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PERSPECTIVES ON THE TWO-WAY RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP

In this chapter, the reader will

- consider aspects of the personal and professional sides of a relationship with participants,

- understand ways to give back to research participants,

- learn ways to process ethical dilemmas, and

- add exit interviews and closure at a study's end.

This chapter explores the research relationship's benefits from both the researcher's and participants' viewpoints. In addition, ethical considerations related to the research relationship in a qualitative longitudinal study are discussed.

BALANCING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Publish or perish! The only good dissertation is a done dissertation! These familiar expressions might lead one to be overly task oriented in conducting

research. Researchers may struggle to balance their goals while meeting participants' need to be respected contributors to the research. Understandably, new professors are concerned with tenure and promotion. Equally clear is that the doctoral student's aspiration is not to stay in ABD status for eternity. However, objectifying or using participants to achieve one's personal career goals is repugnant to the ethical researcher. On the other hand, researchers might succumb to an overly friendly relationship with participants. For example, sometimes at final defenses, I ask doctoral candidates to discuss the most rewarding learning stage in his or her research and writing. Frequently and without hesitation, the candidate enthusiastically states that talking with participants was the most meaningful part of the experience. While this statement alone is not a concern, it is questionable when the candidate continues describing how conversations became exchanges of ideas with job-alike peers, drifting far from the intended data-collection interview questions. In the past, researchers were warned that forming friendships with participants might bias data collection and analysis. In the literature, terms for such involvement include *over identification* and *going native*. Glesne (2016), however, believes that friendships in the field today are not as inhibited as in the past. Nevertheless, such relationships should be respectful; reciprocal; and when possible, professionally trusting—not a close personal association characteristic of relationships with friends. For example, I often know the principals in my studies because we frequently attend the same professional meetings and share many of the same philosophies. However, I do not select them because they are friends, nor do I seek to develop closer bonds with them as I conduct studies.

These issues might apply to any qualitative research, but a longitudinal qualitative study's intensity and duration magnify them. In summary, the longitudinal qualitative researcher must balance the goal of completing a study with the researcher–participant trust relationship characteristic of qualitative research.

GIVING BACK TO PARTICIPANTS

Reciprocity is a two-way street, recognizing the researcher's and the participants' mutual benefits (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Longitudinal qualitative research requires much of participants, who give time, share thoughts and stories, and yet can receive little in return. In fact, Glesne (2016) suggests that the closer the relationship, the greater the possibilities for reciprocation. The researcher must be cognizant of what participants wish to gain from the interaction, making participation worthwhile. Possibilities for researcher reciprocation include communicating throughout a study and giving appropriate tokens of appreciation.

Giving Appropriate Tokens of Appreciation

The researcher might also consider small tokens of appreciation to participants for their time. Greeting cards for holidays and birthdays are an inexpensive way to show appreciation (McLeod & Thomson, 2011). Also, thank-you notes are always appropriate. In recognizing qualitative research participants, reciprocity rarely involves monetary gifts; nevertheless, there are other ways to thank people for their time and involvement. Glesne (2016) suggests providing interviewees snacks or coffee. In an interview, Okilwa and Barnett (2017) discussed being mindful of scheduling interviews at a time convenient for participants; if that was lunch time, they brought lunch. According to Okilwa and Barnett, feeding the participants lunch created a more relaxed environment. These researchers also believe that going the extra mile conveyed the study's importance and the researchers' willingness to do whatever was necessary to gather the information.

The amount invested in thanking participants should be proportional to the time they invest and their level of involvement in the topic. For example, a yearly interview asking for perceptions of a workplace innovation likely requires less involvement than a study following individuals throughout a life transition. After each yearly interview, I sent a thank-you note to the interviewees in the 5-year study. Then after the fifth year, I applied for and received a $200 university grant to purchase thank-you gift baskets containing a coffee mug, candy, and a gift card to a local store. I delivered this more substantial gift at the study's conclusion to long-term involvement.

