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Insights on Conducting International Fieldwork in Developing Regions

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Keywords: international, auto-ethnography, methodology

Abstract: While issues of globalization deserve our attention, barriers to conducting international research may seem insurmountable. Having recently completed fieldwork in a developing region abroad, the purpose of this auto-ethnographic analysis was to examine the experience of conducting unfunded international field research as a means to support and encourage other scholars.

In view of globalization's increasing impact on the field of adult education, engagement in international and cross-cultural research continues to grow as a topic requiring our attention; however, Alfred and Guo (2007) assert North American adult educators neglect to sufficiently engage with issues of globalization and social justice. Merriam, Courtney, and Cervero (2006) challenge adult educators to critically address the consequences of globalization and reclaim those consequences as a means to advance equity and social justice. While, as these scholars suggest, issues of globalization and social justice deserve our attention and arguably require investigation abroad, I suspect the barriers to conducting international research seem insurmountable for some academics.

Having recently completed fieldwork in a developing region abroad, the purpose of this study was to examine the experience of conducting unfunded international field research. I first provide a brief description of the context, background, and tasks necessary for organizing and facilitating the research experience, and then present an auto-ethnographic account of the major elements of adult learning derived from engaging in the fieldwork, with a view to support and encourage other researchers to work abroad.

Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework draws from global feminist theory and Kolb's model of experiential learning, together forming the lens through which I perceived and analyzed the research experience. Global feminist theory highlights how actions in developed, Western nations can disempower and marginalize women in developing, non-Western nations (Tong, 2009). Mies (1993) argues that Western-based international initiatives, like the programs of the non-governmental organization (NGO) with which I worked, cannot produce real change because of inherent prejudice and conflicts of interest. As a white, well-educated, middle class American woman working in a predominantly Black, impoverished nation in West Africa, I specifically wanted to monitor and maintain awareness of my own privileges and biases.

The global feminist theory lens and its hyperawareness of global differences and interconnectivities accurately represent my mindset and research motivation. Kolb's (1984) four-stage experiential learning cycle forms a scaffold upon which I hung the international research process and activities, primarily in terms of reflection upon and analysis of the experiences. As part of the present paper's findings, I present the outcomes of the last part of Kolb's cycle, new information gained from the experience.

Background and Methodology

The present study is an auto-ethnographic investigation of my experience conducting fieldwork in West Africa for five weeks to collect data for my doctoral dissertation, a case study of one NGO's educational programs for women in West Africa. The NGO was established and continues to be directed by Westerners but based in a West African country. During the data collection phase, I was located primarily in one small city approximately 90 miles from the capitol of the nation in which the NGO is primarily active. As part of the process, I planned and organized my own experience, including travel plans and the initial contact and negotiations with the NGO.

I had no relationship with the NGO prior to the research project and agreed to volunteer as part of my field experience. As the initial contact, I called the volunteer coordinator with my proposal (and qualifications) and she passed my interest along to the executive director. Volunteering served three purposes: (i) it facilitated my project's approval by the NGO administration and ensured support at the field site, (ii) it offset my own concerns about the intrusiveness of my research by making a contribution to the NGO's operations, and (iii) was a useful means to build rapport with potential study participants and earn some degree of insider status. The volunteer rapport was valuable for recruiting NGO employees and volunteers but negligible for recruiting the West African program participants.

In general, the NGO was open to and supportive of my work. The NGO had never before had a professional educator interested in their programs and were consequently very welcoming. Although some of the original study's findings were not flattering to the NGO and leadership subsequently requested that I not identify the organization in publications, I was permitted virtually unrestricted access and supported generously during data collection and my fieldwork.

As aligned with principles of qualitative research, reflection on the research experience, including an assessment of the researcher's biases and worldviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), is important to the research process. In consideration of the researcher as the research instrument, and in alignment with the philosophical foundations of qualitative research, researchers must cultivate their cultural and interpersonal awareness. In this study, I extend the researcher's reflective process a step further by engaging in an autoethnographic analysis to share my experiences with other researchers and inform my own future work.

Auto-ethnography can be described as "research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). In constructing an argument in favor of biography and autobiography to understand educators' experiences, Dhunpath (2009) suggests such an approach "is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world" (p. 544). Therefore, extending the method to investigate educational researchers as well as educators seems natural.

