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### **The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan:**

### **Discussing pedagogical and intercultural facets in an international students' research training program in times of pandemic**

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# The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan:

## Discussing pedagogical and intercultural facets in an international students' research training program in times of pandemic

Schrader, Heiko, Gorborukova, Galina, Mamatova, Makhinur

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the conception of a joint intercultural students' research program of one German and two Kyrgyzstani teachers and students from the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (Germany) and the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). The paper conceptualizes such a research training program and gives reference to qualitative methods teaching in the two corresponding universities. What follows is a description of the chosen research topic: "The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan", and the course program. With different academic cultures concerning research ethics in the Anglo-Saxon and continental European contexts, a challenge for such a program, concerning different research ethics, will be addressed. A short review of the research results of the different students' teams is provided. The projects were "Women's rights activism in the region of Osh"; "Women, Islam, and navigating transformation in Kyrgyzstan"; "Domestic violence and traditional ideologies in Kyrgyzstan: a focus on married women and bearing children"; and "Electoral participation of women in Kyrgyzstan". The paper is finalized with a self-reflection upon such a joint intercultural undertaking. Particularly addressed are the benefits for the students having joined such a program, as well as unequal working conditions in a Western European and a Central Asian country.

**Keywords:** students' research training program · qualitative research · research ethics · COVID-19 pandemic · intercultural communication

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## Introduction

All over the world, faculty and students have suffered from Covid-19 lockdowns at universities and were forced to enter into online teaching and studying. Especially during the first wave of infections, universities and staff had not been prepared for such a transgression from ordinary seminars with teaching in presence to online teaching of synchronic and asynchronic type. There were no existing technical standards and platforms, there was suspicion against certain programs concerning security for sensitive contexts, there was no appropriate hardware among staff and particularly students, and there was no experience in online teaching. Initially individual solutions of teachers were frequent, since the universities had not purchased the necessary software. PCs were not equipped with cameras, microphones and headphones. After half a year, online teaching became more a routine, although it had also become obvious that technical equipment of students depended on their socioeconomic background. Many students used their smartphones for one and a half years to join lectures and seminars. Once universities are presently return to ordinary teaching, they raise the question about positive and negative experience with online teaching to evaluate about new forms of teaching such as hybrid forms. There are many well-known disadvantages of online teaching which we do not want to repeat here, but also various advantages for subgroups such as students or faculty with children or working students, once we refer to asynchronic teaching forms. This article, however, will take up another perspective. The software provided is not only appropriate for communication between staff and students at their home universities; it can also be used for joint national and even international seminars between different universities. The departments of Sociology at the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (Germany) and the American University of Central Asia (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan) took the opportunity to design and prepare a joint students' research, monitored by their teachers, which is the focus of this paper.

## Development of the conception of “students’ research training programs” at the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (Germany)

When one of the authors (Heiko Schrader) started working at Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg (hereafter OvGU), he introduced a conception which he brought from the Sociology of Development Research Centre at the University of Bielefeld. The idea is that excellent students are invited to participate in an intensive training program (in German: “Lehrforschung”) to learn in and out of classroom about the research cycle and practise every part, particularly a field research. For some time now, the conception has been practised by the

author at the Department of Social Science of the Faculty of Humanities at OvGU. This program aims at bringing students to empirical research, more precisely, qualitative research with interview techniques, which they can use both in academic as well as extra-university careers, where the gathering of qualitative data and their interpretation is crucial. Usually, the whole process takes a period of one to one-and-a-half years, which already provides a limitation for a two-year master program. Precondition to join is having participated in a course on qualitative methods, provided by the author or by other colleagues. His own course is already designed and addressed as a preparation for this research training programme.

Thus, well prepared students may join the students' research training programme. We start with building background knowledge (phase 0), selecting a research topic and country (preferably in extra EU context to include an intercultural perspective) where to do research, establishing a relationship with a partner, collecting and analysing secondary material for the chosen topic and country, developing the research design, working on research methodology and ethics; then writing a research proposal (phase 1), conducting field research in cooperation with lecturers and students of our partner university (phase 2), making data analysis and finally writing a research report (phase 3). The supervisors take the function of facilitators leading the students through the entire process giving them feedback on their applied interview techniques in the field and supporting the analysis and writing process.

The scientific aim of this training programme is going beyond pure methodological classroom teaching to learn about the exciting (and sometimes also disappointing) work of an empirical qualitative researcher in the field, where the method is adapted to the topic and not vice versa. Besides scientific aims, this training programme exposes the students from the German university to a very different (national and academic) culture confronting them with sometimes extreme poverty in developing countries, giving them a deeper insight into the life-world and biography of marginalized people, work of NGOs and other organizations in the field, and challenge their personalities with regard to a potential working perspective in developing countries and in direct interview contact with other people.

