

Participatory Action Research with High-risk Groups: Best Practice for Researchers' Safety and Data Integrity

Julie van den Eynde and Arthur Venó*

Abstract

Partnerships with high-risk groups can be fraught with personal and methodological problems resulting in researcher ill health, poor data and corrupt analysis. Based upon the literature, a method was developed to avoid these outcomes for a longitudinal community psychology study which required researcher immersion into the subculture of outlaw motorcycle clubs ('OMCs') during Phase One. The methodology, termed 'insider-outsider', improved the accuracy of data collection, compelled researcher debriefing and allowed for enhanced use of data for participant action research ('PAR'). The 'insider-outsider' methodology also appears to have initially prevented negative consequences of ethnographic and participant action research reported elsewhere. However, more long-term analysis demonstrated these methods resulted in the OMCs 'going their own way', but still using the foundations, tactics and principles used in the initial establishment of the study. This methodological comment presents a pilot methodology to advance the field's knowledge about entry and access of PAR.

Introduction

Participatory action research is a research method that requires a closer relationship between researchers and researched than most other forms of academic investigative relationships. A collaborative bond is established between the parties whereby, to at least some extent, they believe themselves bound to the values, morays and *raison d'être* of the subculture being researched. Other methodologies face this same dilemma, notably, ethnography, participant observation and program evaluation. In the main, these methodologies require the researchers to become immersed into the 'world' of the researched. Participatory action research, however, remains unique in one way which amplifies the special relationship: researchers and researched are vested in common action outcomes and, most often, shared social action goals. This sharing of goals and desired social action creates a research

* Dr Julie van den Eynde PhD is a Community Psychologist at Victoria University (Melbourne, Victoria) and Program Coordinator of the Master of Applied Psychology Program, email julie.vandeneynde@vu.edu.au. Professor Arthur Venó PhD is Adjunct Professor at Victoria University (Melbourne, Victoria). He can be contacted through Dr van den Eynde.

environment akin to collective conflict; that is, there are the 'we' (the researcher and the researched) and the 'they' (target(s) of the social action).

We argue that this particular feature of PAR produces a powerful emotional bonding between researchers and researched, which, in turn, places pressure upon the researchers to ask research questions, use micro-methodologies, interpret data and analyse situations favourable to the research alliance. The following pages detail a method developed for PAR designed to counteract the bias built into the alliance between researchers and researched. It is a pilot, or trial method, as it is based upon a single case study and its validity and reliability should be regarded as tentative until other researchers utilise the technique. The cohort upon which we developed the technique is one both extremely marginalised and criminalised: outlaw motorcycle clubs ('OMCs'). For more information about the outlaw motorcycle clubs intervention, please see Veno and van den Eynde 2007; van den Eynde and Veno 2007; and Veno and van den Eynde 2006. We present below a very brief commentary about our attempts at defining an appropriate methodology for a particular form of PAR.

In an unparalleled action, the president of a major international motorcycle club approached Veno to seek advice on how to defuse a serious and escalating violent conflict between the OMCs, the police and the government. Over the previous year, tensions between police and OMCs had amplified to such an extent that OMC members were planning retaliative attacks against police.

As a result of this situation, the authors (applied community psychologists) set two goals for a community-wide conflict resolution strategy: to reduce escalating tension and violence between police and the OMC; and to neutralise a state government's initiated moral panic surrounding OMCs.

Four broad tactics were identified to achieve these goals. These were empowerment of the leadership of the OMC; influencing the media; political activism; and legal challenges. Details of this media-based community intervention, project performance indicators, and a complete evaluation of the data, are reported elsewhere (see Veno and van den Eynde 2007). This paper focuses on the unique methodology developed to conduct the community conflict resolution intervention.

