DISCUSSION ON THEPROPOSED METHODOLOGY AND PRELIMINARY FIELD EXPERIENCEOF A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The cultural discrepancy between the Western worlds and the Asians is wide (Yang, 2000). Most prominent textbooks and resources were written by Westerners and they were coming from the Western contexts. Thus, the knowledge in the textbooks might not be totally relevant in the Asian contexts. For qualitative research, real life settings are usually unpredictable and diverge from the texts.The research proposalportrayed an ideal image of the world out there. However, the preliminary experience in the field created enormous anxiety, as the ideal and the reality did not converge. Helpful resources to counter the anxiousness were the real experiences of the veteran researchers.Resources on field experience based on localized setting are minimal, especially in the South East Asian contexts.Thus, this paper aimed to discuss theproposed research methodology and the preliminary field experienceof a qualitative researcher in the context of Malaysian settings. At the juncture where the ideal and the reality deviate, reference to the experiences of veteran researchers, intuition, discussions with supervisors and peer researchers, gut feelings and respectfulness to the participants became the guide posts in the real life setting. This convergence meanwhile created new learning opportunities for the researcher.

Keywords: Qualitative research; preliminary field experience; methodology

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Introduction

With the emerging themes of Asian epistemologies and Asian forms of Psychology, the cultural discrepancy between the Western worlds and the Asians is prevailing (Yang, 2000). Application of textbooks, psychological studies and journals from America to understand human beings is called into question as the American psychology researches are based on the 5% of the world population (300 million of Americans out of 6.5 billion world population). A human science based on human diversity and is representative of the whole humanity is indispensable (Arnett, 2008).

For qualitative research, field experience is changeable. There is no one method which could fit all. Textbooks knowledge sometime painted an ideal outside world. They could be irrelevant in some social settings. It was a nerve wracking experience when the ideal and the reality did not match. In my personal journey as a novel qualitative researcher, I found the life experience of the veteran researcher in field work was a tremendous support and resource for me to keep going.

There were literatures from the West which addressed the experience of the veteran researchers. Finding resources from on the experiences of the veteran researchers from the West was easier than finding localized resources. Thus, the aim of the paper was to address the experience in between the ideal and the reality from the context of Malaysian settings. The layout of this paper began with the proposed research methodology and followed by the researcher's preliminary field experience. The lesson learned when ideal and reality depart.

Proposed Methodology

Ensuring the Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher is the fundamental instrument for this study. Richardson stated that "the ethnographic life is not separable from the Self" (Richardson & St. Piere, 2005, p. 965). The integration of the identity of researcher and experience has recently gained extensive theoretical and philosophical support (Patton, 2002). In fact, Maxwell (1998)

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believed that the researcher's experience could become a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks. The followings are some of my background.

I am a married woman. I have two boys, aged 8 and 10. I have been married for eleven years. Throughout these eleven years of marriage, the process of deepening the marital relationship is like the process of peeling an onion layer by layer. As a Western trained counselor as well as a Chinese wife, I noticed the Western thoughts and local beliefs sometimes mingle, but sometime clash. This process of experiencing the West and the East sometime could blind me from seeing the person who I married. This alerts me to be aware of my presence for the participants who I interview.

In terms of educational background, I acquired six years of undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the United States, before starting a counseling career at a Christian based non-profit organization called The Bridge Communication in 2001. At that time, the establishment of counseling practice was still in the very infant stage. Local marital study was quite lagging behind (Hull, 2011). I further studied in Master in Counseling at University of Malaya after working for five years. Most of the training and theories learned in counseling courses were Western based.

At the initial stage of practice, it never occurred to me that there were difficulties in applying the Western marital concepts to the local couples in counseling sessions. Western knowledge was like an absolute truth of marriage for me at that time. Though I was aware of sensitivity toward cultural issues, there were not many local resources for reference regarding the cross-cultural counseling experience. Even during supervision and case studies, cross-cultural issues were rarely surfaced for discussion.

