciously prepared 'descriptions' of our participants that were regarded and discussed as 'case studies', although, as outlined in this paper, the act of writing these involved some processes that resonate with ethnography.

The Keeping Connected (KC) project is funded by the Australian Research Council 'Linkage' program and this has involved the researchers in developing the project with a partner investigator (the Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute, Melbourne) that has contributed a significant level of funding. As Cheek (2005) points out, 'Once funding is accepted for research, the researcher is not an entirely free agent with respect to the direction and outcome of that research' (p. 400). Clearly, as researchers, we must adhere to the purpose

that was discussed throughout the project's development and funding application, and to meet our obligations regarding outcomes. We cannot afford to visit this conceptual and methodological site for too long, yet three researchers from the larger team pause here to reflect and clarify how we would like to position ourselves as researchers in this project, and how we would like to go about our work.

In this paper we begin to untangle certain methodological conceptual knots and illustrate two key aspects of our inquirer stance through discussion of our overarching research model and methodology. First, we outline our commitment to a feminist and postmodern framework for approaching epistemological questions. Second, we explore the merits of case study and ethnographic approaches separately and then in combination. Peppered throughout the paper are also references to specific methods and research techniques employed in each field, although these are not the specific focus of this article.

FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM

After the lengthy process of conceptualising our study and the heady time after we were awarded funding, we found ourselves nearing the end of the first year of a three-year study. While much of the work has involved gaining approval from ethics committees, employing support staff and purchasing equipment, we have recently begun to meet and work with the young people who are our longitudinal participants. In the development of our project, the terms 'case study' and 'ethnography' were used interchangeably and the team discussed the strategic use of one term over the other at different times. In the funding and ethics applications there is little mention of ethnography and much mention of a case study approach. Here, we take a closer look at the implications of these choices.

In order to contextualise our discussion of methodology, we draw attention to the difference between 'method' and 'methodology' and equate the latter with 'world view' or 'inquirer stance'. We look to the impact of feminist research, the inherent doubt brought to research through postmodernism and poststructural destabilising of text and perspective. Campbell and Wasco (2000) and Liambuttong (2007) remind us of the debt that contemporary qualitative research owes feminism:

> The ultimate aim of feminist research is to 'capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as sources of knowledge.' To put it simply, feminist methodology argues that the process of research is as important as its outcome. (Liambuttong, 2007, p. 10)

The inquirer stance of our study has not been fixed, nor is it uniform, but we feel compelled to adopt a similarly respectful and reflexive approach. Liambuttong also points to the impact of postmodernism and the decentring of the researcher and comments that postmodern researchers express doubt in their work and are impatient with conventional ways of reporting qualitative research (p. 18). She suggests that Richardson and St Pierre (2005) express this most clearly:

> Postmodernism claims that writing is always partial, local, and situational and that our selves are always present no matter how hard we try to suppress them—but only partially present because in our writing we repress parts of our selves as well. Working from that premise frees us to write material in a variety of ways—to tell and retell. There is no such thing as 'getting it right', only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced. (Liambuttong, 2007, p. 962)

There are many issues that require consideration in this study including voice, agency, power, researcher sensitivity, the vulnerability of our participants, how the research is represented and the complexities of 'visual' artefacts in the assembly of participants' narratives, but our focus in this article is the implications of terms such as 'case study' and 'ethnography' in the writing of research.

CASE STUDY, ETHNOGRAPHY AND PARADIGM

Stake, a significant figure in the case study approach to research tells us that case study is defined by 'interest in the individual case, not by the methods of inquiry used' (2005, p. 443). He suggests that the key feature of case study is its boundedness and specificity, and in his explanation Stake offers the example that 'the reasons for child neglect or policies of dealing with neglectful parents' are not specific enough to be cases (p. 444). In a similar way, we are concerned that 'connectedness' to friends and schooling may not be specific enough to justify the term 'case study'. In order to explore this further, we consider essential elements in case study and later contrast this with ethnographic approaches. Ragin (1992) suggests four perspectives on case study that might prove interesting in this discussion:

1. cases are found

2. cases are objects

3. cases are made

4. cases are conventions.

