Member checking in human geography: interpreting divergent understandings of performativity in a student space

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In human geography, member checking is now routine practice for upholding rigour in qualitative studies, yet it can result in conflicting opinions regarding research interpretations. Here we reflect upon divergent outcomes from member checking research exploring the nature of student experiences in a specific space of a Canadian university law school. While member checking did not yield acceptance of the initial interpretations by all informants, we argue that rather than invalidating our findings, the very disagreement exposed through member checks added to our analyses in important ways. As such, results refuted by informants should not necessarily be discarded in human geography research.

Introduction

Member checking, also known as respondent validation, is frequently acclaimed in the social sciences as a key tool for establishing credibility in qualitative analyses. By returning research products to participants and using such internal authentication to appraise the integrity of findings, this method is argued to function as a qualitative proxy for traditionally quantitative evaluations of rigour (Baxter and Eyles 1997 1999a; Creswell and Miller 2000; Anfara *et al.* 2002; Papadopoulos *et al.* 2002; Patton 2002; Barbour 2003). Yet while featuring prominently as a key solution in debates raised by geographers problematising rigour in qualitative research (cf. Baxter and Eyles 1997 1999b), for the most part, this technique has been unquestioningly incorporated into human geography qualitative research strategies as a 'sure-fire' test for validity, with a lack of critical reflection.

However, this approach – marrying member checking to the positivist concepts of truth and validity – fails to capitalise on the valuable contributions the method brings to rigorous qualitative research, and even undermines the intentions of some of its original proponents (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Authors such as Lincoln and Guba (1985; Guba and Lincoln 1989) and Bradshaw (2001) advocate member checking as a technique more suitable for qualitative research that develops *credibility* alongside other post-positivist practices such as persistent observation and peer debriefing. Indeed, while generally defined in the literature as a method to gauge the extent of coherence between researcher and member accounts, a number of studies provide evidence to the very effect that member checking is by no means a clear-cut avenue for ascertaining the 'truth' of an interpretation. Rather, serves a multiplicity of purposes beneficial to the research process (cf. Emerson and Pollner 1988; Bloor 2001; Bradshaw 2001). With the increasing adoption and acceptance of member checking as standard practice in qualitative work it is surprising, therefore, that there has been little contemporary discussion of the operational intricacies of its role in geography, with Bradshaw (2001) being a key exception.

With these tensions in mind, and noting this lack of recent reflection within the discipline, the aim of this paper is to contemplate the outcomes of a member checking exercise that, while supporting the *authors'* interpretations of findings, did not necessarily result in the acceptance of these by informants. We will argue that this did not negate results, but that rather member checking was able to add further to the authors' initial analyses in new, important and more nuanced ways. We illustrate how precisely because of the *unconscious* nature of the social phenomena under study, the seemingly conflicting results brought forth by member checks operated to enrich the overall analysis. Our discussion suggests that definitions of 'successful' outcomes of member checking need to be expanded in human geography studies, especially those that focus upon the subtle or unconscious nature of social experiences. As such, we contend that when conceptualised as a tool for the further acquisition of relevant data and when incorporated within critically reflexive strategies in geography, member checking can serve to uphold and extend robust analyses in valuable ways not limited to traditional notions of validation. Indeed, credible results of member checking may actually go against informant agreement with researcher accounts.

The initial member checked study focused upon students attending 'Coffee House' in the Faculty of Law at McGill University, in Montreal, Canada, and explored the nature of student experiences in this social space.[1] Coffee House is a weekly social event sponsored for half the academic year by prominent Canadian law firms in an effort to 'brand' their firm. While extremely popular with law students, on any given evening attendees also include Law Student Association (LSA) representatives, a few law faculty, a handful of non-law students and – if sponsored – lawyers representing their respective firms, and waiting staff catering the event. Sponsored Coffee Houses exude an air of exclusivity where the norms of dress are conspicuously more formal than non-sponsored events, women frequently adorned with jewellery and make-up and men, on occasion, sporting suits. Indeed, major law firms compete to host these affairs, paying CAN$5000–10 000 per Coffee House for the privilege of providing live refined music such as jazz quartets, lavish food served by white-gloved, tuxedoed waiting staff and alcoholic beverages, all free of charge to attendees.[2]

