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The security of scientific research with children in Azerbaijan: the ethical, demographic and socio-economic aspects

Bezpieczeństwo badań naukowych z udziałem dzieci w Azerbejdżanie: aspekty etyczne, demograficzne i społeczno-ekonomiczne

Abstract

The Republic of Azerbaijan gained independence 30 years ago. Currently, the situation in Azerbaijan regarding childhood research is still developing despite the crisis in the research field. The paper aims to evaluate the security of the conduction of childhood research in Azerbaijan concerning ethical, demographic and socio-economic aspects. The overall research ethics in the geography of Azerbaijan was observed in terms of previously gained research experience. As the field of childhood studies progresses with the help of new research techniques, Azerbaijan still faces challenges in the appliance of these methods. Participatory methods for the collection of data is often used in social sciences. This paper examines the key features of childhood research in Azerbaijan using observation and interviews methods. The research group consisting of 85 students showed that research with children is not well-considered in Azerbaijan. Their security, anonymity and voluntary participation is not fulfilled, the role of socio-economic background is justified with the cultural and historical practices of the nation.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; childhood studies; research; research design; observation

Abstrakt

Republika Azerbejdżanu uzyskała niepodległość 30 lat temu. Obecnie sytuacja w Azerbejdżanie w zakresie badań nad dziećmi nadal się rozwija, pomimo kryzysu w tym obszarze. Celem artykułu jest ocena bezpieczeństwa prowadzenia badań nad dziećmi w Azerbejdżanie pod względem etycznym, demograficznym i społeczno-ekonomicznym. Ogólną etykę badań na terenie Azerbejdżanu przeanalizowano pod kątem wcześniej zdobytych doświadczeń badawczych. Wraz z postępowaniem w dziedzinie badań nad dziećmi, dokonującym się dzięki nowym technikom badawczym, Azerbejdżan nadal stoi przed wyzwaniami związanymi z zastosowaniem tych metod. W naukach społecznych często stosuje się metody partycypacyjne do zbierania danych. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano kluczowe cechy badań dzieciństwa w Azerbejdżanie, wykorzystując metodę obserwacji i wywiadu. Grupa badana składająca się z 85 uczniów wykazała, że badania z udziałem dzieci nie są w Azerbejdżanie dobrze

przemyślane. Nie zapewnia się im bezpieczeństwa, anonimowości i dobrowolności uczestnictwa, rola pochodzenia społeczno-ekonomicznego jest uzasadniona kulturowymi i historycznymi praktykami tego narodu.

Słowa kluczowe: Azerbejdżan; badania dzieciństwa; badania; projektowanie badań; obserwacja

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to give deeper insight into the overall situation of the social and humanity-based field research under the umbrella of childhood research with due concern about the security of children – participants of the research. Exploring the security of the scientific research with children in Azerbaijan is an important attempt. To secure the children during the research, the researchers should consider key features. For instance, the research should be well-planned, the ethical guidelines should be considered and the participatory methods must be child-friendly (Nykiforuk et al., 2018). Children in research has been debated by many scholars. The progress of humanism principles, seeing the children and women equal, protection of children set ethical perspectives for the conduc of the research.

However, the paper find the answers to the following questions:

1. Which participatory research methods are commonly used in child research in Azerbaijan?
2. How is the research planned in Azerbaijan? (examination of previously conducted research)
3. What is the role of ethical guidelines in Azerbaijanian childhood research?
4. How can socio-economic differences impact the conduct of the research with children?

The answers to the given questions will be found by the help of chosen methods. Observation and interviews are the primary methods of the study. To conduct the research, 85 students were recruited within 6 months of time frame. The group of participants originated from public and private institutions aged 3–15.

Important theoretical reflections are given in the methods and ethical reflections chapters. As the aim of the study is to view the security of childhood research, the chosen theories describe the verified outcomes of the previously conducted studies.

