Reviewer’s report

Title: Co-interviewing across gender and culture: expanding qualitative research methods in Melanesia.

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Reviewer: Katherine Lepani

Reviewer’s report:

1. This article nicely illustrates the value of reflective analysis of the qualitative research process by looking closely at the power and gender dynamics that influence interactions between researchers and participants. Being an anthropologist who has worked in Papua New Guinea, I have experienced these dynamics as well, where research participants actively negotiate the terms of engagement and the interactive process, at times specifically requesting that individual interviews involve more than one researcher, regardless of gender, and where a third person, not a researcher, is present as an active observer. Ethnography as a methodological approach and anthropology as a discipline are open to these dynamic and flexible arrangements and are not constrained by the more structured, standardised approaches of data collection methods applied in public health research. In terms of long-standing theoretical and methodological debates about these issues within the social sciences, the article does little to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of research practice. Nonetheless, the article offers critical reflection on the specific dynamics of the interview process within the Papua New Guinea context, which in itself is a valuable resource especially for students of qualitative health research methods. My comments and suggestions for compulsory revisions are primarily concerned with the need to provide further clarification and elaboration of the issues presented in order to strengthen the argument, specifically in relation to public health research and the main readership of the journal.

Major Compulsory Revisions

2. To better situate the argument within the literature on qualitative methodologies, further discussion in the body of the paper is required to explain what is meant by “orthodox understandings of a researcher’s power”, “Western understandings of researcher’s power” and “orthodox qualitative research methods” (Abstract, third paragraph). While the discussion draws effectively on the key literature regarding decolonizing methodologies, the relevance for public health research, including participatory action research, could be stronger. On this point as well, the disciplinary context of the argument should be made clearer, that is, public health research employs qualitative methods (the tools and techniques of data collection as distinct from methodological approaches, which engage theoretical frameworks and orientations) primarily in mixed-method studies to supplement predominantly quantitative methods. This is not the case for other disciplines, particularly anthropology, where the debate about power
relations, representation, positionality, and reflexivity are very much part of the orthodoxy of ethnographic theory and practice.

3. I question the observation that qualitative research methods are “constantly expanding” (Conclusions, second paragraph), which is also the active verb used in the article’s sub-title. This word choice is somewhat ironic as it conveys a quantitative measure for a qualitative focus. Methods are not expanding in terms of size or volume; rather, they are being enhanced and elaborated through more reflexive attention to research practice. The key focus is not about methods per se but about how methods (interviews, discussions) are put into ethical practice. In this sense, I would encourage further discussion of the ethics of interactive engagement in the qualitative research process, beyond informed consent and the ‘Western’ notion of ‘do no harm’ (Co-Interviewing, third paragraph; Conclusions, second paragraph) as pertains to ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Perhaps “expanding” refers to the increased application of qualitative methods in public health research; if so, the disciplinary argument needs to be more focused (re: comment 2 above).

4. Elaborate on what is meant by the “epistemological, ontological and axiological foundations” (Co-Interviewing, third paragraph; Conclusions, second paragraph) of both researchers and participants, as these are key concepts in social theory as well as complex domains of cultural meaning and knowledge production.

5. Grammar needs correcting in fourth sentence (Introduction, second paragraph) but I would delete “are able to” for the very point being made. Suggesting that people who were formerly subjected to the hegemonic scrutiny of colonial research agendas are now “able” to become researchers themselves sounds patronising, as though the same authoritative power dynamic is at work in determining this new status. The same consideration goes for the very last sentence in the article, which makes a distinction between research participants and research leaders. I question whether “leaders” is an appropriate designation here. This is a subtle point but it becomes significant given the article’s overall focus on power dynamics. Collaboration might require some participants to guide initiatives but interactive processes should transcend hierarchies of engagement.

6. Clarify the concern (Methods, second paragraph) as this is key to the overall argument: the researchers was not merely “present” but directly involved in conducting the interviews. As described in the article, co-interviewing is more than the mere presence of a support researcher taking notes; it involves interactive dialogue.

7. The evidence provided (What we discovered) about the identified advantages of co-interviews is not substantive enough to support the arguments made. The discussion about bikmen status does not adequately support the key point that having two interviewers gives additional status to the study participant. It is unclear whether this refers equally to female as well as male participants, and whether this additional status is recognised and experienced beyond the interview context. Bikman status is achieved (in contrast to being ascribed) in the public domain largely through oratory skills and the capacity to mobilise and
redistribute wealth. A clearer definition of the Tok Pisin term should be provided when first introduced in the article. Tok Pisin is mentioned again later but not in relation to this concept. The observation that the female counterpart, bikmeri, is less common due to the dominance of patriarchal societies is not sufficiently explained. More contextual elaboration and discussion of the concept in relation to broader social dynamics would strengthen the argument about how status contributes to the interactive dynamics of an interview. Is this a question of “audience,” that is, the interview context provides the opportunity for participants to articulate their perspectives to a professional audience of researchers? How then might this be different from a group discussion where other participants also serve as an “audience,” or for that matter other forums where perspectives are voiced such as management meetings or training workshops? Does the interview experience hold status and prestige for the participant in part because of the status of the research project itself (who is involved, who is funding, what its purpose is) and the recognition that the participants, in this instance, were all ‘key informants’, or people with professional and specialist knowledge and interest in the topic being explored? Discussion on the differences between different methods (interviews/discussions) and the status of the key informant participant as distinct from other participants (community members, clients, beneficiaries, etc.) would help to draw out the nuances around these issues.

