

Tackling sensitive and controversial topics in social research—sensitivity of the field

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses issues concerning sensitive topics in diverse social research, primarily connected with sensitive field research. The authors first analyse issues concerning sensitive topics and then move on to discuss examples of socially sensitive research in difficult research-related situations and areas. They also focus on the complex situation of a social researcher conducting research in sensitive, socially, culturally and politically diverse contexts, including the context of education.

KEYWORDS: sensitive topics, sensitive social research, sensitivity of the field, education

AROUND SENSITIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Contemporary societies are (over)loaded with topics that are sensitive or controversial (Hilário & Augusto 2020); they have become inherent to the social world. These topics include many areas related to both the past and present, and affecting the future lives of modern generations. Some have left their mark on hundreds of thousands of lives, or, as in the case of colonisation and racism in social research (Markowska-Manista 2018), Islamophobia (Górak-Sosnowska 2014), gender (Odrowąż-Coates 2015a), also national identity, human rights, or basic income, they indicate today's difficult dimensions and areas of people's lives (Baranowski 2021). Some of them are heated on social media and fiercely discussed online; others get more physical and turn into social movements and other social actions aimed at showing discontent

or resistance. There are also those which turn political or violent and lead to severe consequences. Many other sensitive topics remain unspoken in the fragile context (Isaqzadeh, Gulzar, & Shapiro 2020), yet they are still valid and might pop up someday in the future. Others are conditioned by processes that are gaining momentum, such as humanitarian crises, migration crises and related value crises (Bhabha 2018).

Tackling a controversial or sensitive topic remains a challenge (Ndemanu & Davis 2019), especially if both (or more) sides are actively engaged in the dispute or conflict. Worldview conflicts and social polarization have become dominant features of many contemporary societies. There is probably no society in the world today in which there would not be disputes about the superiority of one truth over another that would attempt to increase or give rights to one group and decrease or take them away from another. The dividing lines that polarize societies and social groups run through political views, beliefs, loyalty to traditional values, ideals, and conspiracy theories that for some are true and justified while for others are at odds with scientific, realistic thinking about the world. Many of these misunderstandings, antagonisms, and conflicts are caused by a socially, politically, or culturally sensitive topic, issue, or phenomenon.

By sensitive, we mean a broader term than ‘controversial’, which refers to the probability of provoking public discussion or arguments. ‘Sensitive’ is an emotion-loaded term that is significant for an individual or a group for personal, political, or social reasons and—if raised—has the potential to cause negative feelings or provoke a conflict. In other words, ‘sensitive’ is, for us, a slightly broader term than ‘controversial’ as it also includes the individual level.

Depending on the context and historical issues (Nichol 2017), some sensitive and controversial topics will be strictly connected with taboos. A taboo is a cultural phenomenon encompassing everything that is socially, culturally and sometimes legally (state legislation, customary law) banned. A taboo refers thus to undiscussable topics (it is improper to talk about them) and unacceptable behaviour. Sometimes a taboo prohibits a particular cultural or social group from speaking, writing about and noticing matters contained within this taboo, hence researchers’ role to gain insight into it based on scholarly exploration and ethical approach (Luce 2019).

SENSITIVE TOPICS, SENSITIVE RESEARCH AND DIFFICULT RESEARCH-RELATED SITUATIONS AND AREAS

Sensitive and controversial topics describe situations that may be encountered while conducting research in culturally, socially, and politically diverse contexts of respondents’ lives and accompanying phenomena. It is research-oriented towards learning about the (real and virtual) world through interaction with other people relating to their social, educational, and upbringing environments. These are also topics accompanying practices in the process of education and upbringing in globalizing, differentiating and polarising societies. They are often a challenge for educators, teachers and academic teachers responsible for transferring knowledge, shaping skills and competencies of new generations. These issues also concern researchers.

Sensitive topics include aspects related to time, space, places, and processes they

are directly or indirectly connected with. Sensitive topics also mean the field where the educator or researcher falls into a peculiar system of manipulation or internal games, often beyond their will and consciousness (Kuźma 2013). These may be places, events and situations related to various kinds of taboos, conflicts, tensions and world-view differences.

These may be situations connected with everyday interactions of school and university teaching on sensitive issues in difficult community contexts or the actions of minority groups that are discriminated against, marginalised, or economically exploited in a chain of global economic and political relationships.

