NOTES FROM PRACTICE/UIT DIE PRAKTYK

A STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE OF GAINING ACCESS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION BY THE SUPERVISOR

The jump from theory to practice

Listening to lecturers and reading text books, students may think that planning a research project, gaining access to a site and finding willing participants is a straightforward process. On the ground, however, they are confronted with a much messier situation. To deal with the practical realities and the often unforeseen challenges of the particular project, they have to apply their classroom knowledge, develop a range of research skills and learn new attitudes. Gaining access is critical. The success of data gathering depends directly on how easy or difficult it is to access the site and how well the student can build and maintain relationships with the participants and hold them to agreements (De Vos, Strydom, Schulze & Patel, 2011). It is a process with many potential pitfalls (Johl & Renganathan, 2010). Failure to access the study site successfully can put paid to the whole project.

Calisto Kondowe, a Master's student under my supervision in the Department of Social Development at the University of Cape Town, found this phase of his qualitative research much more challenging and indeed exciting than he had anticipated.

The study was conducted in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. To enter Khayelitsha and recruit 20 participants who met the selection criteria and were willing to participate in the study, Calisto needed a thorough understanding of qualitative research procedures. He needed to know how to build human relationships, how to ensure the research was ethical, how to apply the study plan, and how to communicate and negotiate in order to overcome the obstacles he would encounter. While book knowledge and a certain amount of practical research experience helped him to map out the process in advance, it was his appropriate application of knowledge and skills that ensured the success of this entry phase of his project.

In the section below Calisto describes his experience in his own words. We hope this glimpse of the practicalities, difficulties, challenges and even dangers of carrying out a research project will be particularly helpful for first-time researchers. I add some concluding words in the final section.

The aim of Calisto's study

This was a study of 20 young people operating informal micro businesses. The selection criteria for the study sample were as follows: immigrant youth (25 to 34 years) from a southern African country, operating an informal micro business in the manufacturing sector in Khayelitsha for two or more years, which the owners themselves viewed as successful. The aim was to investigate these young people's circumstances and their experiences of establishing and running a business. It was hoped that the study would sensitise policy makers and others to the need to include immigrant youths in

programmes that support small business owners, thereby helping them to strengthen their role in the economy.

The challenge of the study site

Gaining entry to a research site involves a combination of planning, perseverance and luck (Kothari, 1985). Khayelitsha is Cape Town's biggest township and the second largest in South Africa. It is part of the City of Cape Town's Metro South East Region, commonly also known as Cape Town's poverty trap (BT and DPLG, 2007). Most Khayelitsha residents (62%) live in shacks or informal dwellings. The rest live in houses on separate stands (26%), in an informal dwelling in a backyard (6%), or in a dwelling whose type is not specified by the statistics (6%) (University of Stellenbosch Business School, 2011). Overcrowding of houses is common, with some areas being particularly bad (BT and DPLG, 2007). There is a high level of unemployment, violence and criminal activities. The township's history and the legacy of its establishment during the apartheid era as a "dormitory town" continue to shape its development needs (City of Cape Town, 2006). Since there are few formal local job opportunities in Khayelitsha, and a consequent reliance on transport because of this township's distance from economic nodes, a significant portion of the population, including immigrant youths, are either unemployed or involved in the informal business sector (PGWC, 2007).

CALISTO'S EXPERIENCE

Choosing the study site

Researchers have to bear many factors in mind when choosing a study site and planning to connect with prospective research participants for a qualitative study (Patton, 2002; Shenton & Heyter, 2004). I selected Khayelitsha because I believed I could gather useful data there. Since the study was about young people running businesses, I had to locate the centres of economic activity in this township. Guided by a friend who had lived in Khayelitsha for four years, I found young business owners operating at the Khayelitsha train station, across the road from a shopping mall.

