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Challenges of ethnographic research in Zimbabwe's political, economic, and social context amid SARS-Cov-2 pandemic

Abstract

The global pandemic is affecting the way we conduct field research: instead of suspending conventional ethnographic field research altogether, alternative methods of research that take social distancing into consideration will be adequately used as a plausible way forward to the social impasse. The topic of my discussion is how I will transform my ethnographic fieldwork to suit the current global SARS-Cov-2 pandemic.

Introduction

We are going through an exogenous shock of having to redefine the conventional methods of research as a control measure of infections emanating from SARS-Cov-2 pandemic. It marks the current situation as an acute crisis that is still unpredictable hence it will shape the lives of many players in socio/economic and academic environments. This paper seeks to direct attention to how my fieldwork will be done under the lockdown conditions. How will my research adapt to desired ethnographic ecosystems: a situation where e.g. gold standards in qualitative face-to-face interview with focus groups, collaboration to analyze data, dissemination of findings at conferences are no longer feasible due to physical distancing.

Given restrictive measures due to the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, the traditional methods of conducting research must be modified but not without its challenges. We see a new era of digital technology taking center stage in research

methodologies and the ethical values getting more attention in new adopted remote methods of research. The current pandemic demands double effort in responding to the crisis, capacity to adequately apply information technology to research and the modification of traditional methods of qualitative research especially, how are we to ensure inclusivity in our research. The invisible financial implications to acquire the relevant digital equipment could be another challenge.

My research desiderata carefully problematize historical timelines that provide insight on how violence is remembered, transmitted, forgotten, not addressed, and addressed in Zimbabwe. South Africa will be the reference point in qualitative and quantitative analysis of researched work. It is also important to analyse immediate and indirect consequences of violence on individuals, marginalized ethnic groups and political organisations. This field of study also presents renewed urgency in unpacking psychological impacts of violence linking it with historical and political anthropology of Zimbabwe and South Africa. Embarking on research on violence is necessitated by complexities- and the magnitude of violence currently bedevilling societies in Zimbabwe. Communities experience direct violence that includes torture, war, gun violence, physical and emotional violence, rape, murder, domestic violence daily, directed at people with a clear subject, object, and actions.

Challenges of ethnographic research on violence amid SARS-Covid-2

Even in the absence of SARS-Cov-2, ethnographic research on violence in southern Africa faces many challenges. There are reasons for weak research activities on violence: Most countries are suffering chronic economic crisis; some governments are autocratic; they barely allow scrutiny in their past violent timelines. Again, there is scarcity and unreliable quantitative data; research is mostly qualitative. Systematic comparison methods in quantitative research between African countries are required to strengthen the quality of research results.

Violence in Zimbabwe is closely related to perspectives in political context and historicity of violence behind it. There is evidence of previous research that focuses mostly on private violence; domestic, social criminals, armed groups, an increasing number of security companies interpreted as privatization of organized regulated violence in Zimbabwe, seemingly becoming daughter metastasis of the violent events of the past.

Veit et al (2011) in their article: *Violence and violent research in Africa south of the Sahara* pose suggestions about the research on the episteme of violence in southern Africa. It should be best done by the indigenous scholars for many reasons: Discourses on state-violence and other excesses of societal violence exposes serious human rights abuses on the citizens they purport to have liberated. Academic scrutiny coming from researchers of European descent are strangely accused of race bias which puts the colonial guilt into center stage.

There is scarce research about violence in the liberation timelines especially by those who were victims of it: As a victim of violence in liberation struggle, my research on violence seeks to delve mainly into those dark times of our struggle for independence that can give us much needed information on how the myriad forms violence of generations is remembered, transmitted, forgotten, not addressed, and addressed in the course of Zimbabwean historicity both pre- colonial and in the postcolonial context.

New adopted ethnographic methodologies

Drifting away from conventional qualitative fieldwork to remote acquisition of data is necessitated by the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic. Ethnographic research approach changes will adopt a new and suitable means of communication that accommodates social distancing. I envisage targeting specific groups of people, focus groups,

eminent war veterans, institutions, and organisations in both in towns, cities and in rural areas. A combination of immersive approaches will be the modus operandi such as one-to-one interviews mediated by information technology. Participants and nonparticipant observations, data sampling techniques, media archives will be used: reviews of archival documents in colleges, museums and libraries, and media houses, questionnaire forms, artifacts and interviews are planned.

How does SARS-Cov-2 change my research?

