

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study employed ethnographic methods of data gathering. The data presented in this study were collected from participant observation, casual conversations and informal interviews over a nine-month period (December 2002 through August 2003) which, in total, entailed more than two hundred hours of fieldwork. These methods also provide a broader spectrum of the conflicts faced by the informants in their work, family, and studies resulting in a lifestyle of juggling multiple roles.

Simply, ethnography by definition is descriptive. In anthropology it means, literally, 'a picture of the way of life of some interacting human group' (Wolcott, 1975). In sociological ethnography, it means insight observations of individuals and descriptive writings on the observations which are termed as data collection. By using the ethnographical methods, the ethnographic observes, interviews, makes field notes, and records in his or her research diary. This process of gathering data takes him over a period of time. Trujillo (1992) in his paper "*interpreting the work and the talk of baseball: Perspectives on ballpark culture*" claims that ethnographic methods require researchers to immerse themselves in the field for an extended period of time in order to gain a detailed understanding of how members interpret their culture.

Generally, the ethnographic methods involved working with the data collected that facilitates the creation of explanations, the emergence of themes, the formulation of theories, and linking one story to others. Thus, those aspects of analysis that seem most prominent in recent ethnographic research are speculative analysis, classifying and categorizing, concept formation, models, typologies, and theory. Nevertheless, not all ethnographies go through all these stages. In one study, Coles (2002) analyzed data collected for emergent themes regarding the motivation and reasoning behind the decision made by African America single fathers with custody of children. In another study, DeSantis (2003) first established a theoretical foundation for his ethnographic study on the community of cigar-smoking, basketball-loving, gregarious men. With this, he detailed the emergent themes from his study.

3.2 RATIONALE FOR USING ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

To justify this kind of ethnographic methods for my work-family-study conflict, study on married working mothers with multiple roles, I have attempted to describe the conflicts problems, happiness, and stress faced by the informants in a way that is as faithful as possible to the way they see it themselves. After two years working together with the three informants in the same private college, I became intimately acquainted with each one of them in most situations. Naturally, most of their conflicts in the work place, some of their domestic pr of the problems in their studies would have come to my knowledg or purely by

narration. In this situation, the ethnographic style of research has proved to be most appropriated in terms of data collection.

Anthropologists like D.T. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and the American Margaret Mead followed ethnographic research and made their classic studies of some of the simple societies of the western Pacific and Melanesia, and of certain African tribes. Malinowski who was regarded as the greatest of these researchers in terms of using the ethnographic approach joined the Trobrianders natives' communities, learned their language, lived among them, noting and recording his observations in preparation for writing about them later (McNeil,1990).

Evans-Pritchard, too, followed the same style of research because no other research methods would enable him to gain the insights that he needed. He went to live among the Nuer of the Southern Sudan as a vulnerable outsider, relying on their goodwill and friendship to enable him to emerge gradually into the background of their everyday lives. Margaret Mead (1935), like Malinowski, went to live among the peoples that she was studying (Arapesh, Mundugamore, and Tchambuli of New Guinea), observing their behaviour as a participant in the society, and combined this with some informal interviewing of members of the tribes that she studied closely (McNeil, 1990).

3.3 SELECTION OF THE SETTING AND SAMPLE

When making site and informant selection decisions, ethnographic methods allow studies to be carried out in the research's own institution or agency, or among friends or colleagues. Some reasons being the researcher would have relatively easy access to their professional or personal life, and the amount of time needed for various research steps would be reduced (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).

To certain extent, however, the familiarity with the setting and sample selected will hinder effective data collection. DeSantis (2003) in his study on cigar smokers reveals his experience of consistently walking the thin line between the participant and observer. He was always introspective about how his position as participant affected the cigar smokers' group discussions. I was in a similar situation because I myself am pursuing a Master's degree and observing the three informants who are my colleagues. In most cases, I stopped myself from discussing my work, family, and study conflicts' with them. By practicing this, I refrained from being a participant in the study. My role was to ensure a steady and natural flow of discussion and interaction among informants as well as the primary researcher that is me.

3.3.1 Setting – The Technocyber Private College

Founded in 1994, The Technocyber Private College is located in Damansara, Selangor. There is easy access to other neighboring townships. An additional campus, known as The Technology Tower is located less than five minutes away by road.

