The Quest for "Really Useful Research": Reflections on Navigating the Research Process

Bonnie Slade, York University, Toronto, Canada

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

Certain methodological and ontological approaches to research, such as institutional ethnography, have an emergent character; much politically motivated research with a social purpose agenda falls into this category. Often in qualitative, post-positivist research traditions the starting point is quite clear to the researcher, but the overall shape of the research is refined as data is collected. The rigid scientific research framework of testing a defined hypothesis against known elements does not typically transpose well onto qualitative research projects. While it is critical to solidify a detailed research design for funding proposals and formal university documentation such as ethical review, in practice it remains somewhat unclear which direction the research will take until the investigation starts. According to DeVault and McCoy (2001), "(Researchers) know what they want to explain, but only step by step can they discover who they need to interview and what texts or discourses they need to examine" (p. 755). It is precisely this emergent character of institutional ethnographic research projects that produces overtly political "really useful research" (Martin, 2008) that sets out to identify, document and disrupt oppressive practices.

This paper, which draws on my empirical doctoral dissertation, explores how research projects are impacted by positivist-influenced university requirements. I reflect on my research process, specifically on recruitment and data collection during which information from the first two research participants provided a previously unknown path of inquiry. I discuss the impact this information had on my research project, as well as how the ethical review requirements impacted how I could respond to this important data. While social purpose researchers aim to create "really useful research" how do we respond when we encounter data that challenge our initial assumptions or deepen our understanding of the issues? How do university (and funder) requirements constrain our ability to collect data and publish findings that will make a difference to marginalised people?

Background
My research addresses the downward mobility and deskilling often experienced by highly skilled immigrants in Canada by investigating their volunteer work undertaken to improve their access to the labour market. My interest and awareness of these issues grew out of my experience working as an Electronics Engineering Technician at a global electronics company for seven years. The workforce was stratified by gender, professional status, race and country of education; it was a living example of the inequalities in the workplace, the impact of globalization and the "flexible" workplace on people. The manufacturing shop floor was almost entirely staffed with immigrant professionals whereas the professional departments of the company, such as process engineering, were comprised almost exclusively with professionals who were predominantly white and Canadian-educated. Many of the employees in the professional departments were young university engineering students. I worked with two young men who had finished three years of their four-year engineering degree and were working to gain work experience, networks and to earn money towards their educational expenses. They were treated with respect by managers, and they were given meaningful, often stressful work with real deadlines; they were also paid $30,000 for their year of work.

Also in the factory were immigrant professionals, the vast majority of whom were people of colour. Unlike the Canadian educated engineers and MBAs, they were concentrated in short-term work contracts performing low-skill, repetitive jobs. In my entire time working at this company, not one internationally educated professional was hired permanently in a professional department, to my knowledge. Through my work in the manufacturing sector, I learned through discussions with immigrant engineers, doctors, accountants and other professionals of the difficulties they encountered in establishing themselves as professionals in Canada. Having qualified for immigration to Canada on the basis of their profession, they were shocked by the barriers they encountered from employers, professional regulatory bodies and universities. My awareness of these issues for immigrant professionals and a sense of injustice propelled me into graduate school to pursue research that might serve as a tool for social change.

**Designing and Conducting the Research Project**

Guided by the social ontology and method of inquiry of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), my starting point was to conduct semi-structured interviews with immigrant volunteers. All institutional ethnographies begin with a problem, a "disjuncture" defined by Campbell and Gregor (2002) as the difference "between different versions of reality - knowing something from a ruling versus an experiential perspective" (p. 48). The interviews would allow me to learn about the disjuncture experienced by immigrants in their search for meaningful work—not being able to get a job because they did not have Canadian work experience, the most significant labour market barrier reported by immigrants (even those with four years of residency!) in the
national Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003).

As is standard research procedure, before I could even think of recruitment or interviewing it was necessary to receive clearance from the Research Ethics Board at the university. While detailing the background, purpose and objectives was straightforward, presenting a specific detailed methodology was not. The ethical review process was a good opportunity to think about the number of interviews, criteria for participants, recruitment strategies, and scope of the research, and the ethical review I submitted conformed to my understanding of the project at that time. Once it was approved, however, that document became my contract with the university and it set out my course of action.

