

Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography as an Innovative Design for Addressing Sexuality Education in South African Rural Farm Schools

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq**Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi¹** 

Abstract

Addressing Sexuality Education among learners in rural schools can be challenging when using traditional designs such as ethnography and phenomenology. This paper introduces Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography as an innovative design for addressing Sexuality Education in South African rural farm schools. This design was developed as part of an engaged scholarship on HIV prevention in rural farm schools in Soutpansberg North Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The paper provides an overview of Sexuality Education at schools and the challenges thereof. It further provides the basics of ethnography and its limitation. The paper then introduces and describes cyclical ethnography as an alternative to original ethnography. The design allows researchers to still have a prolonged engagement with the community without gross disruption of other academic responsibilities such as tuition, academic citizenship, leadership, and administration. The design allows the researcher to visit the area several times over the years, enabling the researcher to observe variations of a phenomenon over time. The Cyclical nature of the design allows data collection, analysis, intervention, monitoring, and evaluation to be conducted iteratively. Though there are primary key informants, the findings could lead to other key informants, settings, and interventions which were not part of the initial plan and objectives. In this study, the target population was educators teaching Sexuality Education, but it ended up involving learners, parents, and community members. The Longitudinal nature of the design enables the researchers to see the impact of the interventions.

Keywords

cyclical longitudinal ethnography, sexuality education, educators, engaged scholarship, learners, rural farm schools

What Is Already Known?

Ethnographic research is a qualitative research design requiring a researcher to have prolonged engagement with key informants (Reeves et al., 2013). The design focuses on observing, exploring, and describing the phenomena in social and cultural contexts (Mannay & Morgan, 2015). Data are collected through observing and interviewing the informants. The interview questions evolve during the course of the study. Data collection and analysis are done interactively.

What Does this Paper Add?

This paper introduces Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography as a design for addressing Sexuality Education in South

African rural farm schools. Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography is a qualitative research design where a researcher visits the research site intermittently over several years to understand the context, the existing challenges and the suitable intervention.

The following are advantages of using Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography:

¹Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa

Corresponding Author:

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, Muckleneuc Ridge, Pretoria, Gauteng 0003, South Africa.

Email: mmudza@unisa.ac.za



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- (i) Focusing on one research site and visiting it for a limited duration, rather than the usual ethnographical study, where the researchers are expected to be on the site for months or even years, enable researchers with limited time to conduct ethnographical studies.
- (ii) Visiting the site at different periods enables the researchers to observe social and cultural practices which might be missed if the person visits the site only once.
- (iii) The design also allows the researchers, especially those engaged in other responsibilities, such as teaching and learning, to plan their time for conducting the research without sacrificing their other academic duties.
- (iv) The researcher is not only an observer but also engaged in assisting the community in identifying and addressing their societal challenges.
- (v) The flexibility of cyclical longitudinal ethnography may assist the researcher in seeing the changes occurring over time and contributing to improving the community life at the research site.
- (vi) This design also allows researchers to build a trust relationship with community members as it is not just a once-off engagement. In a trust relationship, the informants feel free to share sensitive information such as sexual practices and even the "sacred aspects" which they would normally not share with a "stranger" as they are sceptical about researchers' motives.

Introduction

This paper introduces cyclical longitudinal ethnography as an innovative design for addressing Sexuality Education in South African rural farm schools. The project started in 2010 and was developed as part of an engaged scholarship on HIV prevention in rural farm schools in Soutpansberg North Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Sexuality Education is one of the key strategies for reducing the transmission of HIV among the youth, especially in countries with a high HIV prevalence, such as South Africa (Francis, 2013; Wood, 2013). Sexuality Education can be offered anywhere by different individuals or sources, including social media. However, this study focuses on Sexuality Education offered at formal basic education schools where Sexuality Education is taught as a standalone subject or part of the Life Orientation module (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019). Sexuality Education empowers learners with knowledge and skills to make an informed decision regarding their sexuality (Panchaud et al., 2018).

