AN EXPERIENCE INTO RESEARCHING WOMEN’S LIVES: 
ISSUES RELATED TO QUALITATIVE INQUIRY.

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ABSTRACT

Research in the social sciences often involve investigating particular phenomena within a real life context. Choosing the best methodological approach to understanding complex social reality has always been central to social science research. Hence a qualitative inquiry and taking it through the feminist perspective is becoming more important as a mode of inquiry in social science in particularly when researching women’s lives. Therefore this paper provides discussion on selected issues related to qualitative inquiry and to argue that this approach/method is an effective way of exploring the issues concern. This research experience is base on researching the influences of social - cultural factors on entrepreneurship among 31 Malay rural business women from the district of Pendang, Kedah. It also explores background characteristics as well as their perceptions and experiences of business and life. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part will explain what is ‘feminist perspective’ and its relation with the qualitative inquiry method. Secondly, how a qualitative case study approach will apply in researching women’s lives. Thirdly, this paper will be highlighting on issues of the research process, enhancing validity and reliability and some ethical considerations undertaken by the researcher in the context of employing a qualitative inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, a quiet methodological revolution has been taking place in the social sciences. The social sciences and humanities have drawn closer together in a mutual focus on an interpretive, qualitative approach to research and theory. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), where only statistics, experimental design, and survey research once stood, researchers have opened up to ethnography, unstructured interviewing, textual analysis, and historical studies. Scholars are now experimenting with the boundaries of interpretation, linking research to social change, to understand more fully the relationship of the researcher to the research. Hence in considering this note, we are aware that research in the social sciences often involve investigating particular phenomenon within a real life context. Choosing the best methodological approach to understanding complex social reality has always been central to social science research. Hence a qualitative inquiry and taking it through the feminist perspective is becoming more important as a mode of inquiry in social science in particularly when researching women’s lives.

Therefore this paper provides discussion on selected issues related to qualitative inquiry and to argue that this approach is an effective way of exploring the issues concern. The research experience is base on researching the influences of some social-cultural factors on entrepreneurship among 31 Malay businesswomen from the district of Pendang, Kedah. It also explores background characteristic as well as their perceptions and experiences of business and life. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part will explain what is ‘feminist perspective’ and its relation with the qualitative inquiry method, secondly, how a qualitative case study approach will apply in researching women’s lives. Thirdly, this paper will be highlighting on issues of the research process, enhancing validity and reliability and some ethical considerations undertaken by the researcher in the context of employing a qualitative inquiry.

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THE FEMINIST METHOD OF INQUIRY

Feminist inquiries have raised fundamental challenges to the ways social science has analyzed women, men, and social life. From the beginning, issues about method, methodology, and epistemology have been intertwined with discussion of how best to correct the partial and distorted accounts in the traditional analyses. Is there a distinctive feminist method of inquiry? On what grounds would one defend the assumptions and procedures of feminist researchers? Questions such as these have generated important controversies within feminist theory and politics, as well as curiosity and anticipation in the traditional discourses (Harding, 1987 : 1). Hence Brannen (1994) has pointed out that three things in particular, are leading feminists to reconsider their position on method:

i. there is the need to acknowledge that the qualitative techniques they have tended to favour are not in and of themselves specific to feminism.

ii. indeed, they are all an integral part of social science research and have their own histories of development and change outside and independent of feminism. Feminist may have appropriated these techniques, but they did not create them. They have also modified them, although they are not alone in doing so.

iii. in addition, a number of researchers have recently drawn attention to the ways in which the polarization of quantitative versus qualitative impoverished research, and there have been calls for the use of multiple method to be used in a complementary rather than a competitive way.

If the arguments for the existence of a distinctive feminist method can be dismissed, what other grounds might there be for defining research have answered this questions is to turn to issues of methodology, which involves the theory and analysis of how research questions might best be addressed and the criteria against which research findings might be evaluated. In doing so, feminist have tended to concentrate attention on two main areas of concern, the position from which distinctively feminist research questions might be asked and the political and ethical issues involved in the research process ( Maynard, 1994:14). This is because as pointed out by Hammersley (1992) that there is no one methodological approach or research practice specific to feminism in which Maynard (1994) then argues that what is obvious, however, is the challenging and wide-ranging nature of the discussion which has developed that is a discussion which has implications for the whole social research and not just for the feminist variant of it.

