Field research ethical challenges in a post–conflict Rwandan society: mistrust experienced in data collection in Kigali City

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Abstract

Field research in a post-conflict society brings about the concern of 'mistrust'. Due to bad experiences endured, people in such a society are plagued with fear and suspicion to talk about some topics. This happens while the researcher is also required to adhere to research ethics and collect much-needed baseline data. From his experience while he was conducting his PhD research on the informal urbanization and modernization of the City of Kigali, the author explains how he managed to deal with the informants who feared to criticize urban development policies and implementation strategies. The study recommends researchers in a mistrust context, to use different types of data collection methods and to take enough time to gain trust and confidence of informants to discuss on presumed sensitive topics.

Keywords: *Fieldwork, research ethics, mistrust, good data, Kigali City*

1. Introduction

Doing research is not an easy task. It is a demanding process which involves different stages and in which a researcher confronts different contexts and deals with various issues as well as categories of people. Research becomes more difficult when it is being conducted in a problematic situation like war or post-conflict environment that requires applying particular ethical considerations (Thomson, Ansoms & Murison, 2013; Rimando et al, 2015).

Doctoral research is not also an easy task. From its beginning to its completion, there are challenges that are encountered at different stages which can be related to the choice of topic, supervisory team, methodology, study participants, collaborating institutions and field data collection process(David & Resnik, 2015). Concerning the last challenge, which is about data collection, many questions raise up about the quality of data and how to get them. Some of those questions are: What are good data? Where to collect good data? Who is the best provider of good data and how to collect accurate data? All these questions are part of what we can assume as the most important questions which any research relies on is: How to deal with the field for collecting good data? This question is relevant because it particularly engages the researcher to manage different tools leading to a successfulcompletion of his research task.

In this article, the emphasis is on ways a PhD researcher manages field challenges to get accurate or non-biased field data without compromising research ethics, by applying specific strategies depending on the particularity of the field. The author shares his own experience on how he managed to conduct his PhD research on a theme that confronts controversial implications. The topic was about the process of formal and informal urbanization that has been taking place in the City of Kigali over the last two decades. On one hand, the research had to describe the process of the modernization of the city basing on the information collected from the city managers, who were committed to eradicate unplanned settlement. On the other hand, the research had to explain the process of informal settlement by low-income urban dwellers who rely on using the informal process to secure their housing accessibility and affordability in Kigali.

The main focus of this paper is on a mistrust environment in which the fieldwork was conducted. In his methodology, the author describes an ambiguous situation he experienced during data collection, to enlighten how participants were reluctant to release clear and first-hand information; and to challenge his interaction with informants

who, at the same time, openly agree but quietly disagree with formal urban development schemes concerning housing and land use in Kigali City. He confronts his experience with the specific literature on related research theme. Hence, the paper reports on the researcher's reflection on his doctoral field research process. It attempts to answer the following research question: What strategies to apply for collecting reliable data in a mistrust environment? The author argues that the researcher should establish a friendly and trustful environment with research informants, provide enough time to interact with informants and combine different methodologies in data collection.

The overall aim of this paper was to share some tricks that were applied to get out of unpredicted fieldwork challenges. The author's reflection on lived experience will be useful for other researchers, especially doctoral students who may be working on pragmatic topics such quality of education in Rwanda which uses to raise debate among various stakeholders in education.

Regarding the overall structure of the paper, this article is made up of introduction followed by three sections: The first section briefly overviews research ethics and fieldwork challenges. The second one concerns the author's involvement in the research 'in' and 'on' the city of Kigali. The third section discusses the strategies to deal with field challenges when collecting data. It ends with concluding remarks.

2. Overview of literature on research ethics and fieldwork challenges

2.1. The research ethics

The concept of "ethics" refers to rules that distinguish between right and wrong, or norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (David & Resnik, 2015). According to these authors, those norms are acquired in different social settings such as home, school or church. Ethical norms or principles guide the society, the community or any group of people who share activities or profession. They constitute a guideline and framework to ensure a conducive interaction or a less-conflict environment, and facilitate interpersonal relationships between people engaged for a common goal in their daily lives. Beauchamp and Childress (1979) set general ethical principles in five categories, namely (i) respecting autonomy or acting as a free agent, (ii) doing no harm or non maleficence, (iii) benefiting others or beneficence, (iv) being just or justice, and (v) being faithful or fidelity.