8. The identified second advantage of co-interviewing (What we discovered, second paragraph) also requires further evidence and elaboration. Why is the opportunity for participants to speak to an international researcher regarded as important or significant? How does this dynamic enhance the value of the research experience? The statement about the co-presence of researchers as the means for participants to ensure understanding of their perspectives needs further explanation in terms of how this process unfolds. The motivation seems to be increased influence and status within the organisation. The quote provided suggests that opportunities for reflective evaluation of project management and implementation are valued as a form of evidence-based practice, but co-interview techniques are not the only way to facilitate this process. The final statement in this section requires explication.

9. The points about audience, key informants, and recognition get raised again in the next section (Co-interviewing), but primarily in the form of an unanswered question. The effects of the method are presented as transformative but how this was achieved is not made clear in the discussion. Again, the importance of reflective evaluation as part of program management and implementation is implicit but it seems that the argument presented gives undue credit to the status of the interviewers over the capacity of the program manager to improve services. This might have more to do with people’s valuing of evidence-based practice than the gender and power dynamics of the individual interview experience.

10. Further reflective analysis in this section (Co-Interviewing) supports the main arguments for co-interviewing and relational dynamics. However, the specific methods identified (second paragraph) are not unique to this study, but standard
ethical practice in most qualitative research. In this sense, the arguments for co-interviewing could be linked more directly to the bigger ethical and methodological issues of participatory research. Qualitative methodologies, particularly the embodied engagement of ethnographic research, facilitate dynamic and on-going interactions between multiple perspectives in a given research setting. Perhaps rather than being a question of who the researchers are, the key point is that the different subject positions of researchers (including insider/outsider) and participants are an ongoing concern of reflexive research practice and isolated interviews alone do not generate the range of insights and perspectives that a combination of methods is able to do.

11. The article picks up again on the theme of bikman/bikmeri in relation to legitimacy in the research process (Bikman/Bikmeri, first paragraph). Here the analysis focuses on status conferred by age and seniority, particularly in relation to how the research project gained legitimacy through the involvement of a highly respected senior church leader. The final point shifts from bikman per se to the importance of teaming researchers of mixed ages as a means to provide “authenticity” to the younger researcher’s role. This seems to be an argument about cultural notions of authority and how knowledge is produced and transferred between generations, but it is not clear how this follows from the discussion of bikman, which focuses on having an audience or “holding court.”

12. The statement that researchers “act differently” in a cultural and social context defined by the church is not convincing (Opportunity to speak, first paragraph). The ethical principles of all qualitative research are concerned with building rapport and trust, providing a safe and non-judgemental environment, and engaging in active listening.

13. The discussion on researcher positionality (Insider/outsider research) is important and significantly enhances the overall argument. Likewise, the discussion on reflexivity (Conclusions, second paragraph) is critical to the article’s standpoint. Both of these critical dimensions should be introduced early in the article to provide a clear framework for analysing research methods.

Minor Essential Revisions

14. The point about village courts in PNG (Co-Interviewing, third paragraph) requires a reference.

Discretionary Revisions

15. The opening sentence should clarify the subject position of the plural personal pronoun: “it has been our practice as social researchers”. The two references [1, 2] raise questions about how the issues discussed in the article also are shaped by the research topic itself. In this regard, I would like to see some elaboration on the male circumcision for HIV prevention project to provide context for the material that is presented, and some discussion as to whether or not the specific topic of male circumcision, including gendered aspects, might have influenced participants’ expectations and interest in the project and the
dynamics of the interview process.

16. The option of using Tok Pisin or English (Co-Interviewing, second paragraph) is not necessarily either/or. Would you agree that, just as in daily conversation, research participants should feel free to move between a number of languages (Tok Pisin, English, Tok Ples)?

17. Elaborate on the different sites/types of power identified in parentheses (Co-Interviewing, third paragraph).

18. The statement that everyone in Melanesia has their place (Bikman/Bikmeri, first paragraph) requires elaboration. Place (position, status, role, identity) is not static but a relational concept with multiple meanings depending on context and circumstances.

Minor issues not for publication

Lines 82-83. Avoid using ‘diverse’ twice in same sentence.

Lines 84-85. Gender is not a “concept” per se but a relational dimension of social life; it takes form and meaning through lived experience.

Line 93. Change ‘or’ to ‘and as’: “as researchers from PNG based in PNG, and as Australians working in PNG, we are…”

Line 104. Correct Kovach spelling.

Line 131. Interviews (plural)

Lines 134-136. Rephrase passive sentence for clarity: We considered the impact ‘mismatched’ gender might have…and discussed what influence…

Line 182. Correct typo: ‘an’ not ‘and’.

Line 266. Delete second ‘that’

Line 269. Delete ‘a.’ Avoid starting sentence with ‘it.’

Lines 274-275. Rephrase: Opportunities to be listened to depend upon a person’s status in the community.

Line 276. Awkward phrase: “predominantly Christian churches.” Does this mean Christianity is the predominant religion in PNG?

Lines 278-279. Is this a quote from a research participant?

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.