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ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies five key ethical principles of ethical research that appear across the ethical codes of research institutions and associations. These are a) informed and voluntary consent; b) confidentiality of information shared; c) anonymity of research participants; d) beneficence or no harm to participants; and e) reciprocity. It discusses how each of these were applied within one of EdQual's action research projects, *Implementing curriculum change for reducing poverty and improving gender equity*, which is collecting data in South Africa, Rwanda and South Africa. It finishes by reflecting on issues of power, empowerment and ownership within participatory action research.

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1: INTRODUCTION

Research is mostly undertaken to generate knowledge and contribute to scholarship, policy, practice and generally to the well being of the people who participate in it. Hence, in a deliberation on ethical issues in research a polarisation of research into qualitative and quantitative is not particularly required because ethical issues mostly cut across the qualitative-quantitative divide. Having said that, the focus of this conference and the topic given to me is on qualitative research and therefore I will dwell in some depth on ethical issues in qualitative research. Moreover, certain qualitative research approaches such as action research, biography, phenomenology and ethnographic methods do pose complex challenges to an ethical conduct of research and therefore merit a closer scrutiny.

Sound research is a moral and ethical endeavour and should be concerned with ensuring that the interests of those participating in a study are not harmed as a result of research being done. Typically universities and research institutions lay down principles and guidelines for conducting research in an ethically appropriate manner and require the researchers to obtain approval from ethics committees or equivalent. A quick survey of the websites of some major research bodies and universities (e.g. AKU, AERA, BERA) shows that there are four or five key ethical principles that are common across the board. These include: a) informed and voluntary consent; b) confidentiality of information shared; c) anonymity of research participants; d) Beneficence or no harm to participants; and e) reciprocity. Typically associated with these principles and guidelines are detailed procedures which the researchers are expected to follow and provide evidence of to the review committee.

1.1   Informed and Voluntary Consent

Researchers are expected to obtain informed consent from all those who are directly involved in research or in the vicinity of research. This principle adheres to a larger issue of respect to the participants so that they are not coerced into participation and have access to relevant information *prior* to the consent. Usually consent is obtained through written consent forms, and necessary elements of consent are identified by the review committees. These usually include prior information on key elements of research such as purpose, procedures, time period, risks, benefits, and a clause stipulating that participation is voluntary and the participants have the right to withdraw from the study.

1.2   Confidentiality of Information Shared and Anonymity of Research Participants

This principle is also concerned with offering respect and protection to research participants through assurance of confidentiality of information shared and anonymity by not revealing the identity of the individuals and institutions involved. Typically anonymity is provided through the use of pseudonyms.

1.3   No Harm to Participants, Beneficence and Reciprocity

According to this principle researchers are expected to provide the participants with an outline of the risks and benefits involved to the participants in the study. The principle of reciprocity requires that the researchers consider actively ways through which participants could be compensated for their time and effort. Typically information about risks and befits are expected to be provided in summary in the consent form and/or in a brief write up attached with the consent form.

These principles and procedures of an ethical engagement with a research study are laid out with the best of intentions to protect participants from malpractices and breach of ethics. However, the approach is taken from a mainly clinical medical research perspective with a concomitant view of epistemology and ontology. Hence, it is assumed that there is a well stated hypothesis which is to be tested, the relationship between the researcher and researched is clearly divided and bounded, and it is possible to outline the potential risks and benefits in some detail prior to the study. On the contrary, in research undertaken from qualitative, naturalistic position, ethnographic methods are employed which require participant observation, open ended or semi structured interview, thick descriptions and often a long term engagement in the field. The researchers are the primary instruments of research and develop relationship with research participants so that "emic" insights may be gleaned in the social phenomenon being studied. Mostly, there are broad and guiding research questions and not testable hypothesis. Research from this perspective encourages evolving understanding and flexibility to go into new or different directions within the broad framework.

