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**Does deliberative democracy work in practice?
- Methodological considerations¹**

Helene Pristed

**Working paper for Spirit presentation
on Tuesday November 18th 2003**

¹ The somewhat untraditional writing style and approach in the following is based on personal recommendations given by prof. Patti Lather at the Ph.D. course 'Qualitative Data Analysis: Feminist Poststructural Perspectives', at The Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, August 26th-29th 2003. The approach finds further theoretical support in John van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988 and in Laurel Richardson 'Writing – A Method of Inquiry', p.923-948 in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, Sage Publications, London, 2000.

Introduction

In a sense, this section (possibly an appendix?) containing my methodological considerations in connection with my research project on minority political participation in Australia and New Zealand could be written in the form of a German *Bildungsroman*. However, it is up to the reader of the finished product to judge whether it is indeed a story of a researcher coming of age.

To judge that, it is obviously necessary to start with the beginning. So how did it all begin? Well, I started out imagining that I would go to my two countries of investigation and conduct something like 25 qualitative interviews in each country. I then read Steinar Kvale's book on interviewing² during the summer holidays, and realised I had better revise my plan as he estimated around one full day's work just for typing up one single interview, not to think about doing the actual analysis. With view to the temporal and geographical limitations inherent in my field of investigation, I new a different plan was needed.

Obviously my new and improved design would have to take its starting point in my theoretical findings - I only later realised some people would regard my methodological design as 'theory testing'. Having later read Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's book on grounded theory³, I must say I wholly distance myself from their approach and the notion of 'emergent theory', which I find rather implausible and naïve. The idea that data is there for the researcher to collect in any sort of 'pure' or 'uncontaminated' state, I find highly suspect, and I agree with Denzin and Lincoln's view in the introduction to their anthology that Strauss and Corbin's notions seem to be the product of an old-fashioned romanticised view of what true qualitative research should be. Which doesn't preclude me from acknowledging that Strauss and Corbin have a point when it comes to researcher colouring of data due to preconceived theoretical notions.

Even so, I base myself on the recommendations of Robert Yin in this matter⁴. He states in the second chapter of his book that in contrast to ethnographic studies, case studies will often be based on some prior theoretical development, partly due to the very pragmatic consideration that who would be relevant field contacts will depend largely upon the theory of what is being studied. In my case, deciding to study the appropriateness of the model of deliberative democracy as a possible normative guideline for giving groups access to political decision making, obviously dictates that I should be talking to people who have attempted to deliberate along democratic lines.

² Steinar Kvale, *InterView, En introduktion til det kvalitative forskningsinterview*, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København, 1997, 2002.

³ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research, Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1998

⁴ Here I refer til Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research,,Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, London, 1994

On the general question of applying a priori theory or not, which in a sense is also the old debate of deductive vs. inductive studies, one might also take the more pragmatic approach recommended by Erik Maaløe⁵, an approach which he labels ‘explorative integrative design’. The idea behind this model is to do a combination of theory testing and theory development by consciously approaching the field with a number of theoretical predispositions, but also being ready to revise these when meeting new evidence. This has the advantage of forcing the researcher to be well prepared but also to be open towards new ideas.

The conclusion to my theory section was that while old dichotomies of liberalism vs. communitarianism within the field of minority rights more or less seem to have absolved themselves without providing much in the way of practical guidelines, the model of deliberative democracy might provide a more fruitful approach to judging democratic progress within the area of minority rights. So the concluding question to my theory section came to be something along the lines of ‘Does deliberative democracy work in practice?’