The first three courses were placed in India, and the fourth in Nepal. Usually the 10 to 20 students from both the Magdeburgian and the partner universities split up into different sub-projects of 4 to 5 people. In 2004/2005, a group of students conducted research on the strong segregation in Mumbai slums according to religion, place of origin or ethnicity. In spring 2007, another student research group worked on social activism in Mumbai slums: communalism and

anti-communalist movements, grassroots organizations and NGOs. The 2014 research group examined five different topics related to the population of informal settlements in a rapidly changing and growing environment in Pune and Mysore. The Nepal project in 2018 took the 2015 earthquake as the starting point to investigate the Disaster-Conflict Interface, the interplay between a natural disaster and conflict. The students analysed whether and in how far previously existing social conflicts were lessened or increased in the aftermath of the earthquake. The four research topics were (1) the marginalization of Dalits in the Gorkha Earthquake; (2) LGBTI: Challenges and Opportunities in the context of the earthquake; (3) former child soldiers and the question of whether the earthquake formed a window of opportunity for integration of this marginalized group; and (4) knowledge as context to the Gorkha Earthquake and its aftermath. The results of such research trainings are very positive. Students work in cross-national teams, learn about the advantages and disadvantages of team work, get a cultural sensitivity and can decide after the project of whether research in foreign settings would be a work opportunity for them. This refers to both research qualities as well as the own personality. For job applications as well as for academic scholarships participants offer a special feature in their CVs and transcripts which makes them interesting.

## Teaching qualitative methods at OvGU and AUCA

The Department of Sociology at the OvGU was established in 1993, and the different study programs in social science (BA and MA social science, MA Peace and Conflict Studies, BA and MA European Studies). The department is strong in both quantitative and qualitative empirical research projects and publications. The three study programs offer methodological courses in both quantitative and qualitative methods. According to a decision of the German Sociological Association (DGS - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie)<sup>1</sup> in 2002<sup>2</sup> the discipline should provide a professionalization by a double methodological training in both quantitative and qualitative methods in BA and MA programs, because graduates with a profound methodological training can expect good employment opportunities and comparative advantages to those of other subjects. It is emphasized that even for such graduates who will

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<sup>1</sup> <https://soziologie.de/en/dgs/about-gsa>

<sup>2</sup> <https://docplayer.org/12930379-Empfehlungen-der-deutschen-gesellschaft-fuer-soziologie-zur-methodenausbildung-beschluss-des-vorstandes-vom-6-10-2002.html>, in German.

not be employed in research later on, the knowledge of research methods is necessary to critically assess the quality of other scholars' research publications and journalistic articles referring to research findings.

This paper is not the right place to address the basic differences between quantitative and qualitative methods; however, it is worth emphasizing that in the tradition of sociological research in the first half of the last century the two approaches supplemented each other both in US and German sociology, e.g. in ethnography,<sup>3</sup> while during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both approaches took a more hostile position towards each other; the major critique from the quantitative side was a lack of objectivity of qualitative research, being purely descriptive and not explanatory, and thus unscientific (Aspers and Corte 2019). Only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries qualitative research could step out of the shadow and emancipate itself in academia, research and research publications (Flick 2005; Mruck and May 2000). Nowadays empirical researchers recommend mixed-method approaches, and even QDA (qualitative data analysis) software integrates quantitative features.

In the author's methodology seminar, a broad topic is chosen (we experimented with different topics, and most interesting so far has been the topic of violence), and students learn about the theoretical foundation of that topic. Then they study the research cycle (beginning by shaping an individual research question and linking it to appropriate theories) to design their own interview (ranging from expert interviews to problem-centred and even narrative interviews), set up an interview guide (if required), find an interview partner, take this single interview, write an interview transcript (according to the standards of the discipline), make a content analysis and interpretation of the data (preferably with QDA software)<sup>4</sup>, and finally take a self-reflection on the own work: what went well and what can be improved.<sup>5</sup> In addition, every student works in tandem with a partner, who takes the role of an observer of the interview

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. <https://www.budrich-journals.de/index.php/zisu/article/viewFile/7254/6260>

<sup>4</sup> Of course, for an analysis of only one interview QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) software is not necessary. However, the course aims at preparing students for larger researches e.g. for their master thesis which usually covers 6 to 10 interviews, or even for a PhD thesis with many more interviews. Thus, the knowledge of QDA software is useful for a later stage of researches.

