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Qualitative Insider Research in a Government Institution: Reflections on a Study of Policy Capacity

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Abstract

Embarking on a qualitative Ph.D. research project in public administration is often daunting for novice researchers. For those students who consider adopting an emic or insider approach for their research, the ethical, methodological, and analytical challenges that lay ahead may seem insurmountable at times. In this article, I reflect on my experience as a Ph.D. student completing qualitative research with my colleagues to study policy capacity in a provincial government in Canada. I review how I constructed an ethical framework by integrating policy from Research Ethics Boards and government. Throughout the article, I deal primarily with ethical considerations and the personal and professional tensions associated with insider research. In addition to providing an overview of the literature on insider and emic research, I present ethical protocols that student-practitioners in other settings should consider when completing academic research with their colleagues in government institutions. Overall, the risks one must mitigate and minimize when completing insider research in government institutions are not substantially different from insider research in private institutions. While insider approaches in the study of public administration are not without their unique challenges, they do offer great potential in broadening and deepening emic knowledge of public administration practice.

Keywords

insider research, civil servants, ethics, emic, practitioners, embedded, reflexivity, description, reflection

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Qualitative Insider Research in a Government Institution: Reflections on a Study of Policy Capacity

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Embarking on a qualitative Ph.D. research project in public administration is often daunting for novice researchers. For those students who consider adopting an emic or insider approach for their research, the ethical, methodological, and analytical challenges that lay ahead may seem insurmountable at times. In this article, I reflect on my experience as a Ph.D. student completing qualitative research with my colleagues to study policy capacity in a provincial government in Canada. I review how I constructed an ethical framework by integrating policy from Research Ethics Boards and government. Throughout the article, I deal primarily with ethical considerations and the personal and professional tensions associated with insider research. In addition to providing an overview of the literature on insider and emic research, I present ethical protocols that student-practitioners in other settings should consider when completing academic research with their colleagues in government institutions. Overall, the risks one must mitigate and minimize when completing insider research in government institutions are not substantially different from insider research in private institutions. While insider approaches in the study of public administration are not without their unique challenges, they do offer great potential in broadening and deepening emic knowledge of public administration practice.

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Introduction

Designing and implementing qualitative Ph.D. research is the most challenging project some researchers will complete in their entire career. This article is relevant to practitioner-researchers who seek to gain approval for their research from their civil service employer and university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Adding an insider or emic component to Ph.D. research creates additional challenges with respect to ethics, methodology, analysis, and positionality. As I will describe in more detail in the following, the unique ethical considerations of insider research in the public administration field were perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of my research. Working alongside both colleagues and friends, while completing research involving them, required that I navigate a complex arrangement of ethical policies from my university's IRB and civil service employer.

In this article, I provide an overview of existing literature on insider research and ethical factors that a Ph.D. student-civil servant should consider when completing qualitative research with their colleagues in government institutions. The questions I attempt to answer in this article are: What is the nature of insider research in government institutions and what protocols can be established to ensure ethical research? For my Ph.D. research using interviews and a survey, I studied how my provincial government colleagues in Canada constructed and

observed policy capacity and policy work (Cameron, 2020). The Ph.D. research was mixed methods and involved interviews with civil servants and a survey. At the time of my research, I was a manager of policy in a provincial department responsible for natural resources. My research involved interviewing deputy ministers, directors and managers and a survey.

The Emic/Insider Perspective

Collins and McNulty (2020) noted that insider researchers are often required to navigate the complexities of insider research without an explicit guide. Furthermore, even though there is a growing body of literature on insider research —a notable collection contained in *The Qualitative Report* (Chammas, 2020; Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014; Moore, 2015; Unluer, 2012)— much of this literature is not set in the context of public administration, nor is it aimed directly at Ph.D. students in public administration.

