

The challenge of researching violent societies: Navigating complexities in ethnography

Icarbord Tshabangu

Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University

Through use of a recent study researching democratic education and citizenship in Zimbabwe, this paper examines the methodological dilemmas and challenges faced by an ethnographer, particularly by a research student in a violent context. The article posits a bricolage strategy to navigate some of the dangers and methodological dilemmas inherent so as to bring about rigour in an environment empty of convention and lacking the rule of law. To navigate such societies ridden with violence and conflict, the bricolage strategy used a multidisciplinary approach, part of which included triangulation, mixed methods, distance and insider status. These research strategies are discussed in this paper and recommendations posited.

In a study of citizenship and democratic education in Zimbabwe, the endemic culture of violence was found unsafe and inhibitive in exploring participants' social worlds. The main goal of the original research study was to assess and establish levels of democratic education in the secondary schools and whether these impacted on or were impacted by levels of democratic citizenship in the country's macro-politics (Tshabangu, 2008). The study occurred under a dark cloud of publicised animosity where the Zimbabwean regime had declared as 'enemies of the state' most western administrations, some Non Governmental Organisations, human rights lawyers, teachers perceived to support the opposition parties, white farmers and some civic leaders and researchers perceived as pro democratic forces in the country (Raftopoulos, 2003; Kibble, 2003; Human Rights Forum, 2003 - 2008). Many activists in this area had continued to suffer persecution of one form or another, in some cases leading to death (Human Rights Forum, 2003 - 2008). The regime had also embarked on an incessant drive to 'Zimbabweanise' its citizens in a partisan way such as in the 're-orientation' programmes for some teachers, head-teachers and young people under the guise of National Service (Ranger, 2004). The original research study further established a high incidence of polarisation in communities; violence within the schools' micro and macro-politics and the politicisation of the knowledge economy and of some civic institutions, where some citizens were ubiquitously labelled as 'traitors' for holding different views from the status quo (Tshabangu, 2008).

Doing research under these forces of conflict and political strife posed an enormous challenge and impediment to the research process since there is lack of methodological study on researching conflict and violent societies (Porter, et al, 2005; University of Ibadan Conference, 2002). Using insider status and reflexivity due to prior knowledge working in the field under study, a bricolage strategy (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) was deployed to navigate an otherwise complex research activity with risk to life.

While affirming ethnographic principles such as *in situ* to be in the field (Lofland, 1976), 'performing incompetence' (Vail, 2001) and producing 'deep descriptions' (Wolcott, 1994) the use of the bricolage strategy in the original study provided an ethnographic paradigm

shift through use of a multidisciplinary approach comprising of mixed methods, triangulation, distance and insider status which led to a collection of numerous forms of data as stated under research design.

This paper therefore examines the challenges of doing ethnography in an environment empty of convention and how a meaningful research activity can be made possible through the bricolage strategy which is posited as effective and complementary to ethnography in discovering 'what's going on here' (Goffman, 1974; Wolcott, 1994).

The challenge of methodological complexity

As part of a bricolage strategy, Vail (2001) bids ethnographers to look at observing from afar as one of many tools in a well rounded ethnographer's potential tool kit. In ethnographic studies the methodology often demands that the researcher be 'there' and immersed in the field studied (Lofland, 1976) so as to produce deep descriptions that share in the sorrow and joy, pain and conflict, that are an integral feature of social life (Sanders, 1998). In view of the challenges faced in researching violent societies (Porter et al, 2005) and the 'messiness' in ethnography (Smith, 1998; Vail, 2001), the strategy of bricolage provides for navigation that is inquiry led (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Such a paradigm in ethnography may be seen as complementary and non-reductionist in its navigational and accountable approach as it seeks to apprehend an unconventional research field. It is noted therefore that any retreat to 'set methods' may end up restricting our understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Parker, 1999) or our notions of validity (Hammersley, 1984).

