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Conceptualizing and Designing a Qualitative Study: Insights From a Doctoral Study on Youth Livelihoods in Botswana

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Abstract: Qualitative research used to be viewed as a confused and unthinkable research approach. This research approach is increasingly gaining recognition in many disciplines including those focused on the development notions of gender and empowerment in developing countries. This paper details how the author has conceptualized, designed and conducted a qualitative case study for the award of a doctoral degree in international development. The study sought to inform development interventions in Botswana with a better understanding of youth livelihoods from the perspective of youth as active social agents. It was focused on understanding the lived experiences and points of view of the research participants through eliciting diverse meanings they attach to their livelihood trajectories. The study was informed by a social constructionist epistemology, which emphasizes on understanding meanings people construct about themselves within their social contexts. In order to understand diverse meanings the participants attach to their livelihood trajectories the study adopted a life-course framework both as a conceptual and an analytical tool. Life-course approach to social research recognizes that people do not live their lives in isolation but they are embedded within dynamic historically situated socio-cultural contexts within which they construct meanings. The study was conceptualized from a qualitative case study research design and it triangulated different methods to collect data from which socially constructed meanings emerged. It mainly focused on personal narratives of young women aged 18-35 years who are engaged in street vending in Gaborone City. It was also conceptualized to position these young women within their real-life contexts of social interrelationships, and as such, it considered perspectives of other significant research participants. A thematic narrative approach was applied in analyzing data and presenting the research findings. Although the study did not give priority to any of the triangulated methods, the author's main experience of going qualitative is that negotiating access and conducting in-depth life history interviews with people of the opposite sex in one's own 'community' is challenging but enlightening. This paper provides other researchers with insights on how to conceptualize, design and conduct a qualitative study firmly grounded within their philosophical and methodological positions.

Keywords: Botswana, conceptualization, gender, qualitative research methodology, youth livelihoods

1. Introduction

This paper details how the author has conceptualized and designed his doctoral research, which sought to inform development interventions in Botswana with a better understanding of youth livelihoods from the perspective of youth as active social agents. The study was focused on with understanding how young women aged 18-35 years engaged in street vending in Gaborone City define and respond to contextual realties of their livelihood trajectories. It was conceptualized to focus on the lived experiences and points of view of these young women in their capacity as being both youth and women. The Botswana National Youth Policy 1996 identifies young women as one of the six key categories of youth in the country requiring special attention due to problems they encounter. Hence, the study was also focused on understanding how livelihood needs and priorities of youth in Botswana in general, and of young women in particular, are perceived and translated into development interventions geared towards youth and/or women empowerment. In addressing its research questions, the study adopted a qualitative research methodology. This paper elaborates on how this qualitative case study was conceptualized and designed with the view of making contributions to the emerging body of literature which provides practical insights to new researchers interested in qualitative research paradigm. The paper briefly explains the philosophical position of social constructionism that informed the study. It moves on to elaborate on the life-course framework that guided data collection and data analysis. The paper ends by detailing key aspects of qualitative research methodology focusing on research design, the process of selecting the research participants, data collection and analysis techniques.

2. The social constructionist approach

Academic research must have a particular perspective of looking at key issues, and as such, it needs to be philosophically informed (Efinger et al. 2004, Sheffield 2004). This section briefly explains social constructionism, the philosophical position that informed this research. Research adopting a social constructionist approach falls within the interpretivist philosophical tradition, which is centred on understanding meanings embedded in people's life experiences and actions (Burr 2003, Stead 2004). Such research takes as its point of departure the contention that there is no single social reality but instead an existence of multiple realities. Social constructionism premises that what is learnt in social research does not exist independently of the researcher and it holds that knowledge is historically and culturally constructed through social processes and actions (Young and Collin 2004). It emphasizes the need for researchers and policy-makers to move away from trying to ascertain objective conditions of livelihoods and understand the plurality of livelihood constructions (Jones 2002). Hence, it remained in the context of this study an appealing reference point in understanding youth livelihoods from the lived experiences and points of view of young women engaged in street vending in Gaborone City. In order to define *young women* who are the focus of this study, reference is made to two socially constructed concepts of *youth* and *gender*, which have elusive and contested meanings. The literature highlights that young women remain disadvantaged in all most all societies due to double discrimination they face because of stereotypes associated with their age and gender. This suggests that the social construction of *youth* together with that of *gender* determines what entails to be *young women* and how their livelihoods are viewed and responded to in most societies.

