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Qualitative Research on the Attitudes towards Teenage Sexual Behavior of Chinese-British Families: Methodological Issues

Abstract

Qualitative approaches are increasingly used to explore ethnic differences in teenage sexual behavior, whereas methodological issues of conducting such research often remain unaddressed. This paper discusses issues related to sampling, rapport, language, and the ethical considerations arising whilst undertaking research on the attitudes towards teenage sexual behavior held by Chinese-British families. It highlights the value of using snowball sampling, the importance of establishing rapport, and some advantages of matching the ethnic background of the researcher with participants. The researchers' gender, social, and cultural background affects research processes and findings, and this itself merits further reflection.

Early sexual initiation and unwanted teenage pregnancy are issues of concern in many western countries, especially in the United Kingdom (UK or Britain) and United States (US), but teenage sexual attitudes and behavior can also vary between ethnic groups within a country. In Britain, over one-quarter of young people are sexually active before the age of 16 (Wellings et al., 2001). However, Asian teenagers in the UK (Bradby & Williams, 1999; Wellings, Field, Johnson, & Wadsworth, 1994), the US (Okazaki, 2002), and Canada (Meston, Trapnell, & Gorzalka, 1996, 1998) have been found to be more likely to hold conservative attitudes and less likely to initiate sexual intercourse at an earlier age than their western peers. Chinese people have been included in American and Canadian studies, but not in British studies.

Qualitative approaches are most appropriate to explore phenomena, such as, values, meaning, beliefs, thoughts, and general characteristics of life events in a holistic way or within their own context from an individual's point of view (Lincoln, 1992; Walker, 1985). Most research on teenage sexual behavior tends to apply quantitative methods, but qualitative approaches are increasingly used to obtain a rich understanding of an individual's perspectives and experiences, as well as ethnic differences in such behavior (e.g. Berne et al., 2000; Villarruel, 1998; Walker, 2001). Recent UK health policy and practice highlight the need for accessible and cohesive sexual health services for everyone, including those from minority ethnic communities (Department of Health, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2005). With regard to ethnic differences in sexual attitudes and behavior and the importance of providing sexual health services appropriate for minority ethnic groups, more research is needed to understand how and why ethnic influences operate, and ultimately to inform the development of greater cultural competence of nurses who are involved in the provision of such services.

It is challenging to conduct research in this area because the disclosure of sex is a sensitive topic and because engaging minority ethnic communities can be difficult. However, the methodological issues around undertaking such research, especially among Chinese people in western countries have not been frequently addressed in the literature. A total of 243,258 Chinese people were resident in Great Britain according to the 2001 Census, representing 0.4% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2006). Their main countries of birth were Britain (29%), Hong Kong (29%), and mainland China (19%). Smaller numbers also came from Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Taiwan. The earliest Chinese immigrants in Britain were sailors working on British East India Company vessels in the late 19th century (Jones, 1979). The main surge in immigration did not occur until the 1950s and 1960s, due to a combination of an economic depression in Hong Kong and the UK post-war demand for cheap, tasty ethnic food (Cheng, 1997). Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of scholars and students have entered Britain from mainland China. Some of these have settled, comprising the most highly qualified Chinese immigrants.

This paper discusses methodological issues raised whilst conducting a PhD study among Chinese-British families (Yu, 2004). The aim of the study was to uncover the social and cultural influences on the attitudes of sexual behavior held by Chinese-British teenagers within the context of family, culture, friends, and school. Using an ethnographic approach, interviews were conducted with 20 teenagers and 20 parents in Scotland, UK. Issues related to sampling, rapport, language, and the ethical considerations will be discussed, followed by reflections on being a female Chinese researcher. The intention of this paper is to open up discussions for researchers to share real-life experience of undertaking qualitative research on sensitive topics among minority ethnic communities. The argument forwarded here may help others who prepare to conduct studies in similar populations and settings anticipate potential problems, avoid pitfalls, and reduce difficulties.

Sampling Issues

The teenagers recruited for this study were either British-born or had moved to the UK before age 5, were aged 16 to 19, and had never been married and whose both parents were of Chinese origin. Those under 16 years old were excluded thus avoiding ethical issues surrounding the need to disclose underage sex that might have arisen, as 16 is the legal age of consent to have sex in the UK. Similarly, at 16 teenagers are legally able to give their informed consent to be interviewed without their parents giving permission and being present. Even so, this age is close to earlier teenage years to adequately give a teenager's view.

