Navigating Complex Research Terrains

The Experiences of Social Researchers in the Global South

Edited by
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Navigating Epistemic Borders: Lived Experiences of Global South Researchers in Knowledge Production

Oliver Mutanga

Introduction

Global research thrives on a plethora of methodologies, yet persistent inequities continue to marginalise Global South perspectives. Despite the growing presence of these researchers in global academia, as noted by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), their contributions are often limited by systemic barriers and epistemic silencing. This chapter focuses on the journeys of Global South researchers across continents, revealing various challenges they face, including training and mentorship, securing research approvals, conducting fieldwork in remote areas, and navigating the complexities of funding and dissemination.

Central to our discussion is the concept of decoloniality, which challenges the dominance of Western research frameworks and advocates

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for inclusive and context-sensitive methodologies. This endeavour necessitates reconciling indigenous knowledge systems with the institutional expectations of the Global North, a negotiation fraught with complexities but rich with potential for transformative change.

As the introductory chapter, this contribution sets the foundation for a series of discussions that explore cross-cultural collaborations, the integration of indigenous methodologies, and the practical realities of migrant researchers among others. Each chapter in this volume builds upon the themes introduced here, crafted by a diverse group of scholars who bring unique insights into the challenges and innovations within their respective fields.

This book aims not only to document these experiences but also to inspire transformative practices that recognise and value diverse epistemologies, ultimately reimagining the role of Global South researchers in global academia. As we navigate this complex landscape, this introduction lays the groundwork for a nuanced exploration of Global South researchers' agency and systemic constraints, highlighting how these researchers are reshaping the boundaries of global knowledge production.

Overview of the Chapters

This edited collection unfolds as a deliberately sequenced journey that mirrors the research life cycle of Global South scholars, moving from epistemic positioning, through the everyday practice of inquiry, to a collective call for structural reform. This chapter situates readers in the intellectual borderlands where Global South researchers constantly negotiate legitimacy, funding and field access. By sketching these fault-lines, the chapter offers readers a conceptual compass centred on decoloniality and epistemic justice, that orients every subsequent contribution. Chapters 2 and 3 shift from theory to the granular textures of early-career life. Oliver Gore's autoethnography across Zimbabwe and South Africa exposes how austerity, donor dependence and brain-drain curtail scholarly imagination, yet also explores strategies of managing in these contexts. Tandem to this, Sarah Kisanga and Cresencia Masawe's collaborative narrative of 'becoming' women researchers in Tanzania demonstrates how gendered moral economies within universities are both obstacle and resource, compelling creative coalitions that re-inscribe women as epistemic agents. Together they establish the book's first thematic thread: precarity as praxis rather than pathology.

In Chapter 4, Yuqi Lin and Saito Eisuke widens the lens to transnational mobility. They interrogate the myth of liberal academic freedom by chronicling the racialised micro-aggressions and visa regimes that trail Global South scholars into Australian lecture theatres. Their account relocates 'freedom' from institutional charters to the daily politics of recognition. The collection then pivots to methodology. In Chapter 5, Sourav Mukhopadhyay and Emmanuel Moswela dissect power and positionality in disability research with Setswana's principle of *Botho*, modelling a shift from researching *on* to researching *with* marginalised communities. Their reflexive dialogue shows participatory practice as a decolonial ethic in action.

Chapters 6 and 7 form a Pacific dialogue on language and indigeneity. In Chapter 6, Yu-Chieh Wu's study of a Taiwanese Indigenous student reveals how intercultural 'competence' discourses can re-inscribe colonial hierarchies when they neglect structural prejudice, foregrounding the politics of whose language is deemed scholarly. Anawaite Matadradra-Dolavale follows in Chapter 7 with a Fijian *talanoa* that operationalises the Vanua Research Framework; by privileging silence, reciprocity and community consent she demonstrates Indigenous analytics capable of unsettling extractive norms. Together these chapters braid the book's second thread: methodological pluriversality.

Chapter 8 returns to scholarly mobility, this time through Rahat Shah's academic journey from Pakistan to Germany. His autoethnography exposes how Global North infrastructures simultaneously enable career acceleration and reproduce epistemic gatekeeping, making visible the emotional and ethical toll exacted by 'successful' migration.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 9) draws the strands tight. Faith Mkwananzi distils cross-cutting motifs, vertical North–South and horizontal intra-South inequalities, the necessity of reciprocal partnerships, and the imperative of resistance over resilience, while proposing a pluriversal research ecology grounded in *Ubuntu* and convivial scholarship.

Together, and in their order of arrangement, these chapters speak to one another as stages in a single narrative: they begin by naming structural exclusions, trace how scholars craft situated methodologies to contest them, and culminate in a manifesto for systemic transformation. The design invites readers not merely to consume disparate case studies but to witness an unfolding dialectic, between constraint and creativity,

local praxis and global politics, that reimagines how knowledge from the Global South can reshape the academy at large.

Reclaiming Knowledge: Epistemic Justice, Decoloniality, and Lived Experiences

In this section, I explore the transformative potential of epistemic justice and decoloniality through the lens of my own experiences as a Global South researcher. These concepts serve as vital tools to challenge the systemic inequities that persist in global knowledge production, advocating for a more inclusive integration of diverse epistemologies.

Despite growing visibility, Global South researchers remain bound by systemic inequities and the silencing of alternative epistemologies. Their lived experiences reflect broader struggles over knowledge production, where dominant paradigms rooted in the Global North marginalise alternative worldviews (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; 2021). Two critical concepts, epistemic justice and decoloniality, serve as analytical tools to interrogate these dynamics and advocate for systemic change. Alongside these, the contested notion of 'experiences' becomes central to rethinking how knowledge is created and valued.

Epistemic justice, as articulated by Fricker (2003), sheds light on the marginalisation of certain knowers and the dismissal of their knowledge systems. This injustice is evident in the dominance of Western paradigms, which frequently position themselves as universal, sidelining the perspectives of Global South researchers (Connell, 2014; Mignolo, 2007). For example, indigenous methodologies and context-sensitive approaches are often dismissed as 'unscientific' within positivist traditions, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges Western epistemologies (Chilisa, 2019). The structural manifestations of this imbalance are pervasive. Global South researchers often encounter barriers such as limited access to funding, journals, and international academic forums (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). These barriers restrict their ability to contribute meaningfully to global knowledge production, perpetuating what Marovah and Mutanga (2024) identify as systemic inequities that undermine the richness of global knowledge ecosystems.

Epistemic justice demands a radical redefinition of what is considered legitimate knowledge. Lived experiences, for instance, offer an alternative epistemic framework that is grounded in specific historical, social, and

cultural contexts (Frechette et al., 2020). By embracing these perspectives, the academic landscape can move towards a more inclusive and equitable paradigm (Fricker, 2013). Yet, addressing epistemic justice is only part of the challenge. The historical and structural roots of these inequities require deeper interrogation through the lens of decoloniality.

If epistemic justice addresses the present, decoloniality critiques the enduring colonial legacies that continue to shape knowledge production. Scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Mignolo (2007) argue that coloniality persists in the privileging of Eurocentric methodologies, which marginalise or erase alternative epistemologies (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 1999). This dominance extends beyond academia, influencing global perceptions of whose knowledge is considered valuable. Decoloniality, however, is not simply a rejection of Western paradigms (Mutanga, 2024). It is an expansion of epistemic spaces to accommodate pluralistic and contextually grounded perspectives. Indigenous approaches to research, for instance, emphasise relationality, community engagement, and spiritual dimensions, concepts that align closely with African philosophies like *Ubuntu*, which prioritise interconnectedness and collective well-being (Metz, 2023). These methodologies directly challenge the objectivist and individualistic focus of many Western frameworks. Despite its promise, the decolonial project is fraught with tensions. Many Global South researchers must navigate the pressures of conforming to Western academic standards for recognition while striving to maintain the integrity of their local epistemologies. This duality often forces researchers into compromises, as they balance survival within the global academic system and authenticity to their contexts (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023).

From a decolonial perspective, experiences are not merely personal but deeply relational, embedded in historical and sociocultural contexts that shape individual and collective identities (Mutanga & the *Tembo Mvura* people, forthcoming). They disrupt universalist assumptions by foregrounding locality and specificity, offering an alternative lens through which to understand knowledge (Barnacle, 2004). For Global South researchers, narrating experiences often involves navigating the risk of trivialisation or commodification within dominant paradigms, which may reduce these narratives to mere data points (Fricker, 2013).

The framing of experiences also raises ethical and methodological questions. How are experiences represented, and whose voices are prioritised in their documentation? The commodification of experiences as 'data' risks stripping them of their relational meaning, reinforcing rather than

dismantling existing epistemic hierarchies (Mutanga & the *Tembo Mvura* people, forthcoming). To address this, experiences must be understood as both individual and collective, situated within a broader web of relational and systemic structures. As this chapter demonstrates, the role of experiences is central to both epistemic justice and decoloniality, challenging the power dynamics that define global knowledge production. The relationship between epistemic justice, decoloniality, and experiences forms the backbone of this book, which seeks to reimagine global knowledge production by elevating the voices of Global South researchers. Through critical reflections and autoethnographic narratives, the chapters challenge the dominance of Western paradigms and advocate for systemic change.

My own experiences as a researcher provide a concrete illustration of the broader theoretical issues discussed, serving as both evidence and motivation for advocating systemic changes within the academy. This exploration highlights the crucial interplay between personal narratives and broader systemic structures, advocating for a reimagined approach to knowledge production that values diverse perspectives and fosters a more inclusive academic environment. The integration of my own experiences not only enriches the discussion but also positions this chapter as a call to action for embracing epistemic justice and decoloniality in research practices.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND REFLEXIVITY IN NAVIGATING RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Autoethnography is not merely a methodological choice; it is a profound assertion of the researcher's presence within the academic narrative, offering a unique blend of personal experience and scholarly analysis. This section explores how autoethnography, combined with a reflexive approach, enriches our understanding of epistemic justice and decoloniality through the lens of lived experiences.

As a method, autoethnography allows researchers to use their personal experiences as primary data, integrating the subjective into the academic discourse. This method challenges traditional notions of objectivity in research, presenting the personal as a crucial element of the epistemic process. By documenting personal narratives, autoethnography not only contributes to epistemic justice by elevating often-silenced voices but also provides nuanced insights into the systemic barriers that shape these experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). Reflecting on the personal aspects of

research invites a critical examination of the researcher's role within the study. This leads us into the concept of reflexivity, an essential complement to autoethnography. Reflexivity requires researchers to critically examine their own positions within the research context, acknowledging how their background, biases, and assumptions influence their interpretations. This self-awareness is vital for navigating the complexities of global research landscapes, particularly when dealing with topics sensitive to cultural, social, and political dynamics. It ensures that the research remains ethically grounded and contextually relevant, fostering a deeper understanding of the subjects studied (Finlay, 2002). The interplay between autoethnography and reflexivity enhances the rigour and depth of the research process. It is through this integration that we can fully explore the complexities of navigating research contexts.

In my research across diverse settings, reflexivity has been crucial in interpreting the impact of institutional norms and cultural values on the research process. For example, navigating research permissions in different cultural contexts often requires a nuanced understanding of local norms and expectations, which can only be achieved through a reflexive approach. Autoethnography complements this by allowing these experiences to be documented and analysed, highlighting the often-overlooked nuances of academic navigation (Chang, 2008). While the integration of autoethnography and reflexivity offers profound insights, it also presents specific challenges that need to be addressed to harness the full potential of these methodologies. The subjective nature of autoethnographic data can be criticised for lacking generalisability. However, when combined with reflexivity, it provides a powerful tool for challenging dominant epistemologies and advocating for a more inclusive approach to knowledge production. This method allows for a richer, more complex understanding of the interplay between the personal and the structural in shaping academic experiences and outputs.

Through the integration of autoethnography and reflexivity, this section not only demonstrates how personal narratives can illuminate broader academic and societal issues but also advocates for a methodological openness that embraces the complexity and subjectivity inherent in all research endeavours. Next, I reflect my research experiences to set a backdrop for understanding the broader discourse on epistemic justice and the decolonisation of education.

Training and Mentorship: Foundations of Epistemic Agency

Training and mentorship play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of researchers, particularly those from the Global South. My early experiences in Zimbabwe, under the mentorship of seasoned researchers at University of Zimbabwe—University of California, San Francisco (UZ-UCSF) collaborative programme, were crucial in developing my methodological and ethical foundations. Initially, my undergraduate education did not fully prepare me for the complexities of research. This mentorship stressed culturally sensitive approaches, such as integrating local customs and values into research practices, a principle encapsulated in the Shona proverb, *Ukama igasva hunozadziswa nekudya* (relationships are incomplete without sharing food). However, high-quality mentorship in the Global South is often unevenly distributed, reflecting broader structural inequities within the global research landscape. Researchers in under-resourced institutions frequently face limited opportunities for mentorship and skill development, perpetuating epistemic hierarchies that favour Global North institutions. Addressing these disparities requires not only investments in local capacity-building, but also systemic changes to global academic networks to foster equitable mentorship opportunities. This change can be championed by Global South researchers who have benefited from excellent training, within the Global South or in other regions.

While training and mentorship provide the foundational skills and knowledge necessary for conducting research, navigating the complexities of research approvals presents its own set of challenges. These challenges are not merely bureaucratic hurdles; they are deeply intertwined with local cultural and political dynamics and epitomise the broader struggle for epistemic justice encountered by researchers from the Global South.

Research Approvals: Negotiating Power and Authority

Securing research permissions in the Global South often involves navigating complex hierarchies of power and authority, which are not inherently negative but are indicative of the nuanced governance structures within these regions. My fieldwork experiences in Zimbabwe serve as a vivid illustration of these challenges. Obtaining approval from provincial authorities and traditional leaders required not only a deep understanding of local political and cultural systems, but also a commitment

to engaging these systems respectfully and effectively. This process underscores the relational nature of research, where permissions are deeply tied to community trust and reciprocity. These negotiations, while essential for gaining access to research sites, also highlight the significant structural constraints faced by Global South researchers. The institutional ethics review processes, often modelled on Western paradigms, frequently fail to account for the specificities of local contexts (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). This mismatch creates additional hurdles for researchers who must navigate these dual demands.

A decolonial approach to research approvals would prioritise the integration of local ethical principles, recognising the legitimacy of community-based decision-making structures (Lambert, 2014). By doing so, it challenges the imposition of universal, often Western-centric, ethical standards and advocates for a more inclusive and respectful approach to conducting research. Such a shift not only aligns with the principles of epistemic justice but also enhances the validity and impact of the research by ensuring it is more contextually grounded and culturally sensitive.

Having navigated the complex interplay of power and authority to secure necessary research approvals, the next stage involves the practical aspects of executing the research itself. This brings us to another pivotal challenge for Global South researchers: conducting fieldwork in remote and often challenging environments. This experience not only tests the logistical capabilities and adaptability of researchers but also underscores the broader systemic issues of resource allocation and infrastructural support in these regions.

Accessing Remote Areas: Research in Challenging Environments

Conducting fieldwork in remote areas of the Global South presents a unique set of challenges that go beyond academic rigour to include logistical difficulties and personal safety concerns. My work with the *Tembo Mvura* community in northern Zimbabwe, which was generously funded by the British Academy, is a testament to the adaptability required in such settings. Navigating treacherous terrain (Fig. 1.1) and managing risks posed by wildlife (Fig. 1.2) were routine parts of this fieldwork, reflecting the broader systemic neglect faced by under-resourced regions. Navigating logistical difficulties during fieldwork

Signs of wildlife hazards in the field: a reminder of the proximity of dangerous wildlife

Fig. 1.1 My vehicle stuck in soft river sand near the Mwazamutanda River

Fig. 1.2 Fresh buffalo dung on a village pathway

These experiences are not just about overcoming physical obstacles; they are deeply indicative of the disparities in infrastructure and support systems available to researchers in these settings. For instance, the road leading to the *Tembo Mvura* community (Fig. 1.3) deteriorates into rough gravel, navigable only by off-road vehicles. Such conditions necessitate a high level of preparedness and flexibility from researchers, aspects often taken for granted in more developed research contexts.Travelling to the research site

Furthermore, these challenges highlight the need for significant investments in local infrastructure to enable researchers to conduct their work safely and effectively. Addressing these disparities is crucial not only for the success of individual research projects but also for the advancement of equitable research practices globally. By investing in infrastructure and supporting systems, we can ensure that research in remote areas is not only feasible but also conducted under conditions that uphold the dignity and safety of both researchers and participants.

After addressing the logistical and environmental challenges of conducting fieldwork in remote areas, the focus shifts to another critical aspect of research: funding. This section explores the financial hurdles

Fig. 1.3 The road leading to the *Tembo Mvura* community deteriorates into rough gravel, navigable only by off-road vehicles

faced by researchers from the Global South, where securing adequate funding is often compounded by systemic inequities and institutional gatekeeping. These issues not only hinder research progress but also reflect broader disparities in the global academic landscape.

Funding: Gatekeeping and Inequities

Global funding mechanisms remain a site of significant inequity, disproportionately favouring institutions and researchers from the Global North. As a researcher who has navigated both the Global South and Global North academic environments, I have personally encountered these inequities. The process of securing competitive grants, such as from the British Academy, is often facilitated by mentorship and institutional support, privileges not universally accessible to many researchers from the Global South. These funding disparities are exacerbated by eligibility criteria and institutional gatekeeping that disproportionately exclude independent researchers and those from underfunded institutions. For instance, the high costs of open-access publishing and limited access to subscription-based journals further restrict the dissemination capabilities of Global South researchers, compounding the challenges they face. Addressing these funding inequities requires a concerted effort to rethink and restructure eligibility criteria and review processes to ensure they are inclusive and equitable. This is essential not only for fostering a more balanced global research landscape, but also for empowering researchers from the Global South to contribute fully to global knowledge ecologies. Investing in local capacity-building and advocating for systemic changes to global funding networks are crucial steps towards rectifying these imbalances. By doing so, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that marginalise Global South researchers and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable academic community. Successfully disseminating their findings presents another critical challenge. This next section explores the barriers these researchers face when attempting to share their work within the global academic community, emphasising the need for systemic changes to enhance the visibility and impact of their contributions.

Dissemination: Bridging Epistemic Divides

Disseminating research findings is a pivotal aspect of the academic process, yet it remains one of the most daunting challenges for Global

South researchers. The dominance of English-language journals and the prioritisation of Western-centric frameworks create significant barriers to publication. These challenges are compounded by the financial and logistical complexities of participating in international conferences, which are crucial for knowledge sharing and networking. In my experience, navigating these barriers has required strategic adaptations. Leveraging virtual platforms and pursuing collaborative opportunities with Global North institutions have been essential in overcoming some of the geographic and financial constraints. However, these strategies, while helpful, highlight the broader systemic inequities that continue to marginalise the voices of Global South researchers in global academic discourses. A commitment to epistemic justice demands that we restructure academic platforms to amplify these marginalised voices and ensure equitable access to knowledge dissemination opportunities. This involves not only changing the policies and practices of publishing and conference participation but also fostering an academic culture that values and promotes a diversity of epistemologies.

Through addressing the challenges of training and mentorship, negotiating research approvals, accessing remote areas, securing funding, and disseminating research findings, we highlight the systemic barriers that Global South researchers face, urging a collective push towards dismantling these impediments to foster a more equitable global research landscape.

With a clear understanding of the challenges laid out, the next section focuses on actionable strategies and solutions. I explore how both individuals and institutions can implement changes that not only address these barriers but also promote a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. These strategies will draw from the rich insights provided by the contributors to this volume, each offering practical approaches rooted in the principles of epistemic justice and decoloniality.

Transforming Knowledge Production Through Resistance and Systemic Change

The findings presented in this chapter underscore the systemic barriers faced by Global South researchers, including inequitable access to training, funding, and dissemination opportunities, as well as the challenges of navigating power dynamics in research approvals and fieldwork. These barriers are not isolated phenomena, but manifestations of deeper

structural inequities rooted in misgovernance at national levels, colonial legacies and epistemic injustices at global level. This discussion explores the implications of these findings, arguing for a shift from resilience to resistance as a framework for engaging with these systemic challenges, and situates these reflections within the broader discourse on decoloniality and epistemic justice. As we explore the systemic obstacles that Global South researchers encounter, it becomes clear that these are not merely operational hurdles but are deeply entrenched in epistemic injustice, reflecting broader historical and structural legacies.

Epistemic Justice and the Struggle for Legitimacy

The systemic exclusion of Global South researchers from dominant academic discourses reflects what Fricker (2003) describes as 'testimonial injustice', where the credibility of certain knowers is systematically undermined due to epistemic hierarchies. This exclusion is evident in the prioritisation of Western-centric methodologies, the undervaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the structural barriers to participation in global academic networks (Connell, 2014).

As illustrated throughout this book, these dynamics are particularly acute in areas like funding and dissemination, where Global North institutions dominate the agenda-setting process. The criteria for grant eligibility, for instance, often require affiliations with 'internationally reputable institutions' or access to current literature and other resources that many Global South researchers lack as 75 percent of scholarly production can only be accessed through a paywall (Boudry et al., 2019), which most Global South institutions cannot afford. This reinforces a cycle of dependency and marginalisation, perpetuating epistemic injustice by limiting the ability of Global South researchers to set their own research priorities or contribute to global knowledge production on equitable terms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It is not Global North higher education institutions that I blame, but rather the administrators and governments in the Global South who believe the benchmark for high standards should be those of 'top' Western universities.

The recognition of these injustices sets the stage for a profound re-evaluation of the academic frameworks we adhere to, urging a shift towards decoloniality that not only questions but actively seeks to dismantle colonial legacies embedded within current research paradigms.

Decoloniality and the Reclaiming of Inclusive Research Paradigms

The enduring coloniality embedded in global academic structures, particularly in the dominance of Western paradigms in research approvals and methodologies, is problematic. As Mignolo (2007) argues, coloniality is not simply a historical phenomenon but an ongoing structure that shapes contemporary knowledge production. This coloniality is evident in the imposition of ethics in the review processes that often fail to account for the specificities of local contexts, as well as in the logistical and infrastructural barriers to accessing remote research sites. Decoloniality, as a theoretical and practical framework, calls for the reclamation of inclusive research paradigms that are rooted in local contexts and responsive to the lived realities of Global South researchers and their communities (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). This involves not only challenging the dominance of Western methodologies but also foregrounding indigenous approaches that emphasise relationality, reciprocity, and collective well-being (Chilisa, 2019). Understanding the colonial foundations of our academic systems invites a necessary paradigm shift from merely coping with systemic challenges, typified by resilience, to actively resisting and remoulding these structures to foster truly inclusive and equitable research environments.

Resilience Versus Resistance: A Paradigm Shift

The concept of resilience has often been invoked to describe how people and institutions navigate systemic challenges, emphasising their ability to adapt and endure in the face of adversity (Barasa et al., 2018). However, as the findings demonstrate, resilience can risk normalising these challenges and perpetuating the very injustices it seeks to overcome (Chandler & Reid, 2016). By framing these systemic inequities as inevitable, the resilience narrative shifts the burden of adaptation onto the individual, obscuring the need for structural change (Walker et al., 2020).

In contrast, resistance offers a more empowering and transformative framework (Gros, 2020). Resistance involves actively challenging and subverting the structures that marginalise Global South researchers, from epistemic hierarchies to institutional gatekeeping. This is evident in strategies such as engaging with alternative methodologies, advocating for equitable funding models, and creating spaces for the dissemination of diverse epistemologies. Resistance, unlike resilience, emphasises

collective agency and action, positioning Global South researchers as active participants in the transformation of global knowledge production. For instance, the findings on dissemination highlight how Global South researchers are leveraging virtual platforms and collaborative networks to amplify their voices and bridge epistemic divides. These strategies not only challenge the dominance of traditional academic platforms but also create opportunities for more inclusive and equitable knowledge-sharing practices.

This call for resistance brings us to consider the personal and collective experiences of Global South researchers not as passive narratives but as active sites of resistance, where the personal and the systemic intersect to challenge and potentially transform entrenched academic hierarchies.

Experiences as Sites of Resistance

Lived experiences are not mere anecdotes but powerful sites of resistance, disrupting dominant narratives and epistemic hierarchies. As discussed earlier, experiences are not merely personal but deeply relational, embedded in broader social and epistemic structures. By foregrounding these experiences, Global South researchers can disrupt dominant narratives and challenge the epistemic hierarchies that marginalise their perspectives (Chilisa, 2019). However, the commodification of experiences as 'data' within academic discourses risks stripping them of their relational and contextual meaning, reinforcing rather than dismantling epistemic hierarchies (Fricker, 2013). To counter this, it is essential to approach experiences not as isolated anecdotes but as collective and contextualised forms of knowledge that challenge dominant paradigms and advocate for systemic change. By embracing these lived experiences as fundamental to our understanding and actions, we pave the way towards a more just and inclusive academic landscape, where diverse perspectives are not only acknowledged but are integral to the fabric of global knowledge production.

Towards a Just and Inclusive Academic Landscape

This book makes a compelling case for systemic transformation in global knowledge production. This transformation requires a shift from resilience to resistance, from adaptation to advocacy, and from exclusion to inclusion. By addressing the systemic barriers highlighted in

this chapter, from inequities in funding and dissemination to the structural constraints of research approvals and fieldwork, the global academic community can move towards a more just and inclusive paradigm. This vision aligns with the principles of epistemic justice and decoloniality, which emphasise the need to value diverse epistemologies, dismantle structural hierarchies, and create equitable opportunities for participation in global knowledge production. The experiences of Global South researchers, as articulated in this book, offer a roadmap for this transformation, demonstrating not only the challenges of navigating systemic inequities but also the possibilities for resistance and change.

Together, these chapters make a compelling case for systemic change, challenging the dominance of Western paradigms and advocating for inclusive and equitable research ecosystems.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have examined the complex array of challenges faced by Global South researchers, from institutional barriers to profound inequities in training, funding, and dissemination. These challenges extend beyond individual academic pursuits, reflecting deep-rooted structural and epistemic injustices within the global academic system. This discussion emphasises the need to shift from passive resilience to active resistance. By adopting resistance as our guiding principle, we engage directly with the systemic inequities that diminish the contributions of Global South researchers. Resistance empowers us to dismantle the colonial legacies and epistemic hierarchies still prevalent in academic environments, advocating for a paradigm shift that respects and integrates diverse knowledges. The call for decoloniality and epistemic justice is urgent. We must redefine research paradigms to be genuinely inclusive, where the knowledge systems and methodologies historically sidelined are recognised and valued. This shift requires re-evaluating how research is conducted, reviewed, and shared, ensuring that Global South researchers lead and reshape the global knowledge discourse.

lived experiences of researchers, pave the way for the academic community to foster a more equitable and dynamic engagement with global diversity.

This book serves as a call to action for all members of the academic community, scholars, administrators, policymakers, and practitioners, to reflect on our roles within these structures and to commit to transformative change. The future of academic scholarship and its broader societal impact hinges on our collective willingness to ensure that all voices, especially those from the Global South, are heard, respected, and valued.

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Mapping Research Realities: An Autoethnographic Study of Zimbabwean and South African Contexts

Oliver Tafadzwa Gore

INTRODUCTION

Despite the need for research to generate the knowledge required for countries to effectively plan, develop sound policies and manage strategically, Sub-Saharan Africa still lags behind in research and development. The continent has the lowest number of researchers per population, 198 per million, as opposed to the global average of 1 150 per million (Mohamedbhai, 2024). Weak research institutions, less supportive research environments, low budget allocation, dependence on international donor funding, and small number of postgraduate students, are some of the factors that contribute to the low research outputs on the continent (Mouton et al., 2018). This is despite the call by the African Union in its continental strategy 2016–2025 for the countries

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to promote research and innovation and the increase in their budgets for higher education to at least 1 percent of the Gross National Product (African Union, 2016). Although research collaborations are essential in the exchange and development of new knowledge globally, there is little collaboration in all sectors between African countries and the Global North and even within the continent. South Africa is among the top countries generating research outputs in Africa. Its top collaborations are with the United States (33 000 collaborations) and United Kingdom (25 000 collaborations) compared to Nigeria (1300 collaborations) and Kenya (500) collaborations in 2021 (Heleta & Jithoo, 2023). The low level of collaborations in Africa limits the capacity of these countries to exchange knowledge, improve the quality of knowledge and increase the visibility of researchers in the content (Asubiaro, 2019).

The low level of collaboration in research in Africa also affects the growth of the countries' economies. To improve research on the continent, the African Union (2016) has urged member states to put infrastructure in place, to make resources available, create a conducive environment for research, and align research with their development priorities. It further recommends that states develop research institutions, and establish inter-continental collaboration, create competitive research grants and put in place structures for professional development of researchers in the early stage of their careers (African Union, 2016). However, only Egypt and South Africa have done so. Even so, South Africa has only slightly increased its funding on research, that is, the Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 0.60 percent in 2020/21 to 0.62 percent in 2021/22 (Research & Development Statistica Report, 2024, p. 2). Most African countries contribute very little to the overall research output in the continent. Ten countries namely Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, Algeria, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda Tunisia, and Morocco produce 92.2 percent of the publications; the rest of the continent contributes 8 percent (Ali & Elbadawy, 2021, p. 1). The low research output and the underrepresentation of African countries in global research urgently needs to be explored. Using autoethnography, this chapter explores the unique research challenges and opportunities I experienced in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

While there is low investment on education research by most African governments, this is arguably not the major factor responsible for the

low output. Research in the African countries is characterised by epistemic injustice contributing to neglect, disregard, and undermining of the knowledge systems and theories of the Global South. Eurocentric epistemologies that reflect European history and culture are widely used to understand the challenges sub-Saharan Africa experiences. Inevitably, they fall short in articulating and responding to the real challenges faced in the Global South. The marginalisation of the indigenous epistemologies is perpetuated by the fact that most research funders in sub-Saharan Africa are from the Global North that favour Western epistemologies at the expense of the indigenous ones (Mutanga, 2024). The reliance on the Western epistemologies has not been effective in addressing the challenges sub-Saharan Africa faces (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Different approaches to the theories rooted in the Global South historical context need to be used. In this regard, plurality of knowledge systems, approaches, and methods that promote self-reflexivity can be an alternative to the Western mono epistemologies (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Approaches that are sensitive to the unique history of colonisation in Zimbabwe and apartheid in South Africa, and that value the cultures of the indigenous people are an essential means of decolonising the dominant epistemologies in these countries. Decolonisation is a transformative process that seeks to disrupt colonial legacies and reclaim indigenous knowledge, culture and heritage (wa Thiongo, 1986). In this context, this involves the use of research methods that are responsive to the contextual needs of the local people in the two countries during research.

Besides incorporating diverse opinions, indigenous knowledge systems offer an alternative lens to addressing global challenges. Scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018); wa Thiongo (1986) and Mbembe (2016) have argued for the need to recentre African knowledge epistemologies. This requires dismantling the Eurocentric curriculum and recognising the indigenous knowledge systems that are not legitimated, less recognised, and valued in most higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan African (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). Equally important, the African epistemologies are viewed as diverse and more inclusive in comprehending Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The extent to which colonial structures influence knowledge production demonstrates how strongly colonialism has affected research and development (Mlambo, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The use of colonial language to communicate and shape research in Southern Africa has been partly blamed for the marginalisation of the Global South.

For example, conceptualisation, processing, reporting, and dissemination of findings is largely conducted in English ignoring the indigenous languages in which cognitive processes take place (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). The loss of their cultural identity not only disenfranchises the indigenous people but also means that the research results are inaccessible to the indigenous populations where the research was conducted (Baker, 2023). Related to that are socio-economic problems that further constrain research, already hindered by low funding and under-resourcing (Chinogurei, 2011). While mentoring and support structures are vital for their future advancement, most early career researchers do not receive much advice on fundraising, career decisions, and research networks (Beaudry et al., 2018). The unequal power relationship between senior researchers and early career researchers is partly responsible for this. It places the senior researchers at a distance from the early career researchers. Other factors related to low funding, which contribute to low research outputs in Southern Africa, are absence of research equipment and laboratories, lack of incentives, and inadequate living expenses for emerging researchers (National Science Forum, 2024). In Zimbabwe, poorly resourced libraries, limited access to internet, reduction of external funding and high publishing costs are some of the obstacles researchers' face (Garwe, 2015). The unstable economic environment means that most senior researchers join the brain drain further reducing the capacity of the country to produce research.

Mama (2007) raises ethical questions on the dominant role of the Global North in collaborations with the South which undermine the local research partner's autonomy. She argues that to promote epistemic justice in Africa, there needs to be attention to the effect of the collaborations on the African's people identities, epistemology and the entire research process (Mama, 2007). For example, research tools that are formulated externally without an alignment to the needs of the local people are unlikely to be understood by the local people or to yield data that can be used to transform their lives. Additionally, local people often remain unaware of the extent of the challenges and possible solutions when international organisations do not share the results with them. The unequal collaborations contribute to the neglect of the needs of the local communities, often also to a lack of respect and no benefit to them (Ger et al., 2024; Kaur et al., 2023). The term extractivism is used to describe the exploitation of the indigenous people during research; the knowledge they obtain benefits the researchers from the Global North who gain

credit from it (Chagnon et al., 2022). Some researchers from the Global North have been blamed for 'helicopter science' or 'parachute study', a process in which specimens and data are collected for analysis in their countries with little recognition of the local researchers and communities in the Africa (Olufadewa et al., 2020).

Equally important to note is that the Global South is dependent on the Global North for funding in research partnerships. This does not only foster dependency but undermines the capacity of indigenous people to do research. Despite Global North countries having increased their research funding through both increasing the allocation and research grants received, the African continent has not received the global research grants that should be its due, given the size of its population and the challenges it faces (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2024). Although the countries qualify for the grants, the stringent requirements for funding and lack of an institutional base for the researcher prevent them from receiving grants.

In most instances, the choice of country as collaborator stems from funding availability and external interests outside the continent rather than the local and regional priorities (Pouris & Ho, 2014). African countries' reliance on the international donors has created dependency on the Global North for research funding (Heleta & Jithoo, 2023; Beaudry et al., 2018). In many cases, African countries have been dependent on external funding from the USA. These countries are likely to experience even more funding challenges due to the suspension of research aid by the USA government. The USA has also reduced its budget allocation for its research institutions by USD4 billion annually, a cap of 15 percent from 60 percent (Glenza, 2025). The decline in foreign funding is another signal that Sub-Saharan African countries have to rethink their funding mechanisms for research and become self-sustainable through increasing their budget allocations.

Unlike in the Global North, research in Africa lacks institutionalisation, which refers to the presence of research institutions meant for scientific knowledge production, dissemination and utilisation (Mouton et al., 2018). This not only includes formal organisations dedicated to research but also bodies such as 'research and development' that are independent of the universities, publishing houses, and journals. Zavale and Schneijderberg (2022) show that only a few countries in Africa can be said to have institutionalised research, for example Botswana and South Africa. Mouton et al. (2018) reveal that while research in most African

countries is de-institutionalised and underfunded, there is lack of clarity and articulation of research on governance issues. The same study identifies problems such as civil wars, neoliberal policies such as the structural adjustment programmes, low investment in research and the effects of brain drain on de-institutionalisation of research between 1980 and 2000 (Mouton et al., 2018). However, there have been some research advances which have led to more research institutions especially in South Africa and Nigeria, contributing to an increase in research outputs—although still significantly lower compared to the Global North (Beaudry et al., 2018).

