

45th Biennial Convention (16-20 November 2019)

Researching Participants With Power and Privilege: The Triumphs and Tribulations of "Studying Up"

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This presentation reports the successes and challenges encountered in a series of ethnographic studies that were conducted between 2013 to 2018. Throughout all these studies I encountered 'studying up' subtly and face to face as a phenomenon. The presentation is about researching participants with power and privilege which is coined as 'studying up'. 'Studying up' is about researching the social institutions that has power and participants who have power through social, legal, and cultural contexts. Researching such social institutions and participants pose methodological challenges though rewarding at the same time.

A series of ethnographic studies were conducted between 2013 to 2018. The primary study was a doctoral requirement, which was succeeded by a post-doctoral study as well as two funded research projects. In all the studied the participants were purposely selected, and they were officers from criminal and justice system and traditional leaders as well as forensic nurses. The main data generation techniques that I used for these studies were observations, conversations and recording of the talking heads. The studies were conducted in western and traditional courts in South Africa and the medico-legal centres. Collaborative data analysis was done with the participants. When 'studying up', in a cultured and gendered society like South Africa one anticipates many crossroads, diversions and roadblocks during the entire research processes especially data generation techniques. The epiphanies indicated interrelated issues on access, a sense of apprehension and the preconceived racial and gendered narratives that shape racialized societies like South Africa.

Usually, when studying up researchers have less social and perceived power than the researched. Innovative measures to collaborate with participants can be one of the ways to overcome issues of access. There is a need to have clear understandings of the research relationship, reflexive processes in research as well as issues of power connection in research when 'studying up'.

Title:

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Keywords:

'Studying Up', Ethnography and South Africa

References:

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Abstract Summary:

The abstract describes how challenging is to research participants with power and privilege and how best to maintain focus of the study and smooth collaboration.

Content Outline:

I. Introduction

'Studying Up' as a research concept

II. Body

A. Series of Ethnographic designs that were conducted.

B. Data generation and analysis techniques that were followed

C. Epiphanies and Counter-strategies to maintain collaboration

III. Conclusion

Understandings of the research relationship

Reflexive processes in research

Power connection in research

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Author Summary: The presenter and organiser is a Senior Lecturer at University of Pretoria, teaching at postgraduate level using Transdisciplinarity as the approach. Her area of research is in Women's health, African-indigenous knowledge systems and Pedagogy of Technology.