The parents were recruited from those who had British-born Chinese teenagers. The participants included two teenager-parent pairs, five teenager-mother pairs, and two sibling pairs. Other participants were not related to each other. Recruiting Chinese-British people for research can be challenging (Song, 1997).

Three major factors influenced access to potential participants in this study. The first was the lack of a Chinese social network. The researcher had recently arrived from China and not established networks with local Chinese communities at the time of the study. Pang (2000), a researcher of Chinese origin who was brought up in the UK encountered few problems recruiting young Chinese people and parents to take part in his PhD study because he had an established social network and shared similar background with his participants. However other researchers such as Parker (1995), a mixed-descent Chinese-English researcher, and Song (1997), a Korean-American researcher, both experienced difficulties when approaching Chinese-British families, who tended to refuse to give personal interviews.

A second factor was the sensitive nature of the study topic. Sex is always a sensitive topic for people, but especially for Chinese people (Ruan, 1991). This was reflected by the reaction of a head teacher to the study. A letter giving information about the study was sent to the head teacher at a Chinese language school. Following a telephone conversation, the researcher visited the school. The teacher refused access to the school and stated, "We Chinese don't talk about sex. Don't ask my students to take part. I don't think Chinese parents would allow their children to talk about sex to you."

The third difficulty stemmed from the small size of the Chinese population in Scotland, UK. There were about 16,000 Chinese people in Scotland (Office for National Statistics, 2004). It was difficult to find Chinese families that met the sample criteria within such a small population and there were no databases available, where potential participants could be identified. Snowball sampling was considered as the most suitable method for this research because of the difficulties discussed above. Parahoo (1997) defines snowball sampling as "*a respondent refers someone [he/she] knows to the study, who in turn refers someone [he/she knows], until the researcher has an adequate sample*" (p. 234). This strategy is frequently used in qualitative research when approaching hidden or hard-to-reach groups, such as people with HIV (Orner, 2006; Ortiz, 2005), homeless people (Seth, Kotwal, & Ganguly, 2005), and minority ethnic groups (Merrell, Kinsella, Murphy, Philpin, & Ali, 2005), or when exploring sensitive topics, such as homosexuality (Platzer & James, 1997) and abuse (Brown, 2006; Lutz, 2005).

Snowball sampling has been shown to be a useful strategy for recruiting participants for this study. Multiple snowballs were developed by contacting friends and Chinese associations, such as Chinese language schools, Chinese churches, Chinese women's groups, and the General Consulate of China in Edinburgh. Recruitment relied on a chain of participants referring other participants. Twenty teenagers (10 boys and 10 girls) and 20 parents (15 mothers and 5 fathers) were successfully recruited and interviewed.

Establishment of Rapport

Rapport, a key aspect of qualitative research, has been described as the harmonious relationship between the researcher and participants (Spradley, 1979). Rapport is based on trust and not necessarily on fondness or affection. Certain strategies were used in this study to promote the development of rapport.

The researcher tried to 'get into the world' of the local Chinese communities before initiating formal data collection. A number of Chinese associations were contacted in the initial stage of the study. This exploratory phase was important, as the researcher became known as a Chinese student at a Scottish university. She started to get familiar with the communities and this led to ideas about where and how to recruit participants. The main phase of sampling based on this exploratory phase was conducted after institutional approval of the study was obtained.

Rapport started to develop through time spent with the groups once the researcher was known by the communities. It was easy to establish rapport with people who went to Chinese churches. The researcher met them through Sunday worship or bible study groups at least once a week. Most were willing to participate or introduce their friends. Other personal contact, such as having a cup of tea/coffee, chatting casually, or visiting potential participants' home, also promoted the development of rapport. These strategies were highly valued by Serrant-Green (2002) and Brown (2003).

In contrast, it was more difficult to make contacts with a Chinese women's group. At least six families met the criteria, but only one teenager and no parents were willing to take part, which the researcher attributed to the lack of opportunity to build rapport. Similarly, rapport with Chinese language schools which were considered a potential source for recruitment was not developed. Many young people went to these schools to learn Chinese once a week. The researcher was not a teacher there, unlike others who have studied young Chinese-British children (Raschka, Wei, & Lee, 2002; Wei, 1996). These researchers had opportunities to get to know their participants before recruiting them. However, the researcher in this study did not have the opportunity to spend time with teenagers at Chinese schools to build rapport. These schools were closed in the summer during the data collection period. Therefore, no teenagers were recruited from Chinese schools.

