

# Contracts and member checks in qualitative research in human geography: reason for caution?

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*Contracts with, and member checks by, research participants are increasingly recommended in qualitative research in human geography. However, differences in qualitatively researching 'the powerful', as opposed to researching 'down', mean that contracts and member checks may need to be approached with caution regarding the former. The possibility of the censorship of critique by powerful research participants is exemplified in this article, and a number of more general dilemmas in qualitatively researching 'up' are also discussed. Finally, some choices which might help address possible difficulties in qualitatively researching the powerful are outlined.*

**Key words:** Australia, contracts, member checks, qualitative research

## Introduction

These are exciting times for human geographers doing qualitative research. Qualitative research methods and techniques are being explored, good practice in qualitative research is being established, and criteria for evaluating qualitative research are being developed. Perhaps now it is time to consider certain differences within qualitative research, and how such differences might require some alternative practices. One difference I wish to discuss here is that between research concerned more with empathy, advocacy, empowerment or 'speaking for' research participants, common in cultural and feminist geographies, and research more concerned with 'speaking against' a role played by research participants (Becker 1971; Erickson 1986; Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Reinharz 1992; Silverman 1993; Winchester 1996; Doyle 1999).<sup>1</sup> In either case, the standpoint or position (Harding 1986 1987; Pels 1996; Rose 1997) of the researcher, be it feminist, Marxist or whatever, is crucial to the researcher's

relationship with her or his situated research participants. In my experience, for example, there is a difference between a study of low-income households in an urban housing market and a study of senior managers in a capitalist enterprise. Regarding the first example, a piece of qualitative research done from the standpoint of Marxist social theory, for instance, would most likely include highlighting the disadvantaged positions of low income households in a particular urban housing market, and advocating action regarding the improvement of those positions. On the other hand, the second example would involve some critique of one role of senior managers as 'agents of capitalism' (Jackson 1999, 350). The point regarding qualitative research is that contracts and particularly member checks<sup>2</sup> may need to be approached differently depending on the relationship between a researcher's standpoint and those of her or his research participants.

The structure of the remainder of this article is, first, to discuss some of the literature on contracts

and member checks. Second, my experience using contracts and member checks is presented. Third, some of the dilemmas involved in my experience are considered. Fourth, some general choices in qualitatively researching the powerful are outlined with the aim of helping in future to address the difficulty I encountered using contracts and member checks.

## Contracts and member checks

Contracts and member checks have histories that pre-date their relatively recent importation into human geography. This importation has been from two main sources:

- 1 top down, from ethics committees or institutional review boards; and
- 2 sideways, from sociology.

First, '[i]t is increasingly the case that "contracts" with groups and communities [whose members] agree to be researched include feedback of some sort ... These "contracts" are now often demanded by ethics committees that sanction research on human subjects' (Baxter and Eyles 1997, 515). The standard approach adopted by ethics committees for research on human subjects is biomedical and/or psychological. This approach is firmly grounded in quantitative positivist science and applies either a deontological model of ethical absolutism or a utilitarian model of balancing costs or risks against benefits (Plummer 1983; Kimmel 1988; Bertilson 1990; Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Lee and Renzetti 1993). '[T]he attempt to control *biomedical* research, and to protect its subjects, has also become the model for the social sciences' (Punch 1994, 88). This approach requires that certain criteria, such as securing the informed consent of research participants, be met before research can proceed (Douglas 1979; Reiss 1979; Cassell 1982; Stanley et al 1987; Winchester 1996; Babbie 1998). 'Protocols governing informed consent have been imported directly into the social sciences from the domain of the experimental sciences—often with the assumption that the methodologies, along with questions pertaining to risk, injury, disclosure of findings, etc involved in each type of research are essentially analogous' (Parry 1998, 2159). In so called new paradigm research, however, 'the qualitative relationship is so different from quantitative approaches that

most conventional procedures for informed consent and protection of human subjects amount to little more than ritual' (Berg 1998, 39; see also Reason and Rowan 1981; Bogdan and Biklen 1992).

