

## **Socio-Cultural Challenges in Conducting Ethnographic Research among Ethiopian Street Youth**

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*Little has been written on the personal experience of the researcher as it relates to data collection, data analysis and interpretation of results. Even more scarce has been knowledge that addresses the challenges and barriers faced by 21st century researchers engaged in ethnographic data collection amidst culturally diverse populations. The present work has addressed these gaps in the literature by detailing the personal, methodological and cultural challenges encountered by this researcher in a larger study which utilized a mixed method design to investigate homeless street youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Results indicated the need for social workers to possess an awareness of their own limitations and biases as it may relate to cultural differences. Key Words: Field Notes, Qualitative Research, Homeless Street Youth, and Addis Ababa*

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A great body of literature exists on the usefulness of field notes in qualitative research. Much of the literature addresses the importance of field notes for amplifying participant data that are collected in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008). Often, when results from such research are published, limitations noted to these studies include researcher variables/ limitations, without providing information on how to address these limitations. Little has been written on the personal experience of the researcher as it relates to data collection, data analysis and interpretation of results. Even more scarce has been knowledge that addresses the challenges and barriers faced by 21st century researchers engaged in ethnographic data collection amidst culturally diverse populations.

The present work addresses these gaps in the literature by detailing the personal, methodological and cultural challenges encountered by this researcher in a larger study which utilized a mixed method design to investigate homeless street youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The findings presented in this work stem from the qualitative portion of the larger mixed method study, and are comprised of the field notes documented by this researcher before, during, and after the field research. The present work focuses on findings emanating from the analysis of the field notes. Although rich data were collected concerning the experiences of street youth in Addis Ababa, and the findings are being prepared for publication both as journal articles and as documentaries, this researcher found that the analysis of her personal experience would provide useful data for others who wish to engage in like pursuits.

The findings reported in this work are particularly significant in adding to the extant literature on (a) the importance of field notes in qualitative research, (b) managing researcher reflexivity (i.e., bias, making sure the researcher observes data and findings objectively and not subjectively) in qualitative research, (c) conducting qualitative research on culturally diverse populations, and (d) conducting research with vulnerable populations such as homeless street youths. Keeping and using field notes enabled this researcher to make her experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible, and

contributed to the research design, analysis and interpretation process. Methodologically, incorporating field notes in the analysis and interpretation of research data is an accepted practice from constructivist, feminist, interpretivist, and poststructuralist perspectives (Denzin, 1994; Lather, 1991;). The aim of this paper is to show the reader how field notes were used and to show how keeping field notes can have a concrete effect on the research design and on the interpretation of the research findings from a study of homeless youth conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

### **Knowledge Concerning Street Youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is one of the least developed and poorest countries in Africa (Forum on Street Children of Ethiopia, 2008). A large proportion (60%) of the population is illiterate. Ethiopia's economy is dependent on agriculture, and oftentimes the crop is affected by serious drought problems. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2003) 81.9% of the population lives below poverty line. Among those most economically vulnerable in Ethiopia are the country's children.

More than 150,000 children are estimated to live on the streets of Ethiopia (Forum on Street Children of Ethiopia, 2008). The United Nations estimates that the problem may be far more serious, with nearly 600,000 homeless street children country wide, and over 100,000 of these children in Addis Ababa alone. Some of these children are ostensibly forced into life on the street as way of survival, and others voluntarily seek shelter on the streets as they perceive the streets as an option to earn money and help support their families. Other reasons for the proliferation of street youth in Ethiopia is the breakdown of families as a consequence of the death of spouses, various kinds of abuse- including violence in the homes, and sudden changes in household income. The rise in orphans and in the urgency of their survival needs also serve as contributing factors that result in Ethiopian children's homeless status on the streets (Forum on Street Children of Ethiopia, 2008). Another major factor contributing to the increasing numbers of orphans on Ethiopian streets is the adverse impact of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) on the country and its people.

