Disability Research in Cultural Contexts: Beyond Methods and Techniques

Kofi Marfo

Introduction

The invitation to participate in the *expert* meeting on disability research (see Introduction) came at a time in my career when I see myself more as a student seeking to gain a better understanding of the history and culture of the research enterprise so that I can increase the relevance and meaningfulness of my own research and become a better teacher and research mentor for my students. Over the past few years, I have come to characterize my excursions into the sociology and philosophy of science as a quest to develop deeply personal understandings of the ethical and professional responsibilities associated with the researcher role. I hope that the issues I have chosen to address in this working paper will not be deemed too esoteric to be relevant to our discussions in Bonn, because I think a meeting on disability research in cultural contexts is a most authentic forum for a discussion of these issues. The timing is auspicious too, given the ascendancy of the paradigm dialogue in a number of disciplines.

The central premise of this paper is that research/inquiry is not a value-free enterprise. All researchers walk into the arena of inquiry with baggage. Embedded in this baggage, among other things, are the effects of one's own cultural background on the way one views the world, the impact overt or covert of specific social and/or political processes or events that often provide the impetus for specific lines of inquiry, the impact of formally acquired paradigms of inquiry, and the biasing influences of specific conceptual frameworks within a chosen paradigm. In this paper, considerations of the ever-present influence of these forces on the inquiry process are subsumed under the general rubric, *philosophical and socio-cultural underpinnings of inquiry*. With the foregoing as the central premise, this paper seeks to develop the position that no meaningful discussion about research can be deemed to be complete unless it includes examination not only of methodological and technical issues but

socio-cultural and philosophical issues as well. While I consider this position to be axiomatically applicable to discussions of all types of research, it is particularly central to a discussion of research that takes as its starting point the quest for cultural understanding and relevance. To initiate the discussion, I present two specific themes. The first highlights the chasm between philosophical and methodological considerations in scholarly work on inquiry. Recognizing that understandings about, and responses to, *cultural difference* lie at the heart of culturally contextualized inquiry, the second theme focuses on the importance of researchers' self-reflections about their personal constructions of *difference* as a precondition for meaningful inquiry.

On the Chasm Between Philosophy and Methodology

Let me cast the introduction of this issue in the context of a challenge we encounter frequently in debates about the dearth of indigenous contributions to the knowledge base of cross-cultural research. To take an example from the field of psychology, it has been remarked that much of the scanty research knowledge on human development which represents the work of indigenous African investigators is largely unpublished, and contained mostly in theses and dissertations completed in fulfillment of requirements for the award of university degrees (Nsamenang 1992/ Serpell 1984). Conversely, much of what is published and, thus, easily accessible about psychological development in the African context appears largely in foreign sources and tends to represent the work of itinerant Westerners etc. whose mission has usually been to test Western theories on strange populations or to explore exotic cultures (Nsamenang 1992: 14). This is perhaps an observation that can be extrapolated fairly to the state of research knowledge on disability and culture as well. The connotation, in both instances, is that expatriate researchers' dominance over the production of knowledge in indigenous cultures is problematic because the images portrayed about indigenous people, their beliefs and practices, are bound to be colored by the culture-constrained values, biases, and interests these outsiders bring to the issues they study. By implication, increasing the role of indigenous researchers in the production of knowledge is expected to increase the ecological validity and relevance of such knowledge.

But the problem is not just one of expatriate researchers filtering indigenous conceptions and practices through the dark lenses of their

own cultural heritages. A close examination of social and behavioral science research by indigenous scholars in their own cultural contexts will probably reveal a significant, if not preponderant, tendency toward replication studies designed to assess the *universal applicability* of conceptual and empirical models or specific hypotheses tested originally in the industrialized world. That is, given the opportunity and resources, indigenous scholars may not approach the cultural content of social and behavioral science research any differently than the so-called itinerant expatriate investigators. This reality underscores my position that scapegoating expatriate researchers and their scholarship for the paucity of bodies of knowledge that reflect adequate regard for and informed understandings of indigenous cultures is not a productive exercise.

Part of the key to understanding the shortcomings of research relative to the importance of cultural contexts is understanding the *history* and *culture* of inquiry itself. I do not intend to offer an elaborate thesis on the nature of inquiry (I am not even sure if I am the right person to do so), but I do want to lay out some basic ideas to stimulate further discussion. At the barest minimum, inquiry has two components: *philosophical* and *methodological*. The philosophy of inquiry can be further categorized into *ontological and epistemological* considerations. The ontological consideration deals with the nature of the knowable or the nature of reality, while the epistemological addresses the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer/researcher) and the knowable (Guba 1990). Methodology, of course, deals with *how* the knower goes about finding out knowledge.

