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Researching the Reintegration of Formerly Abducted Children in Northern Uganda through Action Research: Experiences and Reflections

MARGARET ANGUCIA[1,2†,‡], JACQUES ZEELEN[3*,§,¶] and GIDEON DE JONG[3‖]

[1]*Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi, Uganda*
[2]*University of Groningen, the Netherlands*
[3]*Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Groningen, the Netherlands*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents experiences and reflections on the use of a participatory research methodology under the difficult conditions of a war situation in northern Uganda. We draw from two complimentary approaches in action research to explain our methodology while doing research on the reintegration of formerly abducted children. First, the experience oriented approach, which emphasizes the need to articulate experience as a basis for learning and knowledge. Second, the exemplary participatory approach which highlights the importance of enhancing empowerment and the need to find solutions for social problems. We find these two approaches useful for doing action research in a conflict area because of their emphasis on experience and empowerment respectively. In our research, experience is important because of the children's encounter with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels that both needs to be understood and justifies reintegration. On the otherhand, empowerment is important for our assumption that the children's experience and encounter with the LRA has disempowering effects on them. We demonstrate the use of the approaches in our research by enhancing participation, balancing power relations and being aware of ethical issues while at the same time attempting to make the research valid inspite of the challenges. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: reintegration; formerly abducted children; child soldiers; war affected children; action research; conflict situations; community involvement; ethics in research

* Correspondence to: Jacques Zeelen, Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Groningen, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 CW Groningen, the Netherlands. E-mail: j.j.m.zeelen@rug.nl
† Lecturer at Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi.
‡ PhD student at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.
§ Associate Professor at the Department of Lifelong Learning of the University of Groningen.
¶ One of the supervisors of Angucia's PhD research.
‖ Lecturer at the Department of Lifelong Learning of the University of Groningen.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on the methodology of a PhD research[1] on the reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda. Its goal is not to report the findings of the research but to show our experiences of drawing on two approaches in action research to understand the reintegration of war-affected children. In the paper, we first discuss the research context briefly explaining the historical background. The context also discusses a wider framework that situates our research in the study of children's involvement in war conditions and the resulting need for reintegration. We then present the two approaches of action research that we draw on. Next, we discuss the interface between these approaches and our experiences in the field. We conclude that, despite several field hiccups, both approaches contribute to gaining insights into the reintegration of formerly abducted children.

THE CONTEXT

Historical background of the conflict and the involvement of abducted children

Since president Museveni took control of the government in Uganda in 1986, there has been a civil war in the northern part of the country. The war fought against the government of Uganda by the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), did not have very clear political aims according to many analysts (Allen, 2006; Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2004). Despite the lack of political goals, the impact of the fighting on local communities cannot be underestimated. They range from massive internal displacement of the local population and human rights violations, to insecurity in all its forms, and abductions (Veale & Stavrou, 2003, p. 40–42).

The genesis and the development of the conflict are quite complex. However, some of the most commonly named reasons are historical-colonial causes, the Ugandan north–south divide, marginalization of the Acholi by the Museveni government and the atrocities committed by the same government against the Acholi people—in addition to a Ugandan history of violence and impunity (International Crisis Group, 2004; Nyadru, 1989; Okot Oburu, 1987; Refugee Law Project, 2004; Veale & Stavrou, 2003).

This conflict has disproportionately involved the use of children (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2004; Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Women's Commission for Refugee and Children, 2004; World Vision, 2004). Mostly these children were abducted in their home villages and were forced to fight in militias of the LRA (Betancourt, 2008; Betancourt, Simmons, Borisova, Brewer, Iweala, & De La Soudière, 2008; Honwana, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 1997, 2003; Macmullin & Loughry, 2004; Smith, 2004). It is estimated that 90% of the LRA recruits are children (Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004, p. 363). Due to psychological developmental processes of these children, they are vulnerable and need guidance. Therefore, militias can easily use their mutability for their own purposes. Their main objective is to transform them into soldiers (Honwana, 2006, p. 28).