HIV/AIDS has already orphaned over 1.2 million children in Ethiopia, and the United Nations Children's fund suggests that the problem may be getting worse (United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (2004)). Anecdotal information obtained from the leadership of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Ethiopia, indicates that poverty is also fostering the growth of child prostitutes, whose health statuses are complicated by the HIV/AIDS crisis. According to a report distributed by the UNICEF Office (2003), many of the child prostitutes have been victims of serious sexual and physical abuse on the streets. Homeless street females in Ethiopia are disproportionately impacted by high levels of poverty, gender-based discrimination, homelessness, rape, other types of violence and illiteracy, and their numbers are increasing (UNICEF).

In spite of the latter discussion, the problems contributing to Ethiopian youth ending up homeless and living the street life has not been fully studied. We set out to conduct semi-structured interviews with sample of these children in Addis Ababa. Although our team collected rich data, this researcher found that her field notes contained much information that is relevant to researchers who plan similar field excursions.

## **Importance of Field Notes in Qualitative Research**

Field notes allows the researcher to portray the whole picture of what is happening. They are also methods of collecting supplementary and complementary data that can inform the careful and systematic analysis of video tapes and audio tapes that are used as primary data collection instruments in qualitative research. Personal notes, as a part of field notes also allow the researcher to express how he/she feels, contributing elements of self reflection, memories and other impressions that can be shared with the reader. Specifically, personal notes as part of field notes and other contextual documentation also help to reveal inner dialogue, self-doubts and questions, insight, anger or frustration the researcher may feel, and other typically human struggles (Ortlipp, 2008). In short, field notes contribute to reflective practice, resulting in transparency of the research outcomes, and reveal the “origins of the various choices and decisions researchers undertakes during the process of researching”, analysis and interpretation (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3).

## **Methodology**

This section details the methods used in the larger study, as well as those used in collecting, transcribing, analyzing, interpreting and reporting on the field notes. In the larger study, the researcher used a qualitative research approach that included field observations, semi-formal interviews with research participants, and with NGO providers of services to street youths. The research team included two primary investigators who conducted the interviews of different groups on four different days of the week, at different locations and at different times. This was done to increase the variability in the composition of the final sample. The researchers systematically reviewed questions before each field visit, and reviewed field notes from the previous field day that consisted of note describing the physical setting, body language and other non-verbal behavior. The research team was also composed of one indigenous and bilingual interpreter, Ashenafi Hagos.

## **Sampling Process**

The sampling method in the larger study of Ethiopian street youth was a targeted purposive sampling technique. Specifically, one person was identified by the indigenous interpreter to recruit participants through a snowball sampling technique. The final sample size consisted of five (5) male participants, five (5) female participants, and three (3) managers from local NGOs, who were interviewed along with the President of Addis Ababa University (n=14). With respect to the present manuscript, the sample size is one (n=1) (i.e., the researcher) who analyzed her own field notes in relation to the research process and experience.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Within the larger study of Ethiopian street youth, triangulation was used in the measures used for data collection. This involved audio recording, video recording, and the compilation of field notes describing the research context as well as the researcher's own feelings and reactions throughout the field experience. The data collection procedure also included reviewing questions before each field visits, reviewing field notes from the previous work day (the physical setting, body language and other non-verbal behavior).

With respect to the larger study of Ethiopian street youth from which the present work stems, each interview was an average of one hour long, with a range of between 57 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes. At the beginning of the interview participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they were free to leave the interview process at any time during the interview without penalty or loss. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, discussed confidentiality, and obtained the informed consent. All information was translated for the participants by the interpreter to assure that participants understood the purposes and procedures. The participants were provided nominal tokens of appreciation, as recommended by the local NGO leadership and by the interpreter for their participation in the study. The amount provided was 50 Bhir, approximately five U.S. dollars.