The neoliberal project has intensified an "audit culture" that privileges research that is "objective," postpositivist, experimental and generally removed from the day-to-day realities of practitioners (Kennedy et al., 2018, p. 4). This means that insider research, where the researcher is embedded in the field alongside their colleagues, has been criticized as less rigorous and credible than "scientific" studies. This is problematic for students and graduate programs that train scholar-practitioners to research context-based solutions for public administration practice. As aptly noted by Kennedy et al. (2018), "technical rationality justifies narrowly defined conceptions of what counts as valid and reliable research, and frames rigor as a qualification that can only be accomplished by an objective researcher detached from contexts and systems [Anderson & Herr, 1999]" (pp. 4-5).

Nevertheless, over the past twenty years, the field of emic or insider research has grown, which is demonstrable of both an interest in this field and an attempt to build its credibility. Although anthropology has made important contributions to understanding the field of insider and emic research (Kanuha, 2000), qualitative insider research has received little attention (Galea, 2009) and in some ways remains underdeveloped (Coghlan, 2003; Ross, 2017; Taylor, 2011). The terms *phoneemic* (inside) and *phonetic* (outside) were developed by anthropologist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s. According to Pike, etic research renders a universal view of behaviour, society, and culture through an objective "outside" stance. Emic research arrives at a focused examination of particulars and nuances from inside the culture, society, or organization itself (Beals et al., 2020). The central idea behind insider research is that the insider's embeddedness in the field allows for a more accurate interpretation of the "truth."

Benefits of insider research are cited to be the researcher's knowledge of the history and culture of the research site and awareness of such things as body language, semiotics and "slogan systems" operating within the organization or social group (Edwards, 1999, p. 1). Olive (2014, p. 4) writes that "the basis behind the thought that the emic perspective is more relevant is that it is impossible to truly comprehend and appreciate the nuances of a particular culture unless one resides within that culture." Mahadevan's (2009) study of organizational culture found that emic organizational reality indeed differs from an etic view, while Darling (2016) recognizes that it is possible for researchers to integrate both emic and etic perspectives.

A superficial scan of studies shows that insider and emic research is often set in a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. Such approaches disrupt arguments for researcher "objectivity" and are pursued to produce holistic, nuanced and contextually rich findings of policy work in practice (Shore, 2010). Particularly for insider researchers, the position of the researcher in relation to participants is inextricably linked to the construction of reality (Greene, 2014), given that a relationship already exists outside the theatre of qualitative research. The positionality of the insider to members of the group often leads researchers to interrogate their

own positionality and engage in deep reflexivity and "emotion work" regarding their professional and personal identities (e.g., Darra, 2008; Morre, 2007; Tshuma, 2021).

Insider and outsider identities are complex, characterized with multiple identity intersections. As noted by Earle (2014), there is a "crude identity essentialism that the insider/outsider dichotomy has a tendency to reinforce" (p. 429). There is no clear articulation of how similar a researcher must be to research participants to warrant the label of insider (Chavez, 2008). For example, the insider-outsider dichotomy does not account for the many ways one can gain an emic perspective or the fact that one often uses both emic and etic approaches in research (Morey & Luthans, 1984), regardless of how much they share with research participants.

Researchers can choose to minimize, utilize, maximize and/or incorporate their insider experience during a study (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2012). Several scholars, including Deutsch (1981), Edwards (1999), Walsham (2006), Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2012), and Teusner (2016), conceptualize the researcher shifting on a spectrum of sorts, from "outside researcher" to "involved" or "inside" researcher, to "deep insider researcher" or "total insider."

During my insider research project, I found myself viewing situations from emic and etic vantage points. When I was interviewing colleagues, who were involved in similar work to me or who held similar identity markers, I sensed familiarity and that I was an insider. In contrast, when I was interviewing deputy ministers or individuals who worked in technical fields, I was more of an outsider observing lived experiences that were much more different from my own. Therefore, during my study, I was essentially a "relative insider" (McEvoy, 2001, p. 51), where my "insiderness" and "outsiderness" ebbed and flowed depending on context. My relative insider status was constructed from being new to government, my position as manager (which excluded me from lower and higher seniority level cultures across the organization) and from having a generalist skill set in an organization that was staffed primarily with subject matter experts.

