



Just Google or Just Research to Improve the Response-Ability of Research Participants?

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Abstract

Research investigations that examine contemporary issues in the 21st century generate information that can be “googled”. Google searches however, may not satisfy the need for a deep understanding of existing information, signalling the need for additional research. Research inquiries are especially pressing when it is evident that despite previous investigations social challenges remain. This study informs of a socially appropriate way to gather information and is part of a larger PhD project that examines the social experiences of adult learners living in rural communities. Particularly, this research contains a methodology that offers each adult learner a social opportunity to engage with the researcher for an extended time period in order to further their own social interests; a methodological approach expecting to improve the opportunities of research participants. Despite being able to google information, some adult learners appreciate more personal advice and support to achieve their goals. Further investigation may seek those circumstances that lead to participants either accepting or rejecting an extended social connection with researchers. This study contributes to existing knowledge about research methodology.

Key Words: Marginalised Individuals, Social Research, Ethical Methodology

Introduction

Google is a significant repository of information that assists researchers to explore a foundation for their investigations. In addition, investigators studying social challenges may reflect on the methodological approaches for their studies. Considering and utilising different methodological approaches may address social concerns with greater expediency than waiting for research to influence the implementation of state based social policies. The process of research may therefore assist research participants that experience complex social problems. This paper reports on the principles of an approach to a PhD study intended to dispense social benefits to the research participants.

The study presented here is part of a project that examines the inclusion and exclusion of adult learners as residents in South Australian rural communities. Previous literature reports that Australian rural communities and their members are often marginalised due to a lack of local resources and services that are enjoyed by the majority of Australians (Alston, 2005; Gray & Lawrence, 2001). Withdrawal of government funding in rural areas since the mid-1980s has reduced employment and development prospects in many communities. Primary production for world markets has likewise reduced the incomes of rural community members (Haslam McKenzie, Hoath, Buckley, Greer, & Rolfe, 2013; McIntosh et al., 2008). Research that involves individuals that reside in these communities offers an opportunity to reflect on methodology that can benefit the participants in the study as well as generate research knowledge. It is theorised here that one possible way to achieve social benefits from research is an approach that offers an opportunity for the participants to spend time to further their social goals. In particular, this offers the study participants a chance to engage with and direct the capacities of the researcher and assist them in realising their goals. It is of interest to academia and policymakers to understand the reports of participants in relation to this method and the consequences for participants and their communities.

Bettering the Social Chances of Individuals

An understanding of the ways in which research participants interact with principal investigators rests on an appreciation of; contemporary social policies, the role of education to generate social improvement; the social circumstances of residents in rural South Australian communities and; a discussion of the reinvigorated prospects for ethical commitment in research. Exploring literature on these topics lays the foundation in understanding the circumstances of adult learners in rural communities and the possibilities for gathering information through socially appropriate research. To begin with, the next section discusses Australian social policy initiatives.

Contemporary Australian Social Policies

Reports of growing social disparities between individuals in the regions they inhabit have drawn the attention of Australian policymakers. The response is the generation of social policies that have been driven by the introduction of social inclusion initiatives. Since 2007, social inclusion objectives, and particular participation in employment, are described in policy documents as supplying individuals with the resources for healthy social interactions (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008b). Social inclusion and its twinned concept, social exclusion originated in Europe when Lenoir (1974) mentioning “les exclus” in a parliamentary speech. “Les exclus” or individuals labelled as socially excluded are considered to be significantly socially disadvantaged. Social exclusion arises through a multiplicity of intersecting social determinants in the circumstances of individuals, such as poverty and low educational attainment. Since Lenoir (1974) articulation of social exclusion in France, the concept has spread across the globe to describe socially deprived situations that marginalise individuals. Likewise, within Australia, social exclusion has been adopted by policymakers to account for the social forces that may combine to restrict healthy social interactions and as a replacement for the term “poverty” that focusses on low

income (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008b; Phillips, Miranti, Vidyattama, & Cassells, 2013). Social exclusion and its twinned concept, social inclusion have an almost universal application in the foundations of current social policies.

