Discourse, Power, and Resistance Down Under
Volume 2

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Discourse, Power, and Resistance Down Under Volume 2 draws together a spirited collection of papers presented at the Australian Discourse Power and Resistance conference held in Darwin 2012. The volume of work addresses and seeks to contextualise the problematic question “What counts as ‘good’ research and who decides?” Each chapter in this volume, written from differing theoretical and methodological positions articulates a notion of what could be considered as being ‘good’ research and is, in some way involved in speaking a truth back to power. The chapters invite the reader to rethink and reconsider the inherently political, critical and subversive nature of research from a range of critical investigations.

Discourse, Power, and Resistance Down Under
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an
electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Discourse, Power, and Resistance Down Under

Volume 2

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1. RESEARCHING THE RESEARCHED

What Counts as ‘Good’ and Who Decides?

In keeping with the theme of the Australian DPR conference held in Darwin 2012, the purpose of this introductory chapter is to situate and contextualise the problematic question “What counts as ‘good’ research and who decides?” Each chapter in this volume, written from differing theoretical and methodological positions articulates a notion of what could be considered as being ‘good’ research and is, in some way involved in speaking a truth back to power.

There is a notion of what constitutes ‘good research’ that is framed by a privileging of logo-scientific discourse which normalises method as rigour and positions critical methodologies as at best partial and/or not empirical. The chapters in this volume contest and question such taken for granted assumptions and problematise what can be constituted as ‘data’.

Negotiating the ‘Being Here’ space of the field and the ‘Being There’ space of the academy (Geertz, 1988 p. 148) is tricky, resulting in moments of intellectual and methodological uncertainties and yet it is often in these moments of doubt and uncertainty that new horizons of understanding about research is grasped. Grappling with methodological process invariably involves reflecting on the ways in which we give a form to knowledge. How we start to make sense and write a way out of our experiences and make meaning is about being candid in acknowledging ontological ways of being and knowing. Good research is a relational activity, both in the doing of the research and the re-presenting of it. It inevitably draws us into a thinking and feeling relation with self and others, and is, ‘an interpretive, personal, and political act’ (Denzin, & Lincoln, 1994). The authors’ demonstrate reflexive thinking on the ways in which they have behaved with and have represented those whom they have worked beside and as Bolton (2010, p 3) reminds us good acts of research are always reflective and at the core of the chapters that follows is writing that relates:

… to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture. It gives strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. It can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult to communicate. It challenges assumptions, ideological illusions, damaging social and cultural biases, inequalities, and questions personal behaviours which perhaps silence the voices of others or otherwise marginalise them.[It]’questions personal
behaviours” alongside the postulations, ethical illusions, detrimental social and cultural partialities and particularly inequities and assumptions, ideological illusions especially as noted above negative social and cultural prejudices.

What is considered and constructed as good research is routinely reified through and by the academic norms of the representational and the represented that uniformly consist of:

- an abstract,
- an introduction,
- a literature review,
- a justification for the methodology and methods,
- a description of the research setting/context/population,
- the presentation of findings,
- discussion of those findings,
- a conclusion,
- appendices where relevant (copies of questionnaires, interview schedules, transcripts etc), and
- a list of references presented in a specific manner.

These fictitious scripts can often have a silent and silencing function and the authors in this volume have endeavoured to articulate other interpretative locations to interrogate the salience of ideologies, identities and values as a productive presence in the research encounter. Interrogating the ‘uninterrogated norm’ (Lorber, 1996, p. 144), the contributions collaboratively work to centre centres and disrupt hierarchies (Kamberelis, 2004, p.167) and situate the ethical and moral implications of doing research that enunciates a “vulnerable self” (Ellis, 1997) in goodly measure.

There is no uniformity, standardisation and normalised style of presentation in the following chapters and because of their very lack of methodological specificity they hold to the dictum that good intellectual work involves criticality, independence, impact and change. Remaining within safe disciplinary silos is not being attentive to the difficult questions of, ‘How can we go on?’ Research endeavours, if they are to be of any good, will travel beyond the margins of the printed page. The book chapters, the journal articles or research report perpetually inform researchers, identity and bring personal rewards but these are but a shallow and a pale simulacrum if hearts and minds are not equally mobilised. Again we return to the need for affect and large heartedness in the work of the research. The heart is not a certain, predictable, or non-questioning space and the orthodox way of ‘doing’ research must be a balance of process and product of both passion and compassion. The works here are both. There is a balance between the fields of passion and compassion and are situated in the purposefulness of the researchers as varied as they are. These chapters recall the passion of the process and the compassion that is needed as the researcher takes us on her or his quest. This is a hard and risky space as the researcher places his or her
trust in the reader. They have told us of the life worlds of the field and remind us in
the words of Bolton (2012, p 8) that it is:

Only with the courage to stop looking and trust the reflective and reflexive
processes, will we begin to perceive the areas we need to tackle. Discovering
what needs to be reflected upon, and how, can be an exhilarating journey.
Insights gained and inevitable changes seem obvious afterwards.

Disrupting the doxa, (Bourdieu, 1984) of ‘What counts as ‘good’ research is
professionally risky. The matter of how do you ‘stop looking’ and enter in to the
reflexivity of knowing when the researcher is increasingly subject to the regimes
of ERA, RAE/ REF and impact factors, methodological purpose and style needs
to be considered. The individual who thrives in the audit culture of the modernized
university by uncritically working towards cracking the codes of what counts and
now intellectual output tends towards the bland, the narrow and the uncontroversial
and Andrew Sparkes captures this version of academic in his characterization of the
‘Weasel’:

Suddenly, out of an office halfway down came a colleague known by staff and
students alike as the ‘Weasel’. Normally, Jim avoided him whenever possible.
But, with nowhere to hide, he went for minimal interaction.

‘Hi Steve,’ he said before moving on down the corridor at rather too fast a pace.

But he could not get far enough away in the time available. It came as it always
did, a thin voice from behind him.

‘Oh Jim, just to let you know that paper I told you about has been accepted for
publication. It’s got an impact factor of 5.4 so it’s really up there. It will look
great in my RAE return.’

Inside, Jim squirmed at the Weasel’s mantra. In his world, everything was
about impact factors. For him, a high impact factor journal meant it must be
good the irony being that, if the a-theoretical, single research design, evaluation
orientated studies that the Weasel specialized in made it into such journals
then, for Jim, by definition, it was mundane, predictable, tedious and self-
indulgent fodder (Sparkes, 2007, pp. 530-531).

The ‘Weasel’ for Sparkes is the colleague who calculates, estimates and contrives
to succeed by knowing and enthusiastically playing by the rules of the modernized
university. For this individual, what counts has become what matters, and what is
good or right has become inconsequential.

