9-9-2018

The Challenging and Empowering Elements of Doctoral Data Collection

Lawrence Nyika
St. Francis Xavier University, nyikalo@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Educational Methods Commons

The Challenging and Empowering Elements of Doctoral Data Collection

Abstract

Data collection was the most challenging aspect of my doctoral journey as an African immigrant student due to a highly unpredictable research environment. This article reports on my doctoral fieldwork experiences in one Canadian province's public secondary schools. The purpose of the article is to highlight data collection challenges and supports in qualitative research. Several barriers to doctoral fieldwork are evidenced in the article, whose successful navigation was enabled by an empowering spiritual experience and supportive and engaging supervision. Doctoral data collection narratives may not appeal to every reader, but their academic and therapeutic significance should not be underestimated.

Keywords

Canada, Church, Doctoral Fieldwork, Education, PhD, Zimbabwe

Creative Commons License

Acknowledgements

The Challenging and Empowering Elements of Doctoral Data Collection

Lawrence Nyika
St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada

Data collection was the most challenging aspect of my doctoral journey as an African immigrant student due to a highly unpredictable research environment. This article reports on my doctoral fieldwork experiences in one Canadian province's public secondary schools. The purpose of the article is to highlight data collection challenges and supports in qualitative research. Several barriers to doctoral fieldwork are evidenced in the article, whose successful navigation was enabled by an empowering spiritual experience and supportive and engaging supervision. Doctoral data collection narratives may not appeal to every reader, but their academic and therapeutic significance should not be underestimated. Keywords: Canada, Church, Doctoral Fieldwork, Education, PhD, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Doctoral researchers can experience data collection challenges in relation to the research environment and participants, whether or not they are based in their native countries. An adaptive mindset is essential for doctoral researchers to successfully navigate the complex and sometimes perilous research landscape. The research field introduces the doctoral researcher to an unfamiliar empirical dimension of the research process, as the student labours to develop lasting research relationships with participants and gatekeepers (Campbell, Gray, Meletis, Abbott, & Silver, 2006; Darling, 2014; Lim, 2012). Pollard (2009) recommended graduate schools to develop student-driven mentoring programs to better prepare doctoral students for fieldwork. Although such programs are appropriate, the uncertainty of the research field demands some measure of creativity on the part of the doctoral researcher (Siwale, 2015). Data collection presents opportunities for academic growth as the student struggles to make sense of the connection between empiricism and theory. Several researchers noted how unforeseen circumstances on the research landscape caused them to adjust their data collection strategies. For example, Darling (2014) was forced to move interview venues from public to private spaces due to participant "resistance." Loera-Gonzalez (2014) urged doctoral researchers to be weary of their outsider status, a positionality that impacts the establishment of relationships with both participants and gatekeepers. Hays-Mitchell (2001) proposed the following approach to doctoral fieldwork: *Regroup, reflect, accept mistakes, and modify*. While such an action, research-oriented protocol is relevant, its effectiveness may depend upon the researcher's *reflexivity* (Archer, 2012) or self-talk. As indicated in the literature (Darling, 2014; Naveed, Sakata, Kefallinou, Young, & Anand, 2017; Pollard, 2009) several factors influence the doctoral researcher's ability to interact productively with the research field, including uncertainty, reflexivity, and supervision. My challenging doctoral data collection experiences left me wondering about the experiences of other students worldwide. I questioned the significance of my doctoral fieldwork experiences to the qualitative research paradigm.

This article seeks to advance the conversation on the role of doctoral data collection experiences, whose literature is scant (Rimando et al., 2015). The purpose of the article is to highlight data collection challenges and supports in qualitative research. To my knowledge

there are no PhD data collection narratives written by African immigrant students in the context of Canada in recent years. Drawing upon Burgess's (1984) qualitative research protocol, I discuss my data collection experiences in one Canadian province's public secondary schools. Burgess's framework emphasises several aspects of the research process, including the researcher and research environment, data collection, and theory. Epistemologically, Burgess's protocol frames knowledge production and representation as relational and contestable. I begin by a brief introduction of my personal background and doctoral research topic. This is followed by a discussion of my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the research field. I conclude by addressing and summarizing the contribution of my doctoral fieldwork experiences to qualitative research.