In our initial analyses of these events, prior to member checking, we argued that the institution of Coffee House contributed to the socialisation of law students, impacting effectively on the identity transformation these young adults were going through during their law school years (Manderson and Turner 2006; Turner and Manderson 2007).[3] We claimed – drawing on Butler's (1990 1993a 1993b) work on the power of performativity, and those of a number of other social theorists and social geographers (including Parker and Sedgwick 1993; Bell *et al.* 1994; McDowell 1994; Lloyd 1999; Nelson 1999; Rose 1999; Pratt 2004) – that the repeated, unconscious performances students engaged in at Coffee House represented and brought to life an embodied notion of what it meant to be a McGill law student, en route to a career as a successful corporate lawyer. Returning to Coffee House during member checking, it was this element of performativity and subsequent identity transformation that we found specific groups of students unhappy to acknowledge when we suggested it as a hypothesis.

In order to situate this experience, we next review the member checking literature that guided the return visits to Coffee House, highlighting the variability in approaches to the technique and the complexities characterising its operationalisation in qualitative research. Then we outline the methods used in the original study and for member checking. A brief summary of key findings from the initial study is subsequently presented, followed by those from member checking. We conclude by discussing issues raised by this member checking exercise which we believe are relevant for other geographers in considering their own motivations for engaging this method.

Member checking

As a mechanism for eliciting informant appraisals of researcher interpretations, member checking provides researchers with a means to test the proximity of member and researcher accounts. Whether the resulting feedback affirms or refutes a correspondence between these understandings then either respectively corroborates or discounts research findings.[4] Member checking thus operates on the assumption that the extent to which members recognise *their* experiences in research products dictates the reliability of research claims (Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Bloor 1983; Guba and Lincoln 1989; Baxter and Eyles 1999a).

A wide range of member checking practices exist that have been little discussed by geographers (aside from Bradshaw 2001). Specific decisions regarding which materials are to be checked, with whom, and when, have guided the adoption of different

member checking formats (Whyte 1979; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Sandelowski 1993; Baxter and Eyles 1999a; Bryman 2003). Possible research products for review by members thus span a diversity of source material from oral scripts to interview transcripts to polished manuscripts. Similarly, procedures for member checking these research products consist of exchanges varying from casual conversations to structured interviews to focus groups (Ball 1984; Guba and Lincoln 1989; Sandelowski 1993; Seale 1999).[5]

One of the key dilemmas in implementing member checking in its various designs stems from a confusion over how to treat different levels of agreement or disagreement. Bryman (2003), in his explanatory description of member checking, claims that strategies for contending with disagreement are unclear and that disentangling the underlying reasons for dissension amongst interpretations is ultimately a problematic pursuit. Along these lines, Schwandt (1997) argues that the inability to comprehensively account for the numerous factors motivating disagreement disables member checking as a method for measuring validity in the traditional sense. Indeed, a number of researchers have reported difficulties in deciphering the nature of dis/agreement in member feedback (cf. Bloor 1983; Emerson and Pollner 1988). Sandelowski (1993) locates this difficulty in the multiple meanings and interpretations with which qualitative data can be understood. These works acknowledge that member checking is a process often complicated by the heterogeneous social experiences of individuals that qualitative human geography research strives to illuminate, thus often effectively raising more questions than signifying the confirmation or conclusion of analyses.

