



Research note

Overcoming challenges in qualitative inquiry within a conservative society

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reflects on a methodological challenge in studying a conservative society.
- Proposes that identifying barriers is essential before accepting data saturation.
- Highlights some of the barriers identified in the literature and during study.
- Emphasizes that barriers may be overcome with proper strategies.
- Recommends several suitable and potentially useful strategies.

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ABSTRACT

This research note looks at issues of interpretation when undertaking qualitative research. The context of the study is Socotra Island, Yemen, a generally conservative country. It questions the thinking that data saturation 'depends' on context, particularly in a conservative society such as that in Socotra Island, Yemen. It argues that within a conservative society ruled by tribal cultures, beliefs and traditions, researchers should consider the fact that the lack of participation could be the result of several factors other than what be narrowly defined cultural reasons. These other factors include a lack of understanding and hence disinterest to participate, negative experiences with previous researchers, and lack of support for the intended outcome of a research project. A few strategies to address the situation are then proposed.

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1. Introduction

Generating valid research findings requires proper understanding of the research context. As Yang, Ryan, and Zhang (2012, p. 3) proposed, "empirically oriented research requires ethnographic methods and an understanding of local languages and power structures". Therefore, researchers need to adopt research methods that suit the socio-cultural context of their research sites to avoid falling into the pitfall of unintentionally collecting invalid data (Dann, Nash, & Pearce, 1988). Yang et al. (2012) for example, found that while the use of questionnaires is common in western countries, transferring the application of this approach to research in China may be inappropriate given the different socio-cultural

context of China. They argue that the Confucian based cultures' emphasis on collectivism; risk acceptance and certainty seeking may affect their responses to researchers.

This research note aims to add to this theoretical emphasis by highlighting a methodological challenge in the application of qualitative inquiry in a country with a very conservative society. It is also among the first study to highlight the issue within the context of a scarcely-researched conservative Islamic society and is motivated by the challenges of conducting in-depth interviews with the residents of Socotra island to further understand residents' attitudes towards tourism development at Socotra Natural Reserve (SNR), Yemen.

The Socotra study adopted a mixed methodology approach i.e. combining personally assisted survey of local residents and in-depth interviews. This approach is particularly useful in trying to understand the reason for local residents' support or opposition to tourism development in Socotra, which was gauged via the quantitative survey. Mixed-method research allows integration or

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triangulation of data collected by different methods for analysis, and draw inferences from the findings (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). In the context of the Socotra study, adding qualitative data to quantitative data was necessary to enrich the data and provide understanding on residents' attitude towards tourism development taking place on the island. As Fodness (1994) contends, combining quantitative and qualitative mixed method will result in a comprehensive measurement in understanding a phenomenon. Mixed method is also preferred because while a quantitative approach ensures that findings can be generalized, qualitative can explain meanings and reasons for the findings. Even though qualitative research is still accused as being subjective and lacking facts, clear reflection of data collection, sampling, and analysis can increase its validity and reliability (Malterud, 2001). In short, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research provides better insights to a research (Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, & Krein, 2008; Kajornboon, 2005; Malterud, 2001; Polit & Beck, 2010). In the context of the Socotra study, the qualitative data helped the researcher further understand the quantitative data generated by survey. However, the qualitative aspect of the study ran into some challenges in getting more participation from the intended target respondents. The main reason for this set back was the culturally influenced conservative attitudes and perceptions of the local community.

Due to this experience, the authors feel the need to highlight the possible barriers of research participation in such context with the hope that future studies will be more careful in designing their research on such conservative communities. This article will begin with a summarized introduction on the empirical study that was conducted earlier by the second author. Next it will describe the qualitative method employed in the study as well as highlight the issues encountered. Finally, it will give several recommendations on how future researchers could mitigate such problem from affecting the quality of their studies.