He argues that researchers who view case study from the first perspective—that cases are found—see assessment of the empirical bounding of cases as an integral part of the research process. There is an implication here that all a researcher has to do is to 'capture' the stories of the participants—that these are sitting like shells on a beach, waiting to be picked up. (Interestingly, in discussing our method for this study, the term 'capture' is often associated with visual imagery.) The second perspective—that cases are objects—implies that 'the objects of investigation are similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon' (p. 1). The third perspective on case study is that cases are made. Researchers working from this perspective see cases as specific theoretical constructs that coalesce in the course of the research. And through the fourth perspective—that cases are conventions—the researcher considers cases to be general theoretical constructs that structure ways of seeing social life and doing social science (pp. 9–11). In relation to our study, any number of these perspectives on what a case might involve seems to be operating.

Stake (2005) differentiates between three types of case study: the intrinsic, the instrumental and the multiple or collective (pp. 445–448). Our project might be described as an instrumental case study because the intention seems to be not to focus on the individuals involved, but on the insights into an issue they provide, the possibilities for generalisation and the identification of improved practices in both education and health care services. If considered in this way, our study is extended further from instrumental case study to a multiple or collective, instrumental case study because it is hoped that this will lead to 'better

understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases' (Stake, p. 446).

It is clear that one of the issues at play in our broader project team is a paradigmatic one. According to Guba and Lincoln's (2005) updated work on paradigm positions, essentially case study appears to belong at the conservative end of the qualitative research continuum in 'post positivism', while ethnography spans their 'critical theory et al.', 'constructivism' and 'participatory' paradigms. In terms of researcher values, a postpositivist case study approach seeks to exclude or ignore the influence of the researcher as somehow tainting the 'data' or 'evidence', while ethnography is more inclusive of the researcher and considers the researcher to be formative in the process. Stake's (2005) assessment contends that case study is 'a part of scientific methodology' (p. 460), and insists upon conventional approaches to rigour, such as triangulation of data in order to address issues of validity, reliability and objectivity.

Clearly Stake's assessment of case study research as primarily situated in a postpositivist tradition does not match well with the feminist, postmodern and researcher-inclusive paradigmatic elements we highlight as desirable above. However, in contrast to the view that case study research should be relegated to postpositivist territory, Willis (2007) instead highlights case study as an approach that is often used by both critical and interpretive researchers (p. 239). Borrowing from Merriam (1988), Willis defines a case study as 'an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, and event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group'. Further, he stresses characteristics of case study research that link it closely to the type of respectful and reflexive methodology desired by us as researchers on this KC project, including that the approach is inductive and heuristic, and that it involves thick descriptive data (Willis, 2007).

Willis (2007) suggests case studies are 'about real people and real situations … [they commonly] rely on inductive reasoning … [and] illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study' (p. 239). He outlines three specific attributes of case study research that make it increasingly attractive for inclusion as we shore up our fledgling methodology:

> 1. It allows you to gather rich, detailed data in an authentic setting.
>   2. It is holistic and thus supports the idea that much of what we can know about human behaviour is best understood as lived experience in the social context.
>   3. Unlike experimental research, it can be done without predetermined hypotheses and goals. (Willis, 2007, p. 240)

Acknowledging that there are differences between case studies and ethnography, particularly in their genesis, Willis (2007, p. 240) suggests that case studies are much more similar to ethnography than dissimilar. Used within an interpretivist framework, 'researchers do not seek to find universals in their case studies. They seek, instead, a full, rich understanding (verstehen) of the context they are studying' (Willis, p. 240).

Mainstream sociologists claim that ethnography is 'the direct observation of the activity of members of a particular social group, and the description and evaluation of such activity. They claim that 'ethnography' has mainly been used to describe the research technique of anthropologists, but the method is commonly used by sociologists as well' (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000, p. 123). Further, that:

> sociologists who use techniques of qualitative research such as ethnography or participant observation, which are time consuming and cannot easily be delegated to research assistants, almost invariably choose the case-study method … Case studies may provide data of a richness and detail that are difficult to obtain from more representative research designs, but at the cost of a lack of generalisability. (Abercrombie et al., 2000, p. 41)

Shortages of resources or difficulties gaining access to research participants are cited as common motivations for choosing a multiple case study approach as a primary method of investigation (Abercrombie et al., 2000, p. 41). In such a study, cases are likely to be selected to explore the range of variability within a population being studied: cases are 'selected to represent what, on the basis of theory or prior knowledge, are thought to be contrasting examples' (Abercrombie et al., p. 41). Indeed this is what we have done already in the KC study when selecting the participants in the qualitative longitudinal component. A theoretical sampling approach has been applied on the basis of such characteristics as age, gender, type and duration of condition and geographic location.

Following these arguments, which we see as suggestive of the suitability of a case study approach, our inclination is to move on from a dichotomous consideration of case study versus ethnography and consider instead the possibilities of assembling a combination of ethnographic and case study approaches.