Several practical problems inherent to member checking also complicate the process of interpreting feedback. First, there are inevitable discrepancies in the level of detail and interest with which members review research materials. Participants may also focus disproportionately upon unintended foci or aspects of minor importance to the overall research, or forget certain details that will hamper their ability to 'authenticate' findings (Emerson and Pollner 1988; Sandelowski 1993; Bloor 2001). In addition, the nature of researcher and participant accounts is essentially different, and participants cannot be expected to detach themselves from interpretations of their personal experiences and provide an academic critique (Bloor 1978; Bryman 2003). On the whole, we believe that it is important to acknowledge

that member checking is subject to the unpredictable human occurrences that characterise the production of any qualitative data in geographic research.

Member checking has also been critiqued for frequently being exempt from the reflexive auspices guiding other stages of qualitative data production, placed in a seemingly privileged position external to the project (see Bradshaw 2001). A number of authors point out that feedback exacted through member checking is shaped by contexts and the multiple positionings of researchers and informants, just as data sourced from initial interviews and observations are. Since member responses are not free from these formative structures, neither are the estimations of the adequacy of research interpretations derived therein (Bloor 1983 2001; Emerson and Pollner 1988; Sandelowski 1993; Schwandt 1997; Bradshaw 2001). Member evaluations are not an exceptional form of impartial judgement, but are instead similarly bound up with the specific places and circumstances in which they are produced, a point, it could be argued, that human geographers should continuously reflect upon.

Regardless of the uncertainties surrounding member checking, some researchers – the current authors included – still argue that it is a strategy supportive of rigorous qualitative inquiry. This is due to its role in fostering an iterative process of re-examining initial findings with regards to queries brought about by the addition of further data. In this way, member checks are stimuli for critical inspections, ongoing analyses, additional interrogation of data and new understandings of topics – practices which ultimately bolster the integrity of research (Bloor 1978 1983 2001; Alkin *et al.* 1979; Emerson and Pollner 1988; Schwandt 1997; Seale 1999). Missing from this work, however, are contemporary examples of geographical research, including those focusing upon the unconscious nature of certain social geographical phenomena that highlight such critical inspection and the integrity it can produce. This paper hopes to provide one such example.

Methods: the original study and member checking

In the initial research, ten Coffee Houses were studied in 2005 – six sponsored by corporate law firms – in McGill's Faculty of Law. Over 90 unstructured conversational interviews with students, faculty, lawyers and waiting staff were carried out by the original investigators Sarah Turner and

Desmond Manderson, and a research assistant, Steve Baird. Students willing to participate were engaged in discussions regarding their reasons for attending Coffee Houses, perceptions of the environment, interactions with lawyers at sponsored events, and comparisons of sponsored and non-sponsored occasions. Similar themes were discussed with faculty and lawyers, while hired waiting staff were asked about their perceptions of the event and the student attendees. More extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted off-site with key informants including members of the Law Students' Association (LSA) and law faculty.[6] Finally, in order to more broadly gauge the interactions and social atmosphere characteristic of Coffee House, participant observation and a series of eight time-and-motion sketches/studies were also undertaken.[7]

Several strategies for upholding rigour were incorporated into the research design. These included two forms of triangulation, drawing on investigator triangulation in addition to utilising the multiple data sources described above, as well as member checking (Baxter and Eyles 1997). One researcher was a male law faculty member in his 40s recognised by all students present, another was a female geography faculty member in her 30s familiar to only two students, and a third was a male undergraduate geography/development studies student in his 20s. Such a design not only facilitated rigorous evaluations of the initial findings, but also critical assessments of how different interviewer positionings influenced the interview process by allowing the research team to constantly compare notes, data and experiences. Dominant themes were then identified across the interviews.[8]

Member checking was subsequently carried out at four Coffee Houses, two sponsored by law firms, between October 2005 and January 2006 by Turner (one of the original faculty researchers), with the continuing support of the research assistant. Member checks were undertaken with 64 student participants in Coffee House, 19 (30%) of whom had previously been interviewed during the initial project.[9] During this review process, all 64 students were shown a one-page 'student participant feedback' statement of the main findings of the original project.[10] This included a brief summary of the two principal reasons students cited for coming to Coffee House (outlined below), and the hypothesis that the researchers had drawn from an analysis of these, the key informant interviews and the researchers' own observations (see Figure 1).