The preparation period for the research should contain small details (Andrade, 2022) because the socio-economic situation and age combination can inform the researchers about the features of upcoming research and assist the researchers to design the research with children. It is also suggested that clarification of the aim, objectives, questions (Thomas & Hodges, 2010) and hypothesis of the research is crucial. The consideration of mentioned features will assist the research to have a smooth data collection phase.

Background of the study

The geographical position of Azerbaijan and the unstable government policy, the change of borders in the last decade of the 20th century strongly impacted the Azerbaijanis' lifestyles and cultural practices (Abilov & Hajiyev, 2021). Azerbaijan is a country where old traditions are still "preserved". In addition, these "unwritten laws" – mentality of the nation forms children and the view towards children.

The field of research, however, is being affected as the scholars conduct their studies. Nonetheless, the path of social research in Azerbaijan cannot be identified as "progressive". Despite the gap between the different socio-economic classes (Valiyev & Babayev, 2021) of the groups, the people try to obey the cultural values. Yet, the appliance of these values changes from province to province, from generation to generation. Conducting a social study in Azerbaijan requires the researchers to consider the ethnic characteristics of the Azerbaijani people.

The emphasis of the current paper will be on the role of age and gender. There is a dilemma between scholars in terms of categorising children into different age groups (Harling, Morris, Manderson, Perkins & Berkman, 2018). Some scholars argue that the age of research informants should be considered before entering the field. In Azerbaijan, age is quite an important variable to consider before entering the field. From the perspectives of the research with children, the age element is a predominant feature in categorising in Azerbaijan. The family structure, level of education, economic situation of the family can also be considered the key elements (Bogges, 1998). Gender of the children is another crucial point. The concept of gender in Azerbaijan is being misunderstood. Sometimes, children are being harassed for their sexual orientations (Aghayeva, 2012). In families, children are perceived as important actors of the institution. Sometimes, parents reverse the decision of divorce for the well-being of children. Yet, this does not justify the fact that, in many families the voices of children are being absorbed. The mentioned cases can differ regarding the different variables. For example, in some families children are the leaders of the family institution.

The transition of Azerbaijani government from authoritarian to democracy reshaped the culturally established practices (Report, 2022). The bias towards girl and boy children is socially constructed. Therefore, Azerbaijan is an active member of UNICEF and has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Azerbaijan child is a person who is aged 0–18, as the country follows the convention of UNICEF (Unicef.org., 2019; <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/UN-Convention-Rights-Child-text.pdf>). Still, there is paradox in the division of the gender roles. Some Azerbaijani families impose the restrictive gender roles for their children starting from the early years. These restrictions emerge as traumas in children's further lives. Although now with the help of international organizations, the government tries to regulate the law about gender parity, child marriages, evasion from education which are still observed in Azerbaijan. The existing problem

is caused by the lack of monitoring strategy of the government on accepted bills and set regulations. The legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan states that women and men are equal and should be treated equally (The Constitution of Azerbaijan. 00. Azərbaycan Respublikasının Konstitusiyası).

The socioeconomic aspect of children security in the research

The socio-economic situation in Azerbaijan is not stable. After the fall of the Soviet Union, in Azerbaijan people were divided into 3 socio-economic classes: rich, middle, and poor. Nonetheless, after the establishment of capitalism, the percentile of middle-class families dramatically reduced. Most people became poorer. The role of the socio-economic classes, life practices, age, gender, geography, and cultural practices are also essential variables that form the flow of the research and data collection process (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell, 2015). The huge gap between the lower and upper socio-economic classes caused several social dilemmas. Although most of the schools are classified as public, the people from the upper class tend to send their children to private schools. The fee of private schools starts from \$2,500 per annum. In some public schools which are prestigious in terms of education and facilities corruption can be observed. The dramatic gap between socio-economic classes reshapes the mentality of the people. The schooling system is based in Russian and Azerbaijani (Educational System of Azerbaijan Republic, 2022). Children of Russian and Azerbaijani schools are being educated and reared differently. There is a tendency that upper-class people tend to send their children to Russian schools. The research in the geography of Azerbaijan should consider all mentioned issues.