In regard to the present work, each day's field notes were eight handwritten pages, consisting of documentation of the researcher's own feelings and reactions throughout the field experience. These notes, along with other notes that were audio recorded were transcribed electronically on a secure, password protected laptop, using Microsoft Word 2007©. Field notes were stored in a locked suitcase inside of a locked room during the course of the field research; and were subsequently secured in a locked file cabinet in a locked office at a major university in the United States.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

The data collection instruments in the larger study were, as mentioned above, a semi-structured interview guide consisting of, but not exhaustive of the following questions and prompts:

- Please describe a typical day for you; how do you usually spend your time?
- What do you do each day?
- Please describe the manner in which girls and boys are treated on the streets.

The remaining questions will be published in the appendix of a manuscript derived from the larger study that is being prepared for publication. The use of audio recordings, video recordings, and the documentation of daily field notes were useful in providing supplemental data in terms of contextual cues, body language, etc.

## Analysis

Data analysis in the larger study consisted of reiterative viewing and reviewing of videotapes obtained by the principal investigator and by the other research team member, as well as multiple listening of audio tape—by two different people. This process contributed to increasing rigor in the analysis of the research data as well as in the analysis of the field notes (Padgett, 1998; Patton, 1990).

With respect to the analysis of the field notes for the present work, this researcher arrived at each category after reflecting on how my day had gone, by processing information cognitively and by writing field notes. It was this process that allowed this researcher to reflect on what my Personal Cultural challenges had been for the day. This, and other a priori codes that would be applied to the data (personal illness due to a significant change in this researcher's diet, personal thoughts concerning the illness of my co-researcher, who desired to make the trip but the status of his health prevented him from traveling) were part of the first phase of coding in analysis. Although the research was exciting and challenging, nights were lonely as this researcher struggled with homesickness and with missing family, especially Thanksgiving Day. As this researcher restructured her thoughts concerning the extant of poverty and the difficult choices that were made by the street youth she interviewed, she began to take notes of her own reaction of the pain of those she interviewed. Their inability to attend school due to the severe poverty present in their community, the loss of their peers to HIV/AIDS and their use of honey wine and illicit drugs such as to cope with daily life on the street were re-occurring themes that led to the development of my second category, Reaction to the Pain of those interviewed. The final categories, Cash Economy and Professional Challenges resulted from the awareness that this researcher could not use a credit card anywhere in Addis Ababa other than in restaurants. Professional Challenges included maintaining a level of professionalism and rigor that would not bias the findings, and making certain that the researcher used good basic interviewing skills that would allow her to maximize the ability to obtain information in a non threatening manner.

In order to provide useful knowledge concerning my field experience as a researcher among street youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a conceptual framework that recognizes the value of individuals' unique realities within the context of their historical and socio-cultural experiences is required. This researcher found a framework in the social constructivist approach.

### Conceptual Framework for Analysis

One of the basic tenets of the social constructivist approach is that there is no objective reality, no absolute truth that is independent of the knower (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this perspective, reality is the product of a social construction process formulated under the influence of cultural, historical, political, and economic conditions. Given that knowledge is socially constructed, it varies historically over time and differs across cultural groups that hold diverse beliefs about human development and nature (Lee & Greene, 1999). Therefore, reality is not discovered but created by individuals (Lee & Greene; Vygotsky, 1978). This framework was chosen because the constructivist approach decreases the possibility of the researchers reconstructing or deconstructing the

participants' reality of their daily experiences of being homeless and of the unique barriers that went along with this status in Addis Ababa. Rather, the constructivist approach is a means of conceptualizing the research participants' personal stories, experiences, desires and their way of looking at living on the streets from their inside perspectives, impacted by the social and historical factors which are unique to them.

The constructivist approach also promotes the openness and tolerance that guided this researcher and her team from data collection, through data analysis and interpretation. It permitted the participants' culture and the social context of the research participant's world view to influence the research process, the findings and the analysis. In sum, this researcher embraced this perspective because it allows the homeless street youths to tell their stories as they have socially constructed them in their own words, from their personal experiences and group experiences, while providing a strong rationale for analyzing the researcher's own experiences in relation to how these affected her perception of the experiences of the participants in the larger study.