However, in writing this paper I had no wish to add to the theoretical controversy which has occurred in the British or American sociology over the past few years concerning feminist methodology and epistemological assumptions underlying the dominant ways of viewing knowledge. In addition, my understanding towards question of epistemology is greatly enhanced by the contribution of definition by Stanley and Wise (1990), `we regard method as ways of doing research, asking questions, collecting and collating information and making sense of it. It is epistemology which defines what counts as valid knowledge and why. If we begin from this position then it is possible to bring a feminist standpoint to a range of methods, we do not have to accept the ‘scientific’ model of surveys or reject surveys as necessarily 'non-feminist'. (Stanley and Wise, 1990 ; 159).

Having served as an academician and researcher, I was accustomed to expecting a varied and challenging task situation when dealing with issues for the development of women in general and in particular their level of participation in the economy. Hence this study poses a new challenge to me as I have made an attempt to approach this study from the feminist perspective and exploring the epistemological issues underpinning the research methods. May (1997) has also argued that a woman's biography and experiences become control to the production of unbiased accounts of the social world and experience too provides the basis of claims to objectivity and experience is a fundamental starting-point to research but this must then be situated within the wider context of women's lives in general. Thus, in order that the theorist does not then become the expert on people's lives, as in the usual hierarchical way in which science proceeds, any thinking about women's lives by the researcher must take place in a democratic and participatory way through involving other women.

Specifically Cook and Fonow (1990) have identified five basic epistemological principles discussed by scholars who have analyzed feminist methodology in the field of sociology. They include (i)
acknowledging the pervasive influence of gender (ii) focus on consciousness-raising (iii) rejection of the subject/object separation (iv) examination of ethical concern (v) emphasis on empowerment and transformation. Further to that Cook and Fonow (1990) have suggested that in order to address these issues using feminist epistemological assumptions, research have to apply a variety of innovative approaches in its methods of study. This include (i) visual techniques (ii) triangulation method (iii) textual analysis (iv) refined quantitative approach (v) collaborative strategies (vi) use of the situation-at-hand. Hence these underlying epistemological assumptions and questions have actually invited the researcher like me to think about my research in a different way. However, I have to acknowledge that no single investigation incorporates all five of these assumptions, while most previous feminist studies have employed at least two or three. But what is important as argued by Cook and Fonow (1990) is the usefulness in the ways in which epistemology is related to research design, methods and analysis. Therefore, in the context of my study, basically one question arise here, what might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social 'reality' which I wish to investigate as in this case, the issues surrounding the Malay business woman in a rural environment? Hence noting the explanation put forward by Mason (1996) in analyzing assumption on the qualitative method, it has help me to understand the principle of epistemology during the construction of research design for this study.

JUSTIFICATION AND STRATEGIES FOR PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THIS STUDY

Jayaratne and Steward (1991), believe that the focus of feminist dialogue on methods, particularly on qualitative versus quantitative methods, obscures the more fundamental challenge of feminism to the traditional 'scientific method'. In taking this argument, while in the process of designing the research method for this study, I wish to position my stand and argue that the debate about research method is not to dispute the notion that qualitative research method is best aligned with feminist perspective in compare to quantitative research but it is more than an argument concerning the best research techniques to be use in researching the lives of Malay businesswomen in the rural area of Pendang District, Malaysia.

Therefore it is more appropriate here to move the focus of the feminist methodology dialogue from definition to implementation. The discussion that follows are among the specific procedures of such strategies that was base on strategies drawn upon contributions by Jayaratne and Steward (1991) and incorporating the principles laid down by Cook and Fonow (1990) as well as Stanley and Wise (1990).

i. When selecting a research problem, ask how that research has potential to help women's lives and what information is necessary to have an impact.

In the context of this study, the desire to conduct this study stems from a general theoretical interest in the subject matter that is on the Malay women entrepreneurship and also from a specific political perspective. It concern how can this study help to improve the situation of the Malay businesswomen towards being more successful in business. Thus the kind of information that is needed is how do they perceive the meaning of entrepreneurs or specifically being a businesswomen, what are their constraints and obstacles, how does gender and other social and cultural values affect them as women and as a businesswomen.

ii. When designing the study, propose methods must be appropriate for the kind of question asked and the information needed.

