CONCLUSION

There are various things that can be learned from research outside from Indonesia or abroad. First, it is eroding stereotypes against other countries, especially in Europe. Second, research abroad in Western countries such as countries in Europe, providing an understanding about European influence and relation in globally, including to Indonesia. However, as anthropologist we always become “outsider” for our topic contents. As Godina states, doing research in Western and Northern Europe brings some statement that in this position, the power of knowledge also can be claimed by non-Western European anthropologist (Godina, 2003, p. 484). Anthropology field works are wide. There are many places outside there that can be explored.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF DIGITALLY BASED CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

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Undertaking qualitative research about intimate relationships has the potential to raise a variety of ethical concerns. Entering this landscape in the digital era, although bringing convenience and
efficiency, can add an array of ethical concerns. In my study exploring Javanese-white Australian marriage, I utilised digital platforms both as a way of broadening my recruitment and as a method to interview participants. Whilst digital technology promises efficiency where participant populations are disparate, there exists little empirical literature proposing solutions for its unique pragmatic and ethical considerations particularly around privacy, participant identity, confidentiality and recruitment. This paper will summarise some of the practical and ethical issues which emerged in my doctoral research using digital tools to examine cross-cultural marriages and which challenged traditional research boundaries of geography, culture and communication.

Keywords: Qualitative research ethics, Digital research ethics, Qualitative research interviews, Cross-cultural research, Internet-based research.

BACKGROUND


Australia is a large country which has three time zones. Conducting research across the country, particularly in rural and remote areas, can be expensive, time consuming and problematic (O’Connor, Madge, Shaw & Wellens, 2011; Duffy, 2002; Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2016; Asetlon, 2012; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Matthews & Cramer, 2008). To address the barriers associated with these issues during advertising, I sent fliers in the post and used digital technology such as internet, email, social media sites and groups, website enquiry pages, blog sites, chat pages and other internet-based fora. During the recruitment phase, I used email, text messaging and made telephone calls. Starting out with a data base of expatriate organisations, such as Indonesian social and welfare groups across Australia – sourced from the internet, university schools of Social Science, religious organisations such as Indonesian churches and mosques, peak bodies and consulate offices, I also relied heavily on word of mouth and snowballing. Interviews were conducted in person, by telephone and using synchronous video platforms (Hooley, Wellens, & Marriot, 2012). Whilst the digital space efficiently facilitated these methods, it also created ethical dilemmas regarding relational ethics, confidentiality and identity verification (Schiek & Ullrich, 2019). It also created practical challenges such as language barriers. Shared language and understanding of culture, are comparable to those which emerge during in-person research, but these were amplified by the digital approach, particularly when the technology was unreliable or failed (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2016; AlKhateeb, 2018; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; O’Connor, et al., 2008; Reynolds & Lee, 2018).
As well, the landscape of institutional ethical review in Australia is currently conservative and cautious, resulting in a highly risk adverse consciousness among human research ethics committees, restrictive methods and many compliance requirements. Added to which, there is little understanding of the tools and methods utilised in digital media. For example, it remains unclear whether pre-existing digital data posted publicly can be mined for the purpose of research, and how best to treat digitally generated commentary so that issues of confidentiality and ethical use are resolved (Hunter, Gough, O’Kane, McKeown, Fitzpatrick, Walker, McKinley, Lee and Kee, 2018).

So while digital media can be a beguiling method and/or tool in research, there are many things to consider to adhere to ethical practice and yield beneficial data.

OBJECTIVE

This paper will summarise the methodological dilemmas I encountered in my study, particularly those relating to digital ethics, and share some proposed strategies.

DESCRIPTION

In 2018, I interviewed 20 White-Australian and Javanese participants, either as a couple or as individuals, who were residing in Australia. Participants were based all around Australia and were interviewed in person, by telephone or using the video platform, Skype. Interviews were semi-structured with questions that were provided to participants prior to interview and interview lengths varied from approximately 90 minutes to 3 hours, depending upon how much the participants wanted to tell me. Being a social media novice, I came across a range of practical and ethical issues for research utilising digital tools.

FINDINGS

I used digital media to advertise my study, undertake recruitment processes and conduct interviews with participants (O’Connor, et al., 2011; Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017). Each phase of the process raised different practical and ethical challenges.