Compared to rules, ethics principles are broader and more informal, but depending on the area of application, they become legal rules that govern behaviour in a specific domain such as research. As David and Resnik (2015) argue, research ethics are the rules that govern research and ensure participants and researchers to act in a fair, safe and righteous manner. For other domains, they posit that research has a particular framework to be applied all along its stages, particularly during data collection (David & Resnik, 2015). This is because data are supposed to influence many changes in the society. Any researcher has to keep in mind that results from the study are needed, that they have to be disseminated widely and that they can be used to implement or revise a program as well as to influence a new policy formulation or to revise an existing one (Woodruff, et al. 2010).

Despite the diversity of research areas like social sciences, education, economics, psychology, or public health; there are specific sets of rules to direct members of research domains or institutions to maintain strict ethical standards. For instance, it is a common practice that any data collection requires the approval and the engagement of the community, as well as their voluntary participation. In addition, the following are five examples of code of research ethics that are randomly selected to help to identify the key research ethics:

Firstly, the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2007) indorses to respect the following ethical principles for conducting research with human participants: (i) consent with participants by informing them about the objectives of the investigation and all aspects of the research to influence their willingness to participate; (ii) appropriate consultation and debriefing before investigation to avoid deception; (iii) informing the participants about their right to withdraw from the research at any time; (iv) protect participants; giving them advice; and (v) keeping confidentiality and /or anonymity.

Secondly, The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code (2002) suggests five principles for research ethics, and these are to: (i) discuss intellectual property frankly; (ii) be conscious of multiple roles; (iii) follow informed-consent rules; (iv) respect confidentiality and privacy and; (iv) tap into ethics resources, like knowing ethical obligations and resources that are available for them.

Thirdly, The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics in the United Kingdom[4] recommends six key ethics principles, namely to (i) design and review research to ensure integrity and quality; (ii) fully inform research staff and subjects about the purpose; (iii) inform them about the methods and intended uses of the research; (iv) respect confidentiality of information and the anonymity of respondents; (v) freely participate from any coercion; avoid harm to research participants and make clear the independence of research and (vi) explicit any conflicts of interest or partiality.

Fourthly, Shamoo and Resnik (2015) indicate that the Codes and Policies for Research Ethics must include honesty, objectivity, integrity, carefulness, openness, respect for intellectual property, confidentiality, responsible publication like avoiding wasteful and duplicative publication, responsible mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, competence, legality, animal care and human subjects protection.

Lastly, the basic standards in social research to which all kinds of research should abide, according to the University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC)[5]include: (i) Proper identification of the researcher; (ii) clear information as to the type of questions; (iii) concern with the welfare of the respondents; (iv) free and informed consent (no pressure on or deceiving the respondents); (v) right to privacy, sensitive issues or answering questions they dislike; (vi) right to anonymity and to confidentiality.

These examples show that different research codes of conduct insist on the value of intellectual property, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of participants. Therefore, in case these aspects are not guaranteed, the informants must be warned in advance, and then agree to participate.

2.2 Challenges related to field data collection

Fieldwork challenges can be regarded from the sides of researcher, field environment, resources and the process of data collection itself. Rimando, et al. (2015) report about fieldwork challenges related to the researcher, including participants' resistance to participation; way of dressing for an interview, either formal or informal clothes; lack of experience to conduct interviews and feelings of isolation from peers and other researchers. They categorise challenges under five themes, namely (i) location, (ii) data collection instrument like language, (iii) duration of data collection, (iv) researcher's fatigue, and (v) release of sensitive information.

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[4]http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/key-ethics-principles-15
[5]https://study.cardiffmet.ac.uk/AcSkills/Documents/Research/Research_Ethics_elesson/page_03.htm

Research environment challenges also have an impact on researcher and participants' safety. For example, research studies that take place in complex socio-political and cultural contexts where participants are not allowed to talk freely or with limited interactions between researchers and participants, are often terrifying. Another example is about war and conflict areas. For instance, it currently seems to be complicated to collect data in the war areas of Somalia, Iraq and Syria. Likewise, discussions or opinions on some political ideologies and other sensitive topics like terrorism, Islam, Nazism, genocide among others may raise socio-political or religious disagreements that can affect researchers or authors' safety; and an example of such cases is the terrorism strike against Charlie Hebdo writers in 2015 in France (Bilefsky &De la Baumejan, 2015).

