Fieldwork ethical dilemmas in Qualitative Research: A critical self-reflection

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Abstract: This paper highlights challenges that the researcher encountered during fieldwork. It argues that despite the popularity of qualitative research scholars are only beginning to publicize segments or summaries of ethnographic fieldwork experiences. Using critical self-reflections of the interactions between the researcher and the participants during fieldwork, the paper identifies five ethical dilemmas and how they were addressed in an African context. The paper concludes that an omission to reflect on fieldwork experience hides the conflicts and tensions that all researchers inevitably face and can learn from. Finally, the paper concludes that lessons from the data on the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee can inform ethical research methodologies and the representation of research findings.

Introduction
According to the literature (Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Bernard 1998; Merriam and Simpson, 1995; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992), there are two dominant guidelines of ethics in research with human subjects, namely, informed consent and the protection of subjects from harm. This paper argues that if ethics in the context of qualitative research refers to the interaction with the researched, how research problems could be conceived and formulated and how findings could be disseminated in ways that are sensitive and inclusive of the values and realities of the researched (Chilisa and Preece, 2005), then tough ethical decisions should ultimately reside with the researcher’s values and judgment of right and wrong and not only with standard guidelines for ethical decision making and contracts signed prior to fieldwork. In an attempt to contribute to this debate, this paper presents a critical self-reflection of ethical dilemmas experienced during fieldwork in Botswana and how the researcher attempted to resolve them. Lessons drawn from this experience are discussed in relation to the role of human interaction in qualitative research.

An overview of the Ethical Debates in Qualitative Research
Ethics in research are the principles of right and wrong that a particular group accepts, hence most academic specialties and professions have codes of ethics that set forth rules on how to conduct research. The majority of mainstream researchers abide by the following ethical principles stated by Bogdan and Biklen, 1992:54
1) The subjects' identities should be protected so that the information collected does not embarrass or in other ways harm them.

2) Treat subjects with respect and seek their cooperation in research.

3) In negotiating permission to do a study, you should make it clear to those with whom you negotiate what the terms of the agreement are and you should abide by that contract.

4) Tell the truth when you write and report your findings.

The guidelines for these generic ethical principles are usually implemented through the use of forms that contain the researcher's description of the study, what will be done with the findings and other pertinent information. The subject's signature on this form is taken as evidence of informed consent that he/she enters the research project voluntarily and understands the nature of the study including the dangers and obligations involved.

However, a closer look at different set of codes of ethics by qualitative researchers has generated discussions on a possible code of ethics for qualitative researchers (Cassell, 1980; Punch, 1986). The argument is that the relationship between the researcher and subjects is different in qualitative and quantitative research. For instance in quantitative research, subjects have a circumscribed relationship to the researcher, they fill in questionnaires or participate in specific experiments, hence, it makes sense to tell the subjects explicitly the content and the possible dangers of the study. In qualitative research on the other hand, the relationship is on-going and evolves throughout the study. In their words (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992:53) "doing qualitative research with subjects is more like having a friendship than a contract. The subjects have a say in regulating the relationship and they continuously make decisions about their participation." In other discussions (Kirsch, Lunsford & Ray, 1996), qualitative researchers have actually concluded that some codes are thoughtful and helpful in sensitizing members of such an association or profession to dilemmas and moral issues they must face, but other codes of ethics are narrowly conceived and actually do more to protect the professional group from attack than to set forth a moral position.

Based on my seven years experience with qualitative research, I have been in situations where my obligation as a researcher and a citizen have conflicted, thus raising numerous methodological challenges/dilemmas that have not been easily resolved by the code of ethics in research. For example, negotiating the insider/outsider statuses during data collection was critical in order to enhance the quality of the data obtained and the knowledge constructed in a non-Western culture. The questions that still have to be answered for me are: "What is the responsibility of the researcher in situations where expectations of the
subjects contradict the ethical guidelines and contracts of the profession or conventional research processes? What are ethical questions and do they only reside in how the researcher should behave in the field or can ethics be understood in terms of their obligation to the people who have touched their lives in the course of living the life of a qualitative researcher?” Critical theory is used as the framework for the discussion of the ethical dilemmas in this paper.