Communicating and Sharing Research Results

While at an American Education Research Association conference, I attended a presentation by Dr. Jason Richardson, associate professor at San Diego State, on a longitudinal study he conducted. Interested in his perspectives on the research relationship, I followed up with a phone interview. Dr. Richardson offered the following advice for conducting a longitudinal study:

> *Build a relationship and continue to talk with these folks [the participants]. We do them a huge disservice if we don't give them something back. Much more is required than sending out an email like is done in a one-off [study].*

When I asked him how he built rapport with participants, he responded,

Ask yourself what's in it for them? Give them something back. This aspect is not as big a repercussion in a one-off study, but it is important in a longitudinal study. Lots of researchers don't think to give back. You can give them professional development on the findings and results and work with the faculty. So, then the results are more meaningful in their eyes.

As a benefit of involvement, participants might gain insight into their experience. Okilwa and Barnett studied principals who led a school that against the odds achieved at a high level for over 20 years. These principals asked to participate in the study and reflect on and share their leadership experiences at the school many years prior. One principal noted, "I wasn't too sure about doing this at first. But I appreciated being able to think through what happened at that time."

Participants typically are interested in a study's findings and eager to read results. In addition to sharing research findings, treating interviewees with respect and listening carefully are ways to reciprocate (Glesne, 2016).

Allowing Participants to Be Heard

The interview is an opportunity for reciprocity especially when the topic is important to participants. Researcher acknowledgment of participant experience and expertise brings benefits as follows (McCoyd & Shadaimah, 2007):

- the validation of being understood and of having one's story heard in full without judgment;

- the chance to have one's story joined with others in such a way as to create a "voice" on a topic of shared experience; and

- the knowledge that findings will be published and communicated to providers, policymakers, and the public. (p. x)

For some participants, the opportunity to have a voice possibly affecting policy is a powerful incentive. For example, in my 5-year study of principals' perspectives on a new teacher-evaluation system, the implementation was challenging because data-reporting systems changed; formal observation time increased, limiting time for becoming familiar with students; and the school staff's established educational culture was disrupted. Principals were eager to have their stories told and anticipated

my published papers would reach policy makers who might change the policy's negative aspects.

Appreciation of Participants' Time

Qualitative researchers frequently underestimate the amount of time needed to conduct research because of such issues as scheduling interviews and failing to anticipate delays. For example, Joe, a doctoral student, was surprised that when he e-mailed participants in schools they did not respond for several days. If he had checked the school calendar, he would have realized that the school's staff members were focused on annual statewide testing. Staff likely did not read their e-mail for days. Glesne (2016) cautions that because researchers are external they are generally not a priority for participants. Researcher flexibility when contacting participants and scheduling interviews demonstrates understanding. It is not unusual for an interview to be rescheduled because of an emergency or an unexpected event that is a higher priority especially for organizational leaders. Noting priority events and considering their significance might provide a better understanding of the context and people.

Consideration of participant time is also a factor in trust development essential to the researcher–participant relationship. By design, longitudinal studies allow time for trust to develop. While time alone does not guarantee that trust will develop, it does allow participants to see that the researcher keeps promises made at the study's beginning (Glesne, 2016). Demonstrate over time that participants' contributions are valuable in a study.

Understand the Context and Topic

Rapport is enhanced when interviewees know the researcher understands the context. To put participants at ease, the researcher consciously should reflect on their behavior and how they fit into the research context (Glesne, 2016). This behavior includes nonverbal cues, appearance, and attire with the goal of fitting in. Rapport is also developed when participants know that the researcher cares about a topic important to them and desires to assist others in understanding the issues.

Sue, a principal, conducted a yearlong case study of principal leadership. At her dissertation defense, she reported that the principals wanted to discuss leadership extensively with her. Thus, Sue's data was rich with insights and stories because she could relate to the situation. On the other hand, John, a primary teacher in a small school, wanted to study an urban principal who closed a school due to declining enrollment and the school district's boundary reorganization. Because John did not have a background

for understanding the principal's role and the complexity of the decisions involved, his study lacked insight and his findings were superficial.