Utilising digital media to advertise the study and recruit participants was an obvious strategy. I found it difficult to conceive of other more efficient, cost effective and efficacious methods. I became aware of digital communities (Hine, 2011) in the form of closed and/or secret FaceBook groups for Australians and Indonesians in intimate relationships, where they talk about their experiences and share resources and information and these were particularly useful (Matthews & Cramer, 2008). Gaining membership was difficult with some of the Facebook groups because they are closed or secret and therefore cannot be found simply by searching. Membership occurs via a snowballing technique where existing members ask the administrators to invite a new member to join. One must meet the eligibility criteria and then be approved by the group administrators. Some group administrators did not respond to my request to join, or if they did, did not do so in a timeframe that worked for my study, or they allowed me to join but not advertise my study. One group administrator declined on the basis that she didn’t believe confidentiality could be assured which reflects the angst surrounding social media generally (Schiek & Ullrich, 2019). On the whole, I found the groups inclusive and receptive and and people received the invitation to participate in my research with great enthusiasm and warmth.
Focus of the groups tend to be on sharing information about visa processes, but I also found strong communities (Hine, 2011) within the groups whereby people shared their joys and offered support to other members during challenging times. It is also clear that small friendship groups emerge within the larger FaceBook groups and ‘meet ups’ allow people in geographic areas to meet in person, usually over a meal. Reading the posts provided a fascinating insight into the kinds of issues facing couples and this provided further impetus for the study. However, closed and secret groups stipulate that what is posted and commented upon in the group cannot be shared outside the group. This was even the case when posts related to my study. I wanted to use some of the positive commentary in my thesis to demonstrate the perceived value of the study and sought extended ethics approval to do so and of course, had to seek permission because of course, covert research requires ethics approval and consent from the group owners and the individuals who made the comments (GSR, 2016). The people who commented, tended to use their true identity, so names, of course, had to be changed. However, this does raise another ethical dilemma which is that there is no way for a researcher to be sure that the identity created online is the authentic identity of the person, or even whether that person really exists. Identity becomes relevant when it is time to gain consent because some people will happily participate using a pseudonym, but ethical guidelines for this dilemma remain silent. So, when paper or emailed PDF consent forms couldn’t be completed, usually because people didn’t have a printer or scanner, I used an alternative digital method for gaining consent - an email from participants acknowledging the Participant Information Form and giving consent under the same conditions as the paper version (Hunter, et al., 2018). As well, my identity as researcher could not be concealed and that placed me in a vulnerable position. Trying to balance my privacy, and that of my family’s, while participating as a member in the group continues to be a tension.

Another difficulty arises in relation to who owns the information on the pages (Hoser & Nitschki, 2010). If studies proposed using the rich data within these groups, ethics is unlikely to be granted because guiding policies and legislation lag behind the technology. The main concern of ethics review bodies would be ensuring no harm is done (Hunter, et al, 2018) which can not be guaranteed in a digital environment. As well, group administrators are unlikely to grant permission given that the groups are usually confidential and/or secret.

Having said that, the openness between study participants chatting on the pages was also an issue during the recruitment phase as friends communicated with each other openly on Facebook about such things as their interview times and venues. This was particularly an issue within the Indonesian community organisations where people tried to help me organise a schedule of interviews. As researcher, I of course, could not comment on who would be interviewed and when, as this would breach confidentiality - another area where ethics guidelines need review. However, I found that not being able to assist with participants arranging the interview schedule, particularly interstate, created a barrier to developing rapport and acceptance with the group. In the case of Indonesian women, I could see very much that this is the way they come together to organise things in Java – I felt very compelled to let them do it their way because I understood the cultural practice of doing so. I could see that this may not be appropriate in other areas of research, but I felt inclusive conversations were the cornerstone of my being accepted as an insider into the groups and by being aloof, people viewed me suspiciously.

After the interviews, some of the participants wanted to ‘friend’ me and keep in touch, but conventional ethical guidelines preclude such relationships, though I have maintained my membership of one of the groups and I continue to struggle with how much to participate. For the
most part, I try to remain neutral and not partake in gossiping or favouring individuals, but I am also conscious of being seen to be exploiting the group for my own ends without contributing, which seemed to go against the ethical grain for me and the purpose of the groups.

Perhaps because of the immediacy of Facebook, I found many people expressed an interest in participating in my research but had sometimes reacted quickly without thinking the ramifications through, or not having properly read the eligibility criteria. Despite my stipulation to Personal Message or email me, many participants chose to continue the conversation at a public level within the group page. Others did not follow through and I found it ethically challenging to know when to stop sending friendly reminders. In some cases, participants were interested but were not actively online and I had no other way of contacting them, which caused some stress. This highlights the unreliability of digital media and social media, in particular.