2. The literature

In the beginning of the Socotra study, the researcher sought to understand community perceptions on tourism development in Yemen because many similar studies in the past have only focused on the western world (e.g. Carmichael, 2000; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002). Very few empirical researches investigated residents' attitudes towards tourism development in the Arab countries (Akkawi, 2010; Burns & Cooper, 1997; Henderson, 2003) when in fact the Arab region has witnessed a consistent increase in the number of international tourist arrivals to approximately 48 million in 2008 (Akkawi, 2010). In addition, the region's cultural diversity, religious difference, and conservatism call for pragmatic research of tourism development from viewpoint of residents' attitudes towards foreign tourists. It is particularly important to see if there have been any changes to residents' attitudes towards tourism particularly within those conservative societies where Western tourists were traditionally associated with unmarried males and females, which is an unacceptable feature in Islamic cultures (see Wigan, 1986). According to Henderson (2003) the arrival of the Western tourists into the Muslim or the conservative communities has been perceived as more 'disruptive' in comparison to their Middle Eastern counterparts due to behaviours that may have unknowingly or unintentionally violated the local religious codes (Poirier, 1995; Sharpley, 2008) as well as contradiction in beliefs could lead to conflict between tourists and people (BinSumeet, 2011). Examples of this include outdoor activities such as bathing in beaches and recreational resorts with bikini (see Burns & Cooper, 1997).

2.1. Defining conservatism

The term conservative in this context refer to the peculiar sensitivity of the Yemeni people to the adherence of religious code and tribal culture. It may have similarity albeit in various degrees to other Muslim countries around the word. Primary identities of this conservatism include the subordination of women to men, with women having to become 'second citizen' to men in all aspects of life; negative perceptions on anything 'western'; low tolerance on modern lifestyles and behaviours such as the mingling between men and women, the wearing of modern and revealing clothes, wild parties and alcohol consumption. In Socotra for example, women are not permitted to talk to men who are not from the same family, not allowed to have education, and are always segregated from men. Their dressing can be considered the most conservative of all Islamic countries' dress codes (Mojalli, 2009) with loosely hanged, head to toe covering clothes. Rights and duties of members of each tribe have to be closely followed and anyone who dares to violate the customs will be severely punished according to tribal customs (Al-Nini, 2009). The tribal system determines the values and customs of the people with many tribes still practicing traditional habits such as kidnapping and blackmailing outsiders including tourists.

Alsagher (2009) posited that where there are clashes between conservative traditions and tourists' cultural values, tourism development would be deemed "culturally undesirable" – a perception that could escalate to hatred or even violence against tourists. This phenomenon signifies the 'antagonism' phase proposed in Doxey's (1975) Irritation Index. However, in the model, antagonism is proposed to be the fourth and last level of community response towards tourism. In contrast, it can be argued that in a conservative society, where religious customs and values are closely protected from violation (Al-Nini, 2009), an introduction of outside cultures, particularly modern secular cultures by tourism may straightaway lead to antagonism. Investigating this possibility was one of the primary drivers that motivated the Socotra study. The study also aimed to get an understanding on the Socotra society's acceptance of tourism as an avenue for economic development on the island.

In conducting the study, the researcher was mindful of the various models of residents' attitude available in the literature. For example, attitude is defined by McDougall and Munro (1987) as an "enduring predisposition towards a particular aspect of one's environment" (p. 87) and can be reflected in the way one thinks, feels and behaves with respect to that aspect. They classified attitudes of individuals along three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Cognitive dimension involves beliefs, knowledge and perceptions; affective dimension deals with the 'likes and dislikes' of individual attitudes and behavioural involves action taken or expressed by residents. Residents of a tourism destination can base their attitudes towards tourism development on any of the stated attitude dimensions (Carmichael, 2000). However, those perceptions that are deeply ingrained in values and personality (Getz, 1994) are even more important to understand because even though what is perceived does not have to be truth (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003), it is perception rather than reality that encourages individuals to behave or act in certain ways. When residents feel that tourism development threatens their identity, then they may develop attitudes that can bring hostility to the tourists, particularly when tourism is recognized as being a danger to the community's status quo or to local culture (Capernerhurst, 1994).

The researcher was also mindful of the models and theories used to investigate residents' attitude towards tourism development. A few amongst these theories are; a typology of host-community interactions extensively discussed by Singh, Timothy, and

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