To answer this question, one obviously has to go directly to the horse’s mouth, in this case those sections of the Aboriginal and Maori populations in Australia and New Zealand who are trying to have their voices heard in their local political debates. To this end, a qualitative approach seems to be the most obvious choice, and as I was looking for a way to systematise my collection of interviews, I thought of Adeno Addis’ point about there being three major areas in judging the deliberative democratic model⁶: the law, media and education. For an easy way to illustrate this idea and systematise my thoughts in some way, I came up with the following matrix: (At this point, I had read a whole lot more about research method and design, and frankly speaking, the idea of trying to make a matrix wasn’t wholly my own. While reading Peter Dahler-Larsen’s book *At fremstille kvalitative data*⁷, I realised how much could be gained from trying to visualise both the data one was planning to get, and also the data actually collected. This idea was reconfirmed as I later heard him speaking at a Ph.D. course on method and design in case studies⁸).

⁵ See Erik Maaløe, *Casestudier, Af og om mennesker i organisationer*, Akademisk Forlag, Viborg, 2nd edition, 2002

⁶ See Adeno Addis’ essay ‘On Human Diversity and the Limits of Toleration’ in the collection by Ian Shapiro and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Ethnicity and Group Rights*, Nomos XXXIX, Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy, New York University Press, New York, 1997.

⁷ Odense Universitetsforlag, 2002.

⁸ This course ‘Case-studiet: Feltarbejde og kvalitativ metode som samfundsvidenskabelig forskningsstrategi’ at Sandbjerg from October 5th-10th came to influence my research design considerably, as will be evident from the following.

MATRIX:

	Australia	New Zealand
Law	1	2
Media	3	4
Education	5	6

First draft design

This matrix, of course, doesn't do the trick in itself. I still need to decide what to put into each little square in the matrix – i.e. I need to decide exactly what kinds of data collection methods I am going to use for investigating each of the key areas of deliberative democracy pointed out by Adeno Addis.

And it is at this point I believe my research design has developed the most within the last two months (August – October 2003). Having read a lot of different literature on how to conduct case studies, I was at the beginning taken by a lot of different ideas, and imagined I was going to combine a variety of different research methods. My first feeble attempts at operationalising the empty boxes in my matrix included the use of different methods for each square in the box, and indeed the use of different methods *within* each square in the box.

Concerning the 'Law' boxes, my original plan was to interview NGO leaders and other leaders of different minority groups who had experience with attempting to gain access to the mainstream political system. I also imagined I would do a couple of interviews with mainstream politicians, taking part in institutionalised political life, about their view on minority access to debates. I further wanted to check my impression of incoming data against law reviews and possibly also against transcripts of meetings and political decision making procedures. Thus boxes no. 1 and 2 would be filled by a number of qualitative interviews combined with document analyses of probably rather formal documents on law changes and political initiatives.

My second parameter for investigating the level of deliberation within my two democracies of concern, is media. Here I had even more complicated initial ideas. My primary idea was to do a quantitative analysis of media coverage of minority affairs – especially of course Aboriginal/Maori affairs. This could be done for example by videorecording a whole week of news broadcasts and simply time the proportions of the news dedicated to Aboriginal/Maori affairs. The same approach

might be used for radio, doing a tape recording, or - focusing on the written media - one might count newspaper articles devoted to the issue both in a local and a national newspaper. This quantitative study might then be supplemented with views expressed by the interviewed NGO leaders about their impression of media coverage and fairness of presentation, possibly also in combination with a couple of interviews with journalists and newspaper editors/programming directors. I thus thought up a very complicated operationalisation of boxes no. 3 and 4 in my matrix.

Coming to the last parameter in my matrix, I imagined there would be a lot of accessible information on things like school curricula, Aboriginal/Maori education levels and participation in the national education systems. So I planned to rely heavily on written sources. But to focus attention on a particular level within the general area of education, I also planned to do a couple of interviews in each country. In this case with school leaders within the same educational area, for example secondary education. I imagined that doing two qualitative interviews in each country would supply me with enough information for me to base a survey upon. I thus wanted to convert quotations from two qualitative interviews into sentences to put into a survey, asking respondents (in this case secondary school teachers in each of the two countries) to what extent they would agree with the viewpoints expressed. In other words, I planned to do a sort of quantification of my research data. This idea of converting a couple of qualitative interviews into a survey was something I got from Steiner Kvale⁹, who recommends it as a method to avoid some of the pitfalls of quantitative studies, while at the same time retaining the advantage of having asked a large section of the relevant respondents about their views. This was an idea that attracted me very much, as I was from the beginning very worried about issues such as representativeness and the validity of my findings. This probably stems from the daily tandrums of explaining to my surroundings what exactly it is that I am paid for doing!

