

# The Importance of Cultural Humility in Cross Cultural Research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the dynamics that exist between researchers from developed countries and participants from developing contexts. It contends that the integrity of cross-cultural research practices can significantly benefit from cultural humility on behalf of the researcher. This research project, carried out by an Australian researcher in Northern Uganda, espoused the theoretical perspective of phenomenography, using both phenomenographic and ethnographic methods. From this perspective it was found that when a foreign researcher assumes the roles of learner and facilitator, potential for unequal power relationships between developed and developing communities is considerably reduced. Many developing contexts are accustomed to Western aid, their education systems rarely encourage critical thought, and communities typically create social hierarchies according to wealth and power. Therefore, it is important that foreign researchers are acutely aware of their own potential to negatively reinforce welfare dependency or positively encourage development. Altogether, this study asserts that in cross-cultural contexts significant relationships exist between the approach of a researcher and the depth of data collection and analysis. It was found that a researcher who takes up the roles of learner and facilitator has the potential to contribute to the wider body of knowledge by giving interviewees a voice.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural research, intercultural competence, Northern Uganda, reflexivity.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discloses the personal revelations of a researcher that transpired during an international research expedition, and subsequently argues that cross-cultural research practices need to move beyond a simple notion of cultural sensitivity and take up a conviction of cultural humility (Deardorff, 2010; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Drawing upon experiences from a phenomenographic research project that was conducted in Northern Uganda by an Australian researcher, it is contended that where research is conducted with cultural humility, which is a factor of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2010); the coming together of developed and developing communities provides opportunity for productive collaboration. The differences that exist between researchers and research participants in cross-cultural settings create tensions for researchers to manage in various manifestations as the coming together of people from developed and developing societies presents a significant risk of uninvited assertions of power (Holliday, 2007; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). This dynamic is not always conducive to sustainable development or to transformative learning, where development is considered to be empowerment rather than welfare (Moyo, 2009). So how, then, should research be conducted where the potential for such power relationships exist? The findings from this study lead to the belief

that cultural humility transcends simple cultural sensitivity. That is, more than adhering to culturally sensitive practices, a researcher needs to take up an attitude of humility and view research participants as equals. Therefore, central to these findings is the role of researcher. This study found that when a researcher takes up the roles of learner and facilitator, rather than expert, the prospects of a rich yield of data are significantly increased. This paper discusses this by drawing upon experiences from the pilot interview, data collection interviews, and responses to the research upon return to Australia. Fundamental to this discussion is the research paradigm of phenomenography, the study of lived experience. Furthermore, I write in first person to take advantage of Holliday's (2007) argument that researchers using first person conventions make a clearer distinction between opinion and fact and liberate the voice of the researcher by doing so.

## **BACKGROUND**

This qualitative study was conducted in Northern Uganda with the primary aim of seeking to understand perspectives of Acholi teachers concerning children's learning. Having been invited to visit the Gulu district in Uganda to work with teachers, I was acutely aware of our cultural and contextual differences. Such an undertaking required considerable reflexivity as it involved the coming together of two very different worlds – a researcher from a Western-based, peaceful Australian society and research participants from a post-war African environment with associated post-traumatic stress, poverty and disease (United Nations, 2003). Only five years ago, this region of Uganda was in civil war with the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Northern Uganda has suffered successive civil conflicts since the uprising of Idi Amin in 1971, and only began to experience ceasefire in 2006. Schooling has suffered significantly, and I was most hesitant to come to such a fragile environment as an authority from the West, regardless of my credentials. Although I am an experienced and highly qualified teacher, I had never lived through war or suffered the effects of dire poverty. In the first instance I felt I had more to learn than to give. As learning is a social process (Bruner, 1996; Leach & Moon, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) I was convinced that in-depth socialisation was needed as a prerequisite to sharing any knowledge I might have.