3. The life-course approach

Giele and Elder (1998: 22) define the life-course as "a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time". Through the use of the life-course approach, "developmentalists have gained sensitivity to the interlocking nature of human lives and generations and an awareness of individuals as choice makers and agents of their own lives" (Elder 1994: 4). This approach has given a distinctly sociological tone to the study of human lives (Crosnoe 2000). It provides a necessary dimension and an integrating framework for the study of social construction of youth livelihoods because it is both developmental and historical (Hareven 1994). Giele and Elder (1998: 9-11) provide this life-course framework (Figure 1) within which people differently enact their livelihoods over time.
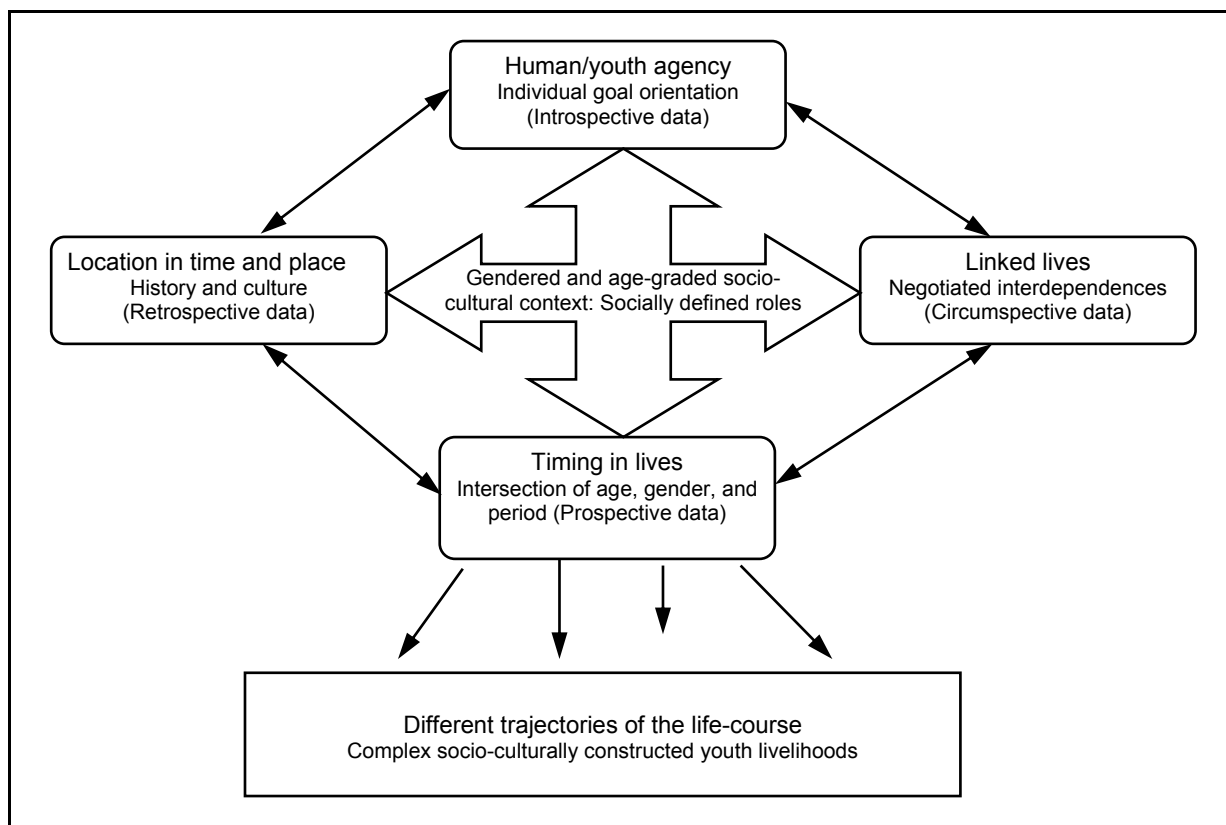

Figure 1: The life-course framework (Based on Giele and Elder 1998: 11)