Our research design included the decision to undertake member checking at a fairly advanced period in the analysis because we were interested to determine student reactions not only to our discussions of their original statements, but also to our interpretations of them. The one-page format chosen provided students with a very brief overview of our key results, rather than detailed notes, so as to reach a large audience and because of the location we chose. The site for member checking – back at subsequent Coffee Houses with all their specific social dynamics – no doubt influenced the reactions we received.[11] However we felt that this location, the initial interview setting, best encouraged students to consciously reflect upon what was happening to them during the event – while standing in it.[12]

Material for member review: initial researcher findings and interpretations

Analyses from the initial study revealed two principal student experiences occurring within the social space of Coffee House. First, the majority of students present maintained that Coffee House served a purely social purpose and they came only to 'have a good time' with their friends and 'there's *nothing* more complicated going on' (Ben, 24/3/05, original emphasis). Students claimed that at sponsored events lawyers were inconsequential to their experiences of the evenings and – beyond their utility in funding the food and alcoholic beverages – students were 'not conscious of the lawyers *on any level*' (Tim, 27/1/05, original emphasis). Students saw the free food and drink as valuable only in attracting a large number of their peers to come together and socialise. Rather than functioning as a successful marketing scheme for firms, students insisted such strategies were ineffective for them personally and that the primary *raison d'être* of Coffee House was social.

The second dominant student performance taking place stood in direct contrast with the first. A minority of students, typically close to finishing their degrees and dressed in more formal attire, utilised the events to establish connections in an effort to advance their career opportunities 'because they get like 140 resumes, and so you have to connect with someone so they remember you' (Oliver, 3/2/05). Interestingly, many students acknowledged that *other* students came to Coffee Houses with a networking motive, but actively denied the practice themselves, revealing a sense of personal immunity

Research on 'Coffee House' at the McGill University Faculty of Law

Student participant feedback

**We would be very appreciative if you could read this brief summary
of our findings from a research project regarding Coffee House and respond**

From talking to over 80 participants at the Coffee Houses in Winter 2005 we found that there were two general 'stories' told to us as to <u>why people come to the sponsored Coffee Houses</u>.

1. People come to socialise and have a good time. The free drink and food are nice, but we come here primarily to be with our friends and unwind after a busy week.
2. People come here to network with the lawyers. It's an opportunity to make connections that might be useful later on when it comes to recruitment.

However, from talking to so many of you, as well as from talking to your LSA reps, Law Professors and from our own observations, we believe that neither of these responses is really sufficient.

Our hypothesis is that the sponsored Coffee Houses teach those who attend not about how to do law (which you learn in lectures), but how to *be a lawyer*.

We think that student identities are being gradually transformed, week by week, as Coffee House socialises those who attend. On the one hand, Coffee House helps consolidate the 'collective image' of the student body here. On the other, the shows put on by the firms – including the lawyers who attend, the brief speeches, the music, the food, wine and waiting staff – speak to a wealthy lifestyle, and promise the rewards of a successful position in society.

We think that students become more and more attracted by this and, moreover, that this kind of 'law' comes to seem natural and perhaps almost inevitable. In these ways, law school changes not only what you know, but who you are and what you want to do: <u>a slow identity transformation</u> in which these Coffee Houses play a part.

We have concluded that <u>why</u> students come along on a Thursday afternoon, and <u>how</u> it affects them, are two separate things.

Do you agree / disagree? We'd be keen to know why . . .   Thanks for your time!

Prof Sarah Turner (Geography), Steve Baird (Research Assistant)

Figure 1   Student participant feedback information sheet used during member checking

from such behaviour. The majority of students were aware that networking occurred, but viewed it as a reprehensible activity in which they did not partake, some going as far as to claim that they 'avoid lawyers like the plague' (Chad, 10/2/05).