The challenge of researching violent contexts

Although Zimbabwe may not be like Kosovo, Afghanistan or Iraq, it was noted that the country existed under the tight grip of dictatorship and had militarised all organs of state to sustain a form of illegitimacy (Raftopoulos, 2003). Furthermore, in the 1980s, Zimbabwe had experienced what Kosovo, Rwanda and Burundi experienced in the 1990s, allegedly recording over 20,000 deaths through a form of ethnic cleansing dubbed 'Gukurahundi' (Human Rights Forum, 2003; Sisulu 2007; Stiff 2002). Most observers seemed to acknowledge that the lack of leadership renewal in the country and the tightening grip on power was heavily premised on fear of possible repercussions related to the 1980s massacres and other subsequent acts of human rights violations and quite recently the political violence after the March 29, 2008 general election (Human Rights Forum, 2003 - 2008). These issues are brought to the fore so as to help put into perspective the gravity of seeking to conduct research in an unconventional environment where the rule of law has been suspended or is applied selectively and where one as a researcher, based on the subject pursued is most likely to be labelled 'an enemy of the state', and as such be persecuted, as are some journalists, teachers, lawyers and researchers in Zimbabwe (Hemel & Menkiti, 2006; Human Rights Forum, 2003 - 2008). In such a hostile environment there may be need to apply a strategy of bricolage so as to sustain the inquiry and achieve rigour.

It is noted that most research is often seen as political (Hammersley, 1995). In a conflict zone the politicisation of research work especially on issues of democracy and citizenship, may be magnified raising the stakes even higher and thus negatively contribute to an already emotive environment. Some researchers such as Ferrell in 1998 and Scarce in 1995 have been subjected to arrest and jail time respectively (Vail, 2001). Others record incidence of gunplay (Sanders, 1998) and detention in Zimbabwe (Hemel & Menkiti, 2006), thus curtailing the effectiveness of an inquiry. Researching in Kosovo, Moore (2003) observed that in a conflict zone there are paradoxical storms of counterproductive action, which encourage division of people into groups of 'us and them'. He further noted that one's own position is also of importance when researching in a conflict zone. Tourists in war zones do not exist and the researcher should remember he or she is not merely an observer. As such research in ethnic war zones is qualitatively more difficult and the researcher must be aware of the problems of working in an environment empty of convention (Moore, 2003).

It is highly probable that by going into the field to carry out the empirical study, one might ironically impede rather than facilitate the enquiry. It is possible that in seeking to do well, by researching violent societies desiring to establish understanding, we can inadvertently worsen a bad situation (Revival, 1999). The research process makes one an active participant in the raging conflict and thus threatens effectiveness and may undermine the study. It should be noted also that such 'dangerous' participation often occurs in the background of suspended societal norms and where the recognition of rights are endemic problems (Moore, 2003).

To navigate methodological minefields and danger to self and participants some research students have used case studies for countries such as Sri Lanka, Liberia, and Afghanistan so as to navigate the often difficult demands of having to address all levels of authority or having to contact people in power to gain access, which they say, is a highly politicised act (Revival, 1999). Some research students have used emails and telephones communicating with Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) in the field to learn of the current situation and also using NGO officials for follow up processes. It is observed that personal safety is paramount for research and that one should never send someone to do things one would not do oneself (Revival, 1999). It may be imperative therefore that the researcher negotiates with trusted designated assistants in the field as to what is probable and what approaches would not cause harm to participants as will be illustrated later in this paper. In the next section, the paper explores what the strategy of bricolage entails.

Understanding the bricolage

The strategy of bricolage in research entails navigation. This is where the research design and application is not bound by rigid, orthodox methods developed outside the demands of the inquiry, but what works best while sustaining rigour in the study (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Smith (1998) observed that we are living in a very complex and rapidly changing world, and that social science and research should not exist in a vacuum, which

led him to conclude that studying social existence with some degree of success involves recognising and responding to a series of challenges.

The application of a bricolage strategy in ethnographic research is non-reductionist but helps to contribute in the extending of already existing orthodox methodological boundaries in ethnography. The key in this paradigm shift is multidisciplinary as noted earlier. The search for 'true' meaning in any given phenomenon often presents difficulty, and particularly more so in a non-conventional setting such as in conflict, thus requiring 'navigation' or 'bricoleurship' (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Such bricoleurship does not imply that 'everything or anything goes' as Bridges (1999) observed in his critique of postmodernist research and as Lather (1991) comments of praxis in research. It is therefore noted that the bricolage strategy is founded on, and starts from the old, orthodox qualitative ways of doing research, but stretches out to the new and flexible ways so as to meet the demands of the inquiry in accountable and credible ways. Kincheloe and Berry (2004, p.11) described this process as operating "between the constructed and discovered knowledge work in a way that understands the blurred line." The use of the term 'blurred line' further reflects the epistemological and methodological complexities or 'messiness' in interpretive research, hence the strategy of bricolage. In this approach, the field becomes a determining factor as to what methods and methodology are usable.