3.1 Human/youth agency

Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 692) contend that "the concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought". Defining what *agency* entails is more problematic because it is rarely defined as a standalone concept but rather in relation to the concept of *structure* (Ahearn 2001, Emirbayer and Mische 1998, Fuchs 2001, Robson *et al.* 2007). Fuchs (2001: 24) argues that "the relationship between agency and structure is one of the many unresolved core enigma in social science and social theory". Ahearn (2001: 130) argues that "no matter how agency is defined […] implications for social theory abound" and further contends that "scholars using the term should define it clearly, both for themselves and for their readers" (ibid). This research adopted the following definition from a publication conceptualizing agency in the lives of rural young people:

> Agency is understood as an individual's own capacities, competencies, and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their lifeworlds, fulfilling many economic, social, and cultural expectations, while simultaneously charting individual/collective choices and possibilities for their daily and future lives. (Robson *et al.* 2007: 135)

This quotation confirms that people position themselves within their complex socio-cultural contexts on a day-to-day basis by exercising their agency as illustrated in Figure 1. From a life-course perspective, youth in general, and young women in particular, are not passive recipients of socio-culturally defined or stereotyped livelihood imperatives which are age-graded and gendered, but by contrast, are creative and active participants in making sense and making choices for themselves.

3.2 Linked lives

The life-course approach takes as its starting point the fact that agency of one person is linked to agency of people around him/her. Giele and Elder (1998: 9) emphasize that "all levels of social action interact and mutually influence each other not only as parts of a whole but also as the result of contact with other persons who share similar experiences". The opportunities and constraints faced by individuals reflect their position in the web of interpersonal ties, and social change has powerful consequences for the individuals through the lives of related others (Drobnic and Blossfeld 2004). The life-course approach to social research emphasizes consideration of how youth exercise their agency in complex socio-cultural contexts within which they are embedded; such as intergenerational relations, peer and occupational groups, educational system, and other agents of socialization.

3.3 Location in time and place

Giele and Elder (1998: 9) state that "individual and social behaviour is multilayered involving several different levels of the social and physical context [and] each individual's experience in its totality is of necessity and that individual's location can be understood as being socially and individually patterned in way that carry through time". Hence, youth do not only exercise their agency within their present interrelationships but also, in relation to the historical development of their societies and the place of their own lived experiences and points of view within that history. Historical forces are essential in understanding youth livelihoods because such forces had direct impact on livelihoods of individuals at the time when they encountered them and continue to have an indirect impact (Hareven 1994).

3.4 Timing in lives

This research moved beyond development discourses which regard street vending as either an aberration of economic failure by the state to provide adequate employment in the formal sector or as a mere form of self-employment or a survivalist and/or livelihood diversification strategy by the poor. Rather, it conceptualized it as a socio-culturally embedded episode or an event, which marks particular transition/s and/or turning point/s in livelihood trajectories of those people who engage in it. Engagement in street vending is then considered to be a point in time in which youth (young women) can look backwards at their lived experiences and ahead towards their future livelihood trajectories. This conceptualization is essentially humanistic in that it looks at livelihoods of people engaged in street vending holistically not in a disjointed anecdotal basis as is the case with popular discourses. By emphasizing the past and the future, this conceptualization presents a two-pronged approach to understanding youth livelihoods. At the centre of this approach is the concept of 'timing in lives'. Hareven (1994: 439) indicates that "the timing [in lives] involves the balancing of individual's entry into

and exit from different roles such as education, family, work, and community etc over their life-course […] and that timing refers to the age at which such entry and exit occur". It addresses the question of "how did individuals time and sequence these transitions in changing historical contexts" (ibid).

Elder (1994: 6) calls this sequencing of life events "social timing [which] refers to the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles, and to relevant expectations and beliefs based on age". Giele and Elder (1998: 10) state that "to accomplish their ends, persons or groups both respond to the external events and undertake actions and engage in events and behaviour to use the resources available". Youth livelihoods can then be viewed as supported and/or constrained by diverse messages from complex socio-cultural contexts which occurred in different historically situated time periods. Apart from the life-course framework, this research also draws from the recent conceptualization, which emphasizes that children and youth are not only *becoming* future adults but their present *being* and complex and diverse socio-cultural contexts within which they *belonging* require much consideration. (Ansell 2005, James *et al.* 1998, van Blerk *et al.* 2008).

