

**Pedagogical and Intercultural Facets in an International Students' Research Training  
Program in Times of Pandemic: A Case Study on "The Intersections' of Gender, Family,  
and Society in Kyrgyzstan"**

Heiko Schrader<sup>1</sup>, Galina Gorborkova<sup>2</sup>, and Makhinur Mamatova<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

**Abstract**

This paper discusses the conception of a joint intercultural students' research program of one German and two Kyrgyzstani teachers and students from the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (Germany) and the American University of Central Asia (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). The paper conceptualizes such a research training program and gives reference to qualitative methods teaching in the two corresponding universities. What follows is a description of the chosen research topic: "The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan" and the course program. With different academic cultures concerning research ethics in the Anglo-Saxon and continental European contexts, a challenge for such a program will be addressed. A short review of the research results of the different students' teams is provided, and the paper is finalized with a self-reflection upon such a joint intercultural undertaking.

**Keywords:** students' research training program, qualitative research, research ethics, COVID-19 pandemic, intercultural communication

Author Note

Heiko Schrader  [0000-0003-2497-1162](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2497-1162)

Galina Gorborkova  [0000-0002-4290-4898](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4290-4898)

Makhinur Mamatova

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Heiko Schrader, Department of Sociology, Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg, Universitätsplatz 2, 39106 Magdeburg, Germany. Email: [heiko.schrader@ovgu.de](mailto:heiko.schrader@ovgu.de)

**Pedagogical and Intercultural Facets in an International Students' Research Training Program in Times of Pandemic: A Case Study on "The Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan"**

All over the world, faculty and students have suffered from Covid-19 lockdowns at universities and were forced to enter into online teaching and studying. Especially during the first wave of infections, universities and staff were not prepared for such a transition from ordinary seminars with in-person teaching to online teaching of both synchronic and asynchronic types. There were no existing technical standards and platforms, there was suspicion against certain programs concerning security for sensitive contexts, there was not appropriate hardware among staff and particularly students, and, furthermore, there was no experience in online teaching. Initially, the individual solutions of teachers were frequent, since the universities had not purchased the necessary software. PCs were not equipped with cameras, microphones, or headphones. After half a year, online teaching became more routine, although it had also become obvious that the technical equipment of students depended on their socioeconomic background. Many students used their smartphones for a year and a half to join lectures and seminars. Once universities returned to ordinary teaching, they raised questions about positive and negative experiences with online teaching to evaluate new forms of teaching, such as hybrid forms. There are many well-known disadvantages of online teaching which we do not want to repeat here, but also various advantages for subgroups such as students or faculty with children or working students, for example, with asynchronic teaching forms. This article, however, will take up another perspective. The software provided is not only appropriate for communication between staff and students at their home universities; it can also be used for joint national and even international seminars between different universities. The Departments of Sociology at the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (OvGU) in Germany and the American University of

Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan took the opportunity to design and prepare a joint students' research project, monitored by their teachers, which is the focus of this paper.

### **Development of the Concept of “Students’ Research Training Programs” at Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg**

When one of the authors (Heiko Schrader) started working at OvGU, he introduced a concept which he brought from the Sociology of Development Research Centre at the University of Bielefeld. The idea is that excellent students are invited to participate in an intensive training program (in German: “Lehrforschung”) to learn in and out of classroom about the research cycle and practice every part, particularly field research. For some time now, the concept has been practiced by the author in the Department of Social Science of the Faculty of Humanities at OvGU. This program aims at bringing students to empirical research, more precisely, qualitative research with interview techniques, which they can use both in academic as well as extra-university careers, where the gathering of qualitative data and their interpretation is crucial. Usually, the whole process takes a period of one to one and a half years, which already provides a limitation for a two-year Master program. A precondition to join is having participated in a course on qualitative methods, provided by the author or by other colleagues. His own course is already designed and addressed as a preparation for this research training program.

