Studying up, down, sideways and through: situated research and policy networks

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Abstract

Earlier this year, I began work in the research and policy centre of a large not-for-profit organisation, where the focus of my work is on disadvantage in the working years. This work is quite different from my previous academic research, which focussed on the wealthy and wannabe wealthy. The change in context and perspective has caused me to think about some of the practical and ethical aspects of research on advantage and disadvantage. In this paper, I reflect on Laura Nader's famous challenge to anthropologists to 'study up' and suggest that her insights have much to offer researchers within other disciplines, including sociology and social policy. I consider some of the challenges and opportunities in studying up, down, sideways and through to argue that situated approaches and an awareness of policy pathways and linkages are important in making sense of the connections and contradictions in social research and public policy.

Keywords: studying up, situated research, reflexivity, public policy, methodology, networks

Introduction

Earlier this year, I began work in the research and policy centre of a large not-for profit organisation, where the focus of my work is on disadvantage in the working years. This focus is quite different from my previous work, which looked at the wealthy and wannabe wealthy (for example, Bowman 2009; 2008; 2007). The change in context and perspective has caused me to consider some of the practical and ethical aspects of research on advantage and disadvantage.

In this paper, I reflect on Laura Nader's famous challenge to anthropologists to 'study up' and suggest that her insights have much to offer researchers within other disciplines, including sociology and social policy. I consider some of the challenges and opportunities in studying up, down, sideways and through and suggest that

situated approaches are important in making sense of 'the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness of policy processes' (Wedel *et al*.2005:44).

Studying up

In 1969, Laura Nader challenged anthropologists to 'study up', but her challenge was often misunderstood. As she pointed out later, she did not mean that anthropologists should only study elites and the powerful. In a recent keynote address to an anthropology conference, she explained that researchers should study 'up, down and sideways simultaneously' (Nader 2008).

There are two key aspects to Nader's challenge to study up: the first is the need to see connections between groups in society and to link groups and individuals to 'larger processes of change' (Nader 2008). Studying up can inform our understandings of patterns of production, distribution, value, and power. The second aspect of Nader's challenge is more practical. Because the researcher has less power than the researched, studying up challenges taken for granted understandings of the research relationship, and forces researchers to address the interrelated issues of access, methodology, attitudes, and ethics (Nader 1969:301). In this paper, I focus on these practical aspects of her challenge first, and then consider issues of connection.

Studying up - Access and methodology

Many researchers find that getting access to those with more power than themselves can be daunting and difficult (Gilding 2002; Kezar 2003). The wealthy and powerful are adept at maintaining their privacy through a range of stratagems, including the appointment of gatekeepers such as personal assistants and advisers (Burrage 2002; Marcus 1992). This lack of access may come as a shock to researchers who are used to 'studying down'. For example, the renowned organisational theorist Barbara

Czarniawska recounts how a feminist sociologist friend of hers, who prided herself on her ability to connect with the women she researched, expressed surprise when she was 'kept waiting' on arrival for agreed meetings or 'sent packing' by 'top female politicians and administrators' (2007:54).

Janine Wedel and her colleagues (2005:41) observe that interviews are 'often the only means of gathering first hand information and gaining entrée to ... individuals in powerful institutions'. However, researchers often describe their sense of anxiety and feelings of reticence about approaching those more powerful than themselves. For example, Michael Gilding (2002:6) described his difficulties in researching the super rich in Australia.

> For a long time, I put off doing the interviews. I cannot imagine anyone on the Rich Lists agreeing to talk with me. I read academic studies of wealth. None of them involve interviews. One American researcher writes that he tried but he gave up – partly because no one would talk with him, and partly because the few people who did talk were so guarded about what they said that it wasn't worth the effort.

These kinds of difficulties tend to influence the choice of methodology, and as a result, perhaps, many researchers rely on publicly available documents and other data rather than using direct techniques such as interviews or participant observation (for example, Donaldson and Poynting 2007).

Studying up – Attitudes and ethics

Adrianna Kezar (2004) identifies two key traditions in studying up: the conflict and the ethnographic traditions, and suggests a third approach, which she describes as transformational. Each approach raises particular ethical and practical issues. The conflict approach seeks to expose abuses of power and confirm 'conjecture about inequities' (Kezar 2004:398). Kezar argues that the conflict approach is characterised

by exploitation of the interviewees, and the absence of trust. On the other hand, the ethnographic approach, which employs methods such as participant observation, is compromised by the desire to balance academic rigour with pragmatic concerns about jeopardising future access to research participants. Malcolm Alexander describes this dilemma as a 'difficult choice'. As he puts it: 'Do [researchers] write to the business class they are studying, or do they use their research and knowledge to expose this class to its critics and class opponents?' (2004:3).