As, we navigate a way between closely held individual values and the
performativity of everyday academic obligations. The realisation that ‘good
research’ invariably is an intellectual activity and a purposeful act that emerges from
our values, passions, preoccupations with compassion. That it is not an innocent
or distant academic exercise but an ‘activity that has something at stake and that
occurs in a set of political and social conditions' (Smith, 2001, p.5). Intellectual work, is relentlessly critical, self-critical, and potentially revolutionary for it aims to critique, change, and even destroy institutions, disciplines and professions that rationalize exploitation, inequality and injustice (reported in Olsen & Worsham, 2003, p. 13). White et al (2012) has critiqued how the nature of being an academic is changing—and elucidates that the definition of academic work and the nature of research has required that we fashion ourselves to fit with expectations and demands of the academy. There is no ‘easy’ definition of scholarly identity when it comes to research, teaching and community engagement as academics and White et al (2012) go on to draw attention to the ‘super complexity’ of academic work and remind us that the work of an academic is ‘inherently conservative.’ These chapters are purposely not conservative and move beyond that the familiar field of reading university labour as a conservative or conserving agency. These chapters ask us to read of the need to move beyond a ‘relatively narrow and policed goals and interests of a given discipline or profession’ and call us to bring ourselves to a place where our intellectual work and the work as represented here move beyond….

As a diverse and hierarchical workforce increasingly undertakes contemporary academic labour, not all perspectives are heard . The professoriate comprises only 20% of tenured academics – of which only 20% are women and most of the able bodies working in universities are white and straight. An estimated 50 to 60% of academic work (teaching and research) is undertaken by a casual and disposable workforce employed on short-term teaching or research contracts with little or no job security. The intensified work environment of the modernized university encourages the conformist, competitive and pragmatic player who performs what is required in order to achieve individual success. The audit culture promotes an uncritical working towards a cracking of the codes that count, namely gold standard, nationally competitive research or handsomely funded contract research. And yet, contending with institutional values and imperatives to perform, most of us working in higher education learn to negotiate the everyday complexities by maintaining a reflexively critical stance in research and knowledge production whilst attempting to fulfill the relatively narrow and policed goals and interests of a given discipline within the increasingly corporatized mission of higher education.

Research discourse is never neutral, it has authority over and shapes identity principles, encounters and feelings and whilst the nature of affect or ‘feelings’ sits, at time uncomfortably in academe these chapters are purposefully ‘affect ridden to wonder, challenge, query and oppose of a lack of voice and presence . The thwarting of situated experience by academic directorialism leads to an unevenness of capacity and Vicars (2008, p.95) reminds us that positionality can be used in social science investigations to contour differently nuanced research practices that take us away from uniformity, standardisation and the guarantees of normalisation. He goes as far to remind us that the researcher and researched boundaries become blurred when ‘perspectival dispositions’ erase and diffuse the boundaries between knower and what can be known. William’s (2003) asserts that, “all propositions about the world are
only meaningful if we can show how they can be verified” (p. 12) and good research far from negating the problematics of proximity, or ignoring the tacit dialectic of intimacy/detachment of psychological, social and emotional ethnoscapes is morally and ethically bound to engage an ethic of un/knowing and un/doing methodological certainty. McKenna and Woods (2012) have written of the need to ethically witness connectivity through arts research using arts works as processes and products. They emphasise the ultimacy of the “intimacy of making shared meaning” where their incitement is for us to ‘do’ research to build community that is firmly and explicitly attached to psychological, social and emotional ‘enthnoscapes.’ Ultimately their call is that the researcher and the researched co-create new ways of respectful engagement which ultimately serve as actions that repair injustice. They are asking for passion and compassion for the outliers who are by definition non-normative, excluded and who actually have a quality of uncertainty at its core—this can be disquieting for the academy especially when any ‘group’ of disenfranchised researched people have their needs addressed.

The inscription of methodological authorship and identities, located and constructed through language are discursively reproduced throughout this volume. Wright (2004) has noted:

…[how] meanings, subjects and subjectivities are formed .... [C]hoices in language point to those discourses being drawn upon by writers and listeners, and to the ways in which they position themselves and others. Questions can be therefore asked about how language works to position speakers (and listeners) in relation to particular discourses and with what effects. (p. 20)

The epistemic landscape around qualitative inquiry has been radically altered by the emergence of a post foundational research vocabulary which while deconstructing methodological rigidities has critically questioned the notion that good research can be considered from some external and objective reference point. In educational domains and academic communities Intellectual interest in post-foundational research methodologies has demonstrated the increasing value in considering the symbolic, situated world, as seen and told by participants in research projects. Transforming existing social and material relations of research production by utilizing individuals’ meaningful representations of themselves not only interject transgressive subject matter into contemporary social discourse, they also disrupt forms of dominant ways of knowing. There is much “baggage” around the researching the field of marginalization and transgression—research that disrupt inequity. These chapters are largely constructed and set out using principles that are deliberately uncertain and by definition transitional. The goal of the chapters is to inform the disposition of us all – as these meaningful representations are a means to inform us as global citizens and to alter our perceptions and interactions as a force for good.

Methodologically, the chapters in this volume announce very much like the child in the Emperors new Clothes, what we know is an unspoken academic reality: that good research is invariably messy. It is only when we can look at the nature of enquiry
and the manner in which it furthers participatory development, democracy and communication for societal change that what could be considered as risky chapters within inter-academic perceptions and relations at the academy level can be re-evaluated for asking about the quality of the inhabitants’ lifeworlds as a consequence of this research. As Sikes et al (2003) have noted questions about the relationships between life as lived and life as presented in research are, fundamentally, questions about the relationships between subjectivities, epistemologies and methodologies, between what knowledge is considered to be and the means by which that knowledge is obtained, recognized and considered. How to reconstruct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority becomes the defining feature of everyday life cannot be articulated in isolation. Feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial and queer theories have all played a role in expanding and transforming how critical knowledge is reproduced. Shifting, in late modernity, a predominant focus on class to include categories such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and age points new directions out of the academy that are potentially productive sites of resistance and possibilities for change.

REFERENCES

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This chapter raises some key issues relating to doctoral completions in Australia and the complex process of thesis examination. More specifically it reports on a set of data that was collected from over 40 thesis examinations from 2009 through to 2012 where examiners reports were deconstructed using a particular lens. Of significance, the data was analyzed through one guiding question: Is the thesis design and report in alignment with the process of examination—epistemologically, methodologically and theoretically? Thinking simplistically, one may interpret what is reported here as a matter of picking the right examiners for successful completion. While this sentiment is common across the academy, the essence of this paper is far more complex, and while it captures some key issues about the final process of the doctoral journey—examination, it does in fact highlight the necessity of rigour on the part of supervisors and students at the levels of thesis design, thesis implementation and thesis submission. Firstly, the context of the research will be reported. Then the question of alignment will be discussed. The third part of the paper will highlight a series of misconceptions from the perspectives of examiners that have been elicited from the data collection over time, indicating that a misalignment of thesis design, submission and examination can lead to problematic outcomes.