These epistemological and ontological orientations make it very challenging to follow the procedures and guidelines for ethics as outlined above. I contend that the ethical principles and procedures drawing from a mainly clinical and medical research model need to be problematised when seen in the context of qualitative research. And, that adherence to

ethical principles in research is closely linked with assuring the quality and rigour of the study, in terms of its credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I will draw from the example of a large-scale, cross-national participatory action research study to illustrate my point. Key features of participatory action research as gleaned from methods textbooks and from the works of key proponents such as Kemmis and Mctaggart include the following:

- Emancipatory and participatory in nature
- Transformational in purpose
- Links theory and practice
- Cyclical and evolutionary in process
- Often involving interventions aimed at improving the social reality

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kerkale & Pittila, 2006)

2: "IMPLEMENTING CURRICULUM CHANGE FOR REDUCING POVERTY AND IMPROVING GENDER EQUITY" EDQUAL (2006-2010)

This particular study which I am referring to also incorporates these methodological features. It is a five year participatory action research project to study the process and outcomes of the "implementation of curriculum change for reducing poverty and improving gender equity". The project is in the initial stages and base line information is being collected. The research sites are in three different countries i.e. Pakistan, South Africa and Rwanda, and the curriculum change is being studied in mathematics and science classrooms. Participants in the action research include academics and research students from the university, and mathematics and science teachers in schools. Community members and policy makers and/or implementers will also be involved.

At a minimum the research process would involve the university researchers and school practitioners working together to interpret the new curriculum for reducing poverty and improving gender equity. This interpretation would lead to some shared understanding of poverty reduction and gender issues in mathematics and science. In light of emerging understanding, curricular and instructional materials would be developed, implemented and the process would be studied. Research activities would involve orientation and research training workshops, school and classroom observations, open ended interviews and dialogues, focus group discussions and document analysis. These activities would take place in cycles of action and reflection.

Of course, what is action and reflection for the university researchers is different from that of the school based researchers. However, the fact remains that both groups are researchers and researched and both work together closely over a period of time. Deliberate effort would be made to establish a relationship of trust within the research participants.

It is expected that the research process would lead to several outcomes and policy recommendations including a more sophisticated understanding of the new curriculum and its potential to reduce poverty and improve gender equity and it would yield products such as teacher guides and instructional materials which were rooted in the contextual realities of the school and community, and lead to skills and competencies for poverty reduction (e.g. problem solving, creative thinking, collaboration). However, for the purpose of this paper I would like to focus on the issues that arise from the perspective of ethics guidelines and procedures.

The evolutionary nature of participatory action research challenges the principle of *informed* consent because it is not possible for the researcher to provide information about the direction of research *prior* to the inquiry being conducted. Similarly, when the participants in action are also researchers, the boundaries between researchers and researched are blurred thereby raising questions such as: Who gives consent to whom? The traditional division between the researcher and the researched is no more. How is confidentiality of data and anonymity of participants being ensured? How are issues of power and equity in participation being addressed? I present my interpretation of the strategies and approaches built in to project design to address the questions above. These interpretations are based on the thinking and experiences with the research team and on the information available from similar work done elsewhere (e.g. Malcolm, Gopal Keane & Kyle, 2006; Hemmings, 2005, EdQual research proposal, 2006).

2.1   Informed and Voluntary Consent: a process and not an event

Consent which is informed and voluntary is an ideal! Given the evolutionary nature of this research, and the inherent politics in participatory research, we strive to work towards the ideal, through several approaches. One approach is to recognise that consent is not a one off event to be undertaken at the start of a project, rather it is a process and needs to be negotiated throughout the course of the project. Consent will be sought through formal procedures such as consent forms and through informal conversations. Moreover, formal consent will be taken at the initial stage of the research and not prior to the research.

Second, is to recognise that there are degrees of participation and therefore the consent to participate should take into account the extent to which different participants would be involved. While there may not be overt coercion to participate, there might be subtle pressure from peers or authorities to give consent. For example, the mathematics and science teachers would be quite intensively engaged in this process and potentially expose their vulnerabilities more than other participants such as the community members. As compared to the school head and others in the district education office, they also have less power in terms of decision making and might feel constrained to give their consent. Hence, consent will be taken not only from the administrative head of the school or the district but would also be sought from the individual participants. Moreover at strategic points in this long term project, consent will be renewed and/or renegotiated. For example, at the initiation stage, later at the stage of field work and as subsequent cycles of the participatory action research take place.

Third, commitment and not just consent is an issue in participatory action research because it demands a high degree of involvement in the study from the academic and the school participants. Through considerations for care and justice, effort is made to seek commitments of the individuals and groups involved.

2.2   Confidentiality of Information Shared and Anonymity of Participants

In a setting where the purpose of research is to establish a community of learners and the process involves a number of people working together in close collaboration, confidentiality and anonymity are difficult to achieve and counter to the purpose of research. Hence, an important ingredient would be to build a relationship of trust and mutual respect within the research participants so that information can be shared without risk of harm to those concerned. However, to maintain anonymity of participants in larger forums, more traditional approaches such as pseudonyms would be employed.