Designing the research methodology

To achieve the goals and tactics for this project in the specific social setting of an OMC, the only logical choice of method available to us was PAR. The particular form of PAR chosen is defined by Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) as emancipatory action research ('EAR'), where the:

researcher aims to decrease the distance between the actual problems identified by the practitioner and the theory used to explain and resolve the problems. The researcher also facilitates reflective discussion with the practitioner to identify underlying problems and assumptions. This assists the researcher to become a collaborative member of the group (Hatten et al 1997:5).

From this definition, this form of PAR required the researcher to develop a close relationship with the OMC, where the problem identification and problem solution would be devised collaboratively. This called for at least one of the researchers to become immersed enough into this highly marginalised and criminalised subculture to develop an

understanding of ‘the ways’ of OMCs in order to complete the PAR. Venno had experience working ‘around the edges’ of the OMC world but, like van den Eynde, had no immersion experience with this subculture. Thus, working with OMCs using a PAR model posed serious challenges in this highly volatile setting. We heeded the work by Miller (2004), who worked with refugee communities, and Scheper-Hughes (2004), who researched the underworld of organ trafficking, and realised traditional sole researcher roles were inadequate and likely to be dangerous in this capricious situation.

Nevertheless, boldly, we set clear goals for the research project. These were to develop a methodology which would:

1. produce sustainable outcomes based on social justice, non-violence and peacemaking;
2. be culturally appropriate for the extreme masculine and secretive culture of OMCs;
3. maintain an anchored research methodology technique, steeped in research, rigid in data collection, and providing the means to record the immersion of the researcher; and
4. maintain the value base of the professional researchers.

The search for a safe and culturally appropriate methodology forced the authors further afield than our original academic disciplines (applied psychology) and into interdisciplinarity. Support for our explorations into interdisciplinarity came from Newell (2000) and Nowotny (2003), who argue that if researchers are to understand context, they are forced into interdisciplinarity. This inevitability drew us into considering methodologies encompassing anthropology, sociology and psychology.

Anthropological traditions (for example, Malinowski 1922) alerted us to emphasise the role of ‘participants’, rather than ‘observers’, when researching foreign cultures. Further, Malinowski accentuates the value of employing ethnographic exemplars to discard distortions of cultural values of western, ‘anglo’, masculine ‘rightness’ of behaviour and thought. More recently, in the community psychology field, Maton concurred, as he suggested research that is not a culturally anchored methodology often results in:

weak, inconsistent, or unimportant research findings. At worst, findings from such research strengthens [sic] negative stereotypes about subcultures, reinforce victim blaming, and contributes [sic] to the development of continuation of social policies that negatively impact subcultural groups or populations (Maton 1993:748).

Malinowski’s and Maton’s works alerted the authors to the need to embrace ethnography and participant observation in our methodology in order to enhance our cultural understandings. We predicted our experiences would be embedded in a ‘foreign culture’, and we could hypothesise we would be culturally challenged at all levels by this foreign culture.

As ethnography and participant observation are not often aligned with applied psychology methodologies, we had to consider: how does a researcher immerse in a foreign culture? Snow, Benford and Anderson (1986) suggested numerous roles for immersion researchers. One role was as a ‘controlled sceptic’, where ethnographers were immersed in a proselytising Buddhist movement and acted and role played as if they ‘were a naive, curious, and moderately willing but sceptical member who needed to be coaxed and instructed each step of the way’ (Snow et al 1986:382). A second possible role was as a ‘credentialed expert’. In this instance the researcher worked as an activist in a nuclear

disarmament organisation and his life was overtaken by his political activism. However, neither of these immersion roles were realistic options for Veno as an insider. In OMC culture he could not role play — deception would be dangerous, as well as unethical.

