Ethical Challenges in Conducting Comparative Adult Education Research: Personal reflections from multi-site research

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Abstract

Ethical issues and the way to address them in the pursuit of research are inevitable. This is true not only in educational research but also issues relating to professionalism and daily life. Different disciplines have different ethical guidelines and laws. However, there are common things that cut across disciplines. Drawing on my experience as a student in a developed country (Norway), and having conducted research in two developing countries (Tanzania and Uganda), in this paper I discuss some ethical challenges that comparative researchers face when conducting research in adult education. The findings of the study suggest that ethical issues and ways to address them are universal. It was also found that ethical issues as regards values are context dependent and they work differently in different contexts. It is concluded that some ethical issues are general and borderless while others are context-dependent. As a consequence special attention should be paid especially to contextual ethical issues.

It is recommended that researchers doing research in comparative adult education be aware of the task ahead of them. Equally important, there is a need for researchers to agree on the differences that exist between and among societies and countries which in turn influence the education system.

Key words: Comparative and international adult education, dilemma, ethical challenges, research

Introduction

Ethical issues are important not only to educational research but also to issues relating to professionalism and daily life. Different disciplines have different ethical guidelines and laws. However, there are common things that cut across disciplines. In this paper I discuss some ethical challenges that face comparative research in adult education. I first provide the concept of research ethics and then discuss various challenges that are likely to arise during different phases of the project. Based on the challenges experienced in the pursuit of a study in Tanzania and Uganda between 2009 and 2011, I developed a framework that encompasses most of the ethical issues to be considered in educational research in general and comparative adult education research in particular. The last section draws a conclusion.

Research ethics: concept and theoretical foundation

Ethics has been conceived differently by various scholars. However, there seems to be agreement that ethics is concerned with "right and wrong", "good and bad" or "humane and

inhumane" actions that affect humans and living organisms, which happen when pursuing various purposes, including research. Kitchener (2000), for example, defines ethics as a branch of philosophy concerned with how people should act, judgments about those actions and developing rules for justifying actions. Therefore, research ethics might be defined as the moral practice of a researcher, the mutual relationship of all research participants, guidelines, principles, laws and the positive consequences of the research results.

Theoretical underpinnings of research ethics
There are at least four basic theories of ethics, namely ethics of principles/duties, ethics of consequences (utilitarian), ethics of relations (trust/social capital between the researcher and participants), and ethics of virtue. The ethics of principles (deontology) is concerned with the conduct of universal principles securing all stakeholders in the research project. It emphasizes the need for researchers to abide by already establish laws, guidelines and rules of moral behaviour regardless of the consequences of actions (Aguinis & Handelsman 1997).

The utilitarian perspective considers actions as ethical if they produce more benefits than harm, and their consequences are positive and are beneficial to a number of individuals (Aguinis & Handelsman 1997). The third theory is the ethics of relations which emphasizes the social nature of human beings as opposed to the asocial. Humans as social beings interact, share and establish networks. As a consequence, they tend to take care of each other. In educational research, the relationship is between the researcher and the respondents/participants. Research brings these people together to establish relations (create social networks). The fourth theoretical foundation of ethics in research is the ethics of virtue, which essentially can be conceived as the opposite of utilitarianism or consequentialism in the sense that it considers the character of the researcher. In terms of the ethics of virtue, the researcher as an individual is more important than the results of the research or the law governing research ethics.

Now, how can ethical practices be analysed to establish whether or not a piece of research, for example comparative educational research, is ethical? A simple and direct answer to this question might be that educational research can be analysed using the four basic theories discussed above. However, the ethical theories of utilitarianism, deontology and relations are the ones most widely used to analyse whether or not a research project has been ethically sound.

Ethical issues in the study
Most research projects involve human participants in data collection. Therefore, assurances of ethical practices are of paramount importance. As a consequence, there are measures that must be taken in account for the purpose of reducing harm not only to the researcher, the institutions and the participants but also to the society and the country(s) involved. As Sieber (1996) has suggested, any research to be ethical must answer some questions. The first is the question that needs an answer from the perspective of the research participants. The second is the question in search of an answer on the communication between the researcher and the participants. The third is the question that addresses the respect of privacy that is important to the participants.

