Public Testimony as a Source of Naturally Occurring Data: An Ethical and Rigorous Approach to Investigating Resilience in the Face of a Natural Disaster

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Abstract

This case study examines the process and implications of using public testimonies as a source of naturally occurring data for a qualitative analysis. The case study uses research and publications from the doctoral dissertation, 'Flood and Fire: Exploring the influence of the process and context of resilience' which set out to explore resilience in adults who experienced a natural disaster to inform public health practice. This project used public testimonies from people who presented to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission to support observations alongside semi-structured interviews with people who had experienced the 2010/2011 floods in Victoria, Australia. We found the public testimonies to be information rich with a surprisingly similar structure to the interview transcripts. The use of naturally occurring data can privilege the voice of communities without increasing the burden of research on participants who experience trauma. Examples show how the use of testimonies available from a public record required an ethical and rigorous approach to using naturally occurring data.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Match the research question to the use of naturally occurring data
- Develop a method to use naturally occurring data that takes into account ethical implications
- Construct a rigorous research method that encompasses naturally occurring data

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Project Overview and Context

Flood and Fire: Exploring the Influence of the Process and Context of Resilience

This case study emanates from a doctoral thesis that investigated the lack of evidence-based public health interventions to address the problem of adverse mental health outcomes in a population following a disaster. We wanted to know how to facilitate resilience and promote positive psychological health at a population level. We sought to develop an increased understanding of the process and context of resilience in adults who have experienced a natural disaster that may be transferred into public health strategies. This led to our research question:

> *Are there public health interventions that support the resilience process of adults in the context of a natural disaster?*

To answer this question, we conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis of community member's knowledge regarding Australian floods and fires. We collected data via observations, semi-structured interviews with people who had experienced the 2010/2011 Victorian floods and public testimonies submitted to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. This case study focusses on the public testimonies methods.

Case Study Context

Disasters are unpredictable so research tends to be opportunistic, making it difficult to plan or to design and implement controlled studies. This means the majority of previous studies explore the impact and management of a single event such as Hurricane Katrina. The state of Victoria in Australia has been in the unfortunate position of experiencing a number of different natural disasters within recent years, including the 2009 bushfires and the 2010/2011 floods. We recognised this as an opportunity to investigate and compare the effects of different types of disaster. This case study focusses on our work with the data relating to the 2009 bushfires. Victoria has a history of bushfires with extensive fires recorded in 1939 (Black Friday), 1977 (Black Saturday), 1983 (Ash Wednesday) and more recently in 2009. On 7 February 2009, much of Victoria had temperatures that reached their highest levels since 1939, and by mid-morning, relative humidity was below 20% and winds came close to 90 km per hour. These conditions led to over 300 grass, scrub or forest fires throughout Victoria.

Public Testimony

Subsequently, the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was established on the 16 February 2009 to investigate the fires. A Royal Commission is a major public inquiry held in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Saudi Arabia. Other countries such as Ireland, South Africa and Hong Kong hold a similar Commission of Enquiry (or Inquiry). These inquiries are led by commissioners who are formally appointed by the government, and have considerable powers, but are restricted to the specific terms of references for that Commission. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held 155 days of hearings, commencing on the 20 April 2009, and finished hearings related to the 173 fire-related deaths on the 19 May 2010. The scope of the Royal Commission inquiry included examining the causes and circumstances, the preparation and planning and all aspects of the response to the bushfires. The commissioners listened to a total of 434 witnesses, including 100 lay witnesses. The lay witnesses provided their stories as personal oral accounts. These are presented in the final volume as written testimonies (http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report.html).

Listening to the Voice of Community Members

One of our team was based in Victoria and knew of these testimonies and suggested we use them in our research, as this would enable us to compare perspectives from community members about two different disasters (the Victorian floods and fires) at the same stage, that is, each within the first 12 months post event. Fran Baum (2008) is an advocate for recognition of the value of knowledge from the community as a fundamental public health principle. The use of knowledge of people who have lived through a disaster can transfer understanding to researchers, and consequently inform policy and practice. This process of knowledge transfer commonly relies on oral techniques such as interviews. Carlson and colleagues (2003) found that most informants indicated they would be willing to do the interview again, and over half viewed their participation as a useful experience, with negative feelings caused by the questions being generally short term. However, this does suggest that some people may find the interview experience of telling (or retelling) to be emotional. Consequently, we were interested in working out a method that enabled us to listen to the community voice while reducing the burden of research on participants.