Table 1: Elements of the Philosophy of Inquiry
Based on Guba (1990)

Element of Inquiry	Associated Questions
Ontological	What is the nature of reality or the knowable?
Epistemological	What is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the knowable?
Methodological	How should the knower go about finding knowledge?

Embedded within all paradigms of inquiry are ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions. There is a good analogy here between culture and paradigms of inquiry. Much as members of any given culture are distinguishable from members of other cultures by the beliefs, values, language, and practices engendered by their own culture and transmitted through the socialization process, researchers operating from any given paradigm of inquiry are distinguishable from other researchers by the beliefs and assumptions or presuppositions they have been socialized to hold about ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues. These beliefs and assumptions frame the questions researchers pose, determine the phenomena about which questions are posed, and dictate the methods and procedures with which data are obtained, analyzed, and interpreted.

Of special pertinence to our discussion here is the suggestion that matters of ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the knower-knowable relationship) are exactly what set one culture apart from another. Cultures tend to impose different value systems and different ways of knowing and relating to the universe, such that what is meaningful and valid in one culture may not necessarily be so in another culture. From this perspective, inquiry is intrinsically a cultural activity. It is a search for knowledge through culturally-determined ways of knowing. It begins with cultural conceptions and should end with outcomes that have cultural relevance. The researcher who misses this central principle misses the very essence of inquiry. This perspective raises some fundamental questions for the researcher: is the validity of culturally contextualized research threatened by ontological and epistemological differences in the worldviews of the researcher and the participants of the research? What steps can be taken to mitigate this potential source of threat to validity? Paradoxically, the answers to these questions are rendered more complex by the reality of increased cultural contact and exchange. The Western education model dominates the educational systems of the developing world, and the formal research training of indigenous scholars continues to take place largely in the industrialized world. Consequently, as implied in an earlier comment, the ontological and epistemological perspectives with which the indigenous scholar approaches research in the local context may not be any different from those with which the expatriate scholar approaches research in a foreign cultural context.[1] The point of this caveat is that in answering the two questions posed above, we must avoid the simplistic tendency to separate indigenous and expatriate scholarship, as if they are informed by substantively different mindsets. Regardless of our cultural identities, too

many of us think of research more in methodological terms than in philosophical terms. Examining our own beliefs, assumptions, and biases about the phenomena we study, the questions we pose, how we pose them, and the individuals from whom we derive our data is not a well established part of the research process in many disciplines. Cultural anthropology is perhaps an obvious exception. The divorce of philosophy from methodology manifests itself across many disciplines. If this is deemed to be problematic in the natural sciences, it is even more so in the social sciences and the humanities where the problems that researchers seek to address are embedded intricately within the complex social, political, and moral fabric of a given culture. However, all too often what passes for good research in the social and behavioral sciences is judged on the basis of methodological rigor and the elegance of the empirical analysis. As can be gleaned from the paradigm debate currently raging in many fields, this divorce of methods and evidence from philosophy and social processes is seen as one of the central weaknesses of the empiricist tradition within positivistic science. In social and behavioral science disciplines which have been under the strong influence of the natural science approach to inquiry, e.g. psychology, sociology, family studies and rehabilitation psychology, graduate-level research training tends to overemphasize methods and techniques of designing research and collecting and analyzing data at the expense of the philosophical, socio-cultural, and moral issues that underpin or are associated with both the research question and the methods and procedures selected to address it.

If the divorce of method from philosophical assumptions and values is problematic for the pursuit of research in the context of industrialized societies, its ramifications for knowledge production in non-industrialized cultures is arguably more profound. The criteria of relevance and meaningfulness require researchers to be sensitive to the importance of framing research questions and selecting methodological tools with due attention 1. to the content and context of the culture and 2. to the researchers' own understandings and assumptions regarding the culture. This is as true for the indigenous investigator as it is for the expatriate researcher. Until research training programs begin to pay sufficient attention to the philosophical, social, and moral dimensions of inquiry, the graduates of such programs will continue to be ill-prepared to pursue culturally relevant research within indigenous contexts.