With respect to the specific aims of the present work, such an approach contributed to this researcher's analysis of her own experience as an African-American researcher conducting ethnographic research in Addis-Ababa; and it provided an excellent framework within which to code and analyze her field notes and to develop themes that were grounded in the data.

## Results

Several themes emerged from the analysis of this researcher's field notes while conducting research among street youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. These are illustrated in Figure 1, below. They are followed by illustrative quotes from the field notes.

Figure 1. *Themes emerging from Analysis of Researcher's Field Notes*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Personal Cultural Challenges           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal illness during Ethiopia visit</li> <li>▪ Reflections on illness of co-researcher who could not travel to Ethiopia</li> <li>▪ Nutritional concerns (unfamiliarity with indigenous fare)</li> <li>▪ Drastic drop in temperature at night               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Uncomfortable lodging</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Pre-flight barriers to travel</li> <li>▪ Homesickness and missing family, especially at Thanksgiving holiday</li> <li>▪ Language barrier in Ethiopia</li> <li>▪ Cash Economy in Ethiopia</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ Reactions to the pain of those interviewed           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poverty</li> <li>▪ Illness</li> <li>▪ Difficult Choices made by street youth               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Inability to attend school</li> <li>○ Use of honey wine and illicit drugs</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Reported peer losses of street youth to HIV/AIDS</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ Professional Challenges           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Scheduling of meeting NGO</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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## Illustrative Quotes from Field Notes that Support Themes from Figure 1

### Theme: Personal and Cultural Challenges

**Sub-theme: Personal illness during Ethiopia visit/co-occurrence: Language barrier/reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** I don't understand why I have developed stomach pain, and wonder if it was something I ate. I am going to try to self-medicate and treat this with medication that I brought with me from the states. I worry about what I will do if the alka seltzer doesn't work because I am not sure how safe things are in their medical system here and I certainly have difficulty communicating without the interpreter around. But even with the common language, the kids on the street have no access to treatment when they are ill and some, based on today's interviews have already died from AIDS. These deaths could have been prevented.

**Sub-theme: Reflections on illness of co-researcher who could not travel to Ethiopia /co-occurrence: Language barrier.** As I sit here, I wonder how my colleague is doing and wonder also whether I will develop delayed symptoms similar to what he experienced before I left Arkansas. More than anything, I am concerned about the apparent seriousness of his symptoms after the malaria vaccine. I miss his gentle presence and wisdom. I think what if I get sick? If I can't communicate about getting a blanket because I am cold, then how do I convey that I might need an ambulance?

**Sub-theme: Nutritional concerns (unfamiliarity with indigenous fare)/co-occurrence: Reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** The food that was served in the restaurants is so different that my appetite is affected. At mealtime, it is difficult to decide what dish to order because the food is so unfamiliar I have a very sensitive stomach. I am having great difficulty becoming accustomed to the many dishes that are so foreign to me. Several of these meals have not agreed with my digestive system, and there appears to be a limited availability of over the counter medical supplies and hospitals. At the same time, I find myself wondering what these poor kids on the street are eating tonight. Some of them may go to bed hungry.

**Sub-theme: Drastic drop in temperature at night/co-occurrence: Language barrier; reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** Adjusting to the cold nights is difficult since the hotel does not have a heating system as part of their infrastructure. I wanted to find out how to turn the heat on in the room, and it took several minutes trying to get the workers in the hotel to understand what I was saying. Once they did understand, they informed me that the hotel had no heating system, nor was there any electric heater available. They did provide me with extra blankets, but this is very new. I am awed at how easy we actually have it in the States, and how much we take for granted. I am disappointed because the hotel is very different than how it was portrayed on the internet. Then, I think about the young man whose body is covered with burns and his account of a cold night during which he sought shelter in a makeshift plaster home, and a policeman threw gasoline on the shelter and set fire to it with the boy inside of the shelter. The poor kid blames himself for being drunk and finding it difficult to get out of the shelter before he was severely burned.