Language Issues

Language issues became apparent during the research process, which influenced the development of good rapport, the languages used for interviews, and translation of data. The establishment of rapport relied on the languages that the researcher had in common with the Chinese communities approached. Spoken Chinese languages include Mandarin, the official language of mainland China, and other regional dialects such as Wu, Cantonese, and Hakka. Most Chinese-British people are of Hong Kong origin and speak Cantonese, the local language of Hong Kong and much of southern China (Home Affairs Committee, 1985). The written Chinese language however is intelligible to all literate speakers of any dialect although some simplification of characters occurred in mainland China in the 1950s to promote mass literacy.

As a Mandarin speaker, the researcher was not able to speak Cantonese although she did understand some of the dialect. It was difficult to build good rapport with some groups because of the lack of a shared common language between the researcher and community members. For example, a local Chinese association was the first community contacted. Most people were Hakka or Cantonese speakers who could speak neither Mandarin nor English. The researcher found it difficult to communicate well with them. As a result strong relationships were not formed; therefore no Chinese families were recruited from this group.

All the teenagers spoke fluent English and were interviewed in English. With the exception of two, parents being interviewed were native Cantonese speakers who spoke some Mandarin. There were few problems in communication with participants. Before the interviews, the parents were asked if they preferred to be interviewed in English or Mandarin. Five interviews with parents were conducted in English and the rest were in Mandarin or a combination of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. Chinese characters were also used to enhance understanding when necessary. However, the researcher's reduced fluency in Cantonese had some impact on how participants expressed their views, as illustrated by Father 14:

To be honest, there was something I didn't know how to describe. I can explain things better in Cantonese. If I speak English or Mandarin, it's okay to talk a little bit, but not much. (Father 14, interviewed in a combination of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English)

Some interviews in Chinese were transcribed in Chinese script first and then translated into English. Later interviews were translated into English directly, as the researcher became more familiar with the data and this avoided the time-consuming process of double transcription. The transcripts were not back translated due to time and financial constraints, but strategies were developed to enhance the reliability of the data. The researcher's principal supervisor, a native English speaker, checked the transcripts. If any issues were raised, the researcher reviewed the tapes. When difficulties emerged from accurately interpreting meanings from the translated transcripts, these were discussed not only with supervisors who had extensive experience in conducting research with minority ethnic communities, but also with participants, local Chinese people, and friends, whilst maintaining confidentiality of participants.

The importance of a shared language between the researcher and participants when conducting qualitative research in a minority ethnic community has often been reported (Arean & Gallagher-Thompson, 1996; Bowes & Dar, 2000). The present study supports this view. Sharing a common language promoted the development of rapport and communication with participants.

Ethical Issues

The proposal was approved by the research ethics committee of the Department of Nursing and Midwifery at a Scottish university, UK. This study raised some distinctive and specific ethical issues due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the involvement of both teenagers and parents from a minority ethnic group.

Informed consent was a key ethical issue. It was important to give the participants as much information as possible, so that they could make a free, independent, and informed decision about participating in the study. A cover letter with an information sheet and a response form was given to potential participants. Information about the aim and scope of the study, preservation of confidentiality and anonymity, and areas to be discussed during interviews was provided. These were written in both English and Chinese language. Before the interview, the same written information was explained orally and participants were given an opportunity to raise questions. All participants gave their informed consent before being interviewed. Participants were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the research process at any time without giving reasons. Nevertheless, no participants withdrew from the study.

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was another ethical issue. The teenagers and parents were interviewed separately. Confidentiality was stressed before, during, and at the conclusion of each interview. Any data that participants provided were confidential and the researcher alone had access to them. The teenagers' data were not disclosed to their parents or friends, and vice versa. Chinese sexual values have been mainly based on Taoist and

Confucian traditions, stressing reproduction and social stability. Since the Open Door Policy in the 1970s, sexual attitudes in China have changed with an increased tolerance of a diversity of sexual behavior (Zhang et al., 1999). However, an open discussion of sex, both in public and at home, has been a taboo topic in the culture (Ng & Lau, 1990; Zhang, Li D, Li H, & Beck, 1999). Findings from this study reflected some of these values, where limited family communication about sex was in part explained by teenagers' perceptions of possible rejection from their families or communities. For example, an 18-year-old girl said that she would be chopped to pieces if her parents knew she had been sexually active and reported:

I think if you are married, then you are a real adult and it's a normal thing that might happen at that time. So you can talk to them about it. But before that age you would think everything should be just covered up until after you are married. (Girl 1, age 18)

These findings confirmed the importance of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Participants' real names were not mentioned in any written documents and codes such as Boy 3 and Father 2 were used instead. A list of codes with the participants' real names was hand written and kept in a locked drawer. All interview tapes and transcript printouts were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Transcripts and analyzed data were stored in a password protected computer file, and all tapes and transcripts were destroyed on completion of the thesis.