Basically this research goal and approach is to describe the individual lives and the tendency is to use a more qualitative methods which seems to be more appropriate to promote understanding of a particular viewpoint of the subjects. Hence, this study has adopted an in-depth interview and narrative accounts which can be facilitated by a quantitative data analysis.
iii. Whenever possible, use research designs which combine quantitative and qualitative methods

Hence, in context of this study, I have to used the triangulation method suggested by Cook and Fonow (1990) as one of the innovative application of research strategies in feminist methodology or mixed method whereby it has been advocated by numerous authors as a way to offset the disadvantages of one method with the strength of the other (Denzin, 1978; Jick, 1979). This strategy suggests the value of acquiring knowledge of both methods. This mean learning and using a variety of appropriate research skills, rather than taking short cuts which are more expedient.

iv. When interpreting results, the researcher should ask, what different interpretation, always consistent with the findings, might imply for change in women's lives.

In the context of this study, I have considered interpretations that imply the most effective intervention for improving the lives of the Malay businesswomen in terms of being a successful businesswomen. Further to that it is also important that I make an attempt for some political analysis of the findings. For example to explore how policy change suggested by research finding might positively affect these Malay businesswomen and their lives.

v. Finally, researchers should actively participate in dissemination of research results

If research is not 'advertised' it will not have an impact, either on policymakers or on the public. Through this research, I have disseminated the results through different seminars/conferences.

In summary, these strategies, combined with others discussed in the feminist literature (Acker, 1983; Cook and Fonow, 1986; Finch, 1984; Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 1998) would provide as a contribution to a dialogue focusing on the practical application of feminist theory in social research. Hence as agreed by Jayaratne and Steward (1991), such dialogue can best advance feminist goals by producing research which not only positively affects women's lives, but also makes the research endeavor itself an exciting, relevant and profitable experience for the researcher.

Having discuss some practical implementation of the feminist perspective upon my study I now move on to discuss and to provide some justifications from the epistemological perspective on the choice of method employed. One important tool of data generation in this study is using in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured form of interviewing. Generally, these types of interviews are characterized by (Mason, 1996:38):

i. a relatively informal style, for example with the appearance of a conversation or discussion rather than a formal question and answer format;

ii. a thematic, topic-centered, biographical or narrative approach, for example where the researcher does not have a structured list of question, but does usually have a range of topics - themes or issues which she wishes to cover;

iii. The assumptions that data are generated via the interaction, because either the interviewee (s), or the interaction itself, are the data sources. Qualitative interviews may involve one to one interactions or larger groups.

Why might I want to use qualitative interviewing as define above? The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is 'inside' someone's mind. Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand the fellow human beings. Thus my justification stands on my ontological position which suggest that people's knowledge, views, perspectives understandings, interpretation and experiences are meaningful properties of the social reality which my research questions are designed to explore. This leads to my epistemological positions which suggests that a legitimate way to generate data on these ontological properties is to interact with people, to talk to them, to listen to them and to gain access to their accounts and articulations. My view of the ways in which social explanations can be constructed lays emphasis on depth, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad
surveys of surface pattern which, for example, questionnaires might provide. I am unlikely to rely heavily on quantifying, although I may want to count or enumerate certain elements of my data.

There are other epistemological reasons for conducting interviews. Mason (1996) suggested that if a researcher wishes to conceptualize herself as active and reflexive in the process of data generation, rather than as a neutral data collector and to analyze the role of the researcher within this process, hence interviews would be the most appropriate method. In addition to that I have used qualitative interviewing as just one of the several methods to explore my research questions. This method however may add an additional dimension, or may help to approach my questions from a different angle or in greater depth (that is by attempting some form of triangulation method).

In addition to these justifications, my awareness and conscious of the special research situation in which woman talk to another woman in an informal way was heightened by reviewing Oakley's (1981) discussion of interviewing women. Oakley (1981) has argued that formal and survey-type interviewing is unsuited to the production of good sociological knowledge on women. She suggested that the use of less-structured research strategies which avoid creating hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee is more appropriated for that matter. Taking up Oakley's (1998) argument the essential objections towards hierarchy situation is that the unequal power relationship between the knower and the known conflicts with the moral obligation at the heart of feminism to treat other women as you would yourself wish to be treated, and in this sense is seen to be at odds with feminism's emancipatory deal. Edwards (1990) has also argued that there may be practical reason why hierarchical research methods do not work, for example because research participants treated in this way respond to their objectification by not trusting researchers, and therefore by lying to them.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The Location Of The Study