Theoretical framework
Critical theory has been chosen to serve as the framework for this paper. According to Herbert & Beardsley (2001), critical theory emerged in the 1920’s with a group of German scholars collectively known as the Frankfurt School. At the time, these scholars argued for a focus on theory, practice and inquiry grounded on the understanding of contemporary social, political and cultural issues. Since, then critical theorists have been influenced by the work of Habermas (1970, 1971, 1974, 1989) who believed that human beings are unnecessarily oppressed by implicit cultural ideologies. Therefore, the goal of cultural theory research is to make these unconscious belief systems explicit, thereby freeing individuals by providing alternatives through self-reflection and social action.

Since critical theorists are committed to work for social justice they are constantly challenging and questioning societal values and practices. Furthermore, critical theorists undertake research with a concern for issues related to power and oppression. Crotty (1998: 157) states that critical inquiry “keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice.” Although the ultimate goal of a totally free and just society may not be attainable, critical theorists believe that their research can at least improve contemporary societal conditions (Crotty, 1998).

I use a critical theory framework to structure my examination of the interaction between the researcher and the human subjects and ethical dilemmas that can arise. Incorporating a critical interpretive lens in the reflection of the fieldwork experience enables me to explain how the unanticipated ethical dilemmas and how attempts to solve them can impact on the research processes, such as methods and representation of research findings. A critical analysis approach is best suited for this paper because it is only through developing and understanding of the subjects cultural values that qualitative researchers and educators will be able to determine appropriate research methods for dealing
with power issues if they are to do ethical research. The next section presents ethical dilemmas that the author experienced during qualitative research field work in Botswana and an attempt to resolve some of them.

**Ethical dilemmas: Tales from the field**

When I began my qualitative research fieldwork experience, I had just completed a sequence of qualitative research courses designed specifically for educators. I was armed with a host of methodology texts and related articles, a sophisticated tape recorder, a video recorder and the latest transcriber and high technology computer software. I also had an approved and certified copy of the Human Subjects Rights contract from my university for my research respondents to sign. So I felt theoretically and methodologically prepared to begin my data collection. Little did I know that I lacked an understanding of the nature of qualitative research, particularly with regard to the ethical issues that all qualitative researchers have to face. I now know that, basically I knew something about how to do research but very little about how to be a qualitative researcher and how to act ethically or explicate what constitutes ethical behavior in a specific research context. The encounter and interaction with human research subjects in my study brought both achievements and challenges that are presented next as ethical dilemmas, my struggles and attempts to be an ethically responsible researcher. With this reflective account, I am in some sense owning up to the ways in which I solved or more often failed to solve these dilemmas.

**Dilemma 1: Anonymity verses acknowledging accomplishments**

As products and members of the conventional scientific research processes, all researchers know that they have to protect the identity and privacy of research participants. The protection of informant anonymity is so elementary in qualitative research that some scholars are even arguing that there is no need to explain that they have used pseudonyms (Hopkins, 1993:124). In my experience, the practice of preserving anonymity often presents perplexing ethical dilemmas especially in conducting case studies and narrative qualitative research. In my study with successful small businesswomen who started in the informal (unregulated) using pseudonyms proved problematic. The following quotations attest to this:

*Tebbie* (a pseudonym) wanted to use the name of her business instead of a pseudonym. In her words:

"I would prefer that you use my business name. You know this business name means a lot to me and the family. The business is named after my deceased father because if it..."
was not him, this business would not exist. You know my father sold his cattle to give me an opportunity to apply for financial support. The financial assistance program needed a 15% down-payment that I did not have. Secondly, he supported a girl’s dream to venture into a male dominated area at a time when it was difficult if not impossible for women to leave the home.”

Mama-K: (Her nick-name) the oldest participant was also against the idea of a pseudonym because in her own words.

“Everybody in this town knows me because of this vegetable street vending business. So if my 20 years of hard is to be recognized in the University libraries, I want my great grand-kids to associate that legacy with me not some funny name that will not be recognized even by my people. Since you insist on not using my real name at least use my affectionate nick-name from my valued customers. They call me ‘Mama-K’.”