It was through years of experience in trial and error, through truancy of couple sessions, feedback from genuine and sincere participants of my seminars and workshops, comments from professional peers and mentors from Taiwanese Professors, thatI began to realize how much sensitivity was needed to identify the cultural specific factors before "implementing" the Western concepts into their lives. In fact, without recognizing the discrepancies between the Western models and local cultural values, intervention would

seem like cutting off from cultural values, which could be assessed as symptoms of disorders (Clammer, 1996). The experience I have gained allows me to be sensitive to my lens, so that I could avoid "imposing schemes of interpretation on the social world" (Denzin, 1988, p. 432).

Meanwhile, it is impossible that I could discard theories, values and assumptions during data collection. I will document all data and make it available for scrutiny by others. Transparency is not to prove that I am clear from biases, but to understand how my values affect the research process and the outcome of the study (Maxwell, 1998). I will keep a journal log for personal reflection and observations.

Practice of Research Ethics

Ethical practice demands much sensitivity. This study will be grounded on the three moral principles based on the context of this study.Firstly,respect for persons.I will not use the participants as "a means to an end" (Marshall &Rossman, 2011). I respect their privacy, their anonymity and their right to participate or not. I assure their withdrawal from this research can be done any time, without having to give reason.

Secondly, beneficence – I will try my best to ensure the participants are not harmed by taking part in the study (Marshall &Rossman, 2011). In order to ensure the participants are free from harm by participating in this research, I will keep confidentiality by ensuring their anonymity. A marker will be assigned to represent them; their real names will be kept anonymous. They will be told how the data will be kept. I will inform the participants that I keepthe data and it is only accessibletome and my research supervisors.

Also, I will not make any interpretations or value judgments on their homes and the couples' interactions when carrying out the interviews. I will respect their home settings as well as their interactions. I will not take any pictures without their consent.

Thirdly, justice – paying attention to who benefits and who does not benefit from the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2011).I will not try to do anything that would cause discomfort or disruption to the participants. The participants' welfare will be prioritized

above my need to get the research work done. I will choose the time when it is suitable for them.I will also prepare a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation. The gift will be given to them after the interview sessions are over. If the participants withdraw or they refuse to say anything because they feel uncomfortable, I will respect them.

Sample

For this study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling will be adopted. Recruitment of sample will be done through word of mouth among friends and relatives, emails, WhatsApp, SMS and social media networking. The recruited couples could provide a link to their friends through snow balling. The sample for this research exhibits the following features:

a) Chinese Malaysian – Chinese who are born in Malaysia.
b) Couples who went through mid-life.
c) Couples who have children.
d) Couples who have in-laws.
e) Couples who have been married over 40 years.

In terms of sample size, Yin (2011) suggested that instead of finding a standard answer for how many participants to interview, the depth of data and the complexity involved in the study should be considered. Merriam (2009) also stated that besides the research question, the availability of the resources to support the study is one of the considerations. Thus, in considering the depth of study and the resources available, for this study, the sample size is approximately 5-7 couples.

In-depth Interviews

To find out the marital strengths of those couples, it is not feasible for me to observe the experience of those couples in their home settings on a daily basis. Thus, in-depth interviews would be more appropriate for people to talk about themselves, their marriages and their experiences. I will use life events method to capture the data. Using life events will reduce the chances that the participants have to answer from my theoretical frameworks. A general question, such as how they get to know each other, will be used to

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start out the interview sessions. Family pictures are another avenue to elicit the couples' marital experiences and rapport building. Talking about the family pictures would sound more relevant and natural to their experiences.

After considering the pros and cons of interviewing the couple together and separately, the potential pitfalls for doing separate individual interview, and considering the research objective, I would opt for interviewing the couple together. The rationale for meeting the participants as a couple is that it might open a window to explore the dynamics of their relationship. It may also help to elicit the "collective memory of events and feeling" (Hertz, 1995, p. 436) of the couples. This would serve as verification to ensure the quality of data. For instance, it might be possible that the husband feels satisfied with their marital relationship, but the wife might not be. Thus, I cannot assume both husband and wife have the same marital satisfaction level(Hicks & Platt, 1970). With the relational dynamics, interviewing the couple together can also validate the sample chosen.

Observation

The stance of observation for the research is participant observation (Creswell, 2013). For this study, it is impossible to adopt the observational stances as complete participant, observer participant and complete observer. As the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of the married couples, by adopting participant observation stance, I am able to immerse in the setting.Observing the home setting gives a holistic view of the couples (Patton, 2002).

