Sociology essays - researcher power relations

How do power relations challenge us to re-think the issue of dialogue in research, ethicsand critical urban ethnography?

Sociological research is not theclearly defined process that the textbooks would have us believe. It can be amessy business and is fraught with pitfalls so the researcher needs to beflexible in his/her approach to the project. Power relationships emerge as anissue right from the beginning. There are the power relations contained withinsocial institutions and in personal relationships. The relationship between theresearcher and the researched is generally thought of as one of unequal powerrelations where the researcher is the custodian of expertise concerning themeaning of a research subject's experiences.

The balance of power may not, however, be in the researcher's hands at the beginning of a project, if theresearcher needs to gain access to a setting then he/she may be subject to thewhims of gatekeepers. Gatekeepers have the power to say no the researcher'srequest and if you do manage to gain entry it is often at the end of a longslow process. Lofland and Lofland (1984) say that feelings of anxiety when aresearcher first encounters gate keepers, is not unusual because they hold thereins of power. Bogdan and Taylor (1984) write about problems with gatekeepers. They argue that there are those professionals in charge of establishments suchas retirement homes or women's refuges, who exercise their power by monitoringwho should and should not visit. In this way they retain control of the spaceoccupied by the people they care for and in controlling their space alsocontrol the influences of and within that space.

Giddens 2001 has argued that thechanges in modern society have, in their turn, brought vast changes to the waywe live our lives:

The development ofmodern cities has had an enormous impact, not only on habits and modes ofbehaviour, but on patterns of thought and feeling. > From the time whenlarge urban agglomerations first formed, in the eighteenth century, views aboutthe effects of cities on social life have been polarized (Giddens, 2001: 573).

Hammersley (2000) has argued that social research cannot be understood outside of the social world that itstudies. It does not exist in some autonomous realm, but affects, and isaffected by other factors in society. Beginning with a brief explanation of keyterms this paper will give a brief description of the long and hotly contesteddebate that frames the quantitative/qualitative divide within researchdiscourse. This should demonstrate that even before a researcher frames aresearch question they have to contend with the powerful discourse that says social research should be undertaken in a scientific manner if it is to producemeaningful data. The paper will examine the question of how power relationschallenge us to re-think the issue of dialogue in research, ethics and criticalurban ethnography. The main focus with regard to how knowledge is acquired, andhow, like research, it is intimately connected with relations of power, will beon feminist work. The final part of the paper will deal with power relations, dialogue and ethics in the context of critical urban ethnography.

Epistemology

An epistemological concern is onethat raises the question of what might be regarded as acceptable knowledge in adiscipline. Central to this point is whether it is feasible to study the socialworld in the same way and using the same principles as science (Bryman, 2004). Research undertaken in this way is generally associated with a positivistparadigm of research.

Positivism

Positivism is most closelyassociated with the work of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. Positivism is anepistemological standpoint that argues for the application of the scientificmethod to the social world. It is usually (though not always) associated withquantitative research and the collection of statistics. Positivism is, therefore, very closely associated with the scientific method which, looselyput, is based around the laws of cause and effect. Bryman (2004) identifies theaspects of positivism in the following ways, only those things that we canobserve through our senses can really be known. Theory (speculations about whatmight be the case) is used to generate hypotheses (general statements) that canbe tested and from which laws can be derived. The hypothesis is subjected toquestions e. g. who, what, when, where and data gathered either throughinterviews, observation, or using existing data such as crime statistics. Ifthe findings confirm the hypothesis then laws are derived, if not then the hypothesishas to be modified. This process continues until a suitable conclusion isreached that confirms the modified hypothesis. Positivists state that sciencemust be objective and value free (Bryman, A. 2004). Durkheim argued that in order to be scientific and to obtain objectiveknowledge, social facts should be

counted as things, and that *allpreconceptions must be eradicated* (Durkheim, E, 1938: 31). Scientific statements should be the interest of the scientist because they arethe only statements that can be confirmed by the senses i. e. science proceedsthrough observable, repeatable experiments.. It is this form of research in particularthat feminists have dubbed ' *malestream research'* (Abbott and Wallace, 1997) they argue that:

Many malestream sociologistsare resistant to the view that there is a need for a reconceptualisation. Nevertheless, this is the position that w accept and while we recognise thatthis is an uphill struggle we think that it is a necessary one if we are toachieve an adequate sociology (Abbott and Wallace, 1997: 13).