Based on analyses of the two performances summarised here, the original study argued that sponsored Coffee Houses acted as key sites for the embodiment of repeated practices that reflected what it was to be a successful corporate lawyer. Coffee Houses provided the space where certain conduct, revolving around the consumption of fine food, drink and music, in the company of distinguished lawyers and attentive waiting staff, could be collectively realised and re-iterated on a weekly (and yearly) basis. Students could thus *behave* as lawyers, literally tasting the fruits of accomplishment possible in the corporate world. As such, these events were platforms for the reinforcement

of a particular lawyer identity typified by a successful position in society and the wealthy lifestyle to go with it. With the repetition of such shared activities and on-going socialisation, Coffee Houses *normalised* this particular image of a corporate lawyer and played a part in the identity transformation of these law students who, over the course of their degrees, came to understand this kind of 'law' as natural and almost inevitable.[13] Because such a career path became the hegemonic norm, it was the students' unconsciousness of these influences that enabled Coffee House to affect them so powerfully. The authors concluded that the reasons for student attendance as described by the students themselves, and how such experiences actually affected them, were two quite different things (see Turner and Manderson 2007).

Returning to the 'field': member checking and student reactions to researcher interpretations

When one of the original authors, human geography professor Sarah Turner, and the research assistant Steve Baird returned to Coffee House with the findings of the initial study, it quickly became obvious that the students reacted to the hypothesis – that they were undergoing a slow identity transformation – in ways differentiated by their year in Law School. First and final year students consistently either agreed with this hypothesis, or maintained fairly neutral opinions, while second-year students were often openly hostile to these suggestions, as explored below.

Final year students commonly responded to the 'student participant feedback' statement with concurring reflections on the impacts of Coffee House and how they felt students changed during Law School. Simon (Y3, 17/11/05) noted, 'I'd say that sounds reasonable. People do get used to having this nice stuff, and then complain when things aren't good enough for us'.[14] Or, as John put it, closely mirroring our own understandings of the event, 'Yeah, Coffee House is part of the system of socialisation, it's like participating in any ritual, it's like, the tie that binds' (Y3, 27/10/05). He continued, 'people dress more and more formally through the years. Like I noticed a difference even between the beginning and end of my first year. At the beginning people were wearing t-shirts, but at the end [of the year] it was all smart casual for guys'. Karen, a fourth-year student, was quick to acknowledge that she thought she had changed, explaining that

we get spoilt. We get used to the free food and drink. People throw this stuff at us, so we begin to think we're special, that we're above other people – I mean, I'm not saying that we are, don't get me wrong, but that's the feeling we get – we think we're well educated so we deserve this. (Y4, 10/11/05)

Sonya succinctly concluded that 'at law school we're playing a game, but little by little you lose track that you're playing a game, and it becomes unconscious' (Y3, 27/10/05).

Our argument that changes occurred not only in student behaviour, but also in student goals and career ambitions was also supported by final year students. Karen, introduced above, was adamant such a change occurred, noting 'at least 90 per cent of people come here with aspirations of doing human rights law or international law, and then they all change their minds and end up doing corporate law – at least for a while'. Similarly, David, a final year student, added 'people are naïve coming into law school. Here they learn about the real world. I mean how many people really go and work for an NGO in Uganda? . . . People want to make a lot of money and have the lifestyle of being a lawyer' (27/10/05). Thus, as noted here and supported by many similar comments, final year students were generally of a mind that a ritual of socialisation was indeed taking place, and that noteworthy changes had occurred to many of them.