Another pragmatic issue that arose was gaining consent. Most ethics processes require an Information Sheet and Consent Form outlining the process of participation and its risks to participants be provided prior to interview. In the digital space this can be problematic because not everyone understands the requirement or access to a scanner, and insisting upon it can disruptive to the establishment of rapport, particularly when the opportunities to communicate are limited. My solution to this was to offer people an email version of the consent form, but occasionally I did not receive consent prior to interview. Sometimes, I received consent in various forms, including by personal message or a photograph of the form, but neither of these are clear on reproduction, so again the ethics process has not stipulated that written consent must be legible and this remains a loophole.

In a face-to-face interview this risk can be mediated by explaining the risks to participants at the beginning of the interview. But when the interview is conducted over a video streaming platform such as Skype (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010), or by telephone, this process becomes more complex and discussion can be more difficult to follow (Seitz, 2015; Janghorban, Latifnejad & Taghipour, 2014). This rests on the researcher setting up the interview in a private space where confidentiality can be assured, just like an in-person interview. Ethics requirements may stipulate a room with a closed door is required, removing such options as open plan living spaces, cafes and public spaces. This can create barriers for the researcher and participants because they may not feel comfortable being interviewed in their home, and if they are, may not be comfortable conducting the interview behind closed doors, particularly if children who require supervision are in the home at the time. Participants know what they’re willing to discuss openly and overly protective rules about where research can occur, undermines people’s abilities to make responsible decisions for themselves and stifles the research. We’ve all been in public spaces where people are having loud conversations on their mobile phones. If a researcher is interviewing a participant, and the participant chooses to conduct that interview in a public space, I think ethics processes need to reflect that the researcher has consent and the participant is cognisant of the issues related to speaking in a public place about personal matters.

There are other pragmatic problems with using video platforms. They can create a sense of discomfort and self-consciousness by researchers and participants which can hamper the research and researchers and participants need a degree of digital competence (Janghorban, et al., 2014). Researchers and participants need to be mindful what other information is in the environment and being broadcast because this might breach privacy (Hoser. & Nitschki, 2010). As well, the quality of the video was often poor and even if we started that way, we usually reverted to audio
only which improved the quality of audio (Seitz, 2015). Even then there was interference and drop outs (O’Conaill, Whittaker & Wilbur, 1993; Sellen, 1995). I also found it difficult to pick up nuances in facial expressions and mannerisms, and for this reason alone, would reconsider this option for intimate interviews (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009).

During the interview with participants using video streaming or telephone, it is difficult if not impossible for the researcher to monitor whether the room is private and whether the interview is confidential (Hay & Israel, 2009). Participants may not view the content as confidential so may be more relaxed about adhering to this requirement. This led me to wonder how important this really is in this type of research. Most of the couples had explored the complexities and challenges of their relationship, and family living in their home were aware of the issues too, so they didn’t see the need for it to be confidential. As well, in some cases, family provided to participants enlightened feedback about their observations of the relationships. In order to fit in with participants’ busy lives, I conducted interviews at all times of the day and night, on all days of the week, including public holidays and sometimes, I followed people around, or they took me with them digitally, as they undertook their daily tasks such as cooking, feeding their families and doing domestic chores whilst the shared with me details about their relationships. Though observation was not part of my data collection, it gave me a very special insight into the way participants interacted as a couple and with their families. This was invaluable for understanding who they were.

As well, ethics review processes proscribe the provision of referral options for psychological support, in the event that participants become distressed as a result of the interview (Hay & Israel, 2009). Whilst the internet comes into its own for providing information about such services anywhere in the world, it is impossible to assess how reliable and relevant such services might be for participants. Some of my participants were moved in some way about the things we talked about. I conveyed sympathy and offered psychological supports. This creates a dilemma for researchers because you can go from being a researcher to a counsellor very quickly and, which is not appropriate but the participant may find the researcher easy to talk to and the dilemma for the researcher then is whether it’s better to keep the participant engaged and offer a listening ear, or destroy rapport – and potentially the data source – to offer referrals. In my experience, talking about a difficult issue did not have ongoing ramifications. Quite the contrary, participants were quite resolved about it.

CONCLUSION

Overall, a well-planned research project using digital technology can reap benefits, particularly when there are practical constraints such as when the population under study is hard to reach due to geographical distances, socially isolated or stigmatised (Duffy, 2002). For my study, I would have preferred face-to-face interviews with all of my participants, but without technology, the time and financial burdens would have precluded me from gaining such a representative participant cohort. Researchers are encouraged to embrace technology in compiling data, but to remain cognisant of exercising ethical caution in this burgeoning research context (Hay & Israel, 2009). Literature analysing the ethical considerations in particular, remains an area of growth for qualitative online research.
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