Second, in sociology, contracts and member checks have been developed and applied in anthropology (see for example Efrat and Mitchell 1974) and ethnography—particularly regarding research on education (see for example Ball 1984; Ellen 1984; Punch 1986; Wittrock 1986).<sup>2</sup> It is now well accepted in sociology that research participants need to be protected, and many standard contract documents are available to present to would-be participants informing them of their rights and requiring their consent before they can be involved in research (see for example Lee and Renzetti 1993; Berg 1998).

Leaving aside the issue of the justifiability of covert research (Bulmer 1982), there is a number of examples of difficulties encountered by researchers due to there being many a slip between contracts and member checks (see particularly Ball 1984; Punch 1986). Member checks are a new paradigm or fourth generation translation of more positivist respondent validation (Bloor 1978 1983; Ball 1984; Silverman 1993). They have been most influentially recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1981 1989; see also Lincoln and Guba 1985) to the point where they are 'writ large in most qualitative studies' (Creswell 1998, 203). Member checks are argued to be a key to establishing the accuracy and credibility of many types of qualitative research, and they can indeed act in this way. My concern here, however, is that efforts to establish the rigour of qualitative research in human geography have somewhat glossed over difficulties that can arise using contracts and/or member checks. Thinking back to the example in the introduction, there are differences in the power relations between a researcher and a low-income householder, as opposed to those between a researcher and a senior manager. In my experience, I had little trouble establishing a friendly, at times collaborative (McCracken 1988) or participative (Reason and Rowan 1981), relationship with low-income householders, to whom I presented a research contract and undertook member checks with almost universal consent and positive and useful feedback. With senior managers, on the other hand, I negotiated a research agreement, ultimately drawn up by a key senior manager, from a weak or supplicant position (McDowell 1992 1998), and I entered member checks with a professional, but

I could not say collaborative, relationship with the senior managers whom I had interviewed. My experience of researching the powerful, which I relate below, exemplifies that contracts and member checks are, like informed consent, confidentiality etc., too simple concepts to be generally applied across all types of qualitative research.

The difficulties I encountered are not new (see for example Becker 1971; Agar 1980; Grönfors 1982; Ball 1984; Punch 1986; McCracken 1988; van Maanen 1988), but they are perhaps less well appreciated in human geography where qualitative research is less strongly rooted than in sociology. Quite simply, while Guba and Lincoln (1989), Baxter and Eyles (1999b) and Ely *et al.* (1991, 166) 'have had no ... troubles with member checking', I have, and I relate my experience in the hope that some might find it a salutary example of difficulties that can arise using contracts and member checks. I believe that such an example is needed in human geography as a growing number of human geographers practicing qualitative research argue that research contracts, bargains (Becker 1971) or agreements (Efrat and Mitchell 1974) between researcher(s) and participant(s) should be entered into and that member checks of the researcher's narrative by participants should also be undertaken (see particularly Baxter and Eyles 1997 1999a 1999b; Bailey *et al.* 1999a 1999b). Baxter and Eyles (1997, 515; 1999a, 180; 1999b, 318) acknowledge that member checks can be problematic, citing in particular Borland's (1991) discussion of interpretative conflict. In the example given below, however, the issue was less one of conflicting interpretations and more one of conflicting standpoints. In short, the following example illustrates the possibility that aiming to 'enable the power of others' (Pile 1991, 460) can result in disempowering ourselves, for power can be taken as well as given.

Equalising power relations by allowing participants to contest one's explanations was fine in principle, but in practice it could turn friends into enemies and so compromise what one wanted to say as to make it worthless. (Burawoy *et al.* 1991, 296)

The example may also 'constitute the most telling piece of evidence that I gleaned' (Punch 1986, 49) from my research, for researchers such as Burawoy *et al.* (1991, 295) believe that 'moments of crisis, generated by oneself or others, reveal the true interests of the participants'.

For my purpose in this paper I do not wish significantly to critique the up/down distinction made in much of the literature cited. This distinction, however, has at least two difficulties: first, it implies that power is held by one individual, who is powerful, in relation to another who is powerless; and, second, it suggests that one set of rules can be used to research up, while another can be used to research down. Neither of these positions is defensible. It is increasingly argued that power is neither unilaterally held nor unidirectionally applied (Foucault 1980; Latour 1986; Deleuze 1988; in geography see Allen 1997). In short, all participants in a research collective possess power. Research may be largely initiated by one powerful actor (the researcher), but it is then translated and transformed with others (research participants), differently powerful. In short, research is a fundamentally negotiated process.