It is important to research Sexuality Education to understand the processes involved and their impact. Most Sexuality Education studies focus either on educators (Beyers, 2012; DePalma & Francis, 2014) or learners (Adams et al., 2016; Essop et al., 2018; Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023).

Quantitative cross-sectional methods are frequently used to collect data for Sexuality Education (DePalma & Francis, 2014). Other researchers utilise systemic reviews (Fonner et al., 2014; Koch & Wehmeyer, 2021). However, some qualitative studies of Sexuality Education use descriptive phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Mavhandu et al., 2022; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Mhlonho, 2021). Reports from those qualitative studies indicated that conducting studies on Sexuality Education is challenging because of some informants' potential reluctance to respond to sex-related questions. This is due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Certain ethnic groups in South Africa, especially in rural areas, consider discussing sexual issues with young people taboo except at initiation schools (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Mhlonho, 2021).

The limited response to Sexuality Education may affect the quality of data collected, which, in turn, may affect the quality of intervention. To curb such limitations, researchers might need to use research designs such as ethnography, which may allow the observation and understanding of day-to-day activities that may have an implication for sexual behaviour and Sexuality Education. Ethnography is a qualitative research design that requires the researcher to be at the study site for a prolonged period to understand how the social and cultural practices influence the phenomenon studied (Brink et al., 2017; Flick, 2014). Moreover, it requires a researcher to have prolonged engagement with key informants (Reeves et al., 2013). Ethnographers focus on observing, exploring, and describing the phenomenon in relation to social and cultural contexts, not an isolated concept (Jones & Smith, 2017; Mannay & Morgan, 2015). Data were collected from the informants through observation and interviews. The interview questions evolved during the study. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively. Original ethnography requires researchers to stay in the area for a longer time, such as 12 months, continuously (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004).

Original ethnography requires researchers to stay in the area for a longer time, such as 12 months, continuously (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). However, the prolonged stay on the research site may pose several challenges to researchers with other academic responsibilities such as tuition, engaged scholarships, academic citizenship, leadership, and other administrative responsibilities. As HIV/AIDS researcher, who aspires to reduce HIV infection among learners through enhancing Sexuality Education by educators at farm schools in the Soutpansberg North circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa, I experience the same challenges. To improve Sexuality Education, I need to understand the cultural practices which may impact Sexuality Education. This is only possible if I have a prolonged stay in a rural area. However, due to the nature of my job, I cannot be at a school for more than one week at a given time. To address this challenge, I initiated cyclical longitudinal ethnography as an alternative to original ethnography.

This paper introduces and describes cyclical longitudinal ethnography. It further highlights the strengths and weaknesses of

using this approach in research on Sexuality Education. The paper also presents the ethical aspects related to the design. Furthermore, it provides recommendations on the use of cyclical longitudinal ethnography in Sexuality Education studies and other relevant fields.

Method

Design

Cyclical longitudinal ethnography was used. Cyclical longitudinal ethnography is defined as a qualitative research design where the researcher visits the research site intermittently over several years to understand the context and suitable interventions. The use of cyclical longitudinal ethnography as a research design enhances the existing approach to ethnography.

The term "cyclical" is used because each phase in the interaction with the key informants leads to other engagements or processes, and there is no real end to the process (Kaaristo et al., 2020). To further clarify this, reference is made to the engaged scholarship project on HIV prevention among learners in Limpopo Province of South Africa. "Engaged scholarship" pertains to the engagement of academics with the community to benefit the public, which will, in turn, enhance teaching and research (Boyer, 1996). The initial key informants were educators, and interaction with them led to the identified challenges, which necessitated intervention and further exploration. Due to limited time because of other academic responsibilities, I intervened and then revisited the site later to evaluate and explore further to determine whether further intervention was required. This is a diversion from the basic ethnographic study, where the researchers are expected to be on the site for months or even a year (Rubio-Rico et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2004). The cyclic nature enables researchers with limited time to conduct ethnographic studies (Gupta & Awasthy, 2015; Mikulewicz, 2019).