Education Sub-Saharan Africa (2025) has identified the huge gap between research and policy making as one of the challenges constraining research in Africa. Researchers and policymakers often work in silos. As a result, research evidence is brought to the policymakers too late for implementation. Furthermore, the report indicates that research findings are often not available to stakeholders such as parents, institution leaders and communities as the results are mostly shared with academics in conferences and published in prestigious journals (Education Sub-Saharan Africa, 2025). Related to that is the complex formatting and packaging of the research results, which means they are not easily understood by the stakeholders. Another problem is that some of the research offers unactionable insights. Consequently, some stakeholders accord less value to research. They find it without benefit for policymaking or for informing their strategies.

One of the constraints on early career researchers from the Global South on competing in global research is 'epistemic coloniality', glorifying knowledge created by the Global North while undermining that from the Global South (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023, p. 75). Through that, research by the Global South is placed at the periphery with the knowledge generated being less valued and recognised because of the perception that it is of low quality (Kessi et al., 2020). For that reason, African researchers have struggled to navigate the global knowledge system dominated by the journals from the Global North. Likewise, the international journals from the Global North are less likely to publish manuscripts with a focus of African issues (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2022). Coupled with that, are the high costs of publishing in international journals that have made it difficult for the African researchers to publish (Musila, 2019). There are few empirical studies that have documented the challenges faced by researchers in Zimbabwe and South Africa thus far (Andrason & van den Brink, 2023; Beaudry et al., 2018; Mouton

et al., 2018). Because of the limited literature on this subject, some of the challenges researchers in sub-Saharan Africa face remain unknown, which paves the way for misrepresentation by the Global North scholars and the marginalisation of the Global South research. This chapter investigates the challenges and opportunities researchers have in navigating the research environment in Southern Africa. The study addressed the following research question: *What research opportunities and challenges do researchers have in Southern Africa? How can the challenges researchers encounter be addressed to increase research in the region*?

Methodology

The section outlines the procedures undertaken in the research that informs this chapter. An autoethnographic research method was used to explore the reflection on my experiences as a researcher. Before expanding on how I conducted the study, I will briefly give a context of the study.

Setting the Scene

This study is based on my reflections as a researcher in Zimbabwe and South Africa, both situated in Southern Africa. The countries were selected for this study because of my lived experiences there. I reflect on my experiences when I worked as a researcher for five years for a collaborative research project between London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University College London and Centre for Diseases Control and Department of Community of Zimbabwe (University of Zimbabwe) between 2003 and 2008. The project was a randomised-controlled longitudinal trial, aimed at reducing incidence of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Disease among adolescents in rural Zimbabwe. Collecting quantitative and qualitative data from learners in schools, out of school youth, and community members was part of my duties. When that project had been completed, I joined a private consultancy research firm that conducted research on behalf of clients who were mainly international organisations from the European Union involved in development work in Zimbabwe. Driven from Global North, the research projects were multi-disciplinary and included education, gender, public health, socioeconomic, and agriculture. I migrated to South Africa after receiving a scholarship for doctoral studies, where I researched issues of human

development, equity, access and success in higher education. After graduating in 2019, I was offered a Postdoctoral Research Fellow (PDRF) at another university in South Africa, where I worked for a period of two and half years between 2019 and 2021. My research focused on (higher) education, human rights, well-being, diversity, and inclusion of students in South African higher education. Based on these two contexts: that is working on the two organisations in Zimbabwe and my Postdoctoral research fellowship in South Africa, there are lessons that I believe are important to share.

Autoethnographic Research Method

I employed autoethnographic research to interpret and reflect on my general research experiences. I used this method because it allowed me to reflect on the challenges and opportunities I experienced as a researcher within particular cultural contexts. The method systematically examines a phenomenon while comprehending a certain culture, which other methods are limited in doing (Ellis et al., 2011). My experiences were clustered and thematically analysed manually around opportunities for professional and academic growth, unequal partnerships and lack of community participation, dissemination of research findings, community entry negotiation, and unequal access to funding and employment.

In my reflections on my experiences as a researcher, I refer to the socio-economic, political, and cultural context while explaining how my experiences are linked to the experiences of other researchers within the same context. Equally significant, I used self-narratives that provide a nuanced account of my personal experiences and interpreted them to gain a deep understanding of a particular culture, belief and practices. Despite the common methods disputing generalisations of a single case (individual) as providing an understanding of the phenomenon, which is culture, autoethnography enables the use of 'self' to gain a full understanding of the research culture and practices. Writing about self is inevitably writing about others as individuals who are shaped by the manner they interact with others (Gannon, 2013). On that account, I used autoethnography through personal narratives to reflect beyond self to theoretical understanding of the challenges researchers confront in similar contexts.

Autoethnography offers an alternative method to dominant ways of researching that have produced biased and inaccurate conclusions

about Southern Africa. Inaccurate generalisations of indigenous cultures made through other methods, such as the quantitative techniques where researchers distance themselves from the phenomenon being studied, can be harmful (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). On that account, I used the research method to challenge the conventional narrative while incorporating my story as a researcher, which is often disregarded and seen as subjective (Turner, 2013).

Despite its benefits, some criticisms of autoethnography are based on the perception that the method yields biased findings because it uses personal experiences. Other criticisms accuse autoethnography of spending insufficient time on studying others and the culture (Delamont, 2009). However, what matters is whether the researcher can unravel the unfamiliar cultural practices, and the usefulness of the story (Flick, 2010). Bringing my self-experiences into autoethnography had the additional benefit that I was native to the context, which positioned me well to explore and interpret my social reality (Polczyk, 2012). The next section presents my reflections as an early career researcher in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

My Research Experiences in Zimbabwe and South Africa

This section is arranged as follows: it begins with a presentation of the opportunities for professional development, partnerships and collaborations as well as the concomitant challenges, particularly community participation. A discussion of the dissemination of research findings, and community entry negotiation follows. Unequal access to funding and employment are also discussed. This section demonstrates how the context, including the policies and cultural practices, shaped my experiences.

Opportunities for Professional Development

Working with two research organisations in Zimbabwe created opportunities to gain some practical research experience. As a social scientist in the adolescent reproductive health project, I was involved in recruiting research participants at community meetings. I also had the opportunity to become familiar with various research methods including ethnography and participatory action research, specifically risk mapping and

community wealth ranking. This was in addition to using the well-known methods such as questionnaires, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. The research also allowed me to acquire the technological skills necessary to code and analyse qualitative data and to use NVivo software. I found this experience valuable in my later research career both in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Additionally, the private research consultancy firm that I worked for gained me practical experience in working with various software for data collection including Tangerine, and Survey to Go. I coordinated data collection teams that used tablets for data collection in remote and rural areas at a time when that technology was still new in research. I managed sampling of enumeration areas and participants, quality assurance through spot checks, and data management in addition to community entry. These experiences remain key in my research career including my postdoctoral research fellowship and current post at a South African university. However, working in these organisations did not give me enough opportunities for professional growth beyond data collection and preliminary qualitative data analysis. Even though the master's degree prepared me for research, much of my role in the consultancy firm was limited to fieldwork management without opportunities to apply for funding or engage in data analysis, report writing and dissemination of findings. This prompted me to look for other opportunities for my professional development outside of Zimbabwe.

Unlike Zimbabwe, South Africa has institutionalised some of its research in higher education and makes significant funding available for the postdoctoral research fellowship programmes at South African universities. These institutions appoint not only Postdoctoral Research Fellows (PDRFs) from within the country but also from anywhere in the world. The lack of PDRF programmes in higher education institutions in other African countries suggests a lack of prioritisation and funding of research. During my tenure as a PDRF, I was involved in writing proposals, data collection, analysis, applying for external funding for research, and disseminating findings through publications and conferences. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to network within the research community in the country and globally. I also organised seminars, colloquiums, and supervised postgraduate students. As the focus of the programme is research, there were limited opportunities to teach students during it or, indeed, after it. This was a huge limitation when I wanted to apply for a lecturing post.

Unequal Partnerships and Lack of Participation of Community People

My experiences of working with research organisations in Zimbabwe revealed power imbalances between the sponsoring organisations from the Global North, and the recipient and implementing organisations that were locally based and local communities. The implementing organisation was responsible for funding the Adolescents' reproductive health project aimed at reducing incidences of HIV/AIDS, Sexual Transmitted Infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies among youth in Zimbabwe. The Global North funders, who were the Centre for Disease Control, National Institute of Health and UNAIDS, set the terms for the funding streams for the projects. The implementing organisation responded by submitting a proposal in line with those terms. As a result, the behaviour change model informing the community, youth and clinic interventions meant to combat HIV/AIDS was externally developed and implemented without much tailoring to local needs. When the research team raised issues regarding the inappropriateness of some of the aspects in the toolkit for youth intervention, the management was adamant that no changes could be implemented. The implementing organisation were in no position to make any changes as they would have risked losing their funding. It must be conceded that any change to the implementation strategies would have made it difficult to measure the impact of the project.

Another complication regarding the Adolescent Reproductive Health project was that while sexual reproductive was a huge problem in Zimbabwe during that time, there were other competing priorities. For instance, most districts sampled for the study were located in arid regions, where the communities frequently experienced food shortages and high levels of poverty. As such, they favoured food aid and income generating projects with reproductive health research as a secondary concern. During my ethnographic study in one of the districts, one of the community elders indicated that as much as they appreciated the research and the respective interventions implemented in schools, health facilities and communities that the study measured, community members had other priorities. This suggests that the study should have been implemented together with food relief and income poverty alleviation projects. Associated with that, the project revealed challenges such as child headed households and sexual abuse, which were not addressed during the implementation of the research. While I was deeply concerned about the precarious situation of these children, I could do nothing about it because

of our research mandate. We could not help no matter how strong the need was. The absence of a coordinated interventions with other organisations dealing with hunger and poverty meant that the research organisation I was working for had to leave vulnerable groups without any assistance.

Related to that were some of the strategies used in the research interventions aimed to equip young people with sexual reproductive health knowledge that was regarded as taboo within the communities. One intervention used peer educators to develop life skills and sexual reproductive health. Some community members raised a concern regarding the language used and explicitness of the sessions as they perceived the intervention as encouraging young people to experiment and engage in risky sexual behaviour. This indicates that the implementing organisation failed to consult with community members on the strategies that would be acceptable to them. Furthermore, the linguists at the local university who translated the questions from English into the vernacular were not sufficiently familiar with local usage. The result was that some of the questions were misunderstood. For example, some of the girls indicated that in the questionnaire they had not yet engaged in sexual behaviour, but their biomarkers indicated that they were pregnant. This was partly because the translation gave the girls the impression that they were to blame for having engaged in unsafe or early sexual activity. The clear conclusion to be drawn is that research tools need to be sensitive to a particular local context.

In South Africa, the project in which I was involved was funded by the National Research Foundation. The research project was aimed at exploring the mental well-being of learners and their teachers because of Covid-19 in South African schools. I conceptualised the study in response to the problem of mental health related to the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa that communities had raised. The point here is that the funding did not determine the research agenda. The local communities and schools valued the project as they perceived it as generating knowledge that would improve the mental well-being and chances of success for their children in schools. Because I was not fluent in the local languages, I conducted the interviews in English, a language well understood in schools. This did not present a challenge regarding comprehension of the questions.

It is important to note in the Zimbabwean context where research was externally funded, community members were marginalised because the

research agenda was determined externally. Moreover, the partnership was unequal in that the funding organisations benefitted most. They obtained data, but little was done to address the communities' immediate challenges and needs. The partnership also directly benefitted the principal investigators and personnel from the international organisations based in the Global North who used the knowledge generated from the research to improve their careers through publications or presenting at conferences. This, however, was not the case in the context of South Africa where funding was locally sourced through Post-Doctoral Research Fellowships.

Dissemination of Research Findings

I also had limited opportunities to contribute conceptually to the research and dissemination of findings in the two research projects in Zimbabwe. Although the project employed local professionals to perform the day-to-day activities, the management of the local organisation was exclusively from the Global North. Despite the availability of skilled personnel in the research teams, much of the analysis, reporting and publishing was performed by the 'experts' from the countries. Local researchers were limited to data collection, data entry and coding and the analysis of qualitative data, where I was involved. Much of the grant funds were used to pay the experts who received international recognition and advanced their academic careers. As far as these two organisations were concerned, only a few local researchers had the opportunity to be named as authors of the publications that resulted from the research; the rest were not even acknowledged in the research outputs. While this raises concerns regarding ethical practices, the experiences illustrate the failure of the two organisations to recognise local researchers' potential and their contributions to knowledge generation within their context. In contrast, I had the opportunity to manage my research funds and disseminate my research findings through publications, conferences, and symposiums during my PDRF at a South African university. However, none of these dissemination strategies directly targeted the stakeholders who were the beneficiaries of the research including university students, school principals, teachers, and parents as I needed to meet the targets set in my task agreement as a PDRF.

Well-Being

The local organisations engaged in unfair working practices as far as the researchers, especially those involved in data collection, were concerned. These researchers were awarded short-term contracts that not only gave them little sense of job security but also excluded them from certain employment benefits that permanent staff enjoyed. The short-term contracts were intentionally or unintentionally used by the implementing organisation's management to ensure the loyalty of the researchers despite the unconducive environment. The researchers were aware that their contracts would not necessarily be renewed at the end of each year. Management also used the high unemployment in the country to persuade the researchers to accept low salaries; the poor economy and the hyper inflationary economic environment in Zimbabwe also weakened the position of the researchers. At the time, the formal economy constituted only 11% of the economy. The rest of the population were either unemployed or engaged in informal economic activities (ILO, 2015). I received my salary in foreign currency. This meant that I had to travel to neighbouring countries such as Botswana, South Africa, and Mozambique to access my salary as the central bank in Zimbabwe did not have hard foreign currency. However, there was an advantage to having foreign currency: most of the goods and services in the country were charged in United State dollars. The downside of the regular visits into neighbouring countries was that they not only robbed me of time for research work and professional development, but they also had a negative effect on my well-being. Finally, the organisations did not adequately support fieldwork. Transport and accommodation arrangements were less than satisfactory. For example, we had to squash into cars and sleep in classrooms and clinic wards. This was a severe challenge to the physical and mental well-being of the researchers.

Although conditions improved markedly when I was appointed as a postdoctoral research fellow (PDRF) in South Africa, funding was still a challenge. While the PDRF programme was institutionalised in the country's higher education, funding did not adequately cover living expenses, data collection and dissemination of findings. As the PDRF programme was given student status, the position of those within it was not professionalised. For example, the remuneration was in form of an allowance. It did not allow PDRF to access bank loans and other privileges accessible to other professionals in higher education. Concomitantly, most

PDRFs were offered a very low level remuneration.[1] To be specific, the National Research Foundation rate was R200 000 (USD10 899) and R250 000 (USD13 623) per annum in 2023 (National Research Foundation, 2023) except for a few who were fortunate enough to receive additional income from other funders. On average, most of the PDRFs earned a third or less of what academic professionals with similar qualifications received. This was despite the strict requirement for the PDRF to meet a certain number of research outputs per annum. Unlike the Nordic countries, PDRF are not considered employees with the same benefits as other academics. Inadequate funding not only affected my well-being, but also my research outputs. While it was desirable to publish in highly ranked international journals, I could not afford the high publication fees the journals charged. Faced with financial constraints, I supplemented my income with research consultancy work, which, however, affected my production time. Although, I surpassed the annual required output targets set by the university, I could have performed even better with more support.

Community Entry Negotiation

The local political dynamics in Zimbabwe often delayed ethics approval of research projects and granting permission. Even after receiving ethics approval from the national ethics bodies, access to communities and participants was not guaranteed because of gatekeeping strategies. To gain access to the communities, permission to implement the study was required at two levels: firstly, at the government provincial and district structures; and secondly, the traditional leaders who constitute chiefs and village heads, sometimes local political leaders. Because the Zimbabwean government suspected Western sponsorship of funding opposition political parties to effect a change in the regime, a stringent vetting process was conducted before a permission was granted by the District Administrator's office. The District Administrator's office would refer the researchers to the relevant ministry under which the research project fell, and the security cluster comprising the state security, police, Rural District Council and political party leaders. In the process, I was interviewed several times by the state security agents who wanted to make sure that the research

[1] An exchange rate of USD1 to R18.35 which was the average for 2021.

projects did not have political objectives. Permission to implement a study was less likely to be granted when the research project explored issues of human rights, democracy and poverty because of the belief that asking participants questions about these topics would not only conscientise community members about the government failures but also reveal the problems to the international community. Even after the permission was granted by both the government and traditional leaders, access to communities was not guaranteed. It was a requirement in some communities to approach political leaders, mainly from the ruling party, for permission as a means of gaining the full acceptance of the communities. Failure to obtain permission from gatekeepers such as the political party in power resulted in low participation. I personally experienced gatekeeping. When I was the leader of the research team in one of the districts, some research assistants were detained by the security officials, ostensibly because the study had not been approved at national level, even though the approval documentation had been submitted to the relevant official. A related incident concerns the elections. Research teams were given an ultimatum by the state agents to leave the districts despite having received permission before starting.

By way of contrast, I experienced no difficulty in obtaining permission from the South Africa's Department of Basic Education, responsible for schools, to access the schools regarding the mental health research project that I implemented in schools. After receiving ethics approval from the university, I obtained a permission to implement the study from the Department of Basic Education at provincial level, which allowed me to access the schools. Most of the participants had a positive perception of the research project because it was addressing challenges, they believed were significantly hindering their functioning as administrative and teaching staff in schools, and their learners. The point that can be drawn from the above examples is that the gatekeepers in Zimbabwe did not support research and thus not contributing to the good of community. On the other hand, the South African experience highlights that when all the requirements such as ethics approval were submitted, there were no hindrances to accessing and engaging with participants.

Unequal Access to Funding and Employment

Universities in South Africa see the importance of internationalisation. Their curricula address global issues, they enrol international students

and employ high-powered staff from different countries. They also award doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships to both its citizens and international researchers. I, together with several colleagues from Zimbabwe and countries globally, have benefitted from the fellowships. What are of concern, however, were some exclusionary tendencies, such as reserving some opportunities within higher education and other sectors for South African citizens only. That is, some National Research Foundation research grants were strictly for South African citizens and permanent residences only. Furthermore, although employers did not explicitly mention that some positions were reserved for South African citizens, their online application forms were designed to screen applicants based on citizenship, with non-South African citizens being the last to be considered.

Discussion

The reflections in this chapter show that complex and unique socio-economic and political challenges constrain some researchers in Zimbabwe and South Africa. For example, being placed at the periphery because of the dominance of international and local implementing organisations, limited funding, and difficulties in gaining access during field work are some of the barriers. Although there are similarities between the two countries, some of the constraints are unique to each of the contexts. Examples of this are the exclusionary tendencies experienced in the South African context and gatekeeping in Zimbabwe. Countries in the region can learn from the experiences recounted above and improve the relevance, quality and quantity of research.

Research, particularly in higher education, is less well funded and less prioritised in Zimbabwe than in South Africa. Similar to other African countries, Zimbabwe relied mostly on international donor funding and grants through partnership with global institutions including USAID and World Health Organisations. The cutting of funding by the USA for the research and development sector has had a negative effect on research especially in Zimbabwe. However, to control its narrative, Zimbabwe needs to prioritise research and increase funding for research to improve its research outputs, to generate knowledge that is helpful in address its challenges and increase visibility in the global research community. Although aware of the crucial role research plays in development of the country, there seems to be a lack of political will to prioritise its funding because of the leader's failure to appreciate the long-term socio-economic

benefits of research. Rather, sectors with immediate and visible outcomes that attract voters and the security to protect the elites are prioritised. This requires the country to have leadership that can create an environment for relevant and quality research to be implemented by the local scientists for the local communities. Good leaders with a vision will enable more investment in research in form of financial, people and infrastructure to increase the quality and quantity of research outputs (Ger et al., 2024). Zimbabwe should also consider putting in place and implementing clear national research and innovation policies. Concomitantly, the country can further institutionalise research through establishing more research centres in higher education, independent research houses, publication houses, and journals. Coupled with that is the need to increase budget allocation for research, which would make it easy for the country to align research with its priorities. To stem the brain drain, there is a need to incentivise research to retain senior researchers who can research and mentor early career researchers.

Related to the above is the exploitation of researchers and communities in Zimbabwe through partnerships with the Global North. The country and the regions can overcome this situation by putting in place and implementing regulatory mechanism, policies and institutional policies and ethics committees to oversee the collaborations throughout the country and in the regions (Kumar et al., 2022). These regulations will have to be enforced making sure that communities also benefit from the research. The regulations can also ensure that funding organisations include capacity development of local researchers and benefits for local communities. The equal collaborations can facilitate an exchange of knowledge essential to resolves the global challenges including that of the local communities (Kumar et al., 2022).

The reflections also highlight the marginalisation of researchers in Zimbabwe who are sometimes relegated to data collection, with little regard for their well-being, by the implementing organisations. Wherever possible, implementing organisations should recognise and respect their researchers, offering them competitive remuneration and opportunities for professional development so that they can realise their full potential. This includes involving them in improving their research capacity, building their data analytical skills, and creating opportunities for them to disseminate research results through speaking at conferences and publishing. Implementing organisations can establish partnerships with other development organisations working in the same communities so

that community people requiring assistance can be referred for support. Furthermore, sharing the findings with local communities can contribute not only to empowering them with knowledge but also to incorporating their views on the strategies used to address their problems.

What emerged from the reflection is that politicians who pursue their own interests constrain research and show little interest in their communities. What is needed is an acknowledgement of the importance of research, an increase in professionalism, and an assurance that government officials' are held accountable when granting permission. We also need ways of ensuring that research organisations adhere to fair and ethical practices. The picture in South African is quite different.

The language challenge can be addressed through involving the local people in the translation of research instruments so that the questionnaires are understandable and appropriate for the local contexts. To improve the community's access to research findings, implementing organisations must conduct feedback meetings to share the results and articulate the way forward as opposed to merely extracting knowledge for the benefit of the Global North researchers.

Although the findings indicate that South Africa has institutionalised research funding, more financial resources could be allocated to improve programmes such as the PDRFs. The reflections made in the preceding sections have shown that PDRFs are placed at the periphery and given student status, resulting in them being poorly remunerated. On that account, professionalising the PDRFs so that their conditions of employment are equated with other academics with similar qualifications and experience will be helpful. This will give the PDRFs financial freedoms to afford costs for their living expenses and for their well-being for them to increase the research outputs. Although financial resources on their own do not constitute well-being, access to them is critical for maximal functioning and well-being of individuals (Gore & Walker, 2020; Therborn, 2013). Another aspect that needs attention is that PDRFs largely concentrate on research and student supervision in most South African universities, with little involvement in university teaching. While this gives them adequate time for research, it reduces the PDRFs' opportunities to acquire the teaching experience that they will need in their future academic careers. To address this, universities should consider reviewing the PDRF task agreements and ensure that teaching is part of their roles. Furthermore, Department of Higher Education and Training should consider reviewing research funding so that PDRFs can adequately fund

their research, including publishing fees in the high impact international journals and attending international conferences. It is equally important for other countries in the region to implement the PDRF programmes in their higher education institutions as a way of developing research capacity in their countries and fostering research in the region and the continent.

Evidence from the previous section has demonstrated that despite the South African government having funded many international PDRFs from across Africa, there are some exclusionary tendencies as some research grants and employment opportunities are reserved for its citizens. Jansen (2022) explains that because universities the world over are centres of excellence for teaching and research and are public institutions, they should recruit talent globally to achieve and maintain this excellence. To address the challenge of exclusion, universities ought to consider giving equal opportunities to all the people who qualify for the position based on their qualifications and experience regardless of their nationality. This will ensure that talented researchers, including non-South African citizens, are able to contribute to teaching and research in the country.

Conclusion

The chapter explores the researcher's personal experiences to illustrate some of the challenges and opportunities experienced by researchers in the two countries. These experiences have implications for researchers in the region and countries in similar context. The chapter contributes to policy and practice through the following recommendations: African countries to increase funding allocations for research, advocating for equal partnerships and collaborations with the Global North. These would offer local researchers professional development opportunities, train public officials in research and professionalism through workshops, and ensure that local communities benefit from research. Moreover, the chapter makes a methodological contribution. Autoethnography offered me the opportunity to critically reflect on my own research experiences, challenge the dominant narratives, and contribute to knowledge production that is grounded in the realities of Zimbabwe and South Africa. By situating my experiences within the socio-economic and political context that I am familiar with, I was able to gain an insider perspective that is appropriate. It also gave voice to my own story of the challenges I faced in my research journey. In other words, it was a way of including the voices of the marginalised within global hierarchical structure. The method revealed

the challenges that constrain research in the two countries, in particular by focusing on the marginalised voice, offering an alternative from the Western epistemologies, promoting indigenous knowledge and the opportunity for reflexivity.

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Becoming Active Researchers as Women in Tanzania's Higher Education Institutions: What Does it Take?

Sarah Ezekiel Kisanga and Cresencia Masawe

Introduction

Women comprise 53 percent of bachelor's degree graduates and 43 percent of PhD graduates in institutions of higher learning (UNESCO, 2021). Regardless of the advancements, gender disparities persist in research in higher education institutions. Relatively few women attain senior academic positions (Huang et al., 2020). Moreover, the attrition rate among female researchers is greater than that of their male counterparts, indicating significant gender discrepancies in the later phases of academic careers (Avolio et al., 2024). The available global data suggests

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that the proportion of women researchers increased from 28 percent in 2001 to 42 percent in 2022 (Elsevier, 2024). Only 33.3 percent of all researchers are women (UNESCO, 2021). This data demonstrates that, despite the growing opportunities for women to access higher education, the research landscape continues to exhibit considerable gender disparity on a global scale. These disparities differ across academic disciplines and geographic regions (Llorens et al., 2021). Evidence shows that the Global South experiences more imbalances than any other region (Das et al., 2024). The inequality in South and West Asia is 19 percent, in East Asia and the Pacific is 24 percent, and in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) it stands at 33.5 percent. This figure exceeds the global average of 42 percent. The United States rose from 30 percent in 2000 to 42 percent in 2022 (Elsevier, 2024).

Tanzania has notably increased the number of women enrolled in higher education. A similar initiative is the case in Africa, including South Africa. Nevertheless, women continue to be underrepresented in academic positions and postgraduate education. Women represent 45 percent of students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Tanzania. However, their demographics suffer marked attrition at higher academic levels. Women constituted 46 percent of those enrolled in the master's degree programmes and hardly six percent of those in PhD studies in the academic year 2022–2023. This sets a precedent for fewer women academic staff recruits, given that the doctorate is a requirement in teaching and research in universities and research and development institutions. This is telling of the workplace gendered dynamics and women constituting only 30 percent of academic personnel in Tanzania's HEIs (TCU, 2024). The gender anesthesia and bias that are inherent in the HEI systems cast structural constraints, including access to networking and mentorship opportunities (Mwakitalu et al., 2022). The net result of these and other challenges is the underrepresentation of women in academic positions in the country and SSA (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2024; Oyeyemi et al., 2019; Prakash et al., 2024).

This chapter builds on existing literature and presents our experiences as Tanzanian women academics navigating a predominantly male-dominated academic environment. We, Sarah and Cresensia, highlight the intricate and challenging act of balancing family and career, confronting gender biases, and having limited professional mentorship. We offer strategies to empower academic women based on our experience. Sarah is

a senior lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) with seventeen years of experience working in higher education. Sarah has extensive experience in the university system. Cresencia is also a senior lecturer at the Dar es Salaam College of Education (DUCE) and has fifteen years of experience in the higher education system. They first met in 2023 and bonded over shared academic passions and a mutual understanding of the challenges to women scholars in their respective fields. Sarah has been married for over twenty years, and Cresencia is a newlywed. They both strive to overcome the challenges that women encounter in academia, such as family interweaving, which often limits career advancement. Sharing our experiences will likely encourage the needed resilience and excellence in other women scholars in higher education, particularly those in the Global South.

The rest of the chapter consists of six sections. The second section reviews current literature on women's participation in research within higher education. The third outlines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the empirical analysis, focusing on intersectionality and Ujamaa ideology (the Tanzanian version of African socialism). It also highlights how collective efforts as a form of agency can shape the trajectories of women in academic research. The fourth section presents the relevant methodological approach, including the research design with techniques for data collection and analysis. The fifth explores the experiences of the researchers. The final section highlights the unique experiences of women researchers in the Global South, focusing on challenges, the strategies to overcome them, and potential future research and collaboration paths that could further support women scholars in these regions.

Challenges to Women Researchers in Academia

Women academics in the Global South, including those in Tanzania, face comparable obstacles during their professional growth. Women's effective engagement in research roles is limited by various factors, including socio-cultural expectations regarding women's domestic responsibilities. Moreover, gender bias, work-life imbalance, inadequate mentorship, and systemic barriers affect more female researchers compared to their male counterparts (Hosseini & Sharifzad, 2021; Jeyaraj et al., 2021). Often, they prioritise societal roles over academic achievements and positions. Tanzanian women face similar challenges; women in academics frequently

face familial responsibilities that restrict their time for professional development, including writing research grants and academic publishing (Mwalyagile, 2020).

In this setting, solidarity among women academics, mentorship, and supportive networks are necessary for enhancing a favourable academic climate (Knowles, 2024). Mama (2011) and Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) also recognise the importance of mentorship and solidarity networks as enablers and tools for empowering female researchers. Due to the male-dominated nature of academic leadership, there are fewer women in senior positions who could mentor women academics in lower ranks (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015; Ngussa, 2018). "We learn best about what we should do when we ask those who are experiencing it" (Richards, 2016, p. 96) captures this essence. Such guidance is essential for success in research and overall professional growth. The limited number of women mentors in senior positions also means fewer female role models in academia. Therefore, limited mentorship and professional development opportunities by mentors with first-hand experience in academia hinder women mentees' careers in the sector.

Gender bias and other structural barriers in securing research funding result in fewer opportunities for women academics to engage in research activities (Boyle et al., 2015). This disparity is evident in fields that males dominate and also those aligned with traditional masculine norms (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019). Such biases often adversely influence the engagement of women in competitive grant funding. The under-representation of women in top positions in higher education thus relates closely with this imbalance (Mwakitalu et al., 2018). Women comprise less than 30 percent of the global research community. A paltry 21 percent of women are in substantive chancellor positions and 26 percent in registrar roles in Africa's ninety-seven highest-ranking universities. Only 35 percent of women are researchers, 24 percent professors, and 28 percent in various leadership roles in Danish universities in Europe (Quaade, 2024).

Women academics who perceive challenges in engaging in active research as manageable can construct appropriate coping mechanisms. Individuals categorise these as either problem-focused or emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), based on their interpretation of the situation (Lazarus, 1993). Individuals use problem-focused coping in situations they perceive as controllable, which requires them to take action and address the root cause of the problem (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). In contrast, emotion-focused coping assists in managing negative emotions when a situation is overwhelming and cannot be resolved (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Activities such as faith in a perceived higher power can help positively manage the emotions, while escapism and avoidance exemplify the negative management of the emotions.

Women academics adopt problem-focused and emotionally focused coping mechanisms in response to the challenges they experience. Essential strategies to achieve work-life balance include time management, social support networks, and management support (Jeyaraj et al., 2021; Lian et al., 2021; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). Many women academics depend on family support or hire a helper to balance work and home life. The spouses' and relatives' support is crucial for career growth (Kisanga & Matiba, 2021; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). Lian et al. (2021) contend that childcare support by family and spouses is crucial to meet the family-work balance challenges involving mobility. Effective social support networks also help women students pursuing higher education manage parenting and academic demands (Kisanga & Matiba, 2021). Furthermore, support from management, such as research funding, mentorship, and reduced teaching loads, can significantly enhance research productivity (Kyauke, 2022). As well, reduced teaching loads can provide time for women academics to actively engage in research and publication (Jeyaraj et al., 2021). Furthermore, emotion-focused strategies, including spiritual faith and time off from family obligations, support stress management and maintaining focus on work (Lian et al., 2021; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015).

The Participation of Women in the Tanzanian Higher Education

Higher education institutions are not necessarily gender-neutral spaces. Often, they perpetuate societal gender norms and biases instead of challenging them (Murphy & Urio, 2024). As noted previously, women are only 30 percent of the total workforce in Tanzanian HEIs, and the under-representation of young women in higher education adversely affects their career prospects. With regard to higher academic ranks, which are professorial, women account for only 27 percent of all the professors in Tanzania (TCU, 2021). There is only one woman among the eleven professors in the oldest and most prestigious university, the University of Dar es Salaam

in Tanzania. Additionally, women make up only twelve of the sixty-nine associate professors and fifty-eight of the 239 senior lecturers at the university. Figure 3.1 further illustrates this disparity. A greater number of successful female role models in various positions among the academic staff can inspire increased enrolment of women in graduate programs and galvanise their advancement in academic careers (Young et al., 2013).

The under-representation of women in higher academic posts in Tanzania is associated with fewer research publications. Publications are a core criterion for promotion to senior academic ranks. This impedes the women's progression into leadership roles and decision-making. Further, women in leadership positions often struggle to balance work and family life. Time and energy constraints make it difficult for them to participate in academic writing (Mwakitalu et al., 2022). This cyclically impedes their prospects for promotion. The pressure to excel in leadership and personal life affects the professional development of women disproportionately.

There has been progress in promoting gender equality through Tanzania's National Women and Gender Policy (2000) and Educational and Training Policy (1995) and similar instruments and initiatives. These serve to implement national and international gender-related commitments in
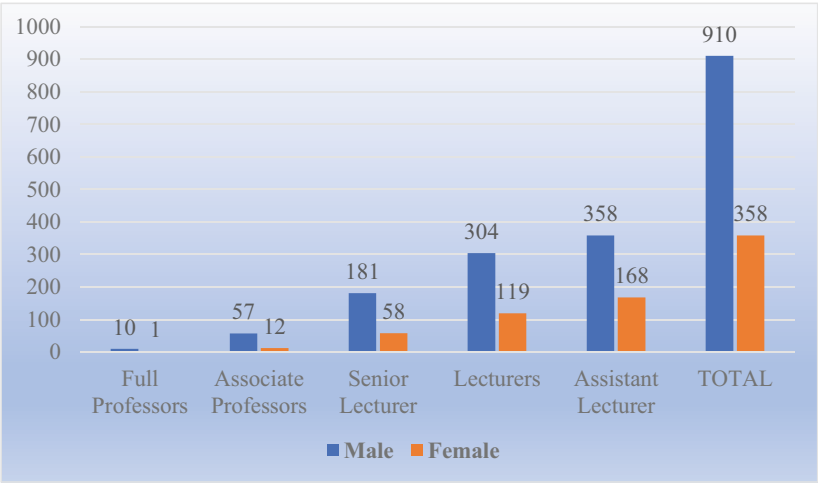

Fig. 3.1 Staff profile by gender, University of Dar es Salaam. *Source* Directorate of Human Resource UDSM (2024)

HEIs and form a national framework to address broader gender issues (Msuya & Mukangara, 2007). However, the persistent influence of institutional, structural, and cultural barriers attenuates the impact of the policies, frameworks, and initiatives (Murphy & Urio, 2024). The barriers collectively impede the advancement of the careers of women academics and researchers. Evidence indicates that the number of women academics pursuing research careers in Tanzania is lower than that of other African countries (UK-Aid, 2019). Additionally, fewer women actively research and publish their findings, with many needing the drive or support to accomplish these goals (UK-Aid, 2019).

Gender biases in the recruitment and promotion processes often favour men, which exacerbates the gender gap. The systemic failure to translate policies into meaningful changes in hiring and promotion practices contributes to this. Nielsen (2016) notes that gender bias in recruitment contributes significantly to the under-representation of women in higher education in Denmark. Their under-representation in the field of academic science perpetuates a cycle that results in a shortage of women mentors and, consequently, a lack of role models for the next generation of women academics (Nielsen, 2016). Furthermore, male-dominated promotion committees are less likely to promote women than gender-diverse committees would. The divergence helps factor in perspectives that minimise the gender anaesthesia in the decision-making process (Llorens et al., 2021).