Research Practicalities

Having decided to use naturally occurring data, we then considered the methodological implications in terms of practicality, ethics and rigour that we describe in this case study. Practical implications included how testimonies were created, timing, funding and access.

Consideration of Who Provides Public Testimonies

Part of the process of choosing naturally occurring data includes consideration of the process of creating the data. In this case, we needed to understand the terms of the Royal Commission, who the commissioners were, the process of the conduct of the enquiry and who provided the public testimonies. The testimonies indicate that the witnesses provided their story and conveyed their experiences with very little influence from the commissioners. It was clear from statements made that many members of the public testified because they hoped the Royal Commission report would lead to action; they appeared to believe the Royal Commission was a credible process that would make a difference. For example, a female witness (#27) suggests that ‘If the Government took out appropriate insurance, this would send a positive message to the rest of the community about responsible risk management. It would also alleviate a major cause of community anger after fire events’. It was also apparent that witnesses needed a degree of self-efficacy in order to share their often harrowing experiences with strangers. While this may have introduced a bias into the sample, it was consistent with the research question that sought to understand experiences of resilience.

Timing

As we have indicated, a driver of our use of public testimonies was the opportunity to use data that would be difficult to generate. Disasters do not neatly align their timing for the convenience of researchers. To do a comparative study in the field of disaster requires capturing one set of data and then waiting for the next event, or gathering at least one set of data retrospectively. The use of existing public testimonies allowed us to use data from two different time points. This was important in our study, as our focus was on experiences of resilience within the first 12 months of a disaster. Consequently, we wanted to gather people's perspectives within that time frame. The use of public testimonies captured the bushfire experience within the first 12 months and enabled a comparison to interview transcripts also created within 12 months of the floods, even though these events were 2 years apart.

Funding

Another practical advantage of using naturally occurring data is that it allows access to data to address research questions that may be outside the budget of early career researchers. As a Doctor of Public Health student, there was only a small fund to support interstate travel, and so the use of naturally occurring data enabled the analysis of a much greater data base.

