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Methodological Decisions in Context: The dilemmas and challenges of novice African scholars

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Abstract

This paper emerges out of a panel discussion during a PhD week and subsequent 8th International Environmental Education Invitation Seminar held at Rhodes University in 2004 and 2005 respectively. It illuminates some insights into our struggles (as novice African researchers) in trying to respond to contextual realities as we research education and social change in African contexts, seeking insight into what counts as legitimate research in this context. The paper considers our struggles at conceptual, methodological, analytical and data generation levels, and in a politics of research. This is done by means of examples drawn from five current doctoral research projects being undertaken in east and southern African regions, using a review framework that represents fairly common dimensions of PhD research. We conclude that research, when defined rigidly within research disciplines/paradigms (as have been defined in some – primarily Western – research trajectories) may fail to take into account African social and contextual realities when applied uncritically. We argue that there is need for researchers in Africa to consider a multiplicity of approaches if research is to be meaningful in, and responsive to, social and contextual realities. In particular, we argue for taking account of socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts in creating African epistemology in and through research.

Introduction

As novice researchers, we are confronted with the challenge of generating new research approaches (or working with existing ones) that help us contribute to research as a process of social transformation of our societies (Janse van Rensburg, 1995; Lotz, 1996; Taylor, 1997). Our quest and innovations in research are often met by scholarly arguments (often Western in orientation) and reasoning of what counts as legitimate within educational and social science inquiry (Russell & Hart, 2003). In much modern, primarily Western-derived educational and social research, many researchers 'carry flags' and associate with one of the four 'main' research traditions labelled as empiricist (or positivist); interpretive, critical and deconstructive (or reflexive)¹ (Schreuder, 2004). Each of the four research paradigms has its own distinct features. These features include assumptions about reality, data generation techniques, how to carry out observations, and what is generated by the enquiry (Deakin Study Guide, cited in Schreuder, 2004). We argue that there is no one paradigm that can be used to see all 'things' in any given study.

In this paper we share some insights into our struggles to respond to contextual realities as we research in Africa. We draw on Latour's work on the construction of scientific knowledge

(Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987; 1988; 1993a; 1993b) to argue our case. He notes that the best way one would know how scientific knowledge is created is by following scientists at work through observing their practice. Of interest to this paper, is his emphasis on the relationships of social and historical contexts; and belief versus knowledge in scientific research (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987). These two aspects are explained in more detail below:

- *Social and historical contexts* – Latour argues that in the creation of scientific knowledge the social and historical contexts in which the research is done is often ignored. Instead researchers create a new context (language, concepts and social reality) through referencing to other research, often out of context (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). The whole research process becomes disembodied from the social realities in which it is located when research frameworks and methodologies are applied uncritically.
- *Belief versus knowledge* – Research paradigms developed in primarily Western contexts, often create oppositions between beliefs and knowledge. Knowledge is seen as a preserve of the educated and often obtained through scientific research. Beliefs or opinions are seen as nonfactual information given by people considered less knowledgeable or simply backward. Latour notes that during the exploration of Africa, facts/knowledge remained as largely that which was created, (however erroneous or misleading) by the explorers, missionaries and anthropologists, about a region. These were considered knowledgeable and educated, despite the fact that they depended on the so-called ‘beliefs and opinions’ of the local people. In reference to the way French navigators drew maps by relying on the informants from local communities in the foreign lands they visited, Latour (1987:216) writes:

the implicit geography of the natives is made explicit by geographers; the local knowledge of the savages becomes the universal knowledge of cartographers; the fuzzy, approximate and ungrounded beliefs of the locals are turned into a precise, certain and justified knowledge.

This opposition of belief and knowledge has become the means by which experienced researchers bracket out others (from their networks) who are perceived as unlearned as they are perceived not knowledgeable enough in a particular discipline/paradigm.