<sup>5</sup> This process of self-reflection aims at discovering own weaknesses in any of the phases of the research cycle. This self-evaluation which is intensively discussed with the teacher engenders an efficient post-learning process.

situation and gives feedback to both teacher and student (afterwards the roles are switched). The research reports of the students which involve a transparent description of the entire research process are carefully evaluated by the teacher, to give them deep face-by-face feedback. The appendix includes the full transcript of the interview,<sup>6</sup> the interview guide and the code tree and coding material, to make the entire project transparent and help the teacher to identify and discuss problems in the entire process. Due to the fact that the entire research process is based on decision-making, the research result is path-dependent on such decisions.<sup>7</sup>

The Department of Sociology at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) was founded in 1998 and today is considered one of the strongest departments at the university. The members of the department are leading empirical researchers working with both local and international partners. Like at OvGU the department offers quantitative *and* qualitative research methods. These courses are offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The qualitative methods course teaches students how to think qualitatively and become critical and reflective researchers. The course module includes such topics as the research cycle, the research question, a theoretical framework, interviews, participant observation, ethnographic oral history observation, and content analysis. Working with MAXQDA software is obligatory.

The authors of this paper agree in the following problems that they most often encounter when teaching qualitative research methods. Students have a simplistic understanding of research design by addressing a certain “interest” in a particular field but not a research question and its theoretical embedding. As empirical researchers we believe that teachers of qualitative research courses should avoid teaching research design as a linear process but more as a cycle as addressed in the following figure.

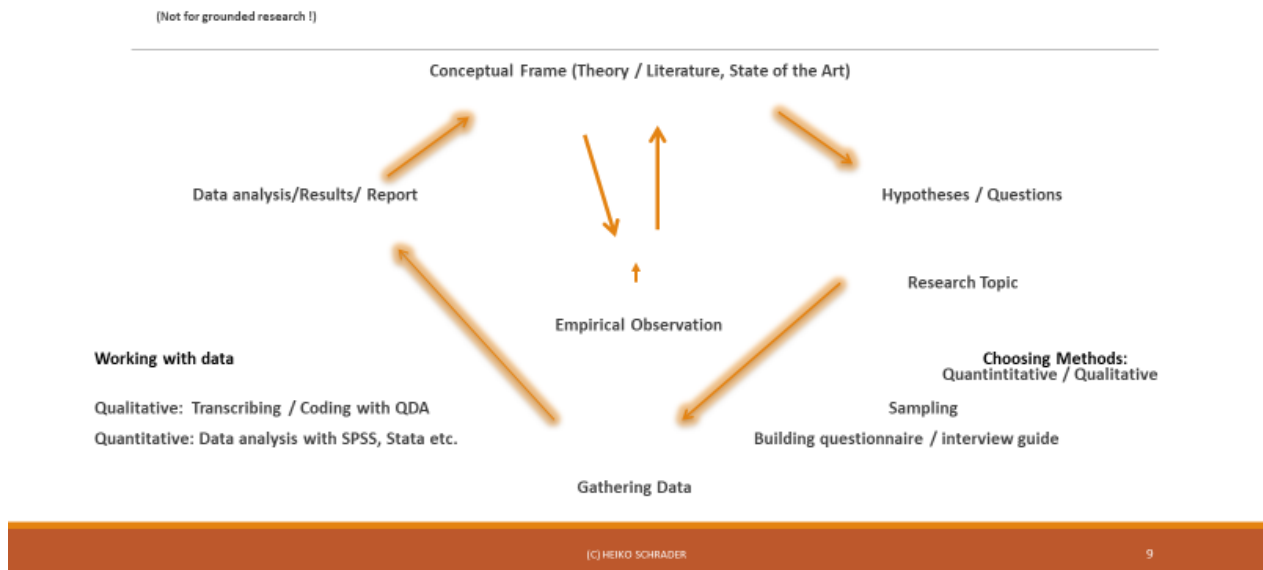
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<sup>6</sup> For the feedback the joint look of student and teacher into the interview transcript is of particular interest. The teacher can show the student where he missed a window of opportunity of adding an ad-hoc question and can see in comparison with the interview guide whether the necessary flexibility is missing.

<sup>7</sup> To provide an example: following his or her interview guide the interviewer has listen to the answers of the respondent and decide whether or not to take up a window of opportunity which is shown by the response but would lead into another direction.