While maintaining communication and contact is a way to keep participants involved, ongoing communication during a study can be time consuming. Consistency of the same researcher making contact also sustains a relationship. A regular connection between data collections can minimize the troubling and all-too-common problem of participant attrition (Thomson & Holland, 2003). For example, Thompson and Holland (2003) describe maintaining telephone contact with participants between interviews.

Perceptions of Risks and Benefits to Participants

Evaluating the cost–benefit of proposed research involving human participants is a criterion of ethical decision-making, typically addressed during the institutional review board process. Therefore, before initiating this process, the researcher should consider the potential benefits versus the costs for participants. While much of what is stated here can apply to any qualitative study, the longitudinal method—because of the development of relationships over time—"demands (even produces) a high level of reflexivity on the part of both the researchers and the researched" (Thompson & Holland, 2003, p. 242).

A team of researchers developed a questionnaire to use as an informed data-driven process of determining cost–benefit, rather than as a subjective assessment of whether the proposed research has safeguards protecting human subjects (Newman, Willard, Sinclair, & Kaloupek, 2001). The following three survey items address the benefits from the participant's perspective:

1. Participation—feeling that I made a contribution to an important cause

2. Personal benefits—gaining insight about my experiences through participation

3. In general—believing that the study's results will be useful to others

The second group of survey items identifies a study's risks or costs in time, emotions, or convenience:

4. Negativity—I thought about things I did not want to.

5. Time—The procedures took too long.

6. Questions—Questions were too personal.

7. Participation—Interviews were boring or inconveniently scheduled.

8. Emotions—Unexpected emotional issues, often intense, were raised.

Two additional survey questions are related to trustworthiness:

9. Confidence in the researcher—I believed that my responses would be kept private.

10. Consideration—I felt treated with respect and dignity.

Although potential risks might be perceived by participants as positive, feelings of being part of a cause larger than oneself are a benefit many experience.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DILEMMAS

Researchers must be aware of ethical issues throughout all phases of a research study. Moreover, the possibility of unwelcome intrusion into participants' personal and private lives is greater for qualitative than for quantitative research (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Qualitative researchers gain access to people's thoughts and observe what they do. The longitudinal researcher becomes even more immersed in the research and involved with the participants over a longer period, and that involvement can uncover issues not as readily apparent in a short-term study. The longer interaction time with participants also increases familiarity, which generates trust. At the same time, the increased closeness might lead to participants' disclosures about personal matters or sensitive topics. For example, in one of his studies, Saldaña (2003) learned of a young man's drug use, abuse, and attempted suicide. The longer interaction time with participants might also affect the researcher's attitudes, values, and belief systems. For example, observations during fieldwork might conflict with the researcher's beliefs as Saldaña noted by describing what he perceived to be humiliating teacher comments that damaged students' learning experiences. It is clear when an observation of abuse requires a mandatory legal report. Less clear is what the researcher should do when troubling, but not illegal, practices (e.g., humiliating comments) are observed. Saldaña advises treating incidents individually and making

a judgment call as deemed necessary. The researcher's goal should be to maintain a professional distance while becoming more immersed in the field context.

Other worrisome roles researchers might confront include those Glesne (2016) describes as *exploiter, reformer*, and *advocate*. Exploiting, or taking advantage of, participants can be subtle. This dilemma can be considered in terms of power and position; that is, the researcher has the power to use the data to reach personal and professional goals while the participant receives little or nothing in return. To resolve this dilemma, Glesne suggests asking how the researcher can give back to the community, referring to those connected by a common interest (e.g., school principals, nurses, or the scientific community).

Advocating for a cause might be tempting when becoming immersed in knowledge of a problem or situation. For example, when studying teacher dismissals, Tom became aware of the sometimes arbitrary judgments involved in performance evaluation. He told me, "That is just wrong," and indicated he might take his concern to a public forum. Like advocacy when the researcher encounters a potentially dangerous situation, reform involves the researcher's intervention to report, expose, or correct activities observed that might be illegal, inhumane, or unethical.