We draw on these two perspectives to reflect on our own doctoral research studies. We highlight our struggles in trying to contextualise our studies so that they may play a transformative role by looking at our research design decisions. We employ a review framework with the following elements:

- *Concepts and context* – Christine Kisamba explores the issue of a the displacement phenomenon and how certain concepts become disembodied from social realities;
- *Methodological consideration* – Mweru Mwingi draws on her research to illustrate how the merging of diverse theoretical perspectives help to respond to contextual realities;
- *Analytical framing* – Justin Lupele reflects on the analytical framing of his research which is driven more by the relations created by contextual realities than paradigmatic arguments;

- *Data generation* – Joyce Kimani shares her struggles in trying to generate data on an issue guarded by cultural taboos, norms and beliefs; and
- *Hurdles in researching contemporary disciplines* – Felistus Kinyanjui explains the difficulties we face as novice researchers when our quest to respond to our contextual realities meets hurdles that seem insurmountable given rigidity in the discipline.

Each element in the above framework represents a particular aspect that is fairly commonly found in all PhD studies. We draw on our research case studies to explain each of the elements as shown above.

Concepts in Context

Christine Kisamba is researching how internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Uganda cope with confinement in protected camps after being there for more than five years. The rebel activities of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the district displaced farmers from their gardens in 1998, posing a disruption in their socio-economic activities where 84% of the total population was forced to live in protected camps.

Christine is interested in developing an understanding of how the IDPs in these remote and isolated areas cope with subsistence production and practice of cultural values. She argues that the IDPs manage to sustain their livelihoods, not through the established United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) assistance (which would be grossly inadequate and is not mandated in any way to assist IDPs) but through the initiation of self-help schemes.

Christine's struggles and challenges in her research into the realities experienced by displaced people have been to try and deconstruct the global phenomena within the realities of her research. She finds the global usage of the term 'refugee' problematic in her research context. She recalls that the concept was coined after the two World Wars when the phenomenon of displacement appeared in the European context. Today, conflicts in the world have taken on new dimensions that do not quite fit the earlier definition of a refugee. She argues that there is need to explain the displacement phenomenon by taking into account the various new contexts in which they occur. She notes that in a continent such as Africa, which is ravaged by ethnic, religious and nationalist conflicts, the so called 'refugee camps' have become permanent homes to millions of people displaced from their homes. For those who have resided in these camps for over five years they consider them as home and the way of life as routine. She observes that the objectivism required by conventional research methods fails to appreciate the complexity of researching in the social context of these camps.

Though the displaced operate in the camps with full knowledge and understanding of the prevailing circumstances, this kind of life appears to be an extremely adverse condition to the outsiders and often global humanitarian discourses are used to explain life in the camps. The uncritical application of global concepts often fails to respond to local realities. Emirbayer (1997:300) argues '... concepts cannot be defined on their own as single ontological entities; rather, the meaning of one concept can be deciphered only in terms of its "place" in relation to the other concepts in its web'.

Methodological Considerations

Lack of African literature and theoretical strands has forced many an African scholar to adopt, albeit uncritically, Western ‘frames’ to research issues and challenges in African contexts. For example, it is now common knowledge that researching gender issues is associated with feminist theories or orientations. However, the uncritical application of these orientations across contexts has often produced research that fails to contribute meaningfully to African society.

To reflect on the foregoing, we look at *Mweru Mwingi’s* research into issues of gender, equality and education as they pertain to secondary education in Kenya. Secondary education is said to be the gateway to employment and to higher education but still few girls access secondary education, and even fewer are taking science and technology both at the secondary and tertiary levels. Mweru examines rural girls’ schools in Murang’a District, where female enrolment in secondary education is higher than male. The study is undertaken on the assumption that education outcomes and output correspond to the high level of access and survival. The study focusses on: subject choice in order to establish which school subjects are accessible to girls in rural schools and their preferences; interest in higher education, and the girls’ career aspirations.

To avoid falling into the pitfalls of uncritically working within what is primarily a body of Western feminist literature, Mweru has been weaving around a number of key feminist orientations – liberal, social, Marxist and radical feminism (Tong, 1989), to find a space to engage, ground and understand the protracted problem of gender inequality in Kenya’s education. This undertaking is imperative, especially given that conventional key feminism theories have been criticised for their being primarily white middle class social discourses (Hooks, 1984; Hood, 1989; Collins, 1990; Walker, 1990; Mohanty, Russo & Lourdes, 1991).