The fourth is the question in need of an answer concerning the most valid research possible at the least possible risk and the fifth question asks about the researcher's scientific perspective in relation to other scientists. These questions are addressed in the next sections.

Planning phase

At the University of Oslo, Faculty of Education, the planning phase involves writing a sound research/project proposal as a requirement for admission. In this regard, several issues and questions need to be answered by the researcher before the proposal is submitted to the responsible organs. Some of the important aspects to be considered are discussed as follows.

Competence, relevance and design issues

Conducting sound research needs competence, skills and knowledge. In this regard, before initiating any kind of research project, it is important for researchers to evaluate their competence to conduct the research, their knowledge of ethical guidelines at the global or national level, soundness of the research design, for example, a comparative or case study, and ethical acceptability of their study (Sieber 1992). Several questions need to be asked before developing a research project, such as: Why do this research (motivation)? Who are the potential respondents and beneficiaries? Is the research worth doing? Am I capable of conducting this research? What are the risks of doing this research? Additionally, when it comes to the competence of a researcher, some theoretical and empirical issues relating to research need to be considered, including the provision of various courses and supervisory issues.

Registering a research project

One needs to register the research with the organs that deal with ethics in the research field. In Norway, for example, there is a rule that requires a researcher (both PhD and other researchers) to register her/his research with Norwegian Social Science Data Services[1] (NSD). The letter issued by the NSD is important when permission is sought from within or outside the country. The same applies to Tanzania and Uganda, where the Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) and Uganda National Commission for Science (UNCS) are responsible for clearing research, respectively.

In the field (sampling and participation)

Access to institutions

Access to institutions needs permission. It is worth noting that I am a Tanzanian employed at the University of Dar es Salaam, studying in a foreign country (Norway) and conducting research in Tanzania and Uganda. As part of data collection I had to travel to the two countries (Tanzania and Uganda). According to Tanzanian law regarding research, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam and COSTECH are legally empowered to issue research permits/clearance to staff and students in universities. Being an academic staff member, I obtained an introductory letter from the University of Dar es Salaam to accompany the one I obtained from the University of Oslo and the NSD letter. I went to the respective institutions (in Dar es Salaam) to gain access to some potential research participants. In one of the institutions it

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[1] Can be accessed online (English version) at: http://www.nsd.uib.no/nsd/english/

was easy to obtain the permit and I had easy access to one of the respondents. The other respondent could not be accessed as he was attending an 'official meeting' preparing important information for the Minister, who was supposed to present the ministerial budget to parliament.

Acquiring research permits may be hectic and time consuming at some point. For example, obtaining a permit at Lubaga centre (a pseudonym, for ethical reasons) which is a government institution was rather difficult. I wrote an application letter soon after arrival, but it was answered three weeks later despite daily follow up at the institution. As can be learned from Extract 1, at Subira centre (also a pseudonym), the head of the institution did not want an introductory letter after showing it to him, because what I was doing was for the betterment of all Tanzanians and that he trusted me. However he suggested that the respondents should be asked for their consent in writing to participate in the research. However, later on after I had finished collecting data with the students, I went back to his office and told him the reason for signing the consent form, and after insisting on this he agreed to sign it.

Extract 1[2]
001. **BK:** (after introducing myself). Here is my introductory letter.
002. **HI**: No need of a letter. I trust you and your research is to benefit all Tanzanians.
      [...]
007. **BK:** Now, if you agree to participate in this study, please read the consent form and sign it. (the researcher hands over the form to the interviewee who reads it)
008. **HI:** (after reading). The form is very clear and there is no need to sign it.
009. **BK:** Please, it is important that you sign it.
010. **HI:** Don't worry; what you are doing is for all of us. You may ask the students to sign it!

Having partly done the Tanzanian part, I travelled to Kampala, Uganda, where I went to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. The mutual relationship between my supervisor (social capital/trust) and the official at the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development facilitated familiarity and later on access to various institutions in Uganda. I had an opportunity to meet with one of the officials in the ministry responsible for adult literacy. In the course of the interview I realized that the ministry was dealing with adult literacy and not other forms of adult learning. I was advised to go to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) where I was told to write an application letter to gain access to officials in the ministry.

