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Insider Research: Articulating the Voices of Women Schooling Their Children in Remote Queensland, Australia

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Abstract Families in remote Queensland, Australia, face a range of challenges, including the education of their children. The question of education strategies was included in the semi-structured interviews conducted with the women. The education of their children emerged as a major concern.

The researcher, who raised her own children on their family grain and cattle property in remote Queensland, faced these issues herself. This case study focused on ethical questions of insider research in such situations. Following Hewitt's (Ethical components of researcher researched relationships in qualitative interviewing, *Qualitative Health Research, 17*(8), 1149–1159. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732307308305, 2007) taxonomy of the components of ethical research, such as bias transparency, reciprocity, respondent validation, research purpose and the ethics of

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care, insider research ethics are examined in relation to the dilemmas and strategies of remote families when planning for the education of their children.

Keywords Australia • Gender • Geographical isolation • Insider research

Introduction

This chapter discusses why and how the children of women in remote Queensland are positioned as learning on the edge and the strategies the women employed to fiercely resist the educational marginalisation of their children. The term "marginalisation" in this situation is discussed. Chiefly, the development of effective and ethical approaches to researching with these respondents in remote Queensland is delineated. These considerations included the research paradigm chosen; the participant recruitment process; the style and depth of the interview conversations; research rigour; and the dissemination of the results.

The position of the insider/outsider researcher frames the discussion. This positioning included not only sensitivity, confidentiality, respect and reciprocity in the research methods and analysis but also the necessity to avoid producing or reinscribing disempowering marginalised subjectivities for the respondents.

The Project and Its Framework

Collecting and collating the experiences of women on the land with regard to their efforts around educating their children was part of my PhD project which investigated resilience strategies of rural women. In this project, 20 women on the land were interviewed, many of them two or three times, and their responses coded and thematically organised into discourses and discursive identities. Ethically, I sought to employ a feminist post-structural research perspective which underscored a

non-hierarchical, egalitarian, non-judgmental, collaborative approach (Bhopal, 2010; Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Pini, 2004).

Feminist epistemology foregrounds women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Bhopal, 2010) and attempts to redress the historical privileging of male research subjects and the androcentric bias of researchers (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Feminist informed research reflects an "ethic of respect, collaboration and caring" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 775). These feminist research precepts reinforced and supported my intention to focus respectfully on women's experiences.

Post-structuralism was useful for meaning-making and comprehending a sense of the multiple realities my respondents inhabited. This paradigm posits that people are constituted, or shaped, by the constellation of the discourses, overlapping and competing, within which they exist (Jones, 2003). According to Foucault (1980), these discourses are formed and maintained by power interests. In the interviews, the women spoke of their disempowerment as daughters-in-law within what rural scholars refer to as "the gendered power relations in family farms" (Pini, 2007, p. 45).

Background

Women on the land in remote South West Queensland are geographically distant from educational facilities. The term "remote" is derived "from measures of road distance between populated localities and service centres" with amenities that include schools. Many of the respondents lived on properties hours away from the nearest towns. Women described the challenges they faced accessing schooling for their children when there were no accessible educational institutions, or if available, were substantially under-resourced. In a geographical and resource sense, the women and their children lived on the margins of educational provision. Children in the margins "typically demonstrate lower levels of educational attainment" (Messiou, 2012, p.10). The women were determined to prevent the possibility of educational disadvantage of their children.

Gender-based disempowerment impacted upon the efficacy of the women as advocates for their children's education. Although living in a

wealthy country and married to landowners who often owned substantial assets, women on the land in Australia have historically been denied voice, influence and the same rights as urban women (Alston, 2003; Grace & Lennie, 1998; Voyce, 2007). Historically, during settlement in the 1800s, two broad discursive identities for women were established. One was as the wife of a member of the squattocracy, with attendant large holdings and large homesteads. The more gentrified the landowners became the more constrained the lives of women and children. The squatter's "grand house was the symbol of his style, and its prisoners were women" (Dutton, 1985, p. 94). An alternate identity for settler women was the hard worker who toiled on the land as long and as diligently as the men. The latter existence of such women was erased statistically by a colonial government in the late 1890s that attempted to project an image of gentility in Australia (Alston, 2003; Voyce, 2007). Either way, women on properties were rendered invisible and silenced.

