

Interviewees, "focus groups" and interpreters: the complexity of participants' roles in research into knowledge and the professions in China.

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Abstract

Bruce Macfarlane's paper questions the authenticity of the participation that is usually claimed to have taken place in qualitative research. This paper illustrates an effort to ensure that participants were fully engaged with the research, particularly for the interpretation and analysis of data. It involved a continuous dialogue between myself as a researcher and the forty-three participants over a period of approximately eighteen months, wherein I tried to engage them with one another's opinion and with the problem of answering my research questions. This method was necessary and effective as the participants were the experts for understanding and interpreting professional related phenomena and experiences.

My research aims to explore the process and feelings graduates went through during the acquisition, understanding and application of professional knowledge, namely professional knowledge in law and IT in the Chinese context. Apart from 22 UK university Chinese graduates, data were collected from 21 Chinese university graduates for comparative purposes. Like Yoshida's research on unwed mothers using life history interviews (Yoshida, 2020), my research requires retrospective data; however, my focus was on educational history and experience. An individually tailored design of the life grid interview helped me ensure that education is the main narrative in storytelling (Abbas et al., 2013). As first stage interviews took place from the start of the pandemic, even though in-person interviews were not viable, the life grid allowed me to understand and get to know each interviewee more comprehensively and establish close personal connections. Since this research involves professional knowledge in law and IT, significant proportions of jargon, industry phenomenon and events were mentioned in the life grid. In my second stage of data collection, I used a series of short informal interviews like the ones adopted by Brumann and Ho et al. (Ho, Jackson and Lam, 2018; Ho, Jackson and Kong, 2018; Brumann, 2012). These interviews generated indirect discussions between interviewees by presenting anonymised quotes that contained jargon, phenomenon and events to and from interviewees through a series of short interviews. This paper will further illustrate how more comprehensive arguments were made with interviewees' in-depth participation and how the relationships between interviewees and me changed throughout 18 months of data collection and analysis.

Keywords

Research Methods, Participation, transnational education, Chinese Returnees, Professional Knowledge, Life Grid, Informal Interview.