Thus, well prepared students may join the students' research training program. We start with building background knowledge (phase 0), selecting a research topic and country (preferably in an extra-European Union context to include an intercultural perspective) for where to do research, establishing a relationship with a partner, collecting and analyzing secondary material for the chosen topic and country, developing the research design, working on research methodology and ethics; then writing a research proposal (phase 1), conducting field research in cooperation with lecturers and students of our partner university (phase 2), making data analysis,

and finally, writing a research report (phase 3). The supervisors take the function of facilitators leading the students through the entire process, giving them feedback on their applied interview techniques in the field and supporting the analysis and writing process.

The scientific aim of this training program is going beyond pure methodological classroom teaching to learn about the exciting (and sometimes also disappointing) work of an empirical qualitative researcher in the field, where the method is adapted to the topic and not vice versa. Besides scientific aims, this training program exposes the students from the German university to a very different (national and academic) culture, confronting them with sometimes extreme poverty in developing countries, giving them deeper insight into the life-world and biography of marginalized people and the work of NGOs and other organizations in the field, and challenging their personalities with regard to a potential working perspective in developing countries and in direct interview contact with other people.

The first three courses were placed in India and the fourth in Nepal. Usually, the 10 to 20 students from both OvGU and the partner universities split up into different sub-projects of four to five people. In 2004 and 2005, a group of students conducted research on the strong segregation in Mumbai slums according to religion and place of origin or ethnicity. In spring 2007, another student research group worked on social activism in Mumbai slums: communalism and anti-communalist movements, grassroots organizations, and NGOs. The 2014 research group examined five different topics related to the population of informal settlements in rapidly changing and growing environments in Pune and Mysore. The Nepal project in 2018 took the 2015 earthquake as the starting point to investigate the Disaster-Conflict Interface, the interplay between a natural disaster and conflict. The students analyzed whether and in how far previously existing social conflicts were lessened or increased in the aftermath of the earthquake. The four research topics were (1) the marginalization of Dalits in the Gorkha earthquake; (2) LGBTI:

challenges and opportunities in the context of the earthquake; (3) former child soldiers and the question of whether the earthquake formed a window of opportunity for integration of this marginalized group; and (4) knowledge as context to the Gorkha earthquake and its aftermath. The results of such research trainings have been very positive. Students work in cross-national teams, learn about the advantages and disadvantages of teamwork, get cultural sensitivity, and decide after the project whether research in foreign settings might be a good work opportunity for them. This refers to both research qualities as well as their own personality. For job applications as well as for academic scholarships, participants can include this special feature in their CVs and transcripts, which makes them interesting.

### **Teaching Qualitative Methods at OvGU and AUCA**

The Department of Sociology at OvGU was established in 1993, and the different study programs in social science (BA and MA in Social Science, MA in Peace and Conflict Studies, BA and MA in European Studies). The department is strong in both quantitative and qualitative empirical research projects and publications. The three study programs offer methodological courses in both quantitative and qualitative methods. According to a decision of the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, or DGS) in 2002, the discipline should provide professionalization by a double methodological training in both quantitative and qualitative methods in BA and MA programs, because graduates with profound methodological training can expect good employment opportunities and comparative advantages to those of other subjects. It is emphasized that even for such graduates who will not be employed in research later on, the knowledge of research methods is necessary to critically assess the quality of other scholars' research publications and journalistic articles referring to research findings.

This paper is not the right place to address the basic differences between quantitative and qualitative methods; however, it is worth emphasizing that in the tradition of sociological

research in the first half of the last century, the two approaches supplemented each other both in American and German sociology, e.g., in ethnography (Reinhart, 2012), while during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both approaches took a more hostile position towards each other; the major critique from the quantitative side was a lack of objectivity of qualitative research, being purely descriptive and not explanatory, and thus unscientific (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and then in the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries could qualitative research step out of the shadow and emancipate itself in academia, research, and research publications (Flick, 2005; Mruck & May, 2007). Nowadays empirical researchers recommend mixed-method approaches, and even qualitative data analysis (QDA) software integrates quantitative features.