Vestiges of these discourses emerged in this research project, as women grappled with competing discursive expectations. Respondents spoke of maintaining appearances, dress codes, family privacy and proper behaviour while simultaneously labouring both outdoors and in the homestead office.

The masculine hegemony that characterises the culture of families on the land (Alston, 2012) produced another discourse for women, that of the outsider within the family of their in-laws. Most women, especially if they were not from the country, remained unaware before they married of the "web of feudal-like arrangements of which they [would] soon be a part" (Voyce, 1993, p. 122). Properties were owned within a range of farm financial structures and men were the owners of the capital resources (Hay & Pearce, 2014). Voyce (2007), a legal academic, noted the enduring privileging of male rights in family settlement cases, with the presumption that the farm viability under male ownership is a higher value than the contributions or rights of wives or daughters. He attributed this to legal and institutional support for the special status of farms, and their specific masculinist dominion (2007).

Thus, unsuspecting young women often moved away from their own families and locales to marry into a patrilineal, patrilocal masculinist culture, where they found themselves isolated and positioned in a tangled

web of men who were all related. As such, they often unexpectedly experienced a "sense of marginalization relative to their husband's family of origin" (Trussel & Shaw, 2009, p. 434). Not only were they outsiders, they were often treated with suspicion, in terms of their potential impact on farm assets. A common saying, still current, was: "The most feared beast on the farm is the daughter-in-law". This precarious situation contributed to their geographical and emotional marginalisation.

Women have attempted to form alliances and to find ways to advocate for themselves and for their children. Women's representation in traditional agri-political organisations has been minimal (Alston, 2003). Participation and leadership by women in these organisations have been constrained by the "central and seemingly unmoveable place men and dominant masculinities play" (Pini, 2005, p. 86). In the 1990s, a range of rural women's organisations, such as Women in Agriculture (WiA) and Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Network (QRRRWN), were founded and achieved some success. However, such organisations have struggled to build a consensus among members when developing strategies, which has contributed to muted advocacy (Alston, 2009; Pini, Brown, & Simpson, 2003; Grace & Lennie, 1998).

Marginalisation

Ethical research which focuses on marginalisation includes the imperative to avoid defining a group as marginalised, especially if this notion is not part of their identity. Introducing the concept of marginalisation or otherness may negatively label a cohort and feelings of inferiority may become internalised (Mowat, 2015). This is part of a broader axiom which exhorts the researcher to be mindful of the personal and political situations of respondents and "take extra care not to increase their vulnerabilities, otherwise the damage could be more severe" (Danaher, Cook, Danaher, Coombes, & Danaher, 2013, p. 145). Specifically, I did not want to reinscribe women as victims as has been done is some feminist constructions of rural women (Grace & Lennie, 1996). However, marginalisation as a concept was useful as a framework to discuss a number

of aspects in the discursive realities of women who live and work on the land.

Marginalisation manifests in many ways, can be formal or informal, and includes the labelling of the group or individual, as well as the acceptance or resistance to the label by those affected (Mowat, 2015). Although these women inhabited a world where the pervasive masculinist hegemony contributed to their gendered invisibility and concomitant outsider status, they did not self-identify as fully marginalised. Mowat (2015) contended that in order to be considered marginalised, a person or group would need to feel that they were excluded from an ideal. The most salient area of exclusion my respondents identified was their difficulties in accessing educational opportunities for their children. Hence, their gendered invisibility combined with their geographical isolation did create a sense of marginalisation in educating their children, specifically their inability to "access the range of services and/or opportunities open to others" (Mowat, 2015, p. 457).

Thus, I concluded that women on the land experienced partial marginalisation through their gendered outsider status, but most acutely through the tyranny of distance which impacted on the education of their children.