As negotiations are usually begun by the researcher, however, it is imperative to apply an absolutist principle of avoiding doing any harm to research participants. This principle, though, is just a starting point and backstop in ensuing negotiations. These negotiations can take many turns and forms. Thus, while it is important to be aware of the responsibility associated with the researcher being the instigator of a project, it is also important to note that any research collective is a heterogeneous association and that negotiations have a trajectory that result in particular outcomes, such as a report, paper, monograph or dissertation. All individuals in a research collective possess power to influence outcomes as they are produced, but this power is rarely evenly distributed between actors. Research may be negotiated, but relations are also shaped by the dynamics of power, and ultimately some actors may have a greater ability to influence an outcome than others. Negotiation often involves mutual understanding but it also requires compromise and it may not always result in positive outcomes. Negotiations also change over time. Where at one point in the research process individuals may work together harmoniously, at another they may find themselves in disagreement. Put simply, there is no way of predicting the course or outcome of negotiations.

All in a research collective, therefore, possess power but differently, and the researcher occupies a unique position as initiator of a project as well as being its common thread. As researchers, we cannot work with two codes, one for researching up and one for researching down. An absolutist ethic of

avoiding any harm to research participants must be applied. From this absolutist starting point, however, negotiations begin 'in which the language game and its moves serve to secure and stabilise circuits of power' (Clegg 1993, 42) and we may find ourselves in '[r]elations of power [that] are "systematically asymmetrical"' (Thompson 1984, 130). It is in these situations that we need to appreciate both 'the vague notion of power not as a cause of people's behaviour but as the consequence of an intense activity of enrolling, convincing and enlisting' (Latour 1986, 273) as well as that aspect of power which 'is the capacity to get one's way against either the overt wishes and/or the real interests of others in virtue of structures of exploitation, domination, subjugation and control' (Bhaskar 1993, 402). In sum, power is both held and negotiated—hierarchic and networked—and research needs to be approached in the understanding that, though we may instigate research negotiations, these are set within a research collective that associates and consolidates in ways, and is framed by structures that are largely beyond our control.

### An early accedence and a later difficulty

In negotiating permission to interview senior managers at DUST and CLEV,<sup>3</sup> I agreed, perhaps naively, to the following conditions:

As discussed on X February, DUST grants approval for you to seek to arrange interviews with the individuals discussed as being the most appropriate to address your research, subject to the following caveats discussed on the day:

- 1 Those involved have very busy work schedules and may be limited in the time that they can make available. The time that they are prepared to commit will be at their individual discretion. However my understanding is that a 30–60 minute interview would be appropriate in most cases.
- 2 It is possible that your enquiries will encroach on areas of commercial or other sensitivity, which may limit the information we can provide.
- 3 It is agreed that DUST and CLEV have the right to comment on your draft and that you agree to make changes where the original form would be either inaccurate or in serious conflict with the commercial and corporate imperatives, of DUST and/or CLEV.

- 4 Your contact will be limited to the individuals listed as c.c.'s on your letter and mine unless prior approval from me is obtained to talk to others (Director of Personnel Management: DUST March 1997).

Without agreeing to these caveats I would not have been given approval to interview senior managers at DUST and CLEV. I also believed that I was following good qualitative research practice in entering into such an agreement, which included member checks by DUST and CLEV. I did not fully appreciate, however, the extent to which 'there is, more often than not, a conflict of interests between the interviewer and the interviewed' (Pile 1991, 464).

On completion of a first draft of my doctoral dissertation I posted one copy to DUST's Director of Personnel Management (DPM) and one to the General Manager (GM) of CLEV. I requested that they respond within one month. When a little after a month had elapsed I sent an e-mail to both reviewers, politely inquiring how they were progressing. The e-mail response from DUST's DPM was that the Managing Director (MD) of DUST was now taking 'a lead role' in reviewing the draft and that some sensitive material had been identified. He suggested that a telephone conference (teleconference) involving DUST's MD and DPM, the GM of CLEV, and myself be arranged to discuss the draft further. All three senior managers were known by me through their previously having been interviewed.