Judging the bricolage

In its quest to apprehend studied phenomena, the bricolage does not claim or argue for 'the truth, the whole truth, nothing else but the truth' but attempts to establish deeper meanings and understanding of phenomena, which might otherwise be hidden if traditional approaches were used in unconventional settings. A key in the judgement of an inquiry is the issue of validity. It is noted that Bridges's (1999) outline of a correspondence theory of truth is not generally suitable to the strategy of bricolage. In fact the quest for criterion validity is often seen as incompatible and anathema to basic philosophical assumptions of the qualitative tradition (Hammersley, 1992). Such rejection of criteria does not necessarily seek to undermine the possibility that some methods are more effective than others in producing valid knowledge, but is against founding notions of certainty and absolutism in our understanding of a complex world with varied social worlds. In seeking to judge the bricolage, care should be taken not to impose permanence in approaches. Since criterion validity in the quantitative tradition is often about producing assessments that are 'beyond all possible doubt', the bricolage is not about establishing truth but understanding of varied perspectives. Furthermore, in judging the bricolage effectiveness the issue of 'relevance' (Hammersley, 1992), may also be a key. The question is to what extent do the findings of a bricolage led inquiry resonate strongly with the experiences of those in the studied social worlds? And to what extent does its flexible and multidisciplinary approach establish deeper meanings than otherwise possible in traditional approaches?

The researcher as a bricoleur

The bricoleur asks, "Should ethnography be done only in this way?" Kincheloe and Berry (2004) observe that such cynicism stems from the desire to dispel the notion that chronological, ordered methods get us to the 'right place' in academic research. In view of the evolution of historical moments in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), that is, from the traditional period of positivism and objectivity (colonial research) in the 1900s to the Seventh moment (De Beer, 2003) in the 21st century (celebration of diversity) methodological monism (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990) is discouraged, especially for the bricoleur. Kincheloe and Berry (2004, p.2) stated that bricolage exists out of a respect for the complexity of the lived world and that "approaching research as a power driven act, the researcher as bricoleur abandons the quest for some naive concept of realism, focusing instead on the clarification of his or her position in the web of reality and the social locations of other researchers and the way they shape the production and interpretation of knowledge".

In the search for meaning amid complexity, the bricoleur is often conscious of the social worlds in the multicultural and the complexity which attends the research process on these issues. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) stated that like a sailor on troubled waters, the bricoleur navigates a course that traces the journey between scientific and the moral, the relationship between the qualitative and the quantitative and the nature of social, cultural, psychological and educational insight.

Though bricoleurship may still be at its infancy and as such regarded as under threat in ethnography (deBeer, 2003), Denzin and Lincoln (2000) asserted that it is concerned with moral discourse with the development of sacred textualities and desires that the social sciences and humanities become sites for critical conversation about democracy, globalisation, freedom and community. In the original study some of the contested terms under focus were for example, democracy, quality education and citizenship. It is noted that these subjects are not only slippery in nature but are also vulnerable to the volatile political landscape which impacts on methodology and may not be successfully pursued in a non-flexible way, if deeper meanings and understanding of phenomenon is to be established. The bricolage therefore creates a non-linear but dialogical and critical environment that is conducive to the signification of a rigorous inquiry.

Research design

The main goal of this research was to assess the effectiveness of the bricolage, which was used in a previous study on citizenship and democracy in Zimbabwe. In view of a successful inquiry in the original study, this current study seeks to posit the bricolage strategy as having been effective in establishing meanings and understanding amidst a hostile research environment as noted earlier.

Original study

Premised on 8 high schools and 1 teacher training college in the southern part of Zimbabwe, the study conducted telephone interviews with head-teachers; focus groups and debate sessions with students; brainstorming with both students and teachers; qualitative questionnaires for lecturers and trainee teachers; qualitative and quantitative questionnaires for teachers and students; poetry from students; cartoons from local media and observation accounts from teachers and students. More than 360 students, 90 teachers, 36 trainee teachers, 7 lecturers and 8 head-teachers participated. The average response rate was over 80% in 12 research activities and numerous data were collected in the process. The discussion below explores further how the strategy of bricolage appropriated the above methods to greater effect.