An Overview of My Autobiographical Context

Researchers cannot be neutral because their reflexivity or self-talk is influenced by sociocultural positionings (Cooper & White, 2012). The capacities of researchers to make decisions are dependent upon reflexivity and the philosophies of the social groups to which they subscribe. An expression of the researcher's discursive orientations is of paramount importance to the qualitative research paradigm, which values the role of context. As a qualitative researcher, my research intentions necessarily intertwine with my own stories of experiences.

I attended a Christian high school and studied Bachelor of Education and medical laboratory sciences in Zimbabwe, before moving to Canada in the Fall of 2009 to study Master of Education. My education experiences fostered an understanding of ways to engage children and youth in learning processes while my medical training and work experiences helped sharpen my abilities to interpret and communicate health data. An ability to position myself within both health and education sectors helps me develop school-based health research that is relevant to a variety of audiences. However, it is quite difficult to disentangle myself, my being, and my understanding of the world from *Ubuntu*, a legendary African philosophy of collectivity:

> The concept of Ubuntu is understood as a collective solidarity whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to the perception of others, that is, persons are perceived less as independent of one another, and more as interdependent on one another. (Laden, 1997, p. 134)

The deep connectedness to family and people around me shapes my perceptions of how the world works. My life in Zimbabwe was influenced by a strong sense of community, which was emphasized in my upbringing at home, church, and school. I was shaped by an environment that foregrounded the importance of human relations, such as regarding a complete stranger as "sibling." Not only is Ubuntu a lens through which I perceive the world, it is also strongly related to social constructionism in its advocacy for connectedness. It was highly possible my study participants, immigrant secondary school students of African descent, will by virtue of their history be drawn to Ubuntu.

Introducing My Doctoral Research Topic

A brief discussion of my doctoral research focus is included here to provide applicable context to barriers and enhancing elements of data collection. In 2013, I began my PhD in educational studies, focusing on African immigrant secondary school students and health promoting schools. I wanted to know how African immigrant youth perceived their

relationships with health-related programs and education (i.e., teaching and learning), as foreign students who bring different cultures. Since health promoting schools are cultural constructs, participation therein is potentially contested, especially for African immigrant youth, who may bring different and conflicting understandings of school and schooling. As a foreign student from Zimbabwe, and an education and health professional living in Canada, I had a vested interest in the schooling and health and wellbeing of immigrant youth of African descent, with whom I shared a common cultural and immigration identity.

I obtained research ethics approval from my home university's Research Ethics Board (REB) and permission from the responsible school board prior to conducting the research. In accordance with REB requirements, I distributed and collected letters of Invitation to Participate, assent, and consent forms to prospective participants (and their parents as appropriate). These documents provided participants with information about confidentiality, intended use of findings, the voluntary nature of participation and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, to enable them to give informed consent to participate throughout the various data collection points in the study. The study drew on the social determinants of health framework and was premised within a philosophical *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) or hybrid of social constructionism and critical race theory. Because I sought a comprehensive understanding of African immigrant students' worldviews, the basic qualitative research design was preferable. The basic qualitative research design emphasizes multiple opinions, studying people in their usual places, using adaptable methods and methodologies, and integrating participants' and researchers' views (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). This framework was relevant to my research project as I aimed to document the distinct ways African immigrant students interpreted their experiences in alien school settings. Data were collected from four high schools in one Canadian province over a period of four months, using three data collection strategies namely photovoice, individual interviews, and focus groups. Photovoice is a data collection method whereby research participants take pictures to represent their views related to a key aspect of their lives (Wang & Burris, 1997). As a participatory action research method, photovoice creates space for students to play an active role in the development of knowledge about their schooling and health and wellbeing. Study participants were 15 youth of African descent, who migrated to Canada within the last 10 years from Africa and the Caribbean region. Eight of the participants came from the continent of Africa and seven were from the Caribbean Islands. Each participant received a $50 gift card for participation once the research project was complete. After receiving approval from my home university's REB and relevant school board, I began data collection in four Canadian high schools from February to May 2016.