Insider/Outsider Researcher

I consider myself to be an insider researcher, having lived with my husband and our children on our family grazing and broadacre properties for thirteen years in South West Queensland. The advantages of being an insider researcher include the ability to easily recruit participants. The first four of the 20 respondents were friends, and referrals flowed on to me through the snowball technique. Friendships allowed me to develop rapport more quickly. Common experiences and interests added a more comprehensive understanding of the context and the complexities of the situation being researched, and an intense, often personal and motivating interest in the inquiry (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

My outsider status came originally from being a Canadian urban immigrant with a different cultural perspective, and latterly, from the

outside perspective afforded by my researcher lens. Another area in which I was an outsider was that I married into an agricultural family, and as the outsider daughter-in-law, had to learn to adjust to this unfamiliar and all-pervasive farm family culture. This was a commonality I shared with all of my respondents.

Thus, the duality of the insider/outsider researcher space afforded a number of advantages. My outsider perspective inspired my curiosity about Australian women on the land, their resilience and strategies in the face of rural challenges and lack of resources, such as education facilities. My insider status facilitated the open and fulsome responses of the participants. In a sense, as qualitative researchers, we are all both insider and outsider researchers: insiders because we come to know our participants very well, and outsiders because of our researcher lens (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Ethics

As with all research projects, the proposal was submitted to the ethics department at the university. The ethics application included provisions for ensuring confidentiality, in the information and consent forms, secure data storage and respondent validation. In an effort to ensure the ease of my participants, I decided that the interviews with the women would be conducted at a venue of their choice, which might be their homes. The ethics department, in conjunction with the risk assessment department, questioned the safety of driving to remote homesteads on my own. They suggested that phone or video interviews would be more appropriate, or that meetings be held in the nearest towns.

However, the internet is unreliable in many remote locations. In the spirit of situated ethics in understanding that the construction of complex groups is "tied to questions of power and (dis)empowerment" (Danaher et al., 2013, p. 144), I felt that I should demonstrate understanding that distance is a factor of disempowerment for these women. For instance, many of the respondents routinely drove long distances daily for their children's schooling. Further, proximity ethics, that is, "respect, caring, humanity and obligation to the other" (Hinze,

Romann-Aas, & Aas, 2015, p. 9) contributed to my argument that it was important to show willingness to travel to the respondents, rather than expecting them to do the travelling. My ability to drive a utility vehicle with a two-way radio, and my familiarity with country road conditions supported my case.

Some of the respondents met with me in cafes in the nearest towns but most women invited me to their homes. This necessitated a driving time for myself ranging from one hour to eight hours away from my home. The participants appreciated this gesture, particularly considering the hours of driving they did to educate their children. Additionally, my willingness to drive to their venue of choice indicated respect and acknowledgement of their lived experiences.

My impression was that because I was empathetic and understood from my own lived experience this and other situations they faced, they felt comfortable disclosing their frustrations about a range of issues. Sometimes, like Bhopal (2010), I found that "the more I revealed about my own personal experiences, the more I felt the women began to trust and open up to me" (p. 192).

On the other hand, sometimes the assumptions the respondents made about the similarity of my lived experience to theirs were enough to engender trust and openness. Like Pini et al. (2003) in their research with cane-grower women, I didn't mention my feminist perspective. Pini, who was also an insider researcher, suggested that the identity of feminist had "significant negative connotations" in the rural context (Pini et al., 2003, p. 174). Upon reflection, and ongoing observation, I decided that while a certain level of self-revelation and similar life experiences were important to establish rapport, the women did not seem too concerned or curious about deeper aspects of my life; they were, for the most part, quite gratified to be taken seriously and, as several of them said, to have the opportunity to talk about serious things. Like Pini, I pondered the ethics of lack of full disclosure, but, in the end, decided that my intentions were "motivated by a sympathetic engagement with the context and culture" (Pini et al., 2003, p. 174).

