

Jo's Book

Act I Starry, starry eyes

"We think you should publish your thesis as a book." Heady words - spoken by my PhD examiners right after my *viva voce* in mid-December. Flattered, shattered and relieved, I agreed to everything. My internal examiner, Professor Phillips, set about finding a publisher. My first task was to gain consent to publish from the two organisations in which I had conducted my fieldwork. (I refer to them here pseudonymously as SOON and WEX.) Both organisations had required me to sign the Official Secrets Act. Both are powerful state organisations. Neither has a strong reputation for openness. Nevertheless, I could not foresee any major problems, and optimistically began an exchange of correspondence. I perceived it as the final hurdle prior to the ultimate goal of the shiny new academic - authorship.

Flushed with success, I telephoned my main contact, Mr George, at the SOON office. I considered my primary obligation was to SOON, the organisation he worked for, as they had provided some funding and access for field research. I made arrangements to send a copy of my thesis to him later in December with an accompanying letter requesting permission to publish my thesis in the form of a book. In the February, I wrote to Dr Short of WEX asking if they would like a copy of my thesis.

Q1. Any comments on the situation so far?

Q2. How would you have advised Jo?

Act 2 Partial eclipse

In the reply from SOON in late January, amongst other comments, concern was expressed over several issues, but two in particular. The first of these was my methodology. I had provided both organisations with written research proposals, including my methodological intentions. Both organisations had given me permission to carry out my research. My PhD supervisors had considered my account of my methodology to be a significant aspect of my research. They had suggested foregrounding it by placing it towards the front of my thesis, which I had done. SOON's concern was that I had said in my thesis that I had not, in general, made it explicit to participants which data I would use for my analysis. On one occasion I had replied, "I shouldn't think so" when asked if I was going to publish what an interviewee was saying.

The second issue of concern to SOON was a case I had described to illustrate an argument. In SOON's view, I had implied collusion between SOON and WEX (which would have been improper). SOON Headquarters asked me for full details of the case, and confirmation of quotes I had used.

Q1. Have you any comments on the ethical issues arising here?

Q2. How should Jo respond to this letter?

Act 3 The ethical researcher

I sent a carefully considered, conscientious response in February dealing fully and explicitly with every issue they had raised. In it I pointed out that investigative social researchers have multiple, often conflicting loyalties. I said it was only with hindsight that one could draw conclusions about my methodology. I drew attention to the fact that pseudonyms were used throughout my thesis, and that on professional ethical grounds I could not disclose the identities of participants in my research.

Two months passed by.

Q1. Comment on the content of Jo's letter.

Q2. What should Jo do now?

Act 4 A glimmer of light...

At the end of April I contacted SOON again. I was instructed to supply WEX with a copy of my thesis. This was irritating since WEX had not responded to my February letter. Also I was now unemployed and did not have the resources to photocopy and post the 437 pages of my thesis. I insisted that under the circumstances, it was SOON's responsibility to supply WEX with a copy.

In May I was informed that this had been done. SOON also said they would contact me once WEX was ready to make comments on my thesis. I promptly replied to this letter, reiterating my need of their consent to publish. We had moved forward a couple of paces, and I was heartened by this.

Three weeks later, I received a letter from the SOON local office to the effect that SOON Headquarters Policy Group would contact me direct from now on. Another month passed with no word from Policy Group. In late June, I wrote to the SOON local office asking for the name and address of someone at Policy Group to whom I could direct my enquiries. This information was provided, and on 1 July I sent a letter to Policy Group by recorded delivery, giving a resume of the correspondence thus far. I pointed out that SOON had partially funded this research, yet was not attending to my repeated request for consent to publish.

Q1. Comment on Jo's actions.

Q2. Have you any further suggestions?

Act 5 ...Extinguished

I received a reply from SOON a week later. It was clear that the contents of my February letter to them had been disregarded. Objections to my methodology were repeated thus:

"The fact that you obtained comments . . . by a misrepresentation that they would not be published cannot be supported by SOON. We, therefore will not authorise the publication of any material obtained in this manner."

This was a distortion of what had occurred, what I had written in my thesis and what I had already reported in my February letter. Tellingly, the letter goes on to say:

"It may have been the case that some of the interviewees would not have been so frank had they thought their discussions were being recorded."

I tended to agree. On the matter of the case I had used in illustration of my argument, SOON insisted on having the correct details. I felt threatened by this. Should I disclose the details to SOON and to hell with ethical guidelines? Should I withhold them and risk potentially severe consequences from SOON? Were there other alternatives?

Other issues were raised in this letter which had not been mentioned previously. Briefly, details of SOON's funding of my research was questioned. I presume this was a hint at rights of ownership of the research. SOON also asserted that "collusion" was an "implied theme throughout" my thesis, and that I had made strong accusations against a WEX employee. SOON further asserted that I repeatedly suggest "sinister" goings-on. SOON also complained that I hardly mentioned WEX's non-SOON work, inferring that my thesis was unbalanced. I was angered by the tone of this letter, and the fact that SOON's assertions were groundless. I was concerned and disturbed at SOON's criticism of my methodology. I felt they wanted to 'massage' my research.

Q1. How should Jo respond to SOON's letter?

Q2. Any other comments at this stage?