Challenges to Data Collection

The four-month endeavour was the most challenging experience of my doctoral journey as an African immigrant student. It was crucial to enable school stakeholders (such as principals, staff, and parents) to understand and support my intentions to do research in their schools and with their students and/or children. Yet, I took for granted the negotiating processes going into the research field and awoke to the harsh reality of conducting research in Canadian public secondary schools as an African foreign student. The following sections will show various hindrances to the data collection process.

School Principals as Gatekeepers

Upon entering the research field, I was confident my research plans would progress with only a few hiccups. As with Bamu, De Schauwer, and Van Hove (2016), I expected doctoral fieldwork to be taxing, however the rollercoaster it turned out to be was surprising.

For example, it was difficult to contact school principals who were always too busy to respond quickly to e-mails or phone calls. The significance in doctoral fieldwork of both formal and informal gatekeepers is well-documented (Campbell et al., 2006; Lim, 2012; Wamai, 2014). A fellow university colleague (2016) hypothesised about the challenge of accessing public secondary schools: *"You think that you are just going to show up, a black man, at the schools and tell them you want to do research?"* The quote suggests race would play a role in the problems with access, however this view was not confirmed by my experiences on the research landscape as school principals were very busy yet overall cooperative. It is uncertain whether or not access would have been a problem for any researcher seeking to involve the same study participants. Moreover, the impact of my sociocultural context on interactions in the research field may not be apparent.

Participant Recruitment

The participant recruitment process proceeded for a couple of weeks because it was difficult to get enough participants. While contacting school principals was extremely difficult, it was equally frustrating to recruit research participants. For unknown reasons, several students I approached did not seem to take me seriously. I wonder if this was because of my outsider identity and poorly developed interpersonal skills as a novice researcher. Alas! What research was there to talk about with no participants? This predicament could have been avoided had I followed my doctoral supervisory committee's advice to establish research relationships with potential participants in advance.

It is often challenging to enter the school landscape as an unknown person amid staff and students who are accustomed to their positions and who may not immediately understand the researcher's purpose. I found myself in this *liminal* (van Gennep, 1960) or an alienating position at first in each of the four schools. Even though my cultural context may have conferred on me insider status, I entered the research arena with an open mind to accommodate participants' worldviews, which may be different from mine. However, I felt my presence in school was questioned by some participants, who appeared wary of my role in the schools as an outsider. For example, I vividly remember one participant, Alex (pseudonym), asking me the following question about my research agenda: *"What's in it for you?"* (Preliminary individual interview). The tone of Alex's voice and his body language led me to feel that he was suspicious of my unfamiliar presence. Although I did not realize it then, it was vital to work at developing relationships with the students who had agreed with some tentativeness to be research participants.

Scheduling of Research Activities

My research project added extra work to study participants, principals, staff, and teachers in the four schools, some of whom appeared to be always in a hurry. Going into the research field I did not anticipate participants would work several hours a day during the week, which constrained the scheduling of research activities. It did not take long to realize that participants' lives were embedded in various social determinants of health, such as education, class, and culture (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2016). The difficulties of organizing group meetings delayed photovoice activities until the last two months of data collection. Hence, some of the preliminary individual interviews were combined with photovoice workshops, which proved to be effective. Two of the 15 participants could only participate in the preliminary individual interviews and not the photovoice phase. One participant was recruited late into the study, which made it impossible for her to complete the photovoice processes within the time frame stipulated by school board authorities. Another participant was only able

to participate in the preliminary interviews and for personal reasons could not continue participating in the research project. Most of the interviews were held at school in the African student support worker's (ASSW) office in communal style as participants did not mind the presence of the ASSW and other African students, who were going about their own businesses. It was quite naturalistic although I had to deal with some measure of background noises when transcribing the interview recordings. For reasons unclear to me, the ASSW were available three days a week instead of five as were teachers and students, which proved to be an important constraint to the scheduling of research activities. It took me a while to adjust to the challenges of (re)scheduling interviews, both individual and group, and photovoice activities as well. After several attempts to schedule the first photovoice session at one school, it became apparent photovoice focus groups, the key research method, were very difficult to organize. I did not heed the advice from relevant literature well enough, which is quite clear on the challenges of using group interviews. Despite efforts to confirm research plans with participants ahead of time, there were many times when interview dates had to be changed. For example, several times school was cancelled due to unfavourable weather conditions. Due to the many uncertainties in the research field, it was critical to prepare as many alternative plans as possible.