## Designing Research: The Research Cycle



First of all, we can enter the research cycle from different points. One starting point is an empirical observation (e.g. in our case “disadvantages of women in Kyrgyzstani society”), another one descriptive literature that brings up an interesting question (e.g. “bride abduction in Kyrgyzstan”), or the research interest may be taken from theory (e.g. in our case Pierre Bourdieu’s (2001) “masculine domination”). Students learn and understand the connectedness of these points of access and if and why it is worth investigating this field, and how the investigation can contribute to the topic. One of the learning outcomes is also that theories and methods that can be flexibly combined for a promising research.

Since students in the qualitative course program at both universities follow their own projects, they will have to make literature reviews and other presentations in class to share with the rest of the student body so that all students can become familiar with the different theories and methods. Of particular importance is the nexus between the research question and its theoretical background. The sharpening of the research question is also achieved by thinking about different theories as well as methods to be applied and discussing their pros and cons. In the same way, at the end of the research process or qualitative course program students have to reconsider their research question, provide potential answers and discuss them in the framework of different theories. To paraphrase Margaret Eisenhart and Robert DeHaan, the aim of our course programmes is introducing students to a “culture of research” (Eisenhart and DeHaan 2005).

Further core elements in the course programs are biases of researchers (particularly in cross-cultural research), namely the cultural, gender, class-specific etc. lenses that we apply and how these lenses influence our interpretations. Also important is that students learn about certain sensitive fields of research. This does not only concern the question of research ethics (see later) but also involves questions of accessibility of researcher to informants, e.g. with regard to gender issues.

Both universities include the application of QDA software to organize data, analyse content, make connections and comparisons, identify patterns, and relate information from interview notes, test results, surveys, and other research data. Like in the methods course of the German author, students at AUCA submit a final report that includes an explanation of all steps of the study, key findings, and part of the discussion of the data. Students write a brief literature review and justify how the study contributes to the field. In the analysis section, students connect the research findings with the theoretical framework. The final report highlights strengths and limitations of the study. It contains the main conclusions and highlights what research contributes to knowledge in this area. The final grade for the course is cumulative.

### **The 2020/2021 project with teachers and students from OVGU and AUCA under Covid-19 conditions**

Here we want to report on, and analyse the most recent research training project in 2020/2021. Cooperation between the two departments of Sociology dates back to 2009. It is based upon teachers' and students' exchange in the course of an ERASMUS+ program as well as joint research in Kyrgyzstan<sup>8</sup> (Dittrich and Schrader 2015, 2018) and a larger EU project (TALENT) on the introduction of a master program in Human Resource Management in Central Asia. The idea for this students' research training program in Kyrgyzstan emerged from discussions in December 2019 and January 2020, when teachers from AUCA visited Magdeburg. This was before the Covid-19 pandemic arose.

The specific situation finally led to home office and online teaching in Germany and Kyrgyzstan. Of course, we generally agree on disadvantageous working conditions for both

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<sup>8</sup> Galina Gorborkova was team leader of the Kyrgyzstan research team.

students and teachers during the epidemics; however, what we have to stress here, is one advantage which opened up a new perspective. This is the new momentum of synchronic online teaching software in both universities (which technically had not existed at the universities before the introduction of ZOOM or similar platforms for online teaching and conferences). While we could acquire knowledge in online teaching during the spring term at our home universities, we immediately realized that the use of this software as well as online e-learning platforms opens up a new perspective: the synchronic preparation for the field research in an international seminar with teachers and students from both universities. As we could not foresee the spreading of the different Covid waves we were hopeful that the German teacher and students could come to Bishkek for field research.

However, some adaptations are necessary for such a joint course program. First of all, the time difference between Kyrgyzstan and Germany is four hours, which made us put the joint seminar into the early afternoon in Magdeburg and later afternoon in Bishkek. This would be more difficult when the time difference of participating universities is 12 hours. Secondly, we had to adapt the time frame of the entire project. While in Magdeburg students had taken up to one term to write their final research report, we decided – due to the different credit requirements at both universities and different term schedules, to shorten this last part of the project. To put it another way, while, for example, the students of the Nepal research continued working a full year to write a joint full-scale research report with a length of 100 pages,<sup>9</sup> having been published in the department's working paper series and frequently being read by other scholars as well as organizations working in Nepal, we now put stronger emphasis on the process than on the results. This meant that the research reports of the participating teams remained brief and only summarized some findings. Furthermore, the teachers were fully aware that the Covid-19 situation is very specific and depending on the development might cause a plan B that – instead of travelling to Kyrgyzstan – interviews might have to be taken online. Last but not least, we have to mention that OvGU is a public university with an enormous freedom of teaching elective courses, while AUCA is a private university with different academic model. Nevertheless, both universities supported this joint international project.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.soz.ovgu.de/soz\\_media/downloads/arbeitsberichte/76-p-1344.pdf](https://www.soz.ovgu.de/soz_media/downloads/arbeitsberichte/76-p-1344.pdf)

The core of our collaborative research training program was developing and team-teaching the interdisciplinary course “The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan” taught during 2020 fall semester and 2021 spring semester. The syllabus was designed by the authors of this paper and colleague. Along with the aim of improving the research skills of students and acquaintance with the actual problems of gender and family in Kyrgyz society, this course was aimed at enriching students’ international research experience and intercultural communication.