First-year students appeared to find our hypothesis intriguing. Guy, one such student, mused that 'perhaps my identity will change, although I'm not too sure how. I don't know what type of firm I want to work in yet'. Similarly, Stewart, another first-year student stated 'I don't really know what I want to do yet. Perhaps Coffee House will change my opinion but I'm not sure' (27/10/05). Katie, also a first-year, reflected that

the place [Coffee House] does sort of socialise you I think. Like you see the types of food they serve and you realise that if you worked for immigration or something you'd only be drinking *Coke* and eating chips. Now I want to do corporate law. I didn't start here wanting to though, but now contracts is my favourite class. (27/10/05)

First-year law students in general, reflecting the comments here, were open to our initial research analyses, willing to consider that they might become part of the socialisation of Coffee House, or acknowledging that they had already observed changes in their own viewpoints and values.

In quite stark comparison, however, those in the middle of their law school careers – in their second year – were rather vocal in their opposition to our interpretations, or in the case of a few, to the study as a whole. Take second-year Chad's immediate response: 'I totally disagree. Coffee House doesn't have any effect on people's identities. People don't change their behaviour because of lawyers' (10/11/05). Marc (Y2, 17/11/05), slightly less abrupt, remarked 'I don't think Coffee House, as a discrete thing, has an effect on me, as much as I try to be self-conscious about that effect, knowing that it could be very subtle'. Others felt affronted by our initial results, while at the same time conceding that perhaps the events did have an impact – on others – as Melanie (Y2, 10/11/05) retorted:

> I'm kind of offended by this [pause]. I don't like the idea that we are being influenced in ways that we aren't aware of, personally . . . I mean for me, I know I don't want to end up in one of these law firms. There's also people who know that they *do* want to be in a law firm, and it doesn't really make a difference for them either. It's the people who are indecisive that it has the most effect on.

Anthony and Chris, two male second-year students, had even stronger opinions regarding the project.

> Anthony: You had your hypothesis before you even talked to us! You knew what you wanted to see happening here [said in an aggressive manner with arms waving].
>
> Chris: Yeah, like you think this is an invasion of our space by corporate lawyers. That's crap, they're not invading our space. We know it's our space.
>
> Anthony: You already knew what you wanted to hear. You had your conclusions. Look, we *only* come here for the drink!! . . . Who's paying for this worthless study anyway? It's worthless! [emphasis in speech][15]
>
> At this point, Emma, a second-year woman standing with Anthony and Chris, interrupted their dialogue, commenting: 'Actually, look at me, look at my white shirt. I never used to wear a white shirt. That's changed since I started coming here. I never used to wear this'.
>
> Andrew: So you agree with them? [accusational tone].
>
> Emma: Yeah, I do a bit.

Oliver, another second-year student, also reacted strongly to our initial analyses by immediately stating 'that's a conspiracy theory. Maybe we're being socialised but I'm not aware of it. I came here [to Law School] knowing what I wanted to do' (27/10/05).

On completion of our member checking, it had become plainly obvious that a divide in reactions to our findings and analyses, based upon student year, had emerged. Comments such as those highlighted above led us to conclude that second-year students were the most opposed to the interpretation that an identity transformation was taking place. Overwhelmingly, this second-year cluster did not recognise their experiences in, or agree with, our analysis. We were intrigued and left wondering: why does this group stand out so distinctly? Armed with our initial research findings and these member checking results, we soon realised that our initial findings were not as nuanced as they might have been, and that member checking had revealed valuable additional data.

Developing the initial arguments further, we now propose that this second-year cohort tended to reject our findings because it is indeed this specific cohort that *is in the very middle* of this identity transformation. These second-year students attend Coffee House regularly as part of a shared ritual. After a year at Law School these events are increasingly a place of social unity and social confirmation for this cohort and they, in turn, are constantly socialised by the events and the actors present, becoming more and more attracted by the promising rewards awaiting them as successful corporate lawyers. The very fact that students at the beginning of this process, and those at the end of it, could recognise the forces at work on them, while the students most directly subject to those forces proved so resistant to this analysis, has helped us to appreciate just how important the *unconscious* nature of the changes being wrought is. Therefore now, with member checking results in hand, we could decipher even more finely distinguished understandings of student interpretations of the events, as well as their reactions to our results, and how these were differentiated by academic year. We argue that it is in the second year at Law School that the most salient manifestations of a transformation in the law students occur – towards unconsciously acting out the dominant behaviour patterns expected of a McGill law student and aspiring lawyer.