Within the Australian policy context, Social Inclusion Principles were introduced to serve as an aspirational basis for social improvement (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008a). With the widespread adoption of social inclusion initiatives, there are propositions that the concept of social inclusion may be used to conduct action research. However, an extensive review in an attempt to conceptualise social inclusion highlights significant research shortcomings. Social inclusion and social exclusion are both ill-defined at this time. Both concepts seem to exist as a social process, as individuals may become either socially included or socially excluded. A complication is the concepts are also used to describe a state of individuals being either socially included or socially excluded. Furthermore, it is apparent that an individual may be socially included, socially excluded or both at the same time depending on the criteria used to determine their status. For instance, an individual in low-income employment may be socially included according to policy documents, but classified as socially excluded according to by research parameters. An even greater challenge for researchers, who would like to initiate social inclusion programs, is that social exclusion is used to describe a process whereby social determinants come together to inhibit the social interactions and responses of individuals to social opportunities. However, this same theory is used to speculate about the role of socially excluded individuals to overcome social barriers (Edwards, Armstrong, & Miller). The uncertainties about social or personal responsibility for exclusion suggest that any research that moves according to a social inclusion approach may be problematic. Investigating existing social outcomes may be better executed by engaging in another approach that is not entirely reliant on conceptualising social inclusion or social exclusion.

The Role of Education

Education is well-documented in research as being traditionally associated with positive social outcomes (Black, Duff, Saggars, & Baines, 2000; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Individuals who are involved in education may therefore inform researchers who seek to understand interventions that benefit social outcomes. In particular, social inclusion initiatives promote the participation of the individual in either education or employment as a means of social improvement (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008b) thus providing an environment that encourages the involvement of adult learners' in education programs. Enlisting adult learners in research therefore, is a way to understand the role of education in social outcomes. The assistance of adult learners who are residents in rural communities provides a reflection on existing social initiatives from the perspective of individuals who may be deemed in policy as socially excluded; and review the role of educational attainment in generating social improvement. This is especially pertinent where adult learners continue to be marginalised due to a lack of services and resources in rural communities (Newman, Biedrzycki, Patterson, & Baum, 2007).

The State of South Australia is located in the southern central part of the Australian continent. The State is populated by 1.67 million residents, including 1.23 million individuals who live in the Adelaide metropolis (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The areas outside of the metropolitan area are home to approximately 440 000 residents: many of whom live in relatively arid areas that support the primary production of major Australian exports such as mining concentrates, wine, wheat and livestock (Spoehr & Jain, 2012). Due to economic reliance on exporting to world markets, the population of rural areas may experience rapid economic changes and therefore have; complex education needs to cope with local changes (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation & International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2013). In addition, the current opportunity to conduct research in South Australian rural communities accords with it being the nation's first state to introduce social inclusion initiatives. (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2008b). This highlights South Australia as an important site in

which to understand the improvements from social inclusion based policy. Furthermore, in July 2012, the SA government introduced “Skills for All” funding for priority education courses as part of a continuation of its commitment to social inclusion (Government of South Australia, 2012). The “Skills for All” initiative provides low or no cost vocational and education training in prioritised education programs for all South Australian residents who are at least 16 years of age (Government of South Australia, 2012). Improving access to education for all South Australians improves the prospects for rural members to engage with educational programs and apply their knowledge to the creation of futures in a globalised world. Presumably this education process includes the revitalisation of the social interactions of rural community residents to improve their life chances.

The Principles of the Research Design

Engaging with adult learners that reside in the rural communities of South Australia is the foundation of a PhD thesis anticipated to appreciate their social experiences. The PhD research is intended to offer a worthy contribution to the academic community, the researcher and the participants. The study undertaken here reflects on the social benefits of the PhD research methodology for the participants. In comprehending existing literature concerning the prospects of South Australian rural communities, it is evident that residents located in sparsely populated and isolated communities are subject to economic and social factors, which either separately or in combination contribute to their marginalisation: e.g., unemployment, low income and a lack of education opportunity. The circumstances of the participants requires careful consideration of the approaches that may benefit everyone involved with the research and particularly the methods that could best promote the social wellbeing of the participants.

Many participants in research are offered recompense for their contributions in the form of vouchers, payment or raffle tickets that compensate them for their time. However, it is questionable if this technique is adequate when conducting research examining individuals subjected to apparent and persistent social deprivation. To prevent initiating social harm through the research, I pursued a profound understanding of the ethical considerations for engaging in research with marginalised groups. The work of Strega (2005) discusses this dilemma for researchers who investigate enduring social concerns. Strega (2005) promotes that previous research on social inequities has often done little to assist the circumstances of marginalised individuals. Further, she emphasises that, any research that enlists the contributor of marginalised participants should provide direct and meaningful advantage to them. The work of Young (2011) offers a way to instigate a meaningful advantage to marginalised individuals by recommending the public resourcing of individuals as a means of social assistance. As a researcher in a publicly funded university I felt obligated to support an undertaking of the PhD research in a manner that satisfied the social needs of the participants. This would mean therefore fulfilling an obligation to compensate the participants in a way that offers them a meaningful social advance. Conceivably, participants would spend time assisting me to achieve my social goal of PhD, and it would therefore be fitting for me to assist them with their social goals. I speculated that prolonging a social interaction between myself and the participants as a way for them to receive support for would be a way that I could assist them. I offered them an equivalent amount of my time for the time that they had contributed to the study. My time would be allocated in accordance with their decisions about their particular social aims, so that participants would be able to influence the decisions that have the greatest social consequences for them. It is argued here, that the conduct of research in this manner, generates an opening to understand and report the consequences of a researcher engaging in social interactions with participants as a means to reciprocate their contribution.