Interpretivism

This is the opposite view topositivism where a research strategy is needed that respects the fact thatthere is a difference between the physical world and people. The scientificmethods that are used to study the physical world may not be appropriate tostudying the social world where the sociologist is trying to understand the meaningsthat people give to their actions. Interpretivists most often use qualitativeresearch methods consisting of unstructured interviews and participantobservation. Positivists criticise research data gained in this way asunscientific and subjective. They argue that the findings from such research donot have the same validity or reliability as data collected in a scientificmanner (Bryman, 2004). Researchers who use qualitative methods tend to maketheir research process as transparent as possible and will often ask theirresearch subjects

to check the findings to see whether they are an accuraterepresentation of the person's life.

Both types of researchers want toknow what is happening in society but interpretivists also attempt tounderstand. Weber (1947) maintained that sociology is a

Science which attempts theinterpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causalexplanation of its cause and effects (Weber, 1947: 88).

Qualitative researchers tend tomake use of unstructured interviews, case study research and participantobservation. Ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews and prolongedparticipant observation are also favoured methods. These last tend to be usedmore often by those who are engaged in critical research. Hammersley (1992)criticises the use of ethnographic methods because he believes that this typeof research is less able to produce data that will result in useful theoreticalinsights. Participant observation is regarded by positivists as unscientificand not rigorous enough they regard it as subjective. Hammersley (1992) hasargued that because ethnographers can produce different accounts of the samesetting then the results of such research might be said to reflect a purelypersonal perspective rather than a scientific and reliable account. Yet anothercriticism of this type of method is that the ensuing account is the result ofhighly selective methods of data collection (Hammersley, 1992). This isarguably a nonsensical criticism as all research is the result of a set ofselection processes. The researcher constantly has to decide what is the bestway of

collecting the information that will answer the research question. Thishappens in what is regarded as scientific and value free social research justas much as it does in social research that does not claim to be objective andvalue free. All researchers, as Gouldner (1971) points out have to make choicesabout their ' domain of enquiry' i. e. when, where, how, and from whom they aregoing to obtain their data.

There is a clear difference betweenscience and the scientific method and the methods that are needed toinvestigate the social world. For human beings, human action is meaningful andthey act on the basis of that meaning. The sociologist's job is to interpretthe social world from the research subject's point of view. What this means isthat far from research being objective and knowledge being objective and valuefree, they are in fact marked by the stamp of their producers. Marx recognisedthis in his analysis of capitalism and feminists have recognised this in theiranalysis of patriarchy and of an epistemological stance that bears the stampand is endowed with the power of the white western male. Thus power relationsare evident even before we begin on the actual research process.

Knowledge and Power
The rationalistattitudes towards knowledge that developed during the Enlightenment remaineddominant until well into the nineteenth century. They were, as many feministshave argued (Abbott and Wallace, 1997), a powerful force in determining whatconstituted knowledge and have had considerable effect on the structures ofmodern society. A similar critique of knowledge has also been mounted by theFrench philosopher Michel Foucault (1966).

The work ofthinkers such as Nietzsche (1886) and Foucault (1966) has emphasised the factthat knowledge is intimately tied to structures of power and domination. Foucault argues that it is power which produces and sustains knowledge. Anything that contradicts the authorised view of what counts as knowledge isseen as deviant and transgressional. Thus, he argues,

Power isthat which says no. Any confrontation with power thus conceived appears only astransgression (1966: 53).