Ethical issues were raised when negotiating access to families. Ideally, teenagers and parents should be recruited from the same families, as inconsistent reports on parental sexual values, parent-child communication, and teenage sexual behavior between parents and their children have been found (Dittus & Jaccard, 2000; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000). Seven teenagers took part in the study with either both their parents or mothers alone. Only two teenagers were willing to invite their parents to participate when asked after they were interviewed. However, most parents either asked their children directly or let the researcher invite them to take part if she had previously met the teenagers. Where parents were not willing to introduce their children to take part, the teenagers were not asked even if the researcher knew them. Respecting the choice of both teenagers and parents and maintaining confidentiality avoided potential conflicts within families that could have otherwise occurred.

Protection from harm was an important ethical principle upheld throughout the study. Parahoo (1997) argues that researchers need to make sure that the research should cause participants no harm. Personal and private issues related to sexual values and behavior were explored in this study; therefore, strong emotions could accompany the interview process. It would be inappropriate to explore issues of interest to the researcher if this exploration upset participants. Topics that participants were not willing to discuss were not explored. For example, a 16-year-old girl did not feel comfortable talking about her first sexual experience with her ex-boyfriend at the age of 15. The researcher did not delve deeper on the subject although she was interested to understand more about this girl's emotions and views on sexual initiation.

To further safeguard the participants and the researcher, contact details of two alternative support services independent of the researcher were provided to each teenager before the interviews. Two support workers (a Chinese researcher who spoke Cantonese, Hakka, and English and a lecturer in sexual health) from the researcher's institution were available to provide emotional support. In case a teenager did not wish to talk to a support worker, the telephone number for Childline was also given. This is a free, 24-hour helpline in the UK, which provides counseling services for children and young people in trouble and danger.

Reflexivity – on Being a Female Chinese Researcher

Qualitative researchers become part of the social world they study. Reflexivity, a significant aspect of qualitative research, requires an awareness of the role of researchers and

their impact on the research processes and findings (Hammerley & Atkinson, 1995). There is a need for researchers to reflect on their own values, experiences, interests, and social identities shaped by their own socio-historical experience.

There were some cultural similarities and differences shared between the researcher and participants in this study. The similarity was sharing the Chinese background. However, the researcher who was raised and educated in China was a foreign student in the UK. In contrast, participants were British citizens, who were either born in Britain or had emigrated from Hong Kong or mainland China. Most participants spoke Cantonese, while the researcher spoke Mandarin. These differences indicated that the researcher was not viewed as a pure 'insider,' as she did not belong to any of the Chinese communities contacted. On the other hand, this may have increased the reliability of the data collected because participants may not be ready to share a sensitive topic within the Chinese communities. Loyalty to family is highly valued in traditional Chinese culture. People are often reluctant to talk about topics like sex, in case a rumour spreads in the community, which may cause damage to their family reputation. Teenagers in this study showed their concerns that having sex and getting pregnant would bring disgrace to one's family. These concerns in part contributed to the initial difficulty in getting into the groups. However, once a relationship of trust had been built with confidentiality maintained, the participants felt free to disclose topics that are taboo with the researcher who was not from their communities.

Nothing was known about the perspectives of participants on teenage sexual behavior before the interviews, although the researcher did have some preconceptions about conservative sexual attitudes of teenagers in mainland China and some preconceptions about open attitudes of British teenagers. The researcher was interested in learning from the participants and adopted a non-judgmental attitude, thus, limiting the impact of such preconceptions. She avoided the introduction of personal bias during the interviews by asking open questions and by not leading the participants in any way. She also avoided making any comments, gestures, or facial expressions that could imply agreement or disagreement with participants' views. Her status as an outsider and the adoption of this neutral attitude promoted rigor in data collection and analysis.