Insider Research and the Civil Service

Completing qualitative research in public administration is complex, due to the various ethical dimensions one must consider. Generally, the expectation of civil servants is that they remain neutral and avoid situations that require voicing their own personal beliefs. Civil servants also have a responsibility to protect confidential information and other sensitive facts that could negatively affect government's strategic priorities and goals. This obligation materializes through oaths and policies for confidentiality and secrecy.

The civil service presents unique challenges for qualitative researchers (both insiders and outsiders). As the focus of public, political, and other forms of scrutiny, civil servants can slip into defensive postures when asked to divulge their perspectives to inquisitive strangers — outside researchers— thus obfuscating the reality of public administration practice. Teusner (2016) made a similar observation as an insider researching occupational health and safety and Duke (2002, p. 49) observed that civil servant interviewees in some cases provided "thin" as opposed to "thick" descriptions of policymaking processes. On the other hand, participants may become "closed off to answering questions" when the researcher is an insider, believing that the neutrality and trustworthiness of the interview process has been forfeited (Berkovic, et al., 2020).

At the same time, civil servants may unknowingly or knowingly communicate information to the outside researcher that is critical of their employer, which might be published, jeopardizing the reputation of the individual or organization (Subramanyam, 2018). It may be more difficult for an outsider not familiar with the context of the setting to discern information that is sensitive and confidential or benign. Therefore, researchers attempting to

understand the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, motivations, and perspectives of civil servants — data that is important for rich qualitative research— will encounter unique ethical dilemmas in the field.

Insider researchers, even though being a member of "the group," need to navigate the same policies and norms as outside researchers. However, insiders face the possibility of additional ethical dilemmas. There is an increased possibility of "coercion or undue influence" on colleagues to participate (given already-established relationships), to encounter "privacy breaches" (due to closeness of colleagues in the workplace), and there are additional difficulties with maintaining "confidentiality" following the research project (given that insiders continue to work with participants long after the research project's conclusion).

It was therefore essential, prior to beginning my research, that I committed serious attention to understanding the protocols and best practices for navigating research with my colleagues and the ethical norms of the workplace. This involved reviewing the insider research literature and constructing an ethical framework based on IRB policy from my university and other post-secondary institutions. This turned into a process of discovering the dynamic field of research ethics, insider research and work-based studies.

Seeking Guidance from the Literature

There are textbooks and methodological articles available to guide practitioners who are completing research projects in their place of work. I found the following books particularly useful to understand and implement research with my colleagues:

- Garrick and Rhodes, Eds. (2000) *Research and Knowledge at Work*,
- Zeni, Ed. (2001) *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research*,
- Costley et al. (2010) *Doing Work Based Research*,
- Gardener and Coombs, Eds. (2010) *Researching, Reflecting and Writing about Work*,
- Callan and Reed, Eds. (2011) *Work-Based Research in the Early Years*,
- Gibbs (2011), *Heidegger's Contribution to the Understanding of Work-Based Studies*,
- O'Leary and Hunt (2016) *Workplace Research: Conducting Small-Scale Research in Organizations*, and
- Lees and Freshwater, Eds. (2018) *Practitioner-Based Research*

Much of this literature is not set in the context of public administration and case studies of insider research in governments are scarce. Exceptions include, for example, Kenneally (2013) who reflected on her experience conducting research as a senior manager in a local government, Gottwald et al. (2018) who found that insider researchers in the German public service had to become "micropoliticians" to maintain scientific autonomy and Chammas (2020) who examined the advantages and limitations of being an insider in a public institution for asylum seekers. Furthermore, the textbook *Action Research for Business, Non-profit, and Public Administration* (James et al., 2012) signals that public administrator is increasingly becoming interested in leading research projects in their own settings, as do cases such as the "insider-researcher network" for local government councils in Australia (Sense, 2012).

Costley et al. (2010) argue that the growth of insider research is indicative of the emphasis employers have placed on the human and social capital of employees. Adding to this, Blackman (2016) writes that the democratization of academia to other forms of knowledge has led to a space for "the scholarship of application" (p. 2). In public administration, Ph.D. programs that support public administrators in achieving advanced degrees to ensure public

service competency, as well as the efficacy of government, have been in place for at least the past two decades (Felbinger et al., 1999). It is, perhaps, for these reasons that the literature review identified published academic articles that provide rigorous philosophical, methodological, and ethical guidance for practitioners seeking to conduct research with their colleagues. While the discussion of published insider studies below is not exhaustive, it is demonstrative of scholarly contributions to knowledge creation and practice.