The domain of thesis supervision is a hot topic in 2013 and has been for many years (Parry, Atkinson & Delamont, 1997). The foci of critique range across so many themes, it is difficult to summarize the landscape. Most popular has been the topic of becoming a good supervisor (Boud & Lee, 2009), or working on supervision through teams (Manathunga, 2009). Another huge database can be found focusing on strategies for managing supervision (Evans, Lawson, McWilliam & Taylor, 2005), the stages of supervision (Grant, 2001), and whether supervision is about teaching and learning or research or both (Connell, 1985; Connell & Manathunga, 2012). The field of thesis supervision has witnessed papers on cross-cultural supervision (O’Donoghue & Aspland, 1994), off shore supervision (Chapman & Pyvis, 2012) and the complex relationships that are integral to supervisory interactions (Grant 2005). Most recently a team of scholars in Australia (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovatt & Fairbairn, 2008) completed a study around thesis examination and produced an instructive set of comments that portrayed the inconsistencies inherent in the process of thesis examination.
The thinking in this paper has been developed throughout a five period and is
designed not to challenge these bodies of research. Rather this paper is designed
to propose a very simple conceptual framework that in many ways encompasses
what we know about quality supervision but brings to the discourse a concept
of alignment, not dissimilar to that of Biggs’ earlier curriculum work in higher
education (2003). The argument in this case, advocates strongly for a constructive
alignment across the design, delivery and assessment of doctoral studies in higher
education. The small study is embedded in the context of qualitative research,
primarily in education and the social sciences. The debate around the purposes
of qualitative research in comparison to the purposes of quantitative research
will not be dealt with here. Debates such as these can be accessed elsewhere (e.g.
Creswell, 2005) and are prolific, but not always helpful for doctoral students or
their supervisors. Nonetheless, the argument put forward in this paper could easily
be transferred to alternative paradigms of research. In this sense it is not paradigm
specific. However the key issues that are raised here relate to qualitative research in
all its guises and whether the examiners of qualitative research are well positioned
to fulfill their important role of assessing the thesis at a number of levels. In this
context, qualitative research is conceived of as research that aims to examine people
and processes in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret,
phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln,
1998, p. 3). It is a simple and yet insightful definition that encapsulates a variety
of epistemological and methodological orientations that characterise qualitative
research in education and the social sciences. The data reported in this paper is
based on the deconstruction of a series of thesis reports that have all commented
on dissertations embedded in the qualitative paradigm of educational or social
research.

Prior to entering into the research project reported here the author was very clear
on her ideological positioning about good qualitative research and it was this lens
that led to the interesting interpretation of the database. As an experienced doctoral
supervisor the author’s thinking has been strongly influenced by Crotty (1998) who
argued for the significance of making explicit ones epistemological thinking at the
outset of research design. Crotty (1998) purports that epistemology is a way of viewing
the world in which one lives (Crotty, 1998). It incorporates one’s belief systems about
the world (Creswell, 2005). The author embeds her thinking in an interpretative
(Erickson, 1986) and constructionist (Harel & Papert, 1991; Crotty, 1988) paradigm
pursuing research to construct meaning from participants’ interpretations of the
world—it is their perspective that is important in research. Constructionism (Papert
& Harel, 1991) dictates that meaning is made from the researchers reality of the
interpretation of participants’ perspectives, from the interaction with others (Crotty,
1998; O’Donoghue, 2008). The social constructivist believes that all knowledge is
a meaningful reality and is constructed through the individual’s perspective of that
reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The theoretical underpinnings of the research the
author engages in most commonly is framed by Interpretivism (Erickson, 1986;
Punch, 2004). As such the author is concerned with understanding the meanings that people give to objects, social settings, events and the behaviours of others, and how these understandings in turn define the settings. The main assumption in adopting interpretive, inductive qualitative research methodology is that *many realities exist, not just the one* (Travis, 1999). The purpose of the qualitative researcher is to focus on the individual’s subjective experience, state or consciousness (Witz, Goodwin, Hart & Thomas, 2001), searching for meanings, which people *attribute to social situations and upon social processes* (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 30). The implication of adopting qualitative research methodology is that *we must look at the individuals in society, to understand their values and actions, in order that we may understand the structures and workings of social systems* (Walliman, 2005, p. 206). Research of this type assumes that a constant construction of reality by humans results in a view of a society as fluid, tenuous, shifting, and largely unpredictable (Carothers & Benson, 2003). In short, the author has twenty years of experience assisting doctoral students design significant studies in education and the social sciences within the constructs of qualitative research, shaped by constructionism epistemologically, and theoretically driven by interpretivism with a view to *understand(ing) and explain(ing) society from inside, and taking account of the insider’s view* (Blair, 2002). Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through meanings that people assign to them (Myers, 1997).

The final part of this paper is the author’s commitment to a methodological positioning in educational research. This author is not simply ethically and morally capable of embarking on research that measures human phenomena, nor is she interested in quantifying the impact of interventions on human beings. This is because her epistemological frame of *being and knowing* is at odds with such directions and finds such methodological thinking of this type, not wrong, but at odds with her worldview. Clearly her phenomenological or ethnographic methodological frame of reference is aligned to research work that generates insight into, not generalizations about, human behaviour. Further the theoretical perspectives to which she espouses relate to assumptions about the world that are embedded within the methodology. The argument that is progressed in this paper is straightforward: each methodology is underpinned by a unique view of the world, which shapes the research (Crotty, 1998, p. 60) and as such, must be aligned to the theoretical and epistemological thinking of the researcher at the levels of design, implementation and submission. The point being that, as Crotty (1998) so clearly articulates, that when designing a research project for a thesis, there must be an overt ideological commitment to a congruence amongst epistemological thinking, theoretical framing and methodological positioning as the doctoral student engages in the conceptualization of a doctoral study. Alignment of this type ensures conceptual clarity, rigour and clearly shapes decision-making about the purpose of the research, the shaping of research questions, the inclusion of participants, methods of data collection and data analysis and the findings of the study. It also has implications for thesis examination.
MISCONCEPTIONS

It was with this sense of alignment in mind that the study reported here was instigated. A key question was posed: *Is the design, implementation and submission of the dissertation always in alignment with the process of examination—epistemologically, methodologically and theoretically?* The question was generated due to a concern over the years that the selection of examiners, guided by university policy, was based on a set of criteria that did not include an alignment between the positioning of the examiner and conceptualization of the doctoral research. It can be argued that such a process results in faulty or less than rigorous examinations of doctoral theses due to a misalignment between the examiners’ ideologies and the constructs of the study. Following a process of document analysis of about 40 examination reports of qualitative studies, and a series of semi structured interviews with a group of six experienced thesis examiners, it is evident that many examiners enter into the process of thesis examination based on a series of misconceptions about the type of research that is put before them. This is particularly the case in qualitative research. The misconceptions that were evident in this study are listed forthwith and are expressed as a set of theoretical propositions based on the analysis of the data.