Taking the fragile nature of this context into consideration, I decided, after a pivotal pilot interview which is explained further below, that the theoretical perspective of phenomenography would best serve this project. Phenomenography is deeply rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and is concerned with the ways people conceptualise, perceive and understand aspects of the world (Marton, 2001). It is the study of lived experience (Lichtman, 2006) and seeks to describe variation within that lived experience (Marton & Booth, 1997). Having its origins in educational research, phenomenography seeks to understand the relations that exist between an individual and what he or she is trying to learn (Marton, 2001). In this instance, I was seeking to map the relations that exist between Acholi teachers and their conceptions of children's learning so I could better understand their situation. Francis (1996) claimed that one of the unique traits of phenomenography is its insistence on capturing conceptions within interviews that are faithful to the individual's experiences of a phenomenon. To achieve the security of an interview is paramount. Strong rapport must be built between researcher and interviewees, as the views of the participants ought to be handled in a non-judgmental manner. I found that phenomenography made allowances for the natural development of relationships, rapport and respect. I felt this was especially important in a context that had suffered ongoing political abuse (United Nations, 2003), as I was very aware that my ethnicity and education had the potential to invoke unequal power relationships during interviews. I explore these dynamics further below.

## THE RESEARCHER AS A LEARNER

The nature of this project required the researcher to engage in active and explicit learning. This was somewhat accelerated by a phenomenographic methodology as priority was given to listening to the experiences of Ugandan teachers. However, I must disclose that the project did not originate in phenomenography. Originally, I was of the persuasion that an ethnographic theoretical perspective would be most appropriate and an investigation into pedagogy would be fruitful, but a pivotal pilot interview demanded I rethink this approach. Burns (2000) explained that the primary purpose of a pilot interview is to learn, rather than collect data, and that was certainly the case for this project. During the pilot interview it became apparent that an ethnographic interview schedule based on questions surrounding pedagogy was not sufficient if I was to capture the breadth and depth of the situation in Northern Uganda. The pilot interviewee shared stories of child labour and abuse and revealed a need to look deeper into understandings of children and their learning before even beginning to investigate the topic of pedagogy. From these responses I perceived that the ethnographic interview schedule would limit the scope of responses because these original questions, although they followed Leach & Moon's (2008) work, were constructed from my own pedagogic experience. Accordingly, the scope of this project changed and ethnography became subservient to phenomenography as my focus was redirected toward understanding the lived experiences of teachers in Northern Uganda with children and their learning. This cross-cultural dynamic required me to recognise my own potential to make assumptions, and encouraged me to treat the familiar as strange (Holliday, 2007) to the best of my ability.

Upon arriving in Uganda, the need for cultural humility and a methodology that can accommodate such was immediately confirmed by some of the responses from Acholi teachers to the opening interview question. When asked, "What are your experiences with children and their learning in Uganda?" on more than one occasion teachers responded in a similar fashion to, "I do not know the answer to that one." Having been educated in an examination-driven system themselves, some of the interviewees gave the impression that the woman from Australia was there to test their knowledge. So rather than losing face with an incorrect answer, they opted to decline the question. Immediate reassurance was needed to position the interviewees as the teachers, and the researcher as the learner, as I explained that they themselves held the answers. One participant explained that he never once had an opportunity throughout his formal education, from primary school to university, to express his ideas outside exam conditions. He claimed that there was never a time when a teacher asked for his opinion in the classroom. On the contrary, he came through a system where information had to be memorised and reproduced under test conditions. He strongly believed that this kind of education had robbed his people of their confidence to express themselves, to talk with strangers or to think autonomously. This was most evident during interviews, where much encouragement had to be given to some interviewees. I found these dynamics required cultural humility on my behalf, as I valued and affirmed their experiences and culture in an effort to build confidence in the interviewees.

