

Reflections on fieldwork preparation and practice: Stories from New Zealand and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper reflects on my experiences from a doctoral fieldwork trip to my hometown of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The research examines the effectiveness of HIV prevention sex education, using the perspectives of Zimbabwean youth. I begin by reflecting on my New Zealand based pre-fieldwork training. Then, I discuss the process of setting up the participatory action research [PAR] study in Zimbabwe. I explore the importance of in-country support, namely from Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts [IYASA]. This support made the fieldwork logistically possible and added to its local credibility. IYASA connected me to Amakhosi Performing Arts Academy who provided the research venue and supported youth participant recruitment. Youth and teacher [key policy implementers] focus groups were held over approximately two and half months. My key insights are:

- I spent time getting to know the participants outside the research space which helped build research partnership.
- Using creative icebreakers and expressive tools like drama helped support youth voice.

Keywords: HIV prevention, sex education, youth, fieldwork, Zimbabwe

Introduction

This fieldwork story reflects on my experiences from a field research in my hometown of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The field research was part of my doctoral research examining the effectiveness of HIV prevention sex education, using the perspectives of Zimbabwean youth.

Preparation work in New Zealand

PAR is one methodology which falls under the participatory research umbrella, but moves on to incorporate an 'action' change element, in addition to the principles of collaboration and partnership (McIntyre, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). As I was relatively inexperienced in conducting PAR, I decided to invest time in pre-fieldwork practice runs and preparation. Kindon and Elwood (2009) suggested that PAR is to be best taught and learnt through blending theories and practice. This notion challenged me to learn to clearly communicate key research ideas and design; and trial the planned research tools. This mental and practical preparation included organising and facilitating three practice runs which I will elaborate shortly. Later I found that this pre-field research preparation had well prepared me to train my two co-researchers, Beauty and John [pseudonyms], whom I recruited in Bulawayo.

Pre-fieldwork practice runs [July-November 2013]

Initially, the idea of conducting field research by myself in a hometown I barely remembered¹ was daunting. I had never done any participatory action research [PAR] before. I doubted my little research experience in PAR would be sufficient to carry my research in Zimbabwe. Following my proposed research plan, I decided to rehearse my plan prior to my fieldtrip. I

¹ I had lived in Harare, Zimbabwe for a number of years before moving to New Zealand in 2009.

facilitated two focus group discussions and one mock co-researcher training practice with colleagues in New Zealand. Each practice took about 2 ½ to 3 hours. The practices were run in a way to best replicate the real field research to be conducted in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. These practices helped in building my confidence and mentally visualising the real field research, preparing my research organisation skills, securing of research venues and resources.

For practicing training the co-researchers, I invited two students – 1 female and 1 male at Auckland University of Technology [AUT] to help out. According to Soltis-Jarrett (1997), one of the success elements in conducting PAR is the ability of the researcher and his or her team to have open, informal relationships which support a collaborative research process. Later I learnt from the feedback given by my two colleagues who role-played as my co-researchers, that my approach to the training was very structured, authoritative and dominating; hence making it difficult for the co-researchers collaboratively participate. I also found it difficult to communicate the key ideas of PAR in the way I spoke as I was nervous. Thankfully, my practice partners proactively gave me suggestions to improve my listening skills and skills to engage others in a constructive and open dialogue.

From all of these preparation and practice-runs, I noted down a list of ‘things to do’ in the real field research; including the need to: a) intentionally adopt an attitude of a ‘naïve’ inquirer seeking to learn new knowledge. This helped me to create a free and informal research situation where the co-researchers are given the authority and space to try things and experiment; b) start with what the co-researchers have to offer (i.e. knowledge or experiences) and build on from the strength of the co-researchers in shaping the research process c) actively create debrief sessions with the co-researchers to allow for personal or group reflection. Asking questions like “what went well”, “what did not go well” and “what were your insights” after each event or session, was found to be useful. I also endorse the suggestion made by Soltis-Jarrett (1997) in using clear and everyday language in PAR to support participation. I became aware that I could not assume equal shared power in research between the researcher and co-researchers. That power sharing had to be clearly stated and understood by all involved. For example, during the field research in Bulawayo, I explained partnership to the co-researchers as “working together with youth to decide what is done in the groups”. When doing a PAR, the researcher and co-researchers shall allow the research participants to fully participate in the research process. It means that participants also have full authority and power to have a say or offer a suggestion. Negotiation of the research logistics, process, or decisions are essentials in PAR. One of the strategies I used to invite an open dialogue and negotiation was using a flipchart as a means of providing ‘open and clear’ space for all research team members to express their concern, thoughts, ideas or solutions.