3.5 Different trajectories of a life-course

The life-course is a path, which for most people is far from straight (Gotlib and Wheaton 1997). Individuals are constantly shifting their perspectives as they encounter obstacles that force them to make at least minor adjustments or as they find new opportunities along this path (Clausen 1998). To appreciate that people's life-courses are not enacted in a linear sequence, it is essential to consider the interconnected concepts of trajectories, transitions and events/episodes. The concept of transition has been interpreted and used in many different ways in relation to the conceptualization of youth. The literature reveals that the most popular conception view youth as a structural transitional stage situated between childhood and adulthood (Ansell 2005, McIlwaine and Datta 2004, Valentine 2003). From a life-course perspective, transitions are defined in relation to trajectories. Elder (1994: 5) indicates that "trajectories refer to long-term patterns of behaviour, whilst transitions and events/episodes are always embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans". Livelihood trajectories of youth are punctuated by a sequence of successive events and transitions where an event is conceptualized as a relatively abrupt change and a transition as a more gradual change. The life-course approach emphasizes that different individuals encounter different events and transitions in their life-courses which lead them to follow different livelihood trajectories.

4. The qualitative approach

The methodological approach adopted in this study was qualitative. Creswell (1998: 15) observes that "authors often define qualitative inquiry by comparing it to quantitative inquiry", an approach which according to the literature has limited the use of qualitative research in policy-making. Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right, which not only increased and became institutionalized but became respectable as well (Dam and Volman 2001, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). There is of recent a growing interest and appreciation on the importance of qualitative research in policy-making processes (Hammersley 2000). The emphasis in a qualitative inquiry is on quality of entities, processes and meanings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The point is to look at the research issue holistically by studying and understanding it in its own real life context (Creswell 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Glesne and Peshkin 1992). Qualitative research methodology was the best-suited approach to reveal the processes and diverse meanings the research participants attach to their lived experiences and points of view. On epistemological grounds, this research built upon the author's personal experience as a young person who once engaged in street vending and his previous academic research on this sector. Qualitative research emphasizes the significance of role of the researcher and thus it is justifiable to have adopted this approach in this study.

4.1 Research design

Research design is essential to any research irrespective of the methodological orientation. Yin (2003: 20) states that "a research design is a logical plan for getting from *here* to *there*, where *here* may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and *there* is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions". Specific research designs are suitable for specific research depending on the philosophical and methodological approaches informing research questions a study seeks to address. A flexible and emergent research design based on a case study approach was

considered to be appropriate for this study. The term case study as used in research in general and social research in particular is confusing. In its simplest terms, case study is used to refer to the number of cases investigated as well as to the amount of detailed information that the researcher collects (Gomm et al. 2000). Stake (2005: 443) indicates that "the name 'case study' is emphasized by some of [the researchers] because it draws attention to the question of 'what specially can be learned about the single case?" The researcher needs to identify and describe the boundaries of the case as clearly as possible (Punch 1998: 153). Yin (2003: 39-54) distinguishes between four basic types of case study research designs, namely, single case (holistic); single-case (embedded); multi-case (holistic); and multi-case (embedded). As elaborated below, this study was based on a tailor-made version of the 'single-case (embedded) research design'.

As indicated earlier on, there are numerous events and transitions occurring over the life-course of each and every individual leading to different livelihood trajectories. Research based on the life-course approach treats such events/episodes as the basic building blocks for analyzing the issue under investigation (Giele and Elder 1998). Following Elder (1994), it is posited that people's livelihoods, by their virtue of being long term trajectories, are basically an embedment or an outcome of different events/episodes which evolve over a shorter time. The fundamental question then becomes; which particular event/episode should a researcher take as an entry point to explore and understand livelihood trajectories of an individual/s? The author contends that there is a need to first note that in philosophical terms, a case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied (Stake 2005). Social constructionism premises that there is no single social reality but instead multiple realities and that what social research makes known does not exist independently of the researcher. It was therefore necessary to focus this study on particular research participants who share a particular episode/event, which is embedded within their life-courses but appearing to be influencing their livelihood transitions as individuals in different ways. Such a shared livelihood episode became the tailor-made 'single-case (embedded) research design', which provided a point of entry in understanding livelihood trajectories of the individuals studied.

The shared livelihood episode which, according to the foregoing conceptualization became the 'single-case (embedded) research design' for understanding youth livelihoods from the perspective of young women engaged in street vending in Gaborone City, is their 'engagement in street vending'. However, there was a need for this research design to be flexible and emergent, as this is a key characteristic of qualitative research methodology. A three-staged model was developed to guide the study during fieldwork to look beyond the mere engagement of young women in street vending, and seek to understand youth livelihoods within their real-life contexts as explained below.