Access

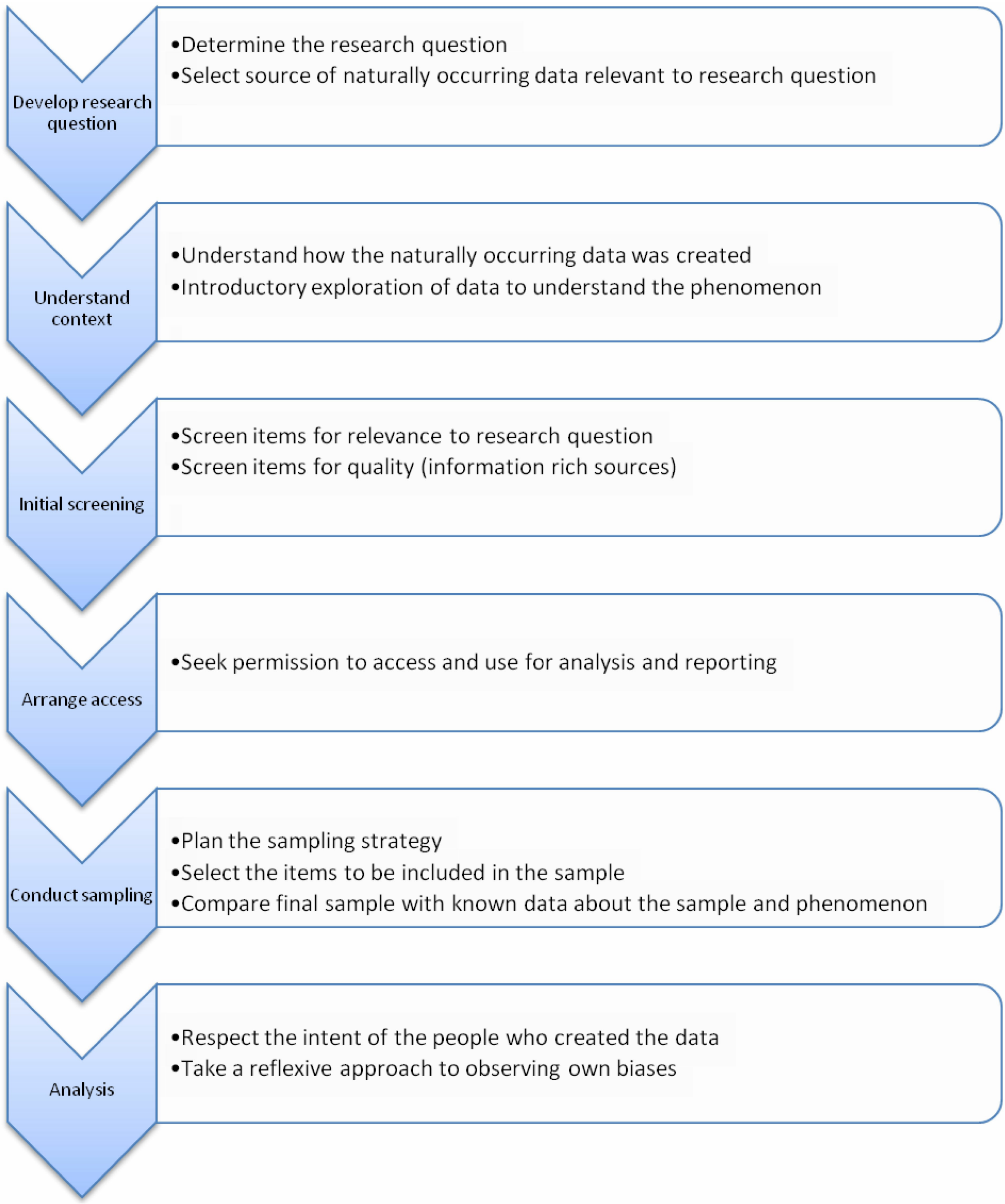
Naturally occurring data can be so easy to access that ethical issues may not be immediately apparent. In this case study, we simply had to download the public testimonies provided in a Royal Commission report available online for public access. However, we did need to think about issues of permission for ethical purposes, as well as copyright and liable laws, and so we wrote to the Honourable Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria and were granted permission to use the public testimonies for research purposes and publication.

Research Design

One of the things that we learned from the process of constructing the method was that using naturally occurring data provides rich opportunities to develop research skills (other than those associated with the construction of data such as interview skills). Using naturally occurring data did not obliterate the need to develop an appropriate research question; in fact, it could be argued it was just as important to ensure there was a synthesis between the meaning within the data and the research question. We found that we needed to give the same level of detailed thought to the methodology and the methods of collecting and sampling.

We describe our process of designing research using public testimony as a data source beginning with the research question (Figure 1). The role of the research question was to summarise and guide the research and as such it was the driver of the research. In other words, the research was not driven by the content of the testimonies; we did not make the research question fit the data. This meant that the data needed to match the question and we needed a process to ensure that the naturally occurring data had the capacity to assist in answering the research question. We dealt with this by undertaking a screening process that included understanding the purpose and process of the original data creation (the Royal Commission), and considering the possible biases and influences that might have influenced the delivery of the public testimonies.

Figure 1. Process of using naturally occurring data.



Using Public Testimony as a Source of Naturally Occurring Data in Action

Designing the Naturally Occurring Data Sample

Entry to the Field

The first steps involved understanding the context of the creation of the public testimonies and establishing access as already described. The other useful strategy used at this point was to read the report of the Royal Commission as a technique for immersion into the field.