Willis (2007) describes ethnography as 'an umbrella term for fieldwork, interviewing, and other means of gathering data in authentic (e.g., real-world) environments … [that] puts the researcher in the settings that he or she wants to study. The research is conducted in the natural environment rather than in an artificially contrived setting' (p. 237). The KC research design does not incorporate what might be considered the traditional hallmark of ethnographic research—extended periods of observation by a researcher occupying a participant-observer role and documenting observations in highly detailed field notes that are revisited as research data. However, this may well be a misleading criterion for the distinction, in that the quality of observation that is represented in the writing of 'cases' is a critical issue, at least as important as quantity or duration of observation. This, in turn, depends, not only on 'data' (visual or otherwise), but also the process of interview and the act of writing that proceeds from interview. A contemporary trend links the poststructural paradigm with both interview and narrative in the 'narrative interview'.

NARRATIVE INTERVIEWING, POSTMODERNISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

In an earlier paper on this study, we commented that a key assumption that seems to have been made within our research group was that the stories of the young people would 'emerge or be found and then analysed within a mixed context of social science theory and visual arts method' (White & Hay, 2007, p. 4). We drew on narrative theory to support our argument, which was essentially that it was the writing that would prove crucial, and that the young peoples' stories would be made rather than found. We also drew attention to 'narrative interviewing', which, according to Kohler Riessman (2006), has the following distinctive features:

> The question and answer (stimulus/response) model gives way to viewing the interview as a discursive accomplishment. Participants engage in an evolving conversation; narrator and listener/questioner, collaboratively produce and make meaning of events that the narrator re-

ports … The 'facilitating' interviewer and the vessel-like 'respondent' are replaced by two active participants who jointly produce meaning. Narrative interviewing has more in common with contemporary ethnography than with mainstream political science interviewing practice that relies on discrete, open-ended and/or fixed-response questions. (Kohler Riessman, 2006, pp. 189–190)

Kohler Riessman goes on to say:

Some investigators, after introductions, invite a participant to 'tell your story'—how an illness began, for example. But experience always exceeds its description and narrativization; events may be fleetingly summarized and given little significance. Only with further questioning can participants recall the details, turning points and other shifts in cognition, emotion and action. (Kohler Riessman, 2006, p. 190)

A further like-minded contemporary perspective on interviewing is noteworthy here. Fontana (2003, pp. 51–55) refers to a method of qualitative interviewing that is 'postmodern informed' in that it:

- allows for multiplicity of meanings rather than as a vehicle for conveying preconceived categories of meaning; is 'dialogic' and 'polyphonic'

- blurs traditional boundaries between interviewer and interviewee.

In our study the data or imagery that will depict, illustrate or contribute to performance of the story actually come from the participants' own production of visual representations as well as transcripts of recorded interviews. There is insufficient space here to consider the multiple methodological issues associated with this approach, other than to say that, to some degree, we ask the participants to adopt the role of participant-observers and introduce the researchers visually to their lived experiences and living/studying environments. Rather than rely on this feature to warrant the mantle of ethnographic research, however, what finally convinces us that we need to align with an ethnographic tradition here are our actual experiences of fieldwork to date, and our questions about how these experiences and associated relationships might be viewed as significant (or not) in the public reporting or narrative of the research.

In contrast to a postpositivist emphasis on validity, reliability and objectivity, ethnography can range from focus on 'trustworthiness and authenticity including catalyst for action' to a 'congruence of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing: leads to action to transform the world in the service of human flourishing' (Guba & Lincoln, 2005. p. 196). The inquirer posture of the ethnographic researcher allows for a number of emphases. The researcher in this instance might operate as 'transformative intellectual' who can be advocate or activist. Or the researcher might be more of a 'passionate participant' who facilitates either 'primary voice' (the self-reflexive I) and 'secondary voice' who illuminates through narrative and other forms (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196).

As bell hooks (1990) pointed out nearly 20 years ago, ethnography is an approach to research in which traditional practices have been questioned, reinvented and developed. She draws attention to the significant work of Clifford and Marcus (1986), who helped redefine ethnography in the introduction to their well-known work:

Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes

and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes. Ethnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where 'culture' is a newly problematic object of description and critique. (hooks, 1990, p. 152)

Britzman (2003) draws attention to ethnography as a 'genre' of research and while she comments that traditional ethnography 'takes the reader into an actual world to reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants', she also provides a poststructuralist perspective to ethnography. As a consequence of poststructuralism, she maintains that ethnographic theorising has become 'more tentative and less concerned with the old struggles of establishing authority as a way of research', and suggests that 'for poststructuralists, representation is always in crisis, knowledge is constitutive of power, and agency is the constitutive effect, and not the originator, of situated practices and histories' (pp. 243–247).

