

Student experience podcast transcript: Alice Palmer

Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.

My project was called 'The Female Occupation.' It explored aspects of the modern housewife role from a feminist perspective, and looked at how the role has become more pedagogic and child orientated compared to the traditional housewife role. I conducted hour-long in-depth interviews with housewives who were mothers of at least one child under five. Children were present during the interviews which took place in the homes of participants.

What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?

Reading Ann Oakley's book *Housewife* showed me that housework was an interesting subject that I could explore further. There also happened to be plenty of media coverage on the subject at the time such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Loose Women* and Anthea Turner's *The Perfect Housewife*. I combined this with my interest in feminine research which stemmed from the fact that my favourite undergraduate model was Sex and Gender. By starting with my favourite area of sociology (gender studies), I was able to choose an angle (feminism), and then a subject (housework).

Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?

Lots of reading to identify gaps in previous research was the most important way of formulating research questions. However, it is also important to follow 'gut feelings' about what needs investigating, even if it has been done before, because things could have changed over time. I also made good use of the wisdom of my tutors and lecturers who knew better than me how to phrase research questions correctly.

How did you go about the literature review? Can you illustrate the steps that you took?

Starting as early as possible meant I could get a really good overview of previous research on housework and the housewife. I made sure that I read a variety of materials including the academic journals and books but also newspaper articles, television programmes, adverts and magazine content. This helped me to prevent feeling swamped by big old dusty books, but kept my subject in mind while I was watching TV or out and about. It also made the literature review more readable and humorous, and I felt more confident critiquing familiar modern media than older academic texts which I felt 'before my time' and were therefore harder to criticize as coherently. I began by making a scrapbook from housewife related magazine or newspaper articles, and asked friends and family to look out for pieces that I might find useful. I used this to direct the more bulky academic material I read. For example, I came across some retro adverts for washing machines which used the image of a housewife. This led me to explore literature on the impact of technology upon the housewife role. It sounds obvious but it is important to look at the references at the end of each article or book you read as this is like a paper trail which leads you to the next potential source of information.

What prompted you to choose this research design and method?

The research design allowed me to tackle the question of how the role of housewife has changed over time. By talking to housewives directly in detail I was able to find out what the contemporary housewife role involves. It was easy to discover how the role had changed over time due to all the previous literature on housework and the housewife.

What factors influenced your choice of research methods?

I chose loosely structured in-depth interviews because they fitted with the feminist research methodology I wanted to follow. This design allowed participants to express themselves freely and control the direction of the conversation to some extent. This put everyone at ease and gave the interviews a chatty, informal atmosphere which helped to tease out lots of interesting information from participants.

How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?

I used a snowball technique which began with a friend who fitted the participant criteria. I then interviewed some of her friends. My tutor put me in contact with some of his friends who also fitted the criteria and eventually, by asking the interviewees to connect me with their friends from child care groups, baby gyms and yoga classes, I was able to gather enough participants for my small sample. I was not interested in finding a large sample as I knew my interviews would be lengthy and the qualitative data I was producing would not be of any statistical interest. It was more important that my data was valid and reflected the feelings of the participants in detail.

Did you encounter any complications in constructing your research instrument(s)?

I found it difficult to know where to begin when I wrote my interview framework. I wrote down lots of questions and did a mock interview with a friend to see which ones worked and check that the questions made sense when I read them out loud. Being patient and willing to work through questions pays off and improves your confidence prior to conducting your interviews.

Were there any problems when it came to administering your research instrument(s)?

Interviews took place in the homes of participants where children were present, which meant that the interviews were often interrupted and sometimes the flow of the conversation was lost or participants lost their trail of thought. One boy stole the tape recorder and refused to give it back! The only way to deal with this was to respond with good humour and try to help participants keep their children occupied. Care was necessary during the transcription process as the interviews were very 'stop-start' with overlapping conversations. I would not change the way I conducted the interviews because I felt that being in the participants' busy homes helped me to better understand their lives and of course it was convenient for the interviewees who would have had to find childcare.

What were your research questions?

What does the contemporary housewife role involve? How do women feel about being housewives? Is housework a feminist issue? How has the role of the housewife changed over time?

Did you experience any ethical difficulties at any point during your research?

I forgot to print out the standard University Ethics form, and was asking participants to sign a 'home made' ethics form. I was later told this was not good enough so I had to re-contact some participants to get the official forms completed after the research had been carried out. This was far from ideal and made me look unprofessional.

Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?

I found it difficult to know whether I had even come close to covering the literature in my area, even though I felt like I was working very hard. In order to get a clearer picture of my progress, I created a mind map of my literature review so far, and took it to lecturers who had experience in research on the same subject. By asking them whether I was heading in the right direction or whether there were any important chunks missing, I was reassured about my progress and the mind map also helped me to keep track of what ground I had covered.

Deciding what was most important and what needed to be cut from the literature review was very difficult. Handing in a rough draft as early as possible to a tutor is well worth it (even if it is embarrassingly rough!). Ask them to be ruthless and cut what is irrelevant and point out what needs bulking up. In my experience, tutors would rather see bad work early enough for them to help you improve it, than average work too late to make any improvement.