THE RESEARCHER'S PHILOSOPHICAL MIND-SET VIS-A-VIS CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Let us examine the importance of philosophical issues in the pursuit of inquiry from another angle. Conducting inquiry from a culturally contextualized perspective entails constant comparisons of value systems, ideas, and practices. Such comparisons are often between the researcher's own beliefs, values, or practices and those of the culture under study (as is the case with expatriate researchers or with indigenous researchers examining two subcultures within their society, one of which is their own). However, comparisons may also involve two cultures or subcultures that are neutral to the investigator. Each one of these instances requires critical reflection on the part of the researcher about her/his own beliefs and attitudes about *cultural difference*. The *subjective self* is very much a part of the research process. This point is very important because while we often do not acknowledge it: the biases we bring to the research process as a function of our own comparative mind-set do impact the outcomes of our research. How does the researcher respond to ideas, beliefs, and practices of others? How do the subjectively held perspectives of the researcher affect the conclusions drawn from inquiry entailing cultural comparisons?

The work of comparative anthropologist Richard Shweder (1991) offers some useful insights into the manner in which different interpretive models lead to differences in the way we view and appreciate the understandings, beliefs, and practices of other peoples. Shweder describes three interpretive models for making sense of *difference*: universalism, evolutionism, and relativism. Universalists are individuals who view diversity as more apparent than real. To them, alien idea and belief systems are really more like our own than they may appear. In search of universals in apparent diversity, universalists emphasize general likenesses and overlook specific differences. To evolutionists, not only are alien idea or belief systems truly different; they are different in a very special way. Evolutionists view alien idea and belief systems as "really incipient and less adequate" (ibid.: 114) forms of their own idea systems. The evolutionist's view reflects a hierarchical organization of idea systems, embedded in which is a three-stage rule. Confronted with diverse idea systems, evolutionists will 1. locate a normative model, 2. reify the evolutionist's own idea system as the normative model at the end or highest point of development, and 3. describe the diverse idea systems in a hierarchy going from the more primitive toward the normative model.

In contrast to universalists and evolutionists, relativists hold the viewpoint that while alien idea systems differ fundamentally from our own, they do display an internal coherency that can be understood but cannot be judged (ibid.: 114). Faced with apparent diversity of human understandings, then, relativists seek to preserve the integrity of the differences and establish the coequality of the variegated forms of life (ibid.: 119). They do so by contextualizing the differences. Contextualization entails searching for and presenting more details (e.g. the objectives, premises, presuppostions, standards, etc.) that make it possible to see the meaning in the otherwise apparently incomprehensible. Thus, in the words of Shweder, relativists are inclined to *think through* the idea and belief systems of other peoples and their cultures as they seek to understand both their own minds and the minds of the peoples they seek to understand. Table 2 summarizes the key attributes and slogans corresponding to each of the three models.

Table 2: Interpretive Models for Understanding Alien Idea Systems
Based on the work of Richard Shweder (1991)

Model Slogan	Key Value and Attributes
Universalism	*Homogeneity*: diversity is "Apparently different but sacrificed for equality really the same"
Evolutionism	*Hierarchy*: diversity is not "Different but only tolerated; it is expected and unequal"
Relativism	*Pluralism*: equality *and* "Different but equal" diversity as a democratic aspiration

Assuming that Shweder's interpretive models are both exhaustive of the ways of viewing difference and are mutually exclusive at the same time, what would it mean for a researcher to characterize her/himself, upon self-reflection, under any one of these models? How differently would each mind-set affect what the researcher chooses to study, how it is studied, and how the outcomes of the study are interpreted? To acknowledge the potential differential impact of these (or any other) interpretive

modes on the various dimensions of the inquiry process is to underscore the centrality of philosophical considerations. This kind of reflection is hard work and perhaps even risky, not only because of its potential to reveal perspectives and orientations that may be hard to acknowledge but also because it can lead to the superficial adoption of politically correct orientations.

SOME PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

1. Build coalitions of international (expatriate) and local (indigenous) research and service professionals and promote ongoing dialogue on research and practice in cultural contexts.
2. Articulate clear values about research, with equal attention to methodological and philosophical issues, and with deep respect for multiple approaches to inquiry.
3. Promote a *multidisciplinary* and *multiparadigmatic* journal on disability research in cultural contexts, with a broad-based editorial board consisting of 1. researchers, practitioners, policy makers (including individuals with disabilities at all levels) and 2. international and local professionals. Use the journal not only as a forum to disseminate original field research but also as a place for ongoing dialogue on philosophical, socio-cultural, ethical, and methodological issues in research.
4. Promote linkages between research institutions in industrialized and developing countries.
5. Support institutions in developing countries to develop research training programs which emphasize culturally contextualized inquiry.

NOTES

1   This comment is not in any way intended to suggest that indigenous scholars are incapable of *thinking through their own cultures*, to borrow the words of Richard Shweder (1991). However, it is naive to distinguish between indigenous and expatriate scholarship purely on the basis of the scholar's *surface* cultural identity.

References

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