All of these bring about theoretical, methodological and ethical dilemmas. They include dilemmas concerning *how to study (in social sciences) and how to present such topics (in education)*? These are also dilemmas concerning the search for answers to the questions: how to define the boundaries when researching and discussing sensitive topics in order to preserve a sense of safety for oneself and the participants of the research or educational process? Finally, how to reformulate and operationalise key definitions related to the understanding of many contemporary social and cultural phenomena and how to decolonise knowledge that will facilitate the understanding of sensitive topics in the contemporary world?

Implementing sensitive topics in education, discussing and analysing them in diverse societies and settings can be challenging and fraught with many ethical dilemmas and social, political or cultural complications (Evans et al. 2000). At the same time, researchers who work in education and childhood studies have the opportunity to articulate important socially sensitive and controversial topics that affect the youngest citizens of the global village—diverse groups of children and adolescents.

Usually, researchers, particularly social scientists, remain hidden to their readers; they do not often confess their difficult experiences encountered in the course of doing research. One may get the impression that exhibitionism aimed at showing difficult research situations and problems experienced by the researcher is inappropriate in some disciplines.

The sensitive topics that social researchers study are increasingly intertwined with their own sensitive experiences in the research process. This applies, for example, to research in refugee centres, in detention or prison isolation, research with children who have experienced sexual abuse, genocide survivors and persecuted or marginalised ethnic minority groups. Often, behind the veil of silence and the pages of academic descriptions, hidden are the dilemmas of the researchers, their difficult experiences, unexpected research situations (the outbreak of conflict, physical assault, being a 'confidant' of difficult experiences told by research participants in armed conflict zones, being a witness to violence), traumas that affected their further professional paths and, to a large extent, their personal lives as well (Markowska-Manista 2017). Rarely does reading books and texts (as opposed to diaries and field diaries) by social scientists, including field researchers, makes us reflect on the cost of what they experience in the field. It is not just about illness, anxiety and physical risks, e.g. when research is conducted in conflict zones, humanitarian crisis areas or war zones. It is also rare that we read about the cost of research on the part of the researched. What we mean is the

veil of silence shrouding for example the infamous practices of researchers' involvement in collaboration with the military/ intelligence (Tomforde 2011), which should be seen as unethical and therefore abusive towards research participants in the field of social research (Kowalski 2015).

Looking at examples of social research from the last decade, it is important to note that there is widespread acceptance that engaging 'vulnerable groups' in research and researching 'vulnerable groups' is important for understanding their situation, lives, development, experiences or implementations proposed from the perspective of majority societies and Western (privileged) researchers. This sensitivity is closely linked to the contexts of the lives and experiences of vulnerable groups, minorities, communities (Powell et al. 2018). However, considerable caution needs to be exercised (it relates to the safety of the researcher and respondents) when initiating and participating in social research on 'sensitive' and controversial issues. This requires that researchers follow ethical standards and become familiar with the socio-cultural context, and at the same time apply an approach that allows for a multi-faceted understanding of what a sensitive or controversial topic is (for both the researcher and respondents). Such an approach to understanding sensitivity allows the researcher to mitigate or avoid potential problems in the research process and to conduct ethical research with sensitive groups (Cronin-Furman & Lake 2018). Sensitive topic research does not close the list of issues related to social research in difficult contexts. Such research is usually socially sensitive and has multiple definitions in the sciences. One fairly general classical definition indicates that it involves "studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research" (Sieber & Stanley 1988: 49). All socially sensitive research in the field has some risks and usually has some consequences for the researcher, the respondents, the environment. We will notice these aspects, for example, in the research of cultural and social anthropologists, cross-cultural and clinical psychologists, educators and sociologists working on critical studies of childhood and children's rights (Liebel 2020) or historians working on genocide studies, the Holocaust and difficult memory.

SENSITIVITY OF THE FIELD

Let us now look at the category of the field, which is often a sensitive research context. Social research conducted in an unfamiliar field may positively or negatively influence the researcher and contribute to the verification of his/her understanding of a sensitive topic. The field (new place, space) is associated with a number of difficulties, problems and burdens that usually accompany social research away from the desk. For example, research in a place that is alien to the researcher (a city district, an island, a refugee camp, slums, a correctional institution) brings with it the awareness that we also unintentionally change the experience of the researched, that we collect, analyse and describe situations and experiences of the researched which may turn out to be psychologically very demanding and sometimes change our perception and behaviour.

