

Student experience podcast transcript: Jonathan Smetherham

Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.

The research was an ethnographic study of development which essentially posited that most development-driven volunteer or aid agencies are the brain child of western organizations. I spent some time living with a local family in rural Guatemala which placed me in a strong position to assess the extent to which local ideologies, concerns and agendas were being acted on. My case study suggested that smaller, independent organizations were in a better position to address these issues, but they were nevertheless driven by Western ideas. For my study, I argued that the aim of such organizations would be to indigenize development – to aim for a position whereby they are able to ‘hand-over’ key strategic roles to the local community in order to effectively develop themselves.

In terms of research design, my ethnographic case study lasted six weeks, and involved various research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured surveys, and in-depth interviews with a few individuals (including directors of local indigenous organizations such as ConAlfa, the rural literacy branch of the Guatemalan government). I used a mixture of snowball sampling, convenience sampling and simple random sampling in order to gain access to key individuals. This decision was partly driven by the fact that there was limited administrative data available for the area in order to develop a more representative sampling method.

What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?

Having spent a number of years travelling and working in developing countries, I had been keen to find a course that would enable me to further explore the needs of developing countries. Sociology was a course that enabled me to do this, whilst at the same time develop core skills in research methods, social theory, policy and analysis. However, the opportunity to do an in-depth study in this area was something I felt very passionately about and I had every intention of using the dissertation as a stepping stone to develop my career in this direction (be that for professional organizations or further academic work). I was motivated by genuine interest in the issues faced by developing countries, first-hand experience of working in this environment, and a desire to have something tangible associated with my name with which I could climb the career ladder.

Did you need to secure access to an organization in order to do your research and, if so, how did you go about this?

Yes, I negotiated access to a volunteer organization in Guatemala. Fortunately, life was made simpler by the fact that I had spent several months volunteering a few years prior to the study, and so I'd already established a good working relationship with key individuals and members of the community. The research did require me to miss a portion of my undergraduate course because, although this coincided with the Christmas holidays, I still missed several weeks of lectures. I also had to negotiate with my university and demonstrate that I had a solid track record of academic achievement to try and convince them that this would not be detrimental to my degree. Fortunately, the faculty staff were incredibly

supportive of my efforts, and after discussions with relevant parties, I was given clearance to proceed with my two-month project.

In order to gain access to this organization, I first contacted the director and explained briefly what I hoped to achieve and asked if, in principle, they would be happy to have me there. Given a positive response, I was able to use this to solidify my position within the university. Once the go-ahead had been given, I was able to make further contact with the organization to explain the further details of my study, and arrange the times and dates that I would be conducting my study.

Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?

Although I had a general sense of what I wanted to achieve from the research, the process of actually refining the research questions was extremely iterative and continued to develop as the research progressed. I believe I was still refining my research questions in the final few weeks before the deadline – whether this is something recommended or not, I don't know, but it did ensure that my research actually addressed them.

In a nutshell, the questions were developed through a general idea of what I hoped to achieve through the research—identifying gaps in existing literature which I hoped to fill, refining and editing questions during the data collection process, is where I began to see what would and wouldn't be possible. In further refining these questions during the analysis and writing up of my data, when I had a greater understanding of what I had achieved through my research.

How did you go about the literature review? Can you run us through the steps that you took?

Fortunately, I chose a subject area I was very interested in and so already had access to a number of articles and materials which provided very useful background information as a starting point. I also consulted with my supervisor who was experienced in this area and was able to provide a number of sources which broadened the scope of my analysis considerably. After this initial process, I developed my research questions and then used these as the basis for a more probing lit review. By this stage, I had seen a few of the 'big names' cropping up frequently, and so began searching out their scholarly work for greater insight.

At the same time, I had decided to use an ethnographic research design. As such, I began reading more methodological texts and, fortunately, discovered a wealth of information on ethnographic studies which explored very similar topics in other areas of the world. I was then able to begin implementing a much wider perspective on my literature review.

By the time I began the analysis, I had acquired a considerable amount of preliminary data from the lit review. Although a large amount of this wasn't ultimately included in the final stages of my project, I wouldn't say it was time wasted – as this background information was invaluable in setting a solid foundation on which to base my research.

After the actual research project had been conducted, I did essentially re-write the literature review given that the scope of my study had changed so considerably during the data-collection process.

However, this was a much more focused and efficient exercise – partly due to the impending deadline, and in part because the review was no longer an exploratory exercise, but something which was sharp, crisp and had more focus.

What prompted you to choose this research design and method?

I wanted to choose a method that was flexible, as there were a lot of uncertain factors that would come into play during the fieldwork process. However, I also wanted to ensure that my approaches were methodologically sound, so I knew that I would need to clearly define a number of methods that would form the basis of the project, so that I could implement additional elements on an ad hoc basis. To summarize, my choices were motivated by my desire to make an ethnographic study as rigorous as possible, whilst at the same time maintaining the flexibility to add elements whilst I was in the field.

How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?

I used a snowball sampling method as I was living amongst the community for seven weeks and contacts would be made almost every day through my activities as a volunteer. By spending time talking to residents, I would be introduced to others and made aware of further areas of the community that might be beneficial to visit. I recognize that there were constraints – firstly, as I had a short period of time for the field work, I wasn't going to gain a full insight into the community and realized that the research would be more of an overview.