There is an increasing amount of literature surrounding this notion of cultural humility, particularly in the medical education field in response to growing multicultural societies and the need to adapt approaches to medical education (Anderson-Juarez, Marvel, Brezinski, Glazner, Towbin & Lawton, 2006; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). This theme is also beginning to emerge in higher education (Deardorff, 2010). In the field of cross-cultural education, O'Donoghue and Clarke (2010) discuss the risk of sending qualified teachers into other countries or cultures with no prior acquaintance with the culture. In cultures where the person standing at the front of a classroom automatically holds authority, and where students have not always been taught explicitly to think autonomously or critically, the importation of foreign teachers is problematic as they are at risk of transferring their perspectives without testing their

cultural or contextual applicability. Similarly, it could be contended that the same dynamic exists for foreign researchers who obtrude with their technology and Western education. In many developing contexts, foreign researchers are at risk of being elevated to a superior social status as these cultures often default to such hierarchies of social power, especially where political abuse has been typical. Due to the observed commonplace practice of Westerners sponsoring African projects, I recognised that there was a probability for research participants to view their association with me as an opportunity to improve their own situation. From this experience, I would suggest that if researchers entertain this dynamic, not only are they perpetuating partisan power relationships, they may also be risking the integrity of their research. In such situations interviewees may feel they have to provide certain answers, or please the researcher. This dynamic is discussed in greater depth below, but here it calls attention to the need for cultural humility.

A phenomenographic approach to cross-cultural data collection conducted with cultural humility produced three unanticipated outcomes. First, it modeled lifelong learning in a context where learning is likely perceived to be confined to education systems. Interview data revealed that teachers in Northern Uganda lean heavily upon the system that administers education policies and pedagogy is invariably examination-driven. Such perspectives perpetuate the myth that education is a linear process that starts and finishes with schooling (Leach & Moon, 2008). It was found that by taking up the position of a learner, a foreign researcher has the potential to incidentally challenge such beliefs and assumptions.

Second, a researcher as a learner increases the prospects for building the esteem of the interviewees as this approach provides opportunity for participants to share their stories and ideas. For example, as mentioned earlier, one of the interviewees believed African people to be shy because they have rarely had opportunity to express and develop their ideas. Further, he believed shyness in children to be a product of their didactic education system. He spoke of the need to build self-esteem amongst his students because he believed they live in fear much of the time; fear of their parents reprimanding them, fear of making a mistake at school, or fear of losing face before their peers and superiors. Another interviewee also discussed this element of fear, explaining that successive wars and associated political abuse in Northern Uganda had resulted in generations of Acholi people fearing for their lives every day. Such a situation is educationally debilitating (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003). So the presence of a foreign researcher, who is esteemed by virtue of her Western background and education, in the role of a learner who is seeking to be taught by Acholi teachers, seemed to tip the balance of power and esteem in their favour. In this setting, I discovered that the Acholi people hold very rich stories and experiences. When they understood that their stories held remarkable value to me they relaxed and freely shared their myths, legends, and experiences. In these circumstances, on more than one occasion, an interviewee would bemoan not yet putting their own stories into writing. It was as though they saw possibilities by virtue of the opportunity to tell their own stories openly. Marton and Booth (1997) argued that the telling of an experience can be somewhat therapeutic in nature, as an interviewee has opportunity to free a previously unreflected event. This leads to the third unanticipated, but very welcome, advantage of positioning the researcher as a learner: a rich yield of data. By modeling lifelong learning, building the esteem of the participants by valuing their stories, and consequently reducing the potential for a foreigner to be intimidating, it was found that participants were willing to talk about the research topic candidly.

I am persuaded that such a rich yield of data is a direct reflection of the capacity of phenomenographic research methods to facilitate open and candid dialogue. Furthermore, an interview proved an appropriate means of data collection as verbal communication has been traditionally preferred by the

Acholi people (Ofori-Attah, 2009). From this experience in Northern Uganda, it could be argued that phenomenographic methodologies provide scope for the symbolic interaction that must take place in cross-cultural research (Sandstrom, Martin & Fine, 2006), and provide a means of giving voice to experience.