Second draft design

But, alas, all good things must come to an end. In fact, it was exactly my fascination with the possibility of combining a qualitative study with a quantitative approach, that led to the fall of my original plan. It all crashed while I partook in a one-week course on qualitative method and design of case studies – and I should have known it would! You don't sign up for a course on qualitative method expecting to be lauded for your quantitative fibs and foils!

⁹ Kvale p.100-101.

In fact, my idea of using a survey was shot down already on the first day of this course, where the overall morale appeared to be k.i.s.s. (keep it simple stupid). In fact, this important point in connection with designing and conducting qualitative studies shouldn't come as a surprise to me, as it was a point continuously reinforced by Patti Lather, on the previous course I partook in. During the Sandbjerg seminar, a number of very strong arguments against combining qualitative interviews with surveys were put forward. For example there is the problem of response rates in surveys, which is generally very low but can of course be lifted if the researcher has been in personal contact with respondents. – In my case possibly showing up at the teachers' lounge at the secondary schools, explaining the purpose of my research project. But having had some of the validity criteria for surveys pointed out to me, it also made me realise that in fact, I have no educational background for conducting quantitative studies. And quite apart from not wanting to spend a lot of time reading up on statistics and quantification rules, I also felt this would unnecessarily divert attention from the core of my project.

As one instructor at the course pointed out: when you do qualitative studies, people will often attack you on the question of validity. And if you want to defend your own study against such attacks, it is important that you keep the argument within the qualitative arena, not attempting to live up to validity criteria that are alien to your own investigation. This provides a further argument against doing a combination design, because obviously different sections of the finished thesis would have to be measured up against different academic standards, which hardly seems a feasible approach.

Based on the realisation that my previous thoughts about my research designs hardly were tenable, I was forced to rethink my previous matrix in a somewhat simplified version, and came up with the following solution:

	Australia	New Zealand
Law	4 interviews	4 interviews
Media	4 interviews	4 interviews
Education	4 interviews	4 interviews

This design obviously has the great advantage of being simple and sticking to the qualitative method approach, which will help me keep the validity criteria and premisses for good research conduct clear. However, the next question evidently becomes: who am I to interview? This latter

question ties in importantly with the rather narrow approach that has been developed here: limiting myself to (approximately) 12 interviews per country means that I had darn well better interview people who know about what is going on!

This means that within the area of law, I still plan to conduct probably three interviews with NGO leaders or leaders of other organisations who attempt to influence political decision making directly. Furthermore – depending on availability – I plan to be interviewing perhaps a Maori/Aboriginal representative who has gone into mainstream politics either at a local or regional level, and possibly supplement this interview with one or two Pakeha/White colleagues in politics.

Concerning media, I still plan to do qualitative interviews with 2-3 journalists (probably working within the same type of media: radio, television or newspapers) and then supplement this with 1-2 interviews with programming directors or editors.

Within the area of education I plan to retain my idea of focusing at a particular educational level (for example secondary education) and interview 2-3 school leaders or others who are concerned with implementing educational changes, and furthermore interview 1-2 local level politicians who have had a hand in drawing up political goals within the area of education.

Obviously – as is always the case with qualitative studies – this approach is most vulnerable to the charge that nothing can be generalised from this small number of interviews. Even so, I believe my design is justified.