Multidisciplinarity as a navigation strategy

The key in the bricoleur's tool kit is multidisciplinarity arising from the desire to apprehend the complex social locations of studied subjects and understand their historicity and meanings from a cross sectional perspective. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) bade researchers to study the intricate layers of visual meaning from different perspectives. Multidisciplinarity is therefore the key for a bricoleur so as to produce 'deep descriptions' (Wolcott, 1994) and achieve plausibility in a study (Vail, 2001). Below are some of the research tools in multidisciplinarity, notably triangulation, mixed methods, distance and insider status. The notion of triangulation in bricolage is only employed especially with reference to how it has enhanced rigour in the study and not for criterion validity purposes as in traditional research.

Triangulation, distance and mixed methods

In the original study, the use of some teachers as participant observers in the inquiry, provided for investigator triangulation (i.e. more than one observer). In this instance, not just the researcher was the observer but other professionals (teachers and lecturers) assisted in the research and also recorded their views on the phenomena studied. In the broader thematic analysis in the original study, the bricolage strategy enabled theoretical triangulation (Guion, 2002), where both structuralist theorists such as Paulo Freire were used alongside post structuralists such as Michel Foucault. In bricolage these theoretical tensions collapse into complicity in aid of a complex study.

Triangulation in methods saw the use of brainstorming of students and teachers, telephone interviews with head teachers, poetry from students, observation accounts from teachers and students, students' focus groups, students' debate sessions, qualitative questionnaires for lecturers and trainee teachers, qualitative and quantitative questionnaires (mixed methods) for teachers and students and cartoons from local media as part of exploring the macro-political field. There was also a triangulation of participants that is, teachers, students, lecturers, trainee teachers, and head teachers and time triangulation since the collection of data started when the researcher was still immersed physically in the field in 2001 as a teacher researcher and the study continued for six years,

part of it being done from a distance in the United Kingdom. Further vigorous and more sustained immersion coupled with reflexivity and data collection occurred from afar between 2003 and 2006.

Though being in the field is important as noted earlier, the difference can sometimes be negligible, since fieldwork by its nature is the intent behind it rather than the label itself (Wolcott, 1995). It is noted that in ethnography such use of distance may serve to fulfil the notion of 'performing incompetence' (Vail, 2001), which helps avoid the ethnographer becoming 'native'. It is noted that three years after leaving Zimbabwe, a lot had changed politically, socially and economically. Although the researcher had some prior knowledge of the field studied, in the telephone interviews with head teachers no assumptions were made on his part based on prior knowledge. In some ways this was 'performed incompetence' which is the key to ethnography. Lines of inquiry were followed up even on some phenomenon, which may be seen as trivia to the insider. Researching from afar may therefore demand that the researcher has previous and deeper knowledge of the studied social worlds so as to recognise the sorrow and joy, pain and conflict, spoken of by Sanders (1998). Without such roots the novelty, performed incompetence, and problems of isolation and temporal constriction could all raise the justifiable concern of those who read the research (Vail, 2001). Furthermore, it is noted that stepping back from intense emotions like fear and repulsion, particularly in conflict, is often necessary in analysing data, (Vail, 2001), a feature only possible where the constrictions of distance are used to advantage.

Insider status, bias and trust

One of the critical factors in researching from afar is insider status, which places the researcher in a position of knowing which geographical areas; institutions; participants and individuals may support and enrich the study without causing further strife or danger to self and participants.

Finch (1993, cited in Hammersley, 1993) observed that when she was researching amongst clergymen's wives they felt content and at ease through her notifying them that she was also a clergymen's wife. Most teachers and head teachers hardly offered any reservations about my requests and I conclude that it was partly because they saw me as 'one of them' and possessing an 'insider status' (Vail, 2001; Sanders, 1998). I always strived to act morally, not seeking to benefit at others' misery or expense (Gilligan, 1982) and they trusted me. Throughout the original study I tried to maintain that trust. Since issues of democracy and citizenship invariably pose a spectre of bias, and fear of indoctrination (Carrington & Troyna, 1988), the original inquiry was conducted in a way that respected respondents' different views and recorded these as they were, without abusing my power and privilege as the researcher. Even though immersed in the group studied for almost ten years I never took undue advantage of that length of time to drown others' voices from the field. It is noted that different people will often experience different things. And even if they experience the same, they will most likely interpret the experience differently (Hammersley, 1984).

Insider status is critical, since the unfettered collection of data may not be possible in conditions where surveillance, brutality and intimidation are present. Sometimes data collection may be done with the full knowledge of participants' superiors or in an unobtrusive way (Lee, 2000). Senior and trusted participants such as some teachers, lecturers or elders in rural communities may help the researcher in the distribution and collection of research material. It is noted that because of the insider status that the researcher had within the field studied, it proved less difficult navigating potential dangers and the data generated proved somewhat a success.

