

**Methodological reflections on access in researching local government and
environmental sustainability**

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Abstract

Research about local government and the environment has increased dramatically in the past few decades. This has produced a rich knowledge base on the subject, but more fundamental questions about the production of knowledge regarding sustainability at the local level have been seldom addressed by scholars. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by reflecting on the methodological issues that arose in a qualitative study of Australian rural local governments and natural resource management. The key focus is on the question of accessing potential sites for investigation. The paper examines access through the lens of macro-level changes that have occurred in the local government sector in Australia. For local governments these changes have included an expansion of roles, an increase in financial pressure, a proliferation of audit measures and a low level of respect amongst local government personnel for academics and academic work. The paper concludes by identifying the reasons why understanding access in qualitative research on local government and environmental sustainability is important.

Introduction

There is now a substantial body of international work on the subject of local government and environmental sustainability. There is, however, very little in this literature that has examined the practices, processes and politics of knowledge accumulation. It is this paucity of reflective methodological writing that is the focus of this paper. The aim is to utilise the difficulties we encountered in researching the environmental practices of Australian rural local governments in order to examine the issue of access in qualitative research on local sustainability.

To begin, the paper examines the literature on access in qualitative research and highlights our focus on the macro-level issues that may have impeded our access. Following this, some context for our study of local government management of the environment in rural Australia is provided. In the next sections of the paper we highlight three issues that acted to obstruct our access. These were: the increased roles and responsibilities of local governments, fear of surveillance and auditing amongst local governments and a low level of respect amongst local government personnel for academics and academic work. In the conclusion that follows we identify the reasons why an understanding of access in research on environmental sustainability and local government is important.

Access and qualitative research

The question of 'access' has been described as one of the 'classic topics' of qualitative research (Walford, 2001, p. 34) so there are numerous references to it in the methodological literature. At the same time, Miller and Bell (2002, p. 55) have argued that it is a topic that is 'often dealt with as relatively unproblematic' in mainstream

research books. What is concerning, and somewhat ironic about this representation of access, is that more detailed and reflexive accounts suggest that it may be, in fact, one of the most challenging aspects of a qualitative research study (Gummersson, 1991; Rossman and Rallis, 1998). Indeed, Alty and Rodham (1998, p. 276) go so far as to say that ‘the main problem encountered when undertaking any research is often that of gaining access’.

Challenges surround access because it is not a straightforward singular event involving a one-off decision by a key stakeholder. It is, in contrast, a process that needs to be continuously negotiated at multiple points and with multiple actors throughout the life of a study (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 33). Certainly, gaining the agreement of an organisation’s leadership is an important first step in gaining ‘access’ to a site, but from this point we may find particular access routes only partially opened as we confront unanticipated gatekeepers or even find our previously negotiated access suddenly withdrawn or circumvented. Thus, we are not necessarily situated as either ‘having’ or ‘not having’ access in a research project as we may find ourselves in simultaneous positions over the life of a project (Wolff 2004, p. 195).

The need for more complex understandings of access in qualitative research is a question taken up in a paper by British educational sociologist Geoff Troman (1996) entitled ‘No entry signs’. His central argument is that access to organisations is becoming more difficult and further, that this is directly related to macro-level changes outside of organisations. To demonstrate this he describes the way in which policy and legislative reform in education has led to such changes as the intensification of teachers’ work, the increase in the number of researchers in schools and the greater financial constraints on

principals. These changes, he contends, have resulted in researchers experiencing increased difficulty in accessing schools to research. He says, in short, 'getting in is getting harder' (Troman, 1996, p. 72).

