

The challenges of democratisation: the role of civilian society

Ethics of asymmetrical relationships evolving from doing comparative studies in poverty research

When entering the field of comparative studies on poverty, researchers face a whole set of ethical issues which are seldom made visible. These issues run as an undercurrent in the relationship between the researchers and the people studied, and in the relationship between researchers from different cultures. At times, this undercurrent is so strong that it hampers carrying out such studies, and influences their results. In the following, it is argued that studying ethical issues is part of the methodology of doing comparative poverty research. The focus is on behaviour and attitudes emerging through interaction with the poor and with research partners from different cultures.

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Two sets of issues

There are at least two sets of issues which should be kept apart.

On the one hand, there are the ethical issues involved in doing poverty research, wherever such research occurs. Doing research on other people's misery always brings the researcher into an area where the borderline between ethical and unethical behaviour is very thin.

The researcher is, by definition, a more affluent person than the person being studied. Even the most dedicated researcher living in the slums on the same terms as the poor has the option of moving on when the study is over.

On the other hand, comparative studies of poverty involving both developed and developing countries bring about ethical problems for researchers coming from both sides.

The poverty in some of the developing countries is extreme, as exemplified by the perpetual lack of basic commodities, outbursts of famine and epidemics, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, vulnerability to natural catastrophes and international conflicts, and little hope of any change which will better the lives of the majority of the population. It is estimated that thirty million people on the African continent are on the brink of dying from starvation, and no improvement is in sight (Report from Perez de Cuellar to ECOSOC, 1991).

The incongruity in poverty between developed and developing countries makes studies of urban poverty in the United States or Britain look like academic games, let alone studies of «new» poverty in the Scandinavian welfare states.

Faced with such facts, how do researchers from non-poor countries relate to colleagues from developing countries when engaging in comparative studies, and vice versa? How do they cope emotionally as human beings, and how do they cope as researchers?

Ethical Issues Involved in Doing Poverty Research

Several approaches to understanding ethical issues involved in doing poverty research are available. First of all, there are the general ethical guidelines for doing social science research. They are manifested through teaching of students, in control of the social science professions and writings (see for example Tom L. Beauchamp et al., *Ethical Issues in Social Science Research*, 1982), without forgetting general norms for decent behaviour in social interaction (Søren Krarup, *Begrepet anstaendighed – udkast til en kristen etik*, 1985). Lately, some of the guidelines have been written into legal form in order to protect researchers and their employees from liability suits. Other legal guidelines developed during the last ten years aim at protecting the privacy and consent of the persons being studied.

Supplementary norms are found in guidelines for social scientists working in the field, that is, researchers who are in close contact with the persons they are studying, over a longer time span. It is in particular the social anthropologists who have developed these guidelines. But the guidelines have several purposes. They are used both as a research instrument, that is they help secure valid and reliable data, and as an instrument for smooth interaction with the persons being studied.

Another set of norms which have had an impact on the social sciences are found in the clinical

professions, including the social workers. The emphasis on the individual, rather than on a collective of individuals, calls for a different attitude to the persons being studied. If the individual is seen as a multi-faceted person, rather than being portrayed through a few, or even a single, characteristic, the person being studied is more likely to be treated as a real person.

The question here is, of course, whether the ethical issues, norms, and guidelines belonging to social science research in general, are any different in poverty research?

For example, are data from the poor obtained in the same way they are obtained from the non-poor, or the not-so-poor? The answer is most likely negative. Experience shows that it is more difficult to obtain reliable and valid data from the poor. It also takes longer to obtain the data. This affects the research methodology. But does it also affect the interaction between the researcher and the persons being studied?

Are the poor treated by the researchers in the same way as the non-poor or not-so-poor would be treated? Is the privacy of the poor protected, for example, or is it a characteristic of poverty that privacy is already forfeited, and therefore needs much less protection? Is the consent of a poor person with no access to the legal world considered important? Is time considered wasted in order to obtain informed consent from the poor part of the population?

In other words, is the relationship between the researcher and the poor person so asymmetrical that the otherwise accepted ethical rules of the game are set aside?

Ethical Issues Involved in Doing Comparative Studies

Doing comparative studies is a lengthy and time consuming process. Linking up with the right kind of partners, sorting out the academic content of the project, and carrying out the many practical details necessary for a successful project, much of it done at a distance, calls for more patience than most researchers are willing to bear. It is a prime example of decision-making under a high degree of uncertainty.

Along the way, guidelines have to be established on how duties, responsibilities, resources and results are to be allocated and shared. Through this process, patterns of interaction emerge.

Researchers from developed countries are on the average more affluent and control a more powerful infrastructure than researchers from developing countries. They are also brought up within a social science tradition which for a long time has taken its hegemony for granted. These circumstances are likely to create an asymmetrical relationship between researchers from developed countries and researchers from developing countries, along several lines.