Theoretical perspectives

Children are considered the main research subjects in “Childhood Studies”. To conduct the research, scholars should agree on viewing children as competent. The development of the humanism principles and the research ethics, childhood studies suggest to use preposition research “with” children (Clark, 2005) rather than research “on” children. This is the important understanding of viewing children as the right-holders of their own lives. To give the opportunity to decide, children realize the importance of their security and privacy in the field of research. The volunteer participation of child informants should also be ensured. Without the collection of data, the validity of purposed hypothesis might be endangered.

The research with adults and children is different. The researcher should have a well-planned data collection strategy before entering the field. Planned strategy, methodology, piloting methods, knowledge on the researcher roles & cultural practices are important key features in the fieldwork. “Innovative” and “research-friendly” (Clarke & Nicholson, 2001) tools help to ease the process of data collection.

Nowadays, most scientists in Global North tend to use modern technologies in the conduct of the research. However, in some urban areas, children’s accessibility

problems are seen. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that the major disruptions in education were based on the lack of the Internet and facility accessibility. Yet, the researchers should be reflexive and must adjust the modern techs in participatory tools to the research site. For instance, S. Punch conducted her research in the rural areas, where the technology is not available for either children or adults. She suggests that instead of using modern technologies, researchers can refer to their imaginations. She also stresses the role of reflection during the fieldwork.

“Researchers need to be reflexive throughout the research process and critically aware of the range of reasons why the research with children may be potentially different from the research with adults” (Punch, 2002).

The role of reflexivity (Kjørholt, 2016) of the researcher opens a new path for the development of the investigation. Researchers should be very careful (Christensen & Prout, 2002) while conducting the research and conducting the investigation, interpreting the collected data.

The problem of ethical basis while researching in Azerbaijan

The situation of ethical guidelines, unfortunately is dramatically frustrating in Azerbaijan. As an example, the conducted data collection process will show that neither educational nor the research institutions are aware of the existing ethical perspectives in the conduct of the research. The word ethics in social sciences field in Azerbaijan remains as the understanding of “the law of etiquette”. By not knowing the ethical perspectives, researchers can endanger the vulnerable members of the society by exposing their identities (Rawbone, 2009). Sometimes shared information should remain confidential. The agreements between universities and educational institutions do not remark the cruciality of the vulnerability of research informants. Research participants are, in most cases, being forced to participate in the study without acknowledging the purpose of the conducted research (Dennis, 2014). The consent for the participation and ensuring the anonymity of research participants are important features for the protection of collected data.

In the legislation, research informants should be asked for the consent of participation, yet, it is not monitored by institutions. Additionally, students, scholars, researchers are not informed about the boundaries of the ethical frameworks. The lack of information and almost non-existing national framework on ethical guidelines endangers the security of research participants. Viewing the research participants as the object of the research instead of subjects (Cree, Kay & Tisdall, 2002) falsifies the whole data collection process. Children are usually being “forced” to be the objects of the research. The scholars of the childhood studies strongly recommend scholars and researchers to view children as research subjects rather than objects (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Methodological perspectives

The methodological perspectives of the current study represent the information about chosen methods and discuss the crucial key points of used participatory methods. Moreover, the relevant participatory tools in social sciences in Azerbaijan are discussed from the theoretical perspectives. The most common participatory methods in social sciences are observation and individual interview (De Walt & De Walt, 2011) that I have used in my study. The two mentioned methods are core tools in childhood research. As it was mentioned before there were overall 85 students aged 3 to 15 and they were categorised for their age groups. Participant observation, individual interviews and focus group discussion with each age group were combined. However, firstly I would like to describe the key perspectives of the methodological perspectives of childhood research in Azerbaijan.

Observations and interviews are commonly used participatory methods in Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2017). Along with observations and interviews, tests, questionnaires, quantitative methods are used as research tools in Azerbaijan. But how observation and interviews are viewed in Azerbaijani research institutions? The method “observation” is understood as a tool to monitor the research participants without acknowledgement of them (Mack, 2011). Interviews are taught as the tool to ask respondents about reflections based on the studied topic (Nardon, Hari & Aarma, 2021). The theoretical framework of qualitative research tools is widely taught in Azerbaijani institutions, however, the researchers do not have an understanding of the designation of the research. The complex of paperwork is only under the legislation, yet, it is not monitored by institutions to secure the vulnerability of the collected data. The information about chosen methods – observations and interviews are given below.