Taking on a neutral stance, the researcher also did not feel uncomfortable asking questions about sex or listening to participants talking about their perspectives on teenage sexual behavior. The participants appeared comfortable talking about their views. Teenagers did not feel obliged to provide responses consistent with traditional Chinese values because of their Chinese background shared with the researcher. This was reflected by Boy 5's report: *'If I were at school, I would say the same thing'*.

Matching the ethnic background of the researcher with participants is highly valued by others, as discussed by Bowes and Dar (2000) in a study of older Pakistanis in the UK, and by Evans, et al. (2001) in a study of culturally diverse inner-city neighborhoods in the US. In the current study the researcher's Chinese background and established rapport made participants more at ease. When being asked about the reasons for participating, participants highlighted such shared cultural background: *'It's relatively easy to talk to a Chinese person because we have the same culture, the same understanding, or similar views'*. Participants were also sympathetic to the study topic. Teenagers wanted their opinions to be heard as British-born Chinese; parents wanted to know more about their teenagers raised in Britain.

As far as I know, no Chinese people have done this kind of project before. It's very special, as you are a Chinese female and are doing this sex-related study. I think it will help Chinese people somehow, like how to bring up young people. (Mother 13, interviewed in Chinese)

The researcher's gender had some impact on recruiting male participants, an issue that has also been faced by others (e.g. Hutchinson, Marsiglio, & Cohan, 2002; Pang, 2000).

Opportunities to approach fathers were limited and none of the mothers introduced their husbands or other fathers to the study. One father recruited through a Chinese church agreed to be interviewed, but did not keep the first appointment. When being finally interviewed, he reported:

At the beginning, I felt a little embarrassed when I heard about the topic of sex. My wife has been interviewed already, and it was not that embarrassing. It's OK. (Father 19, interviewed in Chinese)

He hesitated because of the research topic, but none of the female participants, including this father's wife, reported the same view. This reticence also came through in interviews with teenage boys:

I'm OK with it now. It's not that bad after all, you know, get interviewed about these questions. (...) Well, when I read the information at home, you know, I wasn't sure. (Boy 18, aged 16)

However, this boy introduced his mother to the researcher who was asked to call her 'aunt', a Chinese way to address an older female belonging to his or her mother's generation. Obviously, this mother acknowledged the researcher as Chinese. The gender and Chinese background of the researcher influenced how she negotiated access to the Chinese communities, collected, interpreted, and analyzed the data.

Discussion and Implications

This paper has discussed some methodological issues raised whilst conducting qualitative research in the context of the attitudes towards sexual behavior held by Chinese-British families in the UK. Such reflexivity is rooted in the traditions seen in the writings of anthropologists such as Malinowski (1922) and Rosaldo (1989). Key issues related to sampling, the establishment of rapport, language, the ethical considerations, and reflexivity have been addressed. The discussion presents a challenge to transcultural nursing research.

Difficulties faced when recruiting Chinese-British teenagers and parents suggest the need for researchers to anticipate potential sampling issues when preparing to conduct research within similar communities. This paper has indicated that snowball sampling is a useful technique when exploring sensitive topics within a minority ethnic group. Establishment of rapport can make participants at ease and increase the reliability of data collected. There is also an advantage of matching the ethnic background of the researcher with participants, in order to enhance effective communication and promote development of rapport. When research involves families, researchers should respect both parents' and children's choices and be sensitive to information that may cause conflicts within a family. Preservation of confidentiality is particularly crucial.

Reflexivity is an important aspect in transcultural qualitative research. Both similarities and differences shared between the researcher and participants should be acknowledged. Researchers need to reflect on who they are, how data have been collected, and how their background may impact on research processes and findings. Conducting such research can be challenging, but with careful planning and consideration, many challenges can be tackled. The author believes that the issues discussed here are not limited to female Chinese researchers like herself, but are encountered by others who conduct research within similar populations and settings. The insights provided can benefit researchers undertaking studies among Chinese-British communities, as well as other minority ethnic groups both in Britain and other countries, in the area of teenage sexual behavior and more broadly.

Conclusion

This is the first paper that discusses methodological issues surrounding research on teenage sexual behavior among Chinese communities in the UK. It is important to anticipate

potential challenges and develop strategies to overcome common barriers while planning and conducting similar research. The researchers' gender, social, and cultural background can affect research processes and findings, and this itself needs further reflection. This paper opens up a forum for others to discuss similar issues as more dialogue in this area is greatly needed.

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