The Great Lakes Region is not privileged of research challenges. This is due to different civil wars, killings and atrocities including the 1994 Genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The evidence can be found in the book edited by Thomson, Ansoms and Murison (2013) entitled "*Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa. The Story Behind Findings*". In this book, the contributors relate their field experiences with different types of fieldwork issues in Great Lakes Region. Below is a sample of those issues:

As a humanitarian at the beginning and an anthropologist PhD candidate later, Jourdan (2013) conducted his fieldwork in war zone in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The challenges he faced include the conflict under study itself which was difficult to handle, the participants who were reluctant to work with the organizations and individuals, as well as his security. He argues that he sometimes had to renegotiate and even reverse his position of privilege instead of making profit of it.

While he was conducting his research in war zone of Northern Uganda, in Gulu town, Ogora (2013) showed how he was exposed to physical danger; how challenging it was to interview traumatized victims and witnesses of horrible atrocities; and the dilemma of giving money to respondents for their testimony and time compensation.

Vorrath (2013) also experienced such problems of respondents' accessibility in his research on political conflicts in Burundi as she struggled to interview political elites. The challenge was not only to reach offices in the city where the use of street address is rare, but also the methodological procedures to interact with those Very Important Persons (VIPs) and talk about a 'serious' topic they have been involved in.

In Rwanda, some studies also experienced challenges related to the researcher and the research environment (Ansoms, 2013; Begley, 2013& Bouka, 2013). Regarding the researcher's challenges, Ansoms (2013) could not understand the motivation of her research on peasants' livelihoods in rural Rwanda after more than ten years. She could not realise how the peasants interpreted her identity as a European researcher and final the utility of the research. As for research environment challenges, Begley (2013) got difficulties to conduct a socio-political investigation on genocide ideology in fear and suspicion settings. Likewise, in the research on Rwanda's justice discourse, Bouka (2013) struggled to get the truth from released prisoners of the genocide whose response to any question was "No problem". In fact, people feared to comment openly on socio-political issues and used different narrative manners that are difficult to interpret, as she summarizes it as follows: "*The intimacy of the state's power over ordinary Rwandans causes many respondents to use a variety of narrative strategies to covertly discourse on justice. Consequently, in order to appropriately interpret the data at hand and allow vulnerable respondents to have a voice, the researcher must be familiar with the grammar of those narrative strategies*" (Bouka, 2013, p.108). This may insinuate that it does not only apply in justice but also in other research areas that involve sensitive topics.

The aforementioned experiences inform about difficulties of conducting fieldwork in complex contexts and the huge task for researchers to control them. In this regard, Thomson, Ansoms and Murison (2013) highlight three tricks to deal with fieldwork in such controversial research environments: The first one is to roll with it by keeping adaptability, flexibility and patience. The second trick is to focus on quality over quantity when collecting data. The third one is to manage unpredictability; that is to control and cope with social-political context and emotional stressors. The next two sections present my own research experience and how I coped with mistrust environment when I was conducting fieldwork in the City of Kigali.

3. Lived experience with data collection on informal urbanization and modernization of Kigali City

3.1Snapshoton my PhD research framework and findings

Over the last two decades, Kigali City has been experiencing rapid population growth and remarkable urban renewal as indicated by mushrooming luxury residential and office buildings, infrastructural development and a clean city. Kigali City is envisioned to be "a place that is attractive and supportive of business and investments, both within the Central/East African region and within the world's economy" (City of Kigali, 2002, p.9). However, despite policies and strategies that were set for that ambition, uncontrolled urban growth, land use and housing availability as well as affordability remain topical issues impinging on Kigali City's sustainable development. It has been observed that spontaneous settlements by low-income households often represent the only strategy for the poor to settle in the City, and they are likely to continue in the fringes (Manirakiza, 2014).

It is within this framework that my PhD research explored the challenges about informal urbanisation in the context of the modernisation of Kigali city (Manirakiza, 2015). This study was conducted from the year 2010 to 2015 and its main objective was to analyse the effect of urban planning schemes on informal urbanisation and substantial impact on socio-environment living conditions of the urban residents. The data were collected in 13 neighbourhoods/villages through a quantitative survey on a sample of 360 participants. In-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups discussions were held with 63 participants including land brokers, native residents, local leaders and real-estate promoters. I also made profit of participant observation and a workshop with urban policies planners and implementers.

