A reflection on some challenges in the conduct of fieldwork

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Extended abstract

Purpose: To conduct a successful field research, researchers collect field data through carrying out fieldwork in a real-world organisation. Getting access to valuable field data is very demanding. Although gaining initial access to field data is important, such access needs to be maintained continuously. This is because all access is provisional, which must be constantly (re-)negotiated by a field researcher. Further, once the fieldwork is commenced, the exact nature of fieldwork cannot be predicted in advance, which is always uncertain. Overall, the field is an uncertain territory, where researchers have to confront and navigate several challenges while undertaking fieldwork. The objective of this article is to illuminate some challenges that a field researchers may face while carrying out the fieldwork. The primary audience for this article is novice field researchers. However, this article also aims to stimulate reflection of seasoned field researchers.

Methods: The primary research method used in this paper is autoethnography. Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience" regarding the investigated phenomenon (Ellis et al. 2011, 273). Essentially, autoethnography is a self-narrative or self-reflexive account of a researcher (Ellis 2004; Spry 2001). As a method, it is "both process and product" (Ellis et al. 2011, 273). The current study's autoethnography is drawn on a management accounting fieldwork carried out as part of a doctoral study at a major Australasian research-intensive university. The doctoral project broadly involved the design and implementation of a case company's performance measurement system.

Findings: This article presents five challenges that a field researcher may face while conducting the fieldwork. Firstly, this paper shows that in the field, researchers can be simultaneously perceived as an expert by some participants and ignorant by others. However, the expert image of the researchers does not necessarily facilitate the fieldwork (as demonstrated in the existing literature), and the ignorance image of the researchers does not necessarily hinder the fieldwork (as mentioned in the existing literature). Rather, this paper shows that at times, the researcher's expert image facilitates the fieldwork (e.g., by gaining and maintaining access), whereas at other times, it hinders the fieldwork (e.g., by incentivising the participants not to elaborate on certain issues). Similarly, at times, the researcher's ignorance image hinders the fieldwork (e.g., by initiating "child talk" and refraining from serious discussions), whereas, at other times, it facilitates the fieldwork (e.g., by encouraging participants to explain a certain issue in greater detail).

Secondly, this paper finds that although strong rapport with the participants can facilitate access to valuable field data, it can also have unintended consequences. This paper shows that because of their strong rapport with the field researcher, some organisational members can develop a sense of moral responsibility to advise the novice researcher to spend time against research-related activities and rather encourage to spend time on other "exciting" and higher-paid activities. This is in line with the prior literature that shows that practitioners often underappreciate the value of research. This can make the novice field researchers confused and significantly reduce their motivation to carry out the fieldwork. Thus, strong rapport has the potential to destroy the fundamental purpose of building strong rapport by influencing the researchers to carry out no or little fieldwork.

Thirdly, this paper shows that although accepting small compromises in the researcher's role in the field provides can facilitate trust with the participants, it can motivate organisational members to ask for big compromises in the researchers' role. This can pose a significant dilemma for the researchers. On the one hand, accepting a big compromise in the researcher's role would put the whole research project in significant danger. On the other hand, declining participants' request can alienate them, who can stop cooperating in the project and influence others to do the same.

Fourthly, this paper shows that although spending long hours in the field can build trust with the organisational members, it can also create a suspicion in the mind of the organisational members about the researcher's malicious motive. The researcher's identification of such a

suspicion can be a source of considerable stress, since it can create a frustrated and helpless situation for the researcher. However, there seems no ready recipe to escape from this situation other than to continue the fieldwork with honesty and integrity. Field researchers need to accept the reality that, out of their suspicion, some organisational members can closely monitor researchers' activities overtly and/or covertly. This also means that field researchers need to continuously remind themselves about maintaining honesty and integrity while conducting fieldwork.

Fifthly, in the field, some organisational members can pressurise the researcher to accelerate the fieldwork. This can be for a variety of reasons as identified in the prior literature. For example, some participants may think that the researcher is a negative agent who would create a problem in the field. Some participants may simply consider the constant presence of the researchers in the field as an intrusion to their private lives. For whatever reasons, organisational members' pressure to accelerate the fieldwork can give a considerable stress to the researchers, particularly if these members are key informants of the research project. On the one hand, countering them strongly can create a nuisance in the organisation, which would lead to a more difficult situation to manage. On the other hand, avoiding them would not be easy, since they are key informants of the research project.

Originality: This article contributes to the prior literature (e.g., Baxter & Chua, 1998; Suomala et al., 2014; Ahrens & Dent, 1998) by providing several key insights on the dilemmas that a field researcher can face while undertaking the fieldwork. Firstly, in the field, the researcher needs to preserve a certain image if the image facilitates the fieldwork. In contrast, if a certain image hinders the fieldwork, the researcher needs to avoid it and turn it into an appropriate image that would facilitate the fieldwork. Therefore, managing the "personal front" of the researcher is vital in the fieldwork. Secondly, the current paper encourages field researchers to establish and nurture strong rapport with the participants. At the same time, it urges the researchers to be aware of the potential downsides of strong rapport. Thus, strong rapport can be considered a double-edged sword.

Thirdly, the current paper encourages researchers to spend long hours in the field to avail several benefits as mentioned in the current literature. At the same time, it encourages field researchers to appreciate the unintended consequences of spending long hours in the field. Being aware of this issue in advance can help novice researchers to better manage the stress that may arise from it. Fourthly, following the prior literature, the current paper encourages the

field researchers to make small compromises in their roles for many benefits in the field. At the same time, it urges the researchers to be aware that such a practice can also lead organisational members to ask for a big compromise in the researcher's roles. Further, when the issue of a big compromise in the roles arises, the researchers need to decline such a request tactfully. Fifthly, this article asks researchers to be aware that some organisational members can give pressure to accelerate the fieldwork, which can be a source of considerable stress in the field. The researchers need to accept that there is no easy escape from this situation. However, this paper encourages researchers to try various strategies to make the situation better.