Discussions and conclusions: member checks and rigorous qualitative research

The responses gained during member checking and our interpretations of them show without a doubt that we did not always gain confirmation from

interviewees for our initial analyses. But yet, in a way we did. In the original study it was argued that the students themselves did not voice the interpretations that we concluded because Coffee House allowed for the enactment of this shared performance as powerful and legitimate. One gains the disposition to not only think like a lawyer but to act like one too; one will become proud and powerful, not to mention wealthy. We maintained that this was not openly discussed amongst the students because it was the hegemonic ideal of what going to law school was about, and through constant iterations this discourse had become virtually unchallengeable (cf. Evans 2005; McDowell 1994 1997 2005). By making it conscious, such performativity would have been undermined.

During member checking, by doing just that – making the performance conscious – we found ourselves facing some very strong reactions. We were asking the students to acknowledge their social positioning and to become fully conscious of their performances. Some clearly did not want to. We would thus claim that our member checking results actually presented us with more refined evidence of when these performances were being played out with the most intensity and when identity transformations were occurring the most forcefully. The member checking thus allowed us to gain an even more detailed understanding of the identity transformation process that these students were undergoing, revealing distinctions by student year that we had not noted in our original work. Drawing upon these findings, we would argue that in human geography qualitative research, there are numerous aspects of social life and our interpretations of these that could result in similar member divergence. Within human geography, studying performativity, identity transformations and unconscious reactions to certain spaces and experiences are all themes that require more subtle appreciations of the role of member checks than we have found in the literature to date.

The case of member checking we have presented here illustrates that merely discrediting interpretations based on a lack of member concurrence is too simplistic. Once we acknowledge that participants are positioned differently from each other, no less than from researchers, favourable validating responses coinciding with researcher interpretations might be more unexpected than the norm. Overall, we maintain that embracing member checking within more critically reflexive approaches allows for more

context-appropriate uses of the technique. Instead of automatically discounting member checking data on the basis of dissension, it can be used as an effective platform from which to build more nuanced interpretations.

To ask people to disassociate themselves from their personal experiences, and unreservedly agree with the views of someone outside these, is a lofty expectation (Bloor 1978; Sandelowski 1993; Bryman 2003). Discussing the difficulties in fitting a particular theorisation to all individual experiences, Morse in her editorial critique of member checking, concludes frankly that 'asking for the blessing of participants, each with a singular view, and using their confirmation as an indicator of rigor or validity is nonsense' (1998, 444). Indeed, we argue that it is the very task of the researcher to reveal the complex realities that result from the multiple experiences of individuals which may at times not be self-evident (or may be too second nature) to participants for them to comprehend or see fully from their own emic positions (cf. Ball 1984; Sandelowski 1993; Morse 1998). This is what happened in the member checking case study explored in this paper. Here, we have drawn explicit attention to the differing positionings of members within a particular social process and how this variability, in turn, shaped the ways in which participants recognised and reacted to our interpretations.

In conclusion, it is clear that member checking serves a number of constructive purposes in qualitative human geography research which can enhance credibility and rigour from a more reflexive stance. We have suggested that whatever the indications of member feedback, re-examining initial research analyses with regards to member checks is a worthwhile exercise in rigorous research. In this paper we have demonstrated how a case of disagreement amongst participants served to further clarify researcher understandings of the social phenomena under study. We have argued that the lack of agreement regarding our study unearthed during member checks did not annul the original results, but instead added further depth to our understanding of the precise nature of the differentiated positionings of students undergoing this identify transformation. At the same time, due to the very nature of the unconscious processes that we were investigating, cognisant affirmation would have been near impossible amongst all participants, a fact that we claim ultimately strengthens our own interpretations of the subconscious and performative elements of their transformation.