Not every social researcher is likely to have psychological support during or after

carrying out research in so-called sensitive contexts. Not everyone is also aware of the burden resulting from long-term work with a sensitive topic (humans and massacres, humans and death, incurable diseases, hospice care, humans and psychological and physical violence including sexual abuse, humans and violation of their rights, etc.).

Exploring sensitive topics in the social sciences in the field means operating in a different dimension of everyday experiences than those we know. As Hastrup wrote “field research means living in another world and learning about this world in a process of (second) enculturation, i.e. a process of unconscious incorporation of local knowledge based on experience” (Hastrup 1998: 6). This is nothing else than constant participant observation, taking note of the surrounding reality, constructing a familiar-foreign social reality and asymmetrically balancing between the known and the unknown, the normative and the taboo. Staying and working in the field sharpens perception and predisposes to a thorough observation of the construction by researchers of images and identities of people treated in the categories of ‘Others’, ‘Aliens’, sometimes still ‘Exotic’.

The experience of the field allows us to pose new questions about the ethics of sensitive research in a sensitive area in the context of using images of children and adults who are often unaware of the fact that they are used to ‘embellish’ European academic sources (Markowska-Manista 2019). Another aspect related to ethics concerns research on intimate behaviours that are culturally tabooed, disparaging or incriminating to people (Renzetti & Raymond 1993).

Patric Declerck carried out such research for 15 years in the tabooed world of Parisians in a crisis of homelessness. In a long-term research process, the researcher found a suitable narrative to talk about the research and a method through which he respectfully described the investigated ‘lunatics of exclusion’. In his publication, he defined his attitude as “the ridiculous relativism of the conservative attitude of the intervening observer” (Declerck 2004: 532).

Sensitive research in a sensitive context was conducted by children’s rights activist and academic researcher Judith Ennew. She postulated that ethics in research with a vulnerable group such as children is paramount, and that the planning of research activities should take place around ethics (Morrow 2014). In carrying out research in South-East Asia, the scholar emphasized the right to be properly researched that children from any vulnerable group are entitled to, i.e. children living on the streets, children experiencing physical and emotional abuse, children experiencing armed conflict. She advocated that social researchers in their research and through their research should protect children, not harm children, should not put children at risk, should not use their position to persuade a child to participate in research (Ennew, Beazley, Bessell & Waterson 2009).

Other noteworthy research is an ethnographic study by Ethel V. Kosmiński (2020) on the life of Japanese and Japanese Brazilian Migrants. The author analyses the trajectories of migration processes, paying particular attention to the lives of this population as migrants, lives as returning migrants and their lives as Brazilian and Japanese citizens. The scholar collected stories of the migration of families of Japanese workers to Brazil and their adaptation to new conditions, describing both the positive aspects of

the lives of several generations of migrants, and the difficulties they experienced, such as victimisation. Kosmiński carried out a study of the everyday life of a vulnerable group - migrants with their difficult experiences (Brazilian nationalism in the 1930s, persecution of ethnic communities in 1930-1940s Brazil) and described the formation of the socio-cultural and geographical identity of this group.

A sensitive topic and a sensitive context accompanied Anna Odrowąż-Coates' two-year research conducted in Saudi Arabia. As a female researcher, the author had the possibility to penetrate the socio-cultural spaces of Saudi women (Odrowąż-Coates 2015b). Hence, her research (embedded in the ethnographic stream) focused on the situation of women, revealing the world of social, family and personal/intimate life of Saudi women—a world which is extremely complex and often tabooed in the Western world. The author disenchant the stereotypically perceived categories of the gendered socio-cultural structure by drawing attention to the following sensitive topics: the female body and its associated rituals and customs, the control of sexuality, emotions and erotic impulses, and gender apartheid.

Being a social researcher investigating sensitive topics in a sensitive field is also walking an untrodden path. Not all social researchers have sufficient experience, support, resources that they could use effectively in conducting sensitive research. This is often related to the difficult research and non-research situations they experience. These include, for example, incomplete knowledge of topography and context, uncertainty about moving into unfamiliar territory, clashes with the difficult reality in which the researcher operates and the problematic situations in which the research subjects exist, crossing boundaries in experiencing difficulties, reading the reality of the research site from multiple perspectives, and the inability to predict the course of events. Another difficulty may be confronting stereotypes about the subjects and the problems of their places of life, the clash of colonial and postcolonial discourses in research practice, and the experience of unequal power relations and gender. Importantly, in some fieldwork sites, the researcher becomes categorised, pigeonholed, inscribed into local categories of thinking and perceiving strangers even before arrival. They may become a symbol of a better world, they may resemble colonial oppressors, they may be associated with superiority, power, hierarchy and social inequality.