Theoretical Perspectives

The recent study by Sánchez-Jiménez et al. (2024) shows encouraging trends towards gender equity in academic publications by examining gendered scholarly contributions from 2003 to 2023. Four primary drivers were identified as the key contributors to gender disparities in publication: cultural influences, levels of access to education, legal policy framework, and socio-economic factors (for details, see Sánchez-Jiménez et al., 2024, 2). This chapter utilises intersectionality, Ujama ideology, collective action, and agency as analytical concepts to examine how overlapping identities, communal solidarity, and collective empowerment shape women's academic engagement and productivity. By integrating these concepts within the intersectionality framework, the chapter highlights successful strategies that have emerged from collective efforts,

emphasising the importance of solidarity and shared goals in overcoming barriers in academic publications.

Derived from African feminism, intersectionality works to understand how an individual's multiple identities, particularly those influenced by oppression and privilege, intersect to create a unique experience (Shields, 2008). Intersectionality provides a valuable and contextually grounded framework to articulate our experiences in navigating through the struggles in a male-dominated academic environment in HEIs. The framework is a contextually situated practice that examines the intersection of gender with cultural, historical, and socio-economic dimensions unique to Africa. It encompasses diverse philosophies while emphasising dialogue and negotiation as essential tools and communal values central to African cultures (Nnaemeka, 2004). Our framework uniquely recognises women as active knowledge producers. They can thus contribute meaningfully to knowledge development in enabling cultural and socio-economic contexts (Mikell, 1997).

African feminism offers a framework for analysing the intersection of gender with the cultural, historical, and socio-economic dimensions specific to the African context (Shanyanana & Divala, 2017). It emphasises key concepts including intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013), agency (Nnaemeka, 2004), and collective action (Mikell, 1997) in addressing discrimination based on race, gender, age, and other social identities. It also highlights dialogue and negotiation as critical tools, in addition to the communal values fundamental to African cultures (Nnaemeka, 2004). This approach helps assess the interplay between gender and oppressive systems against academic women, enabling a more profound understanding of everyday social factors and advocating for broader social change that women academics can benefit from (Knowles, 2021). This enables women to navigate cultural expectations while maintaining their professional identities as women academics.

African feminism also criticises Western academic standards and urges African women scholars to draw upon their lived experiences to articulate their socio-cultural realities (Jagire, 2013; Tamale, 2020). For example, African HEIs inherited colonial Eurocentric academic systems that prioritised meritocracy and competition with a narrow definition of academic success and competence. This marginalises African women academics who navigate male-dominated academic systems (Nnaemeka, 2005). African feminism provides a more holistic approach to explain the lived experiences of women academics. Our perspectives account for individual

perseverance, institutional support, and collective empowerment among women scholars to navigate patriarchal systems. The fact that an individual's experience can significantly differ from the experiences of others in how their gender interacts with other identities and contextual factors, and that gender cannot be examined in a binary way, complicates the idea of studying women as a group and feminist research (DeVault & Gross, 2007). This limitation is precisely why the chapter uses an intersectional framework to guide the writing process.

Moreover, we draw on Ujamaa, a socialist ideology. It was introduced by the late Julius Nyerere, the first president of the United Republic of Tanzania. He was the champion of African socialism. The ideology aimed to redress colonial policies soon after independence. Ujamaa challenges the inequalities in education that the colonial education system precipitated. The colonial system excluded women from professional careers (Nyerere, 1987). Promoting universal primary education and adult literacy programs increased female enrolment in education from primary school to university, reducing inequalities and inequities (Mbirigenda, 2020). Ujamaa also values the production of indigenous knowledge that influences the local research agenda. The agenda is an essential enabler for women academics to address regional problems through their influential collectives.

The Ujamaa ideology prioritises collective responsibility and social cohesion over individualism, emphasising that all humans are constituent parts of a larger community. People share mutual responsibilities in this greater whole (Mukhungulu et al., 2017). It asserts that one person's success is inextricably linked to that of others, thereby fostering a supportive environment. Ujamaa also emphasises the familial support to achieve collective goals. It challenges the Western construct, which tends to prioritise individualism and competition (Kibona & Woldegiorgis, 2023). Ujamaa aligns with the lived experiences of women scholars and considers that individual success is realisable through communal support. Ujamaa also illuminates the structural barriers to their research production in Tanzania. Group collaboration can inspire social change through mutual support to build and nurture research networks. In these, women work together on projects and co-author publications that advocate for gender equity. These networks can also foster more inclusive and empowering academic environments (Morley, 2014). Such partnerships, both within and across institutions, enhance access to resources, promote knowledge sharing, and amplify the voices of marginalised women (Liani

et al., 2021). Regional initiatives, such as the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) programme, provide women scholars with opportunities to collaborate, exchange knowledge, and apply for research funding.

However, the policy of Ujamaa served as a framework for national development and emphasised the reproductive roles assigned to women; that is, women as caregivers and community builders rather than as independent scholars (Keskin & Abdalla, 2019). Ujamaa's ideology and policies reinforced the position of women within a cohesive state-driven agenda, which prioritised nation-building over individual development and was also oblivious to existing patriarchal norms (Meena, 2003). Until today, the legacy of Ujamaa perpetuates gender stereotypes and biases, which continue to pose challenges for women in academics. Both structural and systemic factors significantly influence women's performance and participation in career growth and leadership roles within the Tanzanian higher education institution system (Morley, 2010).

Collective agency is the ability of individuals to collaborate to achieve shared objectives, action of considerable significance when individuals face systemic constraints (Mestry & Schmidt, 2012). Collective agency enables women scholars in the Global South to navigate systemic obstacles, fostering their engagement in research while confronting gendered power structures, institutional disparities, and patriarchal norms prevalent in higher education. Women attain these goals by cultivating networks, amplifying their voices, and encouraging collaborative initiatives (Moorosi, 2018). Conversely, individual agency highlights the ability of women in academic roles to confront, redefine, and express their professional aspirations, even when faced with systemic limitations as individuals (Bodalina & Mestry, 2022; Kabeer, 1999). Engaging in strategic negotiation within evolving academic contexts can foster conditions that strengthen women's professional resilience. This chapter builds upon these integrated perspectives to thoroughly examine the lived experiences of women academics in the Tanzanian HEIs. We thus aim to illuminate our professional journeys, highlighting the persistent inequalities in the academic landscape, and explore the strategies for navigating them in pursuit of professional excellence in academia.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of our personal experiences in becoming active women scholars in Tanzania's academia. We used an autoethnographic research design, which allowed us to examine our own academic paths and determine how our personal stories relate to the larger cultural and social issues about women becoming active researchers in the country (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). This design focuses on our subjective experience as researchers, which contrasts with the ethnographic research design describing human social phenomena based on fieldwork (Chang, 2008). We self-observed our academic histories and conducted a reflexive examination of our pathways to becoming established women scholars with this approach (Maréchal, 2010). The autoethnographic method encourages self-reflection. It facilitates a profound understanding of multicultural perspectives, qualitative inquiry, and writing narratives. The design bases on the reflexive account of our experiences within Tanzanian culture. This study addresses Tanzanian cultural practices, particularly the gender dynamics within academia, in addition to critically examining our experiences in research. With the autoethnographic design, we first identified the study's central theme: the path to becoming active women researchers. We collected data from our repertoire of personal reflections and experiences as women scholars within the scope of the study objectives. We explored and shared our lived experiences as primary participants in the data collection process. We cast on the challenges we encountered, the perseverance we required, and the significance of our academic trajectories (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

As illustrated previously, our role as primary participants aligns with African feminist perspectives. These emphasise the recognition of women as producers of knowledge rather than mere consumers (Mikell, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 2003). After we collected our experiences, we contextualised the narratives within broader cultural and institutional frameworks, drawing on existing literature to identify social and cultural influences. We then systematically structured the narratives, highlighting the challenges and employing coping mechanisms. We used thematic analysis with a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013), focusing on experiences related to our study objectives and existing literature concerning the challenges faced by women academics and their coping strategies. We employed the following process to ensure the credibility of data

derived from personal experiences in the autoethnographic research. First, we incorporated the African feminism theory to present our stories and relate them to more general scholarly debates. We conducted a thorough reading of our own background information and context to facilitate the understanding of the social and cultural aspects of the stories. Finally, we integrated personal experiences with earlier research to achieve a balance between narrative analysis and imaginative interpretation. Incorporating individuals into our narratives, we adhered to ethical principles to ensure accurate and respectful reflection of their perspectives (Chang, 2008). This approach maintains the integrity of the individuals concerned and enhances the precision of our accounts.

Reflective Narratives

This section summarises our experiences and tales as we embark on our paths to become active women academics in Tanzania. We highlight the challenges encountered and the strategies implemented to handle our intricate situation. We will start with Sarah's experiences and then proceed to Cresencia's.

Sarah's Personal Account

I am a senior lecturer with seventeen years of experience in teaching, researching, and consulting in Tanzania's higher education system and over two decades of marriage. I reflect on my experiences balancing the responsibilities of being an academic, a wife, and a mother to three sons. I challenge the dominant belief that family obligations impede women's career progression in academia. My duties as a wife and mother have strengthened my resilience and broadened my scholarship by offering new insights and perspectives that enrich my academic contributions.

Academic demands and family expectations often compete for time. Balancing professional and family responsibilities is thus challenging. I experienced this tension when I began my bachelor's degree studies while expecting a child. I decided to continue my studies despite the advice to defer. The demands of completing coursework and preparing for university examinations stressed me out, especially as I welcomed my second son during my fourth year. Nevertheless, I graduated with exemplary grades, thanks to my husband's unwavering support and encouragement. During my master's degree programme, I cared for our children, attended

lectures, and stayed up late to complete assignments. Before attending lectures, I often prepared meals for my children as early as 5:00 a.m.. I stayed up until midnight to wash clothes and complete my assignments when we did not have a caretaker. However, these mounting challenges did not stop us, as a married couple, from having our third son towards the conclusion of my master's programme.

I eventually completed my master's studies and submitted my dissertation on time. While employed at the university, I cared for my father, mother-in-law, and three school-age sons. My husband was then abroad pursuing his Ph.D. studies. As the eldest daughter and daughter-in-law from the Kilimanjaro Region, I was responsible for their care, including accompanying them on hospital visits and being by their side during hospitalisation. My role as an academic woman did not exempt me from fulfilling my primary duties as a wife, mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law in the context of African culture, in addition to being an active academic. My responsibility towards my parents stemmed from natural love and affection purely as a voluntary act grounded in our relationship. It was also my profound gratitude and obligation to give back for all they had done for me. Besides, societal and structural expectations compel children to provide care for their parents (Aboderin, 2006). Regardless of my family and professional responsibilities, I applied for a PhD sponsorship and secured a Commonwealth scholarship. The sponsorship enabled me to pursue my Ph.D. studies in the UK. The loneliness I experienced there motivated me to work hard and return home on time.

Gender biases interfered with how I managed my research time, as weekends often required me to handle household chores such as cleaning, washing, and cooking because traditional Tanzanian society expects me to shoulder a woman's responsibilities. This struggle to find uninterrupted time for research continued unabated, even with the assistance of house help. As a responsible married woman, I cooked and cared for my family, particularly on weekends. Additionally, I devoted Sundays to church and family time, leaving me with little to no time for research. The sacredness of Sundays and societal expectations of women as primary carers further encroached upon my research time.

This gendered division of labour extended to formal research settings. For example, a senior staff member invited me into a research project. During data collection, I had family responsibilities that I could not delegate for an extended period away from home. My three school-aged sons needed motherly care, and my ailing mother-in-law and father were in

need of medical attention and also required my support. It therefore became increasingly challenging for me to continue with the project. The senior project staff replaced me with a male colleague with my consent.

Occasionally, gender biases, stereotypes, and discouragement originated from my female colleagues. I recall seeking advice from some of them on navigating academia as a married woman upon returning from my Ph.D. studies. One colleague responded curtly, 'My dear, can we truly compete with men? They have ample time. We are married and have numerous responsibilities. How will you find time for research and publication? Do you want to risk your marriage? Look at successful women in academia. How many are married? You cannot have everything.' This statement alarmed some female colleagues, leading them to believe that academic success could inadvertently harm their marriages. They used this belief, misguided as it sometimes could be, as a defence mechanism. I, however, assured myself that if God's grace and hard work had brought me to higher education, the same grace and determination would sustain me throughout my research career.

I also encountered a significant hurdle in limited mentorship to become an active researcher. I struggled with academic writing early on, with little formal training in it. This was both frustrating and confusing. After completing the master's degree, I had anticipated mentorship in academic writing from experienced researchers through opportunities to co-author research articles. I could not realise this. I resorted to trial-and-error writing, which was slow and laborious. Nevertheless, I remained resolute and determined to persevere.

Subsequently, I have developed a robust social support network to help me cope with academic challenges. Also, my kind-hearted and considerate husband, an educator, has been a pillar of my strength and motivation. His understanding of academic pressures has allowed me to navigate my professional responsibilities without feeling guilty about the time I should spend on my career. His encouragement and emotional support have been invaluable, especially during challenging moments. He would, for example, help me out when we did not have a caretaker by watching our sons in the evenings while I took care of dinner and the kids' laundry. He also encouraged me to pursue my PhD abroad while he cared for our children with support from my mother-in-law and a relative. His unwavering moral, emotional, and financial support enabled me to get my PhD in three years. My nearby mother and mother-in-law were very helpful,

especially when we had no caretaker. They used to take care of my sons while I played my academic role.

Collaboration has been a significant strategy in my research journey. It has allowed me to participate in several projects with colleagues and postgraduate students. I managed to reduce the time required to write a collaborative manuscript compared to single-authored papers. Collaborators share responsibilities in co-authored manuscripts. However, the success of these largely depends on the commitment of the collaborators. Also, co-authored papers sometimes take much longer than single-authored papers. Collaboration has also enhanced my research skills through the cross-pollination of knowledge and experience among collaborators. Additionally, it has improved the quality of my work by incorporating diverse perspectives from multiple scholars on the same subject matter.

To enrich my collaboration research networks, I focused on co-authoring research articles with shared benefits with other experts. I published eight co-authored papers with this strategy; the other six are in review at the time of this writing. I have also collaborated with my postgraduate students, and this co-creation has supported their academic growth and created a mutually beneficial environment for knowledge exchange. I have maintained the production of high-quality research output while managing other responsibilities, including teaching and family matters.

Properly managed research collaboration also promotes gender equality. Firstly, it brings equal participation for men and women. This helps uncover, confront, and diminish the gender biases and stereotypes that women frequently encounter in academic settings, including in research. Secondly, collaboration creates professional networks for women and partnerships with men. These synergies offer mentorship, guidance, and support. They enable women to manage challenges more efficiently. Thirdly, the distribution of tasks in research collaborations provides greater flexibility. The flexibility helps women academics to balance family obligations with career responsibilities and promotes more equitable professional growth opportunities for everyone involved. However, if a research team is poorly organised and inadequately managed, collaboration becomes dysfunctional, leading to exclusion and decreased productivity.

Writing retreats have become crucial in higher education to make the most out of the limited research time. They cushion against interruptions

resulting from the priority placed on teaching and following university regulations. Given the family responsibilities, they also offset the challenge of relying on weekends, early mornings, and late nights to write. Our institution, therefore, offers writing retreats for female academics. However, these opportunities are scarce and often inaccessible to many female scholars. I decided to participate in self-funded writing retreats from 2022 to the present to address this issue. The goal was to attend at least two retreats each year. I then collaborated with fellow women academics to organise our retreats for dedicated research in 2024. We agreed to hold at least two writing retreats per academic year. As a result, I successfully completed significant writing projects, both collaboratively and independently.

We scheduled the retreat three months in advance. We usually hold the retreats during short or long university vacations, giving us ample time to plan and execute them successfully and manage our responsibilities. This includes arranging with our spouses, children, relatives, or caretakers to delegate responsibilities and ensure a smooth absence from home. We organise retreats outside the city, sometimes in upcountry locations, to minimise distractions. Each participant is expected to engage in a specific academic task during the retreat, such as conducting data analysis, drafting a manuscript, or developing a research proposal based on a well-defined research problem and objectives. We also provide each other peer support, including peer reviewing of each other's work for publication.

My story is incomplete if I do not share my faith in God. My faith has anchored me in times of doubt, exhaustion, and stress. I rely on prayers and fellowship with other Christian believers. Our faith provides peace and clarity and helps us navigate difficult moments with hope. I also mention the sacred words of Joshua 1:9: 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.' The gospel also states in Philippians 4:13: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' Self-doubt sometimes creeps in due to socio-cultural factors. Faith and prayers provide me the emotional support and confidence I need. I have learnt to trust my knowledge, ability, and determination.

Cresencia's Personal Account

Career advancement in research has never been straightforward for me as a woman academic and researcher at a higher education institution

in Tanzania. I face numerous challenges that are common to women academics. They include striking a balance between family obligations and professional responsibilities, limited access to research opportunities, and navigating a male-dominated academic environment. These factors are obstacles that hinder my ability to publish, collaborate, and advance in my academic career. My experience is a story of systemic barriers to many women academics in pursuit of research excellence and leadership roles. As a measure against systemic inertia, Sarah and I collaborated to operationalise the women-to-women writing retreats, which advance our productivity and resilience and are therefore empowering. Working with Sarah on this book chapter enabled us to share lived experiences. The sharing convinced us of the need for institutional reforms to address gender bias in research opportunities, mentorship, and leadership positions in support of the current and future generations of women researchers.

I grew up in a society entrenched in a patriarchal culture. The continuity from primary to secondary school was fraught with uncertainty, given that public schools were few. Many ethnic cultures in Tanzania prioritise boys and perceive them as future providers and descendants of family legacies. Therefore, families often choose to educate boys, viewing it as a strategic benefit for the family. My parents invested in my education in defiance of that cultural imposition. My parents had both completed primary school, a remarkable achievement in their era. However, my grandmother redirected my father to help raise the family cattle and cut his education short. My mother, who was passionate about school, succumbed to an illness. With this hindsight, my parents aspired to provide their children with all the educational opportunities they could afford. Their sacrifice shaped my academic endeavours rather profoundly. I honour their legacy by encouraging young girls to value education and challenging outdated impositions on them. Four of five women in my family have earned postgraduate degrees. Only one of my three brothers has an undergraduate degree. Despite all the children in the family having similar educational opportunities, only one brother has an undergraduate degree. This tells of the importance of parental support in breaking the cycle of inequality and demonstrating that any child can be successful.

In advancing my studies, I faced societal pressure to pursue a PhD despite traditional beliefs that educated women might struggle to find a husband. This fear suggests that women's education may hinder their marriage chances, leading to the expectation that they should abandon

their studies and prioritise finding a husband. I ignored such negativity since I was determined to earn a PhD, knowing the personal growth and the value I could bring to my community. As such, I encourage others, particularly young women, to believe in the transformative power of education. After all, societal expectations should never compromise education and empowerment. I believe young women should prioritise their personal growth over societal norms, as empowerment should always take precedence over often biased and misguided societal expectations.

After my doctoral studies, I realised the importance of publishing to advance my academic career and achieve knowledge-sharing goals. Publication had not been a core component of the doctoral training, so I had to learn the publication business. When I returned to teaching, a colleague in one of the HEIs advised me to focus on publications rather than part-time teaching. The experience reinforced the importance of dedication to publishing for career progress and my sense of purpose and revitalised my energy. Publishing is now integral to my strategy for academic and professional growth. I have co-authorship of six journal articles, one conference proceeding, and this upcoming book chapter. My heartfelt appreciation to Professor Steven Maluka for his guidance.

I have profoundly benefited from women mentors. I came across one successful female professor in particular. I encountered a successful woman academic during my second year of undergraduate studies. Her success in education ignited my passion for further studies, including the doctorate. Her achievements, resilience, and dedication inspired me. She motivated me to pursue my ambition and demonstrated that women can thrive in academia. She challenged stereotypes and offered practical guidance to navigate the unique challenges women experience in that space. She also inspired me to become a role model, leveraging my experience to mentor and support younger women in research. Learning from women role models can empower the newer women academics and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive research environment. Inspired by my role model, I am currently a senior lecturer steadily working up the professorial ranks.

HEIs often have male-dominated departments. These could benefit women researchers if they consider their position as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Male colleagues typically excel in areas such as publishing, project writing, and securing funding. This is because they have fewer work-life balance constraints than women peers, who often bear a disproportionate burden of caregiving and household

responsibilities. This curtails the time and energy they can commit to research and funding attraction. Collaboration with male colleagues with a compelling record in research management has given me insights into essential academic skills. These include project proposal writing, securing research grants, and developing effective research strategies. I learn their approaches to managing time and capitalising on academic networks and apply them in my own space. The personal development that has resulted from this way has significantly grown my confidence. I worked with a senior male researcher on a grant proposal and learnt how to craft compelling funding applications, identify potential funders, and effectively communicate the significance of the research. The skills I developed through collaboration have greatly enhanced my ability to secure research funding independently.

I am the only woman academic in my department. With measurable individual development catalysed by professional collaborations, I am motivated to challenge stereotypes and demonstrate that I thrive in male-dominated settings in academia. Through such experiences, I actively encourage other women to pursue academic careers and seek opportunities in contexts that may otherwise be gender-imperfect. I am convinced that collaboration adds significantly to mentorship and professional growth and is crucial for more robust and innovative research and its outcomes.

The digital space makes it easy for researchers like me, from the Global South, to connect with Global North researchers. Digital platforms aid communication, reaching out and establishing collaborations, and provide access to training and grant opportunities. While some of my project proposals did not secure funding, each attempt to secure project funding with project proposals has enriched my skills and experience in the application process. With professional collaboration, I have increased chances of successful research funding, visibility, and impact. I engage in international research networks, strengthening my ability to contribute to innovative, high-quality research addressing critical regional issues. These experiences have assisted in building more networks with the global research community, where diverse perspectives are recognised and amplified.

As an early-career researcher, I found navigating the academic ranks between junior and senior colleagues challenging, despite networking being central to successful research. At times, I felt humiliated when more experienced researchers ignored contributions from juniors like myself,

leaving me frustrated and discouraged. I realised the importance of senior researchers publicly acknowledging and appreciating the contributions of junior researchers in fostering inclusivity and a supportive environment. The lack of constructive feedback was a significant challenge to me. It made it difficult to gauge my progress and improve my work. Therefore, I learnt how to communicate my contributions more confidently. I also ask for open feedback to improve my academic pursuit. Such feedback is crucial for personal development and creates opportunities for more academic collaborations.

The Interplay of Intersectionality and Ujamaa Ideology in Shaping Personal Experiences

Our experiences resonate with African feminist thought, which highlights how gender roles impose additional expectations on women while also acknowledging their significant contributions to family and community life. As women, gender norms expect us to serve our families, while our employers (higher education institutions) also expect us to advance professionally. These competing demands pressure our time, energy, and emotional well-being. They reflect broader patriarchal norms that continue to shape the academic landscape across much of the Global South. As women academics, we have had to navigate these expectations while striving to establish ourselves as researchers, and we did so through working together. While the Ujamaa and collective action frameworks critiqued the structural forces that sustained gender disparities, intersectionality emphasised how overlapping social identities perpetuated these inequalities (Mama, 2011).

The concept of intersectionality, rooted in African feminism, as used in this chapter, examines the interplay between gender and social institutions alongside patriarchal systems, on which we base our experiences. Through the lens of intersectionality, which considers multiple aspects of identity, our experiences illuminate how the social landscape interacts with the higher education system to generate specific forms of discrimination while sometimes offering privileges and advantages for women to progress in their careers (Sircar, 2022). By exploring multiple overlapping factors that shape women's identity in HEIs, we now better understand the challenges, needs, and ability to adapt to challenges that women academics face, revealing important insights that a simple view would miss (Crimmins et al., 2023). From an intersectionality perspective, women value

their social roles over professional development, which limits their participation in career progression, including research and publishing (Hopkins, 2018). Family duties usually take precedence over careers, maintaining gender inequality in academia. Thus, women in academia often have to choose between their personal happiness and career goals, potentially missing out on significant academic contributions.

Cresencia's experience highlights the deep-seated patriarchy in Tanzania and the broader Global South that discourages women's advancement in academia. From an early age, she encountered societal norms that privileged boys' education over that of girls. However, the belief and support of her parents enabled her to pursue higher education. Thus, she challenged the cultural perception that confines a woman's primary role to the household. African feminism supports establishing social networks and cooperation to balance academic and familial obligations. These concepts highlight community support for enabling women academics to have time for their career progression (Adichie, 2014; Mama, 2011). Our faith is crucial to our resilience and overcoming the negative feelings and emotions associated with the challenges. Reliance on God aligns with African feminist values. These integrate spirituality in women's empowerment. These coping strategies, including social support and collaboration, enable women academics to navigate the complexities of the various competing spaces of responsibilities, including maintaining their scholarly professional identities (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Drawing on Ujamaa has profoundly shaped the social support networks we are part of. Its advocacy for strong communal ties and a societal structure where individuals consider each other and their extended family members strongly aligns with the principles of Ubuntu. As women scholars in Tanzania, we benefit from these communal principles, especially in balancing professional and family obligations. For example, extended family networks are instrumental in enabling us to manage our academic responsibilities and the well-being of our families through the support they offer. As advocated for through Ujamma, collectivity distributes care responsibilities among extended family members to reinforce the notion of shared social responsibility. This communal lifestyle reduces social inequality and upholds the dignity of all (Nyerere, 1987). Through this approach that serves the collective good, interdependent and resilient community social security networks have been fostered. Such principles continue to provide a foundation for women scholars in academia to meet challenges and benefit from the academic communal

networks. Our lived experiences reveal that the cultures of Tanzania's HEIs either resist or ignore women's traditional gender roles, indicating that taking on the familial role is a liability for women. However, the collective social support structure through extended family networks has helped us navigate academic and career growth, with family roles such as caring for the sick and elderly parents. Tanzanian extended families share carers, emphasising a shared societal duty. This collaborative lifestyle lowers social inequalities and honours everyone (Nyerere, 1987), contradicting the Global North models of nursing home facilities for the elderly.

Our experiences illustrate how the convergence of intersectionality and Ujamaa ideology offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities women academics face in Tanzania and pathways for collective action to navigate them. The integration of intersectionality with Ujamaa, collective action, and agency enriched our analysis of communal support systems available to women in Tanzania's higher education institutions, including ourselves. This multi-lens approach also illuminated the barriers we encountered, such as gender bias and institutional inequalities, and how, as a team, we supported each other in navigating these challenges. The integrated framework provided a deeper understanding of the realities faced by women academics. Awareness of these challenges was often subtle or masked in patriarchal societies, where gender discrimination intersected with cultural and institutional frameworks (Bodalina & Mestry, 2022). Recognising the significance of these frameworks not only enhances our understanding of gender dynamics in higher education but also underscores the need for institutional policies that acknowledge and address these intersecting challenges.

Concluding Remarks

Becoming a female researcher in Tanzania's higher education institutions presents challenges and opportunities for growth and resilience. While balancing family and professional responsibilities, navigating gender biases, and overcoming the limitations of mentorship can be daunting, we have found success through the support of social networks. Our encouragement from spouses, parents, relatives, and friends has been invaluable. Additionally, research collaborations with colleagues and postgraduate students have significantly expedited the research and writing process. Writing retreats have also proven particularly beneficial, as they provide

dedicated time away from work and domestic duties, allowing us to concentrate on our academic productivity.

Furthermore, faith in God is a crucial emotional coping mechanism, empowering us to confront challenges with resilience and hope. We aspire to inspire future generations to persevere and advocate for more inclusive research environments that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by women. This change is necessary and urgent to foster a more equitable research landscape in Tanzania.

We recognise the significance of resilience and effective time management in achieving our professional objectives. To make the most of our limited time, we have developed strategies to balance family life with academic responsibilities, enabling us to meet research deadlines, even in the face of personal challenges. The cultivation and maintenance of social support networks comprising spouses, family members, and caregivers have proved essential for our professional development. Furthermore, faith in God and confidence in our abilities have played a crucial role in overcoming self-doubt and asserting ourselves in a male-dominated field. In an environment where men often have greater access to time, resources, and support, they have strategically created opportunities by attending writing retreats and seeking mentorship within informal networks. Consequently, higher education institutions must allocate the same support to women academics, considering their complex experiences within and outside academia.

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"Leaving Becomes the Only Way Out"—The False Promise of Academic Freedom for Emerging Global South Researchers

Yuqi Lin and Eisuke Saito

Introduction

Academic freedom is the cornerstone of scholarly enterprises and is essential for maintaining the quality of academic work (Hayes, 2009). Although there are various definitions (see Stachowiak-Kudła et al., 2023), the one provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1997) is widely accepted. Following this definition, this chapter defines academic freedom as the freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in conducting research and disseminating and publishing the results, freedom to express opinions about one's institution, freedom from institutional censorship, and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.

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Ideally, academic freedom is governed by independent scholars and institutes (UNESCO, 1997). In practice, however, it encompasses and influenced by various discourses, such as management approaches by institutional leadership, themes prioritised by funding schemes, and the intersection of national security and research. Consequently, the practice of academic freedom is complex and challenging (O'Neil, 2008). Moreover, the concept of academic freedom has become blurred, shaped by multiple dimensions including legal, ethnic, political, financial, and socio-cultural factors (Stachowiak-Kudła et al., 2023). Therefore, it requires further examination and discussion from diverse perspectives (O'Neil, 2008).

This chapter employs an autoethnographic case study of the first author (Yuqi), an Asian female researcher in a Western Global North academic community, to explore her experiences of marginalisation and restricted academic freedom. The second author (Eisuke), a senior scholar, has been invited to provide his perspectives on the Yuqi's experiences. The study will detail three pivotal moments: the construction of false promises, the conditioning to perform on demand, and the eventual disillusioned departure from the university. These narratives capture her journey as a junior Global South researcher (GSR) attempting to assert her voice and ultimately leaving the university disheartened and exhausted.

Such narratives are often obscured in academic discourse and have seldom been scrutinised. The chapter will engage with theoretical debates on academic freedom and inclusion, using intersectionality as a lens to highlight the compounded disadvantages faced by someone embodying multiple marginal identities—an Asian female, an emerging scholar, and a temporary immigrant in the Global North (Crenshaw, 1991). By illustrating how the Yuqi navigates and negotiates challenges to exercise her academic freedom, this work aims to provide a framework for understanding academic freedom from the perspective of Global South scholars. It seeks to empower Global South scholars to continually challenge and reshape prevailing narratives to attain greater academic freedom.

Being and Becoming a Global South Researcher

Across disciplines, researchers from outside the Global South often occupy privileged positions in knowledge generation, leaving graduate student researchers (GSRs) with fewer opportunities and greater challenges in developing concepts and theories, and creating knowledge

(Barker, 2016; Kim, 2021). This disparity in representation and recognition of Global South narratives is rooted in a historical context marked by "imperialism, slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism" (Zimbalist & Ramírez, 2024, p. 128). This power asymmetry allows hegemonic academic practices to persist, reinforcing core-periphery relations between the Anglophone core and peripheral countries (Meriläinen et al., 2008). It is therefore critical to amplify the often-silenced voices of GSRs to understand their experiences, how they navigate existing inequalities in academia, and the strategies they employ to negotiate their environment (Moran, 2020; Salmon, 2023).

The subsequent section utilises the concepts of 'being' and 'becoming' to examine the initial behaviours of GSRs and their progression through deeper engagement in academia. Drawing on Heidegger's (1960) philosophy, it posits that all human beings are inherently oriented towards their potential, which includes paths to both authentic and inauthentic existence. It's crucial to note that changes in behaviours, perspectives, or values may not fully capture their authentic selves. Instead, these changes are often influenced and shaped by their environments, perceived norms, and acquired knowledge. 'Being' is defined as a specific ontological presence at a particular point in time, while 'becoming' is seen as the continuous evolution of the ontological or subjective self (Natanasabapathy & Maathuis-Smith, 2018, p. 371). This exploration aims to critically investigate the inner quests of GSRs as they strive for self-satisfaction, development goals, and overcoming challenges, and critically examines their reflections and interactions to portray the academic environment that shapes their experiences.

Being a Global South Researchers in the Global North

Being a GSR involves navigating the intersections of race, gender, class, and age within an academic environment governed by strict rules, regulations, and organisational structures (Weng et al., 2021; Salmon, 2023). Salmon (2023, p. 513) highlights that neoliberal universities are characterised by 'academic job insecurity ... quasi-feudal social relations ... and competitive individualism.' In these settings, managerial roles, often held by white men, are privileged, while non-white staff frequently face labour exploitation, particularly in diversity projects (Salmon, 2023). Such phenomena, where overt racism threatens financial stability, are common

in neoliberal institutions (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The marketisation process within these universities aims to create a welcoming environment to attract fee-paying international students and international funding yet often underpins superficial diversity projects that serve as cost-effective marketing tools rather than genuine inclusivity initiatives (Lin, 2023; Robertson, 2011). Some of these projects, staffed by junior scholars from the Global South, ostensibly promote racial harmony while detracting from underlying social injustices (Salmon, 2023).

Moreover, being a GSR in such contexts is fraught with challenges related to belonging and inequality within these institutions (Moran, 2020). Lin and Xu (2022) note that belonging involves feeling safe and at home, a sentiment often elusive for GSRs involved in nationalist political projects of belonging, who struggle to secure citizenship in their countries of residence and work (Weng et al., 2021). These overlapping citizenship issues can lead to denied access to academic rights and services such as funding, memberships, or scholarships (Robertson, 2011), further exacerbating exclusion from academic life and negatively impacting social and mental well-being (Lin & Xu, 2022). As Weng et al. (2021) observe, in Australia, a pronounced hierarchy of exclusion exists where whiteness is often equated with Australianness. Individuals who are non-English speaking, non-Christian, and non-white are frequently seen as objects to be governed, or they are ignored, and their contributions undervalued. With large-scale migration challenging the construct of a white nation, racism in Australian society becomes situational, influenced by specific circumstances, relationships, and environments (Weng et al., 2021). Jammulamadaka and Alexandre Faria (2023) identify a prevailing sentiment in universities of 'you are with us or against us,' which masquerades as an effort towards inclusion and cultural diversity. For GSRs, this environment creates a conflict between engaging in decolonising academic activities and being marginalised as the 'other' (Jammulamadaka & Alexandre Faria, 2023).

In the broader context of knowledge production, scholars from the Global North continue to dominate, often propagating their own concepts, methods, and theories while excluding perspectives from the Global South (Meriläinen et al., 2008; Zimbalist & Ramírez, 2024). The academic publishing process reflects this bias, where publication in prestigious journals is commonly viewed as a measure of academic success, further perpetuating these hegemonies (Meriläinen et al., 2008). However, this process is inequitable; scholars from the Global South are

underrepresented in top-tier journals, where scholars from the Global North frequently act as gatekeepers (Zimbalist & Ramírez, 2024). During the peer review process, reviewers often compel authors from the Global South to reference specific scholars, typically from the Global North (Meriläinen et al., 2008). Additionally, reviewers frequently critique the English language of these authors, despite the use of proofreaders, a situation which Eisuka has experienced. Moreover, they may point out deficiencies in the theorisation of arguments (Tamang & Deka, 2023, p. 19). As a result, the publication process is dominated by hegemonic academic practices (Jammulamadaka & Alexandre Faria, 2023). This dynamic, along with strong institutional pressures, forces scholars from the Global South to conform to the prevailing publication standards to gain recognition, job security, and career advancement (Barker, 2019).