I sought to understand and to give voice to the complexity of their situations, the factors affecting their decisions, and their strategies for navigating the difficult terrain of educating children in remote

Queensland. When appropriate, I shared my own challenges educating my children, and my experience of relocation for their education. This encouraged the women to respond with their experiences. The informal semi-structured interview format gave space for in-depth and detailed conversations (Danaher et al., 2013), which contributed to rich data.

The Data

Lena (a pseudonym), at the time of the interview, had been living in a major regional town for two and a half years with her primary aged children until they were ready for boarding school in Year Six, at age eleven. Prior to this situation, she had attempted a range of education strategies:

> So we are 80 kilometres from town, so the first year or two, we did distance education. The problems having a govvy [governess- a live-in schoolteacher] and the standard of Queensland Education at the time, we changed the curriculum to C2C [Curriculum into the Classroom]. It's very internet based and we were really struggling with the internet. So we decided we would drive to a little school that had about 20 kids. A one teacher school and it was 60 kilometres away. So we were doing about 1800 ks [kilometres] a fortnight. We petitioned the government to get this nine-day fortnight, which was fantastic, because every second Friday you had [a] long weekend. So we did that for four or five years.

Lena realised, as her children grew older, that they were falling behind in learning and that there was "no one that could give them that bit of extra help that they needed". At that point, she and her husband made the decision that she and the children would relocate to the closest regional city so the children could attend a few years of formal primary school education living with her before boarding.

Some of the mothers who moved to a regional city with their children enrolled them in schools that offered boarding. Thus, it was easier for the children to transition into boarding when the mother returned to the property. Most families in the research accepted that it was standard

practice in the country to send their children away at age 12 to secondary schools with boarding facilities.

The lower level of educational attainment for children as a possible consequence of education marginalisation (Messiou, 2012) was a common fear amongst the mothers. Their anxieties intensified when their children experienced learning disabilities. Several issues overlapped: distance from schools, inexperienced and under-resourced staff, lengthy driving hours and the disquiet of the untrained mothers when required to teach their own children.

Several of the women taught their children at home through Distance Education, which is provided by the Department of Education, Queensland, Australia. Families register their children in Distance Education, which provides online learning modules and assessments, following the Queensland Education curriculum. Some mothers were more suited to the role than others. Grace (a pseudonym) was comfortable enough in the interview to share her insecurities with me, with an overlay of humour:

> I thought I could teach correspondence. However, it was quickly realised that I didn't have the self-discipline nor creativity for Preschool. All that cutting, colouring and pasting. My kids also didn't have access to TV, so they missed the fundamentals from Play School and Sesame Street. We were all paddock and cattle orientated. [In the] morning—we would traipse into the "school area", open the resources box, and all hell would break loose. Tears from all sides by the end of the session.

Grace conceded defeat and drove her children to the closest local school for many years. However, when the children were about 10 years old, "Learning difficulties and under experienced young state teachers combined", and Grace and her husband enrolled both children into boarding at a convent school in the nearest regional town.

Penny (a pseudonym) lived four hours away from a major town. When her three children were younger, she would drive to town, place the children in a childcare facility and do her shopping. She felt that spending time in childcare helped her children learn to socialise with other children. When they were ready to go to school, they were able to attend a

local one-teacher school. However, one of Penny's children was diagnosed with autism and, as a result, was home schooled for primary and secondary school. On their property was a cottage with a small demountable building (donga) attached. The donga was renovated into a school room and the cottage to a residence for the governess:

> The first two years, Prep and Year One, I taught Callum. … Then it was just getting too much for me because I had … three kids in three different teaching environments. That's when we decided to get a governess. So we've had a governess more or less off and on for … all of those years.

Penny was fortunate that they were able to both find and afford a governess. Other mothers expressed their frustration regarding the difficulties of engaging suitable people willing to relocate to remote properties to teach children. If such a person was found, the next issue was affordability. Isolated Children and Parents Association (ICPA) research found that in 80 per cent of farm families who used distance education, the mothers performed the role of unpaid governess. Such a position could fully occupy 35–40 hours a week, and continue for 8–10 years, depending upon the number of children (QCL August 08, 2019, p. 25).