Tewksbury (2001, 2002) concurs with the ethical imperative for immersion researchers to be ‘true members’ of the subculture. His research into gay bath houses clearly demonstrated how full immersion and participation is necessary to achieve culturally valid results. By full participation, he gained access to the secretive and hidden social setting of gay bathhouses: he achieved special permissions, knowledge of rites of passage, filtering procedures, ceremonies and gate-keeping processes. He recorded sexual activity, ritual, negotiation of anonymous sexual interactions, and the environmental features of the bath houses that facilitate different sexual activities. Tewksbury (2001) stated that, for ethnographic investigators, achieving full membership and full participation is particularly important in criminal and/or deviant social settings, not only to achieve deeper knowledge, but also to increase validity. He warns that ‘the possibilities of skewed interpretations may be especially true when the subculture being investigated is a stigmatized, or hidden, population and/or a population that is built around “deviant” activities’ (Tewksbury 2001:8).

We took heed of these colleagues who had earlier experience with immersion and ethnographic methodologies. Veno was to be able to ease into the OMC world, taking on the role as the anthropological ‘inside ethnographer’ (Kanuha 2000; Messerschmidt 1981) gaining acceptance from, and establishing close, authentic relationships (Miller 2004) with, key OMC members. Veno would develop an ‘emic’ stance — a subjective, informed, influential and powerful standpoint rich in new ethnographic knowledge of OMC culture (Headland et al 1990). In turn, this methodology complies with, and enhances, the necessities of PAR.

The decision ‘to walk a mile in OMC shoes’ was not taken lightly. A great deal of attention was paid to colleagues’ experiences and recommendations on how to conduct deep participation and immersion in the field. Colleagues warned of a series of costs involved in deep participation ethnography. These are discussed below.

Cautions for the ‘insider’

Earlier researchers warn about the emotional and physical costs of ethnographic research. Marquart (2001) reports on his dual roles as prison guard and ethnographic researcher. The two roles meant he felt compromised as he often obtained ‘guilty knowledge’ (Marquart 2001:44) and witnessed many illegalities, but he ‘did not see them’. His reaction was ‘to block or neutralize the moral predicament of seeing too much, I kept quiet and simply observed’ (2001:44). Marquart (2001) succinctly reports on the heavy emotional toll on himself as he conducted this intense research methodology.

Another sole ethnographer was VanderStaay (2005), who eventually abandoned his research project due to emotional distress. To achieve his goal to ‘acquire empathy for local ways of acting and feeling’ (2005:399), he immersed in a drug-dealing community, befriended a young cocaine dealer and became involved with his family. However, the young man murdered his mother’s friend and was jailed. As with Marquart (2001) above, VanderStaay (2005) was ‘haunted’ by the participant’s demise. He was guilt ridden, and suffered emotional distress and secondary trauma. He reported he did not have the ‘capacity to negotiate the emotional trauma and ambiguity of his fieldwork’ (VanderStaay 2005:400).

These warnings from these deeply immersed researchers were of crucial importance in devising our methodology. Specifically, they discussed researchers' ongoing emotional trauma which caused them to lose focus and lose sight of the goals of the research (Marquart 2001; VanderStaay 2005). Of critical significance was that both were solitary researchers, with neither support nor debriefing.

High emotional costs and the abandonment of research are not often reported, but, in preparing to work with OMCs, we believed these researchers were reporting highly salient findings. We hypothesised that the disadvantages of deep participation and ethnographic techniques might be offset by designing a research team for this setting. Could the problems Marquart (2001), VanderStaay (2005) and others encountered have been magnified because they were working solo and, thus, be neutralised (or at least minimised) by working in a team setting?

Constructing a research team

While recognising the dangers of emotional trauma in sole ethnography, as reported by Marquart (2001) and VanderStaay (2005), we also carefully considered the aspect of our physical safety in this conflictual environment.

In this highly charged milieu, the government had 'declared war' on OMCs (Kelton 2003). The State Premier in Parliament described OMCs as 'a bunch of violent, drug dealing criminals' connected to multiple murders, rapes, shoot-outs and bombings (Hansard 2003:543). In newspapers, the Premier claimed OMCs were 'drug dealers on motorbikes' (Wiese Bockmann and Roberts 2005), terrorists and foot soldiers of organised crime (Moscaritolo and Williams 2007).