Did you have any difficulties with equipment or software at any point?

I used a digital recorder, then ran out of memory (and money) and had to delete a couple of the earlier interviews. I did not want to do this until my project had been marked and returned to me in case I had to prove that the interviews took place but I had no choice. In retrospect I would have used non-digital minitapes which could be stored somewhere safe or even returned to participants after I had finished my research.

Do you have any comments about your relationship with your research project supervisor? What role did they have in the process of doing a research process?

I feel so lucky to have had such a great supervisor who was patient, honest and full of enthusiasm. However, I do feel that you get out of your supervisors what you put in. They will be much more willing to help you if they feel you are enthusiastic and hard working and you prove this by having regular short meetings, getting drafts of each section in early and anticipating what information and guidance you will need early enough for them to be able to help. Keep up a regular rapport with your supervisor, even if it just a short email outlining your progress and when you plan to hand in your drafts or arrange your next meeting. You need to stay in contact with your supervisor even if you are embarrassed about how behind you are or the quality of your work, get over this and let them help you!

Don't be dismayed if you feel like your tutor is not giving you all the information you feel you need exactly when you need it, this means that they believe you are capable and feel they don't need to hold your hand every step of the way. I know lots of students who became frustrated with their tutors being

evasive or telling them to do what they felt was right rather than handing them a clear answer. They are doing this because they know you will learn from the research journey and come out feeling like you have achieved something – also, if they gave everyone the same answer the projects would just be too similar.

What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?

The main lesson I have learned is that you should try to enjoy the research as best you can. Pick a topic you find interesting and make it a part of your life for the short time you are studying it.

I would have taken more care with the ethics paperwork earlier on as that was the only really stressful part and my failure to use the official university ethics forms came back to haunt me later.

If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would that be?

Ask lots of questions early on and build a good relationship with your tutor or your supervisor as soon as possible. Hand in short drafts regularly even if they seem embarrassingly bad as this will keep you moving in the right direction. It'll make you more disciplined, and show your tutor that you are worth their effort to help you more than the students who have no enthusiasm.

How did you go about analyzing the data?

All the interviews were recorded, and I made sure to transcribe them immediately so the interview was fresh in my mind. This meant that any humorous comments, sarcasm or jest were translated correctly. Translating the interview immediately is much less laborious because you can recall a lot from memory so you don't have to listen to each section five times which makes it less likely for you to accidentally delete things you didn't mean to from excessive frustrated re-winding!

The transcriptions and themes were both pored over in great detail. After transcribing each interview, I created a list of the key themes to come out of the interview. Then I jumped for joy as these themes came up again and again in the next interviews! When all the interviews had been transcribed, I took all of the themes and related them those I had identified in the literature review. When there were big gaps between the themes identified in the interviews and the literature, it meant that the literature review needed adding to, or that there was something important to write about in my analysis, and I had discovered something which had not previously been written about.

Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?

Because there were young children present during the interviews, it is occasionally difficult to understand what is going on as children make noise, interrupt with questions about the strange lady in their house, or steal the tape recorder for chewing purposes! To remedy this, I would have replaced my hand held tape recorder with a digital video camera with a decent microphone which could be placed

somewhere out of children's reach. However, some participants may object strongly to them and their children being filmed even if they do not mind being recorded.

How did you go about writing up your research project?

I made sure that all sections were short, snappy, and had clear headings. I tried to be light hearted, avoid long descriptions and break up the text with interesting, relevant quotations from other literature or the interviews. I took a gamble and gave my chapters funny titles. It paid off and the examiners really liked them but I would recommend checking with your tutor before doing this. In fact, the most important thing to remember when deciding how to write up your project is that you need to do it again and again, in different ways, and keep checking with your tutor. Ask friends, course mates, family members and other lecturers to read small sections (don't expect anyone to read the whole thing in one go no matter how good you think it is). Asking a mix of tutors and non academics to read your work will help to make it both accurate and readable.

Although you cannot begin writing your analysis before your research is conducted, the literature review should be started as early as possible, and constantly tweaked depending on the direction that your research takes.

A nice saying I heard while studying is 'don't get it right, get it written' and I think this is really useful. As long as you have something written, you are on your way to improving it. I aimed to write a couple of hundred words a day, no matter how inspired I was feeling. I wrote more if I felt it was going well, but at least I could steadily move towards a target which is less stressful than having no idea where you will be in a week's time.

What problems did you encounter at this stage, and how did you succeed in overcoming them?

I found it difficult to let go of ideas that I found interesting and wanted to follow up, but couldn't due to word count or time constraints. I also had to swallow my pride and admit that I was wrong about some of the aspects of my project when I showed my tutor my work. I would advise students to listen to advice, but don't be scared to argue your case if you truly believe something should be done in a particular way. However, don't do this without discussion with your tutors as you might well annoy them with a nasty surprise when they read your finished work and it is too late to make any changes.