Based on the above sentiments and many others, I was challenged as a researcher to reflect on both my influence and responsibility during field work. The ethical question that crossed my mind then, and one that still bothers me, was what is the difference between acknowledging contributions by authors in the literature review chapter and acknowledging those who contribute empirical research data? Whose contribution was/is more important for the research – other intellectuals or those who have the data that I needed badly to write a PhD Dissertation? The notion of anonymity and confidentiality – is it really all about protecting the subjects or it is also a power tool in knowledge acquisition and knowledge construction?

The dilemma for me was dual. On the one hand I had to protect my data participants by concealing their real names, even though I was also using my research to acknowledge by name other group of contributors. Examples include family and friends, PhD committee members, the university that will award the degree and authors of sources reviewed for the literature review chapter. As an African feminist who has also critiqued gender theories for their insensitivity to African contexts and an advocate for more inclusive feminist philosophy, this dilemma does not sit well with my commitment to women’s empowerment agenda given the politics of empowerment.

Dilemma 2: The insider/outsider dilemma
Being a female researcher studying other women in our (them and I) culture was an eye opener in my experiences of the insider/outsider dilemma during fieldwork. The purpose of this study was to understand how semi-literate women learnt how to move from unemployment and poverty in the rural areas to owning and managing successful small businesses in an urban setting. Reflecting on this study’s fieldwork, this section of the paper describes how I switched back and forth between the insider and outsider positions in an attempt to not only address the unanticipated insider problems but even more importantly to use my outsider position advantages to maximize the quality of the data in that specific context.

As an insider (citizen and female), I had no problem with establishing rapport and being accepted by the women I interviewed. The following comments from the women are testimony to this:

"I am really happy to see our own children showing interest in what we do to educate them. As our daughter you will understand our situation better." (An elderly businesswoman)

"Switch off the tape because what I am going to say is just woman to woman talk." (Woman-to-woman or men-to-men talk in our culture is based on uncommon, unspoken or knowledge portrayed in unfamiliar forms. Sometimes this knowledge is portrayed by silence or gestures).

These statements affirms the feminist researchers (Reinharz, 1992) observation that being an insider of the experience enabled them to understand what some women have to say in a way that no outsider could. This was true for me because as an insider, I had access to all sorts of information that I never anticipated. For example, for respondents who perceived and addressed me as a daughter I was given additional business information or advice that was perceived as critical for a daughter/girl child in my culture. Due to my marital status I was perceived as a daughter-in-law to all elderly mothers who participated in this study, and this dictated that certain data was sieved and presented to me from those cultural lenses. For example, one elderly participant said,

"You have children of your own, don’t you? If you consider establishing your own business to feed the children remember that your business success will depend on how you negotiate with your husband and not only what the business books say about business. Married
"businesswomen in this culture cannot afford to be disrespectful."

The advantages of being an insider, namely, easy entry and access to all sorts of data was not without challenges or problems probably because of the interlocking nature of gender and power relations. For instance, some participants used cultural understandings such as language dialects, proverbs and non-verbal expressions to explain new (business) concepts in a shared culture with the assumption that the researcher who is an insider will understand. The use of common understandings such as proverbs to explain business concepts foreign to the culture was problematic for me because not only were they used out of context but because some proverbs can mean different things depending on the context, but as an insider I was expected to extrapolate. I was also expected to participate in the interview or respond to the questions I was asking. These are some of the comments to this effect:

"I don't need to respond to that one. What is there that you don't know about women's problems in this culture? Just write"

"You mean you don't know the answer to that one? What kind of a woman are you? What did you grandmother teach you"?

"I am not sure I expressed my point well. Please feel free to rephrase it so that it is clearer to your teachers in America."