What is useful about Troman's (1996) analysis is that, as he rightly claims, access in research is typically understood and examined at the level of the individual. That is, the researcher's self. In this type of work researchers examine how aspects of their identities (e.g. age, class, gender) may have influenced access and document the personal costs and challenges of access. This is true of the disciplinary areas on which this paper draws such as government and policy studies (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005; Grace, 1998), rural studies (Pini, 2004; Cloke, 1994) and environmental studies (find). It can also be evidenced by turning to a range of qualitative research texts which provide numerous strategies for facilitating effective and efficient access to research settings that are focused at the level of the self. These include providing detailed and clear information about the study, ensuring flexibility, attending to how findings might be disseminated, clarifying how findings might be used, acknowledging the importance of gatekeepers and being open and consistent (Bryman, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Brewer, Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

In this paper we take up Troman's (1996) argument that scholars need to understand and critique the 'macro-context' in which they are negotiating access. We thus turn our attention to examining the ways in which changes in the Australian local government sector may have contributed to the difficulties we faced in terms of access. This type of analysis is particularly pertinent to local government in Australia given that over the past fifteen years it has experienced a period of unprecedented and significant

change (Marshall, 1997; Worthington, 2003). Like Troman (1996) our purpose is not to discount the importance of researcher self in gaining access, but to highlight that access is influenced by more than the individual. What is important is that this means the challenges we faced are likely to be experienced by other researchers seeking to investigate local government environmental management in Australia. Further, given that many of the changes occurring in Australia have corresponded to reforms in the local government sector internationally, (find refs) it may be that the access problems we describe are being encountered beyond our own national context.

Simultaneously, all spheres of public life are subject to the increasing threat of litigation. The requirement for greater public sector transparency has created unprecedented pressure on local government officers who, traditionally, have not had comprehensive training in corporate reporting practices. The lack of clarity regarding the core responsibilities of local government has further exacerbated local government's unwillingness to freely divulge information and practices for academic scrutiny.

Context

The study on which this paper is based was funded for two years through a national rural industry research organisation. The aim of the project was two-fold. That is, to identify those barriers that inhibited the engagement of natural resource management by rural local governments and to identify those strategies that could be implemented to address these barriers. In the initial grant application we had proposed undertaking eight case studies of rural local governments in the states of Queensland and Western Australia. This decision was informed by the fact that we are located in these States and both have a long history of undertaking state based rural research.

Following negotiations with the funding body, however, the project was substantially extended as there was concern that studying only Queensland and Western Australia may not provide a representative picture of local government and its role in natural resource management. This rationale was based on the belief that Queensland and Western Australia are more traditional and conservative States and that these areas of Australia have been slower to adopt an environmental agenda than have other parts of the country. It was thus decided to expand the project and undertake a further eight case studies in the States of Victoria and New South Wales. In resubmitting the grant proposal, and agreeing to the enlarged project, we failed to consider just how problematic access may be.

In total, four potential case study sites we approached refused us access. Further to this, a site in Western Australia withdrew access after we had commenced data collection. Another Victorian site withdrew access despite the fact that all data had been gathered and the project report was only months from completion. As it was too late to undertake a further case study, fifteen, rather than sixteen case studies were described in the final report. Of these fifteen, we were given unfettered access in only three in WA and three in Victoria instances. In the other cases, we had restricted access, largely as gatekeeping administrative staff and chief executive officers circumvented our attempts to talk to their mayors and/or councillors. Thus, as we developed our sampling categories we gave only minor attention to access. This changed, of course, as we began to encounter problems. At this stage we began to take a much more critical and reflective approach to access. It is this approach that we continue in this paper as we identify the types of macro-level issues we believe impacted on whether or not we were permitted

entry to the field. Three issues are identified. These are: the increasing roles and responsibilities of local governments, the emergence of a surveillance and litigious culture in local government and fears of this culture, and the dismissive and negative view of academic work expressed by council staff and elected members. Each of these is addressed separately below.