The media reports were equally inflammatory and most often unsubstantiated. In 2005, the ABC reported on a conference where it was alleged that OMCs were not only involved in the drug trade, but also in people smuggling and sex slavery (ABC News 2005). Editorials referred to the 'lurid and violent background of bikie culture' and supported proposed legislation to eradicate clubs because it 'appears to be an acceptable use of the law for the benefit of the community' (The Advertiser 2002). However, these are strongly contested views with the main evidence coming from sources closely aligned with government and its instrumentalities.

An alternative view comes from reputable criminal investigative sources. In Canada (Beare 2000), Australia (Project Krystal 1999) and Sweden (BRÅ 1999), there is unanimous agreement that while some individual OMC members may have criminal records and some may be involved in criminal activity, OMCs are not organised criminal organisations. Indeed, not all OMCs are involved with criminal activities, and even the most notorious OMCs have chapters free of criminality (Beare 2000; Project Krystal 1999).

In this highly charged environment, we needed to find a way to increase the safety of the research team — not only psychological, but also physical, safety. A fascinating report from Brodsky and Faryal (2006) provided us with important insights. They formed a team to research the culture of Afghan women who resisted oppression during the Soviet invasion, the subsequent Taliban rule and, finally, the US coalition's bombing and invasion of Afghanistan. The insider-researcher was an Afghan woman, whose roles included key informant, translator and collaborator. The outsider-researcher was a non-Afghan woman academic, with rudimentary Dari language skills. The insider and outsider researchers worked together on data collection and basic data analysis. This fascinating ethnography

provided us with hints about the possibility of defining different roles for each researcher in the OMC setting: one as an embedded 'insider' and a complementary role for the other as an 'outsider'.

Further thought-provoking information on insider-outsider roles comes from Bartunek and Louis (1996), who formed teams consisting of outsider academic fieldworkers and insider community members, who jointly worked to take action to manage, improve or solve their problems in the community. The authors strongly recommended the insider-outsider teams should be composed of members of 'complementary dissimilarity' (Bartunek and Louis 1996:17–18). Further:

the more diverse the experience histories of the individuals composing a research team, especially in terms of their relationship to the setting, the more diverse should be their perspectives on and potential interpretations of any particular observed event there (1996:17–18).

The current authors, Veno and van den Eynde, qualify as 'dissimilar' on grounds of gender, the level of experience in the OMC setting, faith system, and class origins. Consequently, it appeared van den Eynde would be an ideal 'outsider' as she had no exposure to OMC culture, while Veno was an ideal 'insider' with his access and long-term exposure to the edges of OMC life. Their similarities included a common social justice value system, a mutual respectful and trusting relationship, and that both are academics trained and experienced in applied psychology research projects.

Both had been invited into the project by senior OMC leaders, albeit via different pathways. Veno was known to OMCs and was consequently sought out by their leaders. Similar to Brodsky and Faryal (2006), the insider (Veno) gained permissions and access to OMC culture as he had previously earned credibility with OMC leadership. Conversely, van den Eynde and OMC leaders had to overcome strong 'mutual suspicions'. The basic tenet of OMCs relies on an overtly masculine culture where women have no place — whereas van den Eynde was a feminist, an academic, and a central component of the insider-outsider research methodology.

At the end of numerous meetings, an agreement was worked out between van den Eynde and the OMC leaders. When this was finalised, she was informed she was now 'under OMC protection'. When she replied that she never wanted to be in a position where she needed protection from anyone, she was told 'you need protection'. No further clarification or negotiation occurred!

Insider-outsider methodology

From the early approaches by the OMC leadership, the authors were acutely aware of the need for careful research-driven methodological design. Thus, the theoretical basis of the methodology was EAR (Hatten et al 1997), which demanded moving closer to the problem, becoming a collaborative member of the group (that is, OMCs), developing a meaningful relationship between the researchers and OMCs, and building a reflective practice between the researcher and the leadership of the OMC.