Suitability of the Data

The challenge posed by designing and conducting a sampling strategy was to ensure that our phenomenon of interest was apparent in the data, and to what extent it might be influenced by the original process, in our case the Royal Commission. Hinds, Vogel, and Clarke-Steffen (1997) suggest that a secondary analysis research question can obtain better results if it is related to the primary purpose. Consequently, one of us (GvK) undertook an initial reading of a random sample of testimonies to establish that they were of sufficient quality in terms of completeness, comprehensiveness and ability to be interpreted. This initial reading also allowed a critical appraisal of the data for representativeness against the purposive sampling criteria based on prior research into resilience, which was important because there was no opportunity to influence who presented themselves to the Royal Commission in the way that a researcher can influence interviewee recruitment. This initial screening allowed us to review who the witnesses were. Without this appraisal process, there was a risk of privileging a dominant group. Finally, the initial screening ensured that the selected testimonies contained a discussion of recovery, which contained sufficient detail for analysis. The following examples demonstrate how the witnesses discussed recovery pointing to the eventual finding that this occurs at the individual and community level:

> *In hindsight, one of the best things [name] and I did on the drive … was talk about what we'd do and make the decision that we would rebuild. (Male witness #35)*

> *I learnt that the essential element of sustainable recovery is to find and engage with the strengths and networks that existed in a community before the disaster. Every community has something that works for them and that they value. It is worth taking the time to identify and connect with those networks and to build on the pre-existing strengths wherever possible. (Female witness #20)*

Selecting Sources Relevant to the Research Question

After this initial screening process that determined the suitability of the naturally occurring data for the research question, we set about establishing which of the 100 witness statements would be appropriate to use for our analysis. We felt that it was important to honour the witnesses' courage and intent. For this reason, every testimony was read to establish an appreciation of the breadth of issues which the witnesses felt the Royal Commission needed to be aware of. This provided an understanding of the context of the Royal Commission and the bushfire event itself. During this process, each testimony was coded for themes related to the research question. We used the depth of initial themes as an indicator of potentially information-rich data relevant to the research question to guide the initial selection of testimonies. Half of the testimonies focused on the emergency phase of the bushfire event and did not discuss the recovery phase, so these testimonies were set aside. The reading of the testimonies that were not selected for inclusion allowed those statements to provide a broader understanding of the context, and enabled the 'voices' and experiences of those witnesses to take a valuable place in the research.

Sampling

True purposeful sampling was not possible, but there was an amount of detail that allowed an analysis of the final sample to determine diversity. As the analysis progressed, we began to include aspects of the witness' location, age and gender where it was provided within the testimonies to develop diversity of selection. For example, an initial bias towards selecting the testimonies from older women led to choosing testimonies from younger women and men. Finally, a check determined whether all the themes from the initial reading and coding had reappeared in the final sample as can be seen in this example.

Theme – emotional support from community	
Quote	codes
<u>The Army was an amazing resource</u> in assisting with our recovery efforts. The officers showed <u>great initiative and compassion</u> and, importantly, <u>their presence was a boost to the confidence and morale of the community</u>. (Female witness # 20)	External resource Caring response Community morale

This identified that one participant who had a unique perspective had not been captured. This testimony was subsequently included in the sample. We did this for both individual and community characteristics, guided by the literature on protective factors for resilience. We used information from the report about the fire location relevant to each testimony, and most of the testimonies provided sufficient information about the person, as they commonly introduced themselves to the commissioners. Knowing the fire location allowed us during sampling to assess whether there was a variety of experiences that covered people from varying degrees of remoteness, the socio-economic status of the community and severity of fire using the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission report on fatalities, hectares burnt and property loss. If the naturally occurring data are diverse enough and are accompanied by sufficient descriptive information on the characteristics of its source and generation, it may still be possible to conduct purposeful sampling.

Conducting the Analysis

Sally Thome (1998) suggests that undertaking a secondary analysis removes the protection for ethical practice that is thought to arise from immersion in the field, so a great deal of thought was put into the ethical considerations of using public testimonies which we discuss further below. Contrary to this concern, we experienced a surprisingly personal response to the testimonies. For example, while reading through the testimonies, one author (G.v.K) found herself urging a particularly stubborn man to evacuate. The people became almost as real as the people interviewed; to this day, we still think of them and wonder where they are, and how they are. This personal response meant we viewed the testimonies as representing the experiences of people, rather than text objects. This was evident in the final stages of the analysis where we judged the credibility of the analysis against what we thought they might think of it. We asked ourselves whether our findings resonated with the essence of their testimonies, were we being true to their intent. To support this approach, we summarised of what appeared to be the key messages the witness wanted to convey, which we reviewed to ensure coherence with the research question. The principle researcher (G.v.K) also kept a reflective journal and the team met regularly to critically appraise the analysis in an attempt to retain the truth and keep the research focused on learning what was there, rather than reflecting what we thought should be there.