A child soldier is defined by Unicef (2009) as any person (regardless of gender) under the age of 18, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed group in any capacity. They

[1]The research was carried out between 2004 and 2008 in the context of the NPT programme ''Capacity Building for Uganda Martyrs University's Programme on Local Governance and Human Rights'', sponsored by the Dutch government through NUFFIC. The collaboration partner in the Netherlands was the University of Groningen.

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can act, for example, as cooks, combatants or porters. The children we have interviewed were used to perform and play numerous roles such as fighting in front line battles, gathering firewood, cooking and domestic chores, fetching water, carrying and transporting supplies, looting military hardware and guarding command posts. Children had also been forced to carry out punishments on fellow children and often even kill offenders. Some have been forced to commit atrocities against their own communities. In the case of girls, they had the additional roles as providers of sexual favours to the commanders and other combatants (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Leibig, 2005; Veale & Stavrou, 2003). The experiences of children in our study fit the Unicef definition of 'child soldiers' but we prefer to call children who have gone through these experiences 'war-affected children'. We prefer this term over child soldiers because the children who participated in our research never referred to themselves as soldiers. This realization made us believe that as outsiders we have no right to call other people names that they do not give themselves. The children in our study are, therefore, referred to as war-affected or formerly abducted children.

The need for reintegration

The roles played by children in captivity have alienated the children from their communities. Thus, the necessity to reintegrate these northern Ugandan children back into society and the need to make them function again as citizens is overwhelming (Betancourt, Speelman, Onyango, & Bolton, 2009; Derluyn et al., 2004; Human Rights Watch, 1997, 2003; Leibig, 2005; MacMullin & Loughry, 2004; Veale & Stavrou, 2003).

The reintegration of formerly abducted children is not an easy task, especially when ex-combatants were part of an abusive military faction (Honwana, 2006; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Kimmel & Roby, 2007).[2] It may be understandable that, besides being seen as victims, war affected children are, therefore, also portrayed as perpetrators (Honwana, 2006; Shepler, 2003). Such multifaceted identities serve as the foundation for the difficulties these children face in creating their own identity. To say the least, there is an ongoing imbalance between formulating their role as a child who plays with other children and who discovers the world, and their role as a soldier who kills and commits atrocities (Honwana, 2006). Also, the exposure to threatening and traumatic situations have an enormous psychological impact on children, from which especially significant increases in symptoms of depression, sleep disturbance, hostility and anxiety can be observed over time (Betancourt, 2008; Gupta & Zimmer, 2008; Macmullin & Loughry, 2004).

Due to these psychological difficulties, formerly abducted children lack the skills which are needed to act in civil society (Betancourt et al., 2008; Hill & Langholtz, 2003; Kimmel & Roby, 2007), which frustrates reintegration in their communities.

Reintegration programmes in northern Uganda

Many NGOs have been involved in northern Uganda in addressing the issue of reception after escape, release or rescue from captivity of thousands of the war affected children who

[2]Although these researchers studied the reintegration of war affected children in different countries—Honwana (2006) in Angola and Mozambique; Humphreys and Weinstein (2007) in Sierra Leone; Kimmel and Roby (2007 in Liberia—due to sub-Saharan context in which the studies were carried out, we can conclude that findings from our study show similarities in relation to difficulties in reintegration as which were observed by these researchers.

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have been used by the LRA as frontline fighters, sex slaves, providers of labour and human shields at battle fronts. The NGOs provide basic counselling, medical treatment, food and some resettlement packages. Thereafter, the children are reunited with their families.

While there are clear, western-based activities for the children at the reception centres for their reinsertion in society, there is no clear idea of what happens to the children when they get reunited with their families. Yet, through the abduction and war experience, the children have either broken their previous relationships or experience an alienated sense of belonging, connectivity, identity or self-determination. Also, they encounter a lack of recognition, sympathy and solidarity by their fellow villagers. In general, their communities are rather reserved in the reintegration of these children, because they are traumatized themselves by children who committed extremely violent acts during the conflicts (Hill & Langholtz, 2003). Therefore, trust is also lacking between the children and their communities, making responsible citizenship even more difficult.