We thus argue that for human geographers, member checking holds as a valuable method when used in innovative ways to facilitate credible qualitative inquiry, when envisioned as a means to acquire further relevant data, and when incorporated within critically reflexive strategies.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the McGill University Research Ethics Board-I. All student names are pseudonyms.

2 Non-sponsored Coffee Houses, on the other hand, have a considerably different flavour, being far more relaxed in nature, with generally a stall or two offering fund-raising activities (often food) for a specific student law club, and beer for sale from LSA representatives.

3 Where the first person plural is invoked with regards to the initial study, it is used in reference to the original research team of Turner, Manderson and research assistant Baird. In all other instances in this paper, the use of the first person plural is specific to the arguments put forth by the current authors, Turner and Coen, supported by Baird.

4 See the work of Schatzman and Strauss (1973), Bloor (1983), Guba and Lincoln (1989), Schwandt (1997), Baxter and Eyles (1999), Seale (1999), Bloor (2001) and Bryman (2003).

5 Less commonly, predicting participant behaviour or 'passing' for a member of the group based on the research also constitutes member checking (Seale 1999; Bloor 2001).

6 Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with five law faculty, three of whom were male. The three representatives from the Law Student Association interviewed, all female, were associated with organisational aspects of the Coffee Houses. These key informant interviews were taped and transcribed. Themes addressed in these interviews included the history of Coffee Houses, arguments in support of and against their continuation, and the involvement of corporate sponsorship.

7 For a detailed explanation of the specific methods and findings of the original study, please refer to Turner and Manderson (2007).

8 While there were differences in the language used and some of the specific ideas raised by students depending on which interviewer they were speaking with (and, for example, on the amount of alcohol just consumed), clear themes were still identified.

9 Given the fluid attendance and crowded nature of the Coffee House events, coupled with our decision not to record participant names and contact details to ensure confidentiality, reconnecting with all original interviewees was a somewhat difficult task at this stage. Adopting a broad definition of member-checking, we therefore also included other members of the same student group, while being pleased to be able to gain the participation of a substantial percentage of the original cohort.

10 Students were welcome to read the statement for themselves or the researchers offered to verbally outline it to them, with both methods chosen fairly equally. The verbal report simply said orally what was contained in the written report, to eliminate any differences in the content of the material shared with students.

11 This raises interesting questions for future consideration within geographical studies regarding the spaces of member checking. For example, if member checking had been undertaken in a quiet room with no peers present, participants might have reacted differently. However, we consciously wanted to mirror the circumstances of the original interviews as much as possible. Indeed, if the original discussions had taken place elsewhere we might have gained altogether different responses, but we do not believe any other location would have captured the influences on the students of the social space that we were interested in as directly.

12 While we were aware that the positionality of the researchers undertaking the member checking impacted upon how students reacted, as with the initial research, we were careful to cross-check the results we were gaining among ourselves, and found in doing so that students were reacting to us very similarly vis-à-vis years in Law School.

13 Interestingly, quantitative data gathered for the initial study also substantiated this shift. Statistics for students graduating in 2003 and 2004 ($n = 278$) revealed that of the 268 students for whom information was available, only four reported employment with non-governmental organisations and 12 had accepted positions outside of law. The overwhelming majority of students, for both 2003 and 2004 (73% and 64% respectively), went into private practice.

14 Y1 and so forth refers to the year of law school that the student was enrolled in when interviewed, with students typically taking three to four years to complete their McGill law education.

15 We always immediately informed the students who enquired that our only funding source for the member checking was Turner's Faculty of Science research funds, covering Baird's research assistant wages; while the original study had also been supported by Manderson's Canada Research Chair in Law and Discourse.

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