While acting on these situations might seem necessary, one must first decide if such action would best serve others. When faced with an ethical dilemma, a researcher might be best served by seeking advice to make effective decisions. Glesne (2016) suggests forming a support group or panel of experts who could help handle ethical questions that arise. When discussing ethical dilemmas, however, researchers must maintain confidentiality. Ultimately, deciding what to do is a judgment call the researcher should carefully consider.

Exiting the Study

When designing my first longitudinal study, I did not understand that a 5-year research relationship might generate participants' need for closure. However, after examining my notes and reflections, I found that participants expressed enjoyment of the interviews and asked questions about when I planned to visit next. Knowing that many participants have enjoyed and benefitted from the research process, the long-term relationship with participants in an ongoing study requires a strategy for closure or exit.

Research in the field typically ends for participants after data collection is completed. However, when participants have revealed personal information, they can feel abandoned or isolated at the end of the study and can have a strong need to continue (Morrison, Gregory, & Thibodeau, 2012). In their

study of overweight adolescent boys, Morrison, Gregory, and Thibodeau (2012) found that communicating at the beginning of the study how and when the study would end was important. Furthermore, they viewed a unilateral exit as unethical as it stemmed from a researcher-centric point of view without participant consideration. These researchers discussed the participants' strong negative emotions when the end of the study and the exit from it approached. During the study, the boys enjoyed and benefitted from the researchers' attention and the opportunity to participate in activities and voice their opinions. However, based on their comments at the study's conclusion, they were angry, sad, and felt let down; and at least one boy felt used or objectified. These feelings conflicted with the trust and rapport developed during the longitudinal research. Consequently, Morrison et al. caution that participants could be harmed or at risk when the need for emotional attention is not recognized. To address these concerns, the researcher should design the exit at the beginning of the study. Additionally, the researcher can negotiate the exit with participants by discussing a smooth, rather than an abrupt, transition. For example, my doctoral student Jenny held weekly meetings in a study of overweight middle school girls. The girls were upset and reluctant to end the supportive discussion sessions. Thus, Jenny agreed to transition to monthly check-in meetings for a specified period and to provide support materials. She also investigated if continuing the meetings with school personnel might be a possibility and spoke with the school counselor.

Considering participants' emotional involvement and need for closure, Morrison et al. (2012) advise institutional review boards to add an exit component to studies involving vulnerable populations. Even if not required by IRBs, an exit strategy should be among the longitudinal researcher's considerations.

Exit interviews can provide participants' perceptions and insights into personal change occurring during the study. Furthermore, the exit interview might also provide the opportunity to add missing data (Saldaña, 2003). In addition, the researcher can obtain useful feedback about the research process and confirm or refute emerging longitudinal themes. Exit interviews can also be beneficial for organizations. For example, over 6 months in three nursing homes, Utley-Smith and colleagues (2006) collected qualitative and quantitative data, including structured interviews with residents, participant observation of staff as they worked, in-depth interviews with staff, and document reviews. In a variation of an exit interview that included consultation, the researchers created and used a presentation. They used the exit presentation for rapidly disseminating research findings to inform organizations. These researchers learned to be more mindful of each organization's dynamics in relation to the data.

Examples of questions from an exit interview with individuals include the following:

- How do you view teacher evaluation differently now than in 2011, prior to the reform implementation?

- How have your beliefs about teacher evaluation changed?

- How did you benefit from research participation during the 5 years?

- What problems did you encounter in participating in the research?

Ongoing contact with research participants generates familiarity affecting the researcher. Over time, this relationship demands and produces a high level of reflexivity (Thompson & Holland, 2003).

Chapter Summary

Researchers will naturally be involved with and focus on their study. However, participants' feelings and needs must be part of a balanced view of the research relationship. This chapter explored many ways to show participants respect and consideration including sharing research results, listening carefully, giving small gifts, respecting their time, and exiting the research mindful of participants' feelings developed during the longitudinal study.

Reflection Questions and Application Activities

- This chapter focuses on the two-way research relationship. In what other ways might you show appreciation and respect for participants' involvement?

- What is the most important concept you learned in this chapter, and why?

- Research and report on your institution's IRB protocol related to longitudinal qualitative studies.