The significance of community involvement and the choice for action research

Clearly, that which has been broken needs to be restored through appropriate methods of reintegration, a process that could bring the abductees and the community together. There was thus a need to investigate reintegration activities in northern Uganda holistically in such a way as to give the community a central role. This is also recognized by several other researchers who have investigated reintegration programs in sub-Saharan Africa. We underline the importance of Betancourt's (2008) holistic approach in which '[. . .] care and the development of systems of social services afford better protection, screening, care and follow up of *all* children affected by war' (p. 140); an approach which fits the cultural and ecological context in which they are carried out. Furthermore, in line with MacMullin and Loughry (2004) and Kimmel and Roby (2007), we agree that community involvement in which influential people from the community help to coordinate the reintegration program is strongly recommended.

The underlying concerns in this social problem include loss of relationships, trust, dignity and confidence, a legacy of individual and collective guilt, trauma and painful memories both among the children and in the community. In addition to these issues, the community has the obligation and duty to receive and accept the returnees back. The responsibility of each community to do this, its dilemma in regard to accepting these disoriented children and the methodology involved justified the use of action research as a tool for gaining insight into how communities might deal with social reintegration, to enhance collective learning processes and to contribute towards possible solutions. Due to the importance of this involvement of members from the local communities, participatory action research (PAR) was considered to be appropriate for studying the reintegration of war affected children in northern Uganda.

TWO APPROACHES OF ACTION RESEARCH: INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS

There are various strands of action oriented research approaches, such as PAR, collaborative inquiry, action learning, appreciative inquiry and exemplary action research (Boog, 2003; Boog, Preece, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008a; Coenen & Khonraad, 2003;

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Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This particular study is based on the general characteristics of action research derived from the collaborative learning and participatory approaches. The two strands are presented as partly comparable approaches of action research, differing only in terms of emphasis on certain aspects. One of these is the collaborative inquiry approach focused on human experience, and the other one is that it is an approach more oriented towards interventions. The experience based approach is used in trying to reconstruct and to create knowledge of the experiences of abduction and captivity of war affected children and the reintegration experiences between the formerly abducted children and other members of the communities to which they have returned in northern Uganda. The intervention oriented participatory approach is used not only to generate knowledge concerning the research questions but also to identify perspectives for improving and implementing intervention practices for reintegration.

Experience as a basis for learning and knowledge

According to Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks, 2000 action research has its roots in John Dewey's pragmatism, itself an extension of historical empiricism and Edmund Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology. These intellectual positions converge in the importance of experience as an important element of learning, knowledge and interpretation as well as the importance of new meanings, change and solving of problems. The theme of experience as an element of learning, knowledge and interpretation is important to reintegration, citizenship and peace building in a post conflict situation because an inquiry into those issues can be strengthened by focusing on individual and group experiences.

Understanding the condition and consequences of abduction, captivity and eventual reintegration of war children could only be possible by listening and thus sharing their experiences. Again, the community's attempts to receive and reintegrate the children and their fears could also be understood by sharing their experience of these events. This was our approach, to co-generate knowledge with the researched Acholi community and to search for options for improving intervention for reintegration. Heron (Bray et al., 2000, p. 26) maintains that '[. . .] cooperative inquiry [is] a way of systematically deriving learning from individual and shared experience as people engage in a refined experiential learning cycle'. In the same way they argue that collaborative inquiry is a way of conducting research into human experience, and we add, of conflict and particular conflict situations.