The teleconference was held approximately one week later and lasted about 40 minutes. To begin with, as far as I could tell in the teleconference situation, the atmosphere was strictly professional. The main problem concerned the line of argument, and the use of quotations in the draft. Regarding the argument, the reviewers disapproved that the interpretation was Marxist not managerialist, though they did not dwell on what they considered to be 'my' critique. (Perhaps I can consider myself lucky here, as other researchers have found themselves in situations where their research participants 'wanted to define the role of a scientist researching them, as well as the nature of knowledge and the "scientific" principles involved in such an enterprise' [Grönfors 1982, 253; see also Ball 1984; Punch 1986].) What the reviewers believed to be 'theirs', however, were the quotations used to exemplify the critical theoretical argument.<sup>4</sup> The reviewers insinuated that I had in some way tricked quotations out of unsuspecting senior managers (all of whom had been

vettied by the DPM and had each personally given me permission to interview and to tape record them). They also stated that I had little idea of how to structure an argument, overburdened as it was, they believed, with quotation. In short, the reviewers required that I rewrite the draft without any of the quotes. They also suggested that in undertaking this rewriting I wear a 'business hat'. No matter of 'fact' or issue of scholarship was raised regarding the draft, only that it was 'embarrassing' to the individuals concerned who had been too 'open' and revealed too much of the 'inner workings' of DUST and CLEV.

At this point I was asked to respond. I stated that in the case of an academic dissertation, publication did not apply in the conventional sense of the term. I outlined the examination procedure and indicated that an embargo could be placed on the dissertation in the University Library to the effect that the dissertation would not be available to anybody for whatever time period specified. The embargo option allayed the concerns of the reviewers considerably. In short, they stated that if I was willing to embargo the dissertation, they would be willing to 'leave the vast bulk of personal DUST and CLEV related material intact' and specify the removal of only specific minor sensitivities. The temperature of the teleconference even seemed to warm somewhat. The reviewers volunteered that they were impressed by what the draft did with the research material, but that it got 'too close' to DUST and CLEV. Particularly with regard to DUST's new North American-influenced entrepreneurial culture, I had quite simply 'got it too right' regarding the deployment of this culture in respect of the intensification of labour.

On discussion with my supervisors, Head of School, the University's Office for Research, and the University Library, I agreed to offer DUST and CLEV an embargo for a time period of their choosing. Following a few days consideration, DUST and CLEV requested a 15-year embargo of the dissertation as well as removal of some of the more sensitive material. I had little choice but to agree, simply to get the dissertation to examination.

## Some dilemmas

'Employing strategies such as allowing informants an opportunity to review the text prior to publication might provide an ameliorative ... for some researchers, but rarely for those whose research work is constructed as a critique' (Parry 1998, 2159).

Did I offer an embargo or concede too easily? Given my agreement with DUST and CLEV, did I have much choice, either ethically or legally? Should I have agreed to the research 'contract'? Did I take an unacceptable risk? Was my study ill-conceived in the first place? How was I to know? It is not 'unusual for the sensitive nature of an apparently innocuous topic to become manifest once research is under way' (Lee and Renzetti 1993, 5). It is possible, indeed in many ways desirable, to know well what you are doing at any point in your research but not entirely to know where you are going. Would science be interesting or even necessary if it were any other way?

In intensive studies the individuals need not be typical and they may be selected one by one as the research proceeds and as an understanding of the membership of a *causal* group is built up. In other words, it is possible—though not mandatory!—for intensive research to be exploratory in a strong sense. Instead of specifying the entire research design and who and what we are going to study in advance we can, to a certain extent, establish this as we go along, as learning about one object or from one contact leads to others with whom they are linked, so that we build up a picture of the structures and causal groups of which they are a part. (Sayer 1992, 244)

Should we restrict ourselves to a consensual research model, avoiding research that is more conflictual in nature (Bulmer 1982)? A number of researchers believe that the opposite should be the case, that we need to be developing an approach to research 'that focuses on the social system itself, away from its victims: the oppressors rather than the oppressed, the monied rather than the poor, the employers rather than the employees, the powerful rather than the powerless' (Grönfors 1982, 256; see also Sayer 1985; Sieber and Stanley 1988; Burawoy *et al.* 1991; Lee and Renzetti 1993; Swartz 1997; Berg 1998; Cochrane 1998).