There are Latin American social scientists, for example, who for a long time have been sceptical of their Western colleagues. In the 50's and 60's Western theories of development and modernisation, in sociology as well as in political science and economics, zoomed in on the «undeveloped» countries and paved the way for an analysis coined in Western terms. Latin American scholars in good faith were instrumental in adapting the ideas embedded in these theories for political implementation. The analysis and conceptual tools proved inadequate, theoretically as well as politically, and the results were disastrous (Calderon and Piscitelli, 1990).

There are African social scientists who have launched the concept of «**afro-pessimism**». On the one hand, it expresses the extreme frustration of living in a battered continent, begging the North for mercy, and knowing that the future holds very little in store for the majority of those living in poverty. On the other hand, it expresses a weariness with verbally well-meaning colleagues in the wealthier countries who never become decoded enough to enter a real dialogue about the specific nature of African culture. Tired of begging for understanding, now there are African scholars who are withdrawing from the international scene, trying to develop an «**African social science**» (Mutiso, 1991).

Doing comparative studies not only implies overcoming cultural differences in the implementation of the project, it also calls for strategies from both sides in coping with the asymmetrical relationships. The outcome of these coping strategies will have an impact on the project. Ethical issues may also have to compete with professional issues in such relationships, for example in questions concerning who has the right to give advice to whom, and who is accountable for the use of resources.

Conflict of Interest between Researchers from Different Cultures

Among other things, coming from different cultures means that poverty researchers are subjected to different political and social realities.

In political discussions in developing countries, for example, theories of economic growth are closely linked to theories of development and strategies for reducing poverty. The notion

of economic growth has become a powerful symbol for developing countries in their striving towards a more manageable economy. At the same time, for the advanced industrial countries, economic growth has become a goal in itself, as a means towards decreasing unemployment and increasing wealth. The demand for economic growth in the developed countries is interwoven with the need for economic growth in the developing countries, and demands and needs are not in peaceful coexistence. The picture becomes more complex when it is realised that economic growth creates its own kind of poverty and social problems, and that economic growth has world-wide consequences on the environment (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The divergence in the political debate may also call for a divergence in academic loyalties. What does it take to create an intellectual climate in which theories of economic growth and the changing concept of economic growth (traditionally expressed as gross national product and income per capita, turning to measurement of inequality reduction and social objectives), can be discussed in purely academic terms?

Coming from different cultures may also mean that researchers are subjected to different structures of reward. Some will gain the most from adhering to the expectations of their academic institutions, while others may gain the most by adhering to the expectations of non-academic or semi-academic institutions. When the different sets of expectations are contradictory, the stage is set for conflicts between the collaborators.

Research vs. action

A conflict of interest may also emerge when deciding whether the project should be research-driven or action-driven. In order to get around this difficult issue, the concept of action research has developed as some kind of compromise.

In spite of comprehensive research on poverty conducted during the last few decades, the magnitude of the complex and intertwined poverty problems of the developing countries is such that even a massive research effort may have little or no impact.

Under such circumstances, is it fair to emphasise theoretical and methodological issues when so much needs be done? Is applied research focusing on immediate problems a more appropriate option for the ethical dilemmas facing those doing comparative poverty research?

The dilemma is exacerbated for those researchers from developed countries who carry with them guilt feelings of not only being among the privileged, but also coming from countries whose political and economic systems are instrumental in keeping developing countries in poverty.

But the dilemma is present for researchers from developing countries as well. It may be difficult to gain acceptance for doing time consuming basic research in an environment where resources are scarce and the social problems overwhelming.

While it is understandable that action research develops as a way of bridging the gap between different interests, the difficulty is that action research does not seem to capture the best part of either the research process, or of the efforts of action. While solving some of the ethical dilemmas involved in doing poverty research, action research defeats its own purpose because it neither fulfils the stringent demands of high quality research, nor the long term engagement necessary if intervention is to be successful.

If it is true, as argued above, that even a massive research effort will have little or no impact on alleviating poverty, the argument for carrying out high quality comparative research studies seems to defy itself.

The American war on poverty, for example, did not fare too well. This was partly due to the fact that it was based on incorrect assumptions, some of them provided by social scientists. Social scientists have been heavily engaged in designing aid programmes aimed at developing countries, many of which can hardly be classified as successful. If social scientists were to advise today on poverty alleviation in developing countries, it is doubtful whether they would be able to do much better. But then, aid programs with no social science input have not done so well, either.

At least two kinds of argument can be put forth here.

One explanation of the failures is that theoretical social science, including theories of poverty, is still too weak to provide useful advice. This is no doubt true, and it is a strong argument in favour of increased research efforts on the theoretical side. The argument is of course, based on the optimistic assumption that poverty research will progress and mature into a full fledged science, from which practical solutions can be deduced.

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The other point to be raised is whether researchers are better at action or intervention than other professionals trained for this purpose? The answer is most likely negative, although no empirical evidence is available.