Generalisability

First of all, stating that there should be four interviews within each box in the matrix doesn't mean that this is a religious rule never to be departed from in case interesting new possibilities present themselves. I don't regard my matrix as a straightjacket, but rather as a guideline that will hopefully remind me of the need to move along – the geographical and temporal limitations to my field research forces me to think in practical terms. Furthermore, as should be obvious under the above consideration over possible interviewees, a number of cross-purposes exist within my matrix. Maybe the Aboriginal/Maori member of the city council I'm going to interview has by chance involved him/herself in educational planning. And very probably he/she has something to say about media treatment of his/her election. And certainly the NGO leaders I plan to speak to, will have something to say about how they feel their cause is being represented by the media. In this way, I still at the outset plan to stick to my 3x4x2 approach, which doesn't at all exclude the possibility of obtaining data towards my other research questions within a different square in the matrix. Thus my

matrix includes inherent possibilities for vertical triangulation among different respondents within the boxes – in other words, respondents within the same national setting will be able to supplement each other on important points.

Secondly, I still plan to check my findings against secondary sources such as law reviews, official school curricula and other formal and semiformal documents, which is another form of triangulation. I don't believe this would constitute a violation of my qualitative approach, and indeed many methodological writers recommend doing document analyses as a supplement to interviews. Examples of this can be found in eg. Robert Yin's chapter 4 on collecting evidence, where he lists document analysis as a major source of data in qualitative studies. Ian Hodder also writes a whole section on the usefulness of document analysis in his contribution 'The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture' in Denzin and Lincoln's anthology. This approach also has the further advantage that it doesn't require my actual physical presence in Australia/New Zealand, so it is a way for me to add data after my return from the field trip.

A third possibility also presents itself, namely to rely on previous studies of the area to supplement my own results. Obviously, research done for other ends is hardly ever directly transferable, but at least in the case of the research institution I am visiting in Perth, Western Australia, I know they are interested in some of the same issues as I am, and have been conducting research into for example Aboriginal access to media. Thus I hope that the academic environment in itself might also point to interesting data sources.

The above paragraphs goes some way towards consoling the researcher primarily concerned with issues of representativeness. But it is furthermore possible to justify my research design within the framework of my own research question and qualitative approach. The point is that my investigation and results don't necessarily have to be applicable to other areas – they will be specific investigations of the state of affairs for first nations in two particular localities (Western Australia and New Zealand) and their experiences with attempting to gain access to and influence upon the policy making processes in their areas. Whether or not the findings can be transferred to other groups in other places can frankly best be decided by themselves; this doesn't in itself rule out the validity of my investigation.

Validity criteria

The methodological literature on case studies and qualitative designs presents a number of varying validity criteria, not all of which I necessarily subscribe to. By presenting some of the main criteria

I plan to make myself accountable to, however, I hope to present a convincing case that my studies are indeed valid.

My primary concern in this respect is to ensure that I have a transparent design, and that I clearly state why I have chosen this particular design and how it reflects on my prior theoretical considerations. This I believe to be doing in the present text. Furthermore, I believe it is important to present my design in a transparent way, so that it would in principle be possible for others to follow the same route and reach similar conclusions. To my mind, all good research should include a self-reflexive account of how results were reached, and this is an important standard also in my work.

Apart from presenting my research design in a clearly stated manner, another way to assure accountability is to keep a research diary in which to note changes in one's design and attitude to research related questions and concepts. Not that the diary in itself would be part of the thesis proper, but as an additional data source in which to check one's evolving conceptions and hence as a measuring rod by which to judge one's conceptional changes and possible jumps.

I see a further very important validity criteria in the idea of member checks, first presented to me by Patti Lather, but also recommended strongly by Erik Maaløe – in both cases both in their writing and through teaching sessions during Ph.D. courses¹⁰. There seems to be several possible layers to member checks, each involving a different level of accountability for the researcher. The first primary level pertains to the simple issue of whether respondents are able to recognise their statements in the researcher's rendering. This I plan to be checking with respondents by sending them not a total transcript (which I in any case don't plan to make), but a summarising paper, where key statements that might later be used as direct quotes are transcribed in full. This is both a way of checking the validity of one's data (quite apart from the fact that I will obviously retain the physical artefact in the form of the tape recording), but also a way to let respondents perhaps elaborate on previous statements and hence expand on important data chunks.