I am obliged to create unique research methods that do not have precedents to commonly known conventional research methods. The inter-professional research in this case is a situation whereby researchers twin up to complement each other in a mutual research project. The international research collaboration between partner researchers will allow pooling of research data of mutual interest. I have twined my research with Mr. Themba Chivheyo in Zimbabwe who will initiate some of the fieldwork on the ground for me. His own PhD research is dependent on my research findings and analysis. (Themba Chivheyo's research proposal is seeking solutions on violence: I am unpacking root causes of societal violence) These two research proposals complement each other.

Research will be more desk-based; data archives will be used extensively to access print media, news – TV, radio[1], magazines articles, textbooks broadcast media, autobiographies, blogs, textbooks, websites, political speeches, and debates, online surveys, Online methodologies will be used; Zoom, Skype, WebEx, WhatsApp's, conferences will replace face-to-face participatory research to comply with social distancing global guidelines, Lupton (2020). This attracts changes in ethical reviews: what will be accepted, how anonymity and privacy of focus groups will be protected and the potential risks to confidentiality, British Psychology Society (2017).

Utilizing Ntombi-Langa Radio project to conduct ethnographic research

Radio is Africa's most important source of information. It reaches for more people than any other media in the continent. Nine out of ten families in Sub-Saharan-Africa have access to radio. Ntombi-Langa Radio project was initiated by a group of Zimbabwean women whose purpose was to give women in communities a voice and platform where they can share diverse information concerning daily life challenges of women and under-aged girls. It is envisaged that this radio project will get down to business at the beginning of January 2021 when formalities related to establishing it in Bremen are finalized.

Ntombi-Langa Radio debates are expected to tackle a wide range of issues on various forms including societal violence such as femicide; child abuse; child labor; child marriages; domestic violence; child prostitution; prostitution; human trafficking. Some of the themes in Ntombi-Langa Radio broadcasting programs are daughter metastasis of violence I want to address in my field research: the myriad forms of violence auger well with my research objectives on violence, providing a platform and an golden opportunity to tape into the radio broadcasting content, putting adequate ethical considerations into context.

Ntombi-Langa Radio project is Bremen based (see picture below): As co-founder of this unique project, it provides opportunities for me to access relevant technical equipment to conduct remote research. You'll find the Community Radio Bremen introducing the Ntombi-Langa Radio project to the wider world:

Ntombi-Langa Radio. Photo: Nomazulu Thata.

What shifts in research content are taking place?

There is more dependence and reliance on acquisition of remote data collected. Missing information on how participants react to emotive questions relating to violence omits the research content. Research leans more on external work such as edited print media, news, articles, and textbooks, it removes the authenticity of individual input. Some targeted groups may not be accessed on-line because of lack of a Wi-Fi especially people living in rural areas who have in-depth knowledge about past atrocities that took place in their areas. Hence, it is arguable and contestable if remote data acquisition can replace the content and substance of empirical material.

What methodological challenges (or opportunities) are emerging?

Online guided interviews, online discussion platforms, story completion methods, and app-based methods will be used taking great care and attention of loss of relevant information. Audio-diaries are a good online method of data collecting whereby participants record multiple answers to selected questions. However, challenges include the access to software needed for research at home, the capacity to understand the application of the new technologies and the ethical implications of remote data acquisition.

Which ethical questions must be asked?

Since this researchwork touches highly emotional topics related to a magnitude of incidences of deaths, destruction and disappearances of individuals in the liberation movements, and after independence, as well as political aspects, preparations are necessary to minimize the risk of harm to participants. It is therefore important to get active consent from my participants, respecting the right of their privacy and confidentiality, trying to minimize the risks.

What structural difficulties am I confronted with?

Field work on violence is directly and indirectly investigating the government of Zimbabwe during the struggle for independence and after independence: which can be a problem. On the other hand, providing information is generally associated with fear. There is an inherent “culture of silence” in the general populace especially from women. The alternative research methods have dependency aspect because information from archives and institutions will be accessed through communication with persons in charge of them in Zimbabwe and South Africa. It will take time to understand remote working conditions because it demands a different time than fieldwork on site.

The autumn seminar of DGSKA should foster exchange of knowledge on how to adjust to ethnographic research challenges in the SARS-Cov-2 era. For me it is interesting to learn how contributions of my research participants could assist in my research methodology during the pandemic.

Nomazulu Thata is an academic, an activist, and an author of books and essays. She is currently working on a research proposal that will seek approval by the PhD Committee; Universität Bremen. The positive response of her PhD-research proposal by the University body will formally enable her to embark on a Doctorate program at the department of Anthropology and Cultural Research Bremen. Contact: Nomazulu.thata(at)hotmail.com

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Footnote

[1] Ntombi-Langa Radio will create access for listening to a myriad of storytelling related to violence in communities.

References

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