2.3   No Harm to Participants, Beneficence and Reciprocity

By its critically reflective and emancipatory nature, participatory action research is meant to be beneficial to the participants. But, this very process can lead to a critical introspection which could be uncomfortable to begin with and it could challenge. Additionally, participatory action research would/should lead to empowerment which in turn breaks down traditional hierarchies in the community. This could potentially lead to tension and conflict.

These benefits and potential risks are difficult to identify in advance, but it is important to recognise them and make room for benefits of the research to be shared with the participants and for the potential of risks be minimised for all. Besides the social and emancipatory outcomes, some other benefits for the participants in this project include the hard outcomes of research in the form of teacher guides, instructional materials for practitioners. To the academic participants in the projects the expected benefits are in the form of a network of academic community, publications resulting from the knowledge generated.

The building of a community of learners is empowering in spirit because it can develop understandings and insights not otherwise possible, and this knowledge is emancipatory in that it offers guidance to the possibilities of social change. However, this project is for a finite period of time. Hence, it is important to ensure that the community develops within itself elements of sustainability so that there is continuity and no sense of loss when the project withdraws.

An additional risk in such a long-term, field-based research project is of setting up potentially false expectations such as possibility of resource materials for the teachers, opportunity to participate in university programmes. A focus of this project is poverty reduction through implementation of the new curriculum, and it is important to recognise the risk of participants seeing a direct and immediate impact on poverty reduction as a consequence of this project. Honesty and clarity of communication are important elements in enabling the participants to see that poverty reduction is seen as a long term goal through empowerment of the community in decisions making, in developing refined understanding of relevant mathematics and science curriculum.

2.4   Power, Empowerment and Ownership

Participatory action research focuses on participation, collaboration and empowerment of all participants with a more distributed notion of leadership not confined to authority only. However, collaboration and empowerment are processes that take place when inherent and traditional power differentials are challenged and shifts in power take place. For example, it is possible for university researchers to be perceived as more powerful and therefore for teachers to be unable to participate in an equitable manner in formal settings such as workshops and seminars. Hence, it is important that genuine attempts are made to structure workshops and seminars so that the nature of activities, topics of discussion, language use and other elements are suitable for teachers to be able to participate effectively and that their input is valued and built upon.

However, in the school where the action of implementation of the curriculum takes place, it is the teachers who are more powerful because they have the power to withhold or share information. Hence, overtly and subtly effort would be made for a relationship of trust to be established so that participants do not feel coerced to share or withhold information.

A key element of participatory action research is the sense of ownership of the problem and of the process being used to address it. In this project the problem in terms of reducing poverty and improving gender equity is already identified by the project and the funding agency, in this case DfID. To promote ownership of all participants in research, the project design team has deliberately kept a relatively broad framework of poverty reduction in terms of reducing inequities on the basis of gender and region (rural) in quality of education provision. Within this broad framework there is immense scope of finding a focus which resonates with the specific school and community. For ownership interventions are not identified a priori; rather interventions are seen as developmental actions that would emerge from the work in the field, affirming and building on the knowledge and experiences of the teachers and the community.

Ownership of the research problem is also important for the rigour and credibility of the study because participatory action research purports to generate knowledge which is rooted in the reality of schools and classrooms, and builds on the intuitive knowledge and perceptions of the people involved. And deep insightful knowledge from the field is difficult to generate without full ownership. Hence, for the findings to be credible and dependable, ownership of the research problem and process is important. Finally, for greater ownership of issues, those schools will be carefully selected to include those in the seriously deprived rural areas.

3: CONCLUSION

To conclude, from the discussion so far it is clear that ethical issues are an integral part of a (qualitative) research design and considerations for ethics should run throughout the course of the research process, including identification of research problem, engagement in the inquiry and dissemination of results. And, as illustrated by the example above, following the ethical principles according to the philosophical foundations of the study is closely connected with assuring the quality of study, its rigour, its dependability and credibility. This contention raises methodological and procedural challenges for the prevailing practice where consideration of ethics and ethics approval is usually seen as a formality to be undertaken *before* the research project has begun, and mostly the same set of procedures and guidelines are applied to the study, whatever be its orientation.

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