Plan for Entry

Fontana and Frey (2005) stated that the success of a study relies on how the interviewer presents himself or herself. For this study, I will present myself as learner. I will also inform the participants that there is no right or wrong answer. My role is to understand the couples. I am trying to minimize the hierarchical position in interview. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), when the researcher is able to show the human side and freely express feelings and concerns, methodologically, it invites wider dimensions of response and more insights into the lives of the participants.

To gain access to the participants of this study, other than usingmy personal contacts, referral by friends, relatives or others will be used. Using my network and referral are effective ways to get to the participants in this cultural context because people in general tend to trust someone they know (Jankowiak, 2009). Silverman (2013) also proposed the advantage of using personal network due to the existing trust between the researcher and the researched.

After getting their contacts, I will make initial contact by calling the participants (both husband and wife) before meeting them in person. After the brief introduction, my personal interest in studying marriage and the purpose of the study will be disclosed.I will seek their permission to visit their homes.Merriam (2009) pointed out that setting up a preliminary meeting could also be used to screen whether the participants are appropriate for the study. Thus, by making the initial meeting, I could determine whether the couples are appropriate for this study. At the same time, the participants are giving the opportunity to meet me in person before they decided to take part in this study (Silverman, 2013).

This initial meeting will be useful also to elaborate on the research and my background, especially they have known me and the study through their friends. I cannot assume that the participants are clear on what I am going to do (Silverman, 2013). Thus, the initial meeting will help to elaborate, clarify, and create a cooling off period for them to reconsider their participation. It can also be useful to screen whether the participants are suitable for this study.

During the initial meeting, I will explainmy role. I will prepare the participants regarding the likely activities involved in the interview and how they can take part in the research.My role is also to respect the participants for withdrawal anytime without having to give reason.I am ready to answer their questions which pertain to the involvement of this research. Meanwhile, I assure the participants that this research is not seeking any right answers. Their real life experience is very much appreciated. I would try something like this: "Thank you for being willing to take part in this research. In fact, during the interview, you do not have to feel you need to give me a standard answer or the right

answer. Especially there is nothing right and wrong about how one experiences the marriage. It would be very helpful if you could just tell it like it is."

During the actual interview meetings with the participants, I will respect their perspective even if it is against my values or frame of reference. I will also try to refrain from using jargon or professional terms during the meeting and interviews because it would create a kind of "academic armor" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 118) that would distance the researcher from the participants. Getting rid of the "academic armor" would facilitate participants' acceptance ofthe researcher.

Plans for Exit

After spending hours listening to the sharing of the couples, the emotional bond between me and the participants is fostered in some ways. Thus, a proper plan to say goodbye without making the participants feel abandoned, a debrief sessionis needed (Marshall &Rossman, 2011).

For this research, during the initial meeting, I will prepare the participants that the research relationship will end when the project is finishing. Being sensitive to the feelings of the participants, I will exit gradually by talking about the completion of the research and giving a gift as an expression of appreciation when it comes to the end (Marshall &Rossman, 2011). I will also find time to debrief the feelings towards the participants with peers. These feelings will also be jotted down in the memo.

Exiting is not just getting something from the participants and leaving the field. Reflecting on the relationship between researcher and the researched is worthwhile to reflect upon how I and the participants have made up the "reality" out there. This reflection will provide a perspective for me to view how I impact on the relationships with the participants and the findings of this study. Silverman (2013) suggested that "whatever your theoretical model, it is good practice to address how your relationship with the people in your study might affect your findings" (p. 283).

Preliminary Experience in the Field

Five couples participated in the preliminary testing. Three couples came from the same rural area and two couples came from an urban setting. The backgrounds of the rural setting couples are rendered before the urban setting couples. Thehusbands' occupations for the rural couples before they retired were food hawker, fish wholesaler in the wet market and a small wood factory owner. The wives of the food hawker and the factory owner were the main business assistants. The wife of the fish wholesaler was a full time housewife. The years of marriage for these couples were 63 years, 50 years and 44 years. One couplelives with their adult child (who suffers from cancer). Another couple lives with their adult child family in the same house. The last couple lives with their adult child family, who live in the house next to theirs. One couple spoke Mandarin and two other spoke Chinese dialects during the interviews. These couples were introduced through friends and relatives of mine.