## **THE RESEARCHER AS A FACILITATOR**

As outlined above, there is a multiplicity of reasons to explain why teachers in Northern Uganda are without the means to tell their own stories. If it is not for the scarcity of resources - computers, electricity, paper, and pens - then it is for the lack of opportunity to develop their recording skills and thoughts. Couple these factors together with a significant lack of confidence, as reported in the interviews from this study, and it seems fair to conclude that the Acholi people are may benefit from collaborative efforts to assist them to voice their experiences. Therein lays the strength of cross-cultural research that is conducted in cultural humility. It brings together the rich experiences of one culture with the recording skills and resources of another culture. Notwithstanding this, cross-cultural research ought to be designed so that both researchers and research participants are empowered. This section will discuss research design, data collection and analysis in a cross-cultural context.

### **Cross-cultural research design**

Experience from this particular study shows that research projects that bring together the developed and developing worlds are best designed in consultation. As explained above, this particular project underwent considerable change in the research design phase in response to findings from the consultation process that occurred prior data collection. This consultation process proved critical to the direction of the project. In a cross-cultural context this process of learning and designing in consultation was found to be crucial to the formulation of relevant questions. When the pilot interviewee freely explained the dominant discourses that operate in Northern Uganda, it was discovered that the original interview questions were at considerable risk of making assumptions about meaning. Consequently, changing the research design created opportunities for Acholi teachers to voice their experiences with children and their learning, rather than merely making comment on pedagogic elements that I had given voice to. For this reason, consultation in the research design phase strengthened the integrity of the research.

Another factor that served to strengthen the integrity of the research was the ethics approval process. Holliday (2007) discussed the tension that exists in research projects between a presenting opportunity and the integrity of the research design. Due to constraints of time and participant consent logistics, the ethics approval process required that ethnographic observations be qualified within interviews. Again, I found this helped reduce the risk of making assumptions. Notwithstanding the benefits of the ethics approval process, once data collection commenced it was found that ethics were not viewed in the same manner between cultures. Due to the regulatory nature of an Australian ethics approval process the opportunity for consultation, as discussed in the section above, was not afforded. Consequently, it was discovered during interviews that the Western ideals of privacy and identity protection were viewed cautiously by Acholi people due to their history of political abuse. As interviews unfolded it was perceived that to be unknown in Northern Uganda had presented personal security issues in the past, so to have someone use your ideas in their work and remain anonymous was viewed with suspicion. This presented a hurdle to building rapport with the interviewees, and so the consent process had to be reframed in a manner that both preserved their sense of security and satisfied Australian ethics

requirements. Again, this is an example of the very present risk of making assumptions about meaning in cross-cultural research. This project would contend that one of the strengths of cross-cultural research is a reduced risk of familiarity due to explicit cultural and contextual differences. However, researchers must be mindful of this strength for it to be active, including its applicability to Western systems of ethics approvals.

### **Reflexive cross-cultural data collection and analysis**

My experience in Northern Uganda reinforces Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) claim that there is no possible way to divorce the researcher from the research. Although a researcher may act in cultural humility, his or her presence is still paramount to the research dynamic (Holliday, 2007). For example, in this project there was no escaping the collision of Australian and Acholi cultures. I discuss my own embedded role in the study here to demonstrate the reflexive nature of qualitative research.

Not only am I an Australian teacher, so was able to empathise with the plight of the participants, but I am also a mother. My two young children and husband travelled with me to Uganda and indirectly became a part of the research dynamic. White children are rare in Northern Uganda. There are many foreign adults working for government or non-government agencies alike, but due to its hostile past foreign children have not typically visited the region. Therefore, the presence of my children, their blonde hair, Western clothing and mannerisms were a novelty to the local Acholi people. In some ways their presence opened up insights that might not have been otherwise available. For example, their participation in local classrooms gave me a point of comparison between children from the developed and developing world. Similarly, their close attachment to their father and me became very obvious in a setting where many children grow up without the opportunity to develop attachments to parents. Furthermore, my role as a mother persuaded me to probe for information concerning the appropriate care of children, and I believe this assisted me to better understand the low priority of schooling compared to the struggles of survival. It also helped me to empathise with the breadth and depth of the realities faced by child-headed families. I could not help but draw comparisons between the effects of functional and fractured communities on the healthy development of children. The desperate need for responsible adults was glaringly obvious to the parent in me.