To effectively apply EAR in this setting, deep ethnography was required (see Headland et al 1990; Miller 2004; Schepher-Hughes 2004; Tewksbury 2001). The authors took heed of ethnographers Marquart (2001) and VanderStaay (2005) who suffered serious emotional consequences and physical danger as a result of their solo work. As a result, this project

developed an insider-outsider team (Brodsky and Faryal 2006) built on complementary dissimilarity (Bartunek and Louis 1996).

As the authors felt sufficiently confident in the methodology design, Veno as the insider eased into the OMC culture, 'riding shotgun' with the president of the OMC, with permissions, protections and access in place. Veno spent time with the OMC leaders, members and associates, attended many social events at the club house, and rode with the OMC. Slowly, the insider took on many of the attributes of an OMC member. Similarly, Wolf, a graduate anthropology student who immersed into OMC culture, noted: 'I watched my own identity change as the result of experiences I had on my own as a biker, and those I shared with Rebel club members' (Wolf 1991:216). He went on to describe how he needed to keep track of himself and be cognisant of how he had changed as a result of being drawn into the club and drifting away from 'the establishment'.

As with Wolf (1991), Veno as the insider slowly and subtly began to drift away from 'the establishment' and some aspects of his attitudes were magnified. His respect for mainstream positional authority decreased, his trust in OMCs increased, his respect for the masculinised OMC lifestyle increased, he began to seriously consider joining the OMC, he changed his clothing and appearance to OMC attire. Conversely, as the OMC leader and Veno became more enmeshed, the OMC leader began to 'mirror' Veno's professional mannerisms, discuss strategy, tactics, interventions and learn the language of the media. Clearly, Veno the insider had submerged in the OMC culture and had established an authentic interpersonal relationship with the leadership (Miller 2004) of the OMC, which enabled him to be privy to insider and secretive knowledge (Tewksbury 2001, 2002).

At an operational level, the insider reported back to the outsider almost daily. Van den Eynde took extensive field notes and digitally recorded conversations. 'Complementary dissimilarity' (Bartunek and Louis 1996) was a powerful dynamic in these sessions. As Veno immersed deeper into the culture, van den Eynde would question, argue, probe, disagree, debate and/or listen to ensure her understanding of OMC culture, and to gain clarity of the ongoing events. These sessions also provided a debriefing function where van den Eynde discussed the changes that were occurring to Veno — from dress code to attitudinal change to his deepening bond with OMC members and their lifestyle. Thus, lessons had been learnt from Wolf (1991), who was reliant on his own self-awareness to manage and record his own shift in perspective as a result of his immersion into OMC culture and lifestyle.

In these sessions, Veno the insider brought information from deep within the OMC setting, including OMC ideas for interventions, perspectives from the OMC group, and ramifications for the OMC group for each proposed intervention. The insider brought culturally appropriate suggestions for action and intervention to the planning table, which had been approved by the OMC leadership and members. Hence, any proposed interventions were culturally sensitive and appropriate, while complying with the conventions of EAR (Hatten et al 1997).

These processes of the insider-outsider team kept the project on track, and avoided the pitfalls reported by Marquart (2001) and VanderStaay (2005) when their solo ethnographic research was prematurely halted as they lost sight of their research goals. The outsider's role as the more objective analyst meant the outsider could feed back preliminary data to the insider, allowing for informed decision making. For example, as we were working to neutralise a moral panic, the outsider was able to collect and analyse newspaper reports and transcripts from television news reports. This media analysis allowed us to determine which media mode was most effective in slowing the moral panic and, critically, we could

determine when the OMC spokesman was successful in taking control of how the media was representing OMC culture. This research and analysis process, and the immediacy of this information, was a vital function of the success of the community intervention. Certainly we were very grateful we heeded the warnings of Tewksbury (2001), who suggested researchers can lose analytical perspective through deep immersion techniques, and Maton (1993), who argued for the necessity of other corroborating evidence to support ethnographic researchers' insider data.