4.2 Selecting research participants

Qualitative studies should be flexible and emergent as it is impossible to know beforehand important selection criteria, or the exact number and nature of interviews required to gather adequate data (Creswell 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Glesne and Peshkin 1992). In this regard, the author developed a three-staged diagrammatic model to use as a flexible strategy for categorizing and selecting potential research participants who were more likely to emerge during his fieldwork. He developed this model, which he named *integrated interface model,* by weaving together the following three key aspects underpinning the overall conceptualization of this research as elaborated above:

- Livelihood trajectory of any individual which has been conceptualized to be an embedment of various *livelihood episodes/events* occurring over his/her life-course;

- A shared livelihood episode amongst young women engaged in street vending in Gaborone City, namely their engagement in *street vending*, which has been conceptualized to be a single-case (embedded) research design; and

- Agency of young women both as being youth, *youth agency*, and as being women, *women agency*. In other words, a need to understand how young women actively exercise their agency within their real-life socio-cultural contexts which expose them to the double discrimination emanating from the social construction of both youth and gender.

The three diagrammatic stages of this selection strategy are presented and discussed as follows:
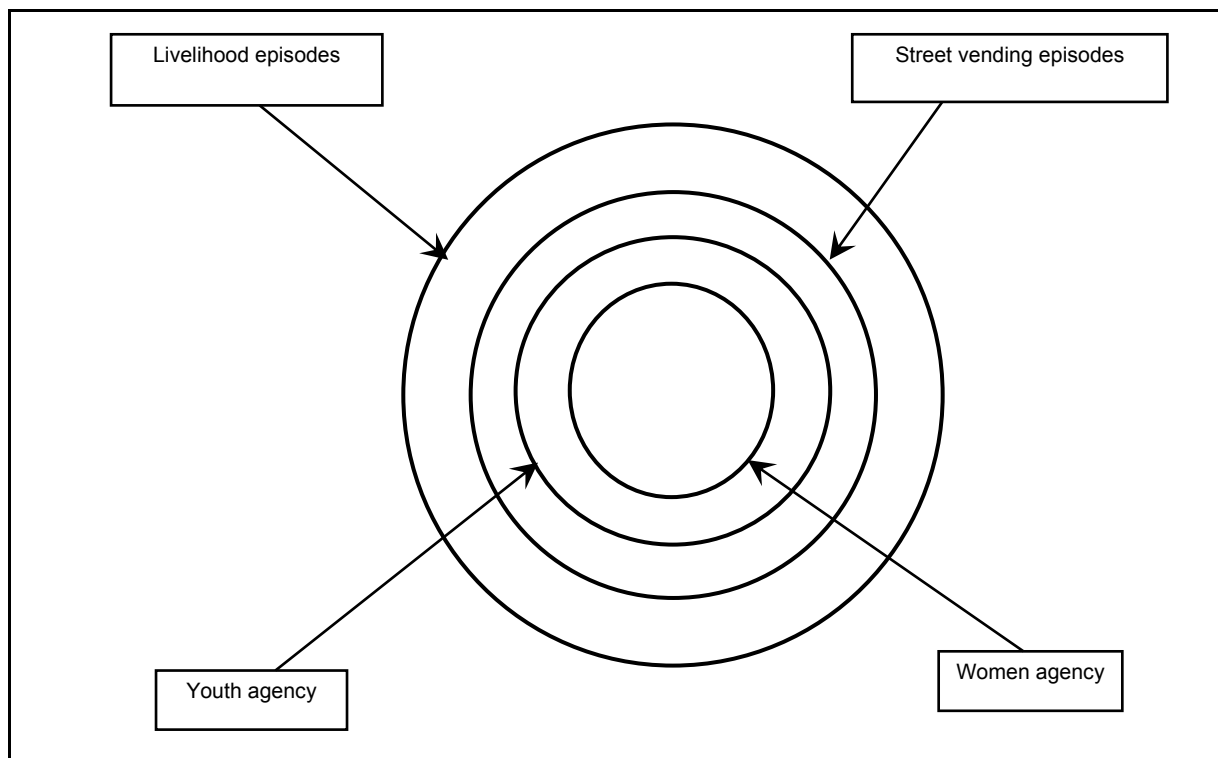
Figure 2: An embedment of livelihood episodes and human agency