The site was a bustling market selling a wide range of products and produce, with businesses operating from stalls and shipping containers, which are often used by the less affluent for offices, shops, pre-school facilities and a range of other activities. What struck me as I got to know this market better was how the business people seemed to operate in harmony, supporting one another's businesses in different ways. I did not witness any xenophobia. Over time my initial perception of Khayelitsha as a hotbed of crime was tempered by the fact that I did not witness or experience any crime over the months in which I visited this market, other than one instance when the police intervened in a fight between two men.

Travelling to the site

The choice of site influenced the way I planned my entry. As I lived far from Khayelitsha, it was vital to budget for both time and money to get there. Once I was clear about where in the township I would find likely participants, I was then able to

estimate the amount of time and other resources I would need for the phase of entering the research site and making contact with the participants.

I decided to commute from Cape Town city centre to Khayelitsha by train, as this 45 minute ride is a cheaper form of transport than taxis and it took me directly to the train station where my research participants were operating.

Khayelitsha is known for violence, theft, robbery and other criminal behaviour (Gape, 1999; Isaacs & Friedrich, 2006; PGWC, 2007). The process of entry had to take these circumstances into consideration. My concerns for my safety prompted me to arrange for the above-mentioned friend, who was familiar with the township, to accompany me on my first visit of orientation to Khayelitsha – not only for safety and security reasons, but also to boost my self-confidence. A further benefit was that this friend had links with youths running informal micro enterprises in this community and was familiar with the area and the local language, isiXhosa.

Getting to know the site and be accepted

Researchers who adopt a qualitative approach should try to spend considerable time in the study area, since the aim is to gather data on the lived experiences of the participants. Although I did not live in Khayelitsha during the period of the study, I became familiar with the setting through regular visits and continued communication with the participants.

The quality of the interview schedule is important, but the most important tool is the researcher himself and how others perceive and are able to relate to him. To gain access to the participants' knowledge and experience, one needs to build respectful, open and trusting partnerships with them. While the fact that I am a Zimbabwean in all likelihood helped in the trust-building process, I believe that it was the application of the pointers discussed in these practice notes that helped me to access participants successfully and maintain cooperative relationships with them until the study had been completed, and even beyond that.

Finding study participants and keeping in touch with them

Explaining sampling in a research proposal is one thing; actually connecting to the people in the sample to negotiate their voluntary participation is quite another.

After my first visit to Khayelitsha I decided to narrow my research focus from immigrant youths running businesses in any sector to those operating in the manufacturing sector. This sector creates employment and facilitates economic growth (SEDA, 2010-2011), which is what South Africa needs at present.

Having identified the population, specified the selection criteria, and accessed the location, I was faced with the challenge of finding not only participants who met the criteria but also enough of them to make up the required sample for the study (Okumus, Altinay & Roper, 2006). I selected participants over a period of about nine months. This extended period was a deliberate choice, as I planned to complete all the other courses in my Master's programme in the same period.

I maintained an open channel of communication with each participant through regular mobile phone calls and visits to their business sites. This was done from the initial contacts right up to the interviews, to build a relationship of trust and to encourage them to see themselves as partners in the research. I assumed that they would be more willing to provide information about the challenges and successes of their business, and about business-related support systems to someone with whom they were familiar and in whom they had a level of trust. This assumption proved correct: during the interviews, the participants were eager to share information about their businesses. Furthermore, they asked me to email the research report to them, which I believe pointed to their interest in the outcome of the study.

Communication skills were essential both to find participants and to build rapport. Communication is a powerful tool that makes the collection of qualitative research data possible and it became the lubricant facilitating the building of trust and rapport. I communicated in English. I was aware that this was not these immigrants' mother tongue, but I used it because it was the language that I and the participants from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi had in common. I also believed that the tone of the interview would be more professional if conducted in English. The consequence of this was that I had to rephrase some questions in a number of ways before the meaning was clear. And the participants' use of a second language could also have limited their ability to express themselves freely and clearly.

When I identified and first made contact with participants, I discussed the ethical considerations of the study with them, presenting myself in a way that helped them to feel that they wanted to talk to me. The process was centred on convincing potential participants of the value and importance of their (voluntary) participation in the study. Some initially hoped that the interview would lead to accessing funding for their business, but I made it clear that this was not the case. None withdrew from the study.