SENSITIVE TOPICS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY CHILDHOOD STUDIES AND EDUCATION

This collection of articles dealing primarily with sensitive and controversial topics, and topics that may be both controversial and sensitive depending on context as well as social and political reception, provides a special space for scholarly exploration in the fields of social research focusing on childhood studies (Powell et al. 2018), interdisciplinary research concerning children's rights (Budde & Markowska-Manista 2020) and education (Darvin 2015). Through the prism of their diverse experiences and research interests, the authors take different approaches to present research on sensitive and controversial topics from a qualitative perspective. At the same time, the authors turn our attention to new topics and conditions of research in the field

of contemporary interdisciplinary social studies, in which the study of childhood and children's rights, as well as educational studies, are crucial for the development and civic preparation of young generations for life in polarised societies of the 21st century.

In this special issue, we present case studies at the local, national and international level that focus on a sensitive or controversial topic connected with childhood and education and show how, in a given society, educational setting or field of social research, relevant stakeholders have dealt with it—i.e., what lessons they have learned. The authors critically engage with children's and young people's issues in school and out-of-school settings. Most of them are empirical studies that use qualitative and discursive methodologies in diverse social, political and cultural contexts.

The first article brings us to the more troubled and difficult dimension of contemporary childhood studies. Korinna McRoberts tackles a problematic topic, a taboo—childhood sexual abuse (CSA). She analyses how CSA is framed and perceived in the mainstream society by triangulating CSA as taboo, stigma, a result and the impact on childhood within the Western (primarily Anglo-Saxon) context.

In the second article, "The Procedural and Constructivist Concept of Good Citizenship and Civic Identity in the Czech Educational Framework", Jan Květina directs the readers' attention to the issues of the Czech educational system after 1989. The author analyses its main shortcomings, dilemmas and challenges related to the concept of civic education and teaching democracy. He draws attention to the need to find a pluralistic, constructivist and procedural approach that would enrich the traditional concepts of social science education in the Czech Republic.

The author of the next article, Elo Süld, critically engages with multicultural learning strategies in Estonian education while addressing Islam and tackling Islamophobia. Considering the secular character of Estonian society, she concludes that religion in general, and Islam in particular, occupy only a marginal position.

The last two articles analyse children's rights issues and are connected with sensitive childhoods issues. Rajaa Sabbagh discusses how democratic movements impact children's understanding of their rights. Taking the case of Lebanon, she implies that democratic movements are a significant factor that supports children's understanding of their rights, especially such rights as freedom of expression, equality or social security.

The last article in this issue covers the complex topic of death and how it is presented in the literature for children focusing on diverse childhood discourses. Sandra Kwaśniewska-Pasza analysed several pieces of children's literature to find the dominant patterns and narratives of death. In her opinion, children can better deal with this challenging topic if their subjectivity is respected and their voices heard.

In all of the articles briefly presented above and their respective research areas, it is not only the topic that is 'sensitive' or 'controversial', but also the way in which it is understood and confronted by the researcher through the lens of the reader's experience of being part of his or her own social, educational, political, and cultural context. The themes raised by the researchers have great transformative potential for changing thinking and rethinking about research in the field of childhood and children's rights studies and the importance of decolonization of sensitive and controversial topics in

school education practice and theories.

Our Special Issue also includes a book review on the situation of children with developmental dysfunctions written by Beata Rajter—another sensitive topic in many societies.

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An ongoing project, *Sensiclass: Tackling Sensitive Topics in a Classroom* (Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education, project number 2019-1-EE01-KA203-051690), has inspired the Special Issue. The project is led by the University of Tartu (Estonia) with partners from the Central European University (Hungary/Austria), University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic), and SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland)—four higher education institutions located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The project aims to prepare educational materials and strategies for teaching sensitive topics in the CEE context. The Special Issue includes articles written by the team members and authors from other institutions and countries in response to a call for papers. It only indicates that tackling and researching sensitive topics is a globally important issue.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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