Participatory Characteristics of action research

According to Boog (2003), action research is participatory and practice oriented. It empowers and finds solutions to social problems. Action research is a reciprocal learning process as the researcher and the researched are partners. This reciprocal learning process requires all the partners to be open, truthful and satisfied with the communication of facts, which is called *reciprocal adequacy.* Reciprocal adequacy in action research is the measure of validity and reliability because it allows for information to be crosschecked and answers agreed upon by the actors in research. This democratic ethos is inspired by the work of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin and is based on the notion of a shared ontology of progressive human development as social learning, emancipation and empowerment towards a socially just and sustainable world community. Alongside this ontology, the different orientations in action research share a subject–subject epistemology; researcher and researched

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subjects become researcher and participant researcher in a mutual learning process. And, finally, they share the typical action research design, which is a cooperative process of problem solving, where researchers and the research subjects act more and more as co-researchers. Action research generates new action scripts, derived from the inquiry, into social action (Boog, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008b).

ISSUES OF PARTCIPATION, POWER, ETHICS AND VALIDITY

Reflecting on both action research approaches it should be added that using action research as a *tool* for generating knowledge and improvements in intervention practices, does not imply that the main tenets of action research will always be applicable to every situation or problem studied (Zeelen, 2004). Often the reality is that due to difficulties entering the field, logistical obstacles and time constraints, full cycles of articulation of experiences, actions and evaluations cannot be executed and only certain stages of action research can be applied (Van der Linden & Zeelen). The emphasis in this research is on getting access into the field, creating space for the articulation of experiences, getting insights in the different reintegration practices, enhancing social learning processes and identifying possible strategies for a more adequate reintegration. These relate to experience and empowerment or power relations as seen in the two approaches.

In our view, issues of participation, power, ethics and validity, which are central to all research, are vitally important to the action research paradigm which many members of the academic community consider to be less scientific and to have less rigor. These issues, if clearly articulated, can validate the action research process. We thus attempt to recount the field experience of an action research design to both bring out and explain the issues under discussion and to validate our own research. We begin by explaining the entry into the field, the initial contacts.

Initial contacts

The first contacts were made through the Chief Administrative Officers who identified the organizations working with the formerly abducted children in the districts and the internally displaced people's (IDP) camps that could be reached without major security hurdles. He also wrote an introductory letter for the organizations within and outside the IDP camps. On arrival at the camps we were to look for the Local Council chairpersons who then identified the formerly abducted and now returned children. Furthermore the local council chairpersons helped in organizing the participants for the focus group discussions.

Creating a conversational space

Knowing that the experience of abduction, captivity and return were quite delicate, at least between a former captive and non-captive and strangers like the researchers, the interviews with parents and the account of life histories during captivity were done in private, except for the focus group discussion. This allowed a fairly high degree of honesty in telling the story. However, one could ask how do we 'recognize' honesty in such circumstances? Perhaps we do not have an 'objective' answer but we could tell when a child was 'telling

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their hearts out' as they recounted their experiences. Besides, even if there might have been some exaggeration here and there, there was a similarity among all these stories although they were all different in their own way. A degree of honesty could be concluded from the body language exhibited, the fact that these were personal experiences and the generic similarities that had characterized the stories. Here our role as participant researchers took over so that we could learn from the children's experiences.

To further give room for the articulation of experiences, what has been formulated by Zeelen (2004) as the creation of conversational space, it was necessary to have an understanding attitude: We could not afford to be judgmental and incriminating, especially towards the children who were telling their horrific stories. This made them feel at ease and cultivated some trust in us. Eventually they could trust us with a piece of their extremely stressful experiences in captivity.

The PhD researcher, having lived in this part of northern Uganda, was able to speak and understand some Luo, the local language in that area. At the same time, she was aware of her need to know what reintegration practices mean in this society in the eyes of war-affected children, their family members, care givers and other community members (subjects and co-inquirers). Clearly, this scenario demanded a relationship of trust, openness and mutual agreement in both procedure and content. This relationship was experienced by the researchers as different from the 'rapport' building in qualitative research. It was more a mix of empathy, sympathy and an expression of 'being' with and among the participants. Thus, the other participants in this research were consulted on times for appointments, if they were comfortable or uncomfortable with the questions they were being asked and if they wanted to remain anonymous.