Becoming a Global South Researcher

In light of the preceding review, it is not surprising that GSRs face unique challenges to survive and thrive in academia (Barker, 2019; Kim, 2021; Moran, 2020). Scholarship from the Global South is comparatively limited, difficult to access, and often deprioritised by institutions (Adefila et al., 2021; Jammulamadaka & Alexandre Faria, 2023). The main reasons for the exclusion and marginalisation of GSRs in the academic community are identified as a lack of funding, representation, and clear development pathways (Kim, 2021; Weng, Zimbalist & Ramírez, 2024). Barker (2016), drawing on critical race theory, suggests that this hierarchy within academia is subtly maintained under the guise of individualistic discourse. In modern society, racism is increasingly based on perceived cultural differences rather than biological ones (Baker et al., 2021), and is rationalised through universally applied rules, regulations, and norms.

Leonardo (2002) notes that whiteness is not merely a description of white people but a performance, a racial discourse, and a way of being. According to Barker (2016), referencing Bourdieu's concept of habitus, whiteness involves 'a set of learned characteristics and practices that include a sense of superiority and entitlement' (p. 137). These characteristics and practices normalise the advancement of white individuals while delegitimising others, citing reasons such as lack of employability, affirmative actions, or cultural misunderstandings (Baker et al., 2021; Kim, 2021). In this context, GSRs may face a dilemma: either conform to the

prevailing norms and values of whiteness to become successful researchers or preserve their ethnic and cultural identities.

It is a frequent occurrence for GSRs to feel pressured to 'assimilate, accommodate, or be expelled once their usefulness expires,' as Salmon (2023, p. 514) notes. Furthermore, Chong and Ahmed (2013) introduce the concept of 'permitted proximity' to illustrate the precarious position of GSRs. They describe GSRs as being seen as intruders until they conform to white standards, at which point their physical presence may be tolerated.

Franken et al. (2024, p. 2) highlight that non-white women are often expected to 'refrain from challenging white people and to protect their ignorance', conforming to male-dominated organisational structures as compliant workers. This behaviour typically leads to severe consequences, which are often mischaracterised as personal issues, such as stress, burnout, or a lack of belonging.

Ironically, diversity initiatives presented as effective solutions for inclusion continue to flourish in institutions, employing positive language and uplifting narratives to demonstrate the integration of non-white individuals, as discussed by Weng et al. (2021). Drawing on Butler's (1999) theory of performativity, which posits that gender is not innate but rather constructed through repetitive actions, it is implied that such initiatives might also perform a similar superficial adherence to inclusion. Similarly, it is unfair to blame GSRs who participate in diversity initiatives, as their actions are often reinforced by institutional, cultural, and societal norms (Zimbalist & Ramírez, 2024). According to Franken et al. (2024), through power mechanisms and control, GSRs undergo a process of internalisation and colonisation, resulting in the creation of 'engineered', 'designer', or 'enterprise' selves. These power dynamics within their environments can fundamentally reshape their identities and behaviours, as they struggle to define their selfhood.

Being a GSR is undeniably complex and challenging. Any attempt to change or resist established norms can lead to expulsion from academia, or at least a forced or obligatory departure. While there has been some exploration into the experiences of 'being' and 'becoming' a GSR, a deeper understanding is still necessary. This should include the experiences of those GSRs who have left academia, exploring how they navigate and react within the academic contexts of the Global North, the treatment they receive from organisations, and how these interactions shape their self-perception over time. These insights are crucial for the GSR

community to foster self-awareness and resilience, enabling them to navigate academia more successfully and potentially excel in their academic pursuits.

Global South Researchers and Academic Freedom

Since the 1900s, the relationship between academic freedom, race, diversity, and inclusivity has been a topic of debate. It is worthwhile to define the boundary of academic freedom for GSR, which is different from epistemic freedom. The former one focus on the autonomy of universities as independent institutions, and the rights of researchers to express their ideas and conduct experiences. Epistemic freedom is about cognitive justice, focusing on "the content of what it is that we are free to express and, on whose terms," (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2018, p. 18). As such, epistemic freedom is considered a broader and deeper concept that encompasses both cognitive and behavioural aspects of freedom for academics.

Currently, as Woldegiorgis (2023) points out, the provenance of the universalist model of the university leads to a hegemonic idea of what knowledge is, how it should be produced, and how university knowledge should be taught. In this way, universities in the Global South may compromise their cultural, epistemological, and ontological contributions in order to assimilate and produce knowledge that is *globally accepted*. In the process, the independence of knowledge production is lost, and critical voices and invaluable insights from the region are getting harder to hear. Being a GSR, they should be empowered and motivated to conduct research that is "properly intended and culturally oriented" (Woldegiorgis, 2023, p. 101), and becoming confidence in producing knowledge that is intellectually sophisticated and socially and culturally connected, reflecting their being and becoming. Therefore, when discussing academic freedom for GSRs, it is critical to consider epistemic freedom, as it serves as the foundation for developing diverse ways of knowing, understanding, and engaging with human beings, as well as making sense of their existence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2018).

Moreover, the experience of being and becoming a GSR cannot be understood from a single-axis perspective, as every individual possesses multiple identities and each of these identities can reinforce and influence one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, the intersectional approach has been providing a particularly helpful theoretical lens, allowing researchers

to gain a more comprehensive understanding of individuals coming from multiple disadvantaged backgrounds, which may include gender, ethnicity, religion, and social group affiliation (Crenshaw, 1991. These individuals may experience social discriminations based on multiple identities, which affects their work, lives, and development in the Global North. For example, Salmon (2023) analyses the experiences of a female and non-white person, who is positioned differently in a Global North university compared to both white and non-white men, and experiences power and suppression based on her multiple identities. Conscious of that, numerous global campaigns have been organised by scholar communities, institutions, and student groups, addressing issues to reverse racism, anti-immigrant discourses, ideological diversity, and anti-neo-racism (Sukhera et al., 2022). Despite these efforts, minority groups in academia often feel they have not received fair treatment, facing more subtle and delicate forms of discrimination that marginalise and other them within the scholarly community (Hayes, 2009; Rodriguez, 2021). Instances of overt exclusion are not uncommon, such as the recent blocking of Chinese students from academic labs in Florida, USA (Mervis, 2023).

Ledesma and Calderón (2015) describe this as suffering from colour-blind racism, where some whites profess anti-racism yet blame minorities for their experiences of racism. Racism within academia has evolved to become highly structural and cleverly interwoven with political and economic liberalism (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). This suggests that the exercise of power in academic settings is justified under political liberalism, with each participant deemed to be freely choosing their actions, the consequences of which they must accept as inevitable (Moran, 2024a, 2024b). Despite this, few scholars acknowledge that structural or institutional racism causes disparities between non-White and White students, instead offering various plausible reasons to deflect from racism (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001; Harper, 2012). This 'anything but racism' approach leads to the systematic negation of minority experiences, feelings, and discussions, perpetuating unfair treatment and structural discrimination (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

With these insights, this study aims to explore how academic freedom for emerging Global South scholars is compromised within the Global North academic community. By referencing the concept of being and becoming, it seeks to examine the nuances between different academic stages and the shifts in mindsets over time.

Methodology

This study employed autoethnography as its research method, a qualitative phenomenological methodology that allows researchers to engage critically with their own identities and systematically analyse the connections between themselves, others, cultures, structures, and politics (Lin & Zhang, 2021). This approach encourages researchers to deeply explore their personal experiences, enabling them to reflect on their behaviours, values, and transformations within the experiences under study (Lin et al., 2022). It is important to note that while autoethnography focuses on personal experiences, it is inherently a social practice. Researchers are required to unravel the interactions and relationships between themselves and other social actors, thus elucidating the underlying reasons and dynamics behind their reactions (Lin & Xu, 2022). Additionally, they must situate themselves within a sociocultural and organisational context characterised by established rules, regulations, and norms (Lin & Zhang, 2021). Through continuous reflection, researchers develop a critical mindset that helps them scrutinise their assumptions and uncover unconscious aspects of their experiences, potentially overlooked before. This process may empower them to reclaim their voice, and their narratives could in turn empower others with similar experiences (Lin et al., 2022).

Autoethnography was employed in this study to cultivate a nuanced and empathetic understanding of human experiences (Lin & Zhang, 2021). That is, autoethnography was chosen for this study because of a need to explore the difficult and troubled experiences that Yuqi had—expecting that there would be similar contexts and issues experienced by other non-White, female and non-native scholars from the Global South. Through this method, the authors engaged in critical self-reflection, analysing their interactions with social actors and cultural and political environments that shaped these relationships. The study incorporates both insider and outsider perspectives, facilitated by autoethnography—a synthesis of autobiography and ethnography (Xu & Lin, 2024). This methodological approach is particularly effective for examining the experiences of Global South researchers (GSRs) navigating Global North contexts, as it uncovers the cognitive and emotional processes underlying these experiences while highlighting the human dimension of the narrative.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process in this study was structured around Borton's (1970) reflective practice model, which utilises three key questions: what, so what, and now what. These questions encouraged the authors to reflect on their experiences, explore their inner thoughts, and articulate their future aspirations. The primary data originated from the Yuqi's notes, emails, and personal files, documenting her tenure as a GSR in Australia. She undertook a detailed self-reflection from February 2021 to September 2023, charting her journey from a final-year master's student beginning her initial research project to her decision to withdraw from a prestigious doctoral programme for which she had been offered a full scholarship. The SA contributed constructive comments and critical insights throughout the narrative, drawing on his experience as a senior researcher.

For data analysis, a thematic approach was employed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. Initially, both authors familiarised themselves with the data by reading through the notes and assigning preliminary codes. These initial codes were then scrutinised within the theoretical framework of 'being and becoming' to distil the main themes. This method allowed us to thoroughly engage with the data while maintaining a focus on theoretical underpinnings.

Positionalities

This study primarily focuses on Yuqi's narrative, detailing her experiences as an emerging GSR in the academic environment of the Global North. She completed her undergraduate degree in China before pursuing postgraduate studies in Australia. She received her research training at prestigious Australian universities—ranked top 100 in the world—and earned numerous awards for her academic performance. Throughout her academic career, she continued publishing journal articles and book chapters with reputable publishers. In 2023, she decided to temporarily leave academia and withdrew from her doctoral project at a world top-ranked university for perceiving restrictions in choosing research areas, despite having been awarded an Australian government scholarship.

Eisuke is a lecturer at the Australian university where Yuqi completed her master's degree. He is a Japanese male scholar with a background

in educational development consultancy and has also worked at a university in Singapore for seven years. Currently, he has been working at his present university in Australia for eight years. His original expertise was in school reform in developing Asian countries, and he is now expanding his interests to include supporting master's students with their publications. Eisuke has acted as an informal collaborator and supporter for Yuqi, organising fortnightly informal sessions on academic publication, which Yuqi attended. In this chapter, Eisuke serves as a critical friend (Samaras, 2011), providing comments and critiques that encourage the Eisuke to reflect and look deeper into her experiences. The reflective exchanges between the Yuqi and Eisuke occurred from February to April 2024 and between June and July 2024, with the Eisuke focusing on areas that require further exploration and elaboration.

Findings

When Yuqibegan her master's degree in Australia, the concept of academic freedom was unclear and vague to her. Initially, she equated academic freedom simply with the right to express oneself, a concept that during her education in China, she had taken for granted, assuming it was a natural right, especially in Western countries. In 2019, she moved to Australia to pursue her master's degree and formal research training.

During the first year of her postgraduate studies, she went deeper into critical thinking. This exploration prompted her to reflect on how the Chinese education system might hinder the development of its college-educated individuals. She was pleasantly surprised by the support from her lecturers for this reflective process, which boosted her confidence to actively participate in scholarly debates and develop her own perspectives. She began to understand academic freedom as the ability to uphold the truth and respect diverse viewpoints.

Initially, she believed she had found a supportive environment that welcomed diverse opinions. However, this perspective shifted slightly during her publishing experiences. A peer reviewer suggested she broaden the implications of her articles, particularly for the U.S. audience. As a junior researcher, she was perplexed by this request but complied, hoping it would enhance the relevance of her findings. Subsequently, it became common for reviewers to suggest that her articles be proofread by native speakers, despite being co-authored with experienced senior researchers and already professionally proofread. This feedback was disconcerting and

led her to question the adequacy of her academic writing or whether her non-native background was apparent.

Despite these challenges, her early academic years were successful. She maintained a strong publication record, received accolades, and secured grants and scholarships. Supported by her senior colleagues, academia seemed like a realm where she could find her voice and place. Being offered a full scholarship for doctoral studies at a prestigious university felt like a culmination of her academic efforts. After discussing with her supervisor, whom she respected deeply, she accepted the offer with high hopes, unaware of the challenges ahead.

The initial months of her doctoral programme were unsettling as she was directed by supervisors to focus solely on topics related to her home country. Despite her interest in reconceptualising the categorisation of international students, her proposals were consistently rejected. This motivation was personal, stemming from her experiences as a Chinese international student in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strained relations between China and Australia, fuelled by media portrayals and incidents of violence against Chinese people, made her feel unwelcome and marginalised. She aimed to use her research to challenge these prevailing narratives and introduce new perspectives, such as socio-economic backgrounds and race, but found herself constrained.

Eisuke's reflections

So, I believe you aim to 'liberate' us—non-native 'Asians' in Australia—from the stigma attached to us as Asians; you seek to demonstrate that those categorised as Asians have narratives that extend beyond just being Asian—am I correct?

Yuqi's response

I began to realise the harsh reality that being Asian is not merely a racial background; it can also be a constraint that limits the scope of my research interests. Initially, I couldn't accept this. Despite my efforts, I faced repeated rejections and was explicitly told to concentrate only on Chinese students. Reflecting on the pre-enrolment discussions, I find myself confused. Initially, there was a surge of validation and encouragement as my ideas were supported by my supervisor. I vividly remember expressing my primary motivation for my research project: to contribute to the reconceptualisation of how we categorise international students, moving beyond narrow definitions of nationality and ethnicity.

I was driven by a deep desire to explore the complex web of connections that unite us—our shared interests, boundless dreams, aspirations,

and even our losses and frustrations. These are the universal themes that transcend simple labels of nationality, revealing the unique life journeys of international students in this era. I aimed to analyse, question, and discuss phenomena not by ethnicity, but by broader social categories, influenced by global policies, economic shifts, and evolving social environments, reflecting our times.

However, I was advised that focusing on Chinese students and their interactions with Australian universities would be the most valuable contribution I could make. During discussions, I was encouraged to design a research project on how to reintegrate Chinese students post-COVID-19. Moreover, I was told that it was 'shocking' that I thought my broader research idea was viable. At that moment, I felt a deep sense of humiliation and embarrassment. My confidence eroded, overwhelmed by self-doubt.

It appears my idea had been met with shock and disdain, which led me to question my own intellect and judgement. As a PhD researcher, I had expected more from myself—I felt the responsibility of my position as an emerging scholar, yet my proposed contribution seemed insufficient and perhaps naive.

Eisuke's reflections
I too felt similar emotions, particularly during my transition to doctoral studies and throughout my PhD. It's not uncommon for supervisors to reject initial ideas, which can sometimes lead students to leave the course. In my situation, my supervisor and I belonged to the same ethnic community, so racism was not a factor. In your experience, did you perceive those comments as purely academic, or were there other reasons behind them? That is, the supervisors would urge you to 'go back' to the familiar categories – although you were trying to stretch your horizons to discuss the issues. If you try to put yourself into her shoes, any comments? Was it the very fixed-up comment, like a bias or prejudice – although I can imagine the supervisor sounded so – or was there any space that at least initially the supervisor really thought that you could take advantage? Would you have felt uncomfortable even if the latter was the case?
Yuqi's response
This directive deeply undermined my self-respect as I faced the troubling realisation that my work might inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes and exploitation. It is disheartening to frequently encounter news articles and social media posts that depict international students merely as financial assets rather than integral members of university communities. This portrayal is especially stark regarding Chinese international students, who are often accused of diminishing the quality of Australian higher education

through language barriers and alleged widespread plagiarism. Such generalisations not only devalue the individual efforts of these students but also perpetuate damaging stereotypes that fail to recognise their varied talents, ambitions, and contributions. How can I shape my research to re-engage Chinese students while honestly addressing the realities of their treatment and my personal experiences of discrimination and constraint? Despite my frustration, I felt powerless to contest these limitations due to my visa status and financial reliance on scholarships.

Eisuke's reflections

Indeed, this demonstrates the multiple aspects you had to address, where you were at the intersection of various factors. Micropolitics occurred between you and your supervisor, and now, other macroscopic factors such as visas are also coming into play.

Yuqi's reflections

During countless sleepless nights, I found myself grappling with existential questions about academic freedom.

Eisuke's reflections

This statement is quite strong—it clearly shows you were extremely annoyed and stressed. Could you elaborate more on how you felt when you first heard the comments from your supervisor?

Yuqi's response

Was my destiny predetermined by my Chinese heritage? Was I confined by my skin colour, nationality, and cultural background? Despite these doubts, I struggled to accept the idea of conforming. This internal conflict took a toll on my mental health, resulting in sleepless nights and significant emotional distress.

Eisuke's reflections

I agree—it may relate to the inherent nature of theory. Theories should be sufficiently abstract to apply to any situation, regardless of their origin in the West or East. Even if we consider sociological theories that may not fully align with different cultural contexts, it doesn't preclude their application to non-Western settings. Sometimes, I feel there is an expectation for non-Westerners to exclusively use non-Western theories and perspectives. This expectation could represent a new form of affirmative Orientalism, imposing a biased view.

Yuqi's response

Throughout my journey, I have often felt engulfed by hopelessness and powerlessness, perceiving myself as an outsider in the mainstream environment, a foreigner in this country, and insignificant on a global scale. My experience in Australian academia, once my cherished dream, has become a battleground where I engage in what feels like a futile struggle, preparing for an overwhelming defeat.

Eisuke's reflections

Academic inquiry is intended to be liberating, yet interactions with supervisors often seem to force students into a mould that aligns with Western comfort but simplifies complex perceptions of non-Western individuals. This reduction often stems from superficial Western biases or stereotypes. A further risk involves gestures that superficially appear to value non-Western cultures. Such discourses can mask micro-aggressions rooted in nuanced racism (Moran, 2024a, 2024b), seemingly rational and progressive due to its apparent cultural sensitivity. The danger lies in the possibility that while appearing well-meaning, such discourses can subtly perpetuate spite and offence beneath seemingly appreciative remarks.

Yuqi's reflections

After months of self-torment, I made the difficult decision to leave academia. Withdrawing from my PhD programme brought immediate relief but also a profound sense of loss. Memories of past celebrations for each success flooded back. I remembered the overwhelming joy of receiving acceptance for my first publication, tears of happiness streaming down my face, and the warmth from mentors and lecturers congratulating me at my graduation. These moments once fuelled my determination, but now, I must walk away. It is a hard choice, but necessary for me to maintain my self-respect. This chapter is my farewell to academia, and though I am unsure about returning, I am certain that if given another chance, I will hold onto my beliefs more firmly.

Eisuke's reflections

This story encapsulates your passion and your commitment to research, marked by deep suffering. You endured immense hardship, akin to being cursed, tortured, and figuratively murdered. I hope for your resurrection. Reimer and Longmuir (2021) advocate for micro-resistance as a counter to micro-aggression. Although your experiences may exceed typical micro-aggressions, the principle of micro-resistance—that healing comes through being respected, valued, and cared for—remains relevant. Your isolation was profound, especially as the only non-Western student in your institution, which undoubtedly made your challenges more acute. It is regrettable that you found no support network to appreciate your ideas, work, and identity, which might have provided the micro-resistance needed to navigate your academic environment.

DISCUSSION

Although the concept of academic freedom appears straightforward, the conditions necessary to secure it warrant deeper exploration. This chapter addresses several critical questions: What factors contribute to the failure to achieve full academic freedom? How can scholars combat disadvantageous conditions? What strategies can be employed? Furthermore, how can academic institutions, scholarly communities, and broader societies establish effective appeal mechanisms for scholars? The following sections identify three primary barriers to full academic freedom: pervasive insecurity, limited choices, and the dilemma of silence versus voice. These challenges reflect the realities faced by GSRs worldwide. Additionally, the chapter aims to highlight the often-overlooked daily aggressions faced by GSRs and the quiet struggles they endure.

Pervasive Insecurity

The insecurity issues for GSRs can be multisectoral, encompassing multiple social characteristics such as race, gender, class, age, and lived political and sociocultural environments (Salmon, 2023). As shown in Yuqi's narrative, her insecurity was generated through multiple sources, including her race, ethnic background, and her citizenship status in Australia as a temporary visa holder. While racial diversity is regarded as a social good, the inclusion of non-white members in academia is often highly valued. However, Leong (2013) highlights that some institutions pursue racial diversity without critically examining their motives and practices, prioritising numerical diversity over meaningful inclusion. The existence of GSRs may thus function merely as a statistic, symbol, or indicator of diversity. Consequently, GSRs' personal identities, interests, and contributions may be overlooked, as their value to the institution is largely linked to their represented cultural, racial or national identity. This can lead to a diminished sense of security as GSRs struggle to receive recognition for their academic contributions beyond their racial or cultural identity.

In the case of tYuqi, her insecurity was exacerbated by her temporary visa status, which not only limited her duration of stay in Australia but also restricted her primary activities to study. The fragile residency situation, coupled with managerialism and job insecurity in academic institutions (Kim, 2021), forced Yuqi to choose between academic freedom

and survival. Additionally, her role as a junior scholar heightened her precarious status (Chong & Ahmed, 2013).

This situation aligns with the concept of micro-aggressions in academia, as defined by Corkett et al. (2021). The specific language and expressions used in these interactions resulted in significant psychological distress for Yuqi, leading to feelings of 'humiliation' and 'embarrassment,' which in turn fostered 'self-doubt.' These incidents, due to their subtle nature, are seldom overtly acknowledged or thoroughly examined. Consequently, the perpetrators are often excused, while the victims are advised to toughen up or stop overthinking. This leads to a culture of victim-blaming, where psychological issues are seen as personal failures (Corkett et al., 2021). As a result, Yuqi describes feeling 'powerless.' The combination of multiple disadvantaged social characteristics, a lack of support within the hierarchical academic structure, and a precarious citizenship status exacerbate her insecurity, complicating her fight for academic freedom.

Constricted Choices

The definition of academic freedom, as outlined by UNESCO (1997), explicitly includes 'freedom in conducting research, disseminating and' publishing results, and freely expressing opinions about the institutions or systems within which scholars operate (See introduction). This chapter highlights an often-neglected aspect of academic freedom: the freedom to pursue research driven by personal interest and to select research topics based on individual preferences. A major conflict in Yuqi's experience. From the perspective of epistemic freedom, her situation may not be unique, as during the course of being, GSRs may find themselves confronting the questions that should I insist on my own thinking, or should I follow the GNRs' lead on which knowledge is worthwhile to produce and create?

This predicament can be understood through the lens of the cultural development of bargaining norms, as described by O'Connor et al. (2019). In conflict situations, certain social groups, such as junior GSRs, face the repercussions of discriminatory bargaining norms due to their relatively weak economic and political power and lack of representation (Adefila et al., 2021; Jammulamadaka & Alexandre Faria, 2023). As a minority and junior scholar, the Yuqi is at a disadvantage in negotiations with dominant and senior groups. The Nash demand game model

suggests that the demands of two parties are only met when they align; otherwise, the outcome is suboptimal, leading to a disagreement point, as evidenced here (O'Connor et al., 2019). Amidst this conflict, Yuqi consistently felt alienated and unsafe. From Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional perspective, her identity as a minority, junior scholar, and temporary visa holder shapes her experience. As the finding indicates, she is expected to contribute to the diversity of research and the university in the way senior Global North scholars deem appropriate. Her ability to exercise her freedom is limited, as her voice is rarely valued, her actions are restricted, and any disobedience could result in consequences, such as the cancellation of her visa.

However, efforts at self-liberation have been unsuccessful, raising the question: Why are Asians expected to conform to Western expectations of their identity, actions, and roles within the academic community of the Global North? Puwar (2004) suggests that the mere physical presence of ethnic minorities often perpetuates a misleading perception of racial equality or harmony. In such contexts, their presence is merely tolerated. Furthermore, Franken et al. (2024) point out that non-white women are expected to conform to both male-dominated institutional structures and racial hierarchies to align with white standards. As a result, social, ethnic, class, and racial inequalities are dismissed as cultural norms, obscuring the true impact of placing non-white, junior GSRs at a disadvantage and overlooking their authentic choices in pursuing personal interests and exploring self-identity.

Silence vs. Voice

In the narratives, the silence, struggle, and determination of GSRs are vividly depicted, underscoring the complex interplay between personal resilience and systemic challenges in academia.

Yuqi's departure from academia was marked by a peaceful, albeit poignant, silence. Hempton and Grossmann (2021) articulate, 'Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything… it can be felt within the chest' (p. 2). Thus, Yuqi's silence should not be seen as a sign of weakness; rather, it represents a moment of potential liberation as she listens to her inner voice. In (not) responding to the critiques, Yuqi withdrew from the environment where she was perceived as 'insufficient.' This (non)reaction to power can be interpreted through Foucault's (1991) theory, which suggests that power

is only exercised when the subject is capable of action. By engaging in acts of non-conformity, she potentially increased the fluidity of the context, allowing for shifts in power dynamics and the creation of new possibilities (Foucault, 1991). Through the emergence of these possibilities, Yuqi liberated herself by leaving the environment and its associated relationships, reorienting towards alternative professional settings.

It is crucial to consider the dynamic between silence and voice in understanding GSRs' experiences, whose voices are often perceived as insufficiently loud. As demonstrated in this chapter, GSRs actively exercise their agency despite oppressive structures, striving to establish their place in a racialised and masculinised world. Within this constrained space, GSRs exhibit unique forms of agency that merge silence and voice. The silence that Yuqi demonstrated meant a series of rejections—a rejection to abusive people and institutions and a rejection to the way of living as a part of them, as well as a rejection to consider those people and institutions worthwhile to spend her energy and time upon.

This study documents the largely unseen stories of GSRs, drawing attention to instances where a GSR was compelled to silence her research voice, only to find a new voice to express her research aspirations. The silent endurance of challenges coupled with the vocal affirmation of their beliefs and experiences form a dual strategy that empowers GSRs to navigate and confront oppressive structures. This duality not only highlights their resilience but also emphasises the nuanced ways they assert their autonomy and integrity within academia.

Conclusion

This chapter draws on the experiences of a junior GSR to reconsider academic freedom, emphasising the need to scrutinise the conditions necessary for its realisation. On the surface, academic freedom involves conducting research, publishing results, and imparting knowledge. However, for GSRs, the pursuit of academic freedom typically starts during their research training, placing them in a vulnerable position. Their vulnerability is exacerbated not only by their cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds but also by their roles as students, and their citizenship status. Consequently, the path to academic freedom for GSRs is inherently complex, influenced by a fluid set of external factors including political, economic, and racial issues. Thus, the current definition of academic freedom may oversimplify these challenges, failing to fully capture the

difficulties GSRs encounter in their daily professional lives. Additionally, the process of collective reflection and writing this chapter can be seen as a community of practice, in which two GSRs at different career stages collaborate to explore the definition of freedom and reflect on their experiences. In this sense, this chapter serves as an example of GSRs working together to reimagine best practices in academia and develop new understandings of what it means to be and become a GSR. From this perspective, the chapter aims to inspire more GSRs to collaborate in challenging, contesting, and striving for a more equitable, fair, and inclusive academia.

We have initiated discussions on several critical issues. Firstly, we identify the microaggressions faced by GSRs during their academic tenure, a topic seldom openly explored, which future studies could examine more critically. Secondly, we address the concept of self-liberation for GSRs—a substantial subject that warrants more extensive research. The self-liberation journey of a junior GSR depicted here may provide limited insights, necessitating further discussion. Thirdly, the chapter proposes that both silence and voice are viable strategies for disadvantaged individuals, arguing that silence should not be seen as a sign of weakness or surrender; rather, it can be a potent and assertive means of expression. However, more in-depth investigations into the interplay between silence and voice are essential, as they could offer valuable perspectives on human agency. In conclusion, academic freedom is not a given right but a hard-earned accomplishment stemming from relentless struggle. It is not merely an individual endeavour but a collective effort that demands contributions from everyone.

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Positionality and Power: Reflections of Non-disabled Researchers Working with Women with Disabilities in Botswana

Sourav Mukhopadhyay and Emmanuel Moswela

Introduction

Despite the high prevalence of individuals with disabilities in the Global South, disability-related issues remain significantly under-investigated. Early conceptualisations of disability in these regions were mostly influenced by Western religious and cultural traditions, often leading to exclusion and stigmatisation (Grech, 2021). Furthermore, the dominance of Western researchers employing Western research paradigms has resulted in critical gaps in how researchers' power dynamics and positionality influence research outcomes. We conducted a large-scale study that examined the status of people with disabilities in Botswana; in the

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same study, we also explored the challenges women with disabilities face in accessing healthcare. However, this study does not focus on experiences of these women; instead, it analyses our own experiences as ethnically diverse researchers and the positionality of non-disabled male researcher working within this research context.

Power and Positionality in Disability Research

Early disability studies in the Global South relied more on Western theoretical models that often clash with the unique social and cultural context of the South (Grech, 2021). Over the past decade, there has been a shift towards Southern-based disability perspectives. This emerging approach challenges traditional narratives and seeks to include diverse voices, particularly from marginalised communities (Grech, 2021; Katsui & Swartz, 2021; Ndlovu, 2024; Peruzzo, 2021). In addition, scholars increasingly recognise the colonial legacies embedded in disability studies (Grischow et al., 2021; Katsui & Swartz, 2021) and, therefore, tend to adopt a decolonised approach that prioritises indigenous methodologies emphasising inclusion of more local and indigenous knowledge (Katsui & Swartz, 2021; Peruzzo, 2021). Nevertheless, utilisation of these approaches has not taken the lead; as a result, the dominant Western research approach remains prevalent, often neglecting Southern epistemologies and contexts and narratives (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Martínez & Agüero, 2021; Shah, 2023). Therefore, it is critical to use Southern theories and research designs that are inclusive, representative, context-specific, community-driven (Grech, 2021; Phiri, 2014) to address the needs of individuals with disabilities from the Southern context.

Southern leadership in research is crucial for impactful collaborations; however, achieving this requires addressing deeper systemic issues beyond funding and role distribution (Harvey et al., 2022; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023). To effectively conduct disability research, it is crucial to understand the interplay between power and positionality. Power refers to the dynamics that influence a researcher's interactions and interpretations within a study. Positionality, on the other hand, involves recognising and reflecting on a researcher's social and cultural position and how it influences the research process. There is a close link between power and positionality in research, as both operate subtly and dynamically to influence the research context, selection of co-researchers, research design, participants, and research outcomes.

Furthermore, disability studies often frame disability using external and Western-centric theoretical lenses (Hollinrake et al., 2019) maintaining traditional knowledge-power hierarchy. It is important to highlight that historically, the field has been dominated by non-disabled academics, who operated from ableist perspectives that failed to capture the lived realities of individuals with disabilities, further marginalising their voices. Conducting research across cultural, linguistic, and ability differences is inherently complex, as these factors shape the power imbalances between researchers and participants, particularly in studies involving individuals with disabilities. However, community-based participatory research has the potential to address issues related to power and positionality through reflective practices could affect the power dynamics. Reflective practices help understand these power shifts, which are often influenced by language, culture, and social status (Adeagbo, 2020; Kostet, 2021) and allow for refinement of the research approach throughout the process (Folkes, 2022; Olukotun et al., 2021). It is, therefore, important for researchers to engage in continuous self-reflection, especially when studying marginalised groups with whom they do not share lived experiences (Hollinrake et al., 2019) to ensure ethical and authentic outcomes (Folkes, 2022; Olukotun et al., 2021). It is vital to recognise how power and positionality influence the interactions, methodologies, and interpretations of the findings. Additionally, hierarchies embedded in disability research structures are shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional power relations that privilege academic perspectives over the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Hollinrake et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2022; Madsen & Mabokela, 2016). Acknowledging and deconstructing these hierarchies through reflexive methodologies is crucial for fostering equitable research practices that capture the voices of individuals with disabilities.

Positionality is not merely a static awareness of one's background; rather, it is the active recognition of how the background interacts with the power structures inherent in the research process, which might allow researchers to navigate the complexities of North–South dynamics, potentially avoiding biases and ethical dilemmas (Jiménez et al., 2021; Shah, 2023; Tian & Rafi, 2023). Perceived 'insider' or 'outsider' status significantly influences interactions; this binary adds complexity to research, necessitating the careful negotiation of roles and relationships with participants (Adeagbo, 2020; Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2019). Simultaneously,

the researcher's position within a given community can shape the inter-pretation of the data. For instance, a researcher's perceived authority stemming from their academic credentials or social standing can subtly influence participant responses. Scholars increasingly advocate participa-tory and inclusive methodologies that position individuals with disabilities as active collaborators rather than passive participants in research (Miller, 2024). Collaborative directions that recognise the importance of reflex-ivity and critical self-examination in understanding power dynamics and positionality within disability research (Hamilton, 2020; Kamlongera et al., 2024) could play critical roles. Additionally, Southern cultural values could integrate diverse perspectives by adopting strategies such as the concept of *Botho*, which emphasises community over individu-alism. Awareness of positionality and power is crucial, especially when working with vulnerable or marginalised groups, to create a respectful and safe research environment in which both researchers and participants are equally valued (Moralli, 2023). Such approaches prioritise the perspectives of people with disabilities, ensuring that research reflects their lived expe-riences rather than being shaped solely by external academic frameworks (Kahonde & Mji, 2024). However, structural barriers within academic and institutional research frameworks continue to reinforce these power imbalances. Ethics review processes, funding mechanisms, and institu-tional hierarchies often privilege researchers from high-income settings, limiting the autonomy of marginalised communities in shaping research agendas (van der Weele, 2024). Addressing these systemic inequities requires the development of equitable research partnerships that recog-nise and value the contributions of individuals with disabilities, ensuring that they are not merely research subjects but also active participants in the production of knowledge.

Intersectionality as a Theoretical Lens

Intersectionality is rooted in Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) foundational work, which challenged single-axis analyses by revealing how ableism, sexism, and racism intersect to shape lived experiences. Therefore, we use intersectionality as our theoretical lens to examine the complexity of power imbalances and positionality between researchers. As researchers of different nationalities, ethnicity, and with different lived experiences, our positionalities shaped the ways we engaged with the participants and inter-preted their narratives (Fig. 5.1). This theoretical framework allowed us to

apply intersectionality within our research, enabling us to move beyond surface-level understanding of power imbalances, thereby giving us the opportunity to acknowledge how racial, national, and social backgrounds could influence research dynamics. This framework allowed us to examine relational power structures, ensuring that our methodological approach remained ethically sound and inclusive (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

Recognising the complexities of power dynamics within the research, we decided to use a collaborative autoethnographic approach to maintain methodological reflexivity and responsiveness. Furthermore, it guided us to address power imbalances within the research process, ensuring that our study remained inclusive and reflexive and provided a comprehensive lens for analysing power structures that are not static but continuously evolve in different contexts (Severs et al., 2016). Intersectionality provides a tool to challenge traditional research practices. In this way, we can decolonise research methodologies that are essential for redistributing power and positionality as well as advance ethical and participatory scholarship in disability research. Despite ongoing challenges, participatory research methodologies offer a unique opportunity to capture researchers' voices, which are often marginalised by the dominant views of northern researchers. By embracing collaboration and reflexivity, disability research
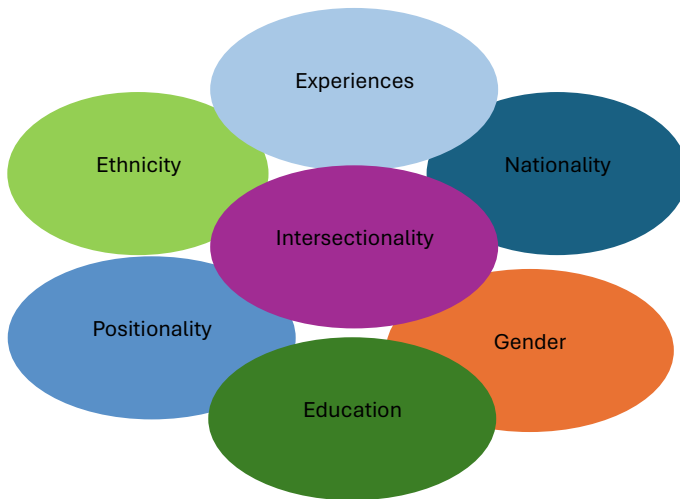
Fig. 5.1 Intersectionality among the researchers

can contribute to a more inclusive academic landscape that prioritises the agency, dignity, and *Botho* of individuals with disabilities.