The Culture of "Busyness"

Another surprise for me was how very busy and tired many people seemed in the schools. Even though the support I received from most of the school employees and research participants was excellent, it was hard to ignore the exhausted faces. As well as me, many of the staff and study participants appeared to be at the top limits of their ability to cope with the many chores they faced. Fromm (1955/2008) wrote about alienation, a form of oppression whereby the concept of busyness functions to disorient people's life practises:

> Man [sic] has to earn his daily bread, and this is always a more or less absorbing task. He has to take care of the many time- and energy-consuming tasks of daily life, and he is enmeshed in a certain routine necessary for the fulfillment of these tasks. (1955/2008, p. 140)

As suggested by Fromm, planning is central to contemporary life whereby people work many hours (and jobs) to survive. The culture of busyness is potentially oppressive because it tends to dominate people's lives, which can gradually decrease the ability to challenge status quo. It looks like the culture of busyness resonates with what Brookfield (2005) described as *logic of capitalism* or mechanics of production, which has arguably spread to just about everywhere in the world today, owing to international endeavours such as globalization.

Overcoming Data Collection Barriers

Although several difficulties made me feel as if the research field was poised to engulf me, there were also some empowering aspects. In the following sections, I discuss two key enabling supports, which helped me successfully navigate the intimidating research landscape.

Supportive and Engaging Supervision

My doctoral supervisor played a pivotal role in this fieldwork by checking in with me. The first check-in came at the initial stages as I entered the research field. She checked on me a second time just past the midway point into the data collection process, an opportune time

when it was neither too late nor too early to make adjustments. Frequent checking can sometimes be distracting. My supervisor and I e-mailed back and forth several times and talked on the phone for about one hour. We met again one last time at a local food outlet and talked over a meal about two weeks before completion of data collection. Throughout the meetings my supervisor reminded me of the importance of data credibility given my rather small sample size. Above everything else, I am very grateful my supervisor believed in me and provided timely and continuous support.

Attending to an Empowering Spiritual Experience

Church was the one place where my troubled soul got healed every Sunday of the four-month academic venture. One Sunday in May, the day's sermon on "facing giants" spoke to my struggles in the research field. The pastor encouraged the congregation to have "Godfidence" and to "use what we were good at," to kill the giants in our lives as did young David when he killed Goliath. My researcher reflexivity was empowered tremendously by the following Scripture: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God" (1 Sam. 17:26). Like fire, the sermon ignited so much hope and boldness in me. I drew upon several resources to persevere, including my growing Christian faith and understanding of Canadian contexts. As a native of Zimbabwe, I believe my more than seven years' stay in Canada increased my awareness of some aspects of the Canadian culture. Hence, it is quite normal to situate my understandings of the world within the context of both Zimbabwe and Canada cultures. This "multicultural consciousness" might be an important context of acculturation as noted by one study participant, Michelle (pseudonym): *"I think when we come [to Canada] we bring a different culture, I think it makes us sort of combine any cultures. I think we can [easily] adapt"* (Photovoice group interview). I had invested a lot of time and energy on the research project. It was exhaustive to write the research proposal and seek research ethics approval from my home university and permission to conduct research from the relevant school board.

The thought of the struggles leading up to my fieldwork, as well as my growing Christian faith and multicultural consciousness, strengthened my determination to confront the unexpected issues present in the research field. Consistent with prior research (Darling, 2014; Hays-Mitchell, 2001; Siwale, 2015; Wamai, 2014), there was a need to be disciplined, flexible, and to co-exist with uncertainty, which prompted me to adjust my research plan and positionality. For example, upon realizing the school setting was shaped by a culture of busyness I became more time conscious and worked to schedule interviews with increased flexibility, and to conduct interviews less formally. At the beginning of the interviews I took time to get to know how each participant's day had unfolded. Through taking this "emotional temperature," it was possible to access valuable data about participants' personal-social lives. This practice enabled me to gradually develop empowering relationships with the participants. With so much going on in participants' school and personal lives, it was important to frequently remind them about upcoming research activities. I did this in two ways. First, I talked to participants at school during breaks or as they left school at the end of the day. Second, where possible, I e-mailed participants and/or their parents. Like the previous work of Loera-Gonzalez (2014), talking to people in-person and volunteering in community projects helped greatly with participant recruitment and retention, but I learned that fliers placed at public libraries or online were not useful ways to recruit participants.