The study identified the following five main factors of informal urbanisation of Kigali City (Manirakiza, 2015):

– The developed residential sites are limited, leading to insufficiency of developed plots. This causes land competition and grabbing of affordable sites that are designed for low-income categories. Therefore, people informally settle in non-developed zones and in the peri-urban areas;

– Long, costly and bureaucratic process in accessing and getting construction permits;

– Accepted housing standards that are too demanding;

– Expropriation with low compensation and without relocation of evicted households. Only 5% of expropriated households stay in redeveloped zones while others settle in the surroundings;

– Land and housing markets are speculative and unaffordable by the large majority.

These findings seem to indicate that urban policies and schemes do not fully facilitate the poor to legally settle in the City of Kigali.

3.2 Mistrust challenges experienced during data collection in Kigali City

Investigating people who are reluctant to participate in a research is not an easy task. It requires enough preparation, efforts, motivation, diligence and patience. It is even to be noted that the participation in the general census or other

large-scale official surveys in Rwanda necessitate an intensive sensitization of the population. My interpretation about this reluctance to give information can be related, on one hand and in a general context, to the political and ethnic conflicts that the country has endured and which resulted to the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, and due to the fear of criticizing some public policies as highlighted Bouka (2013). On the other hand, and in a specific context, people seem to worry that research findings may be used for purposes other than the stated objectives or about subsequent measures on behalf of the informant. An illustrative example about this is the classification of households in categories of poverty known as "*Ubudehe*", of health insurance or the determination of individual contribution to local development activities or projects according to the socio-economic status. Some people complain that they were put in the categories that do not match with their economic status basing on the information they provided in different surveys (Manirakiza, 2015).

My experience with reluctance in getting information in my research in Kigali was mainly about the process of constructing houses without permit and to revealwhether there is room of corruption in those illegal procedures. The study findings indicated that giving such information can be followed by serious measures like the imprisonment of concerned local leaders or destruction of those illegally constructed houses (Manirakiza, 2015).

Regarding the issue of mistrust, the evidence from my field research revealed that mistrust is firstly observed at institutional level. For example, getting an official authorization as a prerequisite to conduct a research sometimes takes long because the concerned leaders take time to investigate on its implications as well as the researcher's identity before authorizing it. For the case under analysis in this paper, this process could be long at the city or districts levels,and some Executive Secretaries at sector level may refuse to take that responsibility. The mistrust was also observed among local leaders who requested to keep their anonymity as well as among the residents who were reluctant to disclose the first-hand information. There was also a little chance of audio or video-recording the informants' views.

Furthermore, people were not consistent and open for discussions. In the course of interviews, their opinions about urban development policies and mechanisms were changing from time to time. At the beginning of an interview, they confirmed that the city is developing without excluding the poor; that urban planning schemes are coherent and well set to allow everyone to settle in the city; and that there is no room of corruption in land and building matters. However, when confidentiality was guaranteed, the respondents gave examples or shared personal experiences to support their different opinions. For example, the finding from my research revealed that over 90 % of respondents confirmed that urban development mechanisms contribute to the high cost of plots, houses and increase of rent. Similarly, 76% of respondents confirmed that urban development mechanisms are favourable for rich people who live in planned neighbourhoods and exclude the small-scale urban dwellers who live informal neighbourhoods. As one informant put it:"*Everything is made available for the rich. The poor is left to himself. Plots are produced and serviced for the rich only and the poor people find themselves in undeveloped areas without basic equipment*" (Manirakiza, 2015:232).