The course consisted of three modules. In the first module major theoretical perspectives regarding issues of gender, family and society were explored. In the second module interrelationships between gender, society and the state in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia were studied. The third module focused on preparing and conducting students’ research projects. Students from different social sciences master’s degree programs from both universities (Sociology, Peace and Conflict Studies, Social Anthropology and Talent Management) organized themselves in four research teams. For their research projects students focused on women issues related to marriage and child bearing, Islamic influence, activism and rights, political engagement and electoral behavior. The problem of domestic violence was also addressed. Course requirements included preparing the research proposals, interview guide presentations, final research report, attendance, class participation and endeavor. An important condition for studying on this course was intensive reading of scientific literature, which was offered by an online reader on an e-learning platform<sup>10</sup> and the development of appropriate theoretical framework of the research. In addition to our regular online-class teaching student groups set up their own online meetings to develop their projects.

A key issue for research in different teams was the advice to the students to immediately transcribe the interviews or at least provide summaries of them on an online-learning platform so that every course member could get information of also the other research groups. It was agreed upon that the research knowledge gathered by the different teams was common knowledge for all groups. Another issue was agreement in how research teams should conduct their interviews. It was decided in advance before the interviews about the different roles: one

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<sup>10</sup> This platform was hosted at OvGU. It should be mentioned that foreign students needed special temporary access which was provided by the university authorities.

interviewer and different observers who could place some more additional questions at the end of the interview and deliver context information. Furthermore, the teachers had advised the students to keep the interview guide as flexible as possible to be adaptive to the flow of the interviews. Every student should slip into the role of interviewer at least once.

One of the major challenges of teaching and learning was the necessity to rapidly adapt to the new requirements of the pandemic reality. As mentioned above, we had to abandon the plans for the Magdeburgian students to travel to Kyrgyzstan for data collection and getting acquainted with the local culture in the direct conditions. Impossibility of usual mobility of students and teachers and probable decrease in student's motivation to study, required a certain amount of pedagogical flexibility, since not only lectures and seminars had to be conducted online, but also all research projects, with some live interviews only. This was not an easy task, as in the process of working on research a number of difficulties have been faced. They are challenges in data collection due to on-line regime, linguistic barrier while communicating with the respondents,<sup>11</sup> in-group communication related to distribution of tasks between team members, high pressure of time management, significant time difference between Germany and Kyrgyzstan. Interaction and communication issues have proven to be the major challenge when total transition to on-line mode was taken. Although the technical problems associated with unstable Internet connections were not a big issue, the lack of access to face-to-face communication between students, faculty, and research participants posed a major challenge for this course causing some level of emotional stress.

To mitigate these negative effects of distance learning, the course instructors stepped up the practice of individual/group consultations, revised the deadline schedule, changed course requirements for final research report, and encouraged students' engagement in teamwork. Social distancing due to the new reality significantly interferes with the social ties and mobility, but at the same time opens the door to developing new approaches to online learning with an emphasis on collaborative research. These approaches should work for reinforcing interaction between research team members, improve in-class communication, develop effective time-

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<sup>11</sup> Although the non-Russian speaking German students were advised to work with personnel from NGOs with English language knowledge, some of the interview partners preferred to talk in Russian. Thus, the students from Kyrgyzstan had to sometimes switch into the role of translators, or they at least summarized the content of such an interview.

management, design proportionate course requirements with realistic expectations and learning outcomes, prevent undesirable consequences of the fatigue caused by extensive video conferencing.

## **Research ethics assurance: a controversial issue**

Adherence to research ethics was an essential requirement of this course before entering into qualitative interviews, but it was a controversial issue according to the standards of the two corresponding universities. AUCA has a structure called the Institutional Review Board or IRB. The task of this committee, made up of university professors, is to verify that the planned study complies with the ethical standards formulated in “The Belmont Report”.<sup>12</sup> IRBs are widely spread ethics committees in universities of the United States. AUCA also followed this model. In order to receive IRB permission to start their research (data gathering phase) our students provided research protocol, informed consent form, copy of interview guides and additional technical documents. Along with this, students and faculty were required to take a multiple-choice exam on research ethics principles and rules or provide the valid certificate of a similar test confirming a passing score.