The location of study is focused on the northern state of Malaysia that is Kedah Darul Aman and in particular the district of Pendang. This study is an exploratory in nature. Therefore the methods used to generate the data are unstructured and structured open and close ended questionnaires, observations, in-depth interviews, discussion and secondary data. To begin the process, the headquarters of AIM has provided me with a list of names and address of all the participant of their programme from the district of Pendang. Then selection participants from that short-listed list is made consisting of those Malay rural women who have been a participant for more than a year and have been in business since. Then from here and with the help of the officer in charge of the programme a selection of 31 cases were made based on the following criteria:

i. Participants who are being categorized as being successful in business ownership as evaluated and recorded by the development agency.
ii. Participants who are able to make their loan repayment as schedule by the evaluation committee of AIM (Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia) and with a substantial monthly income. (a criteria considered to be a successful in business among the participants)
iii. Participants selected were spread over a variety of different types of business and spread over different centers and there can be categorized as petty traders owning family farming and plantations and micro-enterprises.

The Choice Of Research Method

Given the issue to be addressed and the fact that one primary interest was in understanding the Malay women’s live from their own perspectives in relation to their environments and situations it seemed appropriate to employ different phases and methods of study. In carrying out this research I have been guided by an understanding of a feminist research and methods drawn from the large and significant body of knowledge from western literatures. But bearing in mind that ‘most writer of a feminist methodological issues agree there is no one, method that can be termed feminist methodology, certain characteristics can be drawn’ (Edwards, 1990).
For the purpose for this study I have developed the method of study from the feminist perspective. This would be an attempt to apply the principles of feminist research and, in the process, learned about some of the difficulties with this approach with these intention of doing a study that might contribute to the liberation of women. My attempt in adopting this approach has drawn extensively on feminist research, comments and suggestion on researching women’s live. Therefore, the following are some of the principles this study: (1) my aim was to contribute to women’s social change through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves; (2) the methods of gaining this knowledge should then not be oppressive; (3) to continually develop the feminist critical perspective that questions both the dominant intellectual traditions and reflects on its development in the context of Malaysian academic setting or among the women researchers in Malaysia.

My argument in developing a feminist framework for this study is because the research is interested in comprehend among the many significant and relevant questions and factors affecting the entry of women into business ownership particularly from specific situations and factors affecting the entry of women into business ownership particularly from a specific situation and environment. Most importantly this research is concerned with women’s own accounts of their attitudes and opinions, motivations, perception and behaviors. It has to explore and analysis what, how and probably why certain factors have contributed to the existence and creating awareness among the women into thinking and later decide to be self-employed (to be business owner). Apart from these issues, this research would not be complete in exploring issues of entry into business ownership if it does not make an attempt to analyze the relationship that exist between the respondents background and the influence it has on their decision to create new business venture. This study have used research designs using the qualitative methods and have make an attempt to analyze the data from the feminist perspective. This attempt I would say could increase the value of research to be worth-while and recognize the different ways of creating knowledge and ways of knowing.

The Research Process

i) Gaining Consent

The most difficult part of the entire research is entering the setting for the first time and knowing what to do and knocking the first door to solicit the first respondent. Hence, before I began the actual process of physically meeting the respondents, I have had a short discussion with the officer-in-charge (called the ‘pembantu amanah’ or Assistant Trustee) to help in locating the homes and villages of the women in the District of Pendang and have brought along an assistant or a ‘key informant’ from among the villagers or ‘pembantu amanah’ to assist me in getting to the homes of respondent that I have selected and be introduced to them. They are more familiar with addresses of the respondent. Hence time has not been wasted in locating the respondent. This is important for the purpose of forming relationships with the villagers particularly the respondents (women participants of AIM programme so called ‘sahabat’ or good friend). In this way I have gain acceptance and also gained ‘consent’ of the interviewees for their participation in the study. I have also spend my time by mingling around the village for a couple weeks during the field-work to form network contacts within communities. Links have been established with the respondents, women’s group and individuals known and respected within the communities. For sampling purpose. I have used the purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990). The ‘purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator want to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned’ (Patton, 1990).

ii. Data Gathering Techniques

This stage revolve around the question of what data gathering techniques should be employed. It is the most exciting phase of qualitative inquiry. With diligent observation, interviews and analysis in the part of the researcher, pattern emerges. This task takes time, determination, patience and perseverance. The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is ‘inside’ someone’s mind. Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways used to try to understand others.

