The ethics and emotions of fieldwork with friends

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Abstract

In late 2008 and early 2009 I conducted online research with a group of longstanding friends about the intersections between intimate relationships, motherhood and work-life balance, having originally held focus groups with them on similar topics in 2002. During the data collection, it very belatedly struck me that the use of such convenience sampling - perhaps especially in this longitudinal project - involves a number of clear and present ethical issues. I also remembered that a previous project on women's experiences of their bodies within and without the workplace had been undertaken using this kind of sampling. As such, and being the methodological equivalent of a trainspotter, the ethics of gathering data from people with whom one already has a relationship - and a close friendship in particular - began to preoccupy me, and constitute the basis of the paper at hand.

My rationale for this focus is not just the experience of the project referred to above, and the somewhat uncomfortable retrospection it produced. It is also true to say that the topic of researching one's friends - as opposed to examining friendship as a topic in and of itself, or exploring the development of friendships in fieldwork, or indeed of sexual relationships - is barely travelled in any of the literature I have been able to locate. It is certainly (unless I am missing something) not a topic with which organization studies has concerned itself. Of course it may just be that this is a genuinely niche topic in which very few other academics are interested because most are more systematic and rigorous in the development of samples for primary empirics than I am. In the hope that this is not the case, the paper at hand will discuss the ethics and emotions - insecurity and anxiety chief amongst them - of researching friends, with the intention of subjecting this under-examined area to a little more scrutiny.

Overall my premise is that these sorts of projects represent particularly delicate ethical ground. Although I would argue that similar ground must be navigated in any and all research projects, they perhaps constitute some form of 'critical case' and have certainly encouraged me to reflect more carefully on the issues I will discuss - not least because the personal stakes are high for all the women involved. Nonetheless, I concur with Frank's assertion that

"The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. By remaining open to other people's responses to our moral maturity and emotional honesty ... we engage in the unfinalized dialogue of seeking the good." (cited in Ellis, 2007: 23)

I hope I will achieve the 'emotional honesty' Frank refers to above in this paper, and am especially interested in the audience's reaction, as well as their experiences of this sort of fieldwork.

References

Biography

Jo Brewis has worked at ULSM since 2004. She is currently wearing a series of administrative hats and specializes in teaching research methodology. Jo's research interests lie at the intersection of identity, the body, consumption, culture and processes of organizing and she is also developing an unhealthy preoccupation with matters methodological. Aside from the paper at hand, Jo's projects at the moment include research into private military companies with Richard Godfrey; the use of the interlinked concepts of abjection and alterity and how they might shed further light on processes of inclusion/exclusion in the workplace with colleagues at York, Essex and Loughborough; and discourses of Same and Other around culture and professionalism in Aotearoa New Zealand social work with a colleague at Waikato.