Research Purpose

This study seeks socially appropriate ways to gather research information. It focusses on the on the research methodology of the PhD project to further knowledge about approaches to research that fulfil an enhancement of the social wellbeing of individuals who participate.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the narratives of adult learners in South Australian rural communities. The interview method allows participants in the study to communicate their experiences and allows the researcher to clarify points of their oral reports to serve the research purpose. Twenty-one adult learners who were either studying a non-compulsory education course or, had recently attained their qualification were enlisted to contribute to this study. The participants were between the ages of 28 and 70 and represented by 17 women and 4 men. The majority of participants reported suffering from a long term illness or injury and were living below the poverty line as fulltime carers for vulnerable others. Some participants experienced other severe deprivations, such as being homeless. The circumstances of the participants are congruent with the literature review about rural communities and their members that suggested that adult learners in South Australian rural communities would be marginalised and living in circumstances with multiple social disadvantages. It is therefore important that research investigations that seek the views of rural residents as participants find ways to support their social well-being.

The educational attainment or qualification intent of the participants ranged from a Certificate I qualifications, an educational step before the South Australian Certificate of Education, to a PhD as a final qualification in the Australian education spectrum. The interviews with participants were recorded and transcribed and each transcript has been reviewed and approved by the participants for use in this study. Semi-structured interview questions included, “can you tell me how long you have lived in the community?”, “can you tell me what advice you would have for someone who was thinking of moving to your community?”, and “can you tell me the best way to get involved with your community?” The data from the interviews is being analysed in NVivo in line with an inductive approach to understand the social significance of adult learning in rural communities. Importantly, each participant has been offered an amount of the researcher’s time that is equivalent to the amount of time that the participant contributed to the study. Some participants have eagerly engaged and spent time interacting with the researcher to fulfil their social goals, whereas others expressed the view that they will not need anything in return for their contribution. I shall first discuss the outcomes for those who have taken the opportunity for further social interaction to achieve their social goals, and then consider the results for those who have expressed that they do not require any further assistance from the researcher.

Findings

The semi-structured interviews and the review of the transcripts facilitated an understanding by the participants about strategies that are intended to improve their social chances. These strategies included their educational endeavours and often led them to recognise novel social approaches that may further their life chances. Through giving an oral history to the researcher, many participants felt a sense of accomplishment that their story was heard and that it would be represented in research. After the interviews, participants often reported a “sense of hope” about their futures and that of their communities. The semi-structured interviews allowed adult learners to express their concerns about the social challenges in their rural communities. Participants expressed a need to be socially involved in their communities, and the challenges that rural communities face. A significant part of these challenges were social difficulties and the barriers to engaging in social opportunities as a rural resident.

Participants expressed a need to be involved with their communities. Jane stated “I really wanted to be not just seen, but actively participate and contribute to the community in some way. Lily agreed, “ I guess I’m a community based person. I wouldn’t do what I do if I wasn’t community based”. Wynne thought that being involved meant, “Giving something back to the community”. For these contributors their community is an important part of their social identity.

Many participants expressed various problems that their communities face, Heidi opined “I’m thinking for this community... I think the services are just shutting down more and more”. Likewise Helen saw funding as a community issue, “they’re always struggling for finances and I think a busy community is a healthy community and I think that this community down here is very, very asleep”. Katrina agreed and reflected on health services in her community “it’s a real debacle, community health at the moment. It’s putting strains on the whole community”. In accord with the literature review, the withdrawal of services and resources are contributing to the demise of rural communities and marginalising their residents. Anne proposed that social issues were paramount in rural communities, “some of our social problems are the biggest issues that our community faces”. Julie revealed that social disparities disrupted community, “we can’t have a true community unless we’ve got fairness and equity”. Margaret revealed that travelling between communities has led her to observe social differences, “Working over there’s really interesting, because there’s huge support from the families, but definitely a totally different social system to over here”. Communities and their social issues are reported by the research participants as urgent problems that may benefit from research interventions.

