Justifying an EdD student's research method for exploring the educational experiences of South Asian Muslim females.

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ABSTRACT

My current research topic as an Educational Doctoral (EdD) student involves the fusing of race, gender and religion. A thesis attempting to explore these facets was fated to be one with a tumultuous methodology. The educational experiences of ethnic minorities are well documented (Troyna, 1991; Haque, 2000; Pearce & Lewis, 2019) and thus, the task of selecting an appropriate method to assist the researcher in this thesis was a challenging one. As such, the synoptic methodology presented in this article is an attempt to portray the journey of an EdD student that debates the decision to use the following research methods: (1) classroom observations, (2) individual interviews with pupils and teachers, and (3) focus group interviews with pupils; as well as her justification for selecting Thematic Analysis for analysing the data produced from these methods using Braun & Clarke's (2022) guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

The complex subtleties (Wengraf, 2001; Draper, 2004) that exist in human social interactions (Draper, 2004) guide the epistemological, and thus ontological, approach to be steeped within the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The role of the researcher in an interview situation (Dwyer, 2009) is one that demands a confronting of positionality. As an insider researcher, there was the benefit of already having a long historical insight on the experiences a South Asian Muslim female may face, particularly considering the nuanced daily interactions one encounters that are complex to vocalise, and which would take an outsider researcher considerable time, using longitudinal ethnographic research, to even begin to uncover (Horch, 2009). However, it

is important to note that the researcher's own methodological positioning is one that embraces her positionality and uses it as a liberation of positionality, with its benefits in relation to experiences as shared constructs (Wellington, 2009). Here, the interpretivist roots of the nature of knowledge are reiterated – that of it being specific in time and space, and socially constructed because of a convergence of these and the people in them. The influence of positionality is a rich part of the research produced and, although initially shied away from, the newness of the knowledge produced from the convergence of the research method, the participant and the researcher was the crux of this research. Without any one of these ingredients, the outcomes would have been wholly different. Ultimately, the desire for this research to be reliable through triangulation was tenuous in relation to the richness of the data produced *without* the constraint of triangulation, as suggested by Denzin's (1970) seminal work. The desire for the application of a detached mathematical concept to human interaction was liberated from. However, although not triangulated in the positivistic methodological sense, a second research method, that of participant observations, was also used due to its ability to allow participants to carry on with their routines without interruption. Thus, the epistemological underpinning for this research unites the ideas of interview and observation because of their heavy involvement of the researcher and the creation of the new knowledge that these interactions produce. This article starts by presenting the research methods used to research this topic and the implication of having a researcher diary; next, it explores the justification behind selecting an analysis tool, namely Thematic Analysis; and it ends with a summary of the main findings as a discussion.

METHOD SELECTION: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS, SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The reason for selecting interviews for this research was to uncover the view of reality from the perspective of the participant (Seidman, 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Although this interaction is highly complex and nuanced in its approach, and worthy of further exploration, this discussion is not presented here (see my EdD thesis, forthcoming in 2024). The flexibility that semi-structured interviews allow (Wengraf, 2001:5; Seidman, 2005) is the very reason they are appealing – they allow for the natural progression of conversation (Wengraf, 2001; Dar, 2014) while still having an ultimate direction, and additionally, allow for each of these interactions to be different depending on the participant demographics (Wengraf, 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), therefore, negating the desire for this research to be generalisable (Dar, 2014).

As this study also included the use of observation of classroom interactions between teachers and pupils, it was crucial that the ethics of this method were carefully critiqued. Whilst the contested aim of school-based lesson observations is to enhance teachers' professional development (Good, 1988), when being observed, participants have been shown to adopt the expectations of the observer, thus skewing the data produced by this research method (Mayo, 1933; Edington, 2001; Scheff, 2003; Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2014). For this reason, it was crucial that the researcher managed and minimised the risks involved in taking part by keeping participants informed, and reassured that the collected data was not going to be shared with their line managers and any observation notes taken could be verified and excluded if they so wished (Goffman, 1974; Abbas, 2002). Additionally, they were offered, and directed to, safe spaces where further professional support was available (Silverman, 2009; Descombe, 2010:7; Shafaq, 2015).