For the data collection process, the technique use was the semi-structured interview. The interview is conducted after few hours of observation. The researcher knows what question to ask based on the
literature reviews and observation. There are some standard questions for all participants and some particular questions for certain participants. Sometimes from the answers given, the researcher has to be probe and go for in-depth questioning to elicit clearer description or answers. Because of this, the number of questions asked differs from one participant to another. The average time taken for conducting the interviews is between two to three hours per respondent, and it is spread out to two or three interviews. The interview is conducted at different places that the respondents feel comfortable. Some are in their business premises and some in their residents. The interview is tape-recorded and were transcribed.

iii. The Interviewing Process

At the beginning of the field-work, I felt that the interview itself presented a challenge in particular is gaining as much information as possible in the short time and it takes sometimes getting into it. This is so with the presence of the husband and other family members during the conversation and this seems to be an obstacle because there are instance when their children keep coming near and the women kept deferring to her husband and sometimes let him answer question put to her or he just took over. Due to these disturbances I later make an arrangement for the most suitable time and place when the women have much time to be interviewed. Hence, an arrangement or appointment was made for interviews with the rest of the other respondent. In some cases women seek permission from their husband before agreeing to be interviewed.

In the process of collecting data and information to facilitate the research question I also then take into consideration the additional issues that I had not raised before. Therefore with the reflections from the pilot study I have prepared and structured the interviews on an open-ended probe question focusing in issues related to cultural and social values to explore more deeply to what extend it has affected their entrepreneurial behavior and their lives. This has allow the respondents and me to enquire about opinion and views on relationship between their religious teachings and value and being an entrepreneur or self-employed. Therefore this method has provided us to talk about a wider issues than if I had to rely upon a formal approach and to minimize the unequal power relationship between me (the interviewer) and the total Malay women (as the subordinate researcher) so that the level of trust could be achieved. In view of this I became aware that a common racial and gender identity between the interviewee and myself facilitated a greater responsiveness to my research than I had previously envisaged.

In view of approaching this study through the feminist perspective I would like to raise here some of issues pertaining to the interviewing process, the researcher and object relationship and the role and impact upon the researcher. In the process of qualitative data gathering I am force to confront issues about the research relationship. Acker (1983) has pointed out that when researching women’s live, the research must committed to reduce the unequal power in the research relationship. Hence in this study, it took a variety of ways in acknowledging the subjectivity of the respondents. In the first instance, I encourage the interviewee to to take the lead in deciding what to talk about. It does work for a few respondents but majority were not in favour of this process. I understand that they prefer to be interviewed and they want to be asked questions so that they can give the right answers and responses. As a result part of the face-to-face in-depth interview were then base on some of my open-ended structured questions prepared earlier as my interview guide.

Secondly, as Kelly et. Al (1992) pointed out that in researching women’s live through the feminist perspective the role of research in relation to the subject, as a person and the impact on the researcher is important and may reflect the way of our analysis. In relation to my study, I have realized that during interview sessions, I was often asked for information on sources of financial assistance, entrepreneurial seminars and workshops and even request for tips and advise on business management, marketing and etc. In this instance I do provide them with information that is within my knowledge. So I viewed this as an additional opportunity to reciprocate for the help they were giving as becoming a respondent and willing to participate in this study. Subsequently, at the stage of writing-up the findings and the report, I felt that there is feeling of obligations to these women that I interviewed, that is to finish the writing, submit the recommendation to whoever it may concern and probably find a way to publish the material as they expect some benefits and changes after the research.
As the process of interviewing continues during the field-work, I managed to form friendships with a few of the women interviewed. I was offered hospitality and were asked to meet their family members, their in-laws, husband and children. This experience has actually reflect the effectiveness of interviewing as Finch (1984:168) pointed out; ‘the setting of the interviewee feels quite comfortable with this precisely because the interviewer is acting as a friendly quest, not an official inquisitor, and the model is, in effect an easy, intimate relationship between two women’.