The Technocyber Private College provides opportunities for Malaysian students to hone their potential in the field of Science and Engineering. The college offers a full range of programs, including accredited, twinning, and associate programmes in collaboration with local and foreign Universities. Local leading higher learning institutions offer programmes in Engineering, Computing, Built Environment, and Business studies. These programmes are in various forms that are Customized programs, Certificate courses, Higher National Diploma, and accredited Diplomas. Since English is the medium of instruction, an English department has been set up to enable students to polish up their English Language Skills.

Each school has a staff room for lecturers. It is an open system with lecturers in view of each other. Majority of lecturers are Malays, Chinese, Indians and foreigners make up a small percentage.

The student population encompasses the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia namely, Malays, Chinese, and Indians with a predominance of Malay students. There is a small group of Mainland Chinese, and foreign muslim students. Classes for School of Engineering, Computing and Business Studies are in the main campus. The School of Built Environment is situated in a nearby building that is The Technology Tower. Some of the English lecturers have to commute between the two campuses for English classes. One of my informants who is pursuing her PhD programme in a local university, is in this situation. Figure 3.1 shows the position of the two college buildings and the three Schools in the main campus.

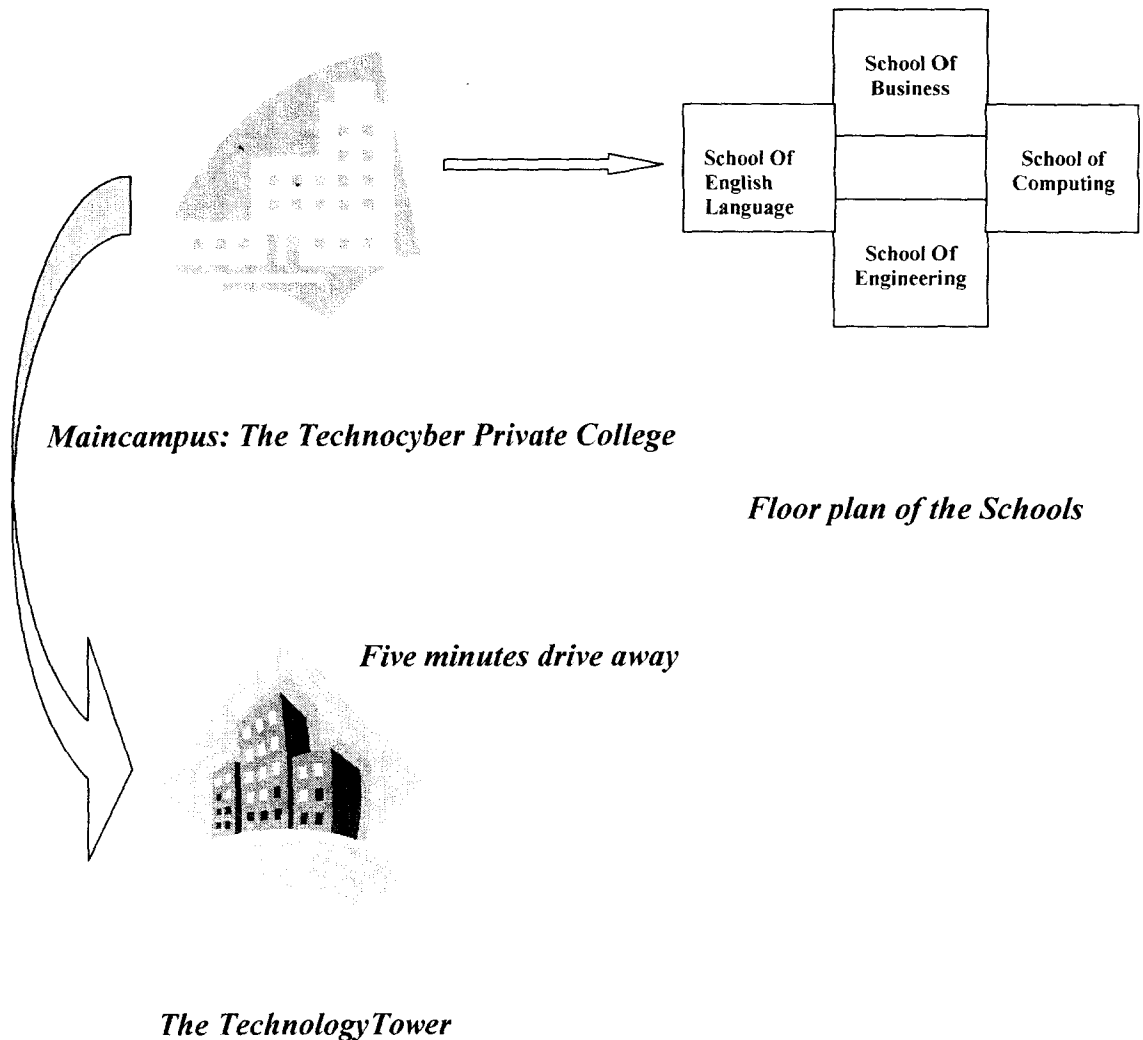


Figure 3.1: Position of the two college buildings and the three Schools in the main campus.