**Misconception 1**

Epistemology is not significant and the expression of one’s subjective positioning in the research of the thesis is self-indulgent.

It became evident in the process of data analysis that a number of examiners perceived the place of epistemology and the locating of the researcher in a particular research space at the outset of the study as self-indulgent and seemingly unnecessary. While good qualitative researchers would argue that the unfolding of the worldview, beliefs and values of the researcher is the platform of the study and the link henceforth to the rationale of the methodological and theoretical framing of the study, over half of the reports examined made negative comments about this lengthy, albeit unnecessary introduction and positioning of the researcher. This was particularly the case when the examiners worldview was clearly misaligned with that of the candidate. He commented that such a long and subjective narrative was egocentric and distracted from the study; another quipped this study seems all about you not the participants; you need to be more objective! One rationalist thinker wrote: you wasted too much space talking about yourself and your opinions about research in the methodology chapter...research at this (doctoral) level needs to be more rigorous.

These three samples are indicative of a disjuncture that was evident in the data and reveal the positioning of examiners in a discourse that is not congruent with that of the candidate and the orientation of the research. Many of the comments were demeaning and dismissive of the underpinning philosophical constructs of the study. Further, the comments scorned the necessity of the subjective positioning of the researcher as a central construct of qualitative research and generated a misconception that rigour and subjectivity were incompatible. There were a stream of comments across
the 40 reports that covertly implied that the epistemology of the examiner and that of the candidate were out of alignment. One examiner even boldly stated that your thinking about research is clearly not aligned with my own. As supervisors we must acknowledge that this type of thinking has serious implications for the candidate, and yet so often this realisation about the examiner does not become evident until after the fact. The same examiner stated that the findings of the study are not clear and I am not confident that the results are generalizable, when in fact that was never the purpose of the study. Of similar concern was a stream of comments that suggested to the candidates that the research findings were biased and lacking in objectivity. One examiner who reported on a dissertation that was embedded in critical action research asked a doctoral student to rewrite some of the final chapter with a view to removing her strong presence from the text. The comments suggested that the dominant presence of the researcher and her friends in the research community is filled with bias and subjective reasoning. The text is far too emotional, personal and sexualised. This may be an affront to audiences and reads more like a personal diary than a piece of empirical research. Clearly this examiner had little understanding of the place of critical theory in social research and was disrespectful of personal narrative as a way of eliciting the deep seated values and experiences of research participants in sensitive areas of study relating to identity formation from alternative perspectives and world views. The appointment of this examiner whose worldview is clearly at odds with this type of research had disastrous consequences for the candidate and one would have to question the rationale of selecting such a person for this task. This point of disjuncture however was not uncommon in the data although this was the most extreme; highlighting the very point of this paper that: supervisors have a very important role in ensuring congruence between the epistemological and methodological constructs of the thesis and the worldview of the examiners.

**Misconception 2**

**The sample size is too small and is not representative of the population.**

All of us at one stage or another have asked the question: How many participants are required to authenticate the study? This is a contested area of debate and the literature reflects an array of opinions ranging from an argument that purports that a case of one is sufficient, to a view that the number of 30 participants has magical potential. Asking how many is actually the wrong question. The question should be posed around the purpose of the research and the alignment between purpose and design. Punch (2004) explains that deciding on the size of the research population or number of participants is part of the integral plan of study; it needs to fit into the logic of the study. Qualitative researchers typically focus on depth of findings rather than breadth and work with small samples of people. The research design should address the selection of participants, including what intentions there are for the findings, the extent of the proposed participants and how they will be chosen. The choice of participants is always purposive but can also evolve once fieldwork begins (Miles
& Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). As was argued some years ago, studying small communities of participants can be very illuminating as the study can yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations (Patton, 2002). In the earlier works of Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative researchers were encouraged to define boundaries within which participants can be selected or invited to participate in the study creating a frame to help uncover, confirm, or qualify the basic processes or constructs that undergird the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). It must be emphasized at the level of design that the purpose of the study is paramount to decision making, which commonly in qualitative studies is not to select a representative sample that enables generalisation; instead it lies in selecting differentiated cases for in-depth study. So if one selects an examiner who is searching for generalisability, reliability and validity as criteria to evaluate a qualitative study, one is likely to generate a problematic set of critical comments about this aspect of the study. It is of utmost importance when setting up the study that the candidate is required to provide a rigorous and sound rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of participants and that this argument is clearly aligned to the purposes of the study. A rather lengthy example from a recent thesis, that was applauded by an examiner, is included forthwith to exemplify one such approach:

The idea of qualitative research is to purposefully select informants or documents that would best answer the central research question. The researcher’s initial plan was to study only the Humanities teachers who faced the greatest changes in its curriculum implementation under the Integrated Programme. Not only had its curriculum been totally revamped, but its mode of assessment had also changed. The Humanities Department is also the only department that had abolished the examination as a mode of assessment and replaced it with the Major Research Paper whereby students are required to write a paper that mirrors that of a mini-thesis. The researcher however, considered the issue of whether the subject discipline might affect the level of receptivity and perception towards school reform and felt the need to look across other disciplines. Hence, other departments like the English Language Department as well as the Mathematics and Science Departments were also considered as the curriculum in these subjects have also undergone changes… With these changes, the researcher felt that it would be interesting to examine the teachers’ perspectives on these changes. … The next domain that was excluded from this research is InfoComm Studies and the Aesthetics… The above explains why the research chose to focus its study on the Humanities, English Language, Mathematics and Science teachers. Hence, these teacher participants represented a purposive sample, i.e. sampling with some purpose or focus in mind. (Punch, 2004, p.193). This is a technique that would help to yield the most appropriate data for the investigation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and their selection was guided by a desire to “provide the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation”
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(Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.181). The intention was to cast as widely as possible for a variety of perspectives and situations in an attempt to obtain the full population…

Clearly, it is important to provide this rigorous rationale for the inclusion of participants particularly when making a commitment to qualitative studies, for example, case study research. The examiner will be looking for a clear definition of what constitutes a case. If left unclear the examiner may assume that the study is a case of one and questions the viability of this research, when in fact the study may be reporting on multiple case studies and cross case analysis portraying the study as a case of something. A lack of clarity that fails to portray cases as units of analysis or as a bounded collection of cases and that fails to address the purpose of research, and thus the reasoning for including case studies, can often lead to misunderstanding at the level of examination. As one examiner incorrectly commented, the data does not seem to have been collected with any sense of purpose. It would have been more rigorous to stratify the sample so the study had a more representative sample that assumes a sense of validity and reliability rather than the ad hoc approach taken in this study. It seems as though the student was desperate and took on anybody who put their hand up to become involved. The question is could the same results have been reproduced if a whole lot of others put their hands up…probably not and as such I question the rigour of this study. Clearly the purpose of the cases involved in data collection was either not made explicit or the examiner was at odds with the nature of case study work. According to Gall, Gall, & Borg (2007), case studies serve one of three purposes of qualitative research. The three purposes are either to produce detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, to develop possible explanations of the phenomenon or to evaluate the phenomenon – all of which characterise the purposes of qualitative research. Thus it can be concluded that unless the purpose is made explicit, and argued rigorously with the support of literature, it may leave the examiner to cast doubt about the resolve and authenticity of the research. One example of this is evident in the following quote: while the various stories were very interesting, they tended to leave me bored and deeply immersed in unnecessary detail…what was the point really of such detail – a summary or list of dot points would have been more useful. As stated earlier, it is essential, at the level of design, to state the purpose of the study which commonly in qualitative studies is not to select a representative sample that enables generalisation; instead it lies in selecting differentiated cases for in-depth study. Without such explication, misconceptions are likely to occur.