In the author's methodology seminar, a broad topic is chosen (we experimented with different topics, and most interesting so far has been the topic of violence), and students learn about the theoretical foundation of that topic. Then they study the research cycle (beginning with shaping an individual research question and linking it to appropriate theories) to design their own interview (ranging from expert interviews to problem-centered and even narrative interviews), set up an interview guide (if required), find an interview partner, take this single interview, write an interview transcript (according to the standards of the discipline), make a content analysis and interpretation of the data (preferably with QDA software)<sup>1</sup>, and finally take a self-reflection on the own work: what went well and what can be improved.<sup>2</sup> In addition, every student works in tandem with a partner, who takes the role of an observer of the interview situation and gives

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, for an analysis of only one interview, QDA software is not necessary. However, the course aims at preparing students for larger research, e.g., for their master thesis, which usually covers 6-10 interviews, or even for a PhD thesis with many more interviews. Thus, the knowledge of QDA software is useful for a later stage of research.

<sup>2</sup> This process of self-reflection aims at discovering the researcher's own weaknesses in any of the phases of the research cycle. This self-evaluation which is intensively discussed with the teacher engenders an efficient post-learning process.

feedback to both teacher and student (afterwards the roles are switched). The research reports of the students, which involve a transparent description of the entire research process, are carefully evaluated by the teacher to give them deep face-to-face feedback. The appendix includes the full transcript of the interview,<sup>3</sup> the interview guide, and the code tree and coding material, to make the entire project transparent and help the teacher identify and discuss problems in the entire process. Due to the fact that the entire research process is based on decision-making, the research result is path-dependent on such decisions.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of Sociology at AUCA was founded in 1998 and today is considered one of the strongest departments at the university. The members of the department are leading empirical researchers working with both local and international partners. Like at OvGU, the department offers quantitative and qualitative research methods as well as courses in applied social statistics and SPSS. These courses are offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The Qualitative Methods course teaches students how to think qualitatively and become critical and reflective researchers. The course module includes such topics as the research cycle, the research question, a theoretical framework, interviews, participant observation, ethnographic oral history observation, and content analysis. Working with MAXQDA software is obligatory.

The authors of this paper agree in the following problems that they most often encounter when teaching qualitative research methods. Students have a simplistic understanding of research design, often addressing a certain “interest” in a particular field but not a research question and its

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<sup>3</sup> For the feedback, the joint look of student and teacher into the interview transcript is of particular interest. The teacher can show the student where he missed a window of opportunity for adding an ad hoc question and can see, in comparison with the interview guide, whether the necessary flexibility is missing.

<sup>4</sup> To provide an example: following his or her interview guide, the interviewer has to listen to the answers of the respondent and decide whether or not to take up the window of opportunity, which is revealed by the interviewee's response but which would lead in another direction.

theoretical embedding. As empirical researchers we believe that teachers of qualitative research courses should avoid teaching research design as a linear process but more as a cycle, as addressed in the following figure.

**Figure 1**

*Designing Research*



First of all, we can enter the research cycle from different points. This is either an empirical observation, in our case, “disadvantages of women in Kyrgyzstani society,” or literature, which brings up an interesting question to be applied to another context, for example, “bride abduction in Kyrgyzstan.” The research interest may also be taken from theory, e.g., in our case, “masculine domination.” Students learn and understand the connectedness of these points of access and if and why it is worth investigating this field, and how the investigation can contribute to the topic. One of the learning outcomes is also that theories and methods can be flexibly combined for promising research.



Since students in the qualitative course program at both universities follow their own projects, they will have to make literature reviews and other presentations in class to share with the rest of the student body so that all students can become familiar with the different theories and methods. Of particular importance is the nexus between the research question and its theoretical background. The sharpening of the research question is also achieved by thinking about different theories as well as methods to be applied and discussing their pros and cons. In the same way, at the end of the research process or qualitative course program, students have to reconsider their research question, provide potential answers, and discuss them in the framework of different theories. To paraphrase Margaret Eisenhart and Robert L. DeHaan, the aim of our course programs is introducing students to a “culture of research” (2005).

Further core elements in the course programs are biases of researchers in research (particularly cross-cultural research), our own cultural, gender, class, etc., lenses that we apply, and how our lenses influence our interpretations. Also important is that students learn about certain sensitive fields of field research. This does not only concern the question of research ethics (see later) but also involves questions of accessibility of the researcher to informants, e.g., with regard to gender issues.

