

Researching your own institution: Higher Education

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Summary

This resource is aimed at those who are considering researching the higher education institution (HEI) in which they are employed or enrolled. It highlights and offers guidance on the issues which are specific to researching HEIs (as a particular type of organization) as an 'insider'. This kind of 'insider research' is sometimes referred to as 'endogenous research'.

The resource highlights some of the key issues raised in conducting research into one's own HEI and the following are discussed: the characteristics of this kind of research and its growth; its strengths and weaknesses; conceptualising the nature of HEIs; ethical issues; and issues about value and robustness. The resource concludes by offering a series of questions for reflection.

Endogenous Research: being an 'insider' researcher

Doing endogenous research (Maruyama, 1991) in the HEI where you are employed or studying could be described as 'insider' research. However, 'insiderness' is not a fixed value: you may be researching aspects of the institution previously unknown to you, collecting data from strangers, and what counts as 'inside' also depends on your own identity positioning. Therefore, many commentators suggest that it is best to conceptualise a continuum between insider and outsider research rather than viewing them as binary opposites (for example Carter, 2004; Labree, 2002).

Merton (1972) suggests that the 'Insider doctrine' (only insiders can do 'proper' research) and the 'Outsider doctrine' (only outsiders have the necessary detachment for 'proper' research) are both fallacies precisely because we rarely are completely an insider or an outsider.

Endogenous research carries benefits: you have better access both to naturalistic data and to respondents; you are better able to produce 'emic' accounts (ones meaningful to actors), especially using an ethnographic approach; you are better able to use naturalistic data, critical discourse analysis and phenomenography, because you are 'culturally literate'. Insider research can be more practical: cheaper and easier. In short you are empowered to offer a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of lived realities, of the hermeneutics of everyday life. There may be a better chance of having an impact too, especially if you are conducting action research or if one of your research questions addresses the implications for policy and practice of your findings.

However your involvement as an actor means that you may lose the ability to produce good, culturally neutral, 'etic' accounts; you may find it difficult to 'see' some dimensions of social life because they have become normalised for you (the literature talks about the difficulty for 'insiders' of 'making the normal strange'); there may be conflicts between your role as a researcher and your professional or student role in the HEI, and respondents who know you may have pre-formed expectations of your alignments and preferences in ways which change their responses (a form of the effect called 'interview bias').

One proposed resolution of this dilemma is to conduct research with 'polyocularity', involving research teams from several 'inside' and/or 'outside' cultures (Maruyama, 1991), but this is of course resource intensive.

Researching HEIs as Organizations

Endogenous research in higher education rarely reflects on the nature of universities or other HEIs. Trowler (2008) offers a summary of alternative perspectives on the cultural characteristics of HEIs and considers their implications for research design. While some authors consider it unproblematic to categorise HE institutions into one of a number of boxes (usually four, for example McNay, 1995, but six for Bergquist, 2008), Alvesson (2002) depicts them as each having a unique multiple cultural configuration and warns against fixed, totalising accounts of institutional culture (2002, 186-187). Deciding where you stand on this issue, and being explicit about it, is important because not to do so would allow tacit assumptions about what an HEI is to shape the research design and the way you see the data.

Ethics in Research: the anonymity problem

There are excellent discussions of ethical issues in general in the BERA online resources

(referenced at the end of this paper). Endogenous research foregrounds the problem of institutional and personal anonymity and creates difficulties around citing information from reports and referencing these, because the institution is usually named in titles. Steps which might assist the anonymising of people and/or institutions include: creating pseudonyms, obscuring identifying details and laying false trails in descriptions – changing small, but unique, details of history, geography and characteristics in a way which does not alter details of the research (the reader must however always be aware that you will do this, and why). But these have limited value when the reader knows that you are a member of the institution being researched. One option is to obscure that fact, but this breaks the important principle of transparency in methodology (so that the reader can assess its robustness) and transparency about and reflection on yourself and your position as a researcher (Ezzy, 2002).