Act 6 Ethereal communications

In need of advice, I decided to contact Professor Phillips. Professor Phillips and I discussed these issues and decided that the main reason for SOON wanting the case information must be to identify the people I had interviewed within their organisation. His view was that it was better the book should be published without the contentious case, rather than not be published at all. The publishers had already informed us that formal consent was essential as they could not risk a legal wrangle, especially with such a powerful organisation as SOON. Professor Phillips was optimistic though, as the publishers had a real interest in my work. My spirits raised, I wrote back to SOON in mid-July.

In my reply, I pointed out that I could not now unwrite my research methodology chapter. Neither could I unhear what had been said to me in interviews. However, for the purposes of publication, I would exclude all the contentious sections with regard to my methodology, and all reference to the case to which I had referred in illustrating my arguments. Other comments and remarks, I wrote, were welcome, and had been noted.

In mid-August I received a letter from SOON Policy Group saying that a rewrite of the methodology chapter "might provide an acceptable compromise". SOON was "puzzled" as to why I was not prepared to reveal the name of the contentious case. They wished to see a draft before finally agreeing to publication. It had taken eight months, and there was still no word from WEX.

Q1. How should Jo respond?

Q2. Should Jo contact WEX?

Q3. Any further comments?

Act 7 Waxing and waning

It had been three months since SOON had sent a copy of my thesis to WEX. I wrote to WEX in the latter part of August, asking them to contact me directly rather than through SOON since I was in the process of editing my thesis with a view to publication. I hoped this would hasten things along.

Before replying to SOON and feeling isolated in this long and lonely fight with two monolithic organisations, I decided to write a formal letter to my Head of Department and PhD supervisor. In it I outlined some issues my experience had raised, requested advice on my rights to publish, and asked for support from the University.

Q1. Comment on Jo's action.

Q2. How should the Head of Department reply?

Act 8 Message(s) Received

Message One

The telephone reply was swift and to the point. My Head of Department suggested that I search the professional guidelines of research conduct and my research award guidelines for means by which I could persuade SOON and WEX to release my research for publication. Formal help from the University he said would not be forthcoming. In a nutshell it was my work and I was on my own.

I also received a prompt reply from WEX in which they said they would need to give the contents of my thesis serious consideration in view of my wish to publish. SOON had informed WEX of the exclusion of certain sections of my thesis in a published version. They hoped to be able to contact me in "a reasonable time to take this matter forward".

Encouraged, I hoped that their concept of "reasonable time" concurred with mine. Sadly, it did not. I wrote again in October, asking if WEX was now able to take these matters forward. I received no reply to this letter.

In a last ditch attempt, I wrote again in mid-December, reminding WEX of our (mainly my) previous correspondence. I reiterated my requirement for consent to publish. I commented that their reluctance to communicate with me over this matter was a simple, yet effective means of ensuring that consent would be withheld. I stressed the importance of peer review for research, expressing dismay that I should not be afforded that opportunity.

Message Two

This letter brought an unexpected response. One evening just before Christmas, I received a telephone call. It was Dr Evans of WEX. He was 'phoning to tell me he had been given my PhD thesis to read over Christmas. I grinned.

Dr Evans asked me what my thesis was about. I informed him of the issues I had raised. He quickly read through the abstract, aloud. Then he quizzed me on my "ethnographic approach", and on the content of my thesis. I answered him as best as I could in the circumstances and expressed the hope that he should enjoy his Yuletide reading. He said he would contact me in the New Year.

Message Three

Dr Evans, true to his word, wrote to me at the beginning of January. Regarding my thesis, he made some complimentary remarks. He was, however, concerned about the accuracy of certain quotes and the question of whether I had collected them "in a clandestine manner". He said he was "reminded of the old adage about annual staff reports, that they are believed to say a good deal about the author as well as the reportee". I regarded this as

gratuitous, and ignored it in my subsequent reply. He asked if I had an edited version which he could see before taking this any further.

Q1. Comment on the Head of Department's stand. What is a university's position on a case of this kind?

Q2. Comment on Jo's actions.

Q3. How should Jo respond to Dr Evans?

Act 9 Deja vu

Towards the end of January I wrote to Dr Evans. I informed him that as yet I had no complete edited version of my thesis. I listed the exclusions I had agreed with SOON and asked him to inform me of any further points which he would like to negotiate or discuss in order that we could reach agreement. On grounds of financial cost, I was reluctant to send him an edited version merely omitting agreed exclusions, when I knew there would have to be at least one other edited version.

Dr Evans replied to my letter two weeks later. In his letter, he said he was anxious to reach agreement in the "least possible time". He again asked for an edited version of my thesis without specifying which parts were contentious. He said he would read it promptly and we could then negotiate the way forward. This feeling of deja vu crept over me.

Q1. How should Jo respond?

Q2. Any further comments?

Act 10 Deja vu

That was the last letter I received in this series. It remains unanswered. It had been one year and two months exactly since I had received my PhD. My enthusiasm diminished, I asked Professor Phillips to release me from my commitment to publish. The timeliness of writing a book based on my research has perhaps passed, although I notice some old chestnuts being raised from time to time in the national media. At times I thought I would burst with angry frustration at what was, in my view, their unfairness. In the end, I had to turn away.

Discuss the issues raised by Jo's experience and suggest rules of guidance to cover this kind of case for:

- 1. Jo's university**
- 2. Jo's department**
- 3. Postgraduate students**
- 4. Collaborative bodies**

List the main points on the acetates provided
