
Insider Insights

My Experience of Interviewing a “Crusader Participant”: Tips for Fellow Researchers

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Abstract

In this article, the author describes the experience of interviewing a crusader participant where audio recording of the interview was not consented to, although she was allowed to take handwritten notes. A crusader participant is someone who is committed to the social justice aims of the research and wants to bring about change by his or her contribution to it. The author provides the lessons learned from this interview as tips for fellow researchers.

Keywords: interviewing, write-up; field notes, qualitative methods

In this article, I examine my experience of interviewing a crusader participant, or someone who is committed to the social justice aims of a research project and participates to effect change. I will first discuss the situation I found myself in during this interview, why I was in that situation, and how I dealt with it. This will be followed by my tips for interviewing the crusaders, especially where consent for audio recording is not provided.

My study and conditions for this interview

This interview was conducted as a part of the pilot for my doctoral study, *Racial Discrimination at Work: Workers’ and Partners’ Well-Being* (July-November 2004).¹ The purpose of my study was to explore how racial discrimination at work affects workers’ and their spouses’ well-being, and how the spouses’ well-being is interlinked. It is an interpretive qualitative study grounded in a feminist philosophical tradition that values and develops theory from subjective experiences and feelings of the participants (Brah, 2000; Campbell & Bunting, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1983), endeavors to develop and maintain nonhierarchical relationship between the researcher and participants during the research process (Pateman, 2000; Reinharz, 1992), and is committed to reflection on and discussion about the nature of interaction between researcher and participant and how that affects the research process and findings (Bhavnani, 1993; Hall & Stevens, 1991; Reay, 1996).

I interviewed two heterosexual married Indian couples (who identified themselves as Indians) for the pilot project. One of those interviews—with Kashish,² a second-generation migrant³ woman academic who had experienced racial discrimination at work—was a crusader participant. The consent to be interviewed was given on the basis that I could not audio record the interview but could take handwritten notes.

Being a novice researcher with more theoretical knowledge than practical experience of interviewing, I had some concerns and a mental “to-do list” for the interview.

My plan for the interview was to

- try to forge an equal relationship with the participant, as according to feminist researchers, participants usually have less power than the researchers during the interview (Reinharz, 1992);
- value the experiences of the participants; in other words, be empathetic to the participant and show that I believe her accounts (i.e., experiences and feelings); and
- take plenty of writing material for the interview, and write as many notes as possible during it. This guideline was a concern, because I remembered Wagstaffe and Moyser’s (1987) warnings that researchers tend to lose important points raised by the participants in hand-noted interviews and that due to the fallible human memory, researchers find it difficult to elaborate on the points they have written in their notes.

With the above in mind, I went to interview Kashish with plenty of pens and paper. I seated myself diagonally from her for the interview to avoid the confrontational position of sitting across the table. Before the interview, I gave Kashish time to ask questions to build a rapport with her and thus start the interview on an equal footing. The following is a more precise account of how the interview started and what happened during it, and also clarifies my definition of a crusader participant.

What happened during the interview, and who is a crusader participant?

Before the start of the main interview, Kashish asked,

“Why did you decide to do this research?”

Anu: Umm [Thinking about the answer].

Kashish: When I heard about it from Shanti [research gatekeeper, who had introduced Kashish to me], I thought what an excellent idea; somebody had to do this research because I was affected [by racial discrimination at work] and families are definitely affected [by it]. That’s why I decided to take part.

It is clear from the above that Kashish not only thought that it is a worthwhile study, and was thus happy to share her experiences of racial discrimination at work, but felt that the voice of affected people must be heard. With this endorsement of my study, I moved on to asking open questions, such as Could you tell me something about your experience of racial discrimination at work? How did you feel at that time?