Studies based on researchers conducting research in their places of employment provided me with helpful examples. I integrated this literature into my IRB proposal, in part to demonstrate that insider research was a legitimate approach to creating knowledge. For example, Platt's (1972) study with her professor colleagues is seminal, given that she was one of the first to explicitly challenge orthodox qualitative research which, at the time, privileged the interviewer as outsider and the purported objectivity of the former (see also Platt, 1981). Platt interviewed professor colleagues at her university to determine the consequences from different modes of examinations. Physician-researcher Aase (2006) interviewed her physician colleagues to determine who they were "behind their professional masks" (p. 48). Costley and Armsby (2007) distributed a questionnaire and conducted interviews with their university colleagues to determine the various approaches being adopted for practitioner-led research. Norton (2007) studied the experience of fellow university lecturers in completing a postgraduate certificate in teaching. Teusner (2010, 2016) published accounts of her experience as an occupational health and safety (OHS) professional, where she used a questionnaire and interviews to identify the barriers to improving OHS in her workplace. Bold (2013) questioned, "What are the characteristics of a teaching-led, research-informed university?" (p. 98) and interviewed her professor colleagues. Parsell et al. (2014) sought to understand experiences with a peer-review process through a questionnaire and interviews with their colleagues. Finally, Rowley's (2014) study included completing interviews with his fellow school board members to determine the impacts an education program had on marginalized families.

Given that the literature is not set in the context of public administration, there is a gap in knowledge. In particular, the literature is missing contributions from practitioners in the field who have completed insider research in their workplaces as part of a Ph.D. program. As such, this article works towards filling this gap by making a descriptive and reflective contribution. Other civil servant-students who are completing Ph.D. research in their places of work may find this article relevant for designing ethical projects.

Role of Research

At the time of completing research, I was a manager of policy in a provincial civil service in Canada. I was interested in researching policy capacity for the potential to improve the organization's ability to develop effective public policies. Furthermore, completing this research as part of a Ph.D. program allowed me to further develop my own applied research skills; skills that are critical for policy development. In the study, I completed interviews with senior government officials from a range of departments and completed in-depth interviews and surveys at one department. Qualitative data was analyzed using NVivo 12 and survey data was analyzed descriptively. Results from both phases of research were triangulated and interpreted to answer the study's research questions. The following describes how ethical issues were addressed.

To limit bias and promote rigor, I fully described my basic assumptions and theoretical frameworks prior to beginning the study (Musson, 2004). I also maintained notes to record assumptions (Teusner, 2016, 2019) and triangulated data from the qualitative and quantitative phases to develop findings (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 109). I shared these findings with respondents to ensure that my interpretations were accurate (Kaiser, 2009). During interviews,

I did not communicate an explicit or overt normative position towards any concept under study (Inwood et al., 2011). I ensured that my practitioner knowledge of my workplace did not impact the dependability of my findings by probing interviewees to obtain clarity for those statements that were only familiar to me as an insider but may not otherwise be clear to an outsider (Teusner, 2016).

My study received ethical review and approval from my university's IRB. There was little to no formal ethics policy from my university specifically for insider researchers. Therefore, I constructed an ethics framework by integrating IRB policies from other institutions and the professional values of my workplace. As established through formal human resource legislation and policy, my workplace values employees and aims to create a workplace that is safe and productive. Government is mandated to uphold the values of the public service and act in the best interest of clients and citizens. The research site was set in the context of an institutionalized infrastructure of professional public administration ethics legislation, policies and protocols, overseen by an Ethics and Integrity Commissioner. As per policy, employees have the right to come to work in a place that is respectful, free from harassment and where they feel safe to perform their day-to-day roles.