As the outsider, van den Eynde remained vigilant and distanced from the OMC world. Although she was invited by the OMC leadership to work on the project, she made no attempt to permeate OMC culture — this was not her role. Early on in the research project, the OMC leadership privately checked with van den Eynde whether OMC members would cause offence with their cursing and 'substance use'. In this milieu of extreme masculinity, she neither swore, nor drank alcohol, nor used drugs. She never rode a Harley Davidson or asked for a ride. In fact she became an 'invisible person' when around OMCs, and certainly in the shadows when OMC 'business' was happening. Upon reflection, we wonder how successful this role would have been if the outsider was a man. It is likely the dynamics would be very different.

Outcomes

As noted previously, Venó's immersion into OMC culture was primarily to enable working with members of the OMC to develop culturally appropriate conflict-resolution strategies. This was achieved, as were all project goals (see Venó and van den Eynde 2007). In summary, the government was forced to call off its moral panic campaign and all performance indicators demonstrated the PAR was highly successful in developing a sustainable mechanism for use by OMCs in their struggle for existence. Not only was the insider-outsider methodology effective in achieving the research goals, but it was also effective in engaging with a highly criminalised and marginalised section of the population, while preserving the researchers' safety and integrity. We were able to build and implement culturally appropriate interventions in conjunction with OMC leadership. We devised culturally appropriate interventions that OMCs would support without any loss to their mode of operation, and that would not offend OMC hyper-masculine culture or their rules, regulations and unique creed.

Utilising this unique insider-Outside methodology, Venó was able to develop an authentic interpersonal relationship (Miller 2004) with the OMC members and leadership, with good faith and without deception (Adler et al 1986). This full immersion into the culture enabled access to the secretive business and 'ways' of the OMC.

The outsider role was essential to maintain an analytical perspective, which can be lost by the insider's deep immersion (Maton 1993; Tewksbury 2001). Further, the outsider provided a 'tough-friend' role to the insider to ameliorate the emotional costs of wearing 'two hats' and obtaining 'guilty knowledge' (Marquart 2001), while identifying and managing how Venó was being drawn into the world of the OMC (Wolf 1991). Finally, the outsider encompassed a debriefer role for the insider to ameliorate the emotional trauma of the intense fieldwork (see Marquart 2001; VanderStaay 2005).

Conclusion

The insider-outsider methodology seems effective in preventing many of the problems of deep participation ethnographic research including, especially, PAR and EAR.

We tentatively conclude from this single case study that the use of the insider-outsider methodology is a powerful and effective research methodology. It is of interest that OMCs operate (mostly) as participatory democracies. However, unlike many community-based groups, there are clear elected positions of authority in OMC culture and members are expected to do what they are told, when they are told, by their elected leaders. They are highly disciplined in this regard. Certainly the OMC with which we built this PAR project functioned in this way. 'Everything starts and ends with the President' was the advice given to Venó as he warmed to the task at hand. However, this may be a limitation to the generality of the methodology. Most community-based groups do not have the formal and highly disciplined structure of OMCs and researchers would face much more complex politics of entry and access.

Our insider-outsider methodology may go some way in facilitating goals similar to ours. Some examples where it might be applied include youth gangs, ethnic gangs and imprisoned persons. It may be that the more organised the group, the better for EAR. However, the insider-outsider methodology has much more far-reaching consequences. The technique allows for immersion by researchers into criminalised and highly marginalised subcultures with less risk than other methodologies. Finally, the insider-outsider technique is a strong tool for shaping the tactical and evaluative components of PAR.

Further research on the applicability of insider-outsider techniques to less marginalised groups will demonstrate whether the technique is as effective a tool for other PAR as we found it to be in our cohort. We urge researchers to replicate our technique with community-based groups with whom they wish to develop participatory action research.

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