In her study, Mweru addresses the inadequacies of key feminism theories by drawing on Black (Collins, 1990; Hooks, 1990) and Third World and African feminisms (Mohanty et al. 1991; Odim-Johnson, 1991; Mikell, 1997; AAWORD, 1999; Assie-Lumumba, 1999; Imam, Mama & Sow, 1999; Meena, 1999) to account for the ‘Third World’ as a geo-political space that differentiates the women located there from others. Integrating feminism within the well-known gender and development approaches – better known as women in development (WID), women and development (WAD) and gender and development (GAD) – frames the political economy in which Kenyan discourses on gender is embedded.

By drawing on Black and Third World feminism, Mweru has been able to frame equity discourses in Kenya’s education under the colonial and independent dispensations. The two orientations specifically raise and deliberate issues of race, ethnicity, regionalism, gender and class in contextualised depth. Black and Third World feminism underscore the importance of politics, economics and historicity. They draw attention to education developments, in particular how gender is framed, defined and shifted as a parameter of social inequality over time and space, and explain why a single orientation of feminism cannot address the myriad of inequalities. Within the context of gender and education in Kenya, Mweru’s research is primed to provide a major paradigm shift from the well-used and perhaps worn out positivist discourses that fail to move gender and education beyond matters of access to schooling.

Analytical Framing

Justin Lupele is researching the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Course Development Network – a project of the SADC Regional Environmental Education Programme. He is investigating how networking can support professional development in environmental education course development. The 14 SADC member countries have identified environmental education as a major strategic activity for the region's environment and sustainable development programme (SADC ELMS, 1996). It is seen as a response to the numerous social, economic and environmental concerns (such as poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, persistent drought, food insecurity, and debt crisis, among others), affecting the region.

In the analytical framing of the research question, Justin takes a relational ontology and epistemology as a central theme of the study. The course development network becomes a network of relations – relations between individuals within the network; relations with other colleagues in environmental education in the region; relations with environmental concerns mentioned earlier; relations that bring human and non-human actors together; and how the region's social fabric relates to the region's history, and social and environmental issues mentioned above. He draws on a number of relational thinkers (Sayer, 1984; Latour, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Law, 1992; Lee & Steve, 1994; Emirbayer, 1997; Yeng, 1997; Bourdieu, 1998) to develop the relational analytical framework of his study. Justin acknowledges the controversy that may arise by his uniform branding of these authors as relational thinkers but argues their works exhibit a relational approach to understanding reality.

He further argues that relational ontology is a premise upon which African Worldview is built. This is manifested in African literature. Perhaps one of the classical examples can be taken from Ben Okri's (1991) postcolonial novel – *The Famished Road*. Okri shares a vision of the world as one of infinite possibility woven in a web of relations. The novel's main character Azaro, the spirit-child, wanders in an idyllic world of his spirit friends and the world of the living. Azaro enables the reader to see the interconnectedness of life. The dead and the living; the humans and nonhumans all mingle together as exemplified in this quotation from the novel:

I stared hard at the crabs clawing the edges of flower-patterned basins. After a while they left me alone. That was the first time I realised it wasn't just humans who came to the market-places of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea ... (Okri, 1991:19)

In a number of the southern African narratives relational philosophy is best described by the word '*ubuntu*' ... It [*ubuntu*] does not just refer to humanity; it means the whole of existence is together, interlinked, totally connected' (Kumar, 2002:177).

Justin also draws on critical realists such as Sayer (1984) who view knowledge as a process. Sayer refers to knowledge as 'knowing' which is a process of becoming, 'in solution' as opposed to the notion of knowledge as a product or a thing that exists outside us, which can be possessed and stored in its finished form in our heads or shelves in the library. He advises that

in order to combat this static view, the production of knowledge should be viewed as a social activity. Lave and Wenger (1991) note that *knowing* is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities. They further state that *knowing* is located in the relationships among practitioners, their practice, the artifacts of that practice and the social organisation and political economy of the communities of practice.