Four research questions guided the study:

- What activities or actions made the research project possible?
- What were the motivations, hopes, and aspirations of the researcher during fieldwork?
- How did the hopes and aspirations for the research experience differ from the actual experience?
- What issues during fieldwork aided or hindered project success?

Data collection included my field notes, observations, and research and reflective journals, all developed while working on site at the NGO's West African location. I used a

thematic analysis of the qualitative data set as aligned with my various perceived and lived roles to develop findings.

Findings

This study's findings can be grouped according to the various roles I experienced while planning and executing my fieldwork. While I describe some facets of my personal experience elsewhere (Zarestky, In Press), what remains for me to describe and analyze is the intersection of my roles as traveler, volunteer, teacher, and adult learner, and academic researcher. While my perception of filling any one role varied in a given moment, the complexity of decision-making about my positioning as one or another during fieldwork was a constant destabilizing force. Ronai (1998) describes this experience as "having ambiguous role identities" (p. 405). She elaborates, "the researcher role becomes a wild card, a joker, a destabilizer, a dancer, with any identity I might reflect on. When we take on the deconstructed researcher identity, we are transformed into tricksters who dandle about, questioning, playing, toying with any formulation of reality that stands as the paramount reality" (p. 419). And so I experienced my various roles independently of and inextricably connected to one another but always in connection to my primary purpose of researcher. In the following sections, I present select findings pertaining to each role, inasmuch as each can be addressed separately from the others.

Traveler

Regardless of one's purpose, travel to foreign lands can be intimidating. Although I consider myself an experienced and adventurous traveler, the fear of the unknown crept in during the planning stages. Visiting places like West Africa, so different than the US, introduces an additional layer of complexity and anxiety. Challenging issues included health and safety, hygiene, privacy, food, sleep, finances, communication, and transportation. But, like traveling anywhere, patience, resourcefulness, and the willingness to ask questions, repeatedly, can solve most problems.

My connection to the NGO was crucial to my successful experience as a traveler. The staff and other volunteers regularly helped me and other new arrivals negotiate the complexities of transportation, shopping, and inter-cultural communication. Examples from my own observations include the local tendency towards expressing preferences subtly, which is often lost on direct Westerners, and a local frankness about money that causes awkwardness for Westerners reluctant to discuss personal finance. Often miscommunication was a very small incident. For example, to get someone's attention in this region, one hisses. One of the other Western volunteers was under the impression for quite some time that a hiss was like a catcall, disrespectful and sexualized. She hated to walk through town, subjected to the vendors hissing, until someone explained what it really meant. After that, she began hissing herself! Small interactions, like this example, seem so trivial when examined individually but in sum, over time, they have the potential to impact the travel experience and subsequent efficacy in other roles.

Volunteer

My global feminist perspective most substantially impacted the volunteer role; I was hyperaware of my privilege with respect to economic status, educational background, and race. However, in trying to be nonjudgmental and open-minded with locals, I became very judgmental of other Westerners. Because I had spent so much time thinking about appropriate behaviors and attitudes, I was frustrated when I saw other volunteers or NGO employees not thinking about

those ideas. I became aware of my double standards through reflection and the present autoethnographic analysis. My personal strategy for addressing this double standard remains an open question.

Similarly, the true value of my volunteer contribution is another lingering concern. I sincerely wished to engage in meaningful work, but ultimately I believe I had very little impact. Primarily volunteers with little or no instructional expertise led the NGO's educational programs. I developed some materials to guide volunteers through entry-level instructional design strategies and facilitation skills. I also led a workshop on basic mathematics skills at the request of the local women (Zarestky, In Press). I strongly suspect these initiatives were discarded or abandoned after my departure.

Teacher

As a university faculty member (in addition to being a doctoral student), I was challenged to separate out my mentoring and instructional experience during my interactions with other volunteers, primarily traditional undergraduate students from a variety of American and European universities working with the NGO as part of an internship program. With only one exception, my volunteer colleagues were women in their early twenties completing design, marketing, or business degrees, and were not so different from my own undergraduate students at Texas A&M University. I had to constantly resist the urge to advise and educate, and instead focus on being a supportive and respectful peer. While my educational expertise was crucial to my volunteer and research work, it was a hindrance to building relationships with other volunteers.

