EXPLORING RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract. The relationship between researcher and participant is crucial in qualitative research. In this presentation, we will explore how this relationship can be developed and negotiated in such a way that the goals of the research project are achieved and both the participant and the researcher, in the research process and after it, feel valued and respected. We will address four aspects of the researcher-participant relationship: “zone of the untouchable,” participants’ vulnerability, reciprocity, and cultural diversity.

Zone of the Untouchable. The quality of the data is in many ways dependent upon the relationship between the researcher and the participant. The closer the researcher gets to his/her participants, the richer and more authentic the data he/she gets. Hence, researchers strive to get close as they possibly can to their participants. There are, however, moments when a researcher may be confronted with the tension between getting rich data and trespassing into a participant’s private sphere, which Logstrup (1997) calls the zone of the untouchable. How to respond to such situations is a dilemma to the researcher, one that is not easy to solve, especially when the participant is a minor or has a mental disability, when there are several people present during the interview (e.g., research team members, translators), when the interview setting does not ensure privacy, or when the researcher himself or herself is caught off guard or lacks training. Handling such situations may call for alternative options which can be drawn from research ethical codes and practices and from the framework of ethical mindfulness (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009).

Do not harm: protecting participants’ vulnerability in qualitative research. Protecting participants from possible risk of physical or mental harm is at the core of research ethics. Yet, beyond a pro forma statement in an informed consent form, it is the researcher’s responsibility to be mindful of potential risks emerging during the interview that may lead to a state of vulnerability in a researcher-participant relationship. Qualitative research, by its very nature, includes the emotional exchange between a researcher and a participant. Even if the latter may not formally belong to a vulnerable population group, he or she may potentially feel pressured or coerced during the interview due to the awakening of bad memory or negative emotions related to a past experience that could unduly create or reopen a wound (Wijk, 2013; Sullivan & Cain, 2004). Therefore, it is critically important to learn appropriate ethical practices and strategies to minimise risk of participants being assaulted as a result of their participation in research.

Reciprocity. Underpinned by Communicative Ethics of Haberma 1992), the concept of “reciprocity” is crucial in a researcher-participant relationship. Qualitative researchers must ensure that both the researcher and the participant mutually benefit from the scholarly exchange. Mutual benefit calls for a win-win approach that is expected to result to an equitable amount of giving and taking. In Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effectively People, thinking win-win is one of the habits preceding public victory in terms of handling personal or professional relationships, much more so in the relational
aspect of conducting research. Participants give of themselves—time, effort, wisdom, and experiences—to aid the researcher in fulfilling the purpose of the study. On the other hand, the researcher’s aims which include the context, nature of inquiry, scope, and even depth may lead to deeper engagement or apathy from participants depending upon the quality of reciprocity evident in the relationship. Sound research ethical practice highly esteems reciprocity as it breeds trust and respect vital to the researcher’s goal of nurturing a positive relationship with the participant which is vital to the quality and integrity of data gathered. Considering the affordances of a stance of reciprocity, the following questions are addressed: (a) How do truth and values traditions support reciprocity? (b) How can participants’ efforts be authentically reciprocated throughout the research process? (c) How can qualitative researchers and qualitative research practice at large embrace reciprocity in dealing with participants? The golden rule of ethical conduct referring to Matthew 7:12 which states, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is also called the law of reciprocity which must be central in any researcher-participant relationship.