Fieldwork in Zimbabwe [February – April 2014]

Prior to my field research, I had developed a strong connection with one youth organisation. Namely IYASA, a theatre organisation. My decision to start building a connection and communication with IYASA prior to my field research was proven to be beneficial. IYASA’s in-country support made the fieldwork logistically feasible and added to its local credibility. So, when I approached organisations for help, having this credibility meant I was often given the information or resources I requested.

I concur with Smith (1999) who highlight the importance of having local support systems to deal with the social, cultural or political circumstances found in the field. Personal support structures, included my extended families and friends, who provided a place to stay, food to eat and importantly, emotional support during the field research. The IYASA director and administrator played the guardian role to me. They helped facilitate my fieldwork journey in the community. Importantly, pre-fieldwork communication meant I was able to establish contact, convince IYASA to benefits of the study and gain their support, before I arrived in Bulawayo.

The informal, kind-hearted nature of IYASA's staff helped me to feel 'safe,' 'well accepted by the community' and for that I felt 'privileged'. With the support from IYASA, I was able to complete my field research within the set timeframe. My insider-outsider identity was best articulated by the IYASA director when I asked him why the organisation was unwaveringly supportive of the study. He said it was because I was born in Bulawayo and "you are one of us", and even though I now lived overseas, I still cared about what happened "back home". All of those sayings, made me feel less of an outcast and that I was welcomed home. Also, the IYASA staff expressed a desire to help one of their "own" make it overseas. Moreover, as an insider-outsider, it was assumed that I would have the local knowledge to produce culturally relevant and specific understanding of the sexual health solutions relevant to youth in Zimbabwe, and especially in Bulawayo.

IYASA also connected me to Amakhosi, a centrally located performing arts academy, who provided the research venue and facilitated the recruitment of youth participants. Thirteen youths aged 18-24 years (seven women and six men) participated in 10 action-orientated focus group discussions [FGD]. In addition, I also facilitated one FGD with five secondary school teachers. IYASA also helped me with recruiting the two co-researchers; obtaining approvals from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to conduct a FGD with the teachers; supporting teacher recruitment; and securing a free venue for the FGD with teachers. As an overseas based researcher, I am convinced of the importance of support from local organisations and community of the research field to achieve the best research outcomes.

Training of the co-researchers

Various critiques of PAR (Hildyard, Hegde, Wolvekamp, & Reddy, 2001; Kothari, 2001) focus on its potentially coercive and tokenistic inclusion of locals, without providing essential methodological training. This challenged me to create a collaborative, creative and inquisitive relationships with my co-researchers. I recruited and trained two local co-researchers, Beauty and John. Both would then run FGDs with the youth groups. I met John via IYASA. Later John introduced and recommended Beauty to become my co-researcher as well. My training approach to Beauty and John focused on harnessing their assets as being locals, young, having good local knowledge and seeking to build their capacity to conduct PAR. I conducted a series of group as well as one-on-one training sessions with Beauty and John. My practices with them focused on how to facilitate FGDs; how to ask the research questions; and how to use the resource materials (which included balloons, sweets, paints and coloured pens). Beauty was the first one who facilitated FGDs with a group of young girls. Beauty then was able to coach John during our 2nd training session. From working with Beauty and John, I concurred my initial beliefs that choosing local youths as my co-researchers was important as they are likely to have good grasps of the relevant knowledge and local issues than I did. Whereas, my research and academic skills were also useful in building their research capacities.