After reflecting on ethics in practice, I found that the frames of *consent*, *confidentiality*, *transparency* and *voluntariness* (Mocker, 2007) were common features of the ethical infrastructure, organizational culture and societal expectations of the research site and IRB policies. As discussed in the following, by interpreting and aligning policies from my workplace and the IRB, I was able to construct an ethical framework that responded to the expectations of both my employer and the university.

To manage and mitigate risk, I drew on policy directives from several university's IRBs that provided guidance to work-based researchers on issues relating to recruitment of colleagues, the involvement of direct reports, role clarification, voluntariness, anonymity and dual-role conflicts. A selection of these policies and their application in my research project is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Research Ethics Concepts, Policies, and Application

Institution	Policy	Application
Recruitment		
Canada, Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics	Institutional permission to conduct research It is important that staff are fully informed about the views of the organization's authorities.	An email announcement about my research was sent from the head of the department to staff. The e-mailed provided notification that I would be administering a survey and sending interview invitations that were separate and distinct from regular work responsibilities. The organization's support for my research was *tacitly* communicated to avoid coercion, but enough to signal that staff participation was approved. I also answered questions and engaged in conversations about my research with my colleagues on
Oregon State University	Students and Employees as Research Participants Investigators may make study-related announcements or provide recruitment materials to employees at regular meetings.	
Ryerson University	Guidelines for Recruitment of Research Participants Researchers may utilize already-existing relationships to aid in recruitment processes so long as the researcher ensures that they emphasize the voluntary nature of participation and that whether or not someone chooses to participate will not impact their future relationship.	

		a regular basis, but avoided initiating conversations openly during meetings and other gatherings.
Direct Reports		
University of Pittsburgh	Research Involving Employees as Research Participants Except in unusual circumstances, investigators should not enroll employees under their direct supervision into research studies that involve greater than minimal risk without the prospect of direct benefit.	To avoid coercion or undue influence, I chose not to interview staff who I managed.
Role Clarification		
University of Pittsburgh	Research Involving Employees as Research Participants In cases where regular workplace activities are also the topic of research, investigators must clarify for potential research participants those activities that are optional and distinct from any mandatory workplace activities that would take place even without the research.	The survey pre-amble and the written consent form for the interviews clearly communicated that my research was separate from regular work obligations.
Voluntariness		
Marquette University	MU Students and Employees as Subjects (IRB-510) Employee participation in research must be voluntary. An employee shall not be required to participate in research as a condition of employment. An employee's voluntary decision whether or not to participate will not affect their employment, performance evaluation, or any other employment practice.	I included a statement in the survey pre-amble and the written interview consent form that participants' employment, performance evaluation, or any other employment practice would not be negatively impacted by their choice to accept or deny my invitation to participate in my study.
Anonymity		
Canada, Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics	Institutional permission to conduct research Those conducting organizational research also need to be aware of the potential stigmatization or adverse outcomes related to the informed consent and privacy needs of individual participants. Participating employees in some organizations, for instance, may risk loss of reputation or employment.	To ensure privacy, the anonymous survey I administered was computer-based. Respondents could choose to complete the survey at a time and location where they felt most comfortable. The survey software was programmed so that I was not able to connect respondents to their answers. When analyzing survey and interview data, I chose to decontextualize responses to further protect the privacy of participants. Given how small the research site was, I chose not to provide demographic or background information about interviewees,

		aside from stating generic job titles.
Dual-Role Conflict of Interest		
Canada, Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics	TCPS 2 (2018) – Chapter 7: Conflicts of Interest Conflicts may arise from an individual's involvement in dual and multiple roles within or outside an institution. While it may not be possible to eliminate all conflicts of interest, researchers are expected to identify, minimize or otherwise manage their individual conflicts in a manner that is satisfactory to the IRB.	I reduced real or perceived conflicts of interest through explicitly communicating in email invitations, the consent form and other scripts that I was collecting data as a Ph.D. student. I also made senior officials aware that I would be conducting research that was separate from my day-to-day duties.

I constructed an ethics framework by combining these policies and directives with the human resource policies found in my workplace. Administrative policies that aligned with IRB policies were those that reiterated government's value for the safety and wellbeing of staff, committed government to ethical decision-making and mandated workplaces be free from harassment.