The longitudinal nature of the design is achieved by visiting the site several times, enabling the researchers to observe the different social and cultural practices which may influence the phenomenon observed at various times of the year. For example, for the engaged scholarship project, the first visit to the site was in 2010, after which visits continued once or twice annually at various times of the academic year till 2019. That made it possible to see the evolution in schools in a specific year. The researcher visited the school at the beginning of the year, during the first term of the year, mid-year, at the end of the year, and also, depending on the workload at the University, during and after the examination period. In the process, it was possible to witness the learners participating in different activities and observe how the educators engaged with the learners during different school periods. Apart from observing and sometimes participating in the learner-educator interaction, the learners' homes were visited, too. That assisted in observing variations in learners' behaviour during school activities and in different social environments. Some of the

phenomena would have been missed if the site had been visited once only.

Ethnography is still maintained as the focus is on exploring how culture influences the way of life (Brink et al., 2017). Ethnography assists researchers in understanding and describing a specific phenomenon in relation to the cultural and social environment (Brink et al., 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the difference between the original ethnography and this cyclical research design is that the process to understand the complexities of culture and social context and how they influence certain behaviours and practices takes years, and observation is done intermittently over the years instead of once off for months or years. The cyclical longitudinal nature of this ethnography assisted in observing the impact of the intervention on the educators' attitudes, behaviour, and practices toward HIV/AIDS and Sexuality Education. Furthermore, it was possible to witness the behaviour changes of the learners from when they started school until they were in higher grades and also to compare those learners with ones from other schools who joined the school in higher classes and were not part of the project from the start.

Sampling and Recruitment

Multiple stakeholders were used as informants. Though the engaged scholarship focused on empowering Life Orientation educators who are expected to provide Sexuality Education, learners, community members, parents, and guardians were also involved directly or indirectly.

(i) Educators

The core informants were educators. The inclusion criteria included: Teaching Life Orientation at one of the schools in Soutpansberg North Circuit and being appointed on a permanent basis.

(ii) Learners

Although the study primarily focused on educators, learners attending the schools could also be included. There was no age limit because of the structure of the schools and classes, though learners were separated during class discussions. Learners under 10 years were in one class, while 10-year-olds and older learners were combined. Another reason for including all learners was that some 11-year-olds were already pregnant.

(iii) Parents/guardians/community members

Interaction with both learners and educators led to the involvement of parents and other community members. The criteria of involvement were being a parent or older adult staying with children from the selected school; most of the learners were not staying with their parents because they were orphaned or deserted, or their parents worked on farms.

The involvement of parents, learners, the community and educators were also recommended to foster support and overcome contradictions and misconceptions (Bonjour & Van der Vlugt, 2018; Francis, 2013; Gudyanga et al., 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2018; Runhare et al., 2017; Smith & Harrison, 2013; Zulu et al., 2019). Furthermore, the involvement of multi-stakeholders, especially parents, in Sexuality Education programmes assists in ensuring cultural relevance and their buy-in in addressing social-cultural norms, which may negatively affect the adherence of learners to what they have learned at school (Denno et al., 2015; Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Svanemyr et al., 2015).

Data Collection

Ethnographic interviews and observation were used for data collection. An ethnographic interview is a series of conversations aimed at understanding the social environment, interactions, and construction of reality (Spradley, 2003). Though the program was started with pre-set questions, those questions ended up being only a guide as the data collection process is dialectical (Eder & Corsano, 1999). This means that the initial questions changed during interaction with key informants after the pilot conversation. The responses of informants also guided the formulation of questions. Some questions were derived from observing the environment (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Thus, unstructured interviews and observations were used in this study. The following were the initial questions:

- What approaches do you use when teaching Sexuality Education?
- What challenges do you experience when teaching Sexuality Education?
- Why are learners sexually active at such an early age?
- Why is HIV prevalence so extremely high among learners in these schools?