MOVING FORWARD

And so, ultimately our case study versus ethnography debate is quieted—if not wholly answered—by the necessity for us to focus adequately on the presence of the researcher in the research, rather than focus predominantly on the material and information provided by the participants. In his 'ethnography of ethnography', van Maanen (1995) comments that 'ethnography is a storytelling institution' that involves the researcher drawing 'close to people and events' and then writing about what was learned in situ. It is 'the ethnographer's direct personal contact with others that is honoured by readers' (p. 428).

As well as stories of profound resilience and positive teenage experiences, already our encounters with young participants have also brought stories associated with harrowing physical aspects of chronic illness, school bullying, complex and challenging familial circumstances and the deep personal sadness experienced by some participants.

Sensitive researchers who are researching vulnerable issues and people must make their judgements on the impact of their research on not only the participants, but also on themselves as researchers. As such, they have to think carefully about the methodology used in collecting their data and the procedures that must be observed as sensitive to vulnerable research participants (Liamputtong, 2007, pp. 6–7).

Our view is that a particular style of writing will be required to convey the effort and emotional management required to develop and maintain good rapport and helpful (at least three-year long) research relationships with these young people. van Maanen (1995) alludes to this style of writing when he stresses the researcher's 'direct personal contact with others' (p. 428). And Richardson (1990) has introduced us to some of the complexities in the writing of our research:

> Social scientific writing depends upon narrative structure and narrative devices, although that structure and those devices are frequently masked by a scientific frame, which is itself a metanarrative (see Lyotard, 1979). Although a life is not a narrative, people make sense of their lives and the lives of others through narrative constructions. In our work as researchers we weigh and sift experiences, make choices regarding what is significant, what is trivial, what to include, what to exclude. We do not simply chronicle 'what happened next,' but place the 'next' in a meaningful context. By doing so, we craft narratives; we write lives. (Richardson, 1990, p. 10)

It seems that at the heart of our intellectual discomfort about committing to a research methodology in the KC project, there have been three slightly different concerns. The first concern relates to how we might go about acquiring the material to be used as 'data' in this research. The second concern relates to how we might understand the nature of that material and the knowledge developed from it. And the third concern relates to how we might move from acquiring this material to making some sense of it and developing academic publications that coincide with the intellectual traditions we have aligned ourselves with above.

More comfortable now with the shape of this project methodology, we are confident in broadcasting our approach. After all:

> Ethnography in all its guises has…proved critical to the social study of children. Its key strength as method lies in the way in which, through close attention to the everyday and familiar through which the social world is both created and sustained, it has enabled the voices of those who would otherwise be silent to be heard. (James, 2007, p. 255)

Likewise, the contextual nature of case study research heightens our capacity to understand contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Meyer, 2001). Thus with this intellectual debate quietened and some important questions more clearly answered in our minds, we return—more prepared—to the field, to our participants, and to our inquiry about the social connectedness and schooling experiences of young people who live with chronic health conditions. The process of developing this article as a 'method of inquiry' (Richardson, 2000) has afforded us the opportunity to make greater sense of the freedoms and constraints of funded research as well as the differences between contemporary versions of case study and ethnography.

NOTES

1   The 'Keeping Connected: Young People, Identity and Schooling' project is funded by the Australian Research Council in conjunction with the Education Institute of the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, for the period 2006–2009. The research team consists of Professor Lyn Yates, Dr Trevor Hay, Dr Peter Ferguson, Dr Pam St Leger and Dr Julianne Moss, all from the Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne; Dr Julie White of the Faculty of Education, La Trobe University; Dr Sarah Drew of the Department of Paediatrics, The University of Melbourne and the Centre for Adolescent Health; Dr Lyndal Bond of the Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Medical Research Council, Scotland; Dr Mary Dixon of the Education Faculty, Deakin University; and Dr Ria Hanewald who has been appointed to work on the project. Mr Tony Potas of the Education Institute has also been involved in all regular team meetings and planning. Further information about the study can be obtained from Ria Hanewald, Project Officer, at riah@unimelb.edu.au or at the project website: http://www.ed-fac.unimelb.edu.au/keepingconnected/index.html.

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