Misconception 3

The findings are not generalisable.

The most common comment that was elicited from the deconstruction of the examiners reports relates to the concern that the findings of the study were not
generalisable across contexts. This basic misconception is not surprising due to the dominant hegemonic thinking of the early positivists and their enduring influence of educational research. The comment below is representative of the essence of this criticism:

I am really disappointed that the candidate did not complete a larger comparative study so that these significant findings about gifted mathematics students and the way they address new problems could not be generalised across schools providing teachers with a deeper understanding of the field. While the perspectives of these teachers from (country X) is insightful, the results are context bound and may not be instructive for other teachers in the West … the distribution of a questionnaire rather than the use of interviews could have addressed this weakness. Further it would have made a stronger thesis…

While it was the purpose of this study not to generalise the findings beyond the professional context of the study, clearly the perspectives of the examiner were at odds with the research design in this case. This was also a concern with the reports that examined studies that adopted grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) as a methodological framework for their doctoral studies. While the purpose of these studies seemed to be very clearly articulated in the methodological chapter and there was an overt alignment across design and delivery of the study, some examiners failed to recognise that the purpose of grounded theory studies as opposed to the less process-oriented positivist research methodology.

In a similar example to the one above an examiner claimed:

I was so disappointed when I read the final chapter. I was really stimulated throughout the thesis to read of the findings that were expressed as theoretical propositions based on a cross case analysis. I wanted to see how this all came together in a set of significant generalizations for the field. Surely this is what doctoral research is all about. Unfortunately the student didn’t step outside the bounded cases and list the implications for fellow higher education academics across the world. So I question now whether the study is valid and I would recommend that the student rewrite the last chapter to bring it to a stronger conclusion for a more global application.

In more recent years, researchers (Morse et al. 2009; O'Donoghue 2007) involved in educational research have been encouraged to take up grounded theory to better understand and make meaning of human activity. This qualitative approach to educational research, according to Habermas (1987), has the effect of unmasking the social sciences emphasizing the socially constructed nature of reality in its multiple forms, searching for the answers of the social experience, interpreting it and giving meaning to it. The need to generalize is not integral to this thinking; rather it is the desire to be generative of deeper insight that is at the heart of its purpose. The aim of this type of qualitative research is discovery and insight not generalizability. If it is the purpose of the research
to convey the deep and complex processes of meaning making that is generative of deep insights about a particular phenomenon that may or may not be transferable to similar contexts, then it is the duty of the candidate to make this explicit as the outset of the study. In this way the reading of the text is guided by the rules of engagement and misconceptions by readers and examiners can be reduced or eliminated.

Misconception 4

The analysis of data is not rigorous.

Commonly exponents of quantitative research adopt empirical measures to investigate a phenomenon or an hypothesis, involving large samples of data; the process of collection and analysis requiring verification, validation and recording before the analysis can take place (Creswell, 2005). It is not unusual to read the analysis from the perspectives of causal relationships based on manipulation or controlling of the data with a view to experimental outcomes, clearly defined by a specific purpose. Quantitatively based analysis such as this is popular with the media and dominates the public discourse including people’s expectations as to the value of research. Research of this type is well respected if it measures human behaviour and conveys certain trends, correlations or causations about human behaviour. This paper is not designed to challenge such thinking. However, like all alternative paradigmatic shifts, new ways of thinking about, analysing and reporting on human behaviour should not be dismissed because it does not fall into a normative reductionist framework, and as such is not generalizable across broad communities. It is argued here that such an alternative brings a richness of understanding to studies of human behaviour that is often silent in the preceding forms of research. Nevertheless, the point must be made that qualitative research if it is to be recognised as a viable alternative must engage in rigorous processes of data analysis in order to be authentic. If qualitative researchers are to engage in investigatory work that is an interactive rather than a controlling process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 67), emphasizing the socially constructed nature of reality in its multiple forms, searching for the answers of the social experience, interpreting it and giving meaning to it, then it too, must analyze data in a manner that is aligned to its purpose but at the same time, rigorous in its own way. Many of the examiners comments reported in this study incorrectly highlight a seeming lack of rigour at the level of analysis either because (i) the method of analysis was unclear or more commonly, (ii) the rigour that was brought to analysis was dissimilar to that of the empiricists and not clearly understood by the examiner as such. For example, one examiner stated: I spent the whole of chapter 5 waiting for some correlations of the findings to the questions; or even better, expecting a metric that highlighted the most popular, moderately popular or least popular parental perspectives on homeschooling but I was disappointed. I was just left wondering what was the most popular reason for parents to homeschool their kids. This is a real weakness in the thesis. Without such analysis and such reporting, how can this study provide the public and policy makers with a rationale for homeschooling?
It is clear in the literature that this is not the purpose of qualitative data analysis. In the case of grounded theory for example, data analysis necessarily confronts the credibility given to generalizations drawn from data through the conventional method as it enables ambiguities between the general and the specific to be addressed and acknowledged (Dey, 1999). Research of a qualitative nature requires more inductive approaches to data collection and analysis where more local, temporal and situational narratives are preferred (Flick 2002). However such approaches do not lack a systematic approach of enquiry. Charmaz (2002), describe systematic research investigation through four key guidelines designed (a) to study social and social psychological processes; (b) to direct data collection, (c) to manage data analysis, and (d) to develop and abstract theoretical frameworks that explain the studied process (Charmaz, 2002, p. 675). This thinking evolved from the early work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), who portrayed qualitative research as that of theory generation research; research that concludes with a theory as a result of systematic analysis rather than commencing with one. Systematic data analysis of this sort results in grounding theory in the data as a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 15).