Both universities include the application of QDA software to organize data, analyze content, make connections and comparisons, identify patterns, and relate information from interview notes, test results, surveys, and other research data. Like in the methods course of the German author, students at AUCA submit a final report that includes an explanation of all steps of the study, key findings, and part of the discussion of the data. Students write a brief literature review and justify how the study contributes to the field. In the analysis section, students connect the research findings with the theoretical framework. The final report highlights the strengths and

limitations of the study. It includes major conclusions and emphasizes what the research adds to the knowledge of the field. The final grade for the course is cumulative.

### **The 2020/2021 Project with Teachers and Students from OVGU and AUCA under Covid-19 Conditions**

Here we want to report on and analyze the most recent research training project in 2020-2021. Cooperation between the two departments of sociology dates back to 2009. It is based upon teachers' and students' exchange in the course of an ERASMUS+ program as well as joint research in Kyrgyzstan<sup>5</sup> (Dittrich & Schrader, 2015, 2018) and a larger EU project (TALENT) on the introduction of a master program in Human Resource Management in Central Asia. The idea for this students' research training program in Kyrgyzstan emerged from discussions in December 2019 and January 2020, when teachers from AUCA visited OVGU in Magdeburg. This was before the Covid-19 pandemic arose.

The COVID-19 situation finally led to home office and online teaching in Germany and Kyrgyzstan. Of course, we generally agree that working conditions for both students and teachers were disadvantageous during the pandemic; however, what we have to stress here is one advantage which opened up a new perspective. This is the new momentum of synchronic online teaching software in both universities (which technically had not existed at these universities before the introduction of ZOOM or similar platforms for online teaching and conferences). When we had the opportunity to acquire knowledge of online teaching during the 2020 spring term at our home universities, we immediately realized that the use of this software as well as e-learning platforms opened up a new perspective: synchronic preparation for field research in an international seminar with teachers and students from both universities. As we could not foresee

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<sup>5</sup> Galina Gorborukova was team leader of the Kyrgyzstan research team.

the spreading of the different Covid waves, we were hopeful that the German teacher and students would be able to come to Bishkek for field research at some point in the project.

However, some adaptations were necessary for such a joint course program. First of all, the time difference between Kyrgyzstan and Germany is four hours, which made us put the joint seminar in the early afternoon in Magdeburg and later afternoon in Bishkek. This would be more difficult when the time difference with other participating universities was 12 hours. Secondly, we had to adapt the time frame of the entire project. In Magdeburg, previous students had taken up to one term to write their final research report, but we decided—due to the different credit requirements at both universities and different term schedules—to shorten this last part of the project. One example of this change was that while the students on the 2018 Nepal research team worked a full year to write a joint full-scale 100-page research report (Magdeburg Research Group, 2019), one that was published in the department's working paper series and was read by other scholars as well as organizations in Nepal, we now put stronger emphasis on the process than on the results. This meant that the research reports of the participating teams remained brief and only summarized some findings. Furthermore, the teachers were fully aware that the Covid-19 situation was very specific, and depending on the development, might cause a plan B where instead of travelling to Kyrgyzstan, interviews might have to be taken online. Last but not least, we have to mention that OvGU is a public university with enormous freedom in teaching elective courses, while AUCA is a private university with a different academic model. Nevertheless, both universities supported this joint international project.

The core of our collaborative research training program was developing and team-teaching the interdisciplinary course “The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan,” taught during the 2020 fall semester and 2021 spring semester. The syllabus was designed by the authors of this paper and a colleague. Along with the aim of improving the

research skills of students and their acquaintance with the actual problems of gender and family in Kyrgyz society, this course aimed at enriching students' international research experience and intercultural communication.

The course consisted of three modules. In the first module, major theoretical perspectives regarding issues of gender, family, and society were explored. In the second module, interrelationships between gender, society, and the state in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia were studied. The third module focused on preparing and conducting students' research projects. Students from different social sciences master's degree programs from both universities (i.e., Sociology, Peace and Conflict Studies, Social Anthropology and Talent Management) organized themselves into four research teams. For their research projects, students focused on women's issues related to marriage and childbearing, Islamic influence, activism and rights, political engagement, and electoral behavior. The problem of domestic violence was also addressed. Course requirements included the research proposal, interview guide presentations, the final research report, attendance, class participation, and endeavor. An important condition for studying in this course was intensive reading of scientific literature, which was offered by an online reader on an e-learning platform,<sup>6</sup> and the development of an appropriate theoretical framework of research. In addition to our regular online class teaching, student groups set up their own online meetings to develop their projects.