Kezar's transformational approach is informed by feminist and narrative traditions in which research is characterised by:

> '(a) commitment and engagement,(b) mutual trust, (c) reflexivity, (d) mutuality, (e) egalitarianism, (f) empathy and ethic of care, and (g) transformation through consciousness raising, advocacy, and demystification' (Kezar 2003:400).

There are practical and ethical issues inherent in this approach. For example, Kezar proposes that researchers conduct three interviews to help break down social barriers and develop trust, which may be impractical. Similarly, 'transformation through consciousness raising' may be unrealistic. Interestingly, Kezar does acknowledge that decisions 'about challenging elites must be made very judiciously and perhaps toward the later part of the study, if possible' (Kezar 2003:411). Wedel *et al*. (2005:42) argue that studying up 'necessitates rethinking the ethical codes designed with "studying down" in mind'. A key feature of these codes is an emphasis on doing no harm to the people they study. Where those people have more power – and different values – than the researcher, a commitment to doing no harm may create a sense of conflict between the roles of researcher and advocate for social change. These concerns echo the 'difficult choice' to which Alexander referred.

Kezar admits that the transformational approach may not always be appropriate, and that 'some people may just want to tell their story, and the researchers should respect this desire' (Kezar 2003:403). A growing number of researchers analyse the narrative frameworks within which the elite 'just' tell their stories (see for example, Nicholson and Anderson 2005; Hytti 2003; and Benoit 1997). Research such as that conducted by Mulholland (2003) and Bowman (2007, 2009) use the different perspectives of husbands and wives to provide insight into class, gender, and the 'success story'. Further, Bowman situates these stories within the narrative frameworks of family, business and success. Concerns about confidentiality limit the way in which perspectives can be compared (Bowman 2007; 2009). Nevertheless, this kind of research reveals how narrative frameworks reflect and reinforce gendered understandings of success, not only for the elite, but more broadly. In this way, a focus on the understandings and experiences of the elite can shed light on broader social relationships and processes.

Studying down

Like those who study up, researchers who study down face the interrelated issues of access, attitudes, ethics and methodology. Access to those with less power than oneself may seem relatively unproblematic. Disadvantaged people have fewer resources to build gates or employ gatekeepers, and part of the experience of disadvantage is lack of privacy – especially in a bureaucratic welfare environment. It may be relatively easy to gain access to information about disadvantaged people and groups. However, meaningful engagement with individuals who belong to stigmatised categories may be more challenging, as they may associate the researcher with other powerful institutions such as government or 'the welfare'. These categories of

individuals are often described as 'hard to reach' (Taylor and Kearney 2005: 4.4), but being 'hard to reach' may be a form of resistance.

Studying down is a description that can apply to different power relations, such as age, gender, class and race (as can studying up). The implications of the power relations may be relatively subtle. For example, Sari Biklen examined age related power in qualitative research with youth. She examined how older researchers' memories of their own youth affected the interpretation of interviews with young people. Biklen argues that researchers need to accept that 'youth are knowledgeable about their lives and [are] able to understand social meanings' (2004:722).

Researchers who study down may be motivated by desire to 'do good', to expose the exploitation and suffering of the disadvantaged, and to effect political and social change. These motivations have practical and ethical implications similar to those identified by Kezar (2003) in relation to elite interviews. But there are differences due to the nature of the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched.

The complexity of power relations can be illustrated by Lorraine Nencel's attempts to connect with prostitutes in Peru, which were met by what she describes as 'unbearably loud' silence. She reflects on the nature of power relations between a researcher who is seeking to develop an egalitarian (if not transformational) relationship, when the researched are 'not interested in sharing power' (2005:349).

> They gave me no more than a minimal amount of space for manoeuvring and the control of the situation remained in their hands … I attempted to build trusting relationships in which they would eventually feel comfortable enough to relate their life story... our relationships were founded on respect and a degree of trust, but this impasse in dialogue was never completely surmounted. They seemed content to hold onto the reins throughout the duration of fieldwork. Thus, the silence between us forced me to ponder to what extent the concept of intersubjectivity [sharing] is ethnocentric, paternalistic and grounded in an essentialist notion of power (2005:350).