The informants responded to the questions individually in writing without adding their names. Later, all the responses were collected, combined and distributed to the informants who read them before having a group discussion about them. The responses and discussions indicated the necessity to gather all educators at one of the schools to demonstrate the approaches to be used while offering Sexuality Education and to observe the environment and interact with learners.

On arrival at the farm school, I wrote my observation regarding the location of the school, the condition of the school, and the learners (their physical appearance, type of uniforms, and condition of uniforms) before formal engagement with the learners. When entering the class to interact with the learners, I observed the condition of the classroom, the furniture used, and how the learners were seated. After greeting the learners and discussing the purpose of the visit, I start interacting with learners. To lead the discussions, I ask the following questions:

- *What makes you sexually active at your age?*
- *What were you taught regarding sexuality and HIV?*
- *What are the sources of your information regarding sex and sexuality?*
- *What is contributing to most of the learners being pregnant?*
- *Where do you practice sexual activities?*

Some of the responses to the first question were: we are sexually active to get money; we want to fall pregnant to get the child-support grant; we are encouraged by our parents to do so; and we have seen our parents engaging in sexual practices.

These responses indicated the necessity to visit the learners' homes to observe the conditions under which they live.

When visiting learners' homes, the location and types of houses were observed. All houses were shacks built of logs. In the houses, which are used as both kitchens and bedrooms, there were just blankets, cooking pots and a few utensils. The situation indicated absolute poverty, which explains why learners engaged in sexual activities to get money. Many people lived in each shack, mostly children under five. When asked about the parents, the response was that some adults were parents and grandparents while some learners were also parents. Learners as young as 12 years already had babies, while their parents were in their late twenties and grandparents in their late thirties and early forties. Regarding employment, most parents and grandparents were seasonal farm workers but spent most of their time unemployed.

Unique Sexuality Education interventions were initiated to address the above situation. The cyclical nature of the study, where the researcher is expected to observe, collect data, analyse, and intervene, led to regular visits to the schools, empowering the teachers with knowledge and skills to empower the learners while also empowering the learners with other means. Meanwhile, donations for learners' uniforms and clothes for whole families were collected. During all subsequent visits, educators and learners were asked questions about Sexuality Education so plans could be improved, and learners were assisted in empowering them. The schools were sometimes visited to inquire about the progress, what learners learned, and to observe interactions. During one such interaction with educators, they raised the issue of substance abuse by learners, making them continue practising sexually risky behaviour. When visiting the learners, some of the questions raised were:

- Why do you use substances?
- What type of substances are you using?

The last question made the learners mention all the substances they use, and they brought samples of those substances to school for us to see. That led to the following questions:

- Where do you get the substances?
- What are the dangers of those substances?

During every visit, different social-cultural practices that may impact Sexuality Education were observed. Learners' behaviour during sports tournaments was observed during one such visit. Weekend activities and the types of entertainment learners engaged in with the farm dwellers were also observed. Different questions were asked during each of the subsequent visits. The informants might have changed because some of the educators retired whilst others have left the schools or were no longer involved in Sexuality Education. Also, some learners have left the schools due to promotions to higher classes or because they moved to other areas or dropped out of school. As Eder & Corsano (1999) highlighted, changing the questions are permissible in ethnography, since the process is dialectical, and the feedback may lead to changing the initial questions.

Some interactions and observations were captured using video cameras. All these observations, engagements, and questioning of the activities and behaviours and understanding of the context have assisted the researcher in compiling a broad picture of determinants of Sexuality Education and the most contextual and relevant approach to Sexuality Education in farm schools.

Data Analysis and Findings

In ethnographic studies, data collection and analysis are done interactively using ethnographic content analysis, as highlighted by Brink et al. (2017). The researcher studied all the written materials (feedback, responses, and comments), photos and video clips of activities while keeping the context in mind. This was done several times to organise the content and find relevant meaning emerging from the data. The relevant meaning assisted in identifying themes, which were classified according to similarities into superordinate themes. A master table of themes was then developed, comprising superordinate themes, themes, and sub-themes.