A key issue for research in different teams was the advice to the students to immediately transcribe the interviews or at least provide summaries of them in an online learning platform so that every course member could get information about the other research groups. It was agreed that the research knowledge gathered by the different teams would be common knowledge for all

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<sup>6</sup> This platform was based at OvGU. It should be mentioned that foreign students needed special temporary access which was provided by the university authorities.

groups. Another issue was agreement in how research teams should conduct their interviews. The different roles were decided in advance before the interviews; there would be one interviewer and different observers who could place some additional questions at the end of the interview and deliver context information. Furthermore, the teachers advised the students to keep the interview guide as flexible as possible to be adaptive to the flow of the interviews, and every student was to slip into the role of interviewer at least once.

One of the major challenges of teaching and learning was the necessity to rapidly adapt to the new requirements of the pandemic reality. As mentioned above, we had to abandon the plans for the Magdeburgian students to travel to Kyrgyzstan for data collection and get acquainted with the local culture in direct conditions. The impossibility of the usual mobility of students and teachers and the probable decrease in students' motivation to study required a certain amount of pedagogical flexibility, since not only lectures and seminars had to be conducted online, but also all elements of the research project, with the exception of some live interviews. This was not an easy task as a number of difficulties were faced in the process of working on research,. There were challenges in data collection due to an online regimen, linguistic barriers while communicating with the respondents,<sup>7</sup> in-group communication challenges related to the distribution of tasks between team members, high pressure upon time management, and a significant time difference between Germany and Kyrgyzstan. Interaction and communication issues proved to be the major challenge when total transition to online mode was taken. Although the technical problems associated with unstable internet connections were not a big issue, the lack

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<sup>7</sup> Although the non-Russian speaking German students were advised to work with personnel from NGOs with English language knowledge, some of the interview partners preferred to talk in Russian. Thus, the students from Kyrgyzstan had to sometimes switch into the role of translators, or they at least summarized the content of such an interview.

of access to face-to-face communication between students, faculty, and research participants posed a major challenge for this course, causing some level of emotional stress.

To mitigate these negative effects of distance learning, the course instructors stepped up the practice of individual/group consultations, revised the deadline schedule, changed course requirements for the final research report, and encouraged students' engagement in teamwork. Social distancing due to the new reality significantly interfered with social ties and mobility, but at the same time opened the door to developing new approaches to online learning with an emphasis on collaborative research. These approaches should work for reinforcing interaction between research team members, improving in-class communication, developing effective time-management, designing proportionate course requirements with realistic expectations and learning outcomes, and preventing undesirable consequences of the fatigue caused by extensive video conferencing.

### **Research Ethics Assurance: A Controversial Issue**

Adherence to research ethics was an essential requirement of this course before entering into qualitative interviews, but it was a controversial issue according to the standards of the two corresponding universities. AUCA has a structure called the Institutional Review Board, or IRB. The task of this committee, made up of university professors, is to verify that the planned study complies with the ethical standards formulated in the "Belmont Report," published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). IRBs are widespread ethics committees in U.S. universities. AUCA also follows this model. In order to receive IRB permission to start their research (data gathering phase), our students provided their research protocol, informed consent forms, copies of interview guides, and additional technical documents. Along with this, students and faculty were

required to take a multiple-choice exam on research ethics principles and rules or provide a valid certificate of a similar test confirming a passing score.