4. Strategies for dealing with fieldwork in mistrustful environment

In a situation similar to the one of the City of Kigali, specific research ethics and strategies have to be applied to ensure that reliable data are collected. The researcher is highly requested to ensure an open working setting with the informants before proceeding to the investigation. S/he must convince them with the research purpose and assure

them that research is officially being conducted. (Rimando et al, 2015; Sales & Folkman,2000; Shamoo & Resnik, 2015).In addition, the research assistants have to be well trained and debriefed about the decent way to interact with informants. From personal experience and from the literature on research ethics, the following strategies can apply for field research in a mistrust situation:

Strategy 1: To establish a friendly and trustful environment with participants
One of the key rules of the research ethics is the voluntary participation. However, to accept does not guarantee to give accurate information. Apart from explaining research objectives, ensuring the confidentiality and the consent with the participants, a researcher needs to create an adapted and trustful environment. The best way to do it is to interact with the informants using emphatic listening skills. However, when dealing with victims of policy implementation measures, the friendly interaction is likely to be their occasion to request for advocacy. In fact, in the post-conflict society, people tend to expect that a survey is intended to identify vulnerable groups for financial support. In such circumstances, their views can be biased. The researcher's role is therefore to develop appropriate devices to deduce respondents' views and integrate them in the research context.

Strategy 2: To provide enough time to interact with informants

The provision of sufficient time for the interview helps to progressively discover the identity of the informant and to properly interpret his/her responses basing on his/her background. In addition, respondents get time to freely express their ideas, to give accurate examples and eventually to draw suggestions to some issues. The number of interviews conducted per day might not matter. For instance, in my field research, four to six interviews per day were enough depending on the availability of participants.

Strategy 3: To use mixed research methods and to ask the same question differently and several times

In mistrust context, the use of one research technique or one data collection tool, like a structured questionnaire, cannot ensure the collection of adequate data. It is better to combine several methodologies such as in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions and the participatory approach where appropriate and apply open-ended questions that allow people to talk freely. The triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments is highly recommended. Asking the same question in another perspective and several times is also another important trick as it allows the cross-check and verification of the responses.

Strategy 4: To set a proper research timeline

Any research is to be designed in a reasonable timeline because, in a post-conflict context, policies change and several reforms take place from time to time due to the process of reconstruction, as it has been the case in Rwanda. For instance, it has been difficult to establish a spatial and demographic evolution of the City of Kigali in recent period because of three successive administrative reforms that took place in 1990, 2000 and 2005 that changed the administrative boundaries of the city.

These four strategies used in my research in Kigali allowed to collect reliable data in an environment that does not affect the research integrity. They are in congruence with three tricks to deal with fieldwork in controversial research environments as mentioned by Ansoms and Murison (2013) that are to roll with the environment by keeping adaptability, flexibility and patience; to focus on quality over quantity in data collection and to control and cope with social-political context and emotional stressors. They are also in line with research ethics highlighted above and other strategies used by other researchers. To establish a friendly and trustful environment with participants is by principle the requirement ethics for any research activity (APA, 2002; BPS, 2007; Shamoo & Resnik, 2015). In the same regard,

providing enough time to interact with informants (Vorrath, 2013) and combining different methodologies for the sake of complementarities and crosschecking the information (Ansoms, 2013) are very important procedures in data collection.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Researchers face different ethical dilemmas during fieldwork, especially in post-conflict societies where the political settings pose challenges to conduct meaningful research. However, the most important principle is that the investigation must give priority to participants' integrity, predict and avoid threats to their well-being and security. In addition, whatever the context of the study, be it during peace, conflict or post-conflict period, scientific research always deals with reality and objectivity. Without compromising research ethics, the researcher has to keep objectivity and mobilization based on contextually adapted procedures to get adequate data.

This paper has explored the challenges that face researchers during field data collection process in a mistrust environment and has suggested some strategies to overcome those challenges. Its main goal was to share experience with doctoral students and early career researchers so as to inform them on how they can shape and handle some research processes in particular settings.

Brief, this paper argues that conducting research in the City of Kigali or in post – genocide Rwanda in general requires managing the context very well. This implies to apply different skills and strategies, to have sufficient knowledge about the field environment and to strategically predict the role and limitations of the actors involved in research, either at individual, public or private institution levels. That is why the focus of this paper was about 'dealing with fieldwork in mistrustful environment'. In fact, the socio-political context may not always allow people to exchange freely and make critics on different issues. Some targeted participants might be unwilling to participate in the research; others might show uncertainty, but the researcher has to manoeuvre to progress with data collection.

Hence, while collecting data in a mistrust context, the researcher is called to develop skills to stimulate participants to talk, to appropriately interpret their views but also to keep in mind the principle of 'doing no harm' to any participant as one of the golden rules of the research. It is also the researcher's responsibility to protect him/her and to respect his/her informants' research ethics as operationalized in terms of informed consent, confidentiality and integrity.

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