As an analytical framework, he draws on Actor Network Theory (ANT) which was developed from Latour's scientific knowledge construction work mentioned earlier. ANT opens up analysis of social networks such as the SADC CDN in that it does not only focus, as it is the tradition with most social network analysis, on the social relations of individual human actors. Rather, ANT enables researchers to treat both the natural and social world as being constructed simultaneously as heterogeneous networks of human and non-human (Gaskell & Hepburn, 1998; Latour, 1999; Davies, 2002). ANT seems to provide an appropriate theoretical lens for Justin's research question, by following a relational approach as it attempt to move away from binary opposition or dualism (Bourdieu, 1998; Popkewitz, 2001; Smith, 2003).

Data Generation

Most disciplines/researchers have devised tools for data generation that are used in research regardless of the context. However, we argue that researching a complex and sensitive issue such as HIV/AIDS in a society where issues of sexuality are viewed as taboos that cannot be openly discussed, calls for eclecticism and tactful approach in the choice and application of data generation techniques. Even after selecting a suitable method it becomes necessary to think of ways of engaging participants in the discussions as there exists a number of relations that people associate with personal and private space which affect the data collection process.

We exemplify our argument with *Joyce Kimani's* research on condom use, in the Thika District of Kenya. Condom use has been touted by the majority as the best method of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Despite the fact that knowledge about HIV/AIDS has been found to be high, the rate of condom use among the sexually active people in Kenya remains low (National Council for Population Development, 1999). Joyce's study aims to explore the factors influencing condom use among rural residents of the district. Thika District was purposively selected for the study for being one of the districts with the highest HIV infection rate in Kenya.²

Cultural norms and taboos posed a great challenge for Joyce's study. Using a triangulation method (Mouton, 1996), Joyce was able to draw from both quantitative and qualitative methods of data generation wherever they became practical. The techniques included self-administered questionnaires, focus group discussions, interviews, observation and ethnographic data.

The cultural norms and taboos were particularly manifested when conducting the focus group discussions. This method aimed at gaining deeper insight into issues of HIV/AIDS and condom use than would have been gained through questionnaires and individual interviews. To encourage participation in the discussions men and women were separated (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2001:109). Since education level has some influence on the level of discussions and the way in which people perceive issues of sexuality, the participants were further grouped

according to their educational level (Morrison, 1998). This was also aimed at making the respondents feel at par and free to talk. Discussions were conducted by interviewers who were of the same age and sex with the members of the group in question.

However, even after grouping the participants as explained above, it still remained a difficult task to make them openly discuss sex and other related matters. In an attempt to overcome this problem, Joyce found it imperative to adopt an eclectic approach related to the participants' culture, which could serve as an ice-breaker. Joyce composed a song that involved dancing and was sung by the research teams before the focus groups started. The decision to use a song was made on the basis that traditionally the Kikuyu people enjoyed their songs and dances which had different themes (Kenyatta, 1938). The song had a message of asking people to say what they knew about AIDS and how it can be contained in their own local contexts. All in all, Joyce had to take into account that sexuality among the residents of Thika is underlined by strong cultural and traditional sensitivity. She had to be flexible in her data collection techniques without necessarily having to compromise theoretical and methodological rigour, which is a cornerstone of good quality research.

The Challenges of Researching Contemporary Disciplines

Felistus Kinyanjui is undertaking historical research into poverty among the people of Thika District in Kenya. In 1999 Thika had a population of 645 715 with a density of 329 persons per sq. km (Republic of Kenya, 2001:9). The district was once an epicentre of coffee farming, the leading export crop in colonial and independent Kenya. Further, Thika District was home to Kenya's first president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The district was then the centre of state resources.

Felistus' motivation for studying the history of the poor in Thika arose from revelations of the Welfare Monitoring Survey (WMS) of 1997 which indicated that since the 1994 WMS of the districts in the Central Province, poverty levels had been escalating in Thika District (Aliber *et al.*, 2004). Yet, the area is relatively endowed with substantial natural and human resources and is reputed as having been the 'Birmingham of East Africa'. It is against this backdrop that Felistus embarked on her study of the political economy of poverty in Thika. She intended to interrogate the factors that had turned a once prime area into the most marginal of districts in the country.