Feministcriticisms of knowledge and the way that knowledge is produced are aconfrontation with power and authority. The tendency of many thinkers toneglect class, race, gender, and economic factors contributes to the exclusionof oppressed and marginal viewpoints thus further reinforcing bothuniversalistic and objective models of knowledge and the power structures associatedwith this view. Foucault has argued that the enlightenment model of scientificreason only existed through the will to objectify and dominate. For Foucault, this kind of knowledge is inseparable from the desire for power. He argues thatresearch into criminality or mental illness is often undertaken for the expresspurposes of legislation, and not for a desire for improvement in these areas(1966). These critiques of the structures of power have meant thatepistemological questions are now a central issue within contemporary culture(Lennon and Whitford, 1994). The writings of Marx (1970), Foucault (1966), andmembers of the Frankfurt school (and in a different context liberationtheologians) emphasise the fact knowledge claims are a reflection of theinterests of those with economic power. More recently, black scholars andscholars from the third world have also indicated the Eurocentric and racistnature of most knowledge

production (Lennon and Whitford, 1994). The separationof fact from value in knowledge production is not appropriate, that is to sayknowledge is not objective and neutral. Rather, knowledge bears the stamp ofits producers and is affected by their value systems. It is through thisunderstanding that feminist and other forms of critical research developed.

Critical Research

Carspecken(1996) maintains that critical research is aimed at exposing the powerrelationships at work in society particularly as they relate to social inequalities. The researcher studies this from the viewpoint of the oppressedin the hope of achieving social change. Critical research is informed by thecritical theory of the Frankfurt School. Critical social research does not fitwell into either the positivist camp or the interpretive one but embraces allthose approaches which tend to criticise society (in terms of its powerrelationships for example) in order to transform it. Hammersley (1995) hasargued that the growing influence of qualitative research and most particularlyof the type of research that is critical of power structures and of theinequalities that exist within society has meant that increasingly the basisfor seeing social research as scientific has been undermined. Harvey (1990) hassaid of critical research that:

critiqueis an integral part of the processA critical research process involves morethan appending critique to an accumulation of fact or theory gathered throughsome mechanical process, rather it denies the objective status of knowledge (Harvey, 1990 quoted in Haralambos et al, 2000: 982).

Knowledge inthese terms is a process that is never finished because the social world isconstantly changing. Knowledge is inseparable from the values of the socialcontext in which it emerged, the research participants, and most importantly, the researcher. The knowers always affect what is known as Ely et al (1996)argue:

Researchlike all other knowing, is a transactional process – the knower and the knownboth act upon each other (Ely, et al, 1996: 196 ibid.).

Criticalresearch is primarily concerned with uncovering oppression and oppressivestructures and by that action transforming them. By uncovering these structureswithin social accounts the critical researcher can then link these with widersocial processes and structures. Thus Oakley's analysis of housework and howwomen bear the brunt of it links back to industrialisation and the rise ofcapitalism and women's removal from the public world of work to the privatesphere of the home, this also links with the growth of patriarchal oppressionof women (Harvey, 1990). Thus a critical analysis such as this can uncover thebasis of some of the power relationships that exist within society andeventually to change them. Harvey (1990) says of this process that it:

.. involvesa constant questioning of the perspective and analysis the researcher isbuilding up. It is a process of gradually, and critically, coming to knowthrough constant reconceptualisation. This means that the selection of a coreconcept for analysis is not a once and for all affair (Harvey, 1990: 30).

Harvey (1990)maintains that critical research does not depend on any one method becauseresearchers may often use a variety of methods in ensuring

that they have madethe connections with wider social processes such as the structures of power, and also to increase the reliability of their findings. Feminist research alsooperates by the use of a number of different research methods, feminists are moreconcerned with improving women's lives and with the non-exploitation of thosewho are researched, than they are with the commitment to any one set of methods. Some (primarily male) researchers argue against feminist research because theysay that it is subjective and partisan. They argue that research should neverbe partisan and that it is impossible for everyone to be equally free, theremust always be some hierarchy. Thus Geuss (1981) contends that:

It seems unrealistic underpresent conditions of human life to assume that any and every preference humanagents might have can be satisfied, or to assume that all conflict between thepreferences of different agents will be peacefully and rationally resolved. Some frustration-even some imposed frustration-of some human preferences mustbe legitimate and unexceptionable (Guess, 1981: 16).