Theme – reciprocity – supporting others	
Quote from transcript	Codes
Those sorts of things <u>*kept me very busy*</u> *and that was my way of coping with everything that had happened. I wanted to* <u>*use some of my skills*</u> *to* <u>*benefit the community*</u> *rather than just* <u>*my immediate family*</u>*.* (Male witness # 24)	*Keep busy* *Use skills* *Benefit the community* *Benefit family*

Researcher's summary *[name] sounds like an amazing person to be able to lose so much but actually think and focus on the loss of others. It seems that the key thing he wants to say is about the benefits of giving.*

In this particular project, the use of the public testimonies followed a period of time collecting interview data from people who had experienced the floods, so it is possible that the analysis of the testimonies was influenced by the experience of talking to people directly about disaster experiences. This is another way a novice to disaster research can understand the context and enter the field of the testimony research component. Researchers with a variety of experiences in listening and learning about people's disaster experiences can also reflect on these previous research experiences and consider their potential influence or bias.

We found that the format of the testimonies was surprisingly similar to the structure of the interview transcripts. Essentially, both witness statements and interview transcripts began by telling the story of the chronology of events of the disaster. This was followed by a reflection on the lessons that might be learnt. As we have described, an initial reading of a couple of testimonies was done to check whether they would be a viable data set before conducting the interviews, but there was no conscious step taken to use the testimonies to frame the interview guide which was written before the screening process.

Limitations

Each step of the method described here does present some limitations. The need for the research question to articulate with the predetermined data does constrain the type of questions that might be asked. In our case, we asked the question first and then found the data, so we did not experience this limitation ourselves. Permission may be denied for some part of access and some naturally occurring data sources may be so vast as to create significant practical barriers in how to manage the selection of the sample. A key limitation may be that problems in the creation of the naturally occurring data will not be known to the researcher, as they were not present to observe or recognise them. The ability to purposefully or theoretically sample can be limited to the level of information provided on the source of the data – in our case, the characteristics of the witness providing the public testimony. An important limitation is the lack of control over the creation of the data in that there was no possibility of using our own interview guide or instigating follow-up interviews. This meant there was no opportunity to probe further to explore emerging themes or confirm contradictory findings. Finally, the analysis itself was subject to the same kinds of limitations associated with other data sources, such as the researcher's natural tendency to use the more quotable quotes and the temptation to use the more eloquent testimonies.

Ethical Implications

We required approval from an ethics committee for the use of naturally occurring data for the purpose of research. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct (2007) describes the values and principles of ethical conduct that we sought to implement while using naturally occurring data. The process of applying for approval to use the data helped us to develop a protocol that respected the people who had created the naturally occurring data, resulting in a research project that has merit and integrity as well as providing beneficence and meeting the principle of justice.

The National Statement considers respect as central to ethical conduct in order to provide protection to those who are not able to exercise their autonomy. This led us to pause and reflect on the concern that the use of public testimonies had to proceed without the explicit consent of the people involved in creating the data. We thought carefully how to respect these people in the absence of consent. This reflection helped to identify the need to seek permission for the use of the public testimonies for the purpose of research, even though the data were readily available online.

We have discussed the importance of ensuring that the research question can be answered by the naturally occurring data. The consideration of ethics extends this to reflect on the relationship between the research question and the *intent* of the people who created the data. What was their purpose at the time of data creation? In our case of using public testimonies, we reviewed the purpose of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, including why it was established and what the themes within the recommendations were. This process helped us to confirm that our research question matched the intent of the person bearing witness, that being to ensure the lessons learned from the bushfire experience were heard and acted on, rather than forgotten and repeated mistakes. In this regard, we felt that using their statements extended the use of them in line with this purpose. This is demonstrated by this witness who conveys important lessons about timing:

> *We spent five months just hanging around. Because of the delay, some of the business people who were initially interested in being involved in the project gave up on Marysville and set themselves up somewhere else. I have also observed that the morale of the remaining business community has been dented by the delay and the constant disappointments it has caused*. (Male witness #25)

During this reflection, we also recognised that the people providing a public testimony at the

2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission did not do so with the expectation, or indeed, the wish for anonymity or confidentiality. In fact they sought the reverse, that their stories would be heard, acknowledged and acted on. We did not need to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of witnesses as they did not present their statements with expectations of anonymity.