In this section we use Felistus' research to illustrate some of the dilemmas in contemporary research associated with 'discipline/paradigm' approaches and how she has tried to respond to the challenges. As African researchers we often have no choice but to work at least in part within the confines of a primarily European episteme.³ Broadly speaking, European categories of knowledge have now become categories of African knowledge. The 'otherness' of knowledge brings tensions to us as scholars because we feel confined to certain parameters (often defined by disciplines or paradigms) to which our data, experiences and realities may not necessary fit. The fact that human beings act in concrete historical circumstances cannot be gainsaid. In traditional, primarily Western categories of knowledge, each research discipline (such as history, anthropology, physics, etc.) has its own conventions and traditional standards as Felistus found out early on in her research in history. When she started to research poverty in Thika District, it

was out rightly perceived as a non-fitting area in the discipline of history, much as she intended to give it an historical perspective. Dealing with contemporary issues was of course a hurdle that she had to contend with. This reception of the topic was more to do with its currency, scarcity of sources, as well as its seeming 'economic' inclination which required quantitative skills that a historian may not necessarily possess. More importantly, situating the study in a theoretical setting proved more contentious.

However, having overcome the initial hurdles, Felistus repositioned her study in an appropriate historical context. She adopted a timeframe of 1953 to 2000, which helped to situate the study in an acceptable historical context. A further step was the identification of key markers of poverty and the dynamics of poverty (as opposed to the World Bank's poverty datum line of US\$1 per day). She grapples with the definition of poverty and attempts a shift from the global US\$1 threshold to a locally constructed one. Her study traces the transformation and change in the economy of Thika over a four-decade period. Using a 'participative/community empowerment' conceptual framework, Felistus has been able trace the historical agency of the residents of Thika from the late colonial to the postcolonial period.

What is evident is that over the years, peoples' perception on poverty and affluence has changed. In the 1970s people without coffee and tea were considered poor. From around the mid-1980s the people of Thika associated affluence with steady incomes derived from employment or business. By the 1990s taking children to school and affording three meals became a key determinant of well-being among the people of Thika. These transformations were moulded by the changes that were taking place in the local and international economies. The study also demonstrates how the politics of patrimonialism contributed to the impoverishment of the residents of Thika, contrary to the popular belief that residents of Thika benefited from Kenyatta's largesse. Owing to power shifts over the last three decades, Thika district has become one of the most marginal areas in the country. This is traced to a gradual but decisive reconstitution of the nature of the dominant national political coalition during the Daniel arap Moi (the predecessor of President Jomo Kenyatta) era. The presidency of Moi systematically intervened in local political processes in order to dislocate existing forces and alliances, and attempted to reconstitute new ones (Kanyinga, 1994:89).

Our contention is that in as much as the writing of history involves selecting evidence and filling gaps through narrative, romance, tragedy, comedy and satire (White, 1973), it is significant that we have regional texts and regional discourses because not all that happens in Africa can be reduced to universal categories defined in European settings. The grand theories cannot be applicable to all situations. It was her strong opinion that the peculiarity of Thika warranted context-specific scrutiny. Felistus' study takes into consideration the fact that there are clear and fascinating movements back and forth between the categories of universal and trans-historical thought and the nuanced interpretation of the significance of regional knowledge in its historically contextualised form.

In her research it emerged that within the Kiambu and Thika context, there were several trajectories and dynamics that could be easily subsumed under hasty generalisations. People in the different divisions and the different genders experienced poverty differently (Republic of Kenya, 2002). It is therefore important not to make broad conclusions but to undertake as

far as possible a local or context specific analysis that gives room for the discernment of the micro-histories in the mega-history. This to her is the major strength of her work as it is a context-specific genre that will hopefully provide insights on future poverty studies as well as make a modest contribution to the historiography of Thika.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this section we reflect on our five case studies by revisiting the review framework established at the beginning of the paper, and Latour's two perspectives on social and historical contexts, and belief versus knowledge.