Taking into account that in violent societies secret agents often infiltrate institutions such as schools and government departments, it is therefore noted that a researcher's line of enquiry might easily arouse concern in some quarters. There is need to adopt cautious and sensitive lines of enquiry as a means of researching what might be a sensitive subject.

Based on insider knowledge, one may suspend or re-negotiate the task in light of risks involved. A good example in Zimbabwe was when such tasks coincided with political elections, often mired in violence. Participants may therefore fear reprisals if they are perceived to be involved in a quasi-political research activity. In relatively less violent periods teachers for example may still fear children of some hawkish government officials in cases where they are tasked to record children's debates on political or economic issues. In most situations insider knowledge offers a more effective way of achieving tasks amid such danger and complexity, navigating what could be potential minefields for an ethnographer who might lack insider status and knowledge of the field. It is noted that in most violent societies, the researcher may be denied access to the field of study or grudgingly given permission only to be curtailed and restricted often with risk to life. It is important that the bricoleur should continue to seek other means, working in ways that preserves the safety and security of his or her participants but at the same time sustaining a plausible inquiry.

The multidisciplinary approach in bricolage thus avoids some allegations of reductionism but strives for rigour amid complexity (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Without the strategy of the bricolage, the research efforts in a polarised and politically violent research field would have been compromised, or even wholly negated. In this light the bricolage strategy is viewed as having achieved novelty and success in establishing better understanding on challenges facing citizenship and democracy in Zimbabwe.

Ethical issues related to researching in conflict

It has been noted that researching conflict and violence ridden societies often pose complex challenges both methodologically and ethically. Beauchamp and Childress (1994) cite four basic principles in ethics, namely; respect for autonomy (exercise no coercion), non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence (doing good) and justice (using fair and just methodologies or strategies). Bearing these four principles in mind, below are some of the ethical considerations related to researching areas in conflict.

The use of insider status and direct assistance from local senior persons was seen as ethically plausible in that it allayed fears from some participants and may have boosted their confidence in an environment that is filled with fear and mistrust and perceives freedom of expression as anathema. The senior persons referred to above were selected based on insider knowledge that they were above reproach and were generally seen as level headed amongst participants. For example, it might be an unjust strategy and also likely to cause harm if a well known aggressive political activist in a conflict zone is used as a helper. The study may be perceived as partisan and in a bad light. It is also a factor that mobilising such networks in order to generate data in such a conflictual environment is the only way of continuing research as an activity. Some compromise may be a necessity when conditions are as bad as they can be in a conflict zone.

Researching from afar may necessitate that some funds be distributed to all those directly assisting. It could be seen as unethical as well as detrimental to the study to expect them to foot some or all of the bills particularly in view of the hostile economic challenges they may face daily in an area ravaged by conflict. Where funds had to be distributed (or prizes given) this was done fairly with no bribery implications.

In situations where government policy allows interception of communication, caution may need to be taken, particularly in telephone interviews and use of emails, as failure to do so may cause harm to participants. It is important that participants in telephone interviews and in other recorded research activities give their consent to be recorded and be allowed to terminate proceedings as and when they feel like. In some situations they may only volunteer information off the record and the researcher may have to take notes or adopt other strategies. At the time when I telephone interviewed the head teachers and used emails, the law allowing interception did not exist; otherwise it might have caused harm if intercepted. It is noted also that the head teachers consented to be recorded on tape and were free to opt out or state certain things off the record.

Seeking consent and gaining access, particularly from government authorities can be a ritualised process in a conflict zone due to hostile polarity and mistrust. It has been stated earlier that the researcher's insider status in some of the schools studied, made access less difficult and at least possible. In some institutions the researcher may have to wholly depend on junior personnel and not a hawkish senior figure for consent and access. As an ethical general rule it is advisable that the introductory part of all distributed material, such as questionnaires, should address individual participants politely, seeking their consent to participate in the study and thanking them at the end.

Participants should also be promised anonymity (Radnor, 2001). This is particularly crucial in a politically violent society in that it protects their rights and avoids recriminations. The senior participants designated to assist the researcher should also be conscientised to exercise impartiality such that the study is not seen as advancing certain agendas, but that it is professionally seeking to understand better a given phenomena. As one of its ethical goals, the research study in a conflict zone should avoid engaging in a violent agenda since to do such may be seen as malfeasance and catastrophic to both the study and the participants' well being.