Autoethnographic Analysis

Our commitment to reflexivity, particularly in navigating our positionality as non-disabled researchers, directly informed our choice of collaborative autoethnography as a methodology. We adopted collaborative autoethnography (CAE) because it provides an in-depth and reflexive tool that not only helps in understanding the complexities of male researchers studying women with disabilities but also allows researchers to critically engage with their personal experiences, power dynamics, and positionality differences (Park & Wilmes, 2019). It integrates autoethnography's self-reflective lens with collaborative inquiry, ensuring dynamic and ethical engagement with the research participants. CAE is rooted in postmodernist and constructivist paradigms that challenge traditional notions of objectivity in research by emphasising power, agency, and social justice (Chang et al., 2013; Lapadat, 2017).

The CAE is particularly well suited for this study for several reasons. First, it accommodates diverse researcher identities and perspectives. Given the differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the CAE facilitated a co-constructed narrative that captured multiple perspectives. Second, the CAE fostered dialogic reflexivity by allowing us to critically examine biases, research dilemmas, and ethical responsibilities through both individual and collective reflection (Jones, 2022). This approach moved beyond individual accounts, engaging us in a shared meaning-making process and ensuring that our reflections were grounded in dialogue rather than solitary introspection. This reflexive dialogue helped identify blind spots and uncovered tensions that might not have surfaced through reflection by only one researcher. Engaging in structured dialogues and revisiting our narratives allowed us to understand how our positionalities influenced the research process.

By prioritising self-reflection, co-analysis, and participatory engagement (Lapadat, 2017), we aligned our research with inclusive and participatory research principles. Some of these principles are: (a) equity and co-learning, we learned from each other and contributed equally to the research process (Marrone et al., 2022; Ramanadhan et al., 2023); (b) shared power and decision-making, we ensured that decision-making was collaborative and all voices were heard and valued (Marrone et al., 2022;

Pettican et al., 2022; Ramanadhan et al., 2023). In addition, we focused on inclusivity (Loignon et al., 2021; Pettican et al., 2022; Webber et al., 2024) while framing knowledge production as an ethical and collaborative process, rather than an extractive exercise.

We employed a two-phase collaborative reflection cycle consisting of written reflections, recorded dialogues, and reflective journalism to document and analyse our evolving positionalities.

Phase 1: Individual Reflexivity: Each researcher independently wrote autoethnographic reflections, exploring their relationship to disability and gender research, assumptions, biases, ethical dilemmas, and emotional responses to research interactions. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. This phase allowed for initial introspection, helping us to understand how our backgrounds shaped our engagement with the research topic.

Phase 2: Joint Reflexivity and Critical Dialogue: We engaged in structured dialogues to discuss how our positionalities influenced our research interactions. We examined the challenges of being male researchers studying women with disabilities and explored how race, disability, and gender shaped our interpretations of data. We then read each other's reflections and discussed them for clarification and mutual agreement, which helped us learn together. Once we agreed on these principles, the data capture and analysis were streamlined. We examined the challenges faced by male researchers studying women with disabilities and explored how race, disability, and gender shaped our interpretations of the data.

Collaborative Autoethnographic Analysis and Integration

Autoethnographic analysis is fundamentally interpretive and reflexive and situates personal narratives within broader cultural and social contexts. Our data analysis integrated narrative inquiry, thematic analysis, and reflexive practices and incorporated intersectionality as a theoretical framework to enhance analytical depth. By interrogating each other's perspectives, we sought to refine our interpretations and mitigate the risks of reinforcing pre-existing biases, and thematic analysis was employed to capture the dynamic process of co-constructing knowledge. Additionally, we revisited and revised our codes to ensure that each researcher's perspective was equitably represented, reinforcing the collaborative nature

of our study and emphasising the co-creation of meaning rather than the dominance of a single voice; there were multiple key moments of tension, learning, and ethical negotiation; however, these activities provided rigorous and robust analysis. For example, cultural, social, and personal experiences helped to understand the interplay between individual and collective experiences that illustrated broader cultural and social dynamics, which helped in recognising patterns across subjective experiences.

Reflections

First Author

As the first author, a non-disabled male researcher and university faculty member conducting a situational analysis of individuals with disabilities in Botswana, it was critical to authentically represent the voices of women with disabilities. The initial motivation for these discussions arose from the first author's self-reflection on the potential biases and limitations in grasping the lived experiences of women with disabilities in Botswana. This awareness prompted a reflective examination of the first author's experiences, challenges, and transformations throughout the research journey. Conscious of the first author's power and positionality, a series of candid dialogues with the second author was initiated. These were not structured meetings, but rather an evolving conversation about conducting research ethically. From the outset, the first author held open discussions with the second author regarding the first author's positionality, socio-cultural knowledge, and research objectives. The collaboration between the second author and the first author commenced with a shared recognition of the inherent power dynamics present in the research, particularly concerning marginalised populations. Establishing trust was paramount, and the mutual dedication to conducting research *with* women with disabilities, rather than *for* them, proved pivotal in comprehending disability within its sociocultural context. A strong desire to prioritise the participants' voices and ensure that the research addressed their needs was articulated. The second author, sharing a commitment to participatory research, provided encouragement and practical suggestions. Critical discussions concerning ethical implications were conducted, prompting the first author to consider alternative methodologies.

Second Author

The second author, a male researcher of African descent, brought a unique perspective to the collaboration shaped by his personal experiences and professional roles. His upbringing in a family that valued equity and justice, coupled with his exposure to literature critiquing societal oppression, fostered a strong sense of social justice and empathy for marginalised groups. His experiences with South African students fleeing apartheid and his understanding of Bantu Education ignited a critical awareness of educational inequalities and the impact of disability on access and participation. As the Manager of Disability Support Services at the University of Botswana, the second author gained firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by students with disabilities in higher education. His critical stance on the medical model of disability and his advocacy for inclusive education practices informed his research approach. He emphasised community-based participatory methods to ensure that the voices and agency of participants were prioritised. His commitment to social justice and equity motivated him to conduct research that could contribute to positive changes and empower marginalised groups. The second author actively engaged in reflexive practices to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases. He strived to accurately represent the experiences of women with disabilities, avoiding stereotypical or reductionist portrayals. By incorporating these elements of his positionality into the research, the second author enriched the collaboration. His insights and experiences ensured that the findings were grounded in real-world challenges and informed by a deep understanding of the social and cultural context.

Collaborative Reflection

From the onset of our collaborative research, we grounded our work on the principle of *Botho*. It promotes embodying mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability. It served as our guiding philosophy to ensure that each participant's voice was valued and heard. We recognised shared responsibility, not only for research outcomes but also for the process itself. We committed to transparent communication, ensuring full information, and involvement in decision-making. This accountability extended to ethically and accurately representing our interactions. This involved actively listening to each other, acknowledging diverse

perspectives, and creating a safe space for contribution. *Botho*'s emphasis on respect and empathy is crucial for building trust and minimising potential bias. While acknowledging the limitations of reflexivity, we maintained a constant awareness of inherent biases and power dynamics. We implemented an iterative process, revisiting reflective notes to co-create meaning and ensuring that all perspectives were considered and valued. The participatory approach, with its emphasis on shared decision-making, helped resolve power asymmetries, and *Botho*'s principles ensured equitable participation. Our awareness of our lack of personal experience with marginalisation led us to adopt debriefing sessions, ensuring that our interpretations remained grounded in *Botho*'s principles of fairness and understanding. We collaboratively reflected on our experiences using reflexive practices, such as narrative writing, to uncover unconscious biases and strive for emancipatory perspectives.

Box 1: Collaborative Reflective Process **First Author**: Hey Doctor M, how are you doing? Good to see you. I wanted to chat about our research project, the situational analysis of individuals with disabilities, especially women with disabilities. Honestly, I have been feeling unsure about how to approach this. I mean, as a non-African male university professor with no personal experience of disability, I feel pretty far removed from the realities of our participants. As a Motswana, you bring a deeper understanding of the cultural context. But still, we're both men. How do we handle this responsibly?

Second Author: Hey, Prof., I am doing well, thanks. And I hear you, it is a big question. I have been thinking about this, too. This project matters to me because understanding the lives of women with disabilities in Botswana is essential. From our earlier work (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2018), it is clear that these women face serious challenges, especially with education, jobs, and healthcare. However, it is not just about those individual issues; it is how being a woman and having a disability come together to create even more significant barriers

First Author: Exactly, it is that intersection that's so important. And I keep thinking about how we approach this in the right way. What questions do we ask? How do we acknowledge and navigate our power and positionality as researchers? It is not just about identifying their struggles; it is about what we can learn. We should rethink the traditional research approach and shift to a community-based one. They should lead, and we are there to support and understand

Second Author: Totally. What if we started by organising a seminar? We could use that space to get women with disabilities involved from the beginning. Let them talk about the barriers they face, prioritise what matters most to them, and even contribute to data collection. They would set the agenda, and we would guide them where needed. It would be so much more meaningful to hear their stories directly

First Author: I love that idea, Emma. We could also ask the group to recommend research assistants, they could pick people they trust, and we'd support those individuals. However, we need to be careful about ethics. Informed consent and confidentiality will be critical, especially since some participants might be vulnerable

Second Author: Definitely. Moreover, we must ensure we approach this in a way that respects their culture. In Botswana, verbal consent or even a simple nod is often considered just as valid as a signed form. I am not saying we skip the formalities, especially since we have to meet ethical standards, but we should also respect local traditions. Maybe we can find a middle ground that works for both

First Author: That is an excellent point. It is about balancing respect for cultural practices with ethical guidelines. Furthermore, speaking of partnerships, I thought we could connect with NGOs and DPOs (Disabled People's Organisations) that already work with women with disabilities. They could give us valuable insights and even help us with recruitment

Second Author: That is a solid plan. Building those relationships will be key. NGOs and DPOs already have trust within the community, which will help us greatly in access and understanding

First Author: So, I guess our next steps are clear: organise the seminar, hear their stories, and make sure we are constantly reflecting on our biases and positionality throughout the process

Second Author: That sounds good, Prof. Let's also start reaching out to local partners right away so we can get the ball rolling

First Author: Agreed. I am looking forward to seeing where this project takes us, Emma

Second Author: Same here, Prof. I think this research could make a real difference, and I'm excited to get started

We understood that gaining respect required showing respect and empowering others, which necessitated creating opportunities for them to lead. We acknowledged that our privileged background could create power imbalances. Therefore, *Botho* provided a framework for empowering co-researchers through active collaboration in decision-making.

From this collaborative approach, we learned that researchers and participants from diverse ethnicities, positionalities, and cultural backgrounds enrich the research process and outcomes. This partnership revealed the complex ways in which structural inequalities operate at the intersections of various identities. Collaboration with a co-researcher from a different cultural background, enriched by the principles of *Botho*, was instrumental in deepening our understanding of the sociocultural nuances that shaped the lives of the women we studied. It was important to recognise and promote a sense of ownership over the research process to ensure that all perspectives were considered and valued.

Neutralising Power and Positionality

Traditional research paradigms often marginalise the voices of people with disabilities, perpetuating power imbalances (Charlton, 1998). We recognise that decolonising research requires dismantling traditional hierarchies in knowledge production (Smith, 2021). Collaborative processes are crucial in disability research for ensuring ethical and meaningful outcomes. Addressing power hierarchies in disability research requires sustained commitment to reflexivity, open communication, and participatory engagement. We prioritised building trust and recognised that open communication fosters a more inclusive research environment (Liamputtong, 2007). We used *Botho*'s principles. These principles are embedded within the Setswana culture of compassionate to each other and mutual respect which helped create a research environment promoting shared decision-making, respect for diverse perspectives, and a commitment to empowering participants. This involved active listening to the co-researchers, acknowledging their expertise, and valuing their perspectives (Moahi, 2010). It is equally important to create opportunities for participants to voice their priorities and to create a safe space for sharing experiences and setting research priorities. This helped neutralise power imbalances and create a sense of shared ownership over the research process (Diale, 2022). Our goal was not simply to document the experiences of women with disabilities, but to contribute to a broader conversation about power and positionality in disability research. By prioritising community engagement, shared decision-making, and ethical reflexivity, we sought to challenge dominant paradigms and advocate for more equitable research practices (Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024). We found that collaborative research has the potential to create a research environment

that is inclusive, empowering, and respectful of the participants' lived realities. We believe this collaborative approach is essential for conducting ethical and impactful disability research.

Box 2: Power dynamics in Autoethnography Collaborative Research **First Author:** Hi Doctor M, good to see you again. I am really excited about the research project we have planned on understanding the lived experiences of women with disabilities in Botswana. Nevertheless, before diving in, we need to address our positionality. As a non-African male academic who has never experienced disability, I know my perspective is limited. Your deep understanding of Botswana's culture and society is a strength, but we are both men even then. How do we ensure our approach is truly inclusive and reflects the perspectives of women with disabilities?

Second Author: Thanks, Prof. I appreciate your openness about this, it is a meaningful conversation. Positionality is key, especially in a project like this. From what I have seen in my own life and our earlier work, women with disabilities face unique and layered challenges because of how gender and disability intersect. These barriers show up everywhere - education, healthcare, employment. Our job is not just to document these struggles; it is to create space for their voices to be heard and to ensure they are at the heart of the research process

First Author: Exactly! I've been reflecting on moving away from a traditional, top-down approach. It is not just about analysing their experiences from a distance. We need to adopt a community-based approach where they are actively shaping the process. It is not just us studying their lives, it is about co-creating knowledge *with* them on their terms

Second Author: I agree, Prof. What if we start with a community seminar? We could create a safe, welcoming space where women with disabilities feel comfortable sharing their experiences openly. Through group discussions and activities, they could identify the barriers they face and prioritise the areas they think we should focus on. This way, they drive the research; we are just there to facilitate and support

First Author: That is a fantastic idea. We could take it further by involving them directly in the research process. For example, they could recommend potential research assistants from within their communities. We could train and mentor these assistants so the participants take actual ownership of the data collection process. A participatory approach like this could be genuinely transformative, for them and us

Second Author: I love that idea. It would empower the community and make the research process much more authentic. But we'll have to

balance universal ethical guidelines with local traditions. For example, in Botswana, verbal consent or a nod is often considered sufficient, even though formal written consent is the norm in Western research practices. We must respect these traditions while ensuring we adhere to ethical standards

First Author: That is such an important point. We will need to strike that balance carefully. On a related note, I have been considering contacting NGOs and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) already working with women with disabilities. Partnering with them could help us in recruitment and give us deeper insights into the communities we work with

Second Author: I have already spoken to a few organisations, and they are eager to assist. Building these partnerships will be valuable—it will strengthen the project, help us connect with participants, and ensure the research stays aligned with the community's needs

First Author: Perfect! Let's organise the seminar as our next big step. That will allow us to hear directly from the participants and start reflecting on our biases as researchers. At the same time, we can work on building out those partnerships with local organisations

Second Author: That is a solid plan, Prof. I look forward to working on this with you. This project has the potential to make a real impact, not just on the participants but also on the broader community

First Author: Me too. Moreover, honestly, I think this will be a significant learning experience for both of us, not just about the participants' lives but about how we approach research

Second Author: Absolutely, Prof. It's going to challenge us in the best way, and I'm confident we'll create something meaningful and inclusive together

MASCULINITY IN DISABILITY RESEARCH: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As male researchers without disabilities studying the experiences of women with disabilities, we were keenly aware of our privileges and the power imbalances this created. Gendered power dynamics play a significant role particularly in the context of Botswana where men are often regarded as authority figures, which could influence participants' trust and willingness to disclose personal experiences. We recognised that our

gender and social positioning along with cultural biases of 'masculine defaults,' could significantly affect the research process. Such imbalances could distance researchers from their participants.

Recognising these complexities, we prioritised neutralising the inherent power imbalances that could influence our research process and its outcomes. Power dynamics in disability research have been widely discussed, with increasing emphasis on shifting authority to people with disabilities (Chappell, 2014). Therefore, we employed community-based participatory research methods positioning our participants as co-creators of knowledge (Chappell, 2014; Phiri, 2014). Furthermore, non-judgemental interactions and a collaborative research environment to neutralise power using active listening, employing member checks, and involving female research assistants to create a more open and non-hierarchical research environment. The principles of *Botho* (importance of togetherness) also became handy in guiding our collaborative approach.

Concurrently, we continually reflected on our roles and refined our methods to make the research process more inclusive. Jointly reflecting and incorporating diverse perspectives deepened our appreciation of the complexities surrounding disability and gender, which ultimately strengthened the integrity of our research. We critically examined whether our interpretations reinforced or challenged the existing gendered narratives. To counter this, we made a deliberate effort to highlight the voices of women with disabilities, ensuring that their lived experiences shaped the research rather than being framed through a male-centered lens. Through these activities, we learned to critically engage with and use ethical, participatory, and inclusive practices that could contribute to a more equitable and representative body of knowledge. This reflective process is particularly important in managing power complexities, including those between researchers from diverse academic, non-academic, or ethnic backgrounds, each bringing different experiences (Nind, 2017).

> *Box 3: Dialogue: Addressing Masculinity in Disability Research* **First Author:** Hey Doctor M, great to catch up. I've been reflecting on our project about the experiences of women with disabilities, and I think we need to address something important upfront, our positionality as male researchers. Disability and gender are so profoundly intertwined, and while

we aim to make an impact, I can't help but wonder how our masculinity might influence the way we frame and approach the research. What are your thoughts?

Second Author: That is a critical point, Prof. I've been thinking about it too. Gender plays such a critical role in shaping the experiences of people with disabilities, and as men, we need to be mindful about unintentionally imposing a masculine lens on their narratives. I think it is essential that this project centres on the voices of women with disabilities, and our role should be to amplify those voices, not to speak for them

First Author: Exactly. The challenge is rethinking traditional research dynamics. How do we create a truly collaborative, inclusive approach? For example, instead of leading the agenda, we could create opportunities for women with disabilities to set priorities and shape their research. What do you think about using 'storytelling approach' and 'talking circles' led by women facilitators instead of using focus groups moderated by us? They could work with participants to identify their research priorities, first in smaller groups and then in a more significant forum

Second Author: I love that idea. Having female facilitators, especially those with similar experiences, would create a more comfortable and open environment. It would also reduce the influence of our masculinity on the discussions. We could work with local women's organisations or disability advocacy groups to identify and train facilitators

First Author: That is an excellent suggestion. To complement that, we must commit to constantly reflecting on our positionality throughout the process. Societal expectations tied to masculinity, even unintentionally, might shape how we interpret the data or interact with participants

Second Author: Absolutely, Prof. Gender dynamics are often subtle, but they can significantly impact if we are unaware. Maybe we could set up a diverse advisory panel, including women with disabilities, to guide the project. This would ensure that our methodology and outcomes are shaped by multiple perspectives, not just our own

First Author: That is a brilliant idea, Emmanuel. We must involve women with disabilities as participants, co-researchers, and decision-makers. They could help us identify blind spots we might not be aware of. And what if we prioritise participatory methods like storytelling or talking circles? Those could allow participants to control how their stories are told

Second Author: That's an excellent approach. Storytelling and talking circles would give participants the space to share their experiences authentically without us inadvertently framing their narratives. Another thing to consider is how we present ourselves during interactions, our tone, body

language, and the structure of the sessions. We should avoid coming across as overly authoritative or dominant

First Author: Agreed. We must also ensure that our materials and communication are accessible and relatable. That means using language and examples that resonate with the participants rather than defaulting to academic or male-centric frameworks

Second Author: Exactly. And as we engage with the community, we need to listen and defer to their expertise about their lives actively. Building trust and fostering genuine collaboration will be key to mitigating the influence of our masculinity on the research process

First Author: I could not agree more. Let us also commit to documenting these reflections as part of the research process. That way, we can be transparent about how we have addressed issues of gender and power

Second Author: That's a great step, Prof. Being open about our process will strengthen the credibility of our work and contribute to broader conversations about masculinity in disability research

First Author: Absolutely. So, our next steps are to identify female facilitators, engage with local women's organisations, and set up the advisory panel. At the same time, we will keep reflecting on our roles and positionalities

Emmanuel: That sounds perfect, Professor. I'm confident that this approach will help us create research that truly reflects and respects the voices of women with disabilities

Sourav: Same here, Emmanuel. I look forward to learning and unlearning as we go through this process

Emmanuel: Me too, Prof. Let us make this research as inclusive and empowering as possible

Beyond ethical considerations, we engaged in ongoing reflexivity, continuously questioning how our identities, privileges, and biases shaped the research process (Giri, 2025). By engaging in self-reflection and incorporating diverse perspectives, we sought to reduce bias and ensure that our findings remained inclusive and representative. Despite these challenges, conducting research on women's experiences broadened our understanding of gender and disability. Engaging with feminist research methods and reflexive practices deepened our appreciation of the complexities surrounding disability and gender, ultimately strengthening the integrity of our research (Giri, 2025). Furthermore, our positionality as male researchers gave us a unique opportunity to challenge traditional power structures within academia and research institutions. By actively

employing participatory and co-designed methodologies, we contributed to the broader discourse on ethical and inclusive research. Looking back, we recognised the importance of methodological innovation—developing new engagement strategies, keeping ethical considerations at the forefront, and fostering trust with participants. We also understood the necessity of continuous reflection on our positionality. By promoting ethical, participatory, and inclusive research practices, we aim to contribute to a more equitable and representative body of knowledge that genuinely amplifies the voices of marginalised communities. This reinforces our conviction that critically engaging with power dynamics is a fundamental responsibility for all researchers, regardless of gender, striving for ethical and equitable research.

Lessons Learnt

We learnt that navigating power dynamics and positionality in collaborative research requires ongoing critical reflection, a willingness to challenge our assumptions, and a commitment to shared decision-making. As non-disabled male researchers with differing ethnicities and experiences studying women with disabilities, we continuously reflected on our potential biases and how our identities might influence the research process (Bourke, 2014). We recognised the inherent power dynamics and the crucial role of researchers' positionality in shaping the collaboration. Intersectionality served as a crucial theoretical lens for this self-examination. This framework enabled us to analyse the complex power dynamics (Walby et al., 2012), acknowledging the inequalities stemming from our own backgrounds (ethnicity, experiences, positionality) and potential biases. To mitigate these influences and promote a more equitable and inclusive research environment aimed at neutralising power imbalances, we adopted a participatory approach. By engaging in ongoing reflexivity, collaborative dialogue, joint planning on navigating research activities, and committing to participatory methodologies, we learnt how to create ethically sound inclusive research.

Ways Forward

Collaborative disability research requires not only engagement with participants, but also strong collaboration among researchers. This collaborative spirit among researchers is essential for navigating power

dynamics, challenging biases, and ensuring that the research process is respectful, ethical, and ultimately beneficial to the disability community. Researchers can create a more inclusive and equitable research environment by fostering open communication, valuing diverse perspectives, and engaging in ongoing reflexivity as a team. We, therefore, recommend that researchers:

- Prioritise participatory research: Actively involve co-researchers in all stages of the research process, from defining research questions to data analysis and dissemination of findings to ensure equity in knowledge.
- Reflect on positionality as a researcher: Knowledge of how biases and assumptions might influence the research process is critical. Engage in regular critical self-reflection and debriefing with colleagues to identify and address potential power imbalances.
- Consider alternative formats for data collection: Use autoethnography, storytelling, visual methods, or focus groups with appropriate accommodation.
- Employ inclusive methodologies: Utilise research methods that are accessible and accommodate diverse needs and communication styles.
- Equitable Partnerships: Establish genuine collaborations with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and community groups. Recognise their expertise and leadership to ensure equitable sharing of resources and decision-making.

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Learning Perceptions and Adaptation Through Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence Lens

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Introduction

In a globalised world characterised by increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, fostering global competence is imperative. McLuhan (1964), a media theorist, introduced the concept of the 'global village,' suggesting that advancements in communication technology and globalised media would lead to a unified global consciousness and shared perceptions. Grounded in this idea, the contact hypothesis posits that bringing together diverse cultural groups can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1979). Supporting this view, studies have demonstrated that intercultural contact, such as short-term study or travel abroad, facilitates intercultural development among students who participate in these experiences (Lough, 2011). However, other studies challenge this assumption,

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showing that increased cross-cultural interactions do not necessarily result in students' intercultural competence (Lyttle et al., 2011). In contemporary discourse, Deardorff (2006) advances the debate by arguing that intercultural competence is not an automatic outcome of cross-cultural interactions but rather a dynamic, developmental process that requires deliberate engagement. Her intercultural competence model highlights the significance of reflection, adaptability, and the intentional cultivation of intercultural attitudes and skills. This perspective is central to current debates in the field, as scholars increasingly recognise that globalisation alone does not foster meaningful intercultural learning. Instead, structured interventions and pedagogical frameworks are necessary to facilitate transformative intercultural engagement (Deardorff, 2009a, 2009b). This ongoing scholarly discussion reflects the need to move beyond simplistic assumptions that physical mobility or cultural exposure inherently led to competence. Instead, current research explores how factors such as power dynamics, privilege, and systemic inequalities shape intercultural experiences, raising critical questions about how educational institutions can better support students in developing genuine intercultural understanding (Kimmel & Volet, 2012). These contemporary debates add depth to the literature, positioning intercultural competence as a complex and evolving construct that requires sustained inquiry and innovative educational approaches.

While extensive research has examined the benefits and limitations of intercultural encounters in fostering global competence, the experiences of Indigenous students in Taiwan resonate deeply with broader challenges faced by scholars and communities from the Global South. Indigenous education in Taiwan is shaped by historical marginalisation, cultural erasure, and the imposition of dominant educational paradigms. For instance, Brayboy et al. (2012) examine how Indigenous students in settler-colonial contexts often experience education systems that prioritise Western epistemologies, leading to the devaluation of Indigenous knowledge systems and identities. Similarly, Chen (2011) argues that Taiwan's Indigenous students face systemic barriers in mainstream education, where Mandarin-language instruction and Western pedagogies overshadow indigenous ways of knowing, creating significant cultural discontinuities. These findings align with Smith's (2012) decolonial perspective, which asserts that education in postcolonial contexts must actively challenge knowledge hierarchies that exclude Indigenous voices. Despite these insights, few studies have explored how intercultural

competence frameworks, such as those proposed by Deardorff (2006) can be adapted to support Indigenous students in navigating both dominant and Indigenous cultural paradigms. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of Taiwanese Indigenous students, who commonly face challenges in preserving their cultural identities and perspectives within dominant educational settings, while available multicultural resources often fall short in addressing the specific needs of these students (Huang & Liu, 2016). Additionally, Collins (2000) argues that mainstream education tends to frame other cultures as 'wild and primitive,' perpetuating a 'domesticated' view of cultural difference. These dynamics underscore a need to move beyond the mere study of prejudice as an individual attitude towards understanding it as a structural and political phenomenon embedded in education systems. Addressing this issue requires a critical examination of how Indigenous students engage with intercultural learning experiences and whether existing models of global competence adequately reflect their lived realities.

This chapter bridges this gap by enhancing understanding of a Taiwanese Indigenous student's learning perceptions and deconstructing the illusion of shared meaning inherent in dominant cultural narratives. Within dominant educational frameworks, individuals with alternative meaning systems are frequently mischaracterised as psychologically unstable (Dougherty et al., 2009), perpetuating stereotypes that hinder critical engagement with culturally informed perspectives. By employing the Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) Theory proposed by Dougherty et al. (2010), this chapter systematically analyses the participant's responses to explore how meaning divergence may be exacerbated in intercultural contexts. Investigating how learning is conceptualised for underrepresented populations is crucial, as educators' perceptions influence the extent to which alternative learning styles are acknowledged and valued. This chapter specifically addresses the learning perceptions of an Indigenous student from a culture that is often marginalised within mainstream narratives. One major area of marginalisation is language policy. Taiwan's official language policies have historically prioritised Mandarin over Indigenous languages, contributing to language attrition among Indigenous communities (Huang & Liu, 2016). While policies such as the Indigenous Languages Development Act in 2017 aim to promote language revitalisation, in practice, Indigenous students often struggle to access meaningful instruction in their mother tongue due to a lack of qualified teachers, limited resources, and the overwhelming

dominance of Mandarin in school settings (Chen, 2024). As a result, many Indigenous students experience linguistic displacement, where they become fluent in Mandarin but lose proficiency in their native languages, weakening their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

The marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge in school curricula further exacerbates this issue. Taiwan's national curriculum primarily reflects Han Chinese perspectives, often relegating Indigenous cultures to brief historical mentions or framing them through an anthropological lens. For example, textbooks frequently depict Indigenous peoples as part of Taiwan's past, focusing on traditional lifestyles rather than acknowledging contemporary Indigenous contributions in science, politics, and education. This erasure of contemporary Indigenous identities reinforces stereotypes and limits students' ability to see their cultural heritage as relevant to modern academic and professional domains. Additionally, indigenous ecological knowledge, such as sustainable land management, herbal medicine, and navigation skills, is rarely integrated into (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) STEM education, despite its scientific validity and relevance to contemporary environmental challenges (Lin, 2022). In higher education, Indigenous students encounter further systemic barriers. Taiwan has implemented affirmative action policies, such as lower entrance requirements for Indigenous students in university admissions. However, research indicates that these policies are often met with prejudice and misconceptions, with Indigenous students facing stereotypes that they are academically weaker or undeserving of their placements (Nesterova, 2024). Once enrolled, Indigenous students frequently struggle with cultural isolation, as most universities lack Indigenous faculty members or support systems that acknowledge their unique sociocultural backgrounds. Financial constraints also pose significant challenges, as many Indigenous families come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds due to historical land dispossession and limited access to economic resources. These factors contribute to higher dropout rates among Indigenous university students compared to their Han Chinese peers. By centring the lived experiences of an Indigenous student, this chapter seeks to highlight how these systemic challenges shape learning perceptions and engagement. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the Indigenous student perceive learning?

   2. How does the Indigenous student adapt to the mainstream learning
      environment?

This study emphasises the structural nature of prejudice in education, which perpetuates monolithic cultural narratives and overlooks diverse perspectives. By focusing on the Indigenous student's perspective, this chapter highlights the need for inclusive frameworks that value diverse learning approaches, promoting a paradigm shift towards greater cultural equity in education. The findings offer insights into intercultural communication that encourage educators to recognise and integrate diverse perspectives, enriching the academic environment for all students. This study contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity by illustrating the complex intersections of language policy, curriculum design, and structural inequalities in higher education, ultimately advocating for more inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

The Role of Culture and Language in Understanding Assumptions

Culture unconsciously shapes our thinking and conditions our behaviour. Anthropologist Edward Hall (1973) compared these 'built-in blinders' and 'hidden assumptions' to an invisible jet stream, a force that powerfully yet subtly shapes our experiences of the world. Such forces are subtle yet strong, important yet unnoticed, and invisible yet powerful. Because these cultural influences often operate beneath the level of conscious awareness, individuals may not recognise how deeply their perceptions and interactions are shaped by their cultural backgrounds. Amid these subtle yet formidable cultural forces and the potential conflicts they can provoke in a globalised context, language emerges as a critical medium through which these intangible aspects are expressed and interpreted. Language not only serves as a tool for communication but also reflects the deeper cultural frameworks that influence how individuals construct meaning. Language often acts as a medium through which intangible cultural aspects are expressed, influencing how we understand and communicate. However, the same words or concepts can carry different meanings across cultural contexts, leading to divergent interpretations. To unpack these complexities, Dougherty et al. (2010) Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) Theory allows researchers to explore similarities and differences in meanings and reflect on why different

cultural groups may use the exact words with radically different interpretations. For instance, 'democracy' may imply 'liberal democracy' in the American context, emphasising freedoms like speech and press, whereas, for Iraqis, democracy may mean 'chosen by the people to lead,' potentially allowing for religiously based leadership (Zakaria, 2003). Recognising these divergent meanings can help policymakers more effectively account for cultural perspectives in foreign relations. In the context of education, these cultural and linguistic divergences shape both teaching and learning experiences, influencing how students engage with knowledge, interpret information, and communicate ideas. Without an awareness of these hidden assumptions, students and educators alike may misinterpret key concepts, leading to misunderstandings in cross-cultural classrooms. For instance, differing cultural conceptions of 'critical thinking' can affect student participation and assessment in multicultural educational settings (Biggs, 1996). Therefore, fostering intercultural competence in education requires not only language proficiency but also a deep understanding of the cultural values embedded in language, allowing for more meaningful and inclusive learning experiences.

The Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) Theory

LC/MD Theory provides a framework for understanding meaning-making across cultural divides. Dougherty et al. (2009) identified three components: (1) Language Convergence (LC), where shared labels facilitate mutual understanding; (2) Meaning Divergence (MD), where the same linguistic label reflects different meanings across cultures; and (3) a combination of LC/MD, which may create an illusion of shared meaning, hiding deeper cultural misunderstandings. MD is further analysed through 'meaning clusters' and 'meaning fragments.' A meaning cluster represents the collective understanding of a concept, such as 'learning' involving 'teachers and students,' whereas meaning fragments refer to the individual parts of a concept. A total cluster divergence occurs when no meaning fragments are shared, whereas subtle divergences involve minor yet significant differences. Examining areas of overlap in meaning clusters highlights similarities in meaning, while differences are revealed by examining non-overlapping clusters. A total cluster divergence, where no meaning fragments are shared, is illustrated in Fig. 6.1.