Reflections on Mitigating Risks as an Insider Researcher in Government

Overall, the risks one must mitigate and minimize when completing insider research in government institutions are not substantially different from insider research in private institutions. Throughout the research process, I was confronted with personal, professional, political, and ethical tensions. As an insider, I personally knew my colleagues. I therefore had to remain alert to avoid inadvertently creating a situation where my colleagues felt coerced to participate in my research. I was also familiar with how important the oath of confidentiality is to the functioning of the civil service, as are commitments to openness and transparency with the public (see Aftergood, 2012; Larsen & Walby, 2012; Michael, 1985).

An ethical situation I had to prepare for was the possibility that as an insider, participants would share information critical of the organization more openly than they would with an outsider. Subramanyam (2018), who studied policy processes in a local government in India, noted:

> As government decision-making and policies tend to be political, participants might inadvertently provide responses critical of the government institutions and/or those in power. Thus, through the study, the researcher might subject consenting participants to unintended risks such as reputational damage or institutional stigmatization, should the critical findings be published. (p. 37)

While this trust and openness is cited as a benefit of emic research, it may expose the participant and organization to risk. Public administration scholars have debated how to best ensure that public institutions (and staff) are protected in the publishing of results that are negative towards the institution (e.g., Signal et al., 2018). This ethical consideration was recognized by Farquharson (2005), who interviewed policymakers in Australia and noted that she grappled with the dual purpose of exposing nebulous tobacco policy decisions and protecting the individuals in her study: "the tradeoff is that I could not use some of my data … for advocacy purposes, and tobacco control advocacy was the purpose of the project" (p. 351).

Regarding organizational research and the uncomfortable truths that researchers may uncover in the field, it is worth quoting Fine and Shulman (2009) who stated that:

> Every job has techniques for doing things—standard operating procedures—that practitioners will avoid exposing to outsiders. Life in an operating room, in a kitchen, in a factory, or in a police station is not always the stuff of heroic public images. As insiders know, the production of good things is not pretty. Workers are caught in a web of demands that compel them to deviate from formal and idealistic rules. Yet for public consumption, practitioners must present glossy versions of how they work. These illusions are essential for occupational survival. When the work is messy, workers have to clean up well. (p. 177)

However, it was exactly the messiness and demands of everyday policy work that my study was attempting to uncover and interpret. As such, throughout all stages of this study, I ethically and carefully considered how best to communicate truths related to public servants' perceptions of the government's policy capacity, including those that could be considered negative (see the following for examples of how similar ethical decisions were made: Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Farquharson, 2005; Norton, 2007). To ensure that my research was ethical, my research decisions supported respect for research participants and demonstrated my concern for their welfare.

To ensure that my research could access those standard operating procedures—which are often hidden from view—while at the same time remain ethical in terms of protecting participants, I chose to focus the study on "understanding" and "contextualizing" policy capacity as opposed to "diagnosing" whether government's policy capacity was strong or weak. This was indeed a trade-off that may not be handled the same way by an outside researcher, who is able to leave the field and return to their own institution. Nevertheless, I ensured that my research remained critical by theorizing, conceptualizing, connecting findings to the body of public administration literature and using rigorous analytical methods.

Mitigating group risk materialized through various protocols that I put in place. During the consent process, I informed interviewees that they could ask me to stop recording, request to review their transcript, edit their comments without judgement or completely remove themselves from my study (see Kirsch, 1999, for an example of a study where similar ethical decisions were made). I also made it apparent that my study was being conducted separately from my regular work. Using my university's e-mail address to communicate with participants, affixing the university's logo on forms and ensuring that participants were aware that I would be publishing results allowed me to identify the project as separate from my day-to-day duties.

To manage and minimize other risks I did not invite for interview, and thus excluded, anyone who occupied a "lower" institutional hierarchical level than myself (i.e., I only interviewed managers, directors, and deputy ministers). The consent form explicitly communicated to my colleagues that their decision whether to participate would not affect their employment, performance evaluation or any other employment practice. I used an anonymous, self-administered, web-based survey so I could not connect respondents to their answers. I used codes to link interview respondents to data, emailed respondents the interview protocol ahead of time and informed interviewees that they could skip questions, relocate, and reschedule interview times and locations upon request.