**Sub-theme: Pre-flight barriers to travel/co-occurrence: reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** I think I am feeling a little bit down today because I had been scheduled to leave the country the day of my birthday. I am feeling kind of sad because I was unable to celebrate my birthday according to family tradition with spouse, children and grandchildren. Some of these kids we are interviewing do not have family to go back to...ever. They have either run away from abusive situations or were kicked out by “loved ones”. At least I will see my loved ones again.

**Sub-theme: Homesickness and missing family, especially at Thanksgiving holiday/co-occurrence: Reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** Being away from home on Thanksgiving Day is very hard. I am thinking that Thanksgiving is a major family holiday for me and here I am in a country where they have no idea what Thanksgiving is and I cannot even get a makeshift Thanksgiving dinner. I think about the young man who told me that he left home, so his younger sibling would have more food to eat and am ashamed that I am missing turkey and stuffing.

**Sub-theme: Language barrier in Ethiopia/co-occurrence: Homesickness and missing family.** I think I may have thought that the language barrier would not be such an issue for me since we have the interpreters. When they are not present, since many of the local residents do not speak English, I am finding it impossible to communicate and to get even the simplest thing done. For example, trying to figure out how to use the telephone, trying to secure extra blankets, and ordering food, all of which seem to be basic activities back home are extremely difficult to get done here.

**Sub-theme: Cash economy of Addis Ababa.** Ethiopia has a cash economy, and I find that extremely inconvenient. Few businesses accept credit cards with the exception of the restaurant. Bhir (the country’s money) could not be purchased prior to entering Ethiopia. I had become accustomed to purchasing currency at my bank in the state prior to leaving the states, but I was unable to purchase the Bhir prior to leaving the United States.

**Theme: Reaction to the Pain of those Interviewed: Poverty/Co-occurrence: Nutritional concerns (unfamiliarity with indigenous fare)**

I have not had to look far for homeless youth and people living on the streets. They appear to be everywhere. Their physical appearance is dirty and most are without shoes. Many were found only a few blocks from the local Hilton, where rows of shanty style housing were located and large number of people living on the streets and begging for a living resided next to the riverbanks. I have seen the face of hopelessness. I have looked in the face of despair and hunger. I have looked in the face of depression and I have not looked into the face of Hope: Perhaps I will have an opportunity to look in the face of hope tomorrow.

**Sub-theme: Illness/co-occurrence: Homesickness and missing family.** There are a large number of children suffering from HIV/AIDS in Addis Ababa based on the representatives of local NGOs. That bothers me to no end; because HIV/AIDS appears to



be an even greater burdens on children who have no one to care for them and who can barely care for themselves. I think of my own children and grandchildren back home and cry for the kids here, but my tears are also an offering of thanks that my own offspring can have access to care.

**Sub-theme: Difficult choices made by street youth/co-occurrence: Reaction to the pain of those interviewed.** A large number of children get up daily and take to the street because there is no public school system in place and because of factors such as the death of parents, no income, etc., they cannot afford to pay to attend school. One young lady today reported that she came to the street at age 15 after her parents died. Many of the other street youth have made difficult choices that brought them to the street. For many, even as they attempt to escape physical and sexual abuse, they have had to make difficult choices that further increase their vulnerability as street youth because they have to eat.