The authority responsible for research clearance at national level in Uganda is the Uganda National Commission for Science and Technology[3] (UNCST). I went to UNCST where I was told to fill in the application form, submit passport size photos and two copies of the research proposal and pay a fee of US$ 300. After fulfilling all the requirements, I was offered a year's

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[2] **BK** stands for researcher and **HI** for head of institution

[3] Can be accessed online at: http://www.uncst.go.ug

permit to conduct research in Uganda. Then I went to the adult education centres where I had an opportunity to interact with their heads and adult learners. In some cases I provided soft drinks as some interviews lasted two hours. This might, to some people, be considered paid research but in this regard it was a matter of hospitality.

Research participants' selection and participation
After obtaining permits from the heads of institution, I was allowed to contact and talk with the potential research participants, who were categorized in line with the existing categories (for example gender and class level). In this regard I did not make up the categories (Hacking, 1983). I then produced a research consent form for each research participant and read it to them. I allowed a few minutes for them to ask questions.

Dilemmas/challenges
Table 1 presents the characteristics of the research setting and the institutions that hosted the researcher. The characteristics have a crucial role to play and greatly shape the research process from its inception. With the characteristics of the research setting in mind, the challenges and dilemmas I experienced in my study are presented below.

Table 1: Research settings characteristics

Characterizing Feature	Norway	Tanzania	Uganda
Ethical governing bodies	NSD/Universities	COSTECH/Universities	UNCST
Language	Norwegian & English	Kiswahili/English	English/Luganda
"Insider-outsider" perspective	Outsider	Outsider but more insider	Insider but more outsider
Community philosophy	Individualistic	Collective	Collective
Informed consent	Important	Important but debatable	Important but debatable
Hospitality	Host institution	Researcher and participants	Researcher and participants
Income	High	Low	Low
Literacy level	98%	70%	70%

Informed consent
Before embarking on the fieldwork I produced an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Although informed consent is needed for conducting research, there has been some contestation as to its applicability and relevance, especially when it comes to Africa where collectivism (Ubuntu philosophy, see for example Venter, 2004) is the dominating ideology. In the abstract to his thesis in relation to the issue of informed consent in Africa, Agulanna (2008, 2) argues:

> Some scholars argue that the principle of voluntary informed consent is rooted in the Western ethos of liberal individualism; that it would be difficult to implement this requirement in societies where the norms of decision-making emphasize collective rather than individual decision-making (for example, Sub-Saharan Africa); that it would amount to "cultural imperialism" to seek to implement the principle of voluntary informed consent in

non-Western societies. This thesis rejects this scepticism about the possibility of implementing the informed consent requirement in non-Western environments and argues that applying the principle of voluntary informed consent in human subjects' research in Sub-Saharan African communal culture could serve as an effective measure to protect vulnerable subjects from possible abuse or exploitation.

On the other hand, Ryen (2002: p.232) notes that:

> For many poor Third-World interviewees, local norms make it difficult to turn down a request from a visitor to be interviewed or they do not know the potential implications of participating in research. The general ethical correctness of informed consent, irrespective of the location of the field, may be questionable with reference to the North-South dimension in Third World projects.

While agreeing with Agulanna, I think the best answer to the issue of informed consent is 'it depends'. A good example is the explanation given in extract 1 where one of my respondents was unwilling to sign the consent form but preferred mutual trust and also was very concerned about the utility of the research project rather than his consent. This is the challenge I faced and I was not in a position to force the respondent to sign the form, although I laboured to explain the importance of him signing the form but without success.

Voluntary withdrawal without 'why'

This was rather challenging during data collection. One of my respondents jokingly said, "I think I am tired and I don't want to go on with this research". I was surprised and puzzled. I wanted to ask why, but realized that in the consent form I had written: *Equally important, you are not subjected to say why you are quitting the study.* Later, my respondent said he was just challenging my informed consent form. According to him, some of the explanations are impractical and might create problems if research respondents decide to use them. I sensed some truth in the respondent's jokes, which are, sometimes, a way of telling the truth, and so he was.