Increased roles and financial constraints

Local government is not mentioned in the Australian constitution, and thus the responsibilities of the over 700 councils that exist are prescribed by State government legislation. Traditionally this legislation bestowed a ‘services to property’ role on local government which meant that its responsibilities mobilized around a narrow set of tasks associated with road maintenance, drainage, waste management sewerage and water supply (McNeil, 1997, pp. 28-29). However, when, in the period 1989 to 1995, all State government legislation pertaining to local government was reviewed, the responsibilities of local governments in Australia were greatly expanded (Aulich, 1999). This is a process that has been described as ‘cost-shifting’ in that local governments are now finding themselves obliged to provide services that were once the responsibility of other tiers of government (MAV, 2001). In some instances local governments have been afforded grants by the State or federal governments to assist them in taking over these roles, but over time these grants have diminished or been withdrawn (Johnson, 2003). This is critical as local governments in Australia have very limited capacity for increasing their revenue.

The fact that local government in Australia is now ‘doing more with less’ (Pocock, Sexton and Wilson, 2001) was a constant theme in our interviews. Illustrative of

this is the position of Environmental Officer on the case study councils. Of the fifteen case study sites, thirteen had environmental officers on staff. This could be seen as a cause for celebration as most revealed these to be relatively new positions. However, it became apparent that the 'new' position of environmental officer was allocated all the traditional tasks of environmental management in local government (e.g. waste, sewerage) as well as a plethora of new tasks. These new tasks included writing reports, developing grant applications, upskilling council staff and elected members, and collating data in order to meet State and federal government legislative and policy changes. Furthermore, in two instances, the Environmental Officer was shared across two local government authorities. While resource sharing makes good sense in relatively small local government jurisdictions such as those that exist in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia, local government authorities in other States have increased in both physical size and responsibility with local government amalgamations.

The problems caused by State and federal governments 'cost-shifting' to a local government sector with limited financial capacity are magnified for councils in non-metropolitan Australia. Daly (2001) has clearly articulated the way in which ageing and decreasing rural populations, extensive geographical boundaries, declining agricultural returns and harsh climatic conditions combine to deplete the resource capacity of rural local governments. Since the mid 1980's, the provision of services and infrastructure have been rationalised to meet 'economic' efficiency and productivity measures stipulated by State and federal governments determined to operate by economic rationalist principles in a commercial framework. This was also one of the key findings of a recent national inquiry into local government and cost-shifting in Australia

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). Submissions from rural councils revealed that some are now running the post office, community housing, the community business centre, the railway station, a general store, a café, a doctor's surgery and a bakery. Commenting on undertaking such tasks, and the concomitant withdrawal of federal and State government services, one rural councillor told the inquiry, 'Quite frankly, local government in our region is the last man standing' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 8).

The rural mayors and elected members to whom we spoke typically undertake their roles in a voluntary role with only limited remuneration. They consequently undertake full time employment in addition to their local government position. We were reminded of this by gatekeeping chief executive officers or administrative staff on a number of occasions. In one shire a farming mayor apologized for his lack of availability explaining that due to financial constraints he no longer employed help on the property and was required to undertake much more farm work himself. This is indicative of a trend across agricultural Australia whereby the number of farm employees has dramatically decreased and farming families are also increasingly taking work outside the farm to supplement their income (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). It is further evidence of the way in which macro-level changes occurring in Australia mediated against access in this research project.

It is understandable that rural local governments, faced with such a multiplicity of roles and with little financial capacity, need to prioritise their involvement in external projects such as research. So significant is the challenge facing rural local governments that we should perhaps be surprised that so many agreed to participate.

Fear of surveillance and audit culture

The legislative reforms to the Australian local government sector introduced by State governments in the early 1990s gave specific attention to performance and audit measures (Aulich, 1999). The legislation was embedded in the discourse of new public management already permeating State and federal governments. This is a discourse which privileges notions of efficiency, effectiveness and economics. It also emphasises quantification and accountability. Thus, the legislation resulted in the instigation of such practices as performance based contracts for staff (Marshall, 2003), financial audits (Kloot and Goodwin, 1997), customer satisfaction surveys (Kloot, 1999), and productivity reports on service delivery (Hodgkinson, 1999). These changes were introduced at the same time that the Australian public and private sectors were increasingly required to adhere to governance practices which subjected them to unprecedented levels of compliance reporting and greater public scrutiny and litigation when good governance was not followed.