One of the ethical challenges faced by those who research societies under conflict and violence is that the participants who volunteer information often do so at risk to themselves with the hope that such research is part of a process meant to end their misery (Smyth, 2001). It becomes morally binding therefore that a researcher in a conflict zone finds opportunities for information dissemination and where possible incorporation into policy making or conflict resolution processes.

Uncertainty and navigating some limiting factors

It is noted that unless communication with participants is effective, the progress of the inquiry may suffer. Sometimes gatekeepers may not have email accounts. In such a situation a person contactable through a phone may be better. Though it may sometimes be seen as nagging, constant follow-up is a prerequisite particularly where research is being completed from a distance. This often helps to avoid delays at various levels in the communication chain. Since there is greater uncertainty in conflict zones, delays are sometimes unavoidable, such as during a military operation or a volatile political campaign, these have to be accepted for the safety and security of participants. My original research study took an extra two years as a result. Depending on the scale of the challenge, the researcher may have to re-negotiate the research boundaries and time-scales; change or re-order assistants; introduce new research instruments while maintaining rigor in the study. Keeping in mind holidays and busy time schedules in the life of institutions studied or seasons in the case of farming rural communities may prove necessary, if one is to maximise the best support available.

Working with gatekeepers and assistants in institutions under study also places one in a position akin to a manager. Rather than just consider their efforts, one also needs to think seriously about motivational aspects. At times it may be wise to devise group prizes or rewards for students or for a school, for example in poetry. Without some of these motivational tools, the study might suffer. These motivational efforts ought to be done ethically without appearing to be bribing participants. Some poor but academically gifted students may be helped in this process. As noted earlier, the economic conditions in a conflict zone are generally tough. The researcher should therefore be conscious of the fact that his or her failure to provide resources may impact negatively on the study. These may include providing writing materials, postage fees and meeting distribution and transportation costs.

To ensure effectiveness in the completion of tasks, it is important to give clear guidelines to those assisting in the research, so as to alert them to key issues and some ethical concerns, such as dealing with participants. For example, forcing participants to complete a certain task would be seen as anathema to the voluntaristic and democratic ethos of any study, more so in an environment where participants may be traumatised by conflict. To counter fatigue on the part of local assistants it may help to always co-opt two or more helpers in an institution. This may also be ideal where the study is longer and some helpers are due for leave. In the original study this seems to have worked very well.

Future research

In future it may be readily acceptable to have a set of methodological strategies expected to research violence and conflict from afar as there exists for example in feminist methodologies. Maybe we will have something like 'snapshot', 'conflict' 'desktop' or 'guerrilla' methodologies where the methodological strategies of bricolage will be an integral part of these. It is noted that such a paradigm shift in ethnographic research opens a new epistemological ground. It may also provide for a full exploration and generation of knowledge in these methodological issues for further enquiry. Some of the knowledge development areas may include, but are not limited to the following.

- The role of local research assistants in a conflict zone
- The use and development of technology in distance ethnography
- The nature of the bricolage in ethnography
- Methods development in bricolage (e.g. unobtrusive methods - Lee, 2000)
- The ethics in bricolage and researching conflict

The bricolage strategy strives for praxis in research where theories on methodology and epistemology should only be seen as an explanation of our relation to the world and not an explanation of the world. The knowledge produced in future research should therefore not be seen as a trans-historical body of truth (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) with permanence that transcends epochs, but as provisional and in process, seen only as flexible transitional tools in the hands of a bricoleur.

Conclusion

Using a previous ethnographic study on democratic education and citizenship conducted within a violent context in Zimbabwe, this paper examined the complexities that are inherent in seeking to do ethnography in violently divided societies, noting the methodological dilemmas and lack of ethical and methodological studies in this area. In reference to the multidisciplinary approach in the original study, this paper has explored how triangulation, mixed methods, distance and insider status was used to greater effect in sustaining a rigorous inquiry amidst a violent research field. Several suggestions have been made on navigating some of the ethical and methodological challenges while maintaining rigour in the study. In view of its effective complementary nature in the original ethnographic study, the bricolage strategy is posited as a potentially plausible alternative in a well-rounded ethnographer's tool kit in apprehending an otherwise complex study.

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Dr Icarbord Tshabangu is a former head teacher in Zimbabwe and a recent graduate of Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. His research interests and previous publications are on Citizenship and Democratic Education. He is currently a part-time research consultant for Aspire Network, UK, a non-profit organisation.
Email: preslica_012@hotmail.co.uk