3.3.2 Sample

The research informants are three female lecturers working in The Technocyber Private College. These women share some common characteristics, such as having at least one child. They do not have parents or siblings staying with them. They have

enjoyed a nuclear family lifestyle since they were married. Both husband and wife are working full time so it is a dual-earner family. All three informants have a live-in a foreign maid throughout the period of my study. They perceive their teaching job as a long term career so they aspire for a higher qualification academic in order to achieve a higher status in academia. It is for this reason they are currently pursuing their higher degrees in the universities while working full time to main their position in The Technocyber Private College.

The adult characteristics of the informants in the sample clearly reflect the composition of my college community from which the sample was drawn. In the college, more than half of the lecturers are pursuing higher education either at Master's or PhD level. The choice of these three female lecturers was criterion-based, semi-random sampling as utilized by researcher Poelmans (2001) in his study, entitled "A Qualitative Study of Work-family Conflict in Managerial Couples". I was seeking a heterogeneous group of informants representing the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.

The sampling was chosen randomly. First, I listed out the married female lecturers who were attending classes for higher degrees. Information regarding their family background (husband's job and number of children), courses taken, domestic help, parents' and siblings' home location, religions, names of universities, and School of programmes taught at The Technocyber Private College, was obtained in a discussion with the informants.

The final sample consists of a Malay lecturer; Maria aged 35, from the School of Business Studies, pursuing a Masters Degree at The University of Technology Malaysia in Skudai, Johor. She has four children with ages ranging from four to fourteen. A Chinese lecturer, Lee aged 33, from the School of Engineering is doing her MBA programme at University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Her baby girl is aged one plus. The third informant is an Indian lecturer; Devi aged 35, from the English Language Department. She is working on her PhD dissertation. She has two children aged six months and six years. Table 3.1 is a summary of the informants' data.

Table 3.1: Summary of information about informants.

	Malay	Chinese	Indian
Personal Details:			
Name	Maria	Lee	Devi
Age	35	33	35
Religion	Islam	Buddhism	Hinduism
Family:			
Husband's Employment	Business	Private Sector	Private Sector
No of Children	4	1	2
Domestics Help	Foreign Maid	Foreign Maid	Foreign Maid
Parents' home	Selangor	Perak	Selangor
Work:			
Workplace Department	Business	Engineering	English
Work Status	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
No of Staff in Department	10	20	30
Studies:			
Course	Business	MBA	English

3.4 GAINING ACCESS

As I am a Masters student like many of my other colleagues, I have an advantage. My position allows me a privileged opportunity (DeSantis, 2003) to be both a friend who faces conflicts in work, family, and studies like any of the informants as well as a researcher with unlimited access to conversations, self-disclosures, and informal interviews even to a certain extent serious in-depth interviews.

The informants who are also my close colleagues in the college freely shared their professional and domestic anecdotes with me trusting that I would write only about their conflicts objectively and without malice.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION/ FIELD TECHNIQUES

The use of multiple-data-collection methods in an ethnographic study contributes to the trustworthiness of the data. This practice is commonly called “triangulation” (Denzin, 1988). Two data collection techniques dominate in this study mainly participant observation and interviewing. A combination of these two techniques have been able to provide a clearer picture of the conflicts faced by the informants when playing multiple roles while pursuing higher education.

3.5.1 Participant Observation

'Participant Observation' has always been the central method of ethnographic study.

Through

participant observation, means by being a part of a social setting, we will learn firsthand how the actions of others correspond to their words. One will also see patterns of their behavior; and experience the unexpected as well as the expected reactions; and develop a quality of trust with others that motivates them to tell and share their experiences (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992)

In the study, as a participant observer, I consciously observed the research setting, particularly, the working environment of individual informant's department; the informants; and the events and conflicts that occurred within them. I focused mainly on the informants' behavior rather than on them as individuals (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

During observation sessions (December, 2002 through August, 2003) of the study, I practiced two ways of taking field notes. First, I always have a small notebook in my bag. As and when anyone of my informants had something to complain or to share during a casual conversation, I had the notebook and pen ready. I also jotted notes on their reactions in the college when they had had problems at home the night before. In the process, I noted what I saw, heard, felt, and thought. The informants were rather uneasy in the initial stage of the study. Somehow, after two weeks or so, they started to ignore my jotting down notes while they talked or discussed. Another reason could

be that they themselves were working on their assignments, so they somehow could understand my situation in pursuing my project.