Time and opportunity to fulfil social opportunities was also a problem, Emily stated, “Even mums with little kids don’t have the time to make friends”. Derek expressed that being in a rural community “makes me feel that I don’t actually live in my community or maybe I’m here as a part time resident.” Whereas Lisa expressed that there was a lack of local consultation, “I think, community projects, we should all have a say, encourage them to have a say”. Meg also reported that local input was imperative for community development, “We know what’s happening with our community and we know what our community needs”. The social challenges in the communities of the research participants demonstrate significant barriers for community development.

Concerning an offer of the researcher’s time, about half of the participants sought further social engagement to further their goals. It is noteworthy, that those participants who were in circumstances with multiple deprivations did not appear more or less likely to engage with the researcher for their personal benefit. Rather the request of participants to engage with the researcher was governed by a perceived urgency on the participant’s behalf to achieve a particular social goal. This led to considerable social interactions to strategize and implement plans to assist the participants with their self-identified objectives. The types of social support offered to the research participants included aiding their education endeavours, assisting with the gain of employment, and helping with various matters related to community groups. Contributors were equally enthusiastic to work towards both furthering their education and employment, as well as advancing community development projects. It is proposed that the eagerness of participants to pursue community development demonstrates that the participants are aware and supportive of the local social progress. This study shows that supporting the contributors often assisted them in the achievement of their own goals, which in turn enriched the social fabric of their community.

As a researcher engaged to support the participants, it was problematic that some of the goals of the contributors, such as attaining low-income employment are reported as placing individuals at a social disadvantage (Pocock & Masterman-Smith, 2008). However, it was my resolve that a time donation would be in alignment with participants’ decisions about their circumstances, rather than using time to persuade them into a different course of action, which may or may not assist them in the future. There is however, some tension with supporting the aims of participants when the outcomes possibly lead to their further deprivation. However, I argue that participants are best placed to understand their own needs and their direction of available social resources is paramount

to an autonomous realisation of their life. Positively, there was a reduced delay in the benefits that participants received in response to their research contribution, supplying evidence that this method generated more immediacy in the social outcomes from the study. The social benefits from the supporting the participants in their social endeavours may have considerable variations that may be best understood through further research.

Half of the contributors were not supported by this research in any discernible way. Some of the participants are yet to decide what they would like assistance with. Others consider this opportunity as a reserve resource to be called upon in further times of anticipated educational difficulties. As one contributor put it, he perceives this offer as an “ace up the sleeve” for when he receives a particularly difficult assignment that he needs help with. It is gratifying to be placed in such a position by someone who contributed two and half hours of his time to assist my PhD study. Many contributors reported that they were satisfied to give something to me and the research community. Contributors that could give such a social gift without needing a return expressed that they were rewarded by this action, indicating that there is a type of social return in being able to give without anticipating or needing reciprocation. More work needs to be done to understand how an opportunity for some contributors to demonstrate that they are in position to give without needing reward benefits them and bolsters their sense of social capacity.

If the findings here are to be better understood, further investigations are required to understand the circumstances under which marginalised contributors are eager or reluctant to accept resources. A significant part of this investigation would be to ascertain if this socially supportive methodology furthers social advantage or disadvantage. The approval of ethics committees for research involving the most marginalised may also need revision. Revising some ethics approval procedures may obligate researchers to assist marginalised contributors and their communities in an accountable manner clearly outlined in the initial research proposal.

Conclusion

Google may provide answers to some of our questions; however, research that enlists a contribution from marginalised individuals is not an easy information task. It is important for researchers to re-consider their role as investigators of persistent social disadvantage and how they can offer direct and meaningful advantage to marginalised contributors. Contemplating the ways in which socially just research may be conducted has led to this small study that shows how a simple social engagement between researcher and participant both informs researchers with elegant insights and offers possible solutions to the social dilemmas. It further shows that our interactions as researchers can produce knowledge outcomes not only for ourselves and our institutions, but also in ways that support our research participants. If we are to avoid imposing our own shortcomings into the circumstances of others, supporting individuals with autonomous decisions about their futures remains a substantial component of an ethical and supportive research methodology.

Understandably, it may be argued that this research design and number of participants lends itself to improving social outcomes of everyone involved. However, regardless of study size, it is timely for researchers to ponder the need for existing practices that produce microscopic social investigations with little or no change in circumstances. In contrast, if research is going to be conducted in ways that are socially supportive then it is worthwhile to explore research designs and the resultant outcomes in terms of social change. This revitalised direction may begin by appraising how research participants will be able to influence their life chances and make social responses because of their involvement in research.

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