A subtle cluster divergence, marked by small, easily overlooked differences, is shown in Fig. 6.2.
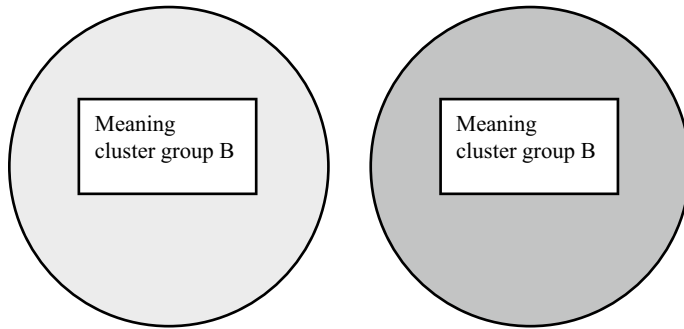
Fig. 6.1 Total meaning divergence. *Source* Dougherty (2010)
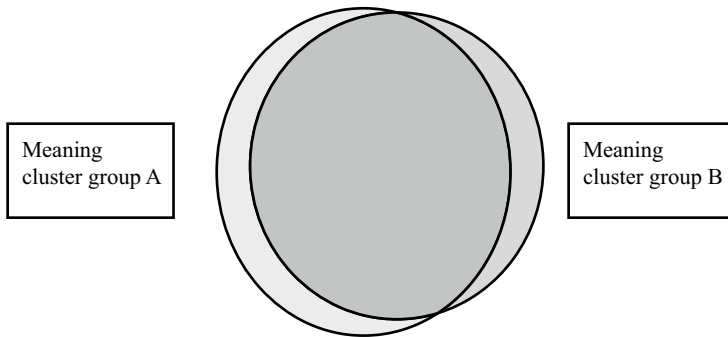
Fig. 6.2 Subtle cluster divergence. *Source* Dougherty (2010)

Among intercultural communication theories, Gudykunst (2003) emphasised outcomes like adaptation, identity management, and acculturation. However, these theories have yet to focus on how language and meanings can converge and diverge simultaneously, particularly in educational settings where diverse cultural perspectives intersect. In multicultural learning environments, students and educators often assume they share common understandings simply because they use the same language. However, underlying meaning divergences shaped by cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, and societal norms can lead to misinterpretations, communication breakdowns, and even learning disparities. LC/MD fills this gap by suggesting that 'divergent meaning systems

can be camouflaged using common or converging language and words'
(Dougherty et al., 2009, p. 21). For instance, concepts such as 'critical
thinking,' 'participation,' or 'respect' may carry vastly different meanings
depending on cultural context, affecting student engagement, classroom
discussions, and assessment expectations. By analysing meaning diver-
gence through context and stereotypes, LC/MD offers deeper insights
into intercultural communication dynamics. This is particularly important
in education, where fostering intercultural competence requires recog-
nising and addressing these hidden divergences. LC/MD Theory informs
this study by exploring participants' learning perceptions and responses
to intercultural challenges, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and
effective teaching and learning strategies.

Implications of LC/MD Theory for Intercultural Communication and Education

To explore how individuals progresses from multicultural communication
to cross-cultural communication, and finally to intercultural commu-
nication. Macnamara (2004) discussed the importance of research in
understanding how cultural factors influence communication effectiveness
across diverse contexts. Table 6.1 illustrates the distinctions and intercon-
nections among multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural commu-
nication, shedding light on how they contribute to the development
of intercultural competence. Multicultural communication acknowledges
the coexistence of diverse cultural groups within a society but does not
necessarily imply meaningful interaction between them (Goldberg, 1995).
Cross-cultural communication, on the other hand, involves comparing
different cultural practices, values, and communication styles, often to
identify differences and similarities. However, such comparisons do not
always lead to deeper intercultural understanding, as interactions may
remain or superficial. Intercultural communication goes beyond observa-
tion and comparison, requiring individuals to actively engage in dialogue,
adapt to cultural differences, and develop mutual understanding. Under-
standing these distinctions and synergies is crucial, as it highlights the
progression towards more inclusive and effective communication, ulti-
mately enhancing social cohesion and cooperation in diverse communities
(Deardorff, 2006).

In this initial stage, individuals, such as students in a multicultural
classroom, may coexist with members of other cultural backgrounds but

Table 6.1 Differences between multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural communication

Aspect	Multicultural communication	Cross-cultural communication	Intercultural communication
Definition	Communication within one society/ organization containing multiple cultural groups	Communication across different societal cultures	Interaction between groups from different cultures, emphasizing multual understanding and relationship building
Key characteristics	Inclusion of local knowledge and minority voices	Globalization often exports one-way, ethnocentric frames ("Coca-colonization")	Two-way symmetric over one-way dissemination
Outcome	Messages align with diverse subcultures	Fit with host culture norms and institutions	Deeper trust, access and sustained collaboration

Adapted from Macnamara (2004)

do not necessarily engage in meaningful interaction. For example, in a classroom composed of students from the United States, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, communication may be limited or one-sided, as shared commonalities may be minimal (Fig. 6.3a). The next stage, cross-cultural communication, highlights cultural differences that may prompt individual change but typically fails to result in collective transformation (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). A defining feature of cross-cultural societies is the comunication across different societal cultures. For instance, while Indigenous knowledge is often regarded as valuable, its perspectives are rarely fully integrated into mainstream classrooms. In these contexts, discourse is generally predetermined, with minority cultural groups merely informed rather than empowered to influence the conversation (Fig. 6.3b). In the final stage, intercultural communication, involves communities characterised by mutual learning, acceptance, and appreciation of differing perspectives, fostering deep intercultural relationships (Fig. 6.3c).

Establishing long-term relationships serves as an indicator of the intercultural depth of a project. For example, students from different cultural backgrounds may engage with the instructor at varying paces. The instructor might encourage quicker responders to listen carefully before
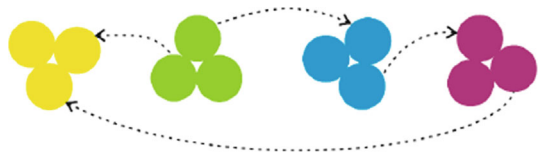
Fig. 6.3 **a** Multicultural communication. **b** Cross-cultural communication. **c** Intercultural communication. *Source* Hawkins (2019)

Fig. 6.3 (continued)
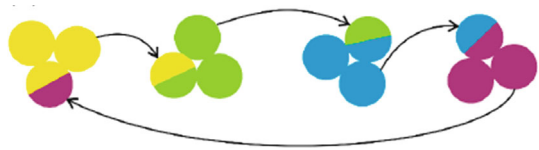
Fig. 6.3 (continued)
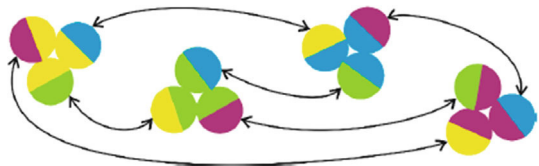
speaking and prompt more reflective students to respond more readily. By observing these interactions within this framework, the instructor can reshape the classroom environment and enhance communication. This model is applied in this study to examine how the interviewee navigates knowledge production, negotiates identity, and constructs and recentres alternative communication routines.

Methodology

This study was conducted at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), a diverse educational setting located in Hawai'i, where English is the primary language, but the demographic is predominantly Asian American. UHM's unique geographic and cultural context fosters a rich multicultural environment, making it an ideal location to study intercultural interactions. The research primarily took place at Hale Mānoa, which houses approximately 480 international participants within the East–West

Center (EWC) Education Programme. Since its founding in 1960, the EWC has facilitated opportunities for mutual understanding among individuals from the United States, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, encouraging dialogue and relationship-building across diverse backgrounds, including differences in gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, nationality, faith, and sexual orientation.

Research Design

The rationale for adopting ethnographic qualitative methods in this study lies in the need to explore the participant's lived experiences, cultural adaptation, and perceptions of learning in a deeply contextualised manner. Ethnography, as a qualitative approach, enables the detailed examination of complex social and cultural phenomena, providing rich, nuanced insights that are particularly valuable when investigating underrepresented perspectives. By immersing themselves in the field, ethnographers capture the complexities of lived experiences and interpret social interactions within their natural contexts, making this method especially effective for understanding marginalised communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This depth of analysis is crucial for highlighting voices that are often overlooked, fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of diverse cultural landscapes. Given that the participant is a middle-aged male from Taiwan's indigenous Paiwan tribe, studying abroad for the first time, ethnographic methods were well-suited to capturing his unique cultural and linguistic experiences. The extended fieldwork at the East–West Center (EWC) over eight months enabled the researcher to observe his interactions, behaviours, and reflections, offering a comprehensive understanding of his adaptation processes within a new educational and cultural environment.

This approach aligns with the study's aim to investigate how the participant's perceptions of learning differ from mainstream educational expectations, which are often shaped by dominant cultural narratives. By focusing on a single participant, the study employed intensive, iterative methods such as participant observation, informal interviews, and reflective journaling to uncover subtleties that might be lost in broader quantitative analyses. The ethnographic lens also facilitated an exploration of the participant's identity, cultural values, and the intersectionality of his background within the broader context of global education. By prioritising depth over breadth, the study contributes to a richer, more

grounded understanding of how indigenous perspectives challenge and enrich dominant educational paradigms. The research focused on how the participant's perceptions of learning diverge from mainstream educational expectations in terms of educational conceptualisations, knowledge perspectives, and learning styles.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews conducted over the course of one month, totalling approximately three hours. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview questions explored the participant's definitions of learning, perceptions of teacher expectations, and the teacher-student relationship. Reflecting on these definitions, the participant described his process of adapting his interactions with people from diverse cultural perspectives. The semi-structured interview format provided flexibility, allowing the participant to respond freely and express his thoughts and attitudes. This approach allowed the researcher to adapt the questions based on the participant's responses, enabling further clarification when necessary (King, 2016). By minimising interruptions, this format facilitated the emergence of spontaneous themes, capturing nuanced insights into the participant's perspective. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using the language convergence and meaning divergence (LC/MD) framework, offering a structured approach to examining the participant's intercultural communication and adaptation.

Data Analysis

This study employed content analysis to examine interview transcripts, identifying themes through the constant comparison method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach emphasises overarching patterns in the participant's linguistic and identity expressions rather than focusing solely on individual words. In line with qualitative research principles, which acknowledge the researcher's role in shaping data through analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2002), interpretive content analysis was used as a tool to identify specific meanings within the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Content analysis theory facilitated an understanding of language convergence and meaning divergence, with themes highlighted in colour to enhance visualisation as recurring patterns emerged. Throughout the

process, analytic memos and field notes were documented to capture additional insights and reflections.

Findings

This study addressed two primary research questions: (1) How does the Indigenous student perceive learning? and (2) How does the Indigenous student adapt to the mainstream learning environment? The analysis revealed three key themes: definitions of learning in relation to schools and teachers, the influence of capitalism on learning perceptions, and the role of community in learning processes.

Divergent Educational Conceptualisations

Analysis through the Language Convergence/Meaning Divergence (LC/MD) Theory revealed that the participant's conceptualisation of learning transcended conventional institutional boundaries. This expanded meaning cluster demonstrated significant divergence from traditional institutional frameworks of education. The data revealed a fundamental linguistic-cultural distinction in educational conceptualisation. The participant articulated this difference through the absence of direct translations in Paiwanese:

> In Paiwanese, there is no direct translation to 'school' and 'teacher.' Learning takes place everywhere. The place that is the closest to 'school' is a place where people gather together to learn how to catch fish and hunting.

Knowledge transmission in this context occurs primarily through experiential and oral traditions:

> Knowledge from observations and experiences in the form of stories, songs, or chants, and passed down to descendants by elders with experiences. We called them Vuvu.

The analysis identified specific tensions between Indigenous and institutional learning environments. Traditional classroom configurations posed challenges for the participant's learning style. The interviewee did not like to be confined in a concrete building called 'school' and was accustomed

to learning through observation. This different learning preference posed challenges for the interviewee in the mainstream school setting.

> I still remember when I was put in a seat in a row as a junior high school student, I felt so insecure because I have no idea who is looking behind my back. In the tribe, we often sit in a circle. It is easier for me to see what others are doing to make sure that I am not falling behind.

Furthermore, the findings revealed significant disparities between Indigenous and institutional behavioural expectations. The participant's experience highlighted this cultural dissonance:

> I mainly raised my hand not for asking questions, but to ask for permission to go to the toilet as a junior high school student. Eating in class is not allowed back home, but here I find it fine as long as there is no such sign that prohibits people from eating.

These institutional norms often resulted in the participant's indigenous learning style being perceived as deficient, despite its cultural legitimacy and effectiveness within traditional contexts. This misalignment between cultural and institutional expectations created significant challenges for the participant's educational experience.

Divergent Cultural Perspectives on Knowledge and Learning and Capitalist Values

Capitalism shapes knowledge production and influences the qualities deemed desirable in students. Reflecting on my education in a 'city school' in Taiwan, the participant recounted,

> I was told to seize the time because 'Time is money.' Wandering around was considered wasting money because students may become less competitive in the future job market. Another famous quote is 'Knowledge is power.' I felt hard to relate to these metaphors because the Paiwanese place great emphasis on 'sharing' and 'exchanging financial capital and cultural capital like knowledge.

When the participant sought ways to improve his English, I suggested the language centre. He expressed reluctance, preferring a reciprocal relationship with a language exchange partner. A formal 'language teacher'

imposed a sense of hierarchy and created discomfort associated with 'owing' something, whereas the partner model allowed him to contribute meaningfully to knowledge production.

The participant also described how his parents distributed their paycheck among siblings the day after receiving it. He shared feeling unsettled when people criticised his parents for lacking 'financial management' skills and prioritising the present over future preparation. He explained,

> While 'saving money' is considered a virtue in 'city school' and promoted by teachers, I felt conflicted because putting money in one's pocket is considered very selfish in the tribe.

From a capitalist perspective, values such as 'Time is money,' 'Knowledge is power,' and personal wealth accumulation are considered virtuous. In contrast, the participant emphasised exploration, collaboration, and communal ownership. The contrast illustrates convergence in valuing learning but divergence in the qualities defining a 'good' student. As a result, alternative relationships and practices are marginalised within the instructor's discourse and actions.

Community-Based Learning and Indigenous Perspectives on Knowledge

The interviewee's definition of learning extends beyond the formal school setting to include the community, nature, and spiritual elements. He explained:

> A dog in our tribe is even regarded as a family member that carries a family name. Unlike treating the dog as a pet to cuddle or for companionship, the dog in the tribe is one of the family members with responsibilities, such as hunting or looking after the house.

Paiwan people believe that everything in nature is intelligent and worth learning. If you listen carefully, you will hear birds warning of potential dangers and the wind predicting impending disasters. The interviewee also described the land as a maternal figure, aligning with the Hawaiian concept of 'Āina,' where the land is revered as family. Unlike the capitalist conceptualisation of land as property, he explained that in his culture,

land cannot be sold because '*no one sells their mother*.' In indigenous worldviews, a person's connection begins with the community, expands to the clan, and finally reaches the family (Fig. 6.4). In contrast, the researcher's learning experience is centred around the family unit, defined by my parents and siblings, as the foundation of society. Caring for one's family is viewed as the primary responsibility, with the family as the central unit from which responsibilities expand to the clan and, eventually, to the community (Fig. 6.5). Through this comparison, the researcher recognised that their connection to the community is relatively weak, whereas, for Indigenous people, it is foundational.

These contrasting learning maps offer insights into how knowledge can be constructed and sustained. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory suggests that individuals' thoughts, ideas, and beliefs develop through social interactions within their specific communities. In this light, the

Fig. 6.4 Interviewee's learning map
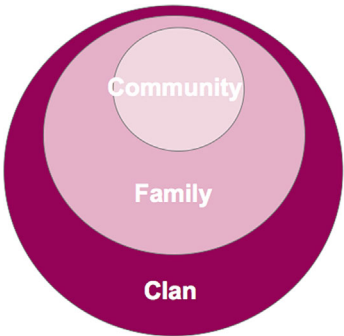
Fig. 6.5 My learning map
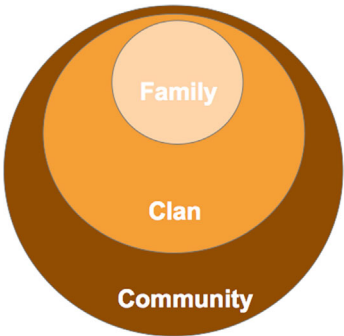
interviewee's community-centred learning map highlights the value of community-based programs that connect students to the land, heritage, and elders. Such program can strengthen students' identities and enhance their motivation for academic learning by embedding education within a culturally grounded community context.

Adapting to Mainstream Education: Navigating Exclusion and Affirming Identity

Adapting to mainstream education presents unique challenges for Indigenous students, especially when cultural narratives are dismissed, devalued, or misunderstood. The participant shared an experience in which he recounted an Indigenous story about a person who violated a cultural taboo and was subsequently haunted by spirits. His classmates responded by teasing him as 'superstitious.' This story, which held profound cultural significance as a reminder to avoid the sacred Mountain Kavulungan, a place crucial to the Paiwanese people for its role in preserving water quality was dismissed. In contrast, discussions about popular Disney cartoons received enthusiastic responses from peers. This double standard proved particularly frustrating for the interviewee, as he held a strong emotional connection to these indigenous stories. He reflected,

> I was often left out of conversations and felt 'blind and deaf.' My inner world is thus very silent. When my classmates were having fun, tossing textbooks and chairs, I could ignore all those noises and complete my work efficiently. Those people's voices were meaningless to me.

Excluded from common discussions, the participant experienced a sense of 'othering,' leading him to feel silent and invisible within the daily school discourse. When asked about his experiences of exclusion, he shrugged and remarked, humorously, that one benefit of lacking financial resources is that tribal people are usually very fit. This reaction illustrates a common coping strategy among marginalised groups, who often experience 'vulnerability to face threats to their cultural identities' (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Such individuals may internally grapple with feelings of uncertainty, frustration, anxiety, and conflict (Barnett & Lee, 2002). To manage these pressures, minority groups commonly employ various strategies, including humour, positive framing, excuses, or passive-aggressive responses such as sarcasm (Chang, 2011).

To counteract feelings of oppression, the participant found joy in everyday acts of autonomy, going off-campus, choosing his own path, and ordering food he enjoyed, which enabled him to regain agency without relying on others. He also developed personal strategies to reconcile his cultural identity within a post-colonial context, focusing on regaining a sense of agency rather than viewing Indigenous cultural heritage as mere artifacts for preservation in museums. Instead, he explored how current generations could benefit from historical experiences of oppression.

In discussions with Native Hawaiian students, the participant shared frustrations surrounding the marginalisation of Indigenous cultures through protests such as the Thirty-Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea. Whenever this topic arose, he felt a sense of understanding and solidarity within these groups. These intercultural experiences affirmed his identity, allowing him to frame historical trauma through a constructive lens rather than adopting a victim perspective. While the path towards transformative justice is gradual, feeling understood and adopting a constructive viewpoint allowed him to transition from a cross-cultural to an intercultural mindset, one grounded in mutual growth, solidarity, and mutual understanding.

Discussion

The experiences of Global South researchers, particularly indigenous students, reveal unique challenges in navigating mainstream education systems. These challenges are not merely linguistic or cultural but are deeply rooted in structural inequities that marginalise indigenous knowledge systems. Many studies conceptualise intercultural learning simply as having studied abroad, but cultures are not easy to map, and even more difficult to change. Studying the interplay between language and culture can lead to the recognition of different perspectives and the achievement of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence involves 'effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations' (Deardorff, 2009a, 2009b, p. 33), supported by key attitudes such as respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. These attitudes encourage individuals to venture beyond their comfort zones and view differences as opportunities, facilitating the negotiation and mediation of cultural differences. While language barriers and cultural distance are often cited in the literature that may hinder communication, less is known about the subtlety of these dissonances. LC/MD Theory examines how different

cultural groups may interpret the same linguistic label differently, even when interaction appear harmonious on the surface. This study offers an individual-level, empirical analysis of how intercultural interactions shape one's personality, cognitive styles, and values in identity negotiation. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) emphasis on cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness, factors essential to understanding the world from multiple perspectives.

Through in-depth discourse analysis, culturally embedded meanings within language can be unpacked, revealing complex layers of identity transformation. Although this study is limited to a single participant, the findings resonate with Deardorff's framework, as the process of identity negotiation aims to lead to greater tolerance, acceptance, and a willingness to accommodate out-groups (Hebrok, 2011). Furthermore, the skills identified by Deardorff (2009a, 2009b), such as observation, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting, and relating, are essential for processing knowledge in intercultural contexts. These competencies are particularly relevant in the face of rapid global change, where adaptability and an openness to diverse perspectives are critical. By analysing the participant's evolving cultural identity, this study underscores the transformative potential of intercultural learning and the importance of fostering an environment that supports curiosity, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

Challenges in the Western Educational Setting

After examining the language convergence data, it was found that shared experiences between Taiwanese Paiwan Indigenous participant reflected a definition of learning as a communal activity involving the acquisition of new skills and sharing responsibilities, rather than an individual effort. However, both parties have different experiences learning in 'schools.' It can be observed that the participant did not feel connected to the 'city school' during secondary education, citing discomfort with the classroom seating arrangement, evaluation methods, and cultural stereotypes. He struggled in culturally unfamiliar learning environments of Western school systems, where learning is often decontextualised. For indigenous students, these challenges are compounded by the dominance of mainstream paradigms in academia, which often marginalise alternative ways of knowing and learning. For example, when presented with a biology multiple-choice question requiring plant categorisation, the participant

expressed difficulty because the plants depicted lacked contextual cues, such as smell or neighbouring species. Western education often emphasises content, skills, and testing over contextualised, process-oriented learning. The rigidity of standardised benchmarks and assessments reflects a larger dilemma of navigating between Western and indigenous learning styles.

Adaptation in the Modern Context

The impact of colonisation on Indigenous populations is profound, one of the most direct being the establishment of the dominant society's educational systems. This divergence is particularly pronounced for indigenous students, whose cultural contexts and knowledge systems are frequently misrepresented or ignored within mainstream academia. The data indicate that the participant experienced insecurity and ambivalence regarding his cultural identity, particularly in interactions with dominant cultural groups. As a member of a minority community, he often struggled to express his emotions in his mother tongue and maintain his cultural traditions. Despite mainstream society's self-perception as inclusive, the participant encountered subtle prejudice that devalued his cultural legitimacy and learning perspectives. However, these challenges did not negate his sense of agency and belonging. He rooted his educational development in community connection and a strong sense of place. Rather than assimilating, he cultivated intercultural awareness by identifying gaps between cultures. Gaston (1984) describes intercultural awareness as the advanced understanding of one's cultural group, enabling individuals to transcend their own cultural lens and view it as a product rather than a constraint. This perspective illustrates how the participant reclaimed autonomy and reconnected his learning to community well-being. In this view, learning entails not only academic success but also sustaining the community's prosperity and working towards shared goals through incremental steps. These divergent learning expectations underscore the importance of shared goals in intercultural education.

Implications

This chapter explores the challenges and pedagogical practices that promote multicultural education, with a particular attention to marginalised Indigenous groups whose experiences, knowledge, and

languages are frequently overlooked. Rather than treating indigenous education as a broad or generalised category, it is essential to recognise the specific challenges and contributions of researchers from the Global South researchers, who navigate challenges in conducting research, developing theoretical frameworks, and engaging with dominant academic discourses. For instance, Wu et al. (2025) present a case study of an environmental curriculum co-developed with a Rukai indigenous community in Taiwan. This curriculum illustrates the potential of culturally responsive education to foster both environmental literacy and technological competence, exemplifying how localised knowledge systems can be leveraged to resist epistemic marginalisation and promote sustainability within Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people are often stereotyped as slow learners, and existing educational resources frequently fail to bridge indigenous and mainstream education. Hall (1973) posits that cross-cultural understanding occurs through both external exposure and an inner process of self-discovery. Through this process, intercultural competence can emerge, but it requires intentional guidance, critical conversations, and reflective practices to foster acceptance and appreciation of diverse perspectives. This chapter extends Hall's (1973) premise by examining how Global South researchers contribute to intercultural understanding through contextually grounded frameworks that challenge dominant narratives. Developing intercultural competence requires more than exposure to difference. It calls for structured opportunities that cultivate openness, critical thinking, and mutual respect. By doing so, we can move towards a more inclusive and equitable educational system that values the contributions of all cultural perspectives. Achieving intercultural understanding in a globalised world requires intentional effort. Diversity alone is not sufficient. Shen and Wu (2025) illustrate such efforts through their analysis of two state-level initiatives in the United States that promote inclusive curricula. In Illinois, the 2021 Teaching Equitable Asian American Community History (TEAACH) Act mandates teaching Asian American history, addressing historical exclusion through targeted legislative reform and teacher professional development. In Hawai'i, the Nā Hopena A'o framework centres indigenous values to foster cultural identity and environmental stewardship, emphasising education rooted in local cultural practices and community engagement. These initiatives reflect intentional strategies to build intercultural understanding, moving beyond symbolic diversity to systemic inclusion.

Future research should explore how shared concepts elicit unique experiential associations, further identifying sociocultural factors that enhance communication and inclusive management strategies. Scholars from the Global South often work within structures that privilege Western epistemologies, making it essential to highlight how they approach intercultural competence and inclusive education from their own perspectives. These insights could support a more equitable academic landscape, ensuring that the voices of Global South researchers are not just included but also actively shape global conversations on education and intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

The costs of intercultural incompetence are significant, especially in an era marked by increased migration, political populism, extremism, and hate speech. The challenges particularly the tension between Western and Indigenous educational paradigms evoke a profound sense of empathy and critical reflection on how cultural contexts shape our understanding of learning and identity. Research indicates that conflicts between home culture and school culture can create difficulties for individuals in educational settings, often leading to challenges with self-esteem, motivation, and engagement (Paris & Alim, 2017).

The challenges faced by indigenous students highlight the need for culturally sustaining pedagogies and invite reflection on how to create more inclusive learning spaces. This chapter sought to understand how intercultural communication within and beyond cultural groups influences individual cultural identity. The participant's insecurity about his cultural identity, shaped by subtle prejudices of his traditions, mirror struggles that many individuals face when navigating dominant cultural expectations.

This study reveals that successful communication heavily relies on mutual appreciation of diverse interpretive framework shaped by individual values, beliefs, and experiences. In addressing the research questions, how an Indigenous student perceives learning and adapts to a mainstream learning environment, the findings demonstrate that the interviewee's concept of learning is profoundly experience-centred and place-based. This research reaffirms the transformative potential of intercultural learning. It challenges us to rethink education not as a one-size-fits-all system but as a dynamic, inclusive process that values the

contributions of all cultural perspectives. These insights also suggest that developing intercultural competence requires a nuanced appreciation of diverse learning paradigms, paving the way for a more inclusive and understanding educational landscape.

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Deconstructing Colonial Bias: Applying Indigenous Methodologies in the Fiji Islands

Anawaite Matadradra

Introduction

The ongoing discourse on decolonisation and epistemic justice has highlighted the importance of recognising and valuing indigenous research methodologies. This article aims to contribute to this discourse by examining the application of indigenous Fijian methodologies, particularly through the lens of the Vanua Research Framework and *talanoa* dialogues or storytelling (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). These approaches provide significant contributions that expand and enrich current research paradigms by emphasising relationality, reciprocity, and ethical engagement principles that are essential to the sociocultural fabric of Pacific societies (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). Leenen-Young and Uperesa (2023) provide important insights directly supporting the aims of this study, particularly in deconstructing colonial biases and applying Indigenous methodologies within Fijian research contexts. The authors trace the

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development of Pacific research methodologies as part of a broader resistance to Western academic imperialism and the marginalisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Leenen-Young & Uperesa, 2023). According to Leenen-Young and Uperesa (2023), Pacific approaches like *talanoa* (storytelling) and *vanua* (land) are philosophically based on relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility rather than being merely methodological tools. They provide a philosophical realignment that places community, land, and ethical accountability at the center (Leenen-Young & Uperesa, 2023). This is especially consistent with the use of *vanua* and *talanoa* frameworks in the current research, which are culturally grounded approaches and representations of Indigenous worldviews. The study advises researchers to use cultural norms and lived experience to guide ethical interactions, while also emphasising the importance of contextual knowledge and warning against tokenistic or superficial uses of Indigenous approaches. A Fijian Values Research System (FVRS) based on the *iTaukei* concepts of *sautu* (wellbeing), *gauna* (time), *maliwa* (space), and *veiwekani* (relationship) was developed by Cammock and Andrews (2023). This system's inclusion offers theoretical and practical support for methodological innovation in Indigenous Fijian contexts. (Cammock & Andrews, 2023). This makes Leenen-Young and Uperesa's study more convincing in its argument that Pacific approaches endeavour to decolonise research practice should give priority to Indigenous approaches and supports their legitimacy (2023).

Positivism is a Western research methodology that emphasises knowledge that can be quantified and tested using tests, surveys, and hypotheses (Yow, 2015). This approach might work in some circumstances, but it might not work well in Indigenous cultures like Fiji. Standardised technologies frequently fail to capture the complexity of information conveyed through *talanoa* and storytelling. The cultural value of forming relationships may clash with the concept of researcher neutrality. Concentrating on any one aspect could mask the ecological, social, and spiritual ties that shape Indigenous culture. Cultural values like reciprocity, respect, and kinship may be overlooked by formal ethics. Using these methods without adaptation risks repeating colonial patterns. Indigenous methodologies offer more culturally grounded and respectful ways of doing research in Fiji. Within Fiji, traditional practices such as *i sevusevu* (ceremonial kava presentation), *i vakavinavinaka* (acts of gratitude), and *i tatau* (farewell formalities) are not merely cultural artefacts but are

pivotal to the research process. The *i sevusevu*, a traditional presentation of kava in Fiji, and the *i vakavinavinaka* is a gift-giving practice exemplify the principles of respect, reciprocity, and community accountability that western paradigms do not account for (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The expression *itautau* is used to denote the thanking of participants for their knowledge and the commitment one makes to safeguard it on behalf of the participants. Their incorporation into the research shows consideration for community structures, enhances confidence, and fosters trust while ensuring the practices of research are in concordance with the customs of the society. These aspects are often neglected by Western research methods which only add to the already existing ethical dilemmas surrounding Pacific research (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012).

Responding to the work of scholars such as Marovah and Mutanga (2023) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), this article critically reflects on the limitations of applying Western methodologies in Indigenous contexts and explores the value of more contextually grounded approaches. Through an autoethnographic lens, I reflect on my positionality as an iTaukei researcher navigating insider–outsider dynamics. This dual position allows me to explore the epistemological tensions and ethical dilemmas of conducting culturally grounded research within academic systems shaped by colonial legacies. Consequently, Global South researchers, as proponents of this knowledge, often face unique challenges that are neither adequately addressed by conventional research frameworks nor considered as a matter of urgency (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023; Lee & Naidoo, 2021). These challenges include navigating complex cultural dynamics, overcoming language barriers, and addressing the scepticism of local communities towards external researchers from or based in the Global North researching in the Global South communities (Ibid). Yet, by utilising Indigenous methodologies, researchers can conduct studies that are culturally acceptable and ethically sound, thereby ensuring that their work is both relevant and respectful to the communities involved (Chilisa, 2019; Marovah & Mutanga, 2023).

The study based on this chapter employs autoethnography as a critical reflection methodology to explore how combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods can enhance the ethical integrity and cultural acceptability of research conducted in Pacific settings. Since autoethnography is based on the genuine experiences of the researcher and the communities involved, it allows for a very reflective and authentic approach (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Using my own positionality as an Indigenous

Fijian scholar and practitioner, the chapter explores fieldwork experiences in Fijian academic institutions and community interactions. It highlights how ethical research techniques are influenced by Indigenous frameworks such as *talanoa* (dialogue-based inquiry) and *vanua* (relational and place-based knowledge) based research. These practices are not merely cultural accessories; they are necessary to uphold epistemic justice, respectful participation, and reciprocal accountability (Smith, 2021). The objective is to provide a comprehensive description of the challenges, sacrifices, and responsibilities related to decolonising research practice in the Pacific, as well as to advance a pluralistic methodological approach that prioritises Global South epistemologies and respects Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith, 2021).

By sharing these reflections, the discussion contributes to broader discourses on decoloniality and epistemic justice, promoting a research ethos that values methodological inclusivity, reflexivity, and respect for diverse knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Building on the contributions of scholars such as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Marovah, Mutanga (2023), and others, this work advances these conversations by grounding them in the unique cultural and experiential context of Fiji. The insights offered highlight the need for more equitable and inclusive approaches to knowledge production that acknowledge Indigenous methodologies as essential to ethically acceptable and contextually relevant research, rather than as an add-on (Chilisa, 2019). Fijian research principles like *veidokai* (respect), *solesolevaki* (reciprocity), and *veiwekani* (community accountability) are used to broaden empirical understandings of decoloniality and epistemic justice. In western knowledge systems, knowledge is often linked to speech, assertion, and documentation (Grange, 2004). This approach ignores other important ways of knowing that are deeply embedded in many Pacific cultures, such as silence, gesture, and presence. Recognising silence as a legitimate form of knowledge challenges epistemic injustice, particularly when it comes to the tendency to overlook Indigenous voices that do not conform to Eurocentric ways of communication.

Pacific cultures view silence as a deliberate agency used to uphold cultural standards, protect holy knowledge, and oppose exploitative colonialism rather than as a sign of weakness or ignorance. Calls for disclosure and transparency in Western research may go beyond these bounds. Communities can exercise epistemic self-determination and decide what information is shared, when it is shared, and with whom by honouring

silence. It invalidates myths, challenges the extractive logic of colonial research, and promotes epistemic reparation by restoring respect for Indigenous resilience, sovereignty, and ways of knowing (Ratubulewa, 2012). These values challenge colonial hierarchies by positioning Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate and vital sources of insight. These approaches promote more equitable and responsible research methods by maintaining meaningful informed consent and encouraging collaboration with study participants and their communities (Collins et al., 2018).

A Call for Indigenous Research Methodologies

Research methodologies employed in social sciences have predominantly been shaped by Western epistemologies, often failing to account for the cultural nuances and specificities of non-Western contexts (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). For a long time, research communities have been subjected to pre-scribed and pre-determined ways of engaging with communities, which override local values and practices of knowledge creation and meaning making of this knowledge. In Smith's (2021) seminal work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith describes how Indigenous peoples have been marginalised by colonial research and knowledge systems, which have framed them as subjects of study rather than knowledge bearers. Researchers have argued that the application of Western research methodologies has often led to a disconnection between the research process and the lived realities of indigenous communities (see Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2021). The Fiji Islands are no exception. Western-informed methodologies, rooted in positivist traditions, often overlook the relational and reciprocal nature of knowledge production that is integral to indigenous cultures (Smith, 2021). They prioritise objectivity, detachment, and the pursuit of universal truths (Yow, 2015). While these approaches have their merits, they are often misaligned with the cultural values and practices of Indigenous communities (Chilisa, 2019). For instance, positivist approaches emphasise empirical data and statistical analysis, which can decontextualise the lived experiences of participants (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Ethnographic methods, although more qualitative, still often position the researcher as an outsider, potentially leading to misinterpretations of cultural practices (Kovach, 2021).

In Indigenous contexts, such as those of Fiji, these methodologies can inadvertently perpetuate colonial dynamics of power and knowledge production. The researcher is often seen as an authoritative figure

and all-knowing, and the knowledge produced may not fully reflect the community's perspectives and values (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This disconnect can result in research outcomes that are not only culturally insensitive but also ethically questionable. Given these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for Indigenous methodologies that are culturally congruent and ethically sound. Indigenous methodologies, such as the *Vanua*[1] Research Framework and *talanoa*[2] dialogues, prioritise relationality, reciprocity, and the co-construction of knowledge. These approaches align with the cultural practices and values of Indigenous communities, fostering a more respectful and inclusive research process (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The *Vanua* Research Framework encourages the application of the *talanoa* method, which is the most suitable research instrument for having sensitive and culturally specific conversations with Melanesian groups (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Participants guide the discussion during a *talanoa* session, while researchers provide follow-up questions to allow participants to freely express their opinions.

In this study, *talanoa* a relational, conversational technique based on empathy, trust, and shared storytelling was a crucial methodological tool (Farrelly et al., 2014). *Talanoa* exemplifies *vanua* ideals by encouraging emotional openness and respect for one another, which goes well beyond casual talk and allows the researcher and participant to collectively generate meaning. In order to facilitate nuanced representations of lived experience, *talanoa* sessions were held in settings where participants felt relationally and culturally safe. This method aligns with the ethical imperatives of *veiwekani vakavanua* (traditional relational obligations), reinforcing the importance of conducting research that respects Fijian protocols and epistemologies (Farrelly et al., 2014). This research advances a decolonial approach that is inclusive, culturally based, and reflective of the lived reality of Fijian communities by combining *talanoa* practices with *vanua* principles.