I encountered my first dilemma during the recruitment phase. In my review I had stated that I would both distribute the recruitment flyer informally to colleagues and post the recruitment flyers on publicly accessible bulletin boards at community organizations. People who were interested in learning more about the research and/or being interviewed could contact me directly through the contact information provided on the flyer. After the initial contact I built in a snowball sampling strategy so that those who were interviewed were asked to give a copy of the recruitment flyer to others who might be interested in participating. When I was contacted by the participants, I described the research in some detail to allow them to consider the time commitment and their interest in the project; further, I asked questions to determine if they met the criteria. If they had interest and met the criteria, we arranged a time and place to meet.

While I had little trouble in successfully recruiting participants through these means I had numerous opportunities for recruitment that fell outside of the approved protocol. Through the course of my daily routines and conversations talking about my research, a wide array of people revealed their extensive knowledge of the issues I was researching, either through their own experience or through others who volunteered as a strategy to improve employability. One morning, for example, I received a phone call from a telemarketer on behalf of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. During the course of our conversation, I told him about my thesis topic and he told me that he knew about this situation well as many of his friends and his wife had volunteered for Canadian work experience. He offered to help me out in any way he could. Another time at a cafeteria at the university, the cashier asked me about my thesis and it was not long before she and the cook were telling me about the numerous (shifting) definitions of Canadian work experience that they had heard as reasons for not getting jobs.

Neither of these conversations led to formal interviews. How could I respond to these moments in keeping with my approved protocol? Could I have
referred them to one of the publicly accessible bulletin boards or could I have handed them a recruiting flyer directly? I was nervous about pursuing these contacts through unapproved means as the ethical review process had been so stringent. My initial application, an expedited review which took three months to complete, was sent back from the committee requiring one small revision. I was asked to add a letter to the community organizations asking for permission to post my recruitment flyer on their public bulletin boards. In the letter I needed to introduce my project, give contact information (that was also on the recruitment flyer) and outline their role. While I had questions about the value of asking for permission to access a public space, I wrote a letter to comply with the review process. Here is an excerpt from the letter:

I am not asking you to play any role other than to allow me to post the Recruitment Flyer on the bulletin board. The Flyer contains contact information so that potential participants can contact me directly. If you have any bulletin board etiquette (time allowed for posting, paper colour, size of paper) could you let me know so that I can tailor the Recruitment Flyer to meet your requirements. I will use the information from the interviews for my thesis and possibly for further publications and conference presentations. If you have any questions about this research please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor via the contact information below.

I resubmitted my ethical review with the new letter and I received permission to proceed with the research project.

When I wrote the ethical review I had considered tracing the volunteer placements brokered through employment programs at community organizations. This notion had developed during my work on a research project that examined the informal learning of 45 immigrants in volunteer work placements; many of these placements were organized through formal community-based employment programs (Duguid, Slade and Schugurensky, 2006). Immigrants also found volunteer placements by approaching a company directly. In thinking about the direction of the research I was concerned that it would be difficult to gather data on volunteering for Canadian work experience as there were many different strategies of securing volunteer positions and sites of volunteerism (private companies, voluntary sector, public organisations). When I interviewed the first participant, I was struck by the fact that he had volunteered as part of an adult education course offered by a school board. I had not considered the school boards as a focal point of the research; in fact, I was not aware that school boards offered programs specifically focused on helping new immigrants access the labour market. After the interview I researched the website of the program he attended and I was very interested to learn about the course, including the fact that each student had to pay registration, materials and assessment fees to take the course. The courses, called co-op programs, were typically 18 weeks long with three to five weeks in the classroom.
followed by a 13 to 15 week unpaid work placement. The curriculum for the 
classroom component was high school English, civics and a career planning 
course. I wondered about the value of these high school credits to immigrant 
professionals.

When the second participant reported that she had also attended a similar 
program in a different school board, my curiosity about the role of the school 
boards in the provision of volunteer work placement for immigrants was 
piqued. I wondered how long Ontario high schools had been offering these 
programs to new immigrants for Canadian work experience, how the 
programs were funded, how they were shaped by federal, provincial and 
municipal policies, and whose interests they served. After completing the first 
two interviews, I wondered if I shouldn’t follow the leads presented to me in 
these discussions. I was aware, however, that the ethical review protocol had 
already set the scope of my research. My ability to refine the research, to 
investigate this emergent lead was limited by the fact that I had not applied for 
ethics approval from a school board. In order to conduct program evaluations 
of specific courses it is necessary to apply for an additional ethics approval 
from the school board. According to ethical review policy:

Ethics approval must be received from all relevant Research Ethics 
Boards (University, affiliated hospital, school board, and/or other 
institution) before the research commences. For students, they must 
either seek ethics approval for a new project or be certain that their 
research has already received ethics approval. This applies to student 
research as part of a graduate course or degree requirement, thesis 
research, and/or as part of research conducted by any student or faculty 
member at the University of Toronto whether or not the research is 
funded (University of Toronto, 2004,'What does this all mean, para 2).