There is a dilemma around whether interviewing is an appropriate research method for child participants. It is advised that more ethnographic research be used instead, as it diminishes the researcher–participant power imbalances that are common in interview scenarios (Weisner, 1996; Corsaro, 1997; Prout & James, 1997). Children, generally, due to their social inexperience and age, perceive adults as those that make decisions on their daily lives (Einarsdóttir, 2007). As such, to reduce the perception of the adult as dictatory, situations within the interview were created where the child participants had the chance to direct the conversation and activities (Punch, 2002). Many of the considerations offered within the child–researcher interaction can be applied to interviews with adults. Although the researcher–adult-participant power relation is different from those involving children, this remains a core criticism of the interview method (Hoffmann, 2007; Edler & Fingerson, 2011; Lusambili *et al.*, 2021).

Turning now to the ethics of the focus group involving children; this is a method largely advocated by those who consider one-to-one interviews to be inferior due to discourses surrounding power imbalances (Punch, 2002; Eder & Fingerson, 2011). In my thesis, focus groups were used to allow for a more relaxed atmosphere. It was discovered that the child participants felt more at ease in a group setting than in a one-to-one interview scenario. To aid a more natural conversation, the group interview was scheduled to take place in a familiar classroom within the school and, as the group became familiar with the interviewer, they began to select their own areas of preference for the interviews – sometimes opting for the library, other times for an art workshop. Doing this, allowed child participants to feel at ease, as opposed to an office location, which could add to power polarity.

The ambition to involve the pupil voice in this research was its intended backbone. However, the plethora of current research that comes with involving pupils in educational research is something that has taken detailed and careful consideration and reconsideration. This work has looked, foremost, at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), a convention that is ratified by all United Nations countries (except the USA), ensuring that all research adheres to this. Particularly important are those articles that refer, specifically, to pupil voice: to act in the best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to have their views respected (Article 12) and giving the child the freedom to express their views (Article 13). Within schools, pupil voice is a hotly contested topic as school leaders navigate this convention and attempt to incorporate it into their educational establishments (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Article 12 has been the basis of the creation of the 'school council'. The school council is a group of elected pupils who have the responsibility of highlighting 'pupil/student voice' and other variations that maintain the same goal: to allow pupils to be involved in the decision-making processes, which can cover a wide range of areas from improving school experiences to gaining feedback on learning experiences (Czerniawski, 2012).

RESEARCHER'S FIELD NOTES FROM OBSERVATIONS

The avoidance of deception (Silverman, 2009) was another ethical consideration that needed to be addressed and, as such, was secured by the aforementioned agreements being sent to the participants prior to the observations. In addition, clarity on the part of the researcher as to whether the observation notes were verbatim – from what is witnessed – or an interpretation, based on inferences of observation, was established (Fox, 1998; Driscoll, 2011). To control any unintentional biases that might have arisen

from the researcher's notes, notes were made using a 'double-entry' notebook. Here, a distinction was made between the verbatim and the inferred. The freedom that the double-entry notebook allowed ensured that a differentiation could be made between the 'seen' and the 'interpreted' observations.

Finally, as with all research involving human participants over an extended period, there was need for a transition that saw the formal ending of the research. To minimise the negative impact of any discomfort during this process, the regularity of the field research was slowly reduced to fewer and fewer occurrences, with a final meeting with participants to formally end the research period with the intention of a more ethical withdrawal (Jorgensen, 1989; Baker, 2006). Reliability of the data produced was not limited to the data collection process. The analysis and interpretation of said data was a critical step that required close attention through the adoption of a system that further minimised potential for missed nuances, missed themes and subsequent skewed conclusions. This next section aims to explore the suitability of Thematic Analysis as a data analysis tool for this research.

DATA ANALYSIS TOOL: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The data from interviews and observations was analysed using a Thematic Analysis approach, as the scope of the research was to identify the educational experiences of a South Asian Muslim female. This was achieved through transcription of interview and focus group interactions as well as the writings from observer field notes during participant observations. Here, the data was analysed as one data set and sorted in relation to identified themes.

It was decided that a thematic approach would be best suited to finding the narratives involved. Grounded Theory is a justifiable alternative to a thematic approach, but its complex nature involving

the natural emergence of themes from the data (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Bryant & Charmez, 2007) meant the key requirements of Grounded Theory, the fulfilment of a confining set of rules around inductive data analysis, made it unsuitable for this research. This study, steeped in its usage of previous research literature themes, made the reality of truly achieving the intended Grounded Theory approach (to produce rich data with no researcher interference) (McGhee *et al.*, 2007) realistically unachievable.