The first stage of the model (Figure 2) is based on the conceptualization that livelihood trajectory of any individual is an embedment of numerous events/episodes. This embedment of various *livelihood episodes* is represented by the outermost circle. In simply terms, street vending is becoming an attractive livelihood strategy over the life-course of many people in developing countries irrespective of their age and/or sex, hence, *street vending episodes* within the livelihood episodes. This study sought to understand youth livelihoods from the perspective of young women focusing on how they exercise their agency, namely, *youth agency* within street vending episodes. Feminist development theorists are now emphasizing more recognition of agency of women within their socio-cultural contexts in order to attain the desired empowerment (Ntseane 2004). There was a need therefore to consider agency of young women engaged in street vending not only as *youth* but also as *women* on their own right; namely *women agency* within youth agency.

The second stage (Figure 3) which is based on the single-case (embedded) research design conceptualized above determines an interface between the three important aspects embedded within it; namely, *street vending episode*; *youth agency;* and *women agency*. The Venn diagram illustrates that conceptualizing engagement of young women in street vending to be an entry point in understanding youth livelihoods is valuable as this category of youth occupies a central position. This second stage also confirms that street vending is indeed an important livelihood option which attracts many people irrespective of their age and/or sex. This sampling model therefore maintained the flexibility and emergent characteristics of qualitative research design because it indicates other key categories of potential research participants the study had to consider. However, the third stage (Figure 4) presents categories of the research participants who actually provided data to address the research questions of the study with some justification for their consideration given thereafter.
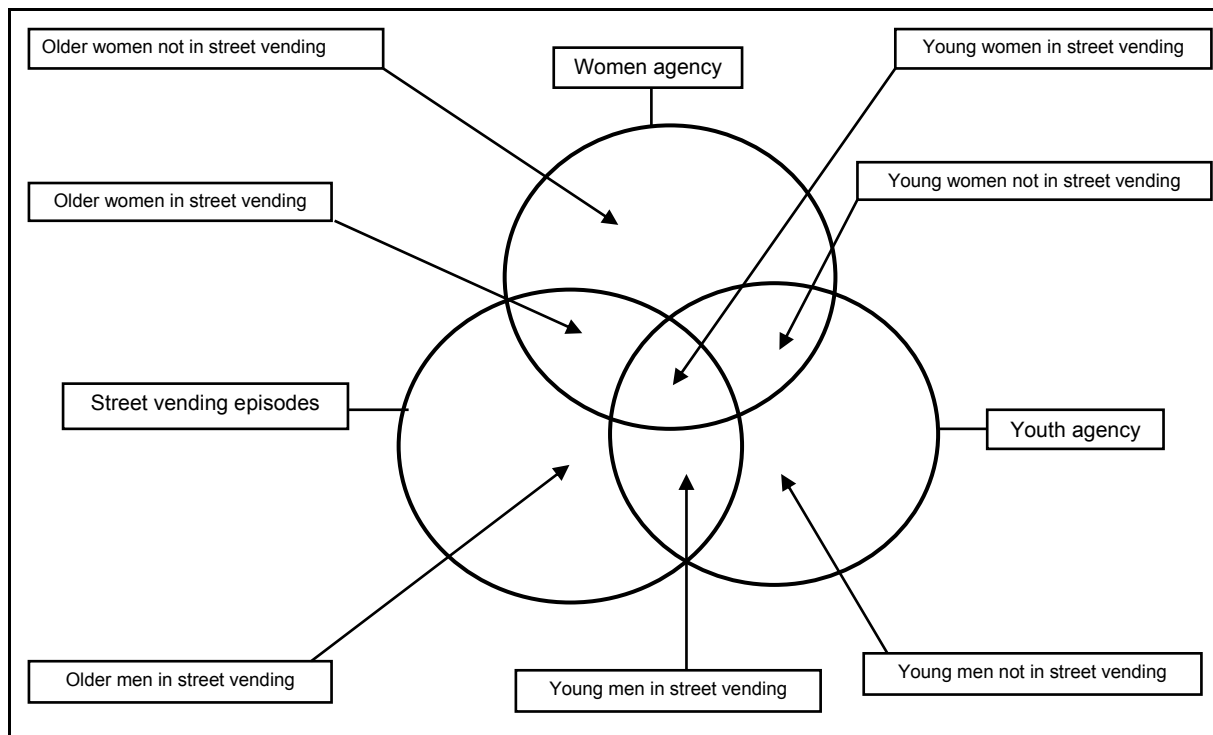
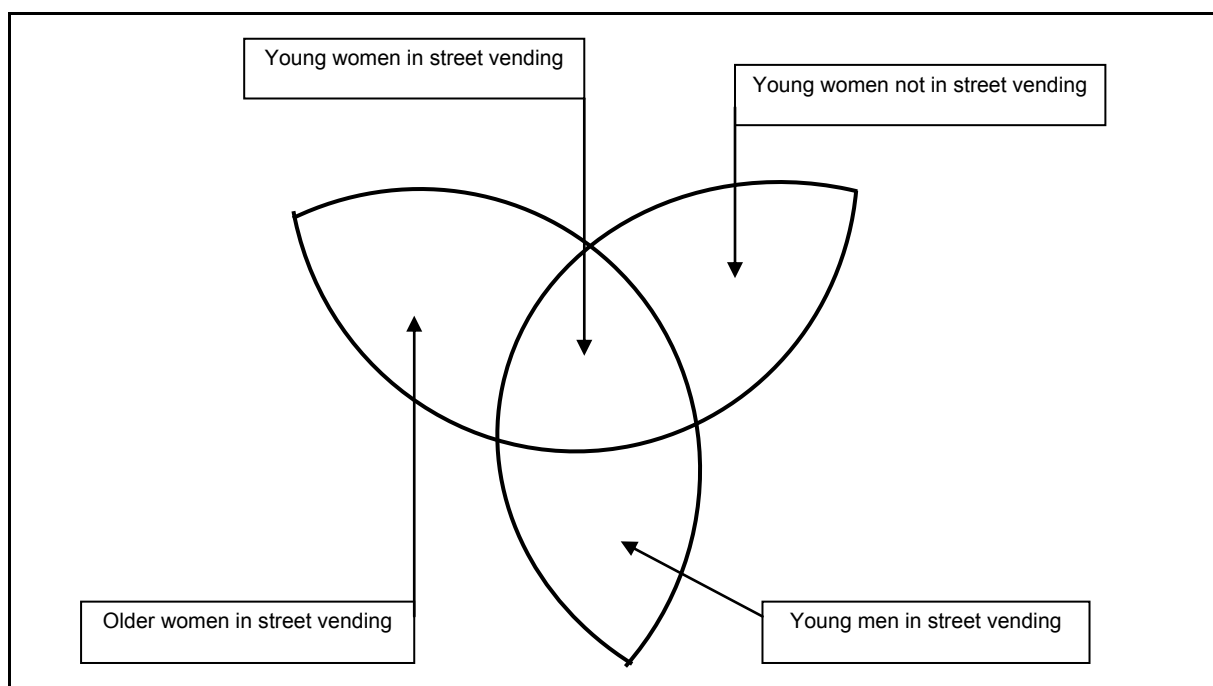**Figure 3**: Street vending episode, youth, and women agency interface