This led Kashish to answer the questions as fully as possibly. However, I noticed that she was talking a bit slowly, and repeating and rephrasing her experiences, as if to make me write down everything she said. Initially, this did not worry me, as I was hoping that she would speed up as the interview progressed. I continued to take as many notes as possible. However, about 10 minutes into the interview, I saw Kashish peering over my notes, and she asked,

“Are you getting everything down? Your handwriting is very neat, though you’re writing quite fast.”

Anu: Don’t worry. I’m not trying to write everything down. I am just keeping some notes and I will send them to you later (...).

Kashish: I don’t want you to miss anything!

Her remark about the “neat handwriting,” combined with her act of peering over my papers, reminded me of my childhood and generated a mental picture of a little girl at school taking dictation and being encouraged by her teacher (Gilbert, 1988). In other words, this one comment and single action placed me in a very hierarchal relationship with Kashish, where she became in charge of the interview in the form of a primary school teacher, and I became a little girl who is supposed to do her teacher’s bidding. This might not have been her intention, but my immediate response to this subordinated position was to explain to Kashish that I was just keeping a few notes that would be added to later, and she would then get a chance to add details when she received the interview write-up for validation.⁴ This reduced some of her anxiety about my note-taking abilities, but not all.

The interview continued for a further few minutes with my mental picture and associated feelings of “a little girl taking dictation at school” becoming stronger because of Kashish’s continued, repetitive rephrasing of her experiences and feelings. As a response, I made a frantic attempt to get some power within the interview by first putting my pencil down and then by taking notes only intermittently.

The result of my “pencil down” approach was a gradual transition of the interview from a scenario of dictation to a more natural conversation with eye contact and greater interaction. It also helped to reduce the total duration of the interview, because if Kashish had continued with her repetitions, it would have surely taken much longer than the 3 hours it took to interview her.

The above quotes and discussion illustrate actions of a model crusader participant, who is committed to the social justice aims of the study, wanted her voice to be heard as accurately as possible, and believed that by taking part in the study, she was facilitating change.

My tips for conducting non audio-recordable interviews with crusaders

Based on this experience, my tips for conducting nonrecordable interviews with crusaders are as follows:

- Do not get encumbered by the theory of interviewing. That means, read the theory but be pragmatic, as each interview is likely to be quite different.
- Tell the participants before the interview that you are going to take only brief notes during the interview and you do not intend to write their every word. This might prevent them from turning the interview into a dictation session.

Furthermore, one strategy to relieve their anxiety about inaccurate representation of their accounts or parts of the interview being lost is for researchers to provide a copy of the write-up to validate. This means that they can amend your first write-up, and their revised version will be the one that will be taken into account.

- Write only brief notes during the interview, because it is far more important to maintain eye contact with the participants than to keep detailed notes. Participants must feel that you are interested in their accounts, and are confident about your writing up the interview from brief notes. Furthermore, from my experience, I can say that despite my fears, I remembered large

chunks of Kashish's interview in her exact words. However, to document verbatim quotes, writing up must be done as soon as possible, preferably within 24 hours of completing the interview.

- At the end of the interview, make sure to tell the crusader participant when he or she is likely to receive his or her interview write-up (if applicable), and then keep to that timetable.

I conclude this article by saying, Do not make my mistakes in interviewing a crusader, and if you do interview crusaders, add your own tips to this list.

Notes

1. Since conducting the pilot, my research has become focused on male Indian doctors' experiences of racism at work. The research still aims to explore the impact of racism on the workers' and their spouses' well-being and how the spouses' well-being is interlinked.
2. It was a pseudonym chosen by the participant.
3. In the case of immigrants, the adjective second-generation is usually used to indicate that the person concerned had his or her primary socialization in the host country, in this case the United Kingdom. Therefore, he or she was either born and brought up either in the United Kingdom, or migrated to it before the age of 5 years and was then brought up here (Berrington, 1996).
4. A write-up is simply a practice of rewriting field notes as "fair notes," which are more presentable and complete than field notes (Robson, 1993).

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