For the German teacher and his students, the requirements for passing the IRB procedures turned out to be new and even unexpected. We have to admit that this created some level of stress, especially the requirement of taking this multiple-choice exam. Although going through IRB procedures is more of a technical nature, we have found that this requirement revealed differences in American and European approaches to research culture. First of all, the German tradition, on the example of Magdeburg University, and also the tradition over Europe except the UK, is that such a top-down institutional structure as the IRB does not correspond to the principle requirements of freedom in qualitative research in social science. Instead, students learn about the principles and rules of research ethics throughout the course of their studies at the university. Here, the pedagogical emphasis is placed on the development of personal accountability of the future researcher for the observance of ethical standards. Secondly, the German tradition maintains a fairly wide range of exploratory flexibility if it is dictated by the

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<sup>12</sup> AUCA IRB homepage and the Belmont Report see e.g. [https://auca.kg/en/res\\_irb\\_home/](https://auca.kg/en/res_irb_home/). Access 13 July, 2021

concrete research situation and thus does not favor IRBs and formalized rules (see e.g. Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016 for a German critique to IRBs, as well as Lincoln and Tierney 2004; Swauger 2009 for an Anglo-Saxon critique).

The two positions of freedom of research and fixed institutional ethical standards have been discussed in “Ethics in Social science and Humanities” (2018:3)<sup>13</sup> by the European Commission. It is argued that research in social science has to adapt certain standards concerning human beings (e.g. the “do not harm” principle which concerns informants), while on the other hand it has to guarantee the freedom of science. The Commission’s position is that principles of research ethics have continuously changed and become more complex and that the researcher has to take decisions in all parts of research (from planning via data gathering to data analysis and publication). The researcher in social science has to decide whether the benefits from research outweigh the potential risks and prospective research participants “are free to decide whether or not to take part in the research, and whether any data collected from and about them is included in analysis” (ibid:5). This is nowadays guaranteed through obtaining informed consent from the participants, which is similarly a requirement in the IRB rules.

Our broad research topic of “The 'Intersections' of Gender, Family, and Society in Kyrgyzstan” is a sensitive topic and deserves ethical consideration. It may concern domestic violence and psychological pressure, traumas of victims as well as sensitive materials of women and children in particular. Such may be touched in problem-centered and narrative interviews, and old wounds of the respondent may be torn up once more. As experienced senior researchers but with no specific trauma training we nevertheless know that following the rules of a problem-centered or narrative interview with a traumatized person will give that person the choice to get deeper into the trauma or to stop talking about the context. The decision is in the hands of the traumatized person; and he or she is able to take such a decision. The researcher should not pressure him or her but open up a window of opportunity or hardship. The latter example shows that research ethics cannot be fully standardized since they depend on discipline, research topic and method involved.

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<sup>13</sup> European Commission 2018: Ethics in Social Science and Humanities. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/6.\\_h2020\\_ethics-soc-science-humanities\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/6._h2020_ethics-soc-science-humanities_en.pdf). Access 13 July, 2021

In our case, however, most interviews taken by our research teams were expert interviews with members of organizations dealing with such sensitive topics. The interview partners had a professional expert knowledge on the topic and they dealt with vulnerable people, not our students. Thus, the students did not even come into a situation to take interviews from potentially traumatized people and only had to guarantee anonymization of names or places if this concerned victims or perpetrators. Information gathered from experts usually remains rather aggregated and abstract, and the researcher has to even motivate them to provide concrete examples.

In context of our course, the dichotomy personal conscientiousness vs. institutional control manifested itself quite clearly and caused a lively discussion between the training participants, including teachers. An important question that arose before us in connection with the revealed dichotomy was how to reconcile these two approaches? What is more important - institutional control or awareness of individual responsibility for research ethics without institutional oversight?

While IRB procedures are a mandatory technical requirement for everyone regardless of university affiliation in order to determine whether the study is ethical and is the researcher familiar with the basic principles of ethics when working with people, our position was that we should avoid excessive formalization in teaching students about the research culture, but at the same time fulfill the institutional requirements of a particular university. Our experience emphasizes the importance of finding common denominators and minimizing the factors that divide us. Today we are still in search of answers to the questions posed above, as the two approaches to the academic culture of research ethics seem to contradict rather than unite.