Figure 4: Categories of key research participants

As conceptualized in this study, engaging in street vending is not an end on its own but one of the many episodes some people experience in the process of improving their livelihoods. *Young women not engaged in street vending* were initially taken to comprise those that moved out of it to engage in a different episode and those that never took part in it. It was impossible during fieldwork to distinguish between those who once engaged in it from those who have not or will never engage in it. This key category therefore comprised young women who consented to complete open-ended questionnaires after listening to the interviews and/or discussions the author held with street vendors (their relatives, friends and customers). Consideration of this category of key research participants

confirms that the scope of this study was to understand youth livelihoods as a developmental process in which young women exercise their agency rather than as an outcome of a single episode.

Young men engaged in street vending were considered on the basis of the following two reasons. First, gender is a key concept in this study and thus there was a need to deconstruct misconception of equating it with women. Cornwall (1997: 12) emphasizes that "if gender is to be everybody's issue, then [there is a] need to find constructive ways of working with men as well as with women to build the confidence to do things differently". Second, the study attempted to inform development interventions with a better understanding of youth livelihoods from the perspective of youth as active social agents, which inevitably refers to both *young women* and *young men*.

Three reasons led to the consideration of *older women engaged in street vending* (those aged above 35). First, transitions from childhood to youth to adulthood are socially constructed, and as such, boundaries between them are not a clear-cut (McIlwaine and Datta 2004, Valentine 2003). The study recognized that it is difficult to define *young women* as a distinct category of social inquiry. Second, this category was considered to fulfil the need of conducting an inter-cohort comparison which is one of the key principles of the life-course approach to research. Giele and Elder (1998) state that inter-cohort comparisons permit one to contrast livelihood trajectories over the life-course across age groups and to identify the nature and extent of their varying agency. Third, Stake (2005: 451) advises that "selection by sampling of attributes [in this case youth] should not be the highest priority but opportunity to learn is often more important". Stake further advises that "sometimes it is better to learn a lot from an atypical case which is mostly accessible [in this case older women] than a little from a seemingly typical case [young women] which one cannot spend the most time with" (ibid). In general, a qualitative research design that is fit for the purpose of the study will be one that has emerged as the best response to practical considerations of that study (Arskey and Knight 1999).

4.3   Methodological triangulation

The next aspect of the research design is to answer these two basic questions; 'what form of data was collected from the research participants?' and 'how was that data collected?' Data which can be collected in any research can be classified into one of these four categories; *introspective data* (looking from within a particular situation), *circumspective data* (looking around a situation at a moment in time), *retrospective data* (looking at a situation with a backward view), and *prospective data* (looking at a situation with a forward view) (Murray 2002, Scott and Alwin 1998). Figure 1 illustrates that each one of the four elements of the life-course framework can loosely be associated with collection of a particular type of data. To understand how an individual exercises his/her agency it is important to look *introspectively* from within that particular individual. However, individuals do not exercise their agency in isolation but are embedded in socio-cultural contexts of power relations which can be understood by looking *circumspectively* at their current situations. Current contexts within which youth livelihoods are embedded can be understood when viewed *retrospectively* in relation to historical episodes/events which led to them in the first place. Considering the changing historical contexts is helpful in understanding how the participants *prospectively* exercise their agency in relation to successive episodes and/or transitions.

Data collection methods selected for any particular research should be appropriate to the epistemological orientation, the questions asked and the population studied (Ambert et al. 1995). This study was based on triangulation of different methods. There exists different interpretations of triangulation in social research based on different philosophical perspectives (Flick 1998, Fontana and Frey 2005). From a positivist perspective, triangulation is used to validate data from different angles with the intention to improve the accuracy and reliability of the information. From an interpretivist perspective, this term refers to the application of different research methods to understand the complexity of people's lives. Fontana and Frey (2005: 722) emphasize that "humans are complex, and their lives are ever changing, the more methods we use to study them, the better our chances will be to gain some understanding of how they construct their lives and the stories they tell us about them". Qualitative research as a set of interpretive activities, privileges no single methodological practice over another (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). This study adopted an interpretivist perspective of methodological triangulation whereby different methods were concurrently applied in data collection.

As discussed in detail elsewhere, data collection consisted of eight months of fieldwork involving 23 in-depth life history interviews with key research participants (17 young women, 2 young men, 4 order

women), 46 self-administered open-ended questionnaires by youth, 4 self-administered opened-ended questionnaires with official organizations and follow-up interviews, 2 face-to-face open-ended questionnaires with older women, direct observation, life charts, photographic diaries, and the media. Data analysis was divided into two inductive and iterative phases, namely, the foundational analysis undertaken concurrently with data collection and the detailed data analysis undertaken after fieldwork. The study yielded rich life history data and thus narrative analysis became the technique for analyzing data and reporting the findings (Atkinson 1998, Bryman 2008, Smeyers and Verhesschen 2001).

5. Conclusion

This paper detailed how the author has conceptualized and designed his qualitative doctoral study. McCaslin and Scott (2003: 447) highlight that "planning a qualitative study for the first time tends to be an intimidating venture for graduate students just entering the field". They further highlight that "a second major hurdle for the novice qualitative researcher, and perhaps for others, is how to determine the appropriate tradition and then how to construct a canvas and frame upon which a study can be effectively and artistically painted" (ibid). Despite a wide range of literature on research methodology, most of the first time researchers are facing challenges in the practicalities of executing a well grounded and coherent research project. The overall purpose of this paper was to provide useful insights to new researchers who are interested in undertaking a qualitative study. Although the study did not give priority to any of the triangulated methods, negotiating access and conducting in-depth life history interviews was too challenging for the author as first time qualitative researcher himself. There are complex methodological and ethical dilemmas qualitative researchers encounter in applying this research method particularly with women in one's own socio-cultural context. Despite methodological challenges the author encountered, the study produced results which could positively inform development interventions geared towards youth and/or women empowerment in Botswana.

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