**Sub-theme: Use of honey wine and illicit drugs/co-occurrence: Reaction to pain.** Today, I have found out that there may be a relationship between substance use and abuse among these young people on Ethiopia's streets, as I discovered that many of the street youth turn to drugs as a mean to cope with the hard life on the street. I could not help but think about some of the similarities of using drugs as a coping mechanism among homeless youths in the states and how the addiction complicates a ready difficult problem. Still the homeless youths in the state fare far better than those found on the street of Addis Ababa. Seeing such pain and suffering related to the lack of basic needs, (such as clean water, food, shelter, public education, access to some form of health care) things that I take for granted daily will forever be recorded in my memory of street youth in Addis, Ababa. My sense of self-awareness has certainly...

**Sub-theme: Reported peer losses of street youth to HIV/AIDS/co-occurrence: Personal illness during Ethiopia visit and reflections of illness of co-worker who could not travel to Ethiopia.** A young girl shared that when she first came to the street she stayed with a group of 15 girls. She reported that presently the group is down to five or six. She reported that at least three of the girls had died due to sexual transmitted diseases: 1 died from syphilis, two died from HIV/AIDS. She reported being tested for HIV/AIDS but it was negative, she did report having Hepatitis B and having to be treated several months for it. She stated it was all clear now. How in the world do these children deal with such grief and loss on top of all the other trauma? I felt selfish to complain about a stomach ache from the food, after hearing the young girl story. I also felt graceful and thankful that my-co researcher was recovering after a life threading illness because he had had an opportunity that these children had never experience and that is having healthcare insurance that allowed him to receive good healthcare on a daily basis for several months in a hospital.

### **Theme: Professional Challenges**

Scheduling meetings with NGO representatives around their schedules has been a challenging task because meetings also had to be coordinated with the video crew,

interpreter and audio crew. Some of the agency workers were very hesitant to talk with me, even though their managers and supervisors had given them permission to talk with me. I later was informed by the interpreter that their reluctance stem from a distrust of government officials.

### **Discussion**

Researchers engaged in qualitative field work can expect to face personal, methodological and cultural challenges. Field notes can serve as important data to triangulate other data collection methods such as direct interviews, and as tools to help the researcher reflect on the data collection process and its impact on her own life. Carefully collected and managed field notes can have a concrete effect on the interpretation of research findings. The careful documentation and analysis of her field notes has enabled this researcher to share her experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings, providing a visible view of the data analysis and interpretation process from an insider's perspective. However, the effect of keeping and using field notes went far beyond simply achieving methodological rigor. Critical self-reflection and an increased self-awareness have had a definite effect on the entire research process. Boden, Kenway, and Epstein (2005) point out that inexperienced researchers are often not made aware of the "muddle, confusion, misstate, obstacles, and errors" (p. 70) that come up in the research process and that are exacerbated when the results of the research projects are presented as a "seamless, neat and linear process" (p. 70). Keeping and using field notes can make the problems encountered, the thought, the fears, guilty feeling etc., involved in the research process all visible to the researcher who can then make it transparent to those who read the research. The ultimate outcome is the clarification of the daily experiences of individuals involved in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008).

### **Implication for Social Work Practice**

There are several implications from this study that should be noted by social work practitioners as well as social work researchers. The decision to analyze and publish the findings from the analysis of this researcher's field notes was made so as to make visible her thinking, values, and experiences- both herself and to the reader. Sowers and Rowe (2007) maintain social work been profoundly influenced by Western thoughts, values, and views. This study can reinforce for social work practitioners and researchers that social work practice does not follow the same patterns in all parts of the world. The themes surrounding personal and professional challenges inform that human experience and social work research and practice within any society are shaped by the prevailing, social, economic, and cultural patterns, as well as the personal paradigm of the researcher or practitioner. The study validated the need for social workers to possess an awareness of their own limitations and biases as it may relate to cultural differences. Another implication of the findings reported herein is that the researcher engaged in field research or practice needs to be constantly aware of his or her own value orientation, so as not to impose them on the research participants or clients (Walls, 2009). In this study, the researcher had to be fully aware of the research participants' cultural values, cultural

experience, religious beliefs and practices. Good self-awareness and cultural sensitivity were paramount.

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