Is it objective? Is it reliable? Is it valid? The evidence suggests that these are questions commonly asked by examiners but it must be argued that these are the wrong questions and belong to a paradigm of thinking that sits outside of or is misaligned to the purpose of theory building that is central to qualitative research. In the case of grounded theory, it is the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101) which ensures the gradual development and refinement of theory grounded in the data. Through the simultaneous processes of data gathering, data analysis, and theory evolution rigour becomes evident, authenticity is guaranteed and it legitimizes these research methods as scientific inquiry (Charmaz 2004). According to O’Donoghue (2007) this kind of theorizing is described as “emergent analysis” that is creative and intuitive as opposed to being mechanical. The goal is to make sure the theory fits the data and not vice versa (O’Donoghue 2007, p. 58). There were many examples in the data that indicate that examiners commonly do not uphold this thinking. In qualitative research, it is commonly accepted that research findings are necessarily subjective by design and this in not a fault within the thesis as some examiners suggest. Nor is qualitative work designed to be objective. Further, it is evident that qualitative research pursues rigour and authenticity by way of systematic and well-theorized design. The evidence shows that examiner judgments continue to be suspicious of qualitative research and its lack of commitment to the imposed criteria of reliability, credibility and validity. This seems to remain unquestioned, as the data in this study can attest. What is important for the argument put in this paper is to ensure that the examiner as reader evaluates the design, the implementation and the results through the theory that is generated and elaborated; and that discursive judgments are made about the empirical grounding of the research findings.
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(Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 252), which, if well-articulated, will gain affirmation for the doctoral student as making a significant contribution to the field of study and scholarship. This is the substance of the final misconception that has been elicited from the data that is central to this study.

Misconception 5

**This study does not make a contribution to theory.**

The array of comments that capture the misalignment of the examiners’ methodological thinking to the world view of the doctoral student who engages in qualitative study include the following:

I have come to the point of asking so what? And I find very little to quench my desire to answer this question;

One of the key purposes of doctoral research is to make a significant contribution to knowledge-this is not evident in this study because it is parochial and not global in its findings;

This work is insightful and I have really learned a great deal about these types of people (refugees) but what about the messages for countries like ours that have the same problems. The final chapter could be enhanced if a set of theoretical findings could be stated as generalisation for all to see. This would then make a significant contribution to social science.

Comments such as these fail to see the significance of qualitative theory building which is designed to illuminate through investigation the uniqueness of each human situation and set of interactions to see if they fit, how they might fit, and how they might not fit. They demand an openness of the researcher, based on the ‘forever’ provisional character of every situation. Grounded theories are not just another set of phrases; rather, they are systematic statements of plausible relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 279). The data listed above in this section is dislocated from the central premise of qualitative research. The comments included here reflect the misconceptions of many examiners as to the purpose of qualitative research and the expected outcomes. Punch (2005) some time back, stated that qualitative research and the systematic processes of data collection and emergent theory building ensures that researchers make an authentic contribution to the building of a substantive theory or the revision of an existing one. It is clear that qualitative research can and does make a significant contribution to theory building through a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). More recently Charmaz (2006) confirms that qualitative research makes a significant contribution to knowledge through systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analysing data to build middle range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 509). Clearly the task for the qualitative researcher is to discover
and conceptualize the essence of specific interactional process (Hutchinson, 1988, p. 51) generating deep insights that portray, understand and transform human interaction in socio-cultural locations and build the resulting theory or frameworks to provide a way of understanding the social situations from which the theory was generated. Not to do so enables a space for examiners to become disconnected to the purpose of qualitative research and its place in building theory and making a significant contribution to knowledge and scholarship. A number of examples of such a disconnect have been presented in this paper.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an evidence-based argument that when designing a research project for a thesis, there must be an overt ideological commitment to congruence amongst epistemological thinking, theoretical framing and methodological positioning at the point when the doctoral student engages in the conceptualization of a doctoral study. Alignment of this type ensures conceptual clarity and clearly shapes decision-making about the purpose of the research, the shaping of research questions, the inclusion of participants, methods of data collection and data analysis and the findings of the study. As has been shown here, it also has implications for thesis examination. Without such alignment, particularly in the field of qualitative research, misconceptions are likely to occur; the purpose of the research may be misunderstood and the outcomes for the student may be less than favourable.

REFERENCES

MISCONCEPTIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN


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3. MATERNAL DEATH IN WEST TIMOR

Phenomenally Challenging

We describe our research on mapping maternal mortality situated in West Timor, where we combined geographic and anthropological techniques to describe families’ lived experiences. We conducted a pilot study in 2011 and report here on the research design, research methods and some of the challenges faced during the study. ‘What counts and who decides’, the theme of this book, are highly relevant to maternal mortality in a developing context. On the issue of ‘what counts’, maternal mortality is not counted in many countries despite women (and infants) dying each year. On the issue of ‘who decides’, we discuss who decides on birth choices, who decides how the story of a maternal death is told and the challenge of convincing a human research ethics committee of the beneficence and the absence maleficence of our study. We will describe how we collected the data cross-culturally, and the ethical concerns that we encountered in collecting phenomenological data.

WHAT COUNTS? MATERNAL MORTALITY

The death of women during pregnancy and childbirth remains a tenacious health problem in many parts of the world. Each year 500,000 women die from the biological causes of excessive bleeding, infection, high blood pressure, unsafe abortion and obstructed labour (Hill et al., 2007, Hogan et al., 2010). In nearly all cases we currently have the treatments and cures to prevent death, which are: blood transfusions, medications, caesarean sections and offering contraception and legal abortions. There is a strong association between having access to a skilled birth attendant, either midwife or doctor, and survival (Gabrysch & Campbell, 2009). Moreover those women who die are likely to be the youngest, the poorest and the most vulnerable in any society (Human Rights Council, 2010).

Most articles on the subject are written from biomedical perspectives and more recently regarding human rights. The human rights discourse suggests that women have a right to survive during reproduction, and furthermore have rights to access health care services that are of high quality; as well as understand their health and have some control over their fertility (Briozzo & Faundes, 2008, Cook et al., 2003). This is highly contested globally and the slow progress to rectify the problem is often framed as a lack of political will to fund health services.
Indonesia has made improvements to maternal health over the decades and now has a maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 220/100,000 (Republic of Indonesia 2010, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, & The World Bank 2012). However Indonesia is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands with over 230 million people with great diversity in socio-economic conditions, access to health services and ability of people to enact their rights to health. The eastern Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is one of Australia’s closest neighbours and comprises the islands of Sumba, Flores and West Timor. West Timor is on the fringes of Indonesia and is one of the poorest and driest Indonesian provinces, where people subsist on agriculture and fish. West Timor was colonised by the Dutch in the 17th Century and most people are Protestant Christians in contrast to the majority Muslim faith of Indonesia. The study district is characterised by mountainous terrain, tropical rivers, and distinctive wet and dry seasons (Monk et al., 1997).

In Indonesia in 2009, 77% of births were assisted by a skilled birth attendant, and 82% of women received the recommended minimum of four antenatal visits (Republic of Indonesia, 2010). However, in West Timor only 42% of births were assisted by a skilled birth attendant, and amongst the poor of NTT a skilled birth attendant was only present for just 25% of births (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010). Further, in West Timor only 63% women received at least four antenatal care visits (Dinas Kesehatan, 2009). The challenges of delivering adequate maternal health care are well known and include: limited access to quality facilities, limited availability of health staff, lack of awareness and cultural constraints regarding safe motherhood, low nutritional and health status of women, unmet need for contraception, and a frail system for recording maternal deaths (Ansariadi, 2013, Ansariadi, 2008, Titaley et al., 2010, Titaley et al., 2009).