Similarly, as I was an outsider so to speak, this required me to be culturally sensitive in my behavior at all times. For this reason, it was not appropriate to talk to certain sections of the community – particularly more traditional communities living on the borders.

Throughout my project, I argued that this sampling strategy still held significance on a wider scale, particularly since targeted interviewing was done to reduce male-to-female, and young-to-old bias. However, whilst I would have liked to have had access to a more diverse population, it simply was not feasible given the circumstances. It was better to conceive my research as a study based on the core community. Therefore, the sampling strategy employed was an "illustrative" or "evocative" one in so far as it sought only to provide a flavour of the wider community.

I also experienced some methodological complications with the sampling strategy, and so to counteract these, a high level of organizational rigor was required throughout the sampling process. For example, a local man whose opinion I valued highly worked in another town as a government advisor and was only home at weekends. I didn't want to intrude on his family life, but similarly thought his opinions would be valuable to my research and so therefore, we arranged the interview two weeks in advance. Likewise, an opportunity with a local business owner was missed because due to the relatively unorganized nature of every day Guatemalan life, arranging a meeting and sticking to it seemed impossible. This is perhaps a pitfall in the nature of snowball sampling, and whilst opportunities were missed, I felt a balanced sample was nevertheless achieved in the long run.

What were your research questions?

My main question was how might NGOs practically overcome issues of legitimacy, accountability and sustainability by utilizing collaborative approaches?

In order to effectively answer this question, the research would also answer the following:

- What significance or value does the local community attribute to the NGO?
- To what extent is the local community involved or excluded from participation in the NGO's projects and decision making process?
- What are the primary functions of the NGO and are there any unintended consequences?
and
- Does the NGO address or reproduce inequalities found in the wider community?

Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?

The main difficulties I encountered were due to the fact that I had not clearly refined my research questions. The area I was interested in exploring was broad, and the task of streamlining the assignment seemed overwhelming; however, this proved relatively straight forward to deal with as I started early, gave myself lots of time and had not been afraid to read lots, write lots and re-write.

What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?

The main lesson I learnt from this is that anything is possible. I don't think I took any negatives away from this experience – the few minor setbacks I encountered were far outweighed by the benefits acquired and it has been a learning curve that has prepared me well for my professional research role.

If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would it be?

Go with your gut instinct. Virtually anything is possible at this level and in professional research, the opportunity to do an innovative piece of research on something that interests you are few and far between, so relish the chance! If it is a subject that interests you or that you feel passionate about, then you will produce a better piece of research as a result (even if you are sick of it by the time you finish!)

How did you go about analyzing the data?

The bulk of the analysis was conducted after the initial period of fieldwork using the 'code and retrieve' system to identify segments of data which could be copied and filed under specific categories. This was an important process in my analysis, since it helped me to organize large amounts of data. There were two stages to my analysis: firstly the identification of themes; and secondly the use of coding to manage the data and group together similar responses.

As participant experience was relatively long-term, the themes emerged both during and after the period of active fieldwork meaning that a rigorous process of analysis was necessary. First, I typed up the field note and observations with wide margins, ensuring that each page had the correct date on top.

Then, I made a provisional list of topics before and during my research, and updated this as needed. The whole process of analytical coding was associated with the cutting and pasting of transcripts, in which chunks of text are placed alongside other items fitting under the same thematic heading.

What problems did you encounter at this stage, and how did you succeed in overcoming them?

I struggled with the analysis of qualitative data. It took me some time to get my head around how to process this; but ultimately, by reading various analytical texts, I began to grasp the idea which gave me the confidence to dive in and apply a rigorous analysis.

How did you go about writing up your research project?

There was no predetermined timeline for writing up my research. Essentially, it was a continuous process from start to finish, but due to work and other commitments, some periods were more hectic than others, but essentially the work was ongoing.

I ended up with a folder full of field notes, ranging from survey data through to interview transcripts. There was no other way around this than to spend a few long days typing up my findings. There are things that can make this a slightly more enjoyable task though – thing such as listening to music and taking regular breaks to do alternative things to keep you focused.

My experience leads me to believe that part of being a researcher is the self-discipline to be able to lock yourself away for hours at a time and work in focused bursts of activity. Writing in this focused, absorbed way really enabled me to get to grips with my analysis and ensure that I was focused when I needed to be, but still had lots of other things going on in my life.

Did you encounter any problems in the writing process, and, if so, how did you overcome them?

One of the biggest challenges I faced was in the last few weeks before the deadline. I convinced myself that there were too many distractions at home, and so began working in the library. However, this was not a pleasant place to be. As dissertation deadlines approached, I found the presence of lots of other students distracting and would frequently find myself getting irritated by the amount of noise and rustling made by other students.

In the end, I decided that the library was not the best environment to tackle my neuroses. Instead, I opted to properly clean my room, move everything that could possibly be construed as a distraction out of my peripheral vision and ensured that for the final few weeks of writing up I had a clean, organized and clutter-free space in which to work. Having that space proved essential in beating the panic and annoyances that everyone gets as deadlines approach.