A next step in the member check process would be to send respondents those parts of the draft thesis that pertains to their statements and situation. Not that I plan to let respondents have an absolute say at this stage concerning the analysis of statements (I regard the analysis in itself as my own intellectual property), but to ask for reactions and perhaps incorporate these if appropriate. At this stage I believe it is important to have a fairly broad conception of what 'appropriate' would be – especially considering that I will be entering an area that in many ways is totally different from

¹⁰ See for example Patti Lather and Chris Smithies, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1997 or note 5 (p.2) on Maaløe's book.

my own background, but also because of my initial worry that my use of a priori theory to investigate the field should colour my analysis. My theoretical starting point should not dictate my results.

Hence I also believe it would be important to consciously seek to speak to those who are known to have a different conception of the state of affairs than the average respondent. In this case, probably by talking to representatives not only of the minority societies that form my case studies, but also by interviewing members of the surrounding majority society. Maaløe also recommends interviewing those people one instinctively dislikes – this might actually be a sound piece of advice! In general, it is of course important to use different informants, and different sources for describing the same state of affairs – which I hope to cover to some extent both within each box in my matrix, but not the least by the different cross-purposes I have already identified within my matrix (and I am sure more will turn up once in the field). Furthermore, my planned use of written sources will obviously provide a further important point of orientation in my triangulation.

To conclude, it is my firm belief – and for that matter the belief of all other qualitative researchers – that even if a study contains no statistically quantifiable results, it can none the less be very interesting. To quote Robert E. Stake from Denzin and Lincoln's handbook, 'Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Isn't it better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case?'.¹¹ In this case the interest should hopefully be generated not only by a description of the level of political influence of the Aboriginies and Maories in their countries, but also by the hoped for theoretical contribution in the form of some evaluation of to what extent the model of deliberative democracy is applicable in these two existing liberal democracies. The best case scenario would even suggest that it might be possible to point to some structural features that might enhance or hinder political participation for such groups – in that case reaching the ultimate goal of the explorative integrative model, namely a combination of theory testing and theory building.

The above description of my intended approach also conforms with Robert Yin's recommendations for a high quality analysis, namely that it should 1. present all relevant material (and not just leave out the inconvenient parts), but also try to develop rival hypotheses, and 2. include all major rival interpretations. Furthermore, Yin recommends that one should approach the

¹¹ Robert E. Stake, 'Case Studies', chapter 16 in Denzin and Lincoln, p.446

field with one's theoretical background in mind, which contrasts starkly with the validity criteria surrounding the notion of 'emergent design' set up by Strauss and Corbin.

However, Strauss and Corbin also include some of the validity criteria that I *do* endorse, for example the one about a certain level of member check of the resulting analysis. Here they state on p.161 that 'A theory that is grounded in data should be recognizable to participants, and although it might not fit every aspect of their cases, the larger concepts should apply'. I also agree with their recommendation that one should pay heed to the reproducibility of one's design, and be testing rival hypotheses.

Interviews

Going back to the question of selecting specific people to interview, I have at this stage not settled on any names yet. But it is my plan to search the internet for NGO organisations and other relevant groups and preselect a prioritised list of names of possible interviewees. To this end I also expect to get a fair amount of help from my research contacts especially in Australia, who have been very helpful so far. For example, I know that they are already doing a project with a television station that focuses on Aboriginal news, and I might try to arrange interviews with some of their employees. Based on the limited number of respondents I plan to talk to, it is apparent that they have to be selected with care, and as is evident from my above design descriptions, it is hardly a representative group I plan to talk to, but rather the somewhat elitist segments of Aboriginal/Maori society – i.e. those who actually attempt to partake in/influence mainstream political decision making. This approach confers nicely with my theoretical background, where I concluded that something like a Habermasian model of deliberative democracy is probably our currently best hopes for an operationalisable theory of how to secure democratic influence for first nation peoples. Habermas has frequently been reproached to placing too high demands on participants in public deliberation – he sets up rather high moral standards for good conduct within the public sphere, and hence has been accused of being elitist. Whether or not this is a fair criticism to level at Habermas, I don't wish to judge here; either way, it is a possible flaw in his theory that I believe to be circumventing by interviewing elitist segments of my two first nation peoples under investigation.