Conclusion

Several barriers to doctoral fieldwork are evidenced in this article, including participant recruitment, school principals as gatekeepers, scheduling of research activities, and the culture of busyness. As argued in the paper, successful navigation of the highly unpredictable research environment was enabled by an empowering spiritual experience and supportive and engaging supervision. The article makes a significant contribution to qualitative research by highlighting the role of data collection challenges and supports. To the extent that data collection narratives arguably provide elaborate and truthful exemplification of what may (and may not) work in the research field, it gives me contentment to write about my fieldwork experiences. Even though doctoral data collection narratives may not appeal to every reader (Walford, 2001), their academic and therapeutic significance should not be underestimated.

References

Archer, M. S. (2012). *The reflexive imperative in late modernity.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Bamu, B., De Schauwer, E., & Van Hove, G. (2016). I can't say I wasn't anticipating it, but I didn't see it coming in this magnitude: A qualitative fieldwork experience in the North West region of Cameroon. *The Qualitative Report*, *21*(3), 571-583. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss3/10

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Burgess, R. G. (1984). *The research process in educational settings: Ten case studies*. London, UK: The Falmer Press.

Campbell, L. M., Gray, N. J., Meletis, Z. A., Abbott, J. G., & Silver, J. J. (2006). Gatekeepers and keymasters: Dynamic relationships of access in geographical fieldwork. *Geographical Review*, *96*(1), 97-121.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cooper K., & White R., E. (2012). *Qualitative research in the post-modern era: Contexts of qualitative research.* New York, NY: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg.

Darling, J. (2014). Emotions, encounters and expectations: The uncertain ethics of 'the field'. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *6*(2), 201-212.

Fromm, E. (2008). *The sane society*. Retrieved from https://historicalunderbelly.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/erich-fromm-the-sane-society.pdf. (Original work published 1955)

Hays-Mitchell, M. (2001). Danger, fulfillment, and responsibility in a violence-plagued society. *Geographical Review*, *91*(1-2), 311-321.

Laden, S. (1997). Middle-class matters, or, how to keep whites whiter, colours brighter, and blacks beautiful. *Critical Arts*, *11*(1-2), 120-141.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Lim, M. (2012). Being a Korean studying Koreans in an American school: Reflections on culture, power, and ideology. *The Qualitative Report*, *17*(18), 1-15. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss9/2

Loera-Gonzalez, J. J. (2014). The power of wellbeing discourses among indigenous and non-indigenous people in Mexico. *IDS Bulletin*, *45*(2-3), 29-42.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Naveed, A., Sakata, N., Kefallinou, A., Young, S., & Anand, K. (2017). Understanding,

embracing and reflecting upon the messiness of doctoral fieldwork. *Compare*, *47*(5), 773-792.

Pollard, A. (2009). Field of screams: Difficulty and ethnographic fieldwork. *Anthropology Matters*, *11*(2). ISSN 1758-6453. Retrieved from https://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/10/10

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2016). *Social determinants of health.* Retrieved from http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/public-health-topics/social-determinants-of-health/

Rimando, M., Brace, A., Namageyo-Funa, A., Parr, T. L., Sealy, D. A., Davis, T. L., ... & Christiana, R. W. (2015). Data collection challenges and recommendations for early career researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, *20*(12), 2025-2036. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss12/8

Siwale, J. (2015). Why did I not prepare for this? The politics of negotiating fieldwork access, identity, and methodology in researching microfinance institutions. *SAGE Open*, *5*(2), 1-12. doi: 2158244015587560.

van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Walford, G. (2001). *Doing qualitative educational research: A personal guide to the research process.* London, UK: Continuum.

Wamai, N. (2014). First contact with the field: Experiences of an early career researcher in the context of national and international politics in Kenya. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *6*(2), 213-222.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, *24*(3), 369-387.

Author Note

Lawrence recently completed his PhD in Educational Studies at St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: nyikalo@yahoo.com.

Article Citation

Nyika, L. (2018). The challenging and empowering elements of doctoral data collection. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(9), 2143-2150. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss9/8