For the German teacher and his students, the requirements for passing the IRB procedures turned out to be new and even unexpected. We have to admit that this created some level of stress, especially the requirement of taking the multiple-choice exam. Although going through IRB procedures is more of a technical process, we have found that this requirement revealed differences in American and European approaches to research culture. First of all, the German tradition, for example at Magdeburg University, and also the tradition all over Europe (except the UK), is that such a top-down institutional structure as the IRB does not correspond to the principal requirements of freedom in qualitative research in social science. Instead, students learn about the principles and rules of research ethics throughout the course of their studies at the university. Here, the pedagogical emphasis is placed on the development of the personal accountability of the future researcher for the observance of ethical standards. Secondly, the German tradition maintains a fairly wide range of exploratory flexibility if it is dictated by the concrete research situation, and thus does not favor IRBs and formalized rules (for example, see von Unger et al., 2016, for a German critique to IRBs, as well as Lincoln & Tierney, 2004, or Swauger, 2009, for an Anglo-Saxon critique).

The two positions of freedom of research and fixed institutional ethical standards have been discussed in "Ethics in Social Science and Humanities" by the European Commission (2018). It is argued that research in social science has to adapt certain standards concerning human beings (e.g., the "do not harm" principle that concerns informants), while on the other hand it has to guarantee the freedom of science. The Commission's position is that principles of research ethics have continuously changed and become more complex and that the researcher has to take decisions in all parts of research (from planning via data gathering to data analysis and

publication). The researcher in social science has to decide whether the benefits from research outweigh the potential risks, and prospective research participants “are free to decide whether or not to take part in the research, and whether any data collected from and about them is included in analysis” (European Commission, 2018, p. 5). This is nowadays guaranteed through obtaining informed consent from the participants, which is similarly a requirement in the IRB rules.

Our broad research topic of “The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan” is a sensitive topic and deserves ethical consideration. We knew the topic might involve domestic violence and psychological pressure, the traumas of victims, and sensitive material concerning women and children in particular. Such may be touched in problem-centered and narrative interviews, and old wounds of the respondent may be torn up once more. As experienced senior researchers, but with no specific trauma training, we nevertheless know that following the rules of a problem-centered or narrative interview with a traumatized person will give that person the choice to get deeper into the trauma or to stop talking about the context. The decision is in the hands of the traumatized person, and he or she is able to make such a decision. The researcher should not pressure him or her but open up a window of opportunity or hardship. The latter example shows that research ethics cannot be fully standardized since they depend on discipline, research topic, and the method involved.

But in our case, most interviews taken by our research teams were interviews with expert members of organizations that deal with such sensitive topics. This means the interview partners had professional expert knowledge on the topic and they, and not our students, dealt with the vulnerable people. Thus, the students did not even come into contact with potentially traumatized people and only had to guarantee anonymization of names or places if the interview content concerned victims or perpetrators. Information gathered from experts usually remains rather



aggregated and abstract, and the researcher has to even motivate them to provide concrete examples.

In the context of our course, the dichotomy of personal conscientiousness versus institutional control manifested itself quite clearly and caused a lively discussion between the training participants, including teachers. An important question that arose before us in connection with the revealed dichotomy was how to reconcile these two approaches. What is more important—institutional control, or awareness of individual responsibility for research ethics without institutional oversight?

While IRB procedures are a mandatory technical requirement for everyone regardless of university affiliation in order to determine whether a study is ethical and whether the researcher is familiar with the basic principles of ethics when working with people, our position was that we should avoid excessive formalization in teaching students about research culture, but at the same time fulfill the institutional requirements of a particular university. Our experience emphasizes the importance of finding common denominators and minimizing the factors that divide us. Today we are still in search of answers to the questions posed above, as the two approaches to the academic culture of research ethics seem to contradict rather than unite.

### **A Short Review of the Different Student Projects**

Within the framework of this research training, students organized into mixed inter-university groups carried out four research projects. The first project concentrated on the theme “Women's Rights Activism in the Region of Osh.” In this project, students studied the opinions of experts and activists about women's civic engagement after the tragic ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. At the center of these events was the exacerbation of long-standing contradictions and escalated tension between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, which resulted in massive acts of violence. In this traditional environment of South Kyrgyzstan, students found a

rather negative attitude towards women's activism, which is perceived as a destabilizing influence of Western organizations sponsoring the activities of feminist groups. The study also revealed a discrepancy in attitudes towards female activism among older and younger generations.