Also involving research assistants who spoke Acholi and Lango, the local languages, created conversational space. It was almost impossible to imagine those children telling their story entirely in English—most experiences needed to be recounted in the first language to bring them to life. It is generally agreed that experiences are best communicated in the first language. Some of the formerly abducted children who are now in secondary schools attempted to tell their stories in English but at the most touching parts they always reverted to Luo. The use of language in this way was not just a medium of transmission of facts but an articulation of the most intimate experiences of the children.

We also had to be patient and empathetic especially when participants broke down as they recalled and recounted their experiences. This was the most difficult part. We were tempted to stop the conversation at these moments but then we knew it was better to finish the story both for the purpose of the research and for 'the healing' process to take place—it was better to speak out than bottle-up. There was always some visible relief and a smile at the end of the conversation—an unintended result of this action research.

Participation

As we have shown, practical participation was achieved through involvement of individual war affected children who told their stories of abduction, experience in captivity and return home. In addition, active participation in knowledge creation was fostered through the focus group discussions that were held with various groups including elders, teachers in schools, school-going formerly abducted children and non-abducted children in schools. All these different participation groups contributed their knowledge and experience of

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abduction, captivity and reintegration practices either as first-hand or secondary experience.

Feedback team

Another critical group of participants is the *feedback team.* This team is a group of people that were asked, from the beginning, to be a part of the process of this research project. The team is composed of three research assistants who all have other duties in society and are thus knowledgeable and have experience of the conflict. One of them is a Gulu District Assistant Chief Administrative Officer, who is also the Chairman of the District Committee of Disaster Preparedness, in charge of coordinating all humanitarian activities in the district and thus is highly experienced in reintegration practices. Apart from these professional positions the team members are all Acholi who understand especially the cultural aspects of reintegration. The idea behind their participation is that this being an action research, there was a need to have a team that would be available for assessing and guiding the research activities, affirming or challenging our interpretations and suggesting areas for deeper queries. Several meetings were organized with all (or a majority) members but all of them were individually consulted on several occasions. The feedback team crosschecked what had been recorded and confirmed that the data were faithfully presented, thus they became part of the meaning making process. They also identified gaps and weaknesses in the research that were filled in the subsequent fieldwork rounds—bringing out the cyclical properties of action research.

The various classes of participants described above again engaged in what we call 'indirect' participation. Through their practical participation, revelations and sharing, the participants directed the research process and the process took a life of its own. On the basis of the comments and information the researchers made decisions on the direction the research should take in the following phase(s). For instance, originally the researcher had not thought of the participation and experience of school-going, formerly abducted children in the school setting. Another angle that had not been considered was to include teachers and non-abducted, school children in the process. Initial contact with the elders, the formerly abducted children, institutions and the members of the feedback team pointed towards education and the school as part of the reintegration system. Steps were then taken to carry out research along that line.

This indirect participation also introduces the twin ideas of democracy and power in the research process. It means decisions in the process of knowledge-creation were not arbitrarily made by the researchers but were influenced by the ideas of the participants. It also demonstrates the power participants had over the research process.

In this arrangement, the researchers as outsiders had the role and responsibility of implementing or taking into account the implicit and explicit suggestions made to feed into the design of the research. The researchers also had the responsibility of critical reflection on the research issues and process, enough to own the research and direct it on a conceptual level. It is also their responsibility to account to the academic community.

Data collection—multiple methods and techniques of social research

As in any other type of social science research, in this inquiry various qualitative data collection methods were used. In-depth interviews were carried out mainly with parents

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and or guardians of formerly abducted children to find out how they were interacting with the family and the community at large. In-depth interviews were preferred to questionnaires because of their ability to evoke unexpected information through probing.