Alternatively, families could separate. This could mean that the mothers moved to a local or regional town to educate their children. Another option was to send their children to a boarding school.

Many of the options women faced were not ideal. Respondents revealed their heartbreak when sending their children away to boarding school, and conversely, the pressure on their marriages for those who moved to town to educate their children. It would be difficult for women to discuss these decisions with a researcher who might judge their choices unfavourably. As an insider researcher, I was able to confirm that I had been faced with similar decisions in my life in remote Queensland, and I had lived experience of the difficulties these mothers faced. In this way, I could tacitly reassure respondents that I would not "harm or place at risk [their] well-being [through] shaming, ridicule … and misrepresentation" (Danaher et al., 2013, p. 144).

There were several challenges associated with insider research. Firstly, the respondent could feel that detailed explanations of their experiences

may not be necessary due to the fact that I might already possess a certain amount of knowledge (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). To mitigate this situation, I prefaced many questions with phrases such as: "Although I know a little bit about this, I would like to know how that experience was for you, in your own words". Secondly, even allowing for the idea of co-construction of knowledge where the researcher's experience is part of the data (Hewitt, 2007), there may be the risk of "knowledge distortion" (Taylor, 2011, p. 6). Taylor suggested that time away from the milieu to gain some distance, critical reflexivity and ensuring that a proportion of the respondents were unknown to the researcher were useful distancing tactics. To ensure authenticity, five of my respondents were completely unknown to me before the project. The outsider perspective from living in a different locale recently, and approaching the conversations through a researcher lens, was beneficial. Also, I regularly reflected upon my processes in my research journals as well as through frequent discussions with supervisors and colleagues.

Further, in order to ensure that my participants felt comfortable with their contribution to this co-created research I utilised a form of respondent validation. This also provided participants with the recognition that they were "the experts in the field of their own experience and views" (Hewitt, 2007, p. 1157). I also used it to seek final permission to use their interviews in my study. This required that I sent them the de-identified transcripts. Individuals' names and locations were altered for the protection of anonymity and confidentiality. I re-assured them of their right to withdraw all or part of the interview data or, in fact, to add material. This was explained before the interviews occurred, and again, when the transcripts were sent to them.

Conclusion

The women sought the best possible education for their children, and they were prepared to go to great lengths to provide their children the opportunity to participate in effective schooling. Most often, they used a combination of strategies. These included the provision of distance education; significant hours of driving to attend local schools; relocation to

regional towns with their children at the risk of putting pressure on the family unit; and sending their children away from the family to reside in boarding schools.

I sought to recognise and respect the "multiple, contradictory, and complex subject positions people occupy within different social, cultural, and economic locations" (Giroux, 2005, p. 13). As such I ensured that this research avoided reinscribing a silenced, outsider discourse. The research respondents described, through their dialogues, the multiple and contradictory discourses they inhabited, and how schooling their children represented a space which is particularly precarious. Their geographical isolation, combined with their gendered historical invisibility and ongoing lack of access to the centres of power and policy, contributed to their relatively powerless position. This also rendered their children vulnerable educationally.

Nonetheless, women drew on their other, more empowering, discursive identities to deploy strategies, tactics and compromises to manage the challenges of the educational marginalisation of their children in order to give them the best academic opportunities possible. In many ways, the mothers compensated for the gaps in education services and resources with their own time, energy and hard work.

When asked about governmental policy recommendations many women suggested more resources for education for their children, including subsidies for governesses, better training and resourcing of staff in small rural schools and assistance with the costs of boarding. They also desired their expertise and lived experience to be acknowledged and heard by policymakers, education administrations and politicians. For example, they were very appreciative when their requests were granted for the nine-day schooling fortnight.

The women themselves, armed with research work such as this project, and their own lived experience, can be effective advocates. Although rural women have been denied a voice historically, contemporary circumstances are changing. Women in remote Australia, individually and collectively are developing visibility and a voice, through social media, agri-politics and women's organisations. Insider research such as undertaken in this project can act as support material to effectively articulate and communicate their voices in rural education advocacy.

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