It is painfully obvious, for instance, that researchers have rarely penetrated to the territory of the 'powerful', and that many field studies focus on lowly, marginal groups ... which do not go about imposing formal restrictions on the researchers' role and on publication. (Punch 1986, 25)

What, then, in research that involves the possibility of 'speaking against' a role played by research participants, of the 'research alliance' (Pile 1991) between researcher(s) and participant(s)? I have a research

relationship with DUST and CLEV that exemplifies the possibility that such relationships can turn out to be difficult. What, then, of member checks 'in the spirit of an "exchange of ideas"' (Baxter and Eyles 1997, 515)?

Such 'awkward questions ... make of codes of ethics a forlorn misunderstanding of the realities of the field' (Fielding 1999, 527). Such realities involve 'the insertion of the researcher into a complex constellation of ethical and political issues' (Hubbard 1999, 235; see also Cochrane 1998). Power relations in any research alliance or 'experience collective' (Butler 1997) need careful consideration (Schoenberger 1991 1992; McDowell 1992; Herod 1993; Winchester 1996; Hughes 1999). 'To be sure there was collaboration, but who set the terms?' (Burawoy *et al.* 1991, 293). I was negotiating with a transnational enterprise and, in the end, the more powerful was decisive.

I acknowledge that 'speaking against' a role of research participants might embarrass enterprises and/or individuals, especially when research is current and involves incumbents. Should I have discussed my theoretical orientations more fully with research participants (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991)? Fuller disclosure, however, would most likely have worked against me getting as close to DUST and CLEV as I did. Certainly, DUST and CLEV are now closed to me. I believe that conducting qualitative research that might involve 'speaking against' a role of research participants raises questions for the too simple ethical concepts and research practices of openness, contracts, confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' rights to comment on, require changes to and/or embargo academic work. Research participants' comments on what researchers make of participants' information can provide invaluable correctives, clarifications, qualifications, insights and credibility, but if researchers are in any way critical of participants then the possibility needs to be acknowledged that participants' rights to read and effectively censor researchers' work can add a second edge to this sword. Out of the member checking process in my study, I received virtually no substantive feedback, only silencing. I was in effect, however, partly silenced by my own ethical procedure. Requirements by ethics committees and recommendations of qualitative researchers in sociology and increasingly in human geography that contracts and member checks be incorporated in qualitative research are appropriate when research is concerned with 'speaking for' research participants. Contracts and

member checks, however, are ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of qualitative research that might 'speak against' a role of research participants. I believe that my ethical practice in some ways loaded the gun, and that DUST and CLEV simply pulled the trigger. Not that I consider that covert research should be standard practice in qualitative research, only that I empowered my research participants to such a degree that I ended up being silenced myself.<sup>5</sup>

## Some choices

'The researcher cannot anticipate everything, but she/he must reveal an awareness and appreciation of and commitment to ethical principles for research' (Marshall and Rossman 1989, 71).

As to how to approach researching the powerful in the future, I face a number of difficult choices.<sup>6</sup> First, to do or not to do such research. As noted, I am not alone in wishing to research the powerful; closing off the powerful to research is not, I believe, an option.

In researching the myriad processes which forge contemporary landscapes of power, it is important to know more about, and critically engage with, the people who are most influential in shaping these processes, along with those affected by them. (Hughes and Cormode 1998, 2098)

Second, whether to do such research with publicly available or with researcher generated information. I could research corporate management, for example, through publicly available documents such as annual reviews, company reports, public statements made to the press and/or to shareholders, company newspapers, individual mill or plant newsletters, etc. These sources of information, however, are not always considered to be public, and access to and use of them can be problematic. Limiting myself, however, to researching corporate management through publicly available documents means that I am denied the opportunity to elicit information from horses' mouths. One of the advantages often possessed by human geographers, in comparison with physical geographers, is that we are able to ask our research participants, among other things, what they are doing and why they are doing it. Talking with research participants provides one of the richest and most interactive means of generating information available to human geographers, and closing this

means off may result in research that is unacceptably partial.