As Nencel observes, the prostitutes' relationships with the researcher may have seemed similar to their encounters with clients. For these women, silence may have been a expression of power and a form of resistance.

Studying sideways

Studying sideways enables researchers to examine the motivations, epistemological and ontological understandings and practices of their peers and themselves. There is an increasing number of sideways studies that examine professional groups (see for example, Hannerz 2004). There is also a growing number of studies that examine the taken for granted understandings of researchers and the contradictions and tensions within research practice (for example Ribbens McCarthy 2003, Skeggs 2004). But as Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet (2003: 414) point out that the problems associated with the practice of reflexivity tend not to be discussed. They argue that too often the '"embodied", situated and subjective researcher carrying out the analysis is rendered invisible as are the interpersonal, social and institutional contexts' (2003: 5). As a result, they suggest, issues of power in interpretation and analysis are obscured. Mauthner and Doucet argue that 'situating ourselves socially and emotionally in relation to respondents is an important part of reflexivity' (2003: 420). However, they caution against using 'gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and geographic location' as tokens to represent difference. Rather they suggest that it is important to understand the impact of these on the researcher's interpretation and analysis.

In a similar way, Pierre Bourdieu argues that 'reflexive analysis must consider successively position in the social space, position in the field and position in the scholastic universe' (2004: 94). He cautions against 'the temptation of indulging in the type of reflexivity that could be called *narcissistic'* (2004:89, emphasis in

original) and stresses the importance of recognising the collective understandings and biases that are the product of the fields in which researchers operate.

Studying through

'Studying through' (Reinhold as cited in Shore and Wright 1997:3) is a re-articulation of Laura Nader's call to focus on connections between individuals and groups and 'larger processes of change' (Nader 2008). Studying through seeks to trace 'the ways in which power creates webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space' (Shore and Wright 1997:11). This kind of approach is particularly useful in the analysis of public policy processes. Wedel *et al.* (2005:34) suggest that an anthropology of public policy

> can explain how taken-for-granted assumptions channel policy debates in certain directions, inform the dominant ways policy problems are identified, enable particular classifications of target groups, and legitimize certain policy solutions while marginalising others.

A sociology of public policy plays a similar role, but it goes beyond explanation. As Gatta and McCab (2005:1) suggest, sociological analysis can build on C. Wright Mills' insight that private troubles 'must be understood in terms of public issues - and in terms of the problems of history making' (Mills 1959: 226). Further, they argue that sociologists need to 'actively engage with policymakers and policy leaders' as partners, but they do not specifically address issues of power between the researchers and policy makers that may affect the nature of such partnerships.

Social network analysis can reveal the 'relationships between individuals, groups, and organisations, and the changing, overlapping and multiple roles that actors within them play' (Wedel *et al* 2005:40) as well as showing how local, regional, national and international fields connect and intersect. An excellent example of this kind of

analysis is the recently published book, *Networks, innovation and public policy: Politicians, bureaucrats and the pathways to change inside government* by Mark Considine, Jenny Lewis and Damon Alexander (2009). In that book, Considine and his colleagues map pathways of innovation within government, and explore the extent to which change is influenced by random, informal factors rather than structure. By looking at interactions, social network analysis can show patterns of power, but it is a demanding methodology that entails detailed data collection and 'a clear sense of which kinds of networks are most important to the forms of power or agency that matter most' (Considine *et al*. 2009:15). In other words, it requires a subjective assessment of networks and the processes of power.

Conclusion

My shift in focus from the wealthy to the disadvantaged caused me to reflect on Laura Nader's well-known but often misunderstood challenge to anthropologists. Studying up, down, sideways, and through are interrelated situated approaches to research and policy analysis. As Laura Nader observed, studying up raises issues of connection, attitudes, ethics, methodology, and power. These issues are inherent in all research relationships, but perhaps they are easier to ignore or discount when studying down. Situated reflexive research practices attempt to locate the researcher in relation to the researched and map connections of power more broadly. These approaches not only recognise practical and ethical research issues. Importantly, they also reveal the connections and contradictions, which along with an awareness of policy pathways and linkages are important in making sense of complex social issues.

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