The years of marriage for the urban couples were 53 and 39. The husbands' occupations for the urban setting were government servant and service sector employee. The wives were full time housewives. The urban couples stay by themselves. The language used for urban couples was Mandarin. They were introduced to me through friends.

All the interviews were conducted in their home settings. The interview session for each couple lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Field Observation

Setting appointments with the rural couples was easier than for the urban couples. I can visit the rural couples on that day when phone calls were made. For urban couples, I had to slot appointments between doctors' appointments and working hours (one urban couple still works). Making initial meeting for screening was not possible. Once they agreed, they were ready to be interviewed.

The support networks for the rural couples come mainly from their children. For instance, the children of the rural couples stay nearby or live in the same house.On the

other hand, the support systems of the urban couples come from neighbors, their siblings and the church.

Hobbies of urban couples are more diverse, such as listening to music, reading, writing, baking, cooking, finding tasty food, watching television and community work. For rural couples, their hobbies are watching television, taking care of house chores, and hanging out with grandchildren.

The expressions of rural couples were simple. It reflects their behaviors in daily lives. For example, when I asked the rural couples, "How do you deal with conflict between you and your spouse?" The common answer they gave was, "I walked away. Then we came back like nothing happened." For the urban couples, when the same question was asked, they replied, "It is very common to have conflicts. Every couple sure has conflicts." I asked further what they do, they answered, "We would let things cool off. Then life would be like usual. We did not hold grudge."

While carrying out interview in the home setting, the grandchildren and the children of the rural couples sat nearby listening to the sharing. This did not happen in the urban settings. Interview with the presence of others was not something I prepared to do in my proposal. The experience in the rural setting led me to be aware of the possibility.

Lessons Learned from the Preliminary Field Experience

I was quite amazed at how receptive the participants were when informed consent was rendered to them.I was expecting they might feel uneasy or unfamiliar with this kind of protocol. Surprisingly, they just signed after I explained to them. That could mainly be because they know the persons who referred tome. They tend to trust someone they know.

Another surprise from the field was the urban couples sent me off with food to bring along. The rural couples did not exhibit this kind of behaviors. Reciprocity in gift exchange is a way of politeness among the Chinese. I was caught off guard as no preparation was made beforehand. Giving gifts to the participants has been a controversial issue in the field. In order not to set up the participants, I did not prepare gifts during the interview visit. This was a big lesson learned. I brought small gifts and kept them in the

bag afterward for the next interview. In case the participants give me gifts, I would be prepared to exchange as a show of courtesy.

Another lesson I learned was, saying 'no' was not a common practice. The ways of expressing "no" were very subtle. When I was being assertive by giving alternatives, some participants might perceive that as the need to accommodate to my requests. I need to be very sensitive to their first response or their first reaction. That first reaction or first response could say what they truly mean.

Through pilot testing, I noticed leading questions were difficult to grasp for most participants. Some participants even showed signs of anxiousness when they were unsure if the answers they provided were right or wrong. It was easier for them to talk about day to day things, incidents and stories. This opened up a window for me to redesign the interview questions. Life events were used instead to capture the data, which could reduce contamination of my presupposed theoretical frameworks.

The meaning of marriage for the urban and the rural couples was very different from that in the West. In the West, love is the center of marriage. Also, presence of children had been identified to lower marital satisfaction in the West (Amato, Johnson, Booth & Rogers, 2003). However, the buttress of marriage for the couples here is children.

Tolerance was one identified marital variable which is common to both rural and urban couples. From the couples' point of view, marital relationship and family relationship are all mingled as one. They did not see marital relationship as one relationship which needs special care. For them, if the children are good, then everything is good.

Conclusion

The initial experience in the field has allowed me to experience "the researcher as the instrument for the research". I noticed I changed according to the contexts and types of people I met. As a Western trained researcher who grew up with the local cultural values as a person, my experiences in synthesizing the field experiences have been overwhelming. In fact, it was a nerve wracking experience.The textbooks knowledge and the real setting

diverged unexpectedly. The guide posts to continue the research included: the field struggling experiences of those veteran researchers, intuitive feelings, discussions with supervisors and peer researchers, gut feelings and respectfulness for the participants.

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