Though the focus of this paper is not the findings but to indicate how cyclical longitudinal ethnography was implemented, it was decided to provide a snippet of the findings and interventions. Detailed information on the findings will be presented in relevant publications.

Three themes emerged from data analysis: (i) educator-related challenges; (ii) learner-related challenges; and (iii) parent-related challenges. Educator-related challenges included a deficiency in information related to Sexuality Education among educators, hopelessness, powerlessness, and the undermining of Sexuality Education. Based on the information provided by educators, schools were visited, leading to the second theme, namely learner-related challenges, including severe poverty, hopelessness, and daily exposure to sex practices. Information on the learners' situation necessitated knowing where and how they live. Their home environment was not a good sight. The overcrowded environment showed severe poverty, with people living for the moment only.

These challenges guided the development of a four-tiered intervention model to address all identified factors. The tiers were:

- (i) educator-focused, including workshops, training manuals, and toolkits;
- (ii) learner-focused, including empowerment, poverty relief, boosting their confidence, and encouraging a future-orientated attitude;
- (iii) community-focused because as single individual cannot implement the interventions; these included empowerment and poverty alleviation; and
- (iv) promotion of collaboration among different groups in the community.

Ethical Consideration

Before engaging in the study, ethical clearance was obtained in 2010 from the Research Ethics Committee. Furthermore, permission was granted by the Vhembe District of the Department of Education to engage in and interact with the schools in enhancing HIV prevention among learners in rural schools. Permission was further obtained from the manager of Soutpansberg North Circuit, where the intervention focus was. The circuit manager assisted in obtaining permission from the school principals, educators, learners, and school governing bodies.

The cyclical and longitudinal nature of this data-collection method necessitated ethical clearance from the University of South Africa in 2013 after the researcher resigned from the University of Venda. The ethics clearance was renewed every third year. Every time a school was visited, permission was requested from the circuit inspector, who informed the principals and other relevant stakeholders. The names of the schools and informants are replaced with pseudonyms. When taking pictures, permission was obtained from the informants, and the researcher ensured that their faces were blurred out. Learners were always treated with respect and addressed in the language they preferred. Instead of telling them what to do, they were usually allowed to devise their own solutions which were contextually relevant to their situation.

The study fully embraced the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice. Not only direct informants gained but also the other community members, which raises the issue of ubuntu in ethics. The researcher did not act only as an observer or journalist who collects news and leaves the community the way they are, but engaged and intervened to improve the situation for all members of the community.

Strengths of Using the Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography

Cyclical longitudinal ethnography offers researchers with limited time the opportunity to familiarise themselves with a community's context and cultural practices without prolonged absence from their place of formal employment. The design provides adequate time to engage in other academic responsibilities while the research continues. The longitudinal nature of

the study enables researchers to visit the area of study several times, which may assist in observing some phenomena which might have been missed during the initial visit. Since researchers mature over time, the cyclical longitudinal design may assist them in interpreting and understanding the context better as times go by, leading to contextually more relevant interventions than what could be designed after a once off visit; initial cultural shock may mislead the researcher. The frequent visits to the study area may motivate the community members to adhere to positive behaviour change, knowing that the researcher may come anytime to visit the place. Moreover, the design assist in ensuring the sustainability of the program, especially in cases like Sexuality Education where the intervention needs to be sustained.

Moreover, researchers can observe the changes which occur over time based on the interventions they brought to the community. They can collect information from a diverse population. The design makes it easier to verify information which might not have been clear or explore certain phenomena further. This design also builds rapport between researchers and informants as the researchers do not only stay once during data collection and then leave the site forever. This set the key informants free to share information. The community also have time to identify their needs and further information they want to share with the researchers so they can address them. The longitudinal nature of the study also enables researchers to identify ways that work in a particular community and implement that and to prepare properly for future visits based on what had been observed and the gaps identified from the data collected.