These comments were not surprising to me because group consensus or collective effort is culturally valued. So women saw me as one of them, hence they needed to know where I stood and whether I agreed with what they perceived as representing all women's experiences in the society. This was important because in this culture, the credibility of what one says is judged by the group consensus. Furthermore, the age factor (i.e. my age) also had to influence the direction of interview and subsequently the quality of data. Elderly women in particular saw me as one of their children, so it was perfectly alright for them to delegate responsibility to the young occasionally depending on the sub-topic. Another unanticipated problem was that of individual interviews that end up being group interviews. Although I had originally set out to interview business-owners, the reality of fieldwork was that since interviews were done at the business site, business-owners would call other key employees (e.g. section
heads of departments) for several reasons. First, because of the collective cultural value, business owners strongly believed that their employees also owned the business. The following statements attest to that:

"If it was not because of these employees commitment, passion and ideas, this business would have long collapsed. So how can I claim that I know it all? On paper Yes! They have my name but we don't believe one person can have a business."

"If this business participation in your study is to result with learning, it would be selfish for me to not allow others to benefit from this interview experience. So they have to be here to help me remember things and also have the opportunity to ask you questions."

"I can not answer questions for the other person when they are here. I am the owner of the business and general manager but other people are responsible for other things in this business."

As can be seen from the above comments, in the Setswana culture, the credibility of the interview is based on how many people approved of it with convincing comments and not the individual who brought the idea. However, in this case the dilemma was accepting or even acknowledging group interviews given that the approved methodology for the study was that respondents were owners of businesses. For example, with the practical reality of group interviews, does the researcher consider responses from other people as part of the interview or not and why? Realizing that the insider position could interfere negatively with the data collection, I took advantage of the outsider position to get answers for questions that were perceived as trivial or unnecessary. My not being a businesswoman and being at university made me an outsider in some respects. For example, to get the businesswomen to provide information that they thought was trivial to be given to a middle-aged woman in their culture, I had to step-out of the insider's boots. It was necessary for me to emphasize that professors at the university did not know many things about our culture and would like me to demonstrate that I spoke to small businesswomen in Botswana. By choosing to ally myself with academic modes of thought, I became what Chaudhry (1997) calls "the objective feminist" (p.447). The outsider position was a disadvantage when the women wanted me to spend some time talking about irrelevant things that morally mattered to me as an insider. For example, younger participants wanted me to use some of
the interview time to talk about university business programs that they could
benefit from. Some shared family and even intimate relationship frustrations
in an effort to solicit ideas from me.

Dilemma 3: The issue of power: Who has power during fieldwork?
If researchers have power over their subjects by virtue of being skilled in
research and having the authority to conduct the research, I did not feel I had
such power during field work. For example, with older participants, I was
addressed as “my sister, daughter, and daughter in law, 'mnaka' or younger
sister”. Secondly, they did not think writing a book was important hence, some
imposed their business advice on me. “As a mother and a wife you have an
economic responsibility in this culture babe. So when you finish writing
our book for the university, you should come back to learn how to manage
a business. This will not fail you girl.” She said. Statements like this
demonstrate conflicting interests. The fact that I was doing research was not
important but what I will do with the information as a female insider was. No
wonder my respondents preferred to use the opportunity to teach and advise
me on survival skills in our context.

Third, I learnt that during fieldwork the researcher’s power is negotiated and
not given especially if the researcher is an insider. It was interesting to realize
that my academic status was not a threat to the women with comparatively
low levels of education. My being at the university was perceived as less
rewarding than being a small businesswoman. If gender had nothing to do with
this behavior, then other cultural factors such as age definitely came into play.
For example, older businesswomen often offered suggestions on how I could
best talk to the younger businesswomen and what information was important
for the book about their stories. On the other hand, the younger businesswomen
expected me to spend some time during the interview to give them advice on
unrelated topics.