Traditional storytelling, or *talanoa*, was selected because it reflects oral traditions in Fiji and promotes direct interaction. In this study, the mainstream Bauan dialect the standard *iTaukei* Fijian vernacular in Fiji is spoken by Melanesian descendants from the Solomon Islands

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[1] It signifies a socio-political and spiritual relationship that binds the community together.

[2] Informal talks and discussions held within an informal setting as a form of socialising.

and Vanuatu who reside in Fiji. Key life events, family tales, everyday routines, and the difficulties of juggling multiple identities in Fiji's multicultural society were all discussed through talanoa (Matadradra, 2022). I paid attention to the pride in community resilience, the grievances associated with the Pacific labour trade, and the delight in positive recollections to gather information and ideas. These conversations deepened my understanding of how colonial recruitment and post-colonial labour policies have shaped Melanesian communities in Fiji (Matadradra, 2022). Although these personal narratives cannot fill every gap in the written record, they illuminate perspectives that official archives often overlook perspectives shaped by intergenerational memory, shifting political contexts, and evolving senses of belonging. By focusing on *talanoa*, this research amplifies voices that have been marginalised, showing that Fiji's history is woven not only through government documents but also through the lived experiences of people whose pasts inform their present and future. A review of existing literature further reveals a pronounced gap in the use of culturally sensitive methodologies within Indigenous research contexts. Focusing mostly on Maori Indigenous communities, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work, 'Decolonizing Methodologies,' emphasises the importance of decolonising research practices and embracing Indigenous epistemologies (Smith, 2021). Similarly, Chilisa's 'Indigenous Research Methodologies' based on sub-Saharan cultures, provide a comprehensive framework for conducting research that respects and integrates Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Chilisa, 2019). In Pacific contexts, research by Nabobo-Baba (2006, 2008) and Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba (2012, 2014) demonstrates the practical application of Indigenous methodologies, highlighting their effectiveness in fostering ethical and culturally congruent research. These studies emphasise the need for researchers to engage with communities in a manner that respects their cultural practices and values, ensuring that the research process is a collaborative and empowering experience.

Contextual Background

Fiji, an island nation in the South Pacific, comprises over 300 islands, with Viti Levu and Vanua Levu being the largest (Cook & Chen, 2019). Its diverse geography, ranging from high volcanic islands to low-lying atolls, has shaped complex cultural practices, kinship systems, and relationships with land and sea. Archaeological evidence suggests that

Austronesian voyagers linked to the Lapita cultural complex first settled the islands around 1500 BC (Clark, 2003), establishing long-standing traditions of knowledge, exchange, and community organization. By the late eighteenth century, expanding European commercial interests transformed these Indigenous systems. Pacific Islanders became entangled in the global economy through the provisioning of ships and the extraction of commodities such as sandalwood and bêche-de-mer. Dorothy Shineberg (2014) documents that hundreds of Islanders from Fiji, the Marquesas, Hawai'i, and other parts of the Pacific joined sandalwood-cutting expeditions between 1830 and 1865, marking an early phase of the Pacific labour trade. This trade intensified in the 1860s as colonial plantations demanded more workers, resulting in the large-scale recruitment and displacement of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples often through coercion or deceit, as in the Peruvian labour trade of 1862–1863 (Campbell, 2003; Matadradra, 2022). When Fiji was colonised by Britain in 1874 (Lal, 1992), these extractive and racialized systems were institutionalized through new forms of governance, land alienation, and labour exploitation. Although Fiji gained independence in 1970, the colonial legacies embedded within social, political, and research structures persist today, continuing to shape how knowledge about the Pacific is produced and valued. It is within this historical and epistemological context that "Deconstructing Colonial Bias: Applying Indigenous Methodologies in the Fiji Islands" positions itself. The article seeks to challenge the lingering colonial assumptions that frame research in and about the Pacific. Drawing on Indigenous Fijian methodologies, particularly the *Vanua* Research Framework it explores how decolonizing approaches can restore relational ethics, empower community voices, and reframe knowledge production as a process rooted in Fijian worldviews and collective responsibility (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

In Fiji, the concept of *vanua* is foundational, encompassing not only the land but also the people and their interwoven social, spiritual, and political relationships. It represents a holistic worldview in which identity, place, and community are inseparable (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). The *Vanua* Research Framework, grounded in these principles, provides a culturally embedded approach to ethical and respectful research, emphasising relational accountability and communal values. Such frameworks are essential for understanding the application and significance of Indigenous methodologies in Fijian contexts, as they ensure that research is not

only contextually relevant but also aligned with local epistemologies and cultural protocols.

Like any other Pacific Island nations, Fiji is grappling with contemporary challenges like climate change, reliance on tourism and remittances for economic growth, and the impact of globalisation on cultural practices. (Kumar & Kumar, 2017; Lockwood, 2017). Ethnic tensions and the effects of colonialism still affect social dynamics in Fiji (Ratuva, 2021). These issues highlight how crucial it is to use contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive research approaches (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Smith, 2021). The voices of Pacific Indigenous people, such as Epeli Hauofa, Teresia Teaiwa, Vilisoni Hereniko, Konai Helu Thaman, Apolonia Tamata, Litea Meo-Sewabu, Okusitino Mahina, Upolu Vaai, Katerina Teaiwa and Kabini Sanga have enabled Indigenous scholars to frame issues and approaches from a more Indigenous perspective. According to Hereniko, ceremonies and rituals were used to convey knowledge about custom and tradition. Observers took close note of how things were carried out and stored the details into memory for future use (2000). In Fiji and other Pacific Islands, traditional literature is primarily oral and takes the form of songs, chants, stories, *meke* (traditional dance), and lullabies. These oral arts' substance is an essential component of the Fijian ethos (Tamata, 2000). Indigenous methodologies, such as the *Vanua* Research Framework and *talanoa* storytelling dialogues, offer culturally appropriate ways to engage with communities, ensuring research processes are respectful and beneficial to the participants. This work makes a valuable contribution to the literature by offering fresh insights into the history of Fiji. Through its exploration of previously underexamined topics and presentation of new research, it enhances our understanding of conducting research within these local contexts and enriches the broader historiographical landscape.

Methodology

The study employed a combination of Indigenous methodologies and autoethnography to explore the complexities and nuances of conducting culturally sensitive and contextually relevant research in Fiji. Indigenous methodologies enable researchers and participants to situate themselves within the context of the research process, fostering a more nuanced and meaningful discussion. The choice of methodologies is guided by the need to respect and integrate the cultural practices and epistemologies of

the Indigenous communities involved. This section provides an overview of the *Vanua* Research Framework, *talanoa* storytelling dialogues, and the autoethnographic approach used in the study.

During the *talanoa* storytelling dialogues, the participant structures the conversation, while the researcher asks follow-up questions. This allows the participants to express themselves freely. *Talanoa* was selected because it was the most culturally appropriate method to use. *Talanoa* exchanges for this research took place in community halls, churches and at private residences. While this type of approach is unstructured and follows no pre-defined format or time constraint, prompts relevant to the discussion were used throughout the discussion. The *talanoa* sessions, led by the community's elders who also participated, were skillfully guided using prompts to refocus the storytelling on the primary research issue. For instance, a notable session in a Ni-Vanuatu community in Fiji, led by the headman, extended over three hours (Matadradra, 2022). Although it was a profound discussion, the prompts proved essential in steering the conversation back to the study's main subject.

Vanua *Research Framework*

The *Vanua* Research Framework, as articulated by Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006), is deeply rooted in Fijian cultural principles. Central to this framework is *Vanua*, which encompasses the land, people, and their interconnectedness, providing a holistic basis for research. This framework prioritises relationality, reciprocity, and the co-construction of knowledge, making it highly suitable for Pacific contexts (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). The inherent connectedness of villagers and Pacific Islanders, akin to an extended family, facilitated the establishment of rapport with study participants. Relationality was ensured through continuous engagement with the community, respecting local norms and values, which helped in building trust. Reciprocity was maintained by ensuring that the research provided tangible benefits to the community, such as sharing findings and offering practical solutions to community issues. The co-construction of knowledge was achieved by involving participants in the formulation of research questions and the interpretation of data, ensuring that their voices were central to the narrative and findings.

Indigenous Fijian knowledge systems, relationships, and customs are at the heart of the Vanua Research Framework, which serves as the cornerstone for ethically appropriate and culturally significant research.

Deeply ingrained kinship systems like *mataqali* (clan affiliation), *veitabani* (ceremonial rivalry), *veitauvutaki* (shared heritage), and *naita* (ritual kinship) are essential to this framework (Cammock & Andrews, 2023). These connections serve as more than just social markers; they also encode histories of affiliation, rivalry, duty, and prestige that influence the creation, dissemination, and validation of knowledge. (iTaukei Affairs, n.d.). For instance, in *veitabani* alliances, *vanua* of equal rank engage in structured competition, which is demonstrated by ritualistic exchange practices, feasting, and ceremonial exchanges that promote respect, reciprocity, and resilience. It is essential to understand these connections in order to steer clear of exploitative or imbalanced research approaches and guarantee that scholarship is incorporated into relational accountability frameworks. By placing Indigenous values at the centre of the research process, these frameworks, as argued by Leenen-Young and Uperesa (2023), defy colonial notions of neutrality and objectivity.

Adhering to the cultural protocols through the presentation of the *i sevusevu*, a revered *iTaukei* tradition of offering *kava* roots, which allows one to seek permission and establish trust with community members (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Community leaders are referred to by their proper titles and are respectfully greeted as part of the *sevusevu* and *vakavinavinaka* ceremony. Before this offering, researchers seek verbal permission to participate in the study, ensuring local agreement (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Presenting the *i sevusevu* and *vakavinavinaka* to the village chief or headman honors the community's social structure and diverse origins. This ritual also recognises the wider regional ties of both hosts and researchers, acknowledging their respective *yavusa, mataqali, i tokatoka*, and *vanua* affiliations (Cammock & Andrews, 2023).[3] The presence of community members during the *i sevusevu*[4] helps build connections and serves as the researchers' point of entry into the research site. The protocol and language used in the *i sevusevu* are pivotal, forging a link through which the research can respectfully proceed. Similarly, the

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[3] *Yavusa* is a clan or tribe. The largest patrilineal kin grouping in Fijian society. The *Mataqali* is a clan, a subdivision of a *yavusa*, in most districts the recognised basic landowning unit for native land. *I tokatoka* is a collection of households or a lineage. *Vanua* refers to both land and people; or a political body comprised of different clans and family groups, headed by a turaga, a chief, to whom the various members owe allegiance.

[4] Traditional Fiji welcoming or introductory protocol.

vakavinavinaka is based on values of reciprocity, responsibility, hospitality, and service, follows principles of identification and respect, reinforcing the mutual and respectful engagement required for the research (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Talanoa *Dialogues*

Talanoa, a traditional form of storytelling and dialogue widely practiced in Pacific cultures, is characterised by open-ended, respectful, and empathetic communication (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). It is more than a conversation, it is a relational method of knowledge exchange that focuses on trust, humility, and shared space. In the context of research, *talanoa* creates space for participants to share stories in their terms, encouraging unrestricted, emotionally grounded dialogue. This approach aligns closely with the relationality and communal ethics underpinning the Vanua Research Framework (Vaioleti, 2006), where knowledge is understood as co-created and situated in relationships rather than extracted through rigid inquiry.

In this study, *talanoa* sessions were conducted in culturally appropriate and community-friendly settings such as village halls, churches, and private homes. These locations supported a comfortable atmosphere and upheld local norms of hospitality. Identifying respected intermediaries and key participants through established social protocols was essential for gaining access and building trust (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Because some participants lived in remote areas, initial phone conversations helped confirm availability and interest before face-to-face *talanoa* began. To deepen the qualitative insights, semi-structured interviews were also conducted, guided by an interview schedule prepared in the *iTaukei* language. This bilingual approach enabled either me or a trusted research assistant to engage participants in a linguistically and culturally responsive manner. While *talanoa* allowed for spontaneous and reflective storytelling, the semi-structured format ensured consistency in exploring key themes. Participants were invited to introduce topics they felt were important but not directly prompted, allowing their experiences to shape the direction and depth of the conversations. This methodological flexibility supported the collection of rich, contextually grounded data while honouring participant agency (Farrelly et al., 2014).

Chang's (2008) advocacy of autoethnography provided a valuable methodological foundation for this research. Autoethnography, as a mode

of inquiry that blends autobiographical and ethnographic approaches, enabled me to critically examine how my own identity and lived experiences shaped the research process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This was particularly important given my positionality as an *iTaukei* woman researching within Indigenous Fijian communities. Rather than treating personal experience as a source of bias to be managed, autoethnography allowed me to engage with it reflexively as a lens through which power dynamics, cultural expectations, and insider–outsider tensions could be analysed and understood. This approach foregrounded the ethical and epistemological dimensions of Indigenous research, positioning reflexivity not as a supplementary activity but as a core element of methodological rigour (Ellis et al., 2011).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles, guided by the *Vanua* Research Framework and *talanoa* methodologies, were paramount throughout the research process (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Engaging with communities was facilitated by the *i sevusevu* and *vakavinavinaka*, which demonstrated respect and reciprocity. Permission for the research was sought from village leaders and elders to ensure community consent and involvement. The headmen of the villages were contacted through various local government departments responsible for these communities to secure permission for visits. Following consent, further contacts were made.

Navigating the complex dynamics of gatekeepers required cultural sensitivity and adaptability, especially as participants were hesitant to share opinions due to political unrest and impending elections in Fiji. Some participants agreed to provide their responses under the condition of anonymity. The Melanesian descendants in Fiji, particularly in the Suva area, have faced challenges such as displacement due to urban development and a lack of support from authorities. Most do not possess secure land rights and continue to reside in informal settlements, sometimes facing eviction notices when land leases expire. As a result, Melanesian communities have experienced considerable fear and instability, forcing some to resettle in other areas of Fiji. Given this context, ensuring confidentiality and minimising harm to participants were key considerations, was important. It was addressed through culturally appropriate practices and ongoing dialogue with community members (Smith, 2021).

Findings

Themes emerging from the research reflect the depth and significance of integrating Indigenous Fijian methodologies. These are categorised into four thematic areas: cultural practices and methodologies; relationality and reciprocity; challenges and adaptations; and impacts on community and knowledge production. These themes emerged from the analysis of data collected through the *Vanua* Research Framework, *talanoa* storytelling dialogues, and autoethnographic reflections.

Cultural Practices and Methodologies

The integration of traditional cultural practices, such as *i sevusevu* and *talanoa* storytelling, was pivotal in our research process. The *i sevusevu*, involving the offering of kava roots, helped us gain permission and build trust with community members. This gesture was warmly received by the local headman, fostering a sense of genuine value and eagerness among us to share our stories. One participant noted that '*Talanoa* sessions felt very different from formal interviews,' highlighting the unique, respectful, and reciprocal nature of these interactions. By incorporating *i sevusevu* and *talanoa* into our study, we not only promoted Indigenous cultural practices but also addressed power imbalances. This approach advances decolonial and epistemic justice by honoring and amplifying Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that marginalised perspectives are authentically represented and valued in the research. Participants affirmed that cultural protocols *i sevusevu, vakavinavinaka, and talanoa* established mutual respect and valued as collaborators rather than mere subjects of research. One participant shared, 'Being part of the *i sevusevu* reminded me this research is not just about us, it is also with us.' This reinforced that acknowledging *Vanua* through enacted ritual is essential to research legitimacy. These cultural elements were not supplementary but primary entry points that set the tone for relational accountability (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Relationality and Reciprocity in Research

Maintaining relationality and reciprocity was a core principle throughout the research. The *talanoa* dialogues, allowed participants to share their stories in a culturally appropriate manner. This approach fostered a

sense of mutual respect or the notion of *veirokorokovi* (respect) and understanding, which was crucial for the success of the research. How one stewards the knowledge or information that has been imparted to you is something that one should always keep in mind. Reciprocate that contribution of knowledge through a token of appreciation presented at the end of the research is crucial. The emphasis on relational ethics, or *veirokorokovi*, resonated strongly with participants. The research process, framed by *talanoa,* enabled safe spaces for storytelling. Reciprocity was shown through follow-up visits, sharing preliminary findings, and symbolic tokens of gratitude. Participants within Melanesian communities in Fiji indicated that these exchanges built trust and encouraged deeper engagement.

My identity as an *iTaukei* woman fundamentally shaped how I approached and navigated the research process within the communities I conducted research in. This positionality offered both cultural fluency and insider awareness, allowing me to engage with participants through shared norms, language, and protocols. My familiarity with local hierarchies and expectations such as the importance of wearing a *sulu* (a long wrap around skirt) during village visits enabled more respectful and seamless interactions. However, being 'insider' did not negate the need for critical reflexivity. I used autoethnography not simply as a narrative device, but as a methodological tool to interrogate how my own background, assumptions, and emotional responses influenced the research encounter. Rather than assuming cultural alignment guaranteed understanding, I maintained ongoing dialogue with community elders, peers, and local scholars to ensure that interpretations of data were grounded in shared meaning. These engagements helped surface areas where my interpretations risked imposing academic frames that did not fully reflect community perspectives. Autoethnographic journaling allowed me to document and analyse these moments of tension, contributing to a more transparent, ethically engaged, and culturally responsive research process. In doing so, I was not only able to honour community knowledge systems but also critically situate myself within them.

My personal and academic journey is deeply shaped by my upbringing in a low-income settlement on the fringes of a Fijian suburb, where I witnessed first-hand the impacts of poverty, unequal access to education, and the social marginalisation of certain communities. These early experiences cultivated a critical awareness of structural inequality and continue to inform the ethical foundation of my research. They also shaped my

commitment to exploring the lived experiences of marginalised *iTaukei* families of Melanesian descent, many of whom migrated in search of better opportunities yet continue to face exclusion despite their long-standing presence in Fiji. Their stories of resilience and struggle not only inspired my research focus but also grounded my methodological choices in principles of relational accountability, cultural respect, and community-centred inquiry. As such, my research is not only about documenting injustice but also about engaging with Indigenous frameworks that have been incorporated to how Melanesian descendants in Fiji honour lived experience and promote ethical, inclusive knowledge production. Motivated by these local realities, I extended the scope of my research to include Melanesian communities in Sāmoa, seeking to understand how their trajectories compared across different Pacific contexts. This comparative lens not only deepened the analytical rigour of my work but also enabled a more textured and authentic representation of community perspectives (Matadradra, 2021).

As an *iTaukei* woman researcher, my identity offered both advantages and challenges. It built cultural fluency and trust but required constant self-reflection to balance insider loyalty with critical analysis meaning I had to navigate my desire to support the community while maintaining objectivity. Autoethnography enabled me to explore these tensions, showing the push and pull between scholarly distance and community engagement. I learned that acknowledging my positionality is essential not as a bias to remove but as an asset that supports ethical research grounded in local context, providing nuanced interpretation and deeper insight into research relationships. By being transparent about my background and relationships with participants, I was able to co-create spaces of mutual respect and deeper engagement incorporating my own indigenous culture within this space and is something many of them are familiar with. This approach enriched data collection and emphasised the epistemic value of lived experience, reaffirming the need for methodologically rigorous yet culturally responsible research.

Challenges and Adaptations

The research process was not without challenges. Navigating the hidden agendas and ideologies of gatekeepers required cultural sensitivity and adaptability. One significant challenge was ensuring that the research remained culturally appropriate and respectful while also meeting

academic standards. Adaptations included modifying research protocols to align with local customs and seeking continuous feedback from community members. During the analysis phase, participants indicated that some interpretations did not fully capture their perspectives. To refine and validate my findings, I revisited the data and sought additional feedback from the participants. To ensure that the communities' viewpoints were accurately represented, I made follow-up calls and revisited the communities. Focus group discussions within the community to obtain preliminary input on research ideas, techniques, and tools were vital. Participants were able to offer feedback on the relevance of the topics being studied, the suitability of the research techniques, and the clarity of the questions. Methodological challenges included navigating gatekeeping, dialect differences, and community expectations. In one case, a village headman limited access to certain informants. This was addressed by engaging a bilingual research assistant trusted by the community. The adaptation of interview protocols ensured that questions were accessible and culturally appropriate. Ongoing *talanoa* allowed for iterative reflection and co-analysis.

Impact on Community and Knowledge Production

This study generated clear benefits for both Melanesian communities in Fiji and the broader field of Indigenous research methods. Using the Vanua Research Framework with *talanoa* storytelling, it did more than collect data. It validated cultural practices and local knowledge systems. Participants spoke freely. They felt heard. Their engagement produced rich, authentic insights. The research revealed important social and political dynamics. Melanesian descendants elsewhere in the Pacific, such as those in Samoa, have used intermarriage to gain social inclusion and leadership roles. In contrast, Fiji's rigid patrilineal customs and constitutional definitions have limited integration. Despite these barriers, Fiji's Melanesian community has its own representative in Parliament. Last year Melanesian descendants in Fiji celebrated their 160th anniversary, drawing hundreds of Melanesians to the capital of Fiji to mark this milestone together.

Focusing on *talanoa* highlighted the importance of culturally informed research. Storytelling sessions allowed participants to articulate experiences of displacement, erasure, and resilience. Their narratives demonstrated the epistemic worth of lived experience. The research process itself

became an act of validation (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Respectful listening and sharing of findings offered recognition long sought by participants. The article shows how Indigenous methodologies can both empower communities and advance academic knowledge. It demonstrates that rigorous methods, when aligned with cultural responsibility, yield data that are valid and socially relevant (Farrelly et al., 2014). The result is stronger scholarship and more inclusive policies. These policies can better address the real needs of Melanesian descendants in Fiji and beyond.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that Indigenous methodologies are not supplemental but foundational to ethical and contextually relevant research in Pacific communities. Incorporating *Vanua* and *talanoa* aligns the research with cultural rhythms, social responsibilities, and collective memory. The findings highlight the significant role these methodologies play in ensuring culturally sensitive and contextually relevant research. This section will analyse the key findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, discussing their broader implications for the field of social research.

Cultural Practices and Methodologies

The integration of traditional practices such as *i sevusevu* and *talanoa* storytelling played a vital role in building trust and mutual respect between researchers and community members. Returning to families for clarification was not only accepted but often warmly received, reflecting the relational depth of these engagements. These culturally grounded practices ensured the research process remained respectful and appropriate, aligning with the ethical principles articulated by Nabobo-Baba (2006) and reinforcing the significance of cultural protocols in Indigenous research, as highlighted by Smith (2021). The findings indicate that embedding such practices strengthens the ethical foundations of the research and deepens participant engagement, ultimately enriching the quality and authenticity of the data gathered.

At the same time, the research process revealed tensions between the flexibility required by community life and the rigid structures of academic timelines. Customary obligations occasionally led to delays that were at odds with institutional expectations. Using autoethnography, I was able

to critically reflect on these challenges and advocate for more culturally responsive research frameworks. In doing so, this work contributes to the growing body of Global South methodologies, supporting the calls by Chilisa (2019) and Marovah and Mutanga (2023) to foreground Global South epistemologies in research practice.

Relationality and Reciprocity in Research

Relationality and reciprocity were foundational to the research process, as reflected in the positive and open engagement of participants. Community members graciously welcomed us into their homes when further clarification was needed, fostering a spirit of trust and mutual respect. By cultivating genuine relationships, maintaining open communication, and exchanging contact details, the research process evolved into one of shared learning and collaboration. This approach resonates with broader discussions on ethical research practices in Indigenous contexts, which underscore the importance of mutual respect, trust, and benefit (Chilisa, 2019). The findings suggest that upholding these principles not only enriches the research process but also supports the empowerment and affirmation of Indigenous communities and their knowledge systems.

Challenges and Adaptations

The study confronted several significant challenges, including addressing hidden agendas, ensuring cultural appropriateness, and adhering to academic standards. Addressing these issues required specific strategies to maintain the integrity and relevance of the research. Hidden agendas among participants were addressed by fostering an environment of trust and transparency through continuous engagement and clear communication of research goals. To ensure cultural appropriateness while meeting academic standards, the research protocols were reviewed and adapted in consultation with local cultural experts, ensuring that all procedures respected local norms and values (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). One of the most pronounced challenges was the language barrier, as the research involved interactions where the researcher and the participants did not share a common dialect. Employing a research assistant who was fluent in that dialect proved essential. This arrangement not only facilitated clear communication but also helped in accurately capturing the subtle cultural nuances during discussions with elders, some of whom did not speak the

standard Bauan[5] dialect. The use of a trained bilingual research assistant was highly effective. This approach ensured that all communication was precise and culturally nuanced, which was critical for the integrity of the data collection process. The research assistant's dual competency in language and cultural understanding significantly enhanced the depth and quality of the interactions.

Future researchers facing similar linguistic and cultural challenges should consider investing in a competent bilingual research assistant or translator who is not just proficient in the language but also deeply familiar with the cultural context of the study population. Engaging with local cultural advisors can help in designing research methods that are both culturally sensitive and methodologically sound, potentially alleviating challenges related to hidden agendas and cultural barriers (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). These strategies not only addressed the immediate challenges but also enriched the research process, providing a robust framework for future studies in similar contexts. Important data for the study was acquired with the assistance of the gatekeepers, who are village headmen known as the *Turaga ni Koro* for Fijians who are obligated through a research permit to provide information. There may be hidden agendas and ideologies of the gatekeepers hence it is important to negotiate these spaces to gain access to the field research sites. Perhaps due to political or personal reasons, gatekeepers may to some extent restrict access or introductions to certain key informants who can provide valuable information.

At times, my interpretations differed from those of participants. These discrepancies were resolved through follow-up *talanoa* sessions that honoured co-analysis. Rather than imposing thematic frames, I allowed narratives to stand independently. This decentralised control of meaning-making and exemplified decolonial ethics. Therefore, the Indigenous approach advocated by Nabobo-Baba (2008) was influential in my own research approach to ensure I followed a culturally appropriate code of ethics. These challenges required adaptive strategies, such as modifying research protocols and seeking continuous feedback from the community. These findings are consistent with the existing literature on conducting research in Indigenous settings, which highlights the need for flexibility and cultural sensitivity (Kovach, 2021).

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[5] There are more than 300 regional dialects in Fiji, the most common of which is the Bauan dialect spoken across Fiji.

Impact on Community and Knowledge Production

The positive impact of the research on the community and the validation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems were significant outcomes of this study. Naepi (2019) states that, 'Pacific research methodologies are an act of decolonial resistance that recognises the legitimacy of Pacific ontologies and epistemologies, enabling research that is truly reflective of Pacific peoples'. A more Pacific Island centred research approach, helps to identify and affirm Pacific ways of knowing and being, offering a more sincere and respectful approach to investigating and appreciating Indigenous cultures and concerns (Cammock & Andrews, 2023). Participants reported feeling more engaged and respected, which enhanced the quality of the data collected. Acknowledging the people of the *vanua* or the land is vital as the intellectual property belongs to them as they have entrusted the researcher with a knowledge that they own. This finding underscores the potential of Indigenous methodologies to contribute to more inclusive and equitable knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The research also highlighted the importance of disseminating findings in a manner that is accessible and beneficial to the community.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this chapter highlight the significant ways in which incorporating Indigenous methodologies supports theoretical frameworks that advocate for their inclusion in social research. By integrating cultural practices into its research methodologies, this study contributes to the ongoing project of decolonising research by positioning Indigenous approaches as foundational frameworks. Rather than serving solely as alternatives, these methodologies offer meaningful insights grounded in the local contexts of Fiji and expand the scope of existing epistemological traditions. The chapter as iterated aligns with Leenen-Young et al. (2023) views which emphasise re-envisioning Pacific research methodologies. This re-visioning is crucial in how it shapes training programmes for emerging scholars in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and influences broader research practices across various national sectors. By demonstrating the practical application and benefits of these methodologies, the study underlines their relevance and adaptability to different research environments.

Utilising *Talanoa* dialogue, a method rooted in the storytelling traditions of Fiji common to many parts of the Pacific, the research aligns

with the cultural norms and communication styles of these communities. This approach not only ensures that data collection is culturally sensitive but also enhances the quality of information gathered, as participants are more comfortable and engaged in the process. For policymakers, the findings underscore the need to support and formally recognise Indigenous methodologies to foster more inclusive and equitable research practices. This recognition can lead to better-informed policies that respect and incorporate the values and needs of Indigenous populations (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

The study provides concrete recommendations for conducting research in Indigenous contexts, emphasising the importance of respecting cultural protocols, maintaining relationality and reciprocity with community members, and adapting to emerging challenges. These recommendations serve as a guide for researchers to engage effectively and ethically in culturally diverse settings. Understanding Indigenous Fijian epistemologies and worldviews has informed the structuring of research variables and the adaptation of interview techniques. This tailored approach ensures that the methodologies are not only culturally appropriate but also deeply reflective of the participants' ways of life, thus enhancing the relevance and impact of the research findings.

Conclusion

Indigenous methodologies from Fiji have resonance beyond the Pacific. The commitment to reciprocity, co-creation, and relationality parallels movements across Africa, Latin America, and Asia that critique extractive, positivist traditions. This study aligns with efforts to re-centre Indigenous epistemologies in global research conversations (Leenen-Young & Uperesa, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This study set out to explore the application of Indigenous methodologies, specifically the *Vanua* Research Framework and *talanoa* dialogues, within the contexts of Fiji. The findings underscore the significant role these methodologies play in fostering culturally sensitive and contextually relevant research. Integrating traditional practices, such as the *i sevusevu, vakavinavinaka, i tatau* and *talanoa*, facilitated trust and respect between researchers and community members. The principles of relationality and reciprocity further enhanced the ethical integrity of the research process. Despite encountering challenges, the adaptive strategies employed highlighted the

importance of flexibility and cultural sensitivity when conducting research in Indigenous settings (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

This article explored the integration of the *Vanua* Research Framework, *talanoa* dialogues, and autoethnography as a decolonial response to research in Fiji. It shows that culturally rooted methodologies can produce rigorous, ethical, and empowering research. The findings do not claim to close gaps in Indigenous research but instead contribute to a growing body of work offering deeper, more contextually grounded insights. They demonstrate how research can be relational rather than extractive, reflexive rather than distant, and inclusive rather than hierarchical. Future research should investigate ways to embed Indigenous methodologies into academic curricula and ethics review processes. Researchers should also assess how these approaches adapt to other Global South settings and their capacity to foster Indigenous collaborations.

This research affirms the value of Indigenous knowledge and the urgency of decolonising how we know, who gets to know, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate. The *Vanua* and *talanoa* frameworks, grounded in Fijian worldviews, offer not only methodological alternatives but philosophical realignments that reposition community, land, and relationships at the centre of ethical research. Several directions for future research emerge from this study. There is a need to explore the application of the Vanua Research Framework and *talanoa* dialogues in other Indigenous contexts to assess their broader applicability and effectiveness. Expanding the scope of future studies to include larger and more diverse participant groups will enhance the generalisability of the findings. Investigating the long-term impact of using Indigenous methodologies on community engagement and knowledge dissemination also remains a critical area for further exploration.

The implications for policymakers and practitioners are substantial. It is essential that Indigenous research methodologies are formally recognised and supported within broader research frameworks. Policy development must prioritise meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities in ways that respect and uphold their cultural practices and knowledge systems. Furthermore, investment in training and capacity-building initiatives is crucial to equip researchers with the competencies required to conduct culturally responsive and ethically grounded research. Such efforts not only enhance the quality of research outcomes but also contribute to more equitable and inclusive knowledge production.

Through the integration of Indigenous methodologies, social research becomes a space for reciprocity, respect, and the re-centering of Indigenous voices and worldviews. The *Vanua* Research Framework and *talanoa* dialogues not only enhance cultural sensitivity and ethical integrity but also promote meaningful and respectful engagement with Indigenous communities. By validating and respecting Indigenous Knowledge Systems, researchers can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable production of knowledge. This research highlights the importance of decolonising research methodologies and advocating for the recognition and integration of diverse epistemologies in social research. Reflecting on the personal and professional impact of this research, the experience underscores the transformative potential of embracing Indigenous methodologies. The insights gained from this study pave the way for future researchers to build on these findings and continue advocating for methodological inclusivity and epistemic justice.

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Autoethnographic Reflections on Transitioning from the Global South to the North as a Researcher

Rahat Shah

Introduction

In the current global academic landscape, researchers frequently navigate across cultural and intellectual spheres. These cross-cultural academic transitions not only provide opportunities for academic exchange but also produce their own set of challenges. Existing studies have explored challenges encountered, and opportunities produced through these cross-cultural academic collaborations and encounters. Studies have shown that in collaborative projects between Global North and Global South researchers, the former have more influence in managing funds, setting agendas, and interpreting and publishing data, while Global South researchers are mostly involved in the gathering of data and more applied components of research projects (Bradley, 2017; Healey-Walsh et al., 2019). Essentially, they have greater influence and power in all facets of

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collaborative research relationships with partners from the Global South (Craveiro et al., 2020). These power imbalances frequently perpetuate colonial dominance, creating a challenge for Global South researchers to manoeuvre through donor priorities and conflicting interests, such as an emphasis on quantifiable, time-bound results or thematic preferences and the conflicting interests between academic autonomy and the accountability frameworks imposed by international aid agencies, NGOs, and national funding bodies (Allard et al., 2017; Kahr & Hollingsworth, 2019). To address some of these challenges, Schmidt and Neuburger (2017) suggest making it crucial to expose, reflect on, and engage with existing power structures to promote equitable international collaborations. Otherwise, these dynamics risk perpetuating a vicious cycle in which institutions in the Global North, particularly in Europe and North America, will continue to dominate the creation and dissemination of knowledge, thereby preserving the existing hierarchy of academic expertise. Factors reinforcing this structure include the use of English or other Western-based languages as dominant languages of scientific communication and a positive bias that favours publications from the Global North in high-impact journals (Fox et al., 2023).

Although various discourses are taking place on epistemic justice and decoloniality within scholarly communities, early-career researchers still have fewer possibilities to participate. There are also limited reflexive accounts, especially transitions from the Global South to the Global North, highlighting the need for such conversations to add to the existing body of knowledge. Therefore, with this autoethnographic account, I share my experiences as a researcher navigating the unique challenges and opportunities in two distinct academic and cultural spheres. It is based on the contrasting academic landscapes I encountered after completing my master's degree in Pakistan in 2018 and applying for various scholarships and funding opportunities to move to Germany for my doctorate. After multiple attempts spanning three years, I received a scholarship and relocated to Germany in June 2021. This transition from Pakistan was emblematic of the opportunities prevalent in the Global North: it exposed the disparities in access to academic resources and opportunities, including support systems at institutions of higher education. Furthermore, it also heightened my awareness of systemic disadvantages widespread in my previous institutional context in Pakistan, where funding disproportionately favours elite institutions

and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, with social sciences remaining under-resourced and bureaucratically inaccessible (Khan et al., 2018). The absence of national work-study policies, compounded by rigid scholarship structures, renders economic participation for students nearly impossible, deepening class-based exclusions (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, transnational hierarchies, epitomised by donor-driven research agendas, prohibitive open-access costs, and Northern publishing monopolies, reinforce epistemic dependency, marginalising Global South scholars as peripheral contributors in knowledge production (Bhambra, 2014; Collyer 2018).