Weaknesses of the Cyclical Longitudinal Ethnography

The major weakness of the cyclical longitudinal ethnography is that individuals who were previously involved are no longer available or involved in the programme at follow-up visits. For example, this project was conducted in farm schools, where most teachers are not comfortable working; each time the researcher visited the schools, some teachers who were involved before resigned or were transferred to mainstream schools. Therefore, new key informants were continuously introduced to the project. The same goes for learners because farm workers are mostly seasonal employees, and some parents left the farms with their children while there was no work. Some learners were migrants from neighbouring countries. Therefore, when their work permits expired, they left the farm with their children while new ones came.

The issue of change may also affect the gatekeepers. If the gatekeepers change, the researcher may need to seek permission again, which may sometimes not be granted. Another challenge may be related to ethical clearance to conduct the study, as most ethical clearances, especially for studies that involve human informants, last for only a year. This increases the administrative burden on the researchers, who must reapply for the renewal of ethics clearance.

A prolonged period of conducting the study may also be affected by the relocation of the researchers to other institutions, where they may fail to get permission to continue with the study or promotion to higher positions which may not allow the opportunity to be engaged in the community. It means the project objectives might be left unattained. Another aspect may be the attrition of team members, meaning continuity is affected each time the community meets new team members. Moreover, frequent visits to the area can be expensive compared to only a single trip and staying for the required duration of the study if it is far from the researcher's residence. The approach can be financially and emotionally draining as some situations are traumatic when the researcher must visit the area several times. It may also be difficult to secure grants from the funders who usually work in a three-year cycle to fund a cyclical longitudinal ethnography study as that funder usually requires well-planned activities with a stipulated period for assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation with timelines and expected outcomes, not a cycle which is based on the researchers' findings.

Recommendations

To curb some of the weaknesses of cyclical longitudinal ethnography, such as attrition of informants, the researchers may target educators staying in the same area where the study is conducted. Moreover, the focus should be on learners from several classes instead of targeting a specific class. Instead of only one researcher being involved in a study, there should be at least three researchers apart from the lead researcher to ensure the project's sustainability. In addition, they should be a mix of established and emerging researchers to facilitate skills transfer.

If the study is conducted in schools, the province should be involved in granting permission to ensure the school principal does not have the final say in the project. This will ensure the continuity of the research even when the school management changes.

A formal Memorandum of Understanding and the proposed duration of the study/project should be documented. Cyclical longitudinal ethnography in Sexuality Education should be conducted by someone who understands the local language, including the sex language used by people in the study area. To curb the cost, the researchers may need to combine Sexuality Education and the evaluation of the impact of previous visits during each follow-up visit. There is also a need to have an intermittent liaison with the community through the key informants, which can be done using WhatsApp or any contextually relevant online communication.

Limitations

As data were collected during the training facilitation, it was difficult to fully explore some issues raised. Because everything was done in a class setting, it was difficult to probe into some sensitive aspects. The classroom setup might also have affected

some informants' responses. The presence of educators while the researchers were interacting with the learners might have hindered learners from fully participating or providing more information. The fact that there were new informants with each follow-up visit, including learners and teachers, might have impacted the outcome of the study, which may be seen as a drawback of using cyclical longitudinal ethnography.

Conclusions

Cyclical longitudinal ethnography is useful for conducting Sexuality Education, especially in schools. Because of other demanding academic responsibilities, the researchers could not spend most of their time at the schools. Being at a school for longer might also affect learners' required learning and teaching time. Cyclical longitudinal ethnography allows the researcher to observe the impact of the project while at the same time alternating approaches depending on the gaps identified or changing societal needs. As with any other design, cyclical longitudinal ethnography has shortcomings, such as attrition of informants, increased cost based on repeated travelling, and changing circumstances that may need obtaining new permission and ethics clearance. However, the benefits surpass the shortcomings.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

Before engaging in the study, ethical clearance was obtained in 2010 from the University of Venda's Research Ethics Committee.

ORCID iD

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6916-8472>

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