Dilemma 4: Choosing between loyalties (i.e. subjects or conventional
research methods)
As a qualitative researcher it was my responsibility to establish rapport because
collecting quality data rests on a good relationship between the researcher and
research respondents. However, as Williams (1996) observed getting close to
my respondents was not without challenges. As I began to know the
circumstances of my respondents I developed a personal commitment to their
welfare and this in some instances conflicted with my professional responsibility
as a human subject’s researcher who had to adhere to conventional data
collection methodologies. In my case the use of simple technology (i.e. tape
recording), and respondents’ expectations and perceptions of my research
impact, led me to seriously consider issues of loyalty. For example, in my
As can be inferred from these quotes, the use of data written or recorded for the research itself in other contexts can raise ethical concerns. In this oral culture participants expected the researcher to respect that oral agreements are equally binding, hence there was no need for signing a piece of paper. Similarly, the experience with the permission to use or not use the tape recorder in this case was not solely an individual decision but rather one that was informed by the collective consensus. For example, in most cases the researcher had to give potential participants time to experiment with the machine but even more importantly to get approval from children and the immediate extended family and friends. The result was that some interviews were tape recorded while others were not. So even with the rapport I pondered the question “whose side am I on” (approved conventional approach or commitment to the welfare of my respondents) given that as a result of the good relationship that developed between me and the respondents, they trusted me with their life stories.

Another issue related to researchers’ loyalty emerged when the respondents perceived the output of this research as a collaborative effort. Women who participated in this study believed that I was collecting information to write their book. This statement was echoed by most of them “Go and write our book”. “Write our stories well because this book is going to be read by our children. We are not educated but we value education for our children.” This attests to their commitment and trust in me as the bearer of their success stories, but the reality was that this was my dissertation. Again for me this genuine and honest trust by the participants got me thinking about power issues and collaborative research. For me this challenge demonstrated that the interaction between the subjects and the researchers is not only
academic but that our status is itself a social location full of diverse and contestable meanings. Oakley (1988) also confessed that it was difficult for her to interview female subjects as a female researcher especially as a feminist because it is difficult to maintain the role prescribed by traditional methodological structures.

Dilemma 5: Representation ethical issues
Throughout the literature, social scientists argue that no harm should come to any informant as a direct result of participating in the research. This ethical code is often compromised when the results of the research are disseminated and published hence the focus on issues of representation (Fixico, 1996; Cassell, 1980). Issues of representation address questions such as whose voice/story/interpretation does the researcher’s work portray? Is it clear to the reader who is saying what? Feminists (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004) have argued that research should be done to recover and examine unnoticed experience and this cannot be adequately done by using standard language and forms. In their words, “standard practice that smooths out respondent’s talk is one way that women’s words are distorted; it is often a way of discounting and ignoring those parts of women’s experiences that are not easily expressed” (pp. 241.).

The dilemma for me was being torn between writing the “women’s book” or a dissertation. Their book would have required more of their stories (i.e. verbatim records of the interview) than my interpretation (i.e. previously developed categories) of portions of their stories deemed relevant to the research questions addressed by the study. As Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) observe, researchers routinely indicate that they have changed respondents’ names and some details of lives lived in order to protect their subjects’ anonymity. Just like the rest of the researchers, although I used pseudonyms, I did not report on the details that I changed and how.

As an African woman I have read what some researchers have written about Africa and Africans and have felt hurt, embarrassed, outraged or deceived. To check how my work as a researcher is contributing or not contributing to problems of representation of my respondents’ work, in this particular qualitative study, I used “member checks” in a effort to give my respondents an opportunity to comment on the quotations from their interviews that were likely to be used in the final write-up of the report to respond to its “truth and validity”. In addition to the many affirmative comments, it was clear that if given the chance, subjects can be used to minimize researcher’s misinterpretation of other people’s contributions. For instance, this is how one participant responded during the member check exercise. “This does capture what I told you but now that it is going to go into the book let me re-phrase it thus........”
Ethical issues of representation surfaced again in the final stages of the write-up. I was unhappy to realize that in an effort to follow the accepted conventional dissertation prescribed format, I captured but a fraction of the rich experiences each businesswoman shared. Furthermore, the desire to protect individual's identities and preserve anonymity also pushed the report towards discussing the activities of the group's businesses rather than ideas and activities of each individual's business or different business types. I learnt that regardless of researcher's plan and intention to write their subject's story, in the final analysis, the researcher's interpretation of subjects' multiple stories in the pretext of protecting the subjects, the researcher's voice dominates in the presentation of research findings.