The second group's research project was focused on studying how the Muslim religious affiliation of women affects their decision-making regarding their daily life. The title of this research project was "Women, Islam, and Navigating Transformation in Kyrgyzstan." This study highlighted the social pressure on young women to meet traditional religious expectations regarding their behavior both in the private and public realms. One of the rationalizations of such an influence is to ensure that a woman gets married and properly plays her traditional female role.

The third project was titled "Domestic Violence and Traditional Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan: A Focus on Married Women and Bearing Children." The hypothesis was that, according to traditional gender roles, wives are expected to be fertile and should preferably deliver boys, and if this causes problems, they are under pressure from their husbands and families. Despite the fact that the analysis of interviews did not reveal any sign of a connection between cases of domestic violence and pressure on women related to childbearing, it emphasized that culturally determined ideas about childbearing may be a precondition to domestic violence.

In the fourth research project, "Electoral Participation of Women in Kyrgyzstan," students studied how local women's non-governmental organizations contributed to the involvement of women in the political process through the example of parliamentary elections. Traditional lifestyle and gender roles pressure, low living standards, and limited access to education for girls and women were found to be obstacles to women's political engagement.

### **Evaluation of the Students' Research Training Program by the Teachers**

How did the authors evaluate this joint students' research training program? To stress the point once again, such a training program aims less at research findings than an understanding of

the research process. Of course, we are aware that only a portion of graduates will continue working in academia and empirical research. However, nowadays, a variety of competencies of students is required in the labor market. These involve translating certain demands into planning processes and breaking down larger tasks into smaller entities. This also happens during the research cycle. A topic is narrowed down into a research question and project, which can be handled under constraints of time, space, and money; it is broken up into different work steps. Here the emphasis is laid upon systematic proceeding and the logic of transparency. As emphasized by the German Association of Sociologists, graduates who have achieved both methodological training and practical research experience have comparative advantages in the labor market.

The second aspect in such research training is learning about the strengths and weaknesses of teamwork. Working in teams provides different challenges from working alone. In the latter case, I have to rely on my own strengths and cope with my hopefully known weaknesses. Working in teams, on the other hand, provides a mix of often unknown people, usually not aggregating according to one's own choice. People are connected through their working place only and usually not through friendship. People who are less active or shy can hide themselves in the group, while more active group members take over the lead, so that in many cases teamwork enhances and strengthens individual qualities and weaknesses. Teamwork progress can to some degree be restricted by the personalities of the weakest and slowest group member. If other group members want to speed up the entire process, they often take over certain tasks of the weakest group members and sooner or later feel unjustly treated when the weakest group member gets the same benefits for less work. It is often wishful thinking, when one considers group processes in reality and not theory, to say that the group members add up to a finally more productive entity (cf. diversity management). Friction losses are too high, and in the

worst cases, an entire research project may be endangered by disturbing group dynamics and individual hostilities. The other way around, the team members can learn about themselves; less active group members may take a more responsible role by being supported by the team and the supervisors; dominant group members, on the other hand, may be kept under control by group democratic processes.

The result of comparative advantages of graduates in the labor market is often indirectly connected to their research competences: potential employers honor the experiences that students have developed to adapt themselves to teamwork, complete a long and exhausting project, and (in the case of the German students) work in a foreign culture. Those experiences lead to competencies in problem-solving and structuring group processes.

But let us remain on the academic level. In master theses, many students nowadays are interested in empirical work. Unfortunately, many of them have never practiced it. A result is that they first of all underestimate the prospective time involved for a research process, and secondly, they lack the necessary instruments, which they may be somewhat familiar with from classroom teaching but have never applied. The result is that their ambitions are too high and the methods involved are too handsome; students step into many traps that open up in the research processes. Then teachers' evaluation reports politely talk about "ambitious projects" that are "difficult to handle for the student due to lack of tools and lack of time." The mismatch between ambitions and outcome is so tremendous that in the end the mark is often disappointing for both student and teacher, and a literature-based thesis might have brought much better results.

Our own experience shows that students who participated in such a research training program deliver good results in empirical theses. Here we talk about qualitative research only, but the same holds true for quantitative research. They know the process and can assess the difficulties that occur in every step in the research cycle; they know particularly how much time

it takes to take an interview and to write a transcript. They know how multiple interviews can be coded and analyzed and can apply QDA software to support the handling of data. Their experience makes them self-conscious in contacting potential interview partners—even if these are professional experts. They have already learned about the frustrations of when an interview partner does not show up or has nothing to say about the research question. They are perhaps inventive enough to solve sudden problems which could not have been anticipated and to adapt the entire research process to new circumstances. They have learned about ethical standards and self-responsibilities.