Presumably thelegitimate and unexceptionable preferences are the prerogative of the male, whofor centuries has had some much power over women's lives. It is this kind ofpower that feminists are keen to expose, they are also concerned about thepower relationships which exist between the researcher and the researched, andwhich have sometimes been exploited by (male) researchers. In view of this somefeminists argue that participatory research, where the researcher and theresearched work together on a project, should be a defining feature of feministresearch. Abbott and Wallace (1997) argue however, that this is not often donebecause,

it is notpossible for the researcher to share her knowledge and expertise, and to implythat she is sharing them conceals a power relationship rather than overcomingit (Abbott and Wallace, 1997: 288).

Feminists who douse these methods argue that participatory research not only gives women a moreactive role in knowledge production but further increases the validity of theresearch findings. McGuire (1987), has this to say

Participatoryresearch proposes returning to ordinary people the power to participate inknowledge creation, the power that results from such creation, and the power toutilize knowledge (Maguire, 1987: 39).

Even this statement isproblematic because the researcher has at least some training in how researchmight be said to proceed and this is not easily passed on to those who are nottrained (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Mies, 1983 has this to say:

the study of an oppressivereality is not carried out by experts but by the objects of the oppression. People who were before objects of research become subjects of their ownresearch and action. This implies that scientists who participate in this studyof the conditions of oppression must give their research tools to the people (Mies, 1983: 16).

Shared experiences, it might beargued, help to balance out the power relationships that feminists such asAbbott and Wallace (1997) contend, inevitably exist between a researcher andthose who are researched. One way in which the researcher may try to lessen thepower differential is through self-disclosure. Thus recovering alcoholics whoare researching

alcohol misuse or women who have survived domestic violenceinterviewing women who are being abused would make the interviewee aware of thefact. While it maybe impossible to do away with the power differentialaltogether, it does make it less problematic. Ann Oakley (1982) has writtenthat,

the goal of finding outabout people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship ofinterviewer and interviewee is non- hierarchical and when the interviewer isprepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1982: 41).

This power differential thatexists in the research relationship may also colour what is found because datais never free of the influence of the person who gathered it. Carspecken (1996)believes that although critical researchers may have a value commitment that isnot to say that the research needs to be biased providing it is systematic andcareful. Stanley and Wise have this to say,

. the recognition that whoa researcher is, in terms of their sex, race, class, and sexuality, affectswhat they ' find' in research and is as true of feminists as of any other researchers (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 228).

This power differential willalso affect, and may distort the dialogue between the researcher and theresearched. Abbott and Wallace (1997) argue that because the researcher willnecessarily involve herself with the women she is studying then she needs to beaware of this. Constant reflexivity is required if the research is to beconsidered valid. The researcher must be aware that because she is a part ofwhat is going on this inevitably affects what is going

on and there needs to bea continual taking stock of how personal values, attitudes and perceptions areinfluencing the research process.

A feministinterviewing women is by definition both " inside" the culture andparticipating in that which she is observing...personal involvement is morethan dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know eachother and to admit others into their lives (Oakley, 1982: 58).

Aronson (1992) has pointedout that the ethnographic interview is a common method of gathering data inqualitative research. Interviewing is also a method which is favoured byfeminist researchers (Oakley, 1982; Stanley and Wise, 1993). The interviewprocess should be such that women feel at ease and can relate their experiencesas they see them. The interviewer should encourage the participation of theinterviewee, the aim of which is to conduct research with women rather than onwomen. In this way it is thought that a fuller picture of women's experiencesemerges (Oakley, 1981 et al). Carspecken (1996) argues that one way ofminimising any distortions that may arise due to the power differential betweenresearcher and researched is to check out your findings with the researchparticipants. Differences may also arise here if the dialogue between theresearcher and the research participants has been awkward or untruthful in anyway there may be objections when the participant sees what has been written. Seeing this distorted dialogue in print may increase any feelings ofpowerlessness that the participant might have and thus renegotiating thedialogue may prove difficult.