Review framework

The paper examined conceptual, methodological, analytical framing, data generation and research politics associated with discipline/paradigm approaches using vignettes from five current PhD studies. Each of the case studies was drawn on to provide insights for a particular element of the review. The review framework demonstrates that researching complex social and economic phenomena such as displacement, girl child education, and professional development through networking, epidemics and poverty within the African context, requires innovative, creative and adaptive methodologies as demonstrated, if research has to play a transformative role. This is owing to the diverse and varied social contexts in Africa, which is, like many other places in the world, rife with multiple realities. Building an argument for contextualising research should, however, not be at the expense of stereotyping Western knowledge or research. This paper shows that as much as we grapple with developing new approaches to research, we have all drawn extensively on thinkers working in the Western world, to inform our own approaches. This demonstrates that epistemology in contemporary society is relational, across borders cultures and contexts.

Social and historical contexts

Throughout this paper, the issues of social and historical contexts have been highlighted. The key considerations to which all the five cases respond to, can be summarised as history, context (language, concepts and social reality) and society. Without giving undue emphasis to the originality and flexibility of our various approaches, our research shows potential to discern the hidden factors – by broadening our research focus through the examination of history, context and society in general. The paper draws attention to research design issues, and indicates that without due consideration of the language and concepts residing in local context, research may become meaningless as local people's understanding of reality may be different to that assumed in research texts and paradigmatic framings. Creativity in applying and generating adaptive methodologies enabled us all to decipher details that could not otherwise be captured by conventional research approaches. The methodological considerations in this paper, for example, took into account the history of girl child education, the social aspects of the context where learning takes place and the children's backgrounds – their socio-economic aspects. All these have influence on the research questions. The culture of the society where the

research is being done was also crucial in the formulation of research design as this could make data generation difficult/problematic. It is only through the appreciation of the culture of the research participants that we are able to tackle controversial and sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS. For the research to be embedded within the social realities, analytical frameworks need to take into consideration the local people's ontological position as demonstrated in this paper. We also demonstrate that as we seek to contextualise our research projects we are likely to steer academic politics with regards to what counts as legitimate research in a given discipline.

Belief versus knowledge

As mentioned before, some Western research frameworks create oppositions between beliefs and knowledge. On the basis of this, some knowledge is rejected as mere opinions or beliefs. But this paper has demonstrated that the researched worldview cannot be brushed aside as opinions and beliefs, as these may form the core of a knowledge system. Unless we acknowledge this, our research could become abstracted from social realities. The opinions and beliefs of the refugees, the African traditional beliefs and perception on such things as schooling, HIV/AIDS and poverty all form part of the 'facts' and are embedded in the knowledge system of their existence. If research has to play a transformative role we need to take on board all forms of knowledge as demonstrated in this paper.

Our experience has taught us that it is imperative to take into consideration the terrain and the underlying values/norms of the societies that we are studying if we are to avoid mechanisation in our research. There is also a need to develop African episteme and knowledge systems suitable to the changing and dynamic research terrain. However, we are aware that by taking this path, we run the risk of being bracketed out from other research networks that function according to the norms of more conventional, modernist (primarily Western) research frames. Nevertheless, unless we take this risk, African knowledge may not gain its significance in extending epistemology and research methodology, and may continue to be viewed as opinions and beliefs or 'variables' in research, yet this is where answers to the many of our social, economic and environmental concerns lie.

Notes on the Contributors

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Endnotes

- 1 We recognise that we run the risk of stereotyping Western research traditions, which are far more varied than Schreuder's (2004) four paradigms framework would suggest. We comment on modern – primarily Western – research mainly due to its heavy influence on African scholarship over the last 100 years, resulting from the colonisation of education in Africa by European countries and the increased colonisation of the world through primarily Western forms of globalisation in the 20th century. We recognise that there are many border crossings, and hybrid forms of knowledge and research that result from cross-cultural exchange, which is ever more possible in the 'information age'.
- 2 The district was leading in terms of HIV infection rate countrywide with the rate of 33% in 1998 and remained high (21% in 2001) according to the Republic of Kenya, 2001.
- 3 We recognise that to create essentialist categories such as 'Western' or 'European' does not fully reflect the complex relationships and histories that characterise contemporary society.

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