I also provided the option of recording and informed interviewees that recordings could be stopped upon request, offered to provide transcripts to interviewees for review and withdrawal of comments and clarified withdraw procedures in the consent form. Recordings were stored on my personal, password-protected computer, so that they could not be found

through information requests from the public. Furthermore, I removed all identifying information from survey data and interview transcripts prior to analysis, sought permission to use quotes and stripped data of identifying information. In this vein, I ethically and reflexively thought carefully about the publication of information to ensure that both the group and research site's reputation and dignity was respected.

Finally, a perceived or real conflict of interest related to my dual role of manager and doctoral researcher was minimized through the written and communicated support for my Ph.D. student research from the head of the department and other senior officials. The process of receiving these letters allowed me to notify senior officials that my research was separate from my day-to-day work. I further reduced real or perceived conflicts of interest through explicitly communicating in email invitations, the consent form and other scripts from which I was collecting data as a Ph.D. student.

Objectivity and Accessing "Truth"

A common critique of insider researcher is that the insider is too close to the field (Delyser, 2001). The researcher's perception of facts and reality can be affected by "insider bias" (van Heugten, 2004, p. 207). Confirmability and credibility, the degree to which findings are grounded in the data and accurately reflect the phenomena being studied, are important for qualitative studies, and particularly for insider research (Asselin, 2003; Teusner, 2016; Unluer, 2012).

Even though my study was in a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, and I therefore accepted that "multiple" socially constructed realities exist based on diverse individual perceptions, I also believe that thematic patterns and commonalities within subjective experiences can be identified (Thorne et al., 2004). I wanted to accurately reflect these common patterns and themes in my research, but there was a risk that my own knowledge and familiarity with the site could obscure the lived experiences communicated to me by participants/colleagues.

To ensure that my findings were confirmable and credible, and not obscured by my insider knowledge, I explicitly identified my pre-structured assumptions about the study and used this knowledge as "guideposts" (Labaree, 2002, p. 108) to indicate when increased reflexivity and stricter attention to the data was needed to ensure accuracy. During interviews, I avoided making assumptions based on my insider knowledge or vocalizing my position on topics or issues (Inwood et al., 2011) and probed interviewees to facilitate dialogue about ideas that were only familiar to me as a member of the research site but would not be clear to an outsider (Chavez, 2008; Teusner, 2016). I used member-checking and asked interview participants to review transcriptions, codes, and themes (Chapman et al., 2015) to identify where my interpretations compared to the lived experience of others in the field. Finally, my presentation of findings provided an "audit trail," which consisted of showing the process of how I moved from raw data to findings and then grounded analysis so that others could easily judge the confirmability and credibility of my interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Implications

For the insider researcher studying public administration, there are multiple policies, norms and expectations that need to be navigated and managed. Sometimes, these seem to contradict one another: for example, government's commitment to transparency and openness versus oaths of confidentiality make insider research in public administration complex. To navigate these tensions, I drew on existing insider research literature from other fields and ethics policies from universities in other jurisdictions. Ultimately, I found that what guided my

ethical decision-making were the frames of consent, confidentiality, transparency, and voluntariness. I found where these frames were enacted through civil service policies and procedures, and ultimately established an ethical framework for my research project that adhered to both research ethics and administrative policies for civil servants.

I agree that the reflexivity required during insider research presents the opportunity for personal and professional transformation (Anderson & Jones, 2000). Insider research in public administration is a new and exciting field for practitioners and academics. It offers great promise in adding a unique perspective to the study of government, which to date has been dominated by the work of outside researchers. In addition to methodological studies, future research should more closely study how practitioners can navigate the ethical policies of IRBs and their employers. Scholars with knowledge of research ethics and practitioners with lived experience in public administration should complete this research collaboratively. Ultimately, practitioner-led insider research provides an opportunity to lessen the theory-practice divide.

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