The objectives of this study were to explore how 11 maternal deaths occurred in one particular sub-district between nine months and three years before data collection in June 2011. We explored the health-seeking behaviour of the families and identified the perceptions of husbands and other family members on the causes of birth complications, as well as the level of access to health facilities during pregnancy and birth. We wanted to identify the reasons for choosing the birth place and selecting a birth attendant, as well as decisions about birth preparations. We aimed to describe any limitations or barriers to accessing emergency maternal care.

One useful conceptual model is Thaddeus and Maine’s ‘3 Delays’ (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994): Delay (1) in seeking health care; Delay (2) in reaching a health facility and Delay (3) receiving appropriate treatment after arrival at a health facility. This model is widely used in maternal death research. We were aware that geography was one factor that affected access to health services for the people of rural villages, so we also created and analysed maps to visualise access to maternal health services. Phenomenological data were collected to provide the context for further investigations of the suite of delays or barriers to accessing appropriate health care.
RESEARCH DESIGN

This was a mixed methods study. Quantitative methods counted the numbers of women who had died, and estimated distances and travel times. These were mapped using geo-information systems which we have previously described (Fisher & Myers, 2011). Qualitative methods observed the terrain, housing and living conditions. We photographed roads, rivers and landslides, as well as talked with village leaders and families within the village. Creswell’s model of concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Creswell, 2009) was applied in the research design. Creswell (2009:13) states that: “Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants. Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994)”.

Creswell (2009) also uses the term ‘transformative’ meaning to advance an advocacy perspective.1 Our agenda is to reduce maternal deaths not merely describe them. In order to achieve this we needed to understand the deaths in social context, as well as geographical location in relation to potentially life-saving health services. In the study subdistrict, eleven women were recorded as dying during 2009-2011 and we were able to speak with eight of the families affected.2 The women died at home or between home and hospital. We talked with the family members who had assisted the women: their husbands, mothers, brothers and sisters.

Who Decides? Gaining Ethics Approval

The researchers obtained approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the Australian University before commencing research. This involved a process of applying for approval and then responding to two rounds of queries, with approval granted nine months after the initial application.

The HREC was cautious about the impacts of the collection of these data on the respondents and researchers who participated in this research, and the health staff who could potentially be implicated in the stories told. Our Indonesian co-researcher identified a local Pastor who could offer comfort to parties to the research who were distressed, and HREC required reassurances that the local Pastor would offer comfort to both respondents and researchers (those collecting and transcribing data). Our research design took into account some traditional practices: for example, the locally recognised period of mourning of forty days after a death. The HREC required detailed explanations of traditional practices as they applied to our proposed research.
Traditional Consent

Consent in the form of a piece of paper is not usual in this area. The notion of putting a written form in front of a family who were semi-literate in any language seemed implausible. Traditional consent, according to our local research associates, would be more appropriate. This consisted of prior warning of our visit and explanation of our intentions to the family, and the exchange of betel nut (*sirih pinang*) on our entrance to the house. We offered a woven box of betel nuts and lime to all members of the family. Acceptance of the betel nut was an indication that consent for the interview had been given. No-one declined to be interviewed.

The HREC also required a description of the role of village leaders and health practitioners in the conduct of the research, and reassurances that respondents would not develop false expectations of direct or immediate benefits from the research. We were able to address the requirements of the HREC because of input from our Indonesian co-researcher, in consultation with the local Pastor and other contacts. We also have a decade of experience in working on environmental projects in eastern Indonesia.

Who Decides? Entry into the Field

The Indonesian consulate provided permission after an invitation letter from Nusa Cendana University was provided. Neither the Indonesian university nor the Indonesian consulate had any problem with Australian researchers examining maternal deaths. Five village leaders in this remote district were also agreeable to our presence and welcomed us with sweet teas and coffees. Our Indonesian co-researcher had negotiated collaboration with a female Pastor who was willing to take us into her parish to speak to the families. Without Pastor D we would not have been so welcome. Pastor D was not a typical key informant. She knew very little of the deaths that were occurring in her parish, although she was concerned. She contacted each family personally to introduce the study and she also agreed to be ‘trained’ as a data collector. She spoke the local language and was a respected leader in the community. These are her words (translated from the local language) of introduction to one family.

Village P, Interview 6, Pastor: Thank you very much for waiting for us since morning until 12 o’clock, it meant that you could not do your work because you have been waiting for us to come here. I am sure that you knew our purpose coming here from the head man of the church here. We want to know why your daughter died when she gave birth. We do not have any purpose to know about that. These ladies just want to know your problem and maybe in the future they can help us, so that no woman will die again when she gives birth. *Bapa* and *Mama* know why [woman’s name] died when she gave birth. You were with her at home at the time so you can tell us about it.
We designed a semi-structured interview schedule and discussed this during training of the research associates, checking if it was culturally relevant and appropriate. We were very flexible with how the questions were asked, in what order and encouraged our research associates to simply let the families narrate the event as they perceived it, prompting for further deeper information as needed.

*Who Decides? Group Narratives*

Our research associates, after training in consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the aims and objectives of the study, were ready to begin. At each house similar events unfolded. We were invited into tiny houses, often with no electricity or sanitation, to be welcomed by many members of the family. We sat on plastic chairs or wooden benches and began to raise the questions that would recall sad memories, inviting the telling of the story of the day their relative died.

Often men would begin narrating the events. The husband, sometimes with the surviving toddler near him, would begin to tell his wife’s story.

Village F, Interview 5, Husband: When my wife died, there was a doctor and a nurse here. The nurse called three times to the health clinic in [placename] to send an ambulance car to pick up my wife but the car was broken. Actually at the same time, there was a woman who gave birth in [placename] so the car was picking up the woman to bring her to the clinic but after arriving at the clinic, the car broke down. We were waited for the car for two days. My wife lost too much blood.

She [the dead woman] routinely went to the health post. We have five children. She always went to the health post since our first child... My wife never had problem with her pregnancy before but on the last pregnancy, she said she did not have the same power to give birth as before. So, I told to her to give birth at the clinic because we would not be able to get help here. My wife agreed to go to clinic so we had already prepared everything such as *bose* (traditional food from Timor island), *periuk* (traditional cooking pot), and *kain* (blanket) to put into a bag. After she died, we kept those things. Our problem here is the road; it is too far to reach the clinic.

At the time all the family and I were here to take care of my wife. My mother helped my wife to give birth, I just hugged my wife. She was bleeding too much like water fills a bucket.