I had colleagues who had completed research in schools and the school 
board review process was complex and lengthy. One colleague waited over 
nine months to have her project approved. If I decided to focus on this 
program as a program evaluation I would not only need to have approval from 
a school board but also from the university again, having to resubmit the 
revised ethical review. I decided that because of time and money (tuition fees 
due to the additional time) I needed to work within the existing approved 
parameters. I ended up finding a workable compromise that allowed me to 
investigate the school board programs without requiring additional ethical 
review approval. Since the programs were offered at several school boards 
across the province, I investigated the programs as a whole, and I was able to 
draw from publicly accessible documents for my analysis of the social 
organization of the programs. My interviews with immigrant professionals and 
teachers provided me with rich data about three different programs, and the 
publicly accessible policy and curriculum documents gave me access to the
program requirements and funding mechanisms. This is how I described the scope of the research in my dissertation:

It is important to state that the aim of this research is not to evaluate a particular co-op program or even one particular school board. There are at least five school boards in Ontario that offer adult co-op programs geared toward immigrant professionals (see Appendix K) and some of the school boards have more than one program. For example, the Toronto District School Board has five adult learning centres all of which offer differently structured co-op programs. The length of time for the placement, the number of high school credits granted for the program, as well as whether the students are divided into specialized classes based on their professions, all vary between co-op programs. A commonality of these programs is that they are geared toward immigrants whose first language is not English. Rather than an evaluation, the design of this research is not to focus on one particular program, but to map the social organization of Canadian work experience as manifested in provincially funded school board co-op programs, and to explore the implications of these programs as a whole (Slade, 2008, p 5).

Discussion

Despite the limitations set by the ethical review, I was able to conduct a critical analysis of the school board programs and their impact on immigrant professionals. Through data collection I learned that the co-op programs are marketed to immigrant professionals, immigrants with years of international work experience and formal education who were unable to find appropriate employment in Canada. While these programs promise and deliver work experience, the impact on immigrant professionals is, in many cases, further marginalization, depletion of savings and downward social mobility. My research reveals that immigrant professionals with graduate degrees and years of international work experience are put through curricula designed for adolescents with limited work experience, and, as part of the program, often perform over 400 hours of unpaid work in private manufacturing companies, banks and other for-profit ventures. These programs contribute to the stratification of the labour market along racial and ethnic lines as many courses explicitly restrict eligibility to immigrants who speak English as a second language, and 75 per cent of immigrants to Canada are people from racialised communities (Statistics Canada, 2008). The co-op program is one site where immigrants learn how their differences with respect to language and work experience are made to matter. Their past experience is not considered relevant, their educational achievements are downplayed and the value of their labour is eradicated. This repositioning – treating highly skilled

1 These programs are operating in areas where a high number of immigrants have settled (especially the Greater Toronto area, but also Ottawa, London and Hamilton).
immigrants, specifically non-native speakers of English as inexperienced high school students – is itself a process of racialization, but one that is cloaked behind the ideological construction of Canadian work experience.

The focus on the experiences of immigrants in adult education programs containing volunteer work placements offered by school boards in Ontario emerged out of my early interview data. I was fortunate that there was publicly accessible data on the school board programs I could draw on without having to redo ethical review forms. Clearly the role of ethical review committees is not to ensure that research is “really useful”, but with processes developed to “uphold the highest ethical and regulatory standards of research involving human or animal subjects” (University of Toronto, 2006, ‘Ethics Review’ para. 1), universities privilege legalistic, often nonsensical actions such as having to ask permission to post on a public bulletin board. In the quest for “really useful knowledge” ethical review processes often limit our ability to “follow our noses”, to switch gears, to take a slightly different path than we planned before we were allowed to gather data and interact (officially) with people.

References
University of Toronto (2004) Research ethics website, Available at:
http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/eh_when_qsg.html. [April 22, 2009].
University of Toronto (2006) Ethics Review, Available at:

This document was added to the Education-Line database on 26 June 2009.