Apart from the above described changes to my research design, a number of other ideas materialised while attending the course on qualitative research design at Sandbjerg. One of these were the idea of doing a sort of preliminary interview. I had of course read about pilot interviews in books like Kvale (p.105 and 151) and Yin (chapter 3), where they each recommend in certain cases

doing a preliminary interview with the informant to establish possible important data areas that might otherwise have been overlooked by the researcher. As I plan to use very open-ended interviews based on a short list of topics, and furthermore wish to leave it up to the interviewee to tell me which areas he/she thinks most pertinent, I don't think it is necessary for me to do pilot interviews. (Quite apart from the fact that I can't make a preliminary trip to Australia and New Zealand just to conduct pilot interviews, I also believe that the fact that my interviewees will probably be used to speaking up for themselves somewhat eliminates the danger of missing important data areas).

However, some of the ideas of doing pilot interviews still appealed to me, among those establishing preliminary contact and contributing to researcher experience. These two aspects I should rather like to retain to some degree, and hence I have decided to ask one or two leaders in Danish immigrant organisations to do an interview with me, primarily in order for me to get interview experience, but also to ask them about areas of particular concern. Concerning the idea of establishing preliminary contact with my interviewees abroad, I am considering writing some of them an email. As they are very probably busy people, it might be necessary to make interview arrangements early on, and I might also take that chance to introduce myself and possibly draw on the good will I know has already been established between my host institution and some of the relevant organisations.

A further preliminary consideration pertains to the issue of publication arrangements. Not that I imagine to be publishing interview transcripts, but I certainly have to establish a preliminary understanding with my interviewees concerning the nature of my project and my dependence upon being able to use data both for direct quoting and to use in analyses. Some methodological writers (eg. Steiner Kvale p.107) recommend drawing up a formal contract with one's interviewees concerning publication rights and the respondent's right to check one's transcripts. But as some of the books also point out, there is a risk that such a formal procedure might alienate one's respondents. For this reason I *don't* plan to be using formal contracts about publication. Neither do I think it will be a big problem for me. Due to the nature of my case study, many of my interviewees will be involved in politics and/or the media, which I suspect will make them naturally interested in having their opinions heard. Obviously, they need to check my preliminary transcripts (which might also provide for further interesting data material if they care to elaborate on previous statements); but I believe such an arrangement can best be agreed upon in a less formal way than via a written

contract. As I will in any case be dealing with an elitist streak of the Aboriginal/Maori population, I believe the risk of appropriation of rights is very slight.

In this vein, I furthermore don't expect that any of my interviewees will request anonymity – although I will of course agree to it if asked. But as they all (in theory!) partake in public political debates, I don't expect a wish for anonymity will be the order of the day. I further propose to validate my findings by sending respondents relevant abstracts of my analysis (those parts where they are used as sources) and ask for reactions. Not that I plan to let my respondents dictate my analysis, but for the sake of continuing our exchange, and possibly also for the sake of letting respondents see their own situation and concerns within my broader field of investigation.