Ethics

At the very least ethics areconcerned with protecting the anonymity of those who are participating in theresearch. This is vital if for example the participants are women who haveexperienced rape or domestic abuse as any such exposure of their true identitycould put them at further risk. Many researchers, not just feministresearchers, also regard the use of non-sexist language as an ethicalprinciple. Sexist language is exclusionary and denotes the power relationshipsthat have for centuries existed in patriarchal society. Relationships that arein some way based on power are prone distortions in communication and it is upto the critical researcher to be aware of these sources of distortion as amatter of ethical principle. Carpecken (1996) thus believes that researchersshould:

Establish supportive, non-authoritarian relationships with the participants in your study. Activelyencourage them to question your own perceptions. Be sure that participants areprotected from any harm that your study could produce, and be sure that theyknow they are protected (Carpecken, 1996: 90).

There isconsiderable contemporary debate about what constitutes ethical research. Thisis particularly the case with sensitive areas and with feminist methodologies(Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Feminist researchers are concerned with the ideathat the people who are the major part of many research undertakings should notbe exploited. As I have stated previously, feminist researchers are concernedwith the researched. Relationships between researchers and their human subjectsare often continued long after

work in the field has finished (Ely et al, 1996). The majority of feminists are conscious that the research relationshipis a two-way process.

Researchlike all other knowing, is a transactional process – the knower and the knownboth act upon each other (Ely, et al, 1996: 196 ibid.).

Many feministsregard it as crucially important that women who are more oppressed andmarginalised than they themselves are given a voice for their experiences. Theyargue that some, (predominantly male) researchers have used respondents asobjects to be worked on (Reinharz, 1983; Abbott and Wallace, 1997). In manycases there is no further contact with the people they have worked with oncethe research process is finished. Feminists have said that this kind of researchis conducted on a rape model.

The researcherstake, hit, and run, with a total disregard for the needs of the researched. They intrude into their subject's privacy, disrupt their perceptions, utilisefalse pretences, manipulate the relationships, and give little or nothing inreturn. When the needs of the researchers are satisfied, they break off contactwith the subjects (Reinharz, 1983: 80).

The issue of giving oppressed andmarginalised women a voice has been identified by black feminists, as anethical matter. This is because black women's voices are the most marginal ofall women's voices in the academy, and the current educational systemreinforces the values and culture of the dominant classes, thereby ensuringtheir continued domination and the covert exercise of power (Hill-Collins, P, 1990). In view of these ethical questions, many feminists are conscious of theneed to put something back in, whether by the payment of a fee, or ofcontributing to work in the

community. More recently however ethical questionshave also concerned researcher safety. Is it ethical to allow a lone (possiblyfemale) researcher to venture into settings where the power relationships thatpertain in such a setting may put that researcher at risk. Power and ethics areclosely entertwined. Covert participant observation (whereby the researcherdoes not disclose their true role and reasons for being in the setting) isoften regarded as unethical and a misuse of researcher power becauseparticipants are not given the chance to give their informed consent to the research. It is also regarded as privacy violation (Bryman, 2004). Thus the powerrelationships that are, or might be at work in the research relationship needto be acknowledged at all stages of the research process and before decisionsabout how the research is undertaken are formalised.

Research, particularly qualitative research is not just composed of a setof '*facts*' drawn from a number of suitably phrased questions. It is madeup of all the seemingly unrelated bits and pieces that are part of humanrelationships (Ely et al, 1996).