## **A short review of the different student projects**

Within the framework of this research training, students organized in mixed inter-university groups carried out four research projects. The first project concentrated on the theme “Women's rights activism in the region of Osh”. In this project, students studied the opinions of experts and activists about women’s civic engagement after the tragic ethnic conflicts in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. At the center of these events was the exacerbation of long-standing contradictions and escalated tension between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, which resulted in massive acts of violence. In this traditional environment of South Kyrgyzstan students found a rather negative attitude towards women's activism, which is perceived as a destabilizing influence of



Western organizations sponsoring the activities of feminist groups. The study also revealed a discrepancy in attitudes towards female activism among older and younger generations.

The second group research project was focused on studying how Muslim religious affiliation of women affect their decision making regarding their daily life. The title of this research project is “Women, Islam, and navigating transformation in Kyrgyzstan”. This study highlights the social pressure on young women to meet traditional religious expectations regarding their behavior both in the private and public realms. One of the rationalizations of such an influence is to ensure an ability of a woman to get married and properly play her traditional female role.

The third project was titled “Domestic violence and traditional ideologies in Kyrgyzstan: a focus on married women and bearing children”. The hypothesis was that according to traditional gender roles wives are expected to be fertile and should preferably deliver boys, and if this causes problems they are under pressure of their husbands and families. Despite the fact that the analysis of interviews did not reveal any signs of a connection between cases of domestic violence and pressure on women related to childbearing, it is emphasized that culturally determined ideas about childbearing may be a precondition to domestic violence.

In the fourth research project “Electoral participation of women in Kyrgyzstan” students studied how local women's non-governmental organizations contributed to the involvement of women in the political process through the example of parliamentary elections. Traditional lifestyle and gender roles pressure, low living standards and limited access to education for girls and women are found to be obstacles to women political engagement.

## **Evaluation of the students’ research training program by the teachers**

How do the authors evaluate this joint students’ research training program? To stress the point once again, such a training program aims less at research findings than process understanding. Of course, we are aware that only part of graduates will continue working in academia and empirical research. However, nowadays, a variety of competencies of students is required in the labor market. These involve translating certain demands into planning processes and breaking down larger tasks into smaller entities. This also happens during the research cycle. A topic is narrowed down into a research question and project, which can be handled under constraints of time, space, and money; it is broken up into different work steps. Here the emphasis is laid upon a systematic proceeding and the logic of transparency. Graduates who

have received a two-sided methodological education and have gained practical research experience have advantages in the job market, as emphasized by the recommendation of the German Sociological Association mentioned above.

The second aspect in such a research training is learning about the strengths and weaknesses of teamwork. Working in teams provides different challenges than working alone. In the latter case, I have to rely on my own strengths and cope with my hopefully known weaknesses. Working in teams, on the other hand, provides a mix of often unknown people, usually not aggregating according to one's own choice. People are connected through their working place only and mostly not through friendship. People who are less active or shyer can hide themselves in in the group, while more active group members take over the lead, so that in many cases teamwork enhances and strengthens individual qualities and weaknesses. Teamwork progress can to some degree be restricted by the personalities of the weakest and slowest group member. If other group members want to speed up the entire process, they often take over certain tasks of those weakest group member and sooner or later feel unjustly treated when the weakest group member gets the same course benefits. In reality, it is often rather wishful thinking that heterogeneous group members unite to form a more productive whole, as is postulated theoretically from the perspective of diversity management. Friction losses are too high, and in the worst cases an entire research project may be endangered by disturbing group dynamics and individual hostilities! The other way around, the team members can learn about themselves; less active group members may take a more responsible role by being supported by the team and the supervisors; dominant group members, on the other hand, may be kept under control by group democratic processes.

The result of comparative advantages of graduates in the labor market is often not directly connected to the research competences than more indirectly: potential employers honor the experiences that students developed to adapt themselves to teamwork, complete a long and exhausting project and (in the case of the German students,) work in foreign culture, to have competencies of problem-solving and structuration of group processes.

But let us remain on the academic level. In master theses, many students are nowadays interested in empirical works. Unfortunately, many of them have never practiced such. A result is that they first of all, underestimate the prospective time involved for a research process. And secondly, they lack the necessary instruments which they know at best from classroom teaching but have never applied them. The result is that the ambitions are too high and the methods

involved are too handsome; students step into many traps that open up in the research processes. Then teachers' evaluation reports politely talk about "ambitious projects" that are "difficult to handle for the student due to lack of tools and lack of time". The mismatch between ambitions and outcome is so tremendous that in the end the grading is often disappointing for both student and teacher, and a literature-based thesis might have brought much better results.