Focus group discussions were on the other hand conducted with several categories of participants, such as elders in various camps; teachers in various schools, formerly abducted children in the school setting and non-abducted school children. In order to corroborate findings using the interviews and focus group discussions, episodic case histories were also used to record the experiences of individual war affected children. A documentary of the conflict condition, some episodic case histories and some of the social reintegration activities have been made as evidence and an illustration of what was happening.

It was particularly interesting to observe the children in the settings and environment in which they were found. Various traits such as alertness, depression and withdrawal were observed. Other forms of non-verbal communication were also noted. Apart from these explicit data collection methods, perception and experience of the PhD researcher, as one who had been in the situation and experienced episodes of the conflict, were important tools. Unsaid communication was interpreted especially in situations where the children explained their experience circumstantially, for instance, most children would not say that they were trained as soldiers but would talk of being given a 'gun and a gumboot'. From other interviews it is known that only those who had been trained were qualified to be given guns and gumboots. Newly abducted children commonly referred to as recruits among the LRA were not given guns; neither did they qualify to put on gumboots even for the purpose of protecting their feet from the overgrown grass through which they constantly walked.

The use of several methods and techniques helped in filling in the gaps for further research and complimented each other as a way of validating the information and knowledge obtained in the theory of social reintegration. All together 255 people participated in this research. There were 19 focus-group discussions with elders in different refugee camps and teachers from different primary and secondary schools. More focus group discussions were conducted with the staff of organizations such as Gusco, KICWA and Concerned Parents Association. In addition, 27 life histories of the formerly abducted children were recorded to understand their experience from the moment of abduction up to the point we interacted with them for the purpose of this research. Interviews were also held with their parents. Finally, the empirical activities ended with a workshop. In this workshop tentative research findings were presented and strategies for reintegration discussed with several stakeholders such as the displaced youth, parents, teachers, NGO workers and the elderly from the communities.[3]

The involvement of institutions as a means for action research

The involvement of institutions as major actors in this research was invaluable. The social and political setting during which the fieldwork was done was very fluid. The whole population in the region was mobile. For example, one could meet a child in a reception centre, thereafter the centre would reunite the child with his or her family but from that point understanding the whereabouts of the child would be difficult. The family could move to another camp, the child could go and live with another relative or in the later stages

[3]Details of the action scripts generated from this workshop are indicated in the PhD report and will be published in future.

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when government introduced the idea of satellite camps, people would try to move to the camps nearest to their original village. In such situations it was not possible to keep the interviewed formerly abducted children (and their parents/family) as part of the community to which we could return for verification of data. Given this fluid social situation, institutions were the constant actors that had accumulated some experience of reintegration practices. They had stored the collective experience of the community and could therefore further be consulted if the need arose. Such institutions included the NGOs, Amnesty Commission, the UPDF's Child Protection Unit, schools, and the 'kal kwaro' (the cultural institution of the Acholi chiefdom).

Besides, the significance of institutions is even greater because they had almost taken over the lives of the Acholi people. There were different NGOs dealing with different aspects of their lives. Provision of food was the preserve of the World Food Programme. Others like AVSI concentrated on health issues, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative among others focused on education and War Child Holland specialized in children's play. Thus, in a situation where conflict made a once vibrant society mal-functional, the community became highly 'NGOnized'. The needs of an individual's life were segmented according to what NGOs could offer. This in itself is a phenomenon which needs more reflection. Too much dependency on international organizations will hardly enhance the empowerment of the community.

Then there was the creation of our own 'institution', the feedback team. The experiences and knowledge of the members of this team cut across the formal institutions just enumerated. While people in the institutions were only able to be critical of their particular practices, the feedback team had the ability and independence to be critical of the reintegration practices of the various institutions and the whole research process.

Issues of validity

As this research process and methodology evolved, issues of validity were in-built. Four aspects of the process can be noted here. First a range of data collection methods such as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were one way of ensuring validity. Focus group discussions for instance allowed for on-the-spot cross checking of information together with the possibility of probing in in-depth interviews, the degree of obtaining reasonably valid information was high.