**ENHANCING VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

The purpose of qualitative inquiry is to produce new findings as a result of the data collected and analyzed. The process of data collections is not an end in itself. The culminating activities of qualitative inquiry are analysis, interpretation and presentation of findings. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), “data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationship among the categories of data…” Therefore, it is the task of the researcher, to make sense of the massive amount of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns and construct a framework for presenting the essence of what the data reveal. There are no formulas for determining significant relationship. There are also no straightforward test for reliability and validity in qualitative research. It all depends on the skills, training, insights and presenting qualitative data but there are guidelines and procedure that one can use. Applying guidelines requires judgment and creativity because each qualitative study is unique. In my research, data for every respondent comes from transcribed interviews, notes from fieldwork and reflection notes such as documents related to the respondent works. I read very carefully all the transcripts and conducted the coding using a set of themes I produced. Respondent validation, which represents one kind of triangulation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993), was used to validate the data. This involved the checking of inferences drawn from one set of data sources by comparing with other sources of data. More specifically, data source triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, different points in the temporal cycles occurring in the setting, or as in respondent validation, the accounts of different participants differently located in the setting. The basic contention of the validation process is that data should not be taken at face value. In this study, validation was conducted largely in the form of cross reference between the different sources of data.

According to Merriam (1998), regardless of the of research, issues of reliability and validity can be approached through careful attention to the way in which the data are collected, analyzed and interpreted. This includes conducting to research in an ethical manner. Acker (1983) has highlight issues of validity when conducting a qualitative research and analysis. Among the question are: how shall we decide whether what we have done (the knowledge we develop) is worth while? How shall we decide if what we say is true? Hence for this study, I have adopted the following strategies to enhance its validity and trustworthiness. Firstly it is through the triangulation methods that is the use of more than one research technique simultaneously. The research was conducted through in-depth interview and through observation at the respondent’s business premise and shops and also validated through interviews with some of their employees and family members. Apart from that data was collected using questionnaire for information such as the age, marital status, number of children, level of education etc. Secondly, I have to seek the ‘peer examination’ strategy whereby, the researcher discussed the findings with colleagues and lecturers as they emerged. Apart from that the translated transcript was validated by an expert in language translation. Thirdly as the collection of data in this qualitative study is done by he researcher herself and form as the primary instrument, hence the researcher has to go to the source, collects and analyzes the required data. Therefore, the researcher has prepared herself for the conduct of the research, by attending the relevant courses pertaining to research methodology and also conducted a pilot study. Finally, the strategy that has been adopted is that the researcher maintained a detailed record and the trail how the data were collected and how the categories had emerged.

**SOME ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THIS STUDY**

A concern with ethical issues is another characteristics of feminist methodology. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument. Her presence in the lives of the participants invited to be part of the study is
fundamental to the paradigm. Whether that presence is sustained and intensive, as in long-term ethnographies, or whether relatively brief but personal, as in in-depth interview studies, the researcher enters into the lives of the participants. This brings a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues that do not attend quantitative approaches (Silverman et al cited in Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

According to Rossman (1999), the issues can be sorted into technical ones that address entry in terms of role and interpersonal ones that capture the ethical and personal dilemmas that arise during the conduct of a study. Mason (1996) has also highlighted the need to consider the ethics and politics of the researchers arguments, analyses and explanations and the way it is presented to a wider audience. Among the key issues stressed by Mason (1996) is questions like have the researcher honoured her commitments about confidentiality and privacy? Have the researcher acted in the spirit of the informed consent that she received? To add to the discussion on ethics in the research process, May (1997) has shown that there are two ways in which approaches to ethics and social research have proceeded. These approaches are known as deontology and consequentialism. Deontology approach is associated with morality, ethical judgments in social research would, from this point of view, follow a set of principles which guide the conduct of research itself. One such doctrine is that of 'informed consent'. This refers to a freely given agreement on the part of the researched to become a subject of the research process.

Consequentialism is not so concerned with following a set of inviolate rules, but with the situation in which researchers find themselves and with the consequences of their acts. Thus, the British Sociological Association code of ethics states: 'guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity given to research participants must be honored unless there are clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise' (cited in May, 1997:55). Punch (1991) has already taken this issue to be important and argued that the rights of people (the respondents) have been flagrantly violated in the past, particularly in bio-medical research, professional and ethical codes have been developed. These embody principles related to the dignity and privacy of individuals, the avoidance of harm, and the confidentiality of research data. Because social science may focus on lowly and inarticulate groups in society, and because research findings may be utilized by people in positions of power against the interests of those group, professional codes of ethics have been drawn. Further in quoting Elshtain's (1981) discussion, feminist ethic requires investigation into professional gate keeping practices, particularly those which prevent publication and dissemination of feminist work through, 'mainstream' sociological channels. In addition Cook and Fonow (1984) has go on to add to the other feminist issues regarding the gate keeping process which includes the influence of gate keeping on topic selection and research funding, the problems involved when feminist become gatekeepers, formulation and implementation of alternatives to the present gate keeping systems, and the effects of gate keeping on feminist negotiating the process of hiring, promotion and tenure.