We recommend empirical work in master theses only. The aim of a bachelor thesis is that students can translate and apply a theory into an empirical problem identified in the literature. This can involve statistical data, for example, or findings from other research projects, but should not involve time-consuming data processing or interview transcripts. The major requirement is not originality, but good academic practice. In master theses, on the other hand, we recommend manageable empirical studies which are taken up under supervision and with the recommendation of the teacher. These projects have to fit the time frame which is provided to the student by his or her institution, and they require time-consuming monitoring of the entire process by the teacher.

If this is the case, then are the findings of such research trainings not interesting for academia or the public because students are still undergoing their education and the time for such a project is very limited? Not necessarily. Working in a team means that not everything has to be done by one's own effort. A division of labor takes place. In a rather short period, more interviews can be taken compared to when working alone, which means that more raw material will be delivered. To provide an example: let us assume the research period covers a time span of two weeks or 10 working days. The team consists of four people. Every day, two interviews can

be taken (this works if interview partners have been found in advance) and immediately transcribed. At the end of that period, 20 interviews are thus available for the team, and if—like in our case—there are four such teams, it adds up to 80 interviews. Even if it is only 10 or 15 per group in reality, this is quite a lot of material.

From such a number of interviews, insights into a more complex issue are possible. Interviews can be compared according to various criteria, including the demographic identifiers of the interview partner such as age, gender, or other social/structural criteria; they can be measured in closeness or distance to ideal types, and the like. Of course, such a gathering of raw materials is the preparation for content analysis and further analysis only. This means, in the best-case scenario, there would be enough time for the students to work with the data. Not in this training, where students immediately needed their ratings to start their master thesis, but in the other cases which were mentioned at the beginning of this article, students continued to work on the material for at least one term. In all cases except this online research, the outcome was a joint research report of 60-100 pages, structured according to the different sub-projects under the joint major topic. We published these reports in our reviewed working paper series, and we can see from our web statistics that these reports are read by other academic scholars, but also by organizations. This means, students can also show a publication in their CVs and deliver such a paper once they apply for a job.

The other option is that students use the gathered material for their own master thesis. We decided to take all the gathered information of the four groups in this training as a knowledge pool available for every student, which meant that every transcript, memo, or summary of an interview was uploaded onto an online platform available for all participants.

What can we say about the intercultural proceedings? As already mentioned before, academic cultures are different. Although most national academic cultures aim at

internationalization, the synchronization of standards has not necessarily taken place. As we have already shown with the research ethics, they are different in the US and Germany. The same holds true for rating standards and requirements. Furthermore, national cultures and national academia impinge on students' behavior. This concerns the closeness or distance of teachers and students, for example. This may also concern the self-consciousness of students in interacting with respondents—especially when they are experts—and the behavior of experts towards students (e.g., hierarchical expectations). And finally, different national cultures impinge on the mix of the research teams, which may increase disturbances of a smooth flow of working together.

Another issue of self-reflections of the authors involves the hegemony of academic cultures. While US or German universities are rather well-equipped with funds and hopefully provide space for not directly curricular seminars, universities from the global South usually cannot not afford such equipment or academic freedom. This also concerns teaching obligations, whether such a training has to be added to the workload of the teacher or can be taken as part of it. As a matter of fact, it is the well-equipped universities from the global North that develop such teaching forms, and those teachers have the freedom to choose at least part of their workloads for such projects; very often they look for partners from the global South, who have to take such a course as an unpaid additional workload. The teachers and students from the former places enjoy travelling into a foreign culture, while those from the latter places work in their own environments and sometimes have to function as interpreters for their Western counterparts. We are fully aware that this can be discussed as hegemonial under the issues of post-colonialism or post-structuralism. It is also a pity that exchange programs do not offer additional funds for the latter universities to join such projects or perhaps even reverse the travel direction.

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