If this is the case, then the ethical issues being solved for the individual researcher through a model of action research, raises a wider set of ethical issues. Does the researcher, when stepping out of the traditional research role, actually do more harm to the poor persons being studied, than if he or she stayed inactive and instead concentrated on carrying out the studies, without engaging at the same time in intervention?

How Such Involvement is Needed

It is an educated guess that most people doing research on poverty nourish some kind of moral indignation at the present state of affairs. If the term 'poverty' carries with it the implication and moral imperative that something should be done about it, then the study of poverty is only ultimately justifiable if it influences individual and social attitudes and actions. This must be borne in mind constantly if discussion on the definition of poverty is to avoid becoming an academic debate – and utterly non-constructive – (Piachaud, 1987: 161).

Piachaud argues that the study of poverty should aim to influence other people and the social agenda. This is a different form of action research. The target for intervention through information about poverty is not necessarily the poor part of the population. If poverty issues are to become part of the social and political agenda, the target for intervention through information is the non-poor part of the population. They are the ones to be won over, and they are the ones with political power to realise new programs for poverty alleviation. They are also the ones who set the moral agenda and gain public acceptance for their definitions of poverty.

It may be argued that action research will have greater effect if it is directed towards the non-poor. It may also help solve some of the ethical dilemmas arising from the conflict between research-driven versus action-driven projects.

But at the same time, working under the uncertainty of research results which may never amount to «solutions», let alone policies, requires a commitment on the part of the researcher which makes the transfer to action research overly tempting. The fine balance between commitment and detachment is constantly being challenged.

The Influence of the Political Climate

The heavy involvement in poverty studies of «outside» actors, such as politicians, administrators, representatives of international organisations, volunteer organisations and the media, is a well known phenomenon. All are pressing for fast answers. Their preference is for an easy access to a simplified analysis, and a limited number of variables that can be manipulated politically. Each and every one of these outside actors offers a reward to the researcher, whether it be in cash or kind, access to media or proximity to political influence. Their behaviour is understandable. The outside actors are only doing their job. But the pressure is counteractive to the long term intellectual investment which seems to be needed in poverty research.

At the same time, researchers are raising the expectations of the outside actors simply by engaging in poverty research. It looks as if the magnitude of the expectations regarding the research results is proportional to the magnitude of poverty – and whatever those expectations are, they are never going to be fulfilled. Fighting off the many unrealistic expectations, while at the same time keeping a good working relationship with those powerful actors who will monitor the implementation of research results, is yet another of the many ethical and strategic dilemmas of doing poverty research at the present time.

The Need for Symmetrical Relationships

So far, it has been argued that one set of ethical issues in doing comparative poverty research stems from the asymmetrical relationships between the researchers and the poor persons being studied, and another set of ethical issues stems from the asymmetrical relationships between researchers with a powerful infrastructure and researchers with a limited infrastructure.

On the one hand, it is necessary to separate the two sets of ethical issues analytically. On the other hand, both relationships can be analysed within the framework of a symmetrical relationship.

An asymmetrical relationship in its simplest form means that one party in a sequence of inter-

action has more of one resource than the other party. The more of that resource one party has, the more asymmetrical the relationship becomes (i.e. if the resource in question is considered valuable for both parties or for the party with the least resources). When one party controls several resources, without the other party having access to the same kind of resources, the asymmetrical relationship increases. The asymmetrical relationship can be eased if the party with the least resources has access to other kinds of resources which are considered valuable to the party with the most resources.

In a research situation, the researcher wants information from the person being studied. The information has a high value for the researcher, and depending on the issue of research, the person being studied may consider the information of varying value. Usually the researcher has little to offer in return, except ensuring that the other party is being treated with dignity. The two parties will have little in common, although the ultimate goal of poverty alleviation may loom on the horizon. The interaction during most of the studies will be limited, both time-wise and otherwise.

In a collaborative research effort such as a comparative study, the two or more parties have a common interest in the outcome of the project. They are striving towards a joint framework, while at the same time accommodating for local and national interests. This calls for long term interaction. It also calls for a comprehensive exchange of information, this being in principle of the same value for all parties involved. If one party controls more economic resources, more technology, more manpower, more access to library facilities and more expertise than the other party, an asymmetrical relationship is introduced. This asymmetrical relationship can be modified, either by sharing these resources in a more equal manner, or by developing coping strategies, which eases the interaction between the parties. In either case it calls for ethical guidelines which should be made visible for the parties involved.

Asymmetrical relationships in a comparative research project are different from stratified relationships which are part of the overall culture in a country. A comparative project is an ad hoc formation developed to reach a certain goal. The ordinary stratification patterns and lines of command may not be the best instrument to reach such a goal. And there is no empirical evidence supporting the fact that the party controlling the most resources in a comparative research project, is also the party best equipped to control the project.