Researcher

Connecting with the NGO and gaining their support was relatively straightforward, as previously described, but working with participants in the field was a challenge. For example, although my institutions' Institutional Review Board (IRB) waived the documentation of consent, my research documents were still problematic; participants found the study information sheet intimidating because it was quite technical. Finding a balance between qualified professional researcher and relatable, trustworthy human being was a continuous balancing act.

Another challenge was the precedent set by other researchers the NGO had previously permitted to access their participants. Many local women felt burnt out on interviews, which was counterproductive to my own work. One woman stated, "they ask us, they come here, they ask, ask so many questions and [we] don't see anything coming out of it." At other times, women would agree to an interview but then behave in a resistant manner. For example, Edith (a pseudonym) agreed to participate in my study on the condition that I interview her immediately in the NGO's office lobby. Although she gave her consent, Edith's responses were terse and she avoided eye contact with me. My understanding of her from my conversations with NGO staff indicated that she was a very positive and upbeat person, but I got only short answers from her, and sensed her reluctance to elaborate when I would ask follow-up questions. At a loss to understand the situation, I terminated the interview early and gave her a pen (my usual gift to participants), which she seemed pleased to receive. She then used it to take notes in a subsequent training event where she actively voiced her opinions and asked good questions. I believe she spoke more during that event than during my whole interview with her! The interview with Edith was a low point in my data collection because clearly the experience was directly related to me but I could not explain what had gone wrong. Nevertheless, I needed to continue recruiting

participants and conducting interviews. I took a day off to collect my thoughts and regroup and the next interview I conducted was one of the best.

As a second example, my laptop computer died during my second week in West Africa. Certainly there was no Apple store in the area for repairs or replacement. I had redundant copies of all my files stored on an external hard drive and an online file storage website so nothing was lost, but I was technologically crippled until I could restore an old, formerly decommissioned, laptop on loan from the NGO. Switching my notes to pen and paper for a while was an inconvenient but necessary adaptation. Ultimately, my data collection success depended on my persistence and resilience in response to setbacks.

Adult Learner

Lastly, as a learner, I was uncomfortable with the difference between my hopes for the experience and the actual experience. Based on the website and publicity materials, I had high expectations of the NGO's work and anticipated engaging with a robust educational program. I was disappointed that only two educational events occurred during my five weeks of fieldwork. I expected to learn about an NGO's successful educational programs but instead learned how difficult international and cross-cultural collaborations are to run and maintain. I struggled, and still continue to struggle, to accept the NGO's actual contribution to the local context, as opposed to the contribution I had anticipated.

Discussion

From the findings related to the various roles I experienced while planning and executing my fieldwork, the activities and actions that made the research possible were largely based on my willingness to ask questions (beginning with the initial request to the NGO through to participant recruitment), reflect on the appropriateness of my behavior in any given context, and adapt to changing circumstances. No single role guaranteed my success but my movement among roles and ability to draw from or suppress them as the situation required contributed to the necessary resilience for completing the original study.

I had hoped to find an NGO with educational programs that might serve as a positive example for others, staffed by employees and volunteers with a clear vision for their work and an ability to engage with sensitivity in a cross-cultural collaboration. I aspired to effective volunteerism and a data collection process that was respectful of my participants and the organization. In actuality, the NGO's educational programs were struggling from a lack of resources and overreliance on inexperienced student interns and my volunteer work with the educational programs was likely a fleeting contribution. I believe I collected my data with as much sensitivity as a novice researcher can, and the original research will inform my future work, but ultimately the original study had little or no impact for the NGO upon which I focused. Coming to terms with the difference between my hopes and aspirations and the actual experience and outcomes remains a topic for reflection as I continue to develop my research agenda.

During fieldwork, relationships with NGO employees and volunteers were key to successful data collection and navigating a foreign environment. Support from these colleagues enabled me to rebound from setbacks and prevent some common foreigner missteps. Barriers to research were the same as those the NGO itself faced, including business practices grounded in the local West African culture, negotiating the complexities of everyday life (e.g. transportation between sites), and limited resources including both time and money.

Conclusions and Implications

As a result of the present study, I wish to highlight the feasibility of international adult education research while providing some practical insight into the challenges researchers may encounter. International research can be a very isolating and personally disruptive experience in addition to the practical and logistical challenges of working abroad. The present study's findings can inform the strategies and agendas of others who wish to engage in international adult education research. Such research could then be used to expand our field's contribution to the theory and practice of international adult education and engage with issues of globalization and social justice.

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