Second, I made mental notes (Lofland, 1971) in cases when I did not have notebook with me, especially when my informants and I met along the corridors of the college; or during meals in the campus. Under these circumstances, I normally tried to remember the main points and jotted them down later.

Regarding the observational time for the study, I spent an average of half an hour to one hour daily with each one of them. For example, I normally had breakfast with Devi as both of us arrived early at the college. At noon, I joined Lee for a vegetarian meal outside the college. In Maria's case, I dropped in at her staff-room. Her colleagues (about 10 of them) congregate there and enjoy pot-luck meals. They bare their souls to each other and are like one big family.

3.5.2 Informal Interviewing using Semi-structured Questions

Interviewing brings together different persons and personalities (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). The nature of the interaction changes from informant to informant, depending on the topic to be discussed, the location of the interview and their emotional state at that time. For example, an interview on the work conflicts faced by the Chinese informant when the passing rate for the subject she had taught was low for the previous-semester would be more negatively emotional than an interview when the passing rate was high. In the latter situation she would be cheerful and more talkative

in a positive manner. Through interviews, one also gets the informants' opinions, perceptions, and attitudes on focal matters.

For this study, a semi-structured interview format and an informal interview guide were used for data collection. Semi-structured questions enable the researcher to follow a sequence of pre-scripted question in a predetermined order (Gatewood and Field, 1994). With this, the researcher is able to follow the pace and the flow of the ideas of the informants while posing the pre-set questions in a subtle manner (Poelmans, 2001).

The interview included questions designed to explore the various constraints faced by the informants in the different domains of work, family, and studies in the pursuit of higher education. Other aspects of concern were on perceptions, and opinions of the informants' in-laws, husbands and even society's perception of a working mother becoming a student. Lastly, questions relating to the informants' own feelings, opinions, expectations, and aspirations while pursuing higher educations were fielded.

Most of the interviews were tape-recorded and each interview lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Only two interviews were not recorded at the request of the informants. Once when Lee was quite emotional when talking about the conflicts with her parents about her method of caring for her baby. The second time was when Maria was quite worried she might accidentally mention something sensitive when touching on her conflicts with her supervisor regarding her thesis. All the interviews which were later

transcribed were conducted in a vacant tutorial room at the college. Before I concluded this study, I sent each informant a transcript of the interviews. Excerpts from interviews that appear in this paper are edited and all names used are pseudonyms.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The inductive data analysis has been the usual mode of data analysis in ethnographic analysis and is simply defined as a process “making sense” of field data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In other words, data analysis is done simultaneously with data collection (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), which may be obtained from observations, interviews, documents, nonverbal cues, or any other qualitative or quantitative information sources.

Inductive data analysis bears remarkable similarities to content analysis, which involves two essential subprocesses terms as “Unitizing” and “Categorizing” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). “Unitizing” is a process of coding whereby raw data are systematically transformed and aggregated into units which permits precise description of relevant content characteristics (Holsti, 1969). While “Categorizing” is a process whereby previously unitized data are organized into categories that provide descriptive information about the context or setting from which the units were derived.

The process of “Categorizing” has been well described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) under the heading of the “constant comparative method”. The data of this study were analyzed using this method which involved sorting words, phrases or sentences on work, family, and studies conflicts into provisional categories on the basis of common characteristics experienced by my three informants. As the provisional categories accumulated, thick description was used in presenting the study in the form of reasoning on the emergent themes relating to the topic of this study.

Some of the organizing categories included work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, work-to-studies conflict, studies-to-work conflict, family-to studies conflict, studies-to-family conflict, parents or external support, working environment, time management, parents’ or husband’s perception, coping with demands and personal needs. Several emergent themes involved the constraints faced by working mothers in the pursuit of higher education, gender role attitude, role balancing, and self-actualization.

Throughout the study, the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used as an integral part of the entire process. As indicated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), a grounded theory is one that will:

“fit the situation being researched, and work when put into use. By ‘fit’ we mean that the categories must readily (not forcibly) be applicable to and indicated by

the data under study; by ‘work’ we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study.”

With the ethnographic research principles of grounded theory, I use the Role Theory and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory to guide me through the entire process of data analysis.