Second, the continuous dialogue (a web of dialogues or triangulation) used ensured validity. The cycles of reflection and action in the research process made it possible to purge information that was either weak or stood out as less reliable. It is important to note that triangulation happened at various levels. At one level there was the *methodological triangulation* where life histories, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and the feedback group discussions were used to collect and verify data. At another level there was also *participant triangulation* where various participants as already indicated were part of the study and finally there was *institutional triangulation* where different institutions were used to gather information on the reintegration practices used in northern Uganda.

The third way that addressed the concerns about validity involved the meaning making process. Again the researcher's reflections were always subjected to the scrutiny of the feedback team. This was also supported by other literature that has highlighted similar concerns. Finally, of importance here is the last fieldwork in the form of a workshop involving practitioners from the institutions that cared for the returned children, elders and

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formerly abducted children themselves. The workshop was organized to validate the findings and also to be used as a forum for making suggestions to improve reintegration practices for war-affected children. The suggestions made would then become action scripts for reintegration.

Data-analysis—reflection (meaning making) and creation of knowledge

The data collected during this action research were mostly tape-recorded, which is typical of qualitative approaches. The researchers had an open attitude towards the transcribed data i.e. meaning making was approached inductively based on the grounded theory through the development of codes and abstract themes from the transcribed data along Flick's (1998) guidelines and with the help of the computer data analysis package Atlas/ti. Codes were developed from the transcribed empirical text material. It is to be noted that coding is normally a difficult, tedious and slow exercise. Our case was helped by the fact that we had been close to the transcribed data for a long time by reading the transcripts over and over, before embarking on the coding process. In addition we had used some of the transcripts for an initial analysis of data collected at specific moments in order to produce drafts in preparation for further data collection. This initial analysis based on themes further helped to familiarize us with the texts.

At a more abstract level families were developed from the codes. In total 115 codes and 14 families were developed. At the next level the families became the themes upon which the final report was based. Writing however, was enriched by field notes, field experience and reflection. Themes were then networked to look for patterns and develop middle level theories of experiences of war and reintegration practices in northern Uganda.

There were also the 'evaluation of the day' sessions with the research assistants which was really a way of trying to understand the events and especially the field discussions of the day. We found these to be some of the key moments when we negotiated meaning of expressions used, attitudes we observed and a deeper reflection on some of the content of the stories told. The 'evaluation of the day' sessions were practically the beginnings of deeper reflection and analysis of the data we collected.

In addition to this, drafts of the initial analysis of data collected, were discussed with and probed by PhD supervisors and the feedback team. This probing was an important part of the meaning making process because more explanation was required for some of the ideas in the draft, causing meanings to become clearer to us.

CHALLENGES OF USING ACTION RESEARCH APPROACHES IN RESEARCHING REINTEGRATION OF FORMERLY ABDUCTED CHILDREN

So far we have discussed the main research experiences concerning issues of participation, the creation of conversational space, power and validity. Using action research specifically in the context of a post-war situation brings with it the following challenges and contradictions.

Field hiccups

We encountered difficulties in the field in several areas. The first is about the difficulties of organizing and actually meeting the respondents, which normally took a long time. Having

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gone through the district authorities, the next step was to make appointments with the Local Council officials to ask them for permission to meet the respondents. This also regularly took a long time. After this, appointments were made with the Local Council officials to ask their permission to do research in their community. The appointments with the Local Council officials were also aimed at requesting them to make appointments with the needed respondents. This process of appointments was usually long and time consuming. It was exacerbated by the fact that sometimes the appointments were not honoured.

The second field hiccup was related to children in focus group discussions. Although originally focus group discussions were planned with formerly abducted children and non-abducted children in schools, the reality was that we could not sustain a group discussion with the children. Our discussions with them ended up being more or less group interviews because the children could not react communicatively enough to experiences and ideas in a group. It was, however, easier for children to express themselves while telling their episodic histories as these were conducted individually in private.