Confidentiality

One head of institution demanded that the name of his institution should appear in my final report. However, my consent form clearly spelt out that no respondents, including institutional affiliations, will be disclosed. Of equal importance is that the respondent's requirement would force me to violate some of my ethical commitments - assurance of confidentiality. It seems I am not the only one who has been faced with this challenge, as other researchers have experienced similar challenges elsewhere. For example, Anne Ryen (2004, 233) noted that in African countries, such as Tanzania:

> There is an established and well-accepted procedure that interviewees' names and titles are given in the appendix… to deviate from this procedure may be perceived as either confusing or arrogant. This dilemma partly stems from experiences with donor projects like Western projects in local villages whose aim it is to alleviate poverty by offering grants or loans. To be selected for funding demands that your name is put on the list.

Lessons learned

The challenges I experienced at different levels of my research project and the insights gained during lectures in the research ethics course, plus the literature on the topic, shaped my understanding of research ethics and facilitated the development of a framework (see Appendix A) that might be helpful for understanding and conducting comparative educational research in different contexts,. Some requirements are more relevant to one area or level of research than others. The box on the far left represents any research problem chosen by the researcher needing empirical evidence to address it. The three boxes that follow represent the main stages in the conduct of research whereas the box that follows represents the mediating factors that regulate ethical practices in educational research in general and comparative educational research in particular. The three boxes on the far right are about ethical concerns that need attention by researchers at different levels.
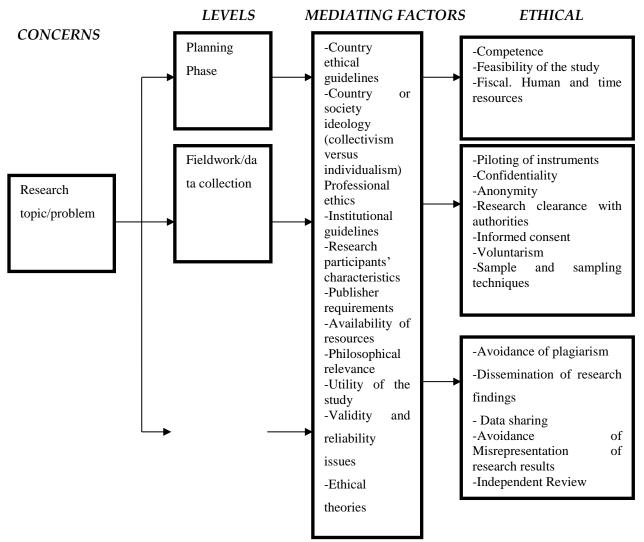
Conclusion

This paper has presented ethical issues and dilemmas while conducting my PhD research project, such as informed consent, the freedom of a respondent to withdraw from participating in the research without explanation, issues of language, different research governing bodies and confidentiality. Based on the challenges presented and discussed, comparative education researchers have to be aware of the tasks ahead of them. Equally important, there is a need for researchers to agree on the differences that exist between societies and countries which influence the education system. Also, it is concluded that some ethical issues are general and borderless while others are context-dependent. Consequently, special attention should be paid especially to contextual ethical issues.

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Appendix A:

A model for ethical concerns at different levels of comparative educational research

CONCERNS	LEVELS	MEDIATING FACTORS	ETHICAL
Research topic/problem	Planning Phase	-Country ethical guidelines -Country or society ideology (collectivism versus individualism) Professional ethics -Institutional guidelines -Research participants' characteristics -Publisher requirements -Availability of resources -Philosophical relevance -Utility of the study -Validity and reliability issues -Ethical theories	-Competence -Feasibility of the study -Fiscal. Human and time resources
	Fieldwork/data collection		-Piloting of instruments -Confidentiality -Anonymity -Research clearance with authorities -Informed consent -Voluntarism -Sample and sampling techniques
			-Avoidance of plagiarism -Dissemination of research findings - Data sharing -Avoidance of Misrepresentation of research results -Independent Review