This story disrupts the notion of an uninformed woman who neglects to attend any health care facility. This woman in a pre-sentient way knew she was not going to be strong enough during the birth and desired to go to a health facility. However, a train of mistakes and circumstances led to her death by postpartum haemorrhage, the most common cause of maternal death today.
Each family member told their version of what happened on the day. Mothers-in-law and sisters commonly spoke of the hands-on assistance they provided as informal birth attendants. Other female relatives spoke of preparing food and caring for children as the births occurred. Brothers and fathers spoke of vain attempts to call midwives, or arrange life-saving transportation which generally failed. Family members listened closely to each other.

The narratives were largely consistent, corrected and amended by all family members as a consensus narrative emerged. Interviewers prompted and probed for further details.

Interview 8, Village N, Mother of deceased: After she gave birth, the placenta was taken, I mean she died with the placenta. I cut the placenta. I gave the baby to grandma and I said to her, Please hug this baby. I will check her.

Interviewer Pastor: There were no problems when she was giving birth?

Mother of the deceased: Yes, no problems.

Interviewer FRN: Was it raining heavily at that time?

Mother of the deceased: It did not rain ibu, it was like today. [Dry season]

Each research associate could and did request more information. After each group interview they discussed the scenario that had unfolded and checked for logic, consistency and missing information. Further clarifications were sometimes sought.

Fatalism was one theme that emerged from our research. Families spoke of ‘God’s will’ and ‘destiny’ as ways of explaining the deaths of apparently young healthy women. Some of the families we interviewed suggested it was God’s way and that no-one was at fault. They felt that they had little control over whether their wives or babies survived pregnancy or birth.

In one village a family told us of generational fate. The dead woman’s mother had also died in childbirth.

Interview 5, Village F, Adopted brother: Excuse me, the dead woman’s mother also died one month after giving birth. She also did not have a husband. We fostered her daughter (the dead woman). But she (the dead woman) also died after giving birth, and then we took care of her daughter (the baby) now. The baby does not have a father, just like her mother.

Interviewer Pastor: So, her story was same as her mother’s story.

We wondered what would happen to the surviving baby daughter and how her pregnancy and birth would eventuate.

While fatalism is a normal way to relieve grief and guilt about what could have been different, it is unhelpful when considering motivating a village to prepare and act to prevent maternal and infant deaths. Scheper-Hughes (1992) noted the ‘everyday
violence’ of life in the shanty towns of Brazil and particularly the ambivalent or indifferent reactions of mother’s to the deaths of their children.

DISCUSSION

These narratives do not claim to explain accurately the circumstances or causes of the maternal deaths. The discussions were not verbal autopsies. Verbal autopsies are structured investigations of the cause of death from a biomedical perspective. They are intended to provide a clinical diagnosis and to improve clinical outcomes or estimate numbers of unrecorded deaths (Sloan et al., 2001). Often clinical records or surveys may be employed to gather data. We interviewed no health personnel as they were peripheral to the phenomena of death as perceived by the families. We privileged the voices of the family as we wanted to understand their perceptions and experiences. The family provided the health support, eased the woman’s pains, delivered her baby and her placenta and tried to keep her alive. They told their version of events leading to the woman’s death. The family could often not identify a cause of death saying it was ‘God’s will’ or simply ‘destiny’. But they were able to describe the time of day, the behaviour of the woman, her social situation and her family’s responses. Thaddeus and Maine’s (1994) first delay in recognition of a health problem and second delay in the ability to seek help played out to its full tragedy. The groups interviewed constructed a collective story of the events as they were perceived by the group.

Was this a group interview or was this a focus group? We think neither. Western culture elevates the individual, and interviews and focus groups seek contributions from individuals who are generally not kin. However, in some cultures where people live in kinship groups with multiple generations in the same house, the individual is not privileged in the same way.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note two dimensions to ethics in qualitative research. The first is ‘procedural ethics’ and this is the formal ethics committee application process and approval. Procedural ethics are important to protect the basic rights and safety of research participants, as well as providing researchers with institutional credibility. However, Guillemin and Gillam argue that ‘procedural ethics has little or no impact on the actual ethical conduct of research’, and so suggest a second component which they call ‘ethics in practice’ (2004: 269). This refers to the everyday ethical issues that arise in performing research and the processes of reflexivity employed by the researchers in their research praxis.

In these interactions lie the possibilities of respecting the autonomy, dignity, and privacy of research participants and also the risks of failing to do so, thus perhaps causing harm to the participants in various ways. It is in these interactions that the process of informed consent really occurs – not on the pieces of paper that an ethics committee peruses. It is therefore in these interactions that the integrity of the researcher is really on the line (Guillemin & Gillam 2004: 275). The data collection
and analysis process was emotional. We anticipated that listening to the families would be emotionally difficult. The research associates who shared first languages with the participants heard immediately and reacted to the families’ accounts. They also later transcribed interviews into Indonesian and subsequently into English further immersing themselves. We, the researchers with little Indonesian language skills, followed the stories through muttered translations during the interviews, but only fully understood the stories later through transcribed text and discussions with Indonesian research associates. The female pastor who assisted us was shocked to hear some of the content. She was not familiar with maternal deaths. Our research associates were moved to listen to the accounts of the most vulnerable and poorest in their home communities. We experienced waves of sadness, guilt, distress, and anger. Were we traumatised? We do not think so and we debriefed our research associates to ensure they were safe. Were the families re-traumatised? Possibly some were, although many, as stated, felt it was their fate and not their actions which had caused the deaths. We offered follow-up visits to all families to further discuss any arising issues. We invited village leaders to meet us some months later to hear our findings and seek village level solutions; none told us any problems with the families. Community leaders and local pastors were moved to advocate for community action, largely through the church, to provide support for pregnant women, especially in the event of maternal emergencies and including unmarried women and girls.

CONCLUSIONS

The causes of maternal death are recorded well in the literature; haemorrhage, infection, high blood pressure, unsafe abortion and obstructed labour and we are aware that the presence of a skilled birth attendant can save lives. However, this is poorly counted and does not seem to count for much even when it is counted. The qualitative methods used in this study added meaning and context to the numbers of women dying and answered a broader range of research questions. It generated insights, captured meanings and produced more complex knowledge.

These narratives of death demonstrate that multiple social and geographical aspects influenced the outcome of the birth, which included seasonally inhospitable terrains, entrenched social mores which acted against the best interests of pregnant women, and a sense of powerlessness to be able to change one’s destiny.

A sense of fatalism can demotivate individuals who perceive that they have little control over their futures. As some of the poorest people on the fringes of Indonesia, who form a minority religious group, it is understandable they feel this way. However, mobilisation of villages is possible and people can control some elements of their circumstances. This in part depends on the decisions of leaders in these communities. Who decided? Many people decided that this research would go ahead from human ethics committee members to the local people in West Timor. The only people missing in the study were the dead women who were unable to speak for themselves.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss our work with the community, bureaucracy and politicians who we hope to influence with our research.

2 By way of comparison about 20 women die each year in Australia from maternal mortality. Australia’s population is over 22 million.

REFERENCES


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