A key ethical concern was the recognition that we would not use all of the statements and so the selection process needed to ensure that we did not position statements simply as a means to an end. We dealt with this concern through the description of a clear selection process that included an explanation for the reasons for inclusion and exclusion from our sample. The use of a reflection journal by the principle researcher also helped to maintain a perspective that the research was about real people's lives.

Rigour

Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) outlined four criteria for qualitative research: trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability that we use here to explore the implications of using public testimonies.

Credibility – Are the Findings Really There

One of the things we had to think through was how credible findings for a fixed data set might be. The qualitative researcher has a degree of control over participant selection through their choice of recruitment strategies, their selection criteria and their purposeful sampling approach. We came across a number of limitations that included a pre-existing data set (the original 100 statements) which could not be increased and the quality of the data (which we found to be very information rich in our exploratory stage). We sourced 20 information-rich statements that directly addressed our research question. We also sought to extend the credibility of our findings by deliberately looking for negative cases (statements from people who felt they had not recovered yet) as well as triangulating with interview data. For example, while most witnesses described the support of others contributed to their recovery, this witness highlights how assistance still needs to be thoughtful, underpinning the theme of a caring response: '*I didn't want their stuff, I had nowhere to store it and I couldn't take it so I had to deal with that as well*' (female witness #23). The conversations we had (peer debriefing) were particularly helpful in testing assumptions.

Transferability – Generalisability of the Results

Qualitative researchers are cautious in making claims of the generalisability of their results. We don't generalise from data, but from theory, and this requires a good sample to develop a good theory. A relatively small original data source can limit the ability to sample for a wide range of perspectives. Our findings are confined to an analysis of the perspective of people who felt the need and ability to make a public statement. This capacity to speak out in difficult circumstances resonated strongly with the core construct of the research that was seeking insights into factors which support resilience. It was a limitation, however, as this does not allow the voices of people who are unable or unwilling (for whatever reason) to make a public statement. We compensated for this limitation by triangulating our data source with interviews. We also sought to provide a thick description of both the method and the findings to allow the reader to make their own determination.

Dependability – Stability, Consistency and Predictability of the Research

Our detailed methods description was important in establishing the dependability of the findings. We described the use of public testimonies in great detail and to the depth required to allow others to duplicate the findings. This includes descriptions of common strategies for dependability such as maintaining an audit and keeping memos.

Confirmability – Objective Characteristic of the Data

The primary issue of rigour emanated from a concern that removing ourselves as researchers from the data gathering phase and consequently from developing a more personal relationship with the sources of data, we might be more open to influencing the research outcomes with our own biases. However, the reverse argument could also be made that by removing our presence from the creation of data, we also remove our bias and influence on the creation of artefacts (e.g. interview testimonies).

Another concern was the possibility of over use of a data set resulting in a bias in the literature coming from the multiple uses of one source. One suggestion is to check previous use of the data set to ensure that the new research question will advance knowledge.

Conclusion

This case study provides an example on how to match a research question to naturally occurring data that focusses on understanding the context of the creation of the data and emphasises the importance of a thoughtful screening process. Our example demonstrates that people who provided public testimonies can be information-rich sources of data. We have described a method to use naturally occurring data that takes into account ethical implications at all stages of the research. We feel strongly that the testimonies needed to be dealt with the same level of respect as people who agree to be interviewed. We offer a process for constructing a rigorous research method that encompasses the use of naturally occurring data that includes suggestions for screening, sampling and analysis. Using public testimonies about the bushfires enabled us to triangulate our data sources and see that resilience to natural disasters is not influenced by type of disaster (flood vs fire) but by the caring support of others within their immediate network as well as the wider community.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the permission granted by the Honourable Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria to use quotations from statements made to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What influences a person to provide public testimony and how might this influence the data and analysis?
2. What steps could you take to minimise researcher bias when using public testimonies?
3. What are some of the influences on how public testimonies are constructed that you might need to take into account?
4. Can we trust public testimonies? What might reduce their credibility?

Further Readings

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