While the introduction of such strategies are consistent with what Power (1997, p. 138) calls the 'audit-society', they have particular significance in the Australian local government sector as they were implemented from State governments in a top-down process (Baker, 2003). It was not surprising, then, that we encountered rural local government staff and elected members who regarded us as another potential source of surveillance being imposed on them from above. They questioned our links to the federal government as the project was funded by a Commonwealth research agency. Moreover, they expressed considerable anxiety that the information collected would be used against them in a punitive sense. They were highly cognizant of the fact that their respective State governments have 'absolute power' over them (McNeill, 1997, p. 39), and that the

instruments for wielding this power have dramatically increased. Even assurances of confidentiality were not sufficient enough to reduce this concern for some potential case study sites which refused us access. This may have been magnified in areas where environmental sustainability was viewed as highly sensitive (see Lee, 1994). In these sites, wariness and suspicion mitigated against access as local governments expressed concern of the political implications of involvement, not just in terms of State and federal governments, but their own citizenry.

Negative attitudes towards academics/academia

The final factor we wish to examine in relation to access in studying Australian rural local governments and sustainability concerns the negative views and beliefs about academia held by council staff and elected members. This is that academic research is unproductive and undertaken by people who are impractical, disconnected from reality and overly verbose. Generally, it was assumed that the academics undertaking the research project were city based and therefore had little, if any, understanding or insights to rural, regional and remote issues or conditions. In one interview, for example (Indigo) a Victorian mayor was talking about a State government officer who had visited his shire whom he saw as academically knowledgeable, but practically deficient. He said: 'It's the old joke about the bloke who knew all 69 lakes in Yachandandah and he'd never been to them. Procedural academic. That's what he was. There's a few too many of them.' In another interview, the council employee was asked about natural resource management monitoring and the response was: 'Well it's just an administrative burden. Perhaps a lot of - - my observation is that a lot of the funding programmes from Canberra are suited to

the culture and resources available to academics and Canberra based bureaucrats and the rest of us in the real world that are perhaps a little bit more practical’.

Importantly, this was not an impediment that was articulated explicitly by any of those councils refusing access. However, as we reflected on our access problems and read and analysed interview transcripts we were struck by the dominance of this theme. It permeated so many interactions that we began to wonder if this also may have informed refusals to participate in the study, but was not articulated as such for fear of causing offence, particularly as other more palatable rationales (e.g. a lack of time) were available.

There are a number of macro-level factors that may explain the negative attitude local government participants expressed towards academia. One is the increased attention on local government as a site for investigation by external actors. For example, in saying that they could not commit to participate in our study, one council explained that they had already in the previous year been involved in four different projects. They had received no feedback on the final reports produced as part of their involvement in these projects. Other participants shared similar anecdotes. There is no hard evidence on just who is undertaking this work but it seems likely that the majority is coming from consultants whose employment in the local government sector has grown dramatically in recent years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The local government sector has therefore become a very crowded site for investigation.

A further important macro-level factor that may be influencing local government views of academics concerns the rise of a new discourse in Australia of ‘anti-elitism’. This discourse has been successfully promulgated by the conservative federal Howard

coalition government to create a binary of 'us' and 'them'. The 'them' refers to a range of groups, including academics who are positioned as 'elitist' and thereby worthy of disparagement (Sawer and Hindess, 2004; Sawer, 2003). As stated, also obtaining discursive primacy in Australia in recent years have been notions of efficiency and productivity. This was reflected in the interview transcripts. Academic work, which typically does not produce quick solutions and immediate outputs, does not fare well in this discursive environment. This seemed to be particularly the case given the financial constraints on local government as participants argued that money spent on research was a waste of limited resources. One Western Australian participant, for example, commented:

We haven't got any money. Well, that is the whole problem with natural resource management. Everyone talks about it as a philosophy and everyone believes from a state perspective that natural resource management is important but they don't resource it. I mean they resource studies. They love resourcing studies but when it comes to implementing the recommendations of the study the biccie barrel's dry.