Discussion and implications

The influence of context

My fieldwork experience on the insider/outsider dilemma demonstrates the influence of culture and context in shaping of social research processes, interpretation and judgements. However, given that cultures and contexts are dynamic and ever changing, this implies that this insider/outsider ethical dilemma is a lifelong process, this call for qualitative researchers' personal commitment to ensuring that they have lenses to filter and frame the research process. As researchers, we could not and should not attempt to remove ourselves from this uncertain but rich dilemma. It is crucial for both self-reflection and informed research. Cultural knowledge determines what questions may be appropriate, how nonverbal communication is interpreted, how people of different genders interact and how the community members viewed the use of technology. It was obvious in my experience that some indigenous people prefer that research be conducted by native researchers (Mihesuah, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Resistance

Another theme adequately represented by the fieldwork dilemmas discussed above is resistance from both the researcher and the research subjects. As a product and member of the conventional research scientific process I found myself questioning the practicality of applying ethical codes that were not inappropriate for the research context that I have to work on for the rest of my life. This reminded me of Collins (1990:202) who says, "Black women intellectuals often encounter two distinct epistemologies, one representing elite while male interests and another, expressing Afrocentric feminist concerns." As a Third World feminist myself, this revealed my marginality as a representative of the 'other' group of researchers. Therefore resistance is inevitable given the commitment to contributing to new knowledge that is based
on subordinate groups own experiences in an effort to help them empower themselves.

Resistance is also demonstrated by respondents of my study. For instance, some of these businesswomen showed some resistance to the use of technology (i.e. taping recording the interview). Audio and videotapes are useful tools for researchers to use to secure interview data in its original form without the influence of faulty memory or scant field notes that require paraphrasing, because the researcher was unable to write fast enough to catch the complete story. In some instances, however participants requested or exhibited some hesitation about being audio-taped. Some expressed the wish not to sign the consent form because they believed that cultural “oral agreement” was more binding. In both cases I consented to their requests because even the literature is inconclusive when it comes to taping of interviews.

Although standard handbooks on qualitative methods stress the importance of exhaustive recording of conversations, these books pay little attention to methods of recording conversations or writing about it. Bogdan and Taylor (1975), who discuss such issues in more detail than most authors, recommend that qualitative researchers avoid taping. Resistance attests to the need for researchers to discover innovative ways to deal with data and research informants; it is an understudied ethical issue. In fact, I would argue that we must find better ways to honor those people who make our tales of the field possible.

The Role of Interaction
Although often overlooked, interaction with respondents in the field is important because it has direct bearing on the quality of data to be collected. In my experience, interaction with respondents in the field was also essential because it compelled the researcher to look back at self as a researcher and to question western notions of social research processes. For example, by turning the camera to face self, traditional reality of knowledge acquisition and knowledge construction were contrasted with Western notions. Another issue revolves around individual versus collective interviewing when everybody contributes to the interview and has access to confidential information. How does that relate to confidentiality and anonymity issues? Although we have various guidelines or codes of ethics, this critical self-reflection demonstrates that one part of good qualitative research is to acknowledge that a lot of times we do not know what we see, what we miss and what we do not understand. I have learnt that I have to ethically negotiate to acquire that I believe is located in certain positions held by others.

Conclusion
In this paper I provide a reflexive account about the ethical dilemmas I faced while conducting my first qualitative research because I believe that fieldwork
dilemmas, although rarely reported, can compromise qualitative research. I have also been honest and open about the manner in which I solved or failed to solve these dilemmas, thus suggesting the need for researchers to have what Williams (1996: 52) refers to as an “owning-up” strategy. It is important that researchers should go beyond identifying and solving ethical dilemmas to actually thinking through and discussing them openly as a first step towards ethical research. The next step is to learn from these discussions so that they can influence future research projects. For example, my field experience on the insider/outside dilemma demonstrates the influence of context upon research activities.

Based on this critical-self reflection, it is clear that knowledge construction is a collective process. Therefore, as qualitative researchers, we can not and should not attempt to remove ourselves from this uncertain but rich dilemma. This is crucial for both self-reflection and informed research. Finally, the omission to reflect on fieldwork experience also hides the conflict and tensions that all researchers inevitably face and can learn from. The observations of how others see us (whether accurate or not) afford good data on how we are positioned, and this is data that we could obtain in no other way.

References