**Dealing with Cultural Diversity.** To establish a positive relationship between the researcher and the participant, cultural diversity is an important factor that must be taken into consideration. In fact, cultural sensitivity is expected to increase the study’s trustworthiness. Culture is always a complex issue because different people understand and apply it differently in different contexts. To make it worse, one country can have many different sub-cultures. People from the same city or town may also culturally differ depending on socio-economic status, educational attainment, race, religion, political affiliations, among many other social structures. It is therefore important for the researcher to have some fundamental understanding about the participant’s cultural beliefs, practices, and expectations. At times, these may be conflicting with the researcher’s cultural beliefs. In this case, the researcher should decide on how to proceed ethically, professionally, and emotionally with the research study. Some of the practical factors that the researcher needs to take into consideration include dress code, language usage and nuances, acceptable interaction practices, gifting, power relations, and even taboos. Participants are quite likely to operate within their cultural background throughout the research study. Contextuality, cultural relevance, appropriateness, and mutual respect are to be observed at all time during the course of the qualitative research study (Plexang & Hutchinson, 2017). Not only does the researcher have to adhere to the cultural norms of the research participants; he or she also needs to critically assess how his or her cultural background and beliefs system can affect the qualitative research study and its outcome. The researcher must always keep in mind that culture cannot be taken for granted at any stage of a qualitative research study.

We do not pretend to be able to substantially address the issues related to these four aspects of the researcher-participant relationship. More questions may be raised. But in the process of dialogue that will hopefully continue among us qualitative researchers, we hope to find ways, within the bounds of ethical and good research practice, which will help us navigate into the intricate interweaving fabric that bind researchers and participants.

**Keywords:** researcher-participant relationship, zone of the untouchable, participant vulnerability, researcher-participant reciprocity, cultural diversity

**Necessary resources:** video projector

**Proposal:**

1. **Brief Context:** The researcher-participant relationship, in this presentation, is explored in the context of the face-to-face in-depth interview.
2. Objectives: This presentation aims to do the following: (a) explore how the relationship between the researcher and the participant can be enhanced so that both, during and after the research, feel valued and respected; (b) emphasize ethical practices in conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews.

3. Dynamics/Strategy:
   a. Presentation - Each presenter will present his or her topic. After all the four presenters have presented, they will do a panel discussion, where they will discuss among themselves issues related to their presentations. Question and answer will follow.
   b. Theoretical Exposition of the theme (define the content and time of intervention for each member):
      Introduction – 1 minute
      Presentations – 10-12 minutes each
      Panel Discussion – 20 minutes
      Summary – 1 minute
      Question and answer – 15 minutes
      Total: 87 minutes
   c. Application in other contexts – The principles and strategies that will enhance and protect the relationship of the researcher and the participant in a face-to-face in-depth interview may be applicable in other forms of interviews such as focus groups or interviews done online. Some principles and strategies may be applicable also in other forms of data collection such as observation and document analysis.
   d. Discussion - The group will do a panel discussion.

4. Application of the proposal in reality/practical examples – The principles and strategies that are useful to a researcher in promoting and maintaining positive relationships with his or her participant/s may also be useful in everyday life. While we may not be engaged in data collection, we ensure that in our dealings with our fellow human beings we observe the principles of respect and mutuality.

5. Expected results – Our expected results are twofold: (a) That our practice as researchers will be properly informed, specifically on how best to relate with our participants; (b) That we qualitative researchers may continue to commit to uphold the dignity of the human being as we pursue our quest for truth.

Biographical notes:

Safari Wa-Mbaleka, EdD, PhD, is a passionate qualitative researcher and author. This passion has led him to deliver several trainings and conference presentations in many different countries.

Arceli Rosario, PhD, serves as professor of the Education Department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines. She conducts research in the areas of educational administration, women leadership, and church issues. She commits herself to empowering qualitative researchers and changing lives through research.

Pavel Zubkov, PhD, is an assistant professor of the Applied Theology Department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines. He teaches Applied Theology research classes and serves as a seminary methodologist. Among his recent presentations is a qualitative research project entitled “Faith experience of African students in secular universities in Russia: A narrative inquiry.”
Gracel Ann Saban, PhD, is an associate professor of the Education department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in the Philippines. Her exposure to research and scholarship informs her pedagogical practices. As a teacher trainer, she is zealous to empower adult learners with andragogy, heutagogy, inquiry-based learning and constructivism. Her research interests include language pedagogy, effective teaching, multicultural education, and curriculum and instruction, among others. Her profound zeal in, and growing exposure to, qualitative research has empowered her to delve in researcher-participant “reciprocity” as a means of spiritually, morally, and ethically upholding human dignity.