It is normally best to assume that the reader will be able to identify your institution, should they wish to. Therefore in the ethical clearance process and in information to respondents you cannot guarantee institutional anonymity. This affects a number of decisions you must take. Senior managers and others will want assurance that your research will not damage the reputation of their organization (increasingly significant in a very competitive HE environment). Individuals will need assurance that neither they nor their job role will be traceable, if their HEI is identified.

Endogenous data collection can raise ethical issues around disparities in power: you need to consider ethical and methodological issues around interviewing those who are more powerful than you (Walford, 1994), those who lack power relative to you (Scott, 1991; Rubin and Rubin, 2005); and interviewing your peers (Platt, 1981). Given that access to raw data is typically very limited, the key ethical question concerns the outputs of research: how you write them; what their circulation is; and how robust they are at protecting institutions and people. Good practice includes: offering respondents sight of drafts of all research outputs so that they can assess whether their identity and role are sufficiently obscured; asking an independent reader to assess your reports for ‘traceability’, and guaranteeing this measure to your HEI and respondents; changing detail of publications relating to the organisation and informing the reader of this. Transparency in your approach to this is important.

‘Value’ and Robustness in Endogenous Research

Researching your own HEI will almost always be a form of case study research, about which there is a large literature base (to dip into it, see Gomm, Hammersely and Foster, 2000; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2009). Thomas (2011) claims that case study research offers a distinctive form of knowledge: ‘exemplary knowledge’, which draws its legitimacy from the fact that it is corrigible and interpretable in the context of experience rather than theory. This is a significant argument for those who research their own HEI because judgements about the robustness of data analysis and conclusions drawn from data are made on the basis of ‘insider’ knowledge.

Those who research their own HEIs need to be clear about precisely what their research questions are, what the rationale behind the research design is, and what the truth claims are. This advice holds for any kind of research, but other research designs tend to draw less critical fire.

Questions for Those Embarking On Endogenous Research

Those contemplating endogenous research within their HEI should carefully consider the following questions:

1. In designing the research, how do I know that the approach adopted will answer the questions I have?
2. How do I design the research to take best advantage of the benefits of endogenous research while avoiding its pitfalls as far as possible?
3. Conceptually, how do I represent my organization, its culture and its practices?
4. How and from whom will I secure access to the data I need?
5. Whom should I inform about the project, and how should I describe it, when I seek 'informed' consent?
6. How will I ensure that the project is run ethically so that all participants and institutional bodies are protected?
7. If I am using participant observation, what are the ethical issues in relation to the people I observe in natural settings (eg should I frequently remind them about my dual role)?
8. If using interviews, what measures do I take to deal with interview bias?
9. What should the balance be between collecting naturalistic data and formally 'collected' data?
10. How should I analyse the different forms of data I have, given that there will almost certainly be a large amount of various sorts?
11. How, and how much, will I communicate my findings to participants to ensure that they are happy with what I intend to make public?

12. How do I satisfy the reader about the robustness of my research and its findings?

To see one example of how these issues were tackled in practice, my five-year ethnographic study of 'NewU' grapples these issues in the context of that study. It was published as Trowler, 1998, and extracts from a final draft of that book are available on the web, referenced below.

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Further Resources

Association for Institutional Research: <http://www.airweb.org>

BERA online resources on ethical issues in research: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/bera-resources/ethics/>

Bamber, V., Trowler, P., Saunders, M. and Knight, P. (eds) (2009) Enhancing Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Theory, cases, practices. Open University Press/SRHE.

European Association for Institutional Research: <http://www.eair.nl/>

Higher Education Close UP JiscMail list: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=HIGHER-EDUCATION-CLOSE-UP>

Organizations and Journals interested in endogenous research:
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/endogenousresearch.doc>

Peter Reason on Action Research/Human Inquiry/Participative Inquiry:

http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers_list.html

Trowler (1998) on the research approach used and research issues raised in his endogenous 5 year ethnographic study of NewU:

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/ResearchIssuesAcademicsRespondingtoChange>

Trowler (1998) on accessing the 'second record' and deploying different types of data to interrogate an argument: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/InterpretingData.doc>

Trowler (1997) on his use of qualitative data analysis software in an endogenous study of his university: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/hyperres.htm>