The communication and relationship-building phase was an ongoing process that continued until the interviews had been conducted. Post-research contact with five of the participants confirmed that, for these five, my regular visits and telephonic contacts had served to shift their initial feelings of intimidation (on account of being the focus of attention of a student from a university) to feelings of self-confidence and trust. I was reminded of how important it is to show respect to your participants through the way you introduce yourself and your study, how you speak to them, and the level of interest you show in them. These issues were mentioned by all five. They liked the sincere interest I had shown in their businesses. This and my respectful manner had warmed them to me and promoted a partnership rather than a researcher-subject type of relationship.

Still on the subject of communication, I was reminded, when listening to the digital recordings of my three pilot interviews, how important probing skills are and how necessary it is to conduct a few pilot interviews. This enabled me to identify aspects of my communication skills that needed to be improved before I conducted the interviews

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for the study. (In the following section I describe one of the lessons I learned from a pilot interview.)

Being flexible

To gain entry to a research site and to access participants, the researcher must be flexible and ready to adapt to the situation. A clearly constructed entry plan is important but successful execution is not guaranteed.

I planned to use purposive sampling, making one-to-one contacts, but I was unable to recruit 20 participants this way. I managed to identify only 13 participants who met the selection criteria during my second visit to Khayelitsha. During a third visit, in September 2012, I found that two of them were no longer operating in the area. I then decided to use snowball sampling, which involves participants recommending further potential participants to include in the study (Marshall, 1996). I recruited an additional five participants through the 11 available participants. Continued snowball sampling enabled me to access the last four participants to make up the sample of 20.

A flexible approach and the application of negotiation skills helped me to identify the best location for the interview and to make changes to interview dates and times to accommodate busy participants whose work environment was ever changing. I had to learn to be patient. I had planned to complete all my interviews by a particular date, but I came to understand that I could not impose my programme on my research participants. I had to check the participant's availability right up to the start of the interview, as it could change even on the day of the interview. I learned that one should never go ahead with an interview at a time that does not suit the participant. I made this mistake in one of the pilot interviews. The participant responded to my questions with monosyllables, I failed to gather the data I needed and ended up feeling very discouraged.

I conducted 18 interviews in the container where the business owner worked, and two at business owners' homes. Was a container the most suitable venue for an interview? It was the most convenient for my participants, so I made an effort to adapt and focus on the participant and not the surroundings.

To sum up the lesson I learned: aligning the research process with the circumstances of the participants requires regular communication, patience and flexibility. The ability to be flexible is critical to successful communication and relationship building.

Adding the essential ingredient: hard work

Gaining entry to a research site, then recruiting and selecting research participants and gaining their cooperation requires not only a plan, flexibility and perseverance but also energy and commitment. My experience indicates that it is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and hard work that brings success. A key lesson for me was that a researcher cannot predict how a research project will unfold.

In the Khayelitsha study, the ongoing communication and relationship-building process, which included phone calls and numerous site visits over many months before the interviews were conducted, demonstrates the importance of staying focused and persevering in order to succeed in gaining entry to the geographical area and the

required number of participants. Were there times I felt like giving up? No. I like young people and get on well with them, and I have a lot of respect for those who have taken the challenging route of starting and running a small business. Admittedly, when I was at the research proposal stage, my thinking was simply to get the research done as soon as possible. But as the process unfolded, I became more and more engrossed in it and committed to giving it my best. This necessitated hard work.

A FINAL COMMENT FROM THE SUPERVISOR

The Khayelitsha study taught Calisto that gaining entry to a research site and recruiting the prospective participants is not a straightforward process. Time needs to be invested in the careful planning of this phase, since it has a significant impact on the subsequent research journey. The execution of the planning should be understood as a cyclical iterative process that requires resource mobilisation, knowledge, skills, flexibility, perseverance and commitment to hard work. Calisto succeeded in getting good data through a combination of careful planning and a willingness to change or adapt his plans as the situation demanded.

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