Australian scholars have traditionally demonstrated little interest in local government ((Marshall, 1997; Worthington, 2003). It is in the context of this historical lack of connection between academia and local government that we sought to access rural local governments to participate in our research. The problems we faced were aggravated by the proliferation of consultancy reports on local government and the ascendancy of anti-academic and pro-efficiency discourses in Australia.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that access in qualitative research is mediated by a range of macro-level factors. We have examined three of these factors in relation to accessing rural local governments in order to study environmental management. These are the increased roles and responsibilities of local government, the increased surveillance and audit culture in local government and the negative beliefs about academic work held by council staff and elected members. Our attention to access, and particularly the difficulties we encountered in seeking access, is motivated by four factors. Collectively, these provide a strong rationale for the paper, as well as highlight the need for the subject of access to be examined more critically in future research on local government and sustainability.

In the first instance access is important methodologically. Validity in qualitative research such as that presented in this paper is heavily dependent upon an adequate sampling framework. (Stake, 2003). This may be compromised by access problems. (Groger, Mayberry and Straker, 1997). It is consequently essential to the integrity of knowledge produced about a subject such as local government and the environment that access issues are clearly enunciated and critiqued by researchers.

Understanding and analyzing access in qualitative research is also critical for epistemological reasons. As Rossman and Rallis (1998, p.101) comment, 'the process of negotiating entry can be as insightful about the people or setting as subsequent observations and interviews themselves'. In this study the problems we experienced in accessing rural local governments to participate were intricately connected to the broader research question at the centre of the study, and indeed our findings. Local governments told us that they could not be involved as they lacked resources. This was a

graphic demonstration of the reality that resource limitations experienced by local government that operate as a key barrier to environmental engagement (see also Keen, Mercer and Woodfull, 1994; Whittaker, 1997; Wild River, 2003).

The third factor that emphasises the importance of considering access is that we currently have little knowledge of local governments not strongly engaged in environmental management. There has been a tendency in the literature to focus on local governments that represent 'best practice' or which are more highly evolved in terms of environmental management (e.g. Wild and Marshall, 1999; Wild River, 2003). Access may be critical in this regard as those councils that are more highly engaged environmentally are likely to be more open to researchers coming to examine progress in their shire.

A final reason why understanding more about access in research on local government and the environment is necessary is because of the transformative potential of research participation. There is, of course, an extensive literature which details the fact that there is a limit to which participation in research can lead to change (Pini, 2002; Pini, 2003). However, some comments made by interview participants suggest to us that the research we undertook was facilitating greater engagement in sustainability in selected case study sites. For example, at the conclusion of one interview in rural Western Australia, the mayor commented on his shire's lack of attention to natural resource management saying:

I think, we, as a council, really haven't got involved in a hell of a lot of this. I can see now with these questions. It's really starting to show me that

we need to become more involved as local government and not just leave it up to the land care co-ordinator or the catchment groups. We've really got to step up I think.

In this instance our presence and our questions had highlighted to the mayor how little his shire had done in terms of environmental management and encouraged him to resolve to place the issue on the council's agenda. In other interviews we had similar moments as councillors and staff had the time to critique their role in environmental sustainability, and reflect on the need for change.

It is clear, then, that understanding and critiquing access in research on local government and environmental management is important. It is not just important methodologically but also epistemologically as access problems may provide useful insight into research questions. Also relevant is the fact that there is currently a paucity of work focused on those local governments not engaged in an environmental agenda. As researchers we need to seek access to these sites. Finally, it is by gaining access to these more problematic sites, and by undertaking collaborative work with elected members and council staff, that we may affect change as researchers. It is thus that we may facilitate a higher level of engagement in environmental management across the local government sector.

Barbara,

I am wondering whether we should overtly acknowledge here the support of RIRDC? I think we should say something like

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