I felt that being a foreign woman reduced the potential for interviews to be intimidating. Men are considered to be the leaders of society in Northern Uganda, and although women shoulder much of the workload, they are subject to their fathers, brothers, uncles or husbands (Meinert, 2009). Therefore, my gender helped to reduce the potential intimidation that may have come with an Australian researcher from a foreign university. In some instances, I am persuaded that being a foreigner also invited frank and open discussion about culture. Because I did not belong to the culture, interviewees were able to be critical without fear of reprisal. From this experience of conducting research in Northern Uganda, I came to the strong conviction that the development of the self-esteem of the local people is critical to the development of their community. African people are very accustomed to receiving welfare from Westerners (Moyo, 2009), therefore my aim was to actively befriend rather than merely bequeath. I was of the persuasion that to position myself as a benefactor had the potential to undermine the opportunity to build the esteem of my interviewees by allowing them to teach me about their culture. I found that within secure friendships, the esteem of the interviewees was encouraged. I did not want to risk reducing dialogue to honorary rhetoric by positioning myself as more powerful than my participants.

Upon my return to Australia, I have found that people frequently inquire whether I plan to return to the Acholi people to make investments back into their communities because they have given me so much by participating in my research. Whether this Western mindset of aid comes from a history of British colonialism and the associated “White Man’s Burden” paradigm (Rudyard Kipling, 1899) would need to be researched further. However, I am persuaded that indeed investments have been made into the Acholi community by treating them as equals and listening to their stories. Marton and Booth (1997) believed an interviewing researcher to be well positioned to reach the unreflected experiences of participants. I found that, by my listening, the teachers themselves came to better understand their own situation. For example, one interviewee explained:

“The problem that we have here [is] we have not written most of what happened. We need to write it down so other people can read. So this is the challenge that most of us are going through. We need to come out with some of those things documented so people can read [sic]. We talk a lot but we don’t write. And yet if we could write whatever we say the whole world could have known, “Hey, this is the culture of this people in this country!””

Following this comment we went on to discuss how he could go about recording his history, to which he responded with a big smile: “You open my mind.”

In so many ways, and by their own admission, the Acholi people have been battered and bruised by years of conflict and abuse, so I wanted to convey a message that I was there to build friendship and learn, not to tell them what to do. Amid all these efforts to build relationships, bridge our cultures and learn from one another, it was necessary to apprehend reality and take nothing for granted. I felt there was no greater respect I could pay or gratitude I could show than to treat the interviewees as fellow professionals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Taking these findings together, this study asserts that relationships exist between researchers from developed societies and research participants from developing contexts on two levels. First, this study would argue that a causal relationship exists between the humility of the researcher and the willingness of interviewees to disclose information about experiences in an open and honest manner. To this end, the integrity and quality of data will highly likely be strengthened when foreign researchers adopt an attitude of cultural humility and take up the congenial roles of learner and facilitator. Accordingly, the importance of cross-cultural researchers resisting the temptation to assume superior knowledge in unfamiliar contexts cannot be overemphasised.

Second, it is also strongly suggested that a relationship exists between the transparency of a researcher’s role and the honest treatment and analysis of the data. Acute reflexivity and metacognition fortifies the research process and allows for complexity in themes and generated theory. In this way, researchers from developed societies have an opportunity to contribute to the wider body of knowledge by giving voice to the rich experiences of their interviewees. This scenario gives teachers in the developing world a voice they might not otherwise have had at the nexus of the continued validation of qualitative research recognising that:

“...qualitative researchers are interpreters who draw on their own experiences, knowledge, theoretical dispositions, and collected data to present their understanding of the other’s world. As interpreters they think of themselves not as authority figures who get the “facts” on a topic, but as meaning makers who make sense out of the interaction of their own lives with those of the research participants”. (Glesne, 1999, p. 157)

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