Thematic Analysis, a traditional approach in psychology research (Braun & Clarke, 2006), has re-emerged as an analysis tool in educational research since the seminal article on its practical usage by Braun & Clarke (2006). Applying Thematic Analysis, the data was coded and themed, making its intention an inductive process involving the identification and creation of themes that were identified (Woo *et al.*, 2017). From there, themes were used to draw conclusions, making it an inductive process due to its being steeped in the influence of prior literature, but also a systematic deductive approach to analysis of a large body of data that required some level of rigour and routine, to minimise fluctuations in the approach. The combination of both an inductive and deductive approach was critical to this research.

DISCUSSION

This article discusses the methodology used by an EdD to explore the educational experiences of South Asian Muslim females. It involves the intersection of race, gender and religion, and was conducted using participant observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. An interpretivist approach was employed, acknowledging the influence of positionality as an insider researcher but using it to benefit the study as a means to have a deeper understanding of the intersections at play. This unique positionality provided a long historical insight into the experiences a South Asian Muslim female may face, particularly

considering the nuanced daily interactions that are complex to vocalise. The epistemological underpinning unites the idea of using interview and observation alongside focus groups because of their heavy involvement of the researcher and the creation of new knowledge that these interactions produce and the importance that this plays in creating opportunities to hear the voices of this under-represented demographic.

To hear these voices, semi-structured interviews were used and justified as they allow for the natural progression of conversation while still having an ultimate direction. The interviews provided insight into the view of reality from the perspective of each participant, and the flexibility that this approach afforded allowed each interaction to be different depending on participants' demographics, negating the desire for it to be generalisable. The use of participant observations to observe classroom interactions between teachers and pupils was also crucial to the study. However, the ethical considerations involved in this method are acknowledged, particularly the risk of participants adopting the expectations of the observer and skewing the data. To manage and minimise the risk, participants were informed and reassured that the collected data would not be shared with their line managers and all data would be anonymised.

Additionally, the selection of Thematic Analysis as the analysis tool was justified, and how this was a more practical alternative to Grounded Theory. It was used to analyse the data produced from these methods using Braun & Clarke's (2022) guidelines due to Thematic Analysis's flexibility in allowing for the creation of meaning from data while still being rigorous and transparent in its approach. It was found that South Asian Muslim females experience unique challenges in the education system, particularly in relation to their religious and cultural identities. This methodology also highlighted the importance of

intersectionality in understanding the experiences of ethnic minority groups in education and selecting research methods that worked in harmony with each of these intersections. As well as this, as many of the participants were children, research methods were selected to diminish the power imbalances using a third method, focus groups.

Overall, the multiple methods, and the acknowledgement of the influence of a researcher's positionality as an insider researcher, provided valuable insights into the methodological approach needed to understand the experiences of a marginalised group. This early awareness of the niche needs of South Asian Muslim females, it is hoped, will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the challenges faced by ethnic minority groups in the education system and highlight the importance of being aware of intersectional identities and the sensitivities needed in order not to further widen the chasm caused by the lack of current literature on this demographic – this starts with carefully considering the methods used to gain this much-needed insight.

CONCLUSION

This article has documented the reasoning behind the method selection process for a Professional Doctorate in Education. It was decided that this interpretivist research required a mixed method approach to data collection with both adult and child participants; thus, using interview, observation and focus group methods facilitated the aim of reducing inevitable power imbalances. The combination of these methods and a well-organised field diary was key to minimising researcher influence. The use of Thematic Analysis as an analysis tool was justified, and positionality as an insider researcher was embraced and used to produce richer data. Although the desire for triangulation was initially present, the richness of the data produced without the constraint of triangulation was ultimately prioritised. Data produced was analysed using Thematic Analysis, which was evaluated

as a more robust approach than Grounded Theory. Overall, this article highlights the importance of carefully selecting research methods and justifying their use in order to produce data that provides meaningful insights into complex topics. Finally, the full methodology for this article will be set out in my thesis in 2024, where detailed justifications for many of the decisions will be explored. ∎

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