Further perspectives and action oriented research

I must, however, stress that I don't propose to be undertaking action oriented research. Respondents are free to read my analysis or not, and make whatever use of it they can. However, there is of course the further perspective that while I'm doing my case studies on the level of political influence for first nation peoples in Australia and New Zealand, a broader reasoning also lies behind it all. As I have described in my presentation of current philosophical reactions to the call for group rights from various minority groups around the globe, a number of theories of how to incorporate such rights circulate. All agree that a more or less liberal democratic state would be the best medium in which to achieve justice for such marginalised groups. But while liberal democracy seems to be presently promoted *tout court*, hardly anybody seems to be investigating what in fact happens to formerly suppressed minorities once the state of democracy has been reached.

Thus, by investigating the state of political influence for minority groups in two longstanding liberal democracies like Australia and New Zealand, I hope to be answering some of these questions. As I say, not to conduct action oriented research, but maybe to make politicians, philosophers and the general population aware of the fact that to achieve constitutional democracy might not do the trick alone. It is still a framework that needs to be filled in some way. Hence I hope there will be grounds for sharing experiences hopefully revealed in my research. But I see my own role as definitely keeping out of the action.

But even if I hold rather modest hopes for the reception of my finished report, I agree with Yin that it is important to keep one's potential readership as well as one's personal motives in mind when starting to write. He states that case studies have a greater potential audience than traditional research, and hence mere description in itself might influence one's field of investigation. At one

extreme, I might on honest introspection have to recognise that part of my own motivation for doing this study is the reaction of an Australian course participator I once followed a course with on Australian culture. She had attended a Catholic girls' school for most of her education, and when discussing the plight of Aboriginal peoples in contemporary Australia, she reacted by saying that the existence of an 'Aboriginal' people was just something we had made up to discredit the Australian nation!

While there certainly is some level of social indignation inherent in my topic of investigation, I want to clearly distance myself from something like the action oriented type of research described by Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong in their contribution to Denzin and Lincoln's book¹². Their driving question is for whose benefit research is being conducted? They want to move the debate towards a sense of doing research to promote social justice and responsibility – while I do not dismiss these as relevant ethical standards, I disagree very much with the view that research should create visions for what could be, or that it should make specific recommendations to politicians. This I would leave to the politicians and the respondents themselves.

Additions

Well, the story of the researcher coming of age seems to continue as I have finally completed my rather untraditional pilotinterview – untraditional in the sense that I didn't actually interview somebody for my research project, only a person within a Danish context. This person is Iraqi refugee in Denmark Sadiq Ali Amin, head of the council for Danish Students in the local refugee education centre and member of the city council's advisory council on integration related matters. This interview made me a lot wiser on several accounts. First and foremost I must remember to plug the microphone into the right outlet – otherwise the recording is absolutely unintelligible! Apart from this technical difficulty, which I very much count on being a one off, the interview went really well. I hadn't prepared anymore than something like 7 concrete questions, and even so the conversation flowed naturally for almost a full hour.

¹² Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen, and Loonmun Wong, 'For whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibility', chapter 4 in Denzin and Lincoln, p.107-131.

Sadiq was a very easy person to talk to, he was very forthcoming and talkative. He raised a number of interesting issues on his own accord (eg. the problem of lending enough credibility to the council, so that people will actually make proposals to it) and he also used a number of concepts such as ‘represent’ and ‘speak for’ without me having suggested them to him.

I also learned that although I couldn’t hear the recording, you can salvage a lot by sitting down and writing immediately – I wrote 6 pages when I came home!

A further valuable lesson was that it ain’t over till it’s over – I thought we’d finished and started rounding off by asking whether there was anything he’d like to know from me. And Søren (who was also in the room during the interview) asked a little more about the rest of my project. When he heard that I was also interested in media portrayal of minority/majority relations, that really set off a spark in him, and he gave me all these horrific stories about unfair reporting by journalists who had visited the language centre.

One final lesson for me was that it is not a good idea to attempt to be polite and hence wait pulling out the recording gear and pen and paper till after a while. What happens then is just that you’ll miss the important first steps of the conversation plus you risk in your hurry putting the microphone in the wrong plug!

For more info on the interview, see your 6 page file ‘Sadiq’ filed in ‘Method’.

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