The types of observation can vary such as participant and non-participant; covert or overt; short-term or longitudinal. Longitudinal observation is the essence of comparative studies (Sanip, 2020). This would be beneficial to focus on the main research questions. Before interacting with research participants, observing the field can create new insights in researchers. During the observation period the researchers should focus on the outcomes and goals of the observation. Involving children into observation part of the study is beneficial for reflecting on the main focus of the researched topic (James, 2007).

Interviews are one of the commonly used participatory tools in data collection around the globe (Umoquit et al., 2008). There are different types of interviews such as – structured, unstructured, semi-structured, focus group discussions. This qualitative method is utilized for getting the important reflections of the research participants by asking open-ended questions (“Types of Interviews in Research and Methods | QuestionPro”, 2022). Brinkman & Kvale (2014) have introduced their interview book for the progress of fruitful data collection. The use of tape recorders, notebooks can assist the researcher to remember the important remarks of the conversation.

Taking notes assist researchers to memorize the collected data. The analyses of the interviews are subjective as it is in the control of the researcher (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014). The interpretation of interviews is usually based on the life experiences and knowledge of the researchers, as it is called “inter-views”. “Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. Interviews may be useful as follow-up to certain respondents to questionnaires, to further investigate their responses” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Interviews are common in daily lives and the use of this method is relevant.

As it was mentioned there were 85 pupils in the study. The organization of fieldwork was essential before entering the field. The collection of data has started with observing these children. I was informed that it is crucial to categorize children by their ages. 34 of the research informants were aged between 11–15, 40 were aged 7–9, and 11 were aged 3–5. I had to organize the fieldwork by dividing children into groups by their age categories. Moreover, according to the general recommendations of the research institutions, the researcher should write a daily report based on the tasks done in data collection. Changes in the data collection must also be mentioned. The institutions, however, hold the position of gatekeepers in the flow of the research – as an outcome, the researchers do not have full independence for the conduct of the research (Campbell et al., 2006). In my study I have grouped the research participants.

Discussion – observations and interviews in educational institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan – from the past experiences

The observation of the children aged between 3 and 5 took place in a private organization in Baku. I was introduced to children as a teacher. I was informed that some children are traumatized as they witnessed crime, harassment, violence at early ages. They were morally drained and some of them were diagnosed with depression. While observing child informants during their playtime, they asked me, if I could join them. As the role of play in the development of children is important (Majumdar, 2020), I joined their play process. Further, it assisted me to interact with children easily. Even though I have been a part of the children’s play process, it was challenging to start the conversation with some of them. One of the kids suffered from chronic depression, as he witnessed the family crime. I have used the friendly role (Abebe, 2009) approach by playing with him. This research role assisted me to build a conversation with him and plan the flow of psychological support.

While observing children aged 7–9, I had to attend their lessons for a month. I have spent 23 hours with them weekly. The observation was based on exploring the relations between pupils, and pupils and teachers. Further, during the interviews, I have asked them to reflect on their relations with their parents, peers, teachers. I was introduced to children as a researcher-psychologist by the headmaster which led to a major misunderstanding for building the further network with

children. I was an outsider in the class and a mistrustful stranger for children. This case is common in the research field and I reflected on the research experience of Corsaro (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008), who conducted the research in Italy with pre-school children. Children were extremely careful while talking to me, additionally, they performed carefully to avoid disobedience. After the observation part of the fieldwork I had to interview them but they were disinclined to answer my questions. I have heard that they perceived me as a psychiatrist and thought that they are having some mental errors. Honestly, I was not surprised hearing that, because the approach towards psychologists and psychiatrists is quite biased in Azerbaijan. So, I had to explain what the psychologist means and clarify the differences between psychologist and psychiatrist. Moreover, I have given a clear outline of my research. In Azerbaijan, research ethics is not followed and children are not needed to be given information and asked a consent. Usually, universities agree with the educational institutions, organizations for the conduct of fieldwork without the provision of the consent of parents and children. After speaking and explaining to child informants the basis of the research I could start interviewing them. The conversation with children assisted me to create a relaxed atmosphere, moreover, children became more relaxed and willing in terms of participation.