Critical Urban Research

The most famous urban research is that of the Chicago school in the 1920sand 30s. Robert Park was the central figure here and his main concerns werewith the effects of social and cultural forces on human nature. Park and hiscolleagues recognised two levels of behaviour the biotic and the cultural. Thebiotic level concerned mechanisms of survival and competition and the culturalwas concerned with how the human subject was constituted (Dickens, 1990). Urbanresearch is concerned with how the city influences those who inhabit it and howit shapes their lives. Giddens has argued that

the space people occupy has tobe taken into account when studying social life because social interaction isnot aspatial, it has to take place somewhere. This somewhere Giddens designatesa locale.

Localesrange from a room in a house, or street corner, the shopfloor of a factory, towns and cities to the territorially demarcated areas occupied by regionstates. But they are typically internally regionalised (Giddens, 1984).

The Chicago school was highly influential on the way in which streetsociety was studied. Jacobs (1961) undertook what became a classical study ofGreenwich Village when she studied the everyday behaviour and relationships ofpeople on the sidewalk. In the nineteen-ninetees Duneier (1999) wanted todiscover how sidewalk life had changed in the intervening years. He studied thelife of pan handlers and street vendors to see whether and in what ways itscharacter might have changed. Duneier started out as a voyeur and customer at abookstall in Greenwich Village and it was there that he noticed the tenor ofsidewalk life. His primary informant was the bookseller who at first wasreluctant to take part in the research. When he eventually wrote up hisfindings and submitted the manuscript for publication he was not comfortableeven though he had invited his informant to read the manuscript and comment onit. He eventually co-opted the informant to co-teach with him about life on thestreet for a Black American. Duneier believed that not only would this adjustthe imbalance in power relationships in research more adequately but thatstudent feedback and comments on the course might allow him to remedy anyshortcomings of the original research.

Duneier had faced a number of challenges during the course of researchsuch as gaining access to the culture and the confidence of those who lived andworked on the streets. He had trouble fitting in because of the obvious powerdifferentials of class and race as well as the inequality of the researchrelationship (adapted from Giddens, 2001 pps 652-655). Duneier's researchparticipants were among the least powerful of society. The way in which modernsocieties operate what Giddens (2001) has called a geography of centrality andmarginality where affluence and abject poverty co-exist made the lives ofDuneier's research participants unliveable. He was worried whether he wasimposing an agenda on his research participants that would make their liveseven more problematic. What Duneier's research revealed was that the socialresearcher has to take account of the wider social context and processes ofwhich he/she is a themselves a part. Mac an Ghaill's critical ethnography ofheterosexual and homosexual young men also tries to reduce the powerdifferential between researcher and research participants and to be as open andethically aware as possible though collaboration, reciprocity and reflexivity(Haralambos et al, 2000).

Conclusion
This paper has examined how power relationships in research impact at alllevels of the research process and affect the dialogue between the researcherand the research participants and the ethical considerations that are part ofsocial research. It has also attempted to show how these processes can severelyaffect the undertaking of critical urban ethnography. Duneier's work inparticular demonstrates how power relationships operate at all levels inresearch and how decisions that have been made (for example the changinggeography of the urban environment) which neither the

researcher nor researchparticipants have any control over can affect the outcomes of the research anda researcher's own sense of his personal ethical commitment to the people whomay have participated in the research. There are a number of reasons why thisis important. Those scholars who are critical of this type of research oftenfail to acknowledge that the scientific paradigm is also beset with these kindsof issues and problems but fails to take them into account. This is what Popper(1992) called the theory of demarcation whereby any variables that do not fitwith the theory are ruled out of the equation. Duneier and other's explicitrecounting of the problematic nature of undertaking social research thatcontributes to knowledge, is committed to social transformation, and at thesame time is aware the pitfalls that can occur when researching the lives ofthose who are already disenfranchised by society. There may never be a completeanswer to addressing the issue of power relationships in social research but Iwould wish to argue that the researcher who neglects the fact that such thingsexist and influence all research is failing to give an accurate account of thesocial reality that he/she is investigating.

5000 words

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