Hanging out with the youth

Once I engaged with the community and young people, I become aware of the imbalanced and diverse power dynamics relationships present in Bulawayo's local contexts (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). I became conscious of my presentation as an overseas based academic in her mid-thirties, from a higher socio-economic bracket, as potentially alienating and intimidating to local youths in Bulawayo. Thus, I began to think of ways to minimise the effect of my power so as to make youth feel comfortable to work with me. Draw on previous experiences working with youth in community development I decided to attend some of the Amakhosi classes; watch youth as they rehearsed their Academy dramas, songs and dances; and regularly walk with them to the bus station.

Inspired by the statement made by PAR researchers like Avison, Lau, Myers, and Nielsen (1999) who emphasizes on the importance of praxis and researcher integrity; they focused on "what

researchers do than on what they say they do” (p. 96). I asked myself “how can I encourage meaningful participation and power-sharing in the research space if the participants and I do not know each other?” So, I decided to start ‘hanging-out’ with the young people studying at Amakhosi. And I also invited Beauty and John to join. By ‘hanging-out’ with those youth participants, Beauty, John and I, were able to informally get to know each other that later helped us to create a research space in which youth felt it was right and okay to voice their perspectives on HIV prevention sex education, question and propose alternatives. Unfortunately, efforts to build rapport and trust with youth research participants are often ignored Punch (2002).

Icebreakers

Using icebreaker games was a useful way to create inclusive conditions and a fun space for youth to express and voice their ideas and thoughts. In Zimbabwe, generally young women find it embarrassing and difficult to have frank discussions about sex (Chikovore, Nystrom, Lindmark, & Ahlberg, 2013; Pattman, 2005). I followed Cahill (2010) who uses drama in work with young people to help youth practice for change. Cahill (2013) argued that the direct, physical and embodied character of theatre-based activities supports participation. I therefore introduced the use of theatre-based icebreaker games to youth participants.

The icebreaker games were designed to be playful, fun, and help build group rapport, confidence and encourage the youths to participate. When engaging in the icebreakers, the youth participants were invited to think and take ownership of voicing their perspectives on HIV prevention sex education, as they were encouraged to use their body, mind and voice to think their ways into the issue. This embodied participation was demonstrated in a number of ways, as follows.

Firstly, Beauty used a theatre-based icebreaker to encourage young women to talk about sex through acting as their chosen characters in a talk show. Participants were asked to physically move, speak and act as the character depicted. Beauty chose the talk show topic, “Let us talk sex”. But, the women were free to add or refuse the characters, which included condom, being faithful, penis, vagina, hairdresser and anti-retro viral drugs. The icebreaker provided the space for women to begin expressing and interrogating each other’s perspectives on sex. The following dialogue facilitated by Beauty, on participants’ perceptions of the different characters illustrates. Participant 1: “On being faithful, we don’t like them because they tell people lies”, participant 2: “... [I liked] being faithful because you will not get HIV”, participant 3: “But what if your partner is not faithful”, participant 2: “It’s good as long as you [both] are faithful”. The activity helped break the ice between the women by diffusing silence and reluctance to talk about sex.

Secondly, John chose to use theatre-based icebreakers for the men’s groups using a ‘free-style rap, poem and song’ to sing/rap their personal experiences of HIV/AIDS, as they stood in a circle. I found this activity emotionally moving as the men passionately voiced the anger, sadness and pain they felt when they lost friends and family to the disease.

Recommendations

Working with locals is important to the success of a fieldwork project, particularly if the coordinating researcher is based overseas. Moreover, investing time informally building relationships with participants supports participant participation.

IYASA’s support contributed to making the fieldwork possible within set timeframes. I was also able to draw on community members and family to help realise fieldwork objectives. By ‘hanging-out’ with participants, we are able to informally get to know each other. This helped create a research space in which participants felt better able to voice and express their perspectives. Using theatre-based icebreakers introduced fun and encouraged social support in

the research space. In these spaces, participants felt confident to question and propose alternative ways of designing and implementing HIV prevention sex education.

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