The reality and existence of power relations and power centres

The field experience exposes the limitations of action research in complex emergency situations where people know what they want but are hampered by human insecurity, and a disabling environment. At the time of the research in northern Uganda, the power to change living conditions, and therefore reintegration, was the responsibility of (or hampered by) (a) the government that created the IDP camps, (b) international and local NGOs that provided basic necessities and (c) the rebels who were a source of constant fear. Parents wanted to have control over their children and teach them traditional community values of being responsive and responsible—issues of community citizenship—but this was practically impossible in a displaced peoples' camp where each family was almost anonymous and institutions were taking over the roles of parents; this becomes clear in the following quote:

> Many of the parents would wish to receive their children with lots of feasting but there is fear that there may be the agents of the rebels here who may report that we are rejoicing over the return of a child from the bush. Later on they may come back and cause havoc. There is fear, otherwise what can stop us from feasting when we have got our child back alive. (From a focus group discussion)

Ethics in action research in a complex emergency

The research experience leads to challenging ethical questions such as 'buying information'. Is it more ethical to abide by 'research rules' or to promote human coexistence? In practical terms, is one 'allowed' to give a token to a visibly hungry child who has narrated his or her harrowing experience in captivity?

Or should we just walk away in the name of research ethics from the child who is a participant but during the interview said they have been sent away from school for lack of school uniform or did not go to school at all because they did not have exercise books to write in? How removed should one be in the name of objectivity from a 15 year old who just sobbingly retold the story of how she was forced to kill her own father? Having no direct answers to these questions, it felt more ethical to go with the heart and give tokens to the participants; this was not considered to be 'buying' information (after all this was always

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done after the discussions) but to share with them in the moment of need. It was considered more ethical to buy the needed exercise books or give some little money to the mother to go buy some food for the hungry family. Thus, to the researchers, ethics was about sharing. . .or is it celebrating our common humanity in a conflict situation?

These questions show that the experiences of the victims are so personal and intricate—and sometimes intimate—that a researcher, with what Eikeland (2006, p. 37) calls a 'condescending ethics' approach, may not succeed in understanding these ethical issues.

The need for a dependable physical space

We use the term dependable physical space to imply the personal, social and economic stability of the environment, which should enable people to make social changes in their life situations. A dependable physical space is the positive sum total of the personal, social and economic conditions of an individual or a group of people. In a conflict ridden society like that of northern Uganda, the personal, social, and economic environment is shattered and cannot sustain aspirations. If action research is to be effective in practice, there is need for such a safe space, i.e. an environment that enables people to rely on certain things and to trust. Life changing actions are normally only possible if actors have a physical space unlike in emergency situations where 'everything' can happen.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper shows the use of two theoretical approaches, i.e. collaborative inquiry based on experience (Bray et al., 2000) of the research subjects and participatory approaches based on opportunities to viably participate and practice (Boog et al., 2001 Boog, Coenen, Keune, 2001; Boog, 2003) in understanding the reintegration of formerly abducted children. The approach emphasizing experience was helpful in exploring the children's encounter with the LRA and the experiences related to reintegration in northern Uganda. The abduction and captivity narratives, the relationships between formerly abducted children and other members of the community have been viewed using the experience perspective of action research. The experience perspective guided the researchers' interactions in the field; in other words the researchers tried to be conscious of the personal experiences with respondents and situations. This was necessary because of the delicate nature of the issues under research.

On the other hand, the participatory approach of Boog et al. (2001) is important for discovering and generating knowledge of reintegration practices by different actors on the basis of reciprocal adequacy. Moreover, the approach helped to create democratic procedures and structures to make the research accessible for stakeholders. The approach is also important for developing action scripts to improve intervention programmes and practices for reintegration. In the last empirical phase of the research, during focus groups and a workshop, more emphasis was put on the interaction with several stakeholders to deal with how reintegration programmes could be improved, including the practices in the community. Thus we found the general flexibility of action research and its emphasis on participation very useful in addressing the difficulties of doing research in a fluid and unpredictable conflict condition

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