Having discuss and examine the ethical considerations put forward by researchers above, I do not intend to try to anticipate all of the ethical and political dilemmas which I might face in any research process but to select a few key issues which apply to my study in accordance to principles of research method that I have chosen. I will begin with examining the technical considerations for instance the issue of entry and negotiation and reciprocity and then into interpersonal consideration such as building trust, maintaining good relations, respecting norms of reciprocity. At this stage of the research process, the technical considerations addressed includes decisions about negotiating access and about deployment of the researcher's time and other resources. Initially I have made plan for negotiating access to the site and participants through formal and informal gate keeper in an organization.

First and foremost I made a visit to the headquarters of Amanah ikhtiar Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur and was able to carry out a brief formal interview with it's Assistant Director (Administrative) Section and explaining my identity and my purpose of research. However due to the fact that this is a development agency implementing important policies on women development it has some ethical issues to be observed for reasons discuss above and adhered to, I am requested to submit an application letter together with a copy to my research proposal in order to be permitted to conduct interview's with the participants of the AIM project that is the Malay rural business women. Secondly, the ethical considerations given in this research process involves revisiting the question of 'informed consent' of research subjects to 'analyse data gained from them in the way you have, and to present in some kind of public way data which are sufficiently conceptualized for judgments about reliability, validity and
generalizability to be made' (Mason, 1996:159). This ethical issue is very much related to Finch (1984) notification that face-to-face data generating methods such as interviewing and observation can involve the development of interpersonal relationships between researched which are characterized by a high degree of trust and confidence.

To observe the issues of consent and gaining trust in the context of this study. I have engaged myself in forming relationships during the initial stage of field-work with the villagers of the Pendang District particularly those categories of women known as Malay businesswomen of which they are the participants of the AIM programme so called 'sahabat' (good friend). This is to gain acceptance and also to gained 'consent' of the interviewees for their participation in the study. Finally I was being 'adopted' by a 'key informant' which was introduced by the 'pembantu amanah' (the trustee assistant). She was considered a successful women participant of the programme or a successful businesswomen by her friends and she seems to be the role model in the community. She willingly gave some of her time to take me on motorcycle to visit the respondents for the interviewing processes. However, Mason (1996) has given a word of caution that qualitative researchers have to decide what to do with such data, in the knowledge that however friendly they may feel with the researched, and however much they feel the relationship is one of mutual trust, the researcher are nevertheless also a professional who is intending to use some of the products of the relationship for another, formal, purpose. So it is here that I might find difficulty in trying to resolve such difficult dilemmas and to acknowledge that informed consent is complex and may need to be renegotiated throughout the research process as relationships change and develop. Thirdly, the ethical consideration observed in this study involves issues on the ‘politics of field research’. By political it means 'the micropolitics of personal relation, the culture and resources of research units and universities, to the powers and policies of government research department, and ultimately the state' (Punch, 1991:13). I believe that all of these context crucially influence the design, implementations and outcomes of research.

CONCLUSION

I anticipated that I am affected by the research process. The impact has extended into friendship and professional networks with the businesswomen, the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia Project Officers, village leaders and other development officers in Pendang that I met along the way. I became friends with a few of the respondent and we use to meet each other on certain occasions such as at Entrepreneurial Conference and workshops. They continue talking about their business even though it is not an interview session of the actual field-work. Professionally base on my personal status as a university’s lecturer, they are offers from the development agencies to act as trainers and motivators in their motivational programmes for the development of rural women. The fact here was that the research has actually created opportunities for me to become an active participant in the process of implementation program of how this research has potential to help women’s live and to bring some changes. It is noted that during the conduct of this study, the country was plagued with an economic crisis which had affected the operation of most of the businesswomen. So, probably it is during these trouble times that they experienced have made this study to have an impact on them. For many respondents, the interview were the first time that they had been given an opportunity to talk about themselves and their lives. I believe and felt that the interview itself may have affected the future of the business. Few women mentioned that they had received either a boost or a jolt and somehow was motivated by my presence or intervention in the running of her business. Hence, I believe this is a justification for practical implementation of a feminist perspective in this study and in doing so is very much related to the qualitative research process.

REFERENCES