The last age category that I had to observe was the adolescent, between the ages of 11–15. Adolescents usually need to feel safe to speak about their sincere inner reflections (Varela et al., 2021). The lack of time for observation also was a challenge for the start of the organization of psychological support. Regularly, I had to be introduced to the informants. The headmaster introduced me as a psychologist and also told them that I am going to conduct a study with them. I observed that adolescent informants were uncomfortable with my presence. During observation, they were stressed and acting unnaturally. Besides pupils, teachers were not satisfied with my presence as well. Seeing me in the classroom I could feel that the informants and teacher were notified to behave “properly”. Luckily, I had an opportunity to explain to them the purpose of the study. Moreover, I informed them that further interviews and chosen methods will assist them to overcome the difficulties in their daily and educational life. I have tried to be more careful by choosing “proper” words while communicating with young people to avoid hurting them. With teenagers, we could build a rapport which was a part of interviewing process. This method was successful to attract them to interviews. A trustful atmosphere assists the researchers to organize the fieldwork efficiently.

Conclusion

The study elaborated on the general principles of the security of childhood research in Azerbaijan. Reflections and experiences of the researcher emphasize the importance of the viewing the geographical position, age and gender, cultural practices, socio-economic situation of the people of the researched group. From the study it

is clear that, the commonly utilized participatory methods in social studies in Azerbaijan are observations and interviews. In social sciences, it is also popular to use the quantitative research methods. However, the appliance of these methods is not sufficient. Researchers are not trained to design the whole research process. The theoretical knowledge of methodological basis is not often applied in Azerbaijan.

Theory based designation of the research is lacking in Azerbaijan. The researchers and research institutions are unaware of the consideration of researcher roles. The plan of the research in Azerbaijan in social sciences is based on the reports – the reporting the whole research processes. The researcher investigates the group of participants and plans the flow of the research from that perspective. Categorising in research design, burdens the researcher to reflect on the insights of the research participants. Observations are important in terms of entering the field and planning the flow of the data collection in Azerbaijan. The plan is usually constructed after the observations. The researcher should carefully investigate the social practices and economic classes in Azerbaijan before entering the field.

The role of the ethical guidelines in Azerbaijan should be monitored carefully. The reports of the UNICEF show that the ethical guidelines are not followed in the research with children. The concerns of the UNICEF are often verified and observed in the local studies and data collection processes. From the study it is also visible that children were not asked for the consent of participation and the voluntary principle cannot be fulfilled. The explanation of the ethical guidelines should be ensured. The government and Ministry of Education along with the National Science Academy should be in cooperation for the development of the ethics. Development of the ethics is an insurance for the security of the research participants.

The consideration of socio-economic background of the research participants can help to comprehend knowledge about the researched group. In case of Azerbaijan, the inclusion of the feature along with age and gender matters, the components expand the path to design the research. Education is based on the previous Soviet style which is outdated and hardens the integrity of local researchers to the global field of research. Yet, the local research outcomes are being underestimated by many governmental and non-governmental organizations. The appliance of the given suggestions can increase the level of research and ensure the security of research participants in Azerbaijan.

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Aydin Aghayev – a researcher with a Master of Philosophy in Childhood Studies, the research interests are children's development, children's rights, child policy, and children's geographies. Published and presented papers: *The work of psychologist with difficult children of primary school age*, April 2017; *The psychoanalyses of adolescent: comparing E. Ericson and Z. Freud*, March 2018; *Work of a Psychologist with respondents predisposed to depression*, December 2019; *International efforts to expand universal access to education in the global south*, 6 June 2021; *An overview about the "Child Ambassadors Council" in Azerbaijan*, December, 2021.