Our own experience shows that students who participated in such a research training program deliver good results in empirical theses - here we talk about qualitative research only, but the same holds true for quantitative research. They know the process and can assess the difficulties that occur in every step in the research cycle; they know particularly how much time it takes to take an interview and to write a transcript. They know already, how multiple interviews can be coded and analyzed and can apply QDA software to support the handling of data. Their experience makes them self-conscious in contacting potential interview partners – even if these are professional experts. They have already learned about frustrations before when an interview partner does not show up or has nothing to say about the research question. They are perhaps inventive enough to solve sudden problems which could not have been anticipated, and adapt the entire research process to new circumstances. They have learned about ethical standards and self-responsibilities.

We recommend empirical works in master theses only. The aim of a bachelor thesis is that students can translate and apply a theory into an empirical problem which is known from the literature. This can involve statistical data, for example, or findings from other research projects, but should not involve time-consuming data processing or interview transcripts. The major requirement is not originality, but to demonstrate the ability to perform good academic practice. In master theses, on the other hand, we recommend manageable empirical studies, which are taken up under supervision and with recommendations of the teacher. These projects have to fit the time frame which is provided to the student by his or her institution, and requires a time-consuming monitoring of the entire process by the teacher.

Are the results of such research therefore not of scientific or public interest because students are still in training and time resources are scarce? Not necessarily. Working in a team means that not everything has to be taken by one's own effort. A division of labor takes place. In a rather short period, more interviews can be taken compared to working alone, which means that more raw material will be delivered. To provide an example: let us assume the research period covers a time span of two weeks or 10 working days. The team consists of four people. Every

day two interviews can be taken (this works once interview partners have been found in advance) and immediately transcribed. At the end of that period 20 interviews can thus be available for the team, and if – like in our case - there are four such teams, it is up to 80 interviews. Even if it is only 10 or 15 per group in reality, this is quite a lot of material.

From such a number of interviews insights into a more complex issue are possible. Interviews can be compared according to various criteria, including items of the interview partner such as age, gender or other social structural criteria; they can be measured in closeness or distance to ideal types, and the like. Of course, such a gathering of raw materials is the preparation for content analysis and further analysis only. This means, in the best case, there would be enough time for the students to work with the data. Not in this training, where students immediately needed their ratings to start their master thesis, but in the other cases which were mentioned at the beginning of this article, students continue to working on the material for at least one term. In all cases except this online research, the outcome was a joint research report of 60 to 100 pages, structured according to the different sub-projects under the joint major topic. We published these reports in our reviewed working paper series, and we can see from our web statistics, that these reports are read by other academic scholars, but particularly also organizations. This means, students can also show a publication in their CVs and deliver such a paper once they apply for a job.

The other option is that students use the gathered material for their own master thesis. We decided to take all the gathered information of the four groups in this training as a knowledge pool available for every student, which meant that every transcript, memo or summary of an interview was uploaded onto an online platform being available for all participants.

What can we say about the intercultural proceeding? As already mentioned before, academic cultures are different. Although most national academic cultures aim at internationalization, the synchronization of standards has not necessarily taken place. As we have already shown with the research ethics, they are different in the US and Germany. The same holds true for the rating standards and requirements. Furthermore, national cultures and national academia impinge on student's behavior. This concerns the closeness or distance of teachers and students, for example. This may also concern the self-consciousness of students to cope with respondents - especially when they are experts, and the behavior of experts towards students (hierarchical expectations). And finally, different national cultures impinge on the mix of the research teams which may increase disturbances of a smooth flow of working together.

Another issue of self-reflections of the authors involves hegemony of academic cultures. While US or German universities are rather well-equipped with funds and may provide space for such not directly curricular seminars, universities from the global South usually cannot not afford such an equipment and such an academic freedom. This also concerns teaching obligations, whether such a training has to be added to the work load of the teacher or can be taken as part of it. As a matter of fact, it is the well-equipped universities from the global North that develop such teaching forms, and that teachers have the freedom to choose at least part of their workloads for such projects, and very often they look for partners from the global South, who have to take such a course as an unpaid additional workload. The teachers and students from the former places enjoy travelling into a foreign culture, while those from the latter places work in their own environments and sometimes have to function as interpreters for their Western counterparts. We are fully aware that this can be discussed as hegemonial under the issue of post-colonialism or poststructuralism. And it is also a pity that exchange programs do not offer additional funds for the latter universities to join such projects and perhaps even reverse the travel direction. But teachers and students from both universities made a good experience with this project and want to continue international research seminars in the near future.

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