Third, having decided to do the research and to talk with participants, I need to decide whether to approach participants covertly or openly (Punch 1986). Covert research may involve working with senior managers as one of them, as Dalton (1959) did, but for many researchers this type of ethnography is not possible, thus entailing an open approach to participants. In my experience, I believe that I was not open enough. Full disclosure is clearly impossible, but research participants need to be made aware of how their information might be used by the researcher. Giving research participants copies of examples of a researcher's previous work is one way of more fully informing participants of a researcher's standpoint and methods. In doing so, a researcher risks being refused permission to interview, but clarifying differences is better done early than late in the research process. Following such clarification, contracts and member checks may then be entered into with a reduced capacity for misunderstanding.

## Conclusion

It is impossible to avoid ethical dilemmas in research. In covert approaches we deceive research participants, while in open approaches we risk powerful social actors excluding themselves from investigation. In practice, many researchers employ elements of both approaches, walking a tightrope between the right to inquire and the rights of research participants; in short, between critique and sensitivity.

Much depends upon the researcher and the researched and the kinds of research bargain which they make. In some cases pseudonyms will be used. In some investigations informants will be invited to comment on drafts of the study while in others they will not. None of these approaches either used together or alone will ever satisfy all of those who participate in or receive field studies. The task is to continue to reflect on the issues involved so that we are sensitive to the problems and to the wishes of our informants. (Burgess 1984, 207)

The reality of research is often a trade-off or balancing act performed personally by each researcher (who, it should not need to be pointed out, is a professional with often years of training and experience), who less needs formal ethical prescriptions administered by committees than general guidelines that allow her or him flexibly and sensitively to deal

with issues as they arise, while leaving room for the possibility of 'speaking against' a role of research participants.

Although ethics procedures function as gate-keepers to protect vulnerable populations and encourage the return of information to participants, they offer little guidance for the structure of interviews in situations of great social inequality'. (Winchester 1996, 128)

In short, generating good information may involve a worthwhile element of risk, 'no risk, no good construction, no invention, thus no good science' (Latour 1997, xix). No recipe, I'm afraid, but not a recommendation entirely to do-it-yourself either, for good research needs to be something of a *considered* risk which we *share* with other human geographers through communications such as this.

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## Notes

- 1 This difference is also referred to as studying 'down' as opposed to studying 'the powerful' or studying 'up' (Cormode and Hughes 1999). Admittedly, these two concerns can be difficult to separate. Theme issues of *Geoforum* (1999 30 299–374), *Environment and Planning A* (1998 30 2098–2179) and the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1993 22 3–122) all usefully address issues involved in researching elites (see also Moyser and Wagstaffe 1987; Hert and Imber 1995).
- 2 'Member checking has participants comment on researcher interpretations of their interviews to see if indeed they "recognise" the meanings contained therein' (Baxter and Eyles 1999b, 314; see also Walker 1985; Minichiello *et al.* 1990; Miles and Huberman 1994; Creswell 1998).
- 3 DUST and CLEV are pseudonyms for a transnational enterprise and a transport logistics consortium respectively.
- 4 'Because we researchers shape, interpret, and then write of our experiences—being parties to, and objects of, the same communications in which our subjects took part—it is unclear what parts are public or private, science or nonscience' (Herdt 1988, 159).
- 5 For discussion of some 'classic' if somewhat ethically contentious works in sociology which involved the use of covert research, contracts and/or member checks (such as Dalton 1959; Vidich and Bensman 1968; Humphreys 1970; Willis 1980; Whyte 1981) see for example Ellen 1984; Marshall and Rossman 1989; Babbie 1998; Berg 1998; and Hay 1998.

6 See Cochrane (1998, 2129–2131) for discussion of a number of useful general principles underlying the qualitative research of the powerful, including: having an explicit theoretical starting point; having a base outside the research context; remaining sceptical of information until it has been checked with other sources; and manageably defining the field of action under investigation.

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