This chapter is divided into six main sections, including the introduction. In the introduction section, I situate my autoethnographic account within the broader context of Global South–North academic mobility, highlighting structural and epistemic asymmetries in international research. I then move to the second section, the literature review, where I discuss existing research on international academic mobility, institutional inequalities between the Global South and North, and epistemic hierarchies. I also highlight the framing of my reflections through the interrelated concepts of *epistemic justice*, *knowledge hierarchies*, and *coloniality of knowledge*. I then move to the third section, the methodology, where I discuss the autoethnographic approach underpinning this study. The fourth section provides a detailed account of the findings—my previous academic journey in Pakistan, where I highlight the opportunities, the Pakistani academic system offered and the complexities I had to navigate. In this section, I also discuss the newfound opportunities and privileges I experienced in the German context and how these continue to be a reminder of the challenges I experienced in Pakistan. I then turn to a discussion of the findings in the fifth section. Here, I provide an analysis of my transition experiences and their implications for the broader academic landscape. By doing so, my experiences not only shed light on the complexity of my academic transition and emphasise the ongoing process of epistemic negotiation but also provide a basis to explore broader issues and challenges involved in global knowledge production. I then wrap up everything in the conclusion section by reflecting on how my experiences contribute to current debates on epistemic justice, coloniality of knowledge, and academic mobility, and by calling for more inclusive, reflexive, and equitable research environments that recognise the value of diverse knowledge systems and scholarly trajectories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The movement of students, researchers, and academics from the Global South to the Global North has emerged as a key theme in international higher education studies (Gutema et al., 2024; Javed et al., 2019). While this mobility is often framed through the lens of opportunity, skill enhancement, and internationalisation, it is also embedded within broader structural inequalities and asymmetries of knowledge production (Abdulai et al., 2021). Research comparing higher education systems in the Global North and Global South reveals deep-seated inequalities in institutional resources, pedagogical approaches, epistemic hierarchies, and the global prestige economy (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Tikly, 2004). Universities in the Global North are positioned as hubs of excellence, while those in the Global South are often seen through a deficit lens, as lacking innovation or global competitiveness, with these structural imbalances shaping academic mobility patterns, where students from the South seek validation and advancement in the North (Abdulai et al., 2021; Bradley, 2017).

Moreover, the cultural dynamics within Northern institutions tend to privilege Western epistemologies and modes of academic expression. Scholars like Connell (2007) and Alatas (2000) argue that 'academic dependency' persists, where knowledge from the South is under-recognised or expected to conform to Northern frameworks to gain legitimacy. Therefore, students trained in the South often find themselves having to 're-learn' or 'translate' their academic skills and experiences to meet Euro-American standards, an adjustment that can be intellectually and emotionally taxing (Menon, 2022; Puwar, 2020). On the other hand, higher education systems in the Global South are frequently constrained by limited funding or inconsistent research infrastructure (Craveiro et al., 2020). However, these systems are also sites of critical, decolonial thought and grounded research methodologies that challenge the authority of Global North paradigms (Mbembe, 2016; de Sousa Santos, 2015). Therefore, South–North mobility can be seen both as an aspirational journey and as a complex process of navigating epistemic injustice, institutional gatekeeping, and cultural recalibration.

International student mobility has significantly expanded over the past two decades, with students from Asia and Africa making up the bulk of those moving to the Global North (Gutema et al., 2024). While countries like China and India dominate numerically, Pakistani student mobility, though smaller in scale, is gaining scholarly attention (Iqbal

et al., 2023). Studies have shown that many Pakistani students view education abroad as both a personal investment and a strategy of social mobility (Javed et al., 2019). They are often motivated by the perceived prestige of Western degrees, access to research opportunities, and better job prospects either abroad or upon return (Iqbal et al., 2023). However, this mobility is not without cost, and Pakistani students, particularly those from middle- or lower-income backgrounds, often rely on scholarships or family remittances, adding financial pressure and limiting their agency in host countries (Kayani et al., 2015).

Germany, with its low tuition costs, research infrastructure, and growing English-language programs, has become an increasingly popular destination for international students, including those from Pakistan (DAAD, 2024). Yet, studies indicate that international student well-being in Germany is shaped by multiple challenges, including language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, housing crises, and experiences of exclusion (Bitschnau, 2023). Studies consistently report that international students experience elevated stress levels, especially in the early semesters of study, and factors such as language barriers, unfamiliar academic norms, and social isolation contribute to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates compared to domestic peers (Huhn & Nikendei, 2018). The German university system's emphasis on independence and self-directed learning, while empowering for some, can also create confusion and stress for students from more guided or hierarchical systems (Bitschnau, 2023), especially in the case of South Asian students, these challenges are expected to be compounded by cultural distance and often the absence of familiar social networks.

However, despite a growing body of scholarship on international student mobility and academic migration from the Global South to the Global North, much of the literature tends to focus on policy-level analyses, institutional barriers, or aggregate wellbeing metrics, often overlooking the subjective, embodied, and epistemic dimensions of this transition (Bitschnau, 2023; Bradley, 2017; Puwar, 2020). Similarly, there are increasing calls for further research on educational migration and experiences of the students from the Global South in the Global North academic system (Abdulai et al., 2021; Krachman et al., 2018). Existing studies rarely centre the personal and intellectual negotiations that scholars from the Global South must undertake as they navigate new academic cultures, expectations, and epistemological regimes in the North. Furthermore, while research on epistemic injustice and knowledge

hierarchies has critically interrogated global academic inequalities, few studies integrate these conceptual insights with lived, reflexive accounts of early-career scholars operating across both contexts. Therefore, in this study, I address these gaps by offering an autoethnographic narrative that not only captures the structural disparities between academic systems in Pakistan and Germany but also interprets them through the lens of epistemic justice, coloniality of knowledge, and the knowledge hierarchies.

Epistemic Justice, Knowledge Hierarchies, and Coloniality

In reflecting on my academic journey across the Global South and Global North, I find it essential to frame my reflections through the interrelated concepts of *epistemic justice*, *knowledge hierarchies*, and *coloniality of knowledge*, concepts that help make visible the subtle yet persistent dynamics that shape how research is perceived, evaluated, and legitimised across transnational academic spaces. The notion of *epistemic injustice* refers to the ways in which individuals are wronged, specifically in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2017). This is not just about access, but about whose voices are heard, and whose are systematically silenced or deemed marginal, and in my experience, this often manifested in calls to 'contextualise' my research in ways that implicitly assumed a default Western norm, positioning Global South knowledge as peripheral or in need of translation.

Similarly, *knowledge hierarchies* are a closely related idea where certain epistemologies, methodologies, and academic traditions are elevated above others (Garicano, 2000). For instance, research from the Global South is frequently held to standards or expectations shaped by Eurocentric paradigms, reinforcing structural inequalities in academic publishing and collaboration (Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2015). It is important to note that these dynamics are not isolated; they stem from the *coloniality of knowledge*, a legacy of colonialism that continues to structure global academia by privileging Western modes of knowledge production and authority (Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2000). Recognising these interlocking concepts allows me to situate my experiences not as individual struggles but as part of broader systemic patterns that many scholars from the Global South navigate. This framing also offers a vocabulary for thinking critically about what it means to produce and publish knowledge

'across' borders, while negotiating the politics of visibility, legitimacy, and recognition.

Methodology

Most of this autoethnographic account is grounded in the empirical experiences of my doctoral research, conducted between 2021 and 2025, which explored the experiences of female breadwinning couples in urban Pakistan using qualitative, interview-based fieldwork. Although I was institutionally based at Goethe University Frankfurt, I conducted fieldwork in Pakistan, involving 40 semi-structured interviews. These experiences, both in the field and within the German academic system, form the foundation of the autoethnographic reflections presented in this work.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method in which the autobiographical experiences of a researcher are used as primary data to interpret and analyse cultural and contextual meanings of such experiences, with the broader aim of connecting the personal with the social (Holman et al., 2015). At a fundamental level, autoethnography can be understood as a deliberate and self-conscious practice of doing identity work to represent or understand a specific phenomenon beyond the self, situating the personal within the broader social context and allowing for a deeper understanding of how individual experiences intersect with societal dynamics (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

I chose autoethnography as the primary methodological framework for this study as it allows for an in-depth, reflexive examination of the intersection between personal experience and broader sociocultural structures (Adams et al., 2017). Being situated at the margins of two academic systems, Pakistan and Germany, I found other methods insufficient for capturing the layered tensions, affective ambivalences, and moral negotiations that shaped my scholarly trajectory. Autoethnography method enabled me to articulate embodied knowledge, often left unacknowledged in academic discourse, particularly in research shaped by epistemic hierarchies and power asymmetries (Holman et al., 2015). Similarly, unlike detached observation, autoethnography invites critical introspection and narrative honesty, foregrounding how macro-level forces such as donor agendas, institutional constraints, and gendered expectations manifest within the micro-politics of everyday academic life (Adams et al., 2017). Moreover, to address the common critique of subjectivity, I adopted a

rigorously reflexive approach involving sustained self-questioning, transparency regarding my positionality, and triangulation of insights with relevant literature, peer feedback during conferences and workshops. This process aimed to balance narrative depth with analytical clarity. By situating my personal account within a broader socio-political and institutional context, I sought to ensure that the findings were not merely anecdotal but analytically generative.

Background of my Academic Journey in Pakistan

My early education was in a small town at a government school with no chairs, where I and the rest of the students sat on the floor. Sometimes, we would improvise with some sitting on bags of flour. Our school was built of mud, and the classes would be dismissed early whenever it rained because the rain would cause the roof to leak. After school, I would rush home because, after lunch, I had to gather fodder for the animals, mostly cows. After feeding them, I would go to the mosque to read a section of the Quran, then return home in the evening to have dinner and go to sleep. During my primary and high school education, there were very few occasions when I had the time to study at home, pay tuition, or receive financial assistance or other help.

After high school, my family enrolled me in an engineering college, and I couldn't go against their wishes, even though I had no interest in studying Engineering. I completed a three-year diploma in civil engineering and found a job, but I was never motivated to work in this field. From the beginning, my interests were oriented towards writing, public issues, and social justice, and I often found myself reading about human rights or existing inequalities in the social system rather than technical manuals or design frameworks. This mismatch between my aspirations and the field's technical focus made it difficult for me to envision a fulfilling career in engineering. Therefore, without my family knowing, I applied and enrolled as a private candidate for a bachelor's degree in sociology at one of the local universities.

Being a private candidate meant that I did not attend classes and continued working, appearing only for exams. After completing my bachelor's degree, I wanted to pursue a master's degree. However, this time, I did not want to do this privately, given the limited learning opportunities as a private candidate and being away from the regular teaching and learning environment of the university; yet there was resistance from

my family. They wanted me to continue working instead of pursuing further studies because they could not afford it. In Pakistan, during your university education, you are largely on your own, as there is a lack of funding and scholarship opportunities, and part-time work is not an option; essentially, you are either a full-time student or a full-time worker. This is unlike many countries in the Global North, where work-study programs and student employment frameworks are embedded in university systems. Pakistan lacks formal infrastructure to support student labour during academic semesters, and universities seldom offer paid research assistantships at the undergraduate or master's level in social science fields, a practice common in many European and North American institutions (Khan et al., 2018; Pineda & Mishra, 2023). Similarly, with no financial aid beyond a limited number of merit-based scholarships, most of which cater to STEM disciplines, students from lower-middle-class backgrounds face structural exclusion from higher education unless subsidised by family support (Murtaza & Hui, 2021; Sarwar et al., 2021). This configuration of policy gaps, pedagogical inertia, and labour inaccessibility reflects a broader systemic neglect of student welfare, particularly in the social sciences.

It is also important to understand that the education system in Pakistan is deeply stratified along lines of class, language, and geography. For instance, elite private schools follow international curricula (e.g., Cambridge or International Baccalaureate, IB), while many students attend under-resourced government schools or religious madrasas, often taught in Urdu or regional languages (Akhtar et al., 2024). These divides are similarly mirrored in higher education, with limited research infrastructure and uneven access to quality education, where most public universities struggle with outdated curricula, insufficient funding, and bureaucratic hurdles (Hoodbhoy, 2009). These structural disparities, compounded by gender norms, significantly influence who can pursue higher education and under what conditions (Akhtar et al., 2024).

Despite all these challenges, I proceeded with my plans and was admitted into a master's degree programme. At the time, there was no institutional or financial support available to me, and pursuing further studies, particularly in the social sciences, was often regarded with scepticism or indifference in my surroundings. I completed my master's degree with countless struggles. After obtaining it in 2018, one of my professors encouraged me to seek scholarship opportunities abroad. However,

in Pakistan, such opportunities are severely limited and highly competitive, particularly in disciplines outside of the STEM fields (Murtaza & Hui, 2021). While in many countries, applicants can apply directly to universities or scholarship foundations, in Pakistan, major public scholarships such as those administered by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) require candidates to undergo a series of centralised, bureaucratic steps, which include national-level aptitude tests, academic ranking evaluations, interviews, and institutional nominations, often resulting in delays and limited transparency. This process, especially for overseas scholarships, can extend over multiple years, as it did in my case, taking nearly three years to complete from application to award. Moreover, the selection processes are not always discipline-neutral; they tend to prioritise candidates from applied science and engineering disciplines, reflecting donor-driven development priorities (Collyer 2018).

Once I passed every selection procedure, I was asked to find a supervisor at a German university, as I had selected Germany as my destination country. I wrote emails to potential supervisors, with more than 60% of them unanswered. The few who did respond often did so after several reminders, typically with responses such as: 'I don't have enough space to accommodate more students,' 'I am on leave,' 'I am nearing retirement,' or 'Your research area does not match my research expertise.' I am not suggesting that they were being dishonest, but as can be imagined, the emails with the 'unavailable' responses were frustrating, especially since I had already secured funding and only needed an acceptance letter from a supervisor at a German university.

The organisation from which I had secured the scholarship had given me a three-month deadline to secure admission, which I missed, and they had granted me an additional three months, which I was also about to exceed. Under tremendous stress and on the verge of losing my hard-earned scholarship, I sent emotional emails to several professors, including my current supervisor, who had initially been hesitant to take me as a PhD student but then accepted me and provided the necessary supporting letters for the scholarship. Since then, my supervisor has been a source of support for my academic progress and transition into Germany. This also shows that while there was an overall reluctance among the professors to accept me as a PhD student, there are also academics within the Global North who are challenging the overall system and are available to support students like me.

On the date of my visa appointment, the very unfriendly behaviour of the visa officials made me think for a moment about giving up my aspirations to pursue my studies abroad. However, I remained composed, successfully received my visa after a month, and arrived in Germany on 5th June 2021. People were still very conscious of their safety and well-being in the wake of the pandemic, completely unlike the country I was coming from: after the first three months of lockdown in Pakistan, everything returned to normal. Coming from an integrated cultural and familial background, transitioning to a very individualistic culture, combined with major linguistic challenges and the ongoing presence of COVID-19, made everything very difficult. Given my limited proficiency in the German language, I faced daily challenges, including issues related to my scholarship residence permit, navigating university bureaucracy, and adjusting to everyday life outside of it. Before discussing the challenges and opportunities of the German academic context, I provide a detailed account of the academic challenges I experienced in the Pakistani context below.

Academic Challenges in Pakistan

Limited Resources for Participation in Academic Activities

When I was based in Pakistan, my participation in academic events was confined mainly to two conferences organised locally, for which I paid the registration fees and all associated costs from my limited resources. This lack of financial resources and support was also a key reason for my limited access to international academic platforms, such as membership in associations, opportunities for collaboration with experts and scholars, and participation in international conferences, workshops, or summer schools. My efforts to participate in international conferences were thwarted by financial constraints and a lack of funding. Again, the concept of balancing employment with academic studies is quite rare in Pakistan, and even at the postgraduate level, students typically rely on family support for educational expenses due to the limited state support available.

I also aimed to publish my manuscripts in reputable journals, and since English is not my native language, I needed support with language editing and proofreading, which was unavailable to me. The absence of appropriate language skills, along with a lack of institutional and financial support, made it nearly impossible to publish in high-impact journals or

to collaborate with and learn from fellow academics through participating in conferences and seminars.

Limited Access to Publishing Opportunities for Wider Audiences

Similarly, I, like many other researchers from the Global South, had not been able to publish papers open access because of the associated cost. Research has shown that papers presenting new discoveries or ideas by authors or organisations in the Global South receive fewer citations from research teams in the Global North, and this trend persists even when the work appears in established, high-impact journals (Liu et al., 2023). While there may be a lack of refinement or excellence in the work conducted by scholars in the Global South, the high rate of rejection and underrepresentation in global publication listings is concerning (Amarante et al., 2022).

Another disparity I observed is that many papers published by authors in the Global North often omit their geographic location. It is argued that the extent to which titles specify the geographic focus of the articles determines how scientists perceive the generalisability, validity, and scope of their data, as well as their intended audience and the purpose for which their research should be read (Cheon et al., 2020). Nearly all my publications explicitly mention the country of the study; reviewers frequently ask for clarification in the title or introduction that the research pertains specifically to Pakistan. This practice reflects the dominance of Global North academic institutions in academic practices. Studies conducted in this region are less likely to specify the country of study in their titles compared to those studying the South, which could imply an undue claim of universality as omitting the geographical origin of the data could mislead readers about the applicability of the results (Kahalon et al., 2022), research studies that lack specific geographic references in their titles could be misinterpreted as outlining universal truths (DeJesus et al., 2019).

Although the Pakistani academic landscape provided a conducive environment for conducting empirical research, collaborative efforts within this academic sphere tended to be localised, fostering community ties among researchers within Pakistan (Rizvi, 2015). This localised focus was also reflected in publishing practices, with language improvement and manuscript development often facilitated through peer networks and a preference for regional academic journals. Similarly, a lack of focus on the

abstract theorisation of empirical data is cited as one of the major reasons for the non-representation of the academic work of the researchers from contexts like Pakistan in reputable journals, a problematic expectation of conforming to hegemonic disciplinary standpoints (Liu et al., 2023). Even many of the Global South scholars do engage in theorising, but their work is often not framed as formal theory (Öztiğ, 2024), and when research in the Global North and Global South contrasts, often discordantly, Global North research paradigms emerge as dominant and more valid due to long-standing legacies of imperial/colonial traditions, standpoints, and episteme (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Social Influence on Participation in Research

My access to female study participants during my PhD project in Pakistan was controlled by their male partners and other male family members. Most women were denied participation in the study because their male partners did not permit it. From a Western perspective, requiring the approval of a male family member for a female participant in a research study presents an ethical dilemma, particularly regarding voluntary participation in the study. However, it is deemed appropriate and necessary in this cultural context that interaction between female family members is only allowed by their male relatives (Shah, 2024a, 2024b). Men make most of the decisions in the family, especially elderly men, and within the context of research, husbands and in-laws often determine whether women can participate in studies (Fatima, 2021). This gatekeeping role played by male partners, husbands, brothers, or fathers reflects broader patriarchal norms in Pakistani society, where male guardianship over women's mobility and social interactions is institutionalised through both family structures and cultural expectations (Zia, 2009).

The surrounding community also facilitates or limits researchers' access to relevant participants in this close-knit social system: the Biradari system, which includes extended families, community elders, religious leaders, and local politicians, generally plays the role of gatekeeping, and consent or refusal to participate in a study often comes from them, not the potential participant (Khowaja-Punjwani, 2016). Consent given by these gatekeepers cannot be denied, and doing so could lead to participants being denounced by their community. In the context of my PhD study, the surrounding community and extended families played a dual role in facilitating as well as hindering my access to potential participants. In

cases where I developed a good rapport with a male family member or a community elder, I was provided with easy access. However, a lack of such networks reduced my possibilities of conducting interviews.

Participants' Perceptions of Research

Due to educational and economic disadvantages, another issue arises concerning participants' perception of research to obtain immediate relief for their current problems and challenges. While the production of knowledge is highly valued within academia, particularly in the Global North, participants in my doctoral project often do not perceive it as worthwhile for their time or the researcher's effort. They tend to believe that research should be action-oriented and often seek instant solutions, asking how the researcher can assist in addressing their issues (Shah, 2024a, 2024b). They also expect monetary compensation for their participation in the study, which is sometimes their only motivation to take part, complicating the voluntary nature of participant recruitment. Achieving Western standardised voluntary participation and obtaining informed consent in research within contexts like Pakistan presents unique challenges, primarily due to the emphasis on collectivity and shared realities prevalent in many parts of society (Shah, 2024a, 2024b).

Ethical Constraints

It is also important to highlight the differing approaches to ethical considerations between contexts in the Global South and the Global North. For instance, the adoption of standardised ethical procedures is relatively recent in Germany, especially in social science disciplines, but has rapidly become rigorous: research projects now require approval from dedicated ethical boards, ensuring adherence to strict ethical standards. In Pakistan, however, there is a notable absence of such standardisation at university levels; institutional review boards are either non-existent or non-functional. This discrepancy extends to the implementation of Western ethical standards in Pakistan, which often clash with local realities. For example, obtaining informed consent in areas with high illiteracy rates can be problematic, and cultural practices such as participants offering hospitality to researchers despite their limited means create unique ethical dilemmas not commonly encountered in the West. Due to the challenges associated with obtaining written informed consent, I

only obtained verbal consent from the participants for participation in my PhD study. However, these challenges raised many critical reflections on my part. My observations from the field indicate that participants, in most cases, are willing to participate in studies but are hesitant to sign a document that they cannot understand or read. Given that most of the population cannot read or write, participants may worry about inadvertently signing away the little property they own (Upvall & Hashwani, 2001), perhaps having only used thumbprints or signed for significant life events, such as marriage certificates or property documents. There is thus, reluctance to provide signed consent (Fazal, 2022). In such settings, where oral agreements are often the norm, important ethical questions arise: What does informed consent truly mean when literacy is limited? And if consent is given verbally, how does one later withdraw consent that was given verbally?

Moreover, in Western research paradigms, individual privacy and confidentiality are paramount, often governed by strict protocols and regulations. In contrast, in Pakistan, where communities are characterised by close-knit relationships and a collective sense of belonging, it is challenging to ensure the same level of confidentiality. While interviewing their female partners in my PhD study on the experiences of female breadwinners, a few of the men also stayed present during the interviews. Sometimes, there would be others present for situations they found interesting as well, showing that applying Western standards of confidentiality and anonymity in a context like Pakistan requires careful consideration of local cultural and social norms. The presence of other people significantly reduced the collection of rich data. Especially during my interviews with women in the presence of their partners and other family members, I found them to be very restrictive in expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences. I had to exclude four to six such interviews, which I found lacked rich data and mostly involved 'yes' and 'no' responses from the participants. To address this issue, I began approaching female participants in their workspaces, where I found them to be more vocal and expressive compared to their interviews in the presence of others.

Academic Opportunities in Germany

Increased Support for Participation in Academic Activities

The notion of privilege often goes unnoticed by those who benefit from it (Wu & Dunning, 2020). Social privilege is typically understood as the benefits or advantages that members of dominant social groups enjoy simply because of their affiliation with these groups. In my case, the privileges I encountered in Germany heightened my awareness of the disparities I had experienced while living and working in the Global South. Germany was the first foreign country I ever visited, and I found the German academic landscape markedly different from what I had experienced in Pakistan. I observed that many students manage to work part-time while pursuing their studies, supported in part by state resources. In Germany, students can combine part-time work with full-time studies, which is supported by legal provisions, such as §16b Aufenthaltsgesetz (Residence Act), which allows international students to work up to 120 full or 240 half days per year. These legal and policy frameworks create an enabling environment that allows students to fund their education while gaining valuable experience. This contrasts with the Pakistani academic landscape, which lacks a national policy framework that enables university students to undertake part-time work formally during the semester. As a result, academic participation in Pakistan is shaped by financial precarity and dependence on family support, particularly for students in public institutions.

I also benefited from the well-funded academic ecosystem in Germany, which enabled me to actively participate in numerous international academic gatherings, including conferences, workshops, seminars, and summer schools, with support from DAAD travel grants and university-based funding. Such support is rare in Pakistan, where the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) international mobility programs remain highly competitive, underfunded, and rarely accessible to early-stage researchers, particularly in the social sciences. Similarly, I received support to travel internationally to present my work, access to literature resources, and support for language improvement and editing of my manuscripts. Although I still face challenges, my academic productivity has more than doubled during my time in Germany. There is a common perception that academic affiliation not only provides material support in terms of funding but also enhances one's reputation in relevant circles. Similarly, I also find that professors and experts in the field are now more willing to respond

to emails and requests for feedback. This finding resonates with other studies, which have found that academic affiliation with a specific institution, as well as with a country or region, influences editorial decisions on manuscripts (Leimu & Koricheva, 2005; Walters, 2006). This is evident in the number of publications, with an incomparable number of papers published annually in the Global North (World Bank, 2020).

Increased Exposure to Knowledge Expansion and Open-Access Publishing

Moreover, in Germany, I was able to start publishing open access due to my institutional affiliation, making my work accessible to a wider audience. This reflects a clear disparity, where German universities offer open-access publication support through institutional memberships with publishers and central funding lines, while researchers in Pakistan are often unable to afford article processing charges (APCs), which can exceed their two to three-month salary. All these newfound privileges in Germany were a clear realisation of the many disparities that I had previously experienced, a reflection of the obvious imbalances in resources and opportunities in the unjust and unequal global knowledge domain. This stands in contradiction to prevalent perceptions that insufficient experience in scientific writing and a lack of academic rigour are the reasons for Global South researchers' underrepresentation in global knowledge production (Craveiro et al., 2020).

During my PhD studies in Germany, I was further exposed to methodological approaches, ethical procedures, and standards different from my previous experiences in Pakistan. Academic approaches in Pakistan were deeply rooted in classical social science methodologies, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative aspects (Rizvi, 2015). The use of narrative inquiry and storytelling was prevalent, underscoring the value placed on indigenous knowledge systems. This aligns with research methodologies employed throughout the Global South, which are often intricately linked to local contexts, utilising narrative-based approaches, qualitative analyses, and case studies (Collyer 2018). In contrast, in Germany, I noticed a shift towards a wider array of methodologies, including advanced data analysis techniques and approaches, such as constructivist grounded theory, new materialist, and reflexive methods. Exposure to these advanced methodologies signified a move away from a predominantly local focus to a more global academic perspective.

It is important to highlight that the privileges I have accessed in Germany are not merely institutional or individual but reflect systemic advantages embedded in national policy frameworks, global academic hierarchies, and infrastructural investments in research and the disparities between my experience in Pakistan and Germany cannot be reduced to personal effort or institutional prestige alone, but instead, reveal enduring structural inequalities in global knowledge production.

Academic Challenges in Germany

Linguistic Barriers

Alongside many newfound privileges in Germany, I experienced a wide array of challenges that continue to impact my academic journey. One of the major challenges is my limited proficiency in the German language. Despite enrolling in language courses, the demanding workload of my PhD and the limited duration of my project funding has prevented me from investing adequate time in studying German to achieve fluency. However, I continue to make an effort.

As most university events, such as seminars, workshops, and conferences, are conducted in German, the inability to speak German fluently restricts my participation in such activities. I have also experienced a degree of alienation in university community gatherings, where conversations often revert to German, excluding those who do not speak the language fluently. This often-unintended exclusion through language affects not just academic discussions but also casual interactions and socialising opportunities, which are vital for building a supportive network. Additionally, there have been instances where I felt that my mere presence compelled others to switch to English, making them uncomfortable. I often sensed discomfort when others needed to switch to English to accommodate me, which sometimes led to a feeling of guilt on my part. Partly my perception, though it may be, this guilt further demotivates me from participating in gatherings.

Additionally, administrative processes at the university, such as registration and accessing resources, are also primarily in German, complicating what would otherwise be routine tasks. Moreover, my limited German language skills have restricted opportunities for academic growth, not only in departmental meetings and informal settings but also in collaborative projects. I had to decline participation in one project because

the meetings were conducted in German, raising concerns about effective communication. I have been continuously asked why I 'don't want to learn German', or why I did not choose an English-speaking country instead of Germany, advised to learn German if I 'want to survive here,' and told that three years is such a long time to spend in a country without knowing the language.

Although the feeling of unbelonging that I discussed here may initially appear as an outcome of personal limitations, substantial evidence shows that these are symptoms of broader structural and institutional shortcomings within the German higher education system. For instance, studies point to persistent language barriers that significantly impact academic performance, increase dropout rates, and delay graduation among international students (Huhn & Nikendei, 2018; Thies & Falk, 2023). These challenges are compounded by the difficulty of adjusting to the implicit norms of German academic culture, which often lacks mechanisms for intercultural mediation, contributing to widespread experiences of social isolation and psychological distress (Pineda et al., 2022). Moreover, complexities related to bureaucratic issues, particularly in matters of visa regulation, housing, and employment, add another layer of systemic exclusion (Abdullaeva, 2014). Despite Germany's low tuition model, restrictive work permits, and limited financial aid exacerbate economic insecurity for many students (Thies & Falk, 2023). Similarly, health disparities have been consistently observed between international and domestic students (Krämer et al., 2004), showing the systemic gaps in policy design, institutional infrastructure, and cultural inclusion, reinforcing a structurally produced sense of unbelonging.

Cultural Adaptation Challenges

Linguistic barriers are often intertwined with cultural differences, further complicating interactions. In Pakistan, the relationship between supervisors, researchers, and peers is typically more spontaneous and informal, allowing easier access and more frequent interactions. In contrast, I have spent a considerable amount of time navigating what I perceive as cultural inappropriateness in initiating contact or maintaining less formal relationships in Germany. The general German cultural disposition towards strangers and outsiders, which often leans towards formality and reservation, has compounded my feelings of estrangement. Communication styles are reserved, with strict adherence to formality, including the

routine use of titles and surnames. I mostly remain uncertain about how frequently to seek guidance without appearing to overstep. To deal with this issue, I mostly avoid frequent emails or seeking guidance from the professor. Although I developed more informal academic relationships with my supervisors over time, the general hesitance to approach other relevant people in academic circles remains persistent. Therefore, I mostly avoid approaching professors and other relevant people unless I am very sure of their response. This may be an overly perceived hesitance on my part, but my observations of the academic community here in Germany are changing these perceptions at a very slow pace.

Navigating Ethical Challenges Across Cultural Contexts

My academic transition to Germany further involved complex dynamics of insider–outsider and power asymmetries. During my PhD fieldwork in Pakistan, I had to navigate the complex dynamics of being both an insider and an outsider across different academic settings. My background and familiarity with the culture, language, and societal norms positioned me as an insider, but my affiliation with a Western academic institution introduced an element of outsider-ness. There was a general reluctance among the participants to communicate with me when I introduced myself and explained my research to them, as well as my institutional affiliation. As elaborated elsewhere in detail (Shah, 2024a, 2024b), an overall lack of research culture and reluctance among people to discuss sensitive personal issues, especially those related to gender, complicated my fieldwork journey. I observed that these challenges were further complicated due to my academic affiliation with a Western academic institution, where, in most cases, I was perceived as someone working for an NGO or on a Western agenda, a label often associated with liberal values, secular norms, or externally funded initiatives that are seen as incompatible with local moral and cultural frameworks (Kirdina-Chandler, 2018; Shah, 2024a, 2024b). Working for or being affiliated with an NGO in Pakistan, particularly in the realm of gender research, is often met with suspicion, as NGOs are frequently viewed as vehicles for foreign influence or accused of promoting ideas that challenge traditional social values (Bano, 2008). Therefore, my association with a German university thus triggered concerns among some participants that I was either externally funded or gathering information for donor-backed institutions, and these

perceptions shaped my access, required extra effort in building trust, and influenced the kinds of responses I received.

To address the challenges of being both an insider and an outsider and to reach potential participants, I employed various strategies. Firstly, I utilised my informal networks instead of relying on key informants, and this approach proved helpful in reducing biases towards me. Secondly, I also spent a considerable amount of time building rapport with my potential male participants and integrating myself into their daily activities through frequent meetups, staying in contact via text messages, and playing various games, such as cards and Ludo, with them. Building rapport with these men was helpful as they not only introduced me to other potential interviewees but also allowed me, in some cases, to interview their female partners. Thirdly, I recognised that my international exposure and connection with Germany intrigued some participants, who saw me as a potential source of information for moving abroad. Staying transparent about my research and the purpose of our interaction, I provided as much information as possible to these participants, which helped me develop a rapport with them. Finally, my fluency in speaking local languages (Pashto and Urdu) also helped reduce the barriers associated with my outsider status.

Power Asymmetries

Along with my fluid identities as both an insider and an outsider, my transition to the German academic system has created power asymmetries. The power asymmetries largely stem from structural and cultural differences between the two educational systems, as well as cultural milieu and opportunity structures. The academic environment in Germany is often more hierarchical and rigidly structured, emphasising independent research, which could be seen as empowering but may also feel daunting to students used to a more guided academic culture. In Germany, as in other European countries, PhD programmes do not involve coursework; students work directly on their projects, traditionally with support from an advisor and collaborating partners (Schneijderberg & Teichler, 2018). I struggled with not being integrated with fellow researchers.

Moreover, the consistent feelings of disempowerment led me to act cautiously in every interaction to avoid offending anyone. Therefore, I have mostly refrained from expressing even academic disagreements. I have been consistently told to make connections keep and maintain them,

as 'they will come in handy.' I cannot disagree; this is true even in my native context. However, the feelings of unequal power dynamics for me, as a researcher, are starker and more visible here, in the German context. I aim to avoid causing offence, which could lead to complications and risk being viewed with suspicion, even when my arguments are valid. Studies also show that currently, in academia, there is a lack of safe discursive spaces for graduate students and early career scholars where they can express themselves openly based on mutual respect, trust, reciprocity, and without power imbalances (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Discussion: What does this Journey Entail?

The challenges and opportunities I have highlighted in my research career across Germany and Pakistan not only illustrate the disparities and diversities in global academic practices but also demonstrate the challenges faced by researchers from the Global South adapting to the academic paradigms of the Global North. The reflections show that although both contexts provided their own set of opportunities and challenges, the academic environment in Pakistan was more challenging, and the possibilities for academic growth were much more limited compared to the German context. The contrast in knowledge production, teaching, and academic support between the two contexts led to a critical shift in my understanding of research practice, methodologies, and epistemological frameworks. Existing research also indicates that the Global North dominates the research process through its influence on publication authorships, budgets, intellectual property, and agenda-setting (White, 2020). An overrepresentation of Global North researchers in conference presentations, journal articles, and citations, mostly written in English and published by publishers based in the Global North (Amarante et al., 2022), is also present. This results in the continued dominance of the Global North in various disciplines and the commodification of histories, theoretical positions, and knowledge overall (Collyer 2018).

Although the German academic context provided me with many opportunities and enhanced my research and publishing possibilities, the challenges I encountered were not merely personal inconveniences, nor were they unique to me as a scholar from the Global South; instead, they reflected persistent structural barriers embedded in the architecture

of Global North academic institutions. Studies have shown that international doctoral students, especially those from postcolonial or resource-constrained contexts, frequently report feelings of exclusion, marginalisation, and institutional neglect within European higher education systems (Aksay Aksezer et al., 2023; Myles & Cheng, 2003). For instance, the sense of isolation I experienced in the German academic environment, manifested through limited social integration and implicit cultural hierarchies, is part of a broader pattern in which the academic system remains largely calibrated to domestic norms and linguistic/cultural expectations, despite its international branding (Huhn & Nikendei, 2018; Thies & Falk, 2023). These challenges are further reinforced by limited intercultural support structures and bureaucratic complexities surrounding visas, housing, and employment, which marginalise international students and lead to social isolation and emotional stress (Abdullaeva, 2014; Pineda et al., 2022). Together, these factors reflect institutional shortcomings that structurally reproduce feelings of exclusion.

Although existing literature on international academic mobility from the Global South to the Global North has shed light on institutional inequalities, policy barriers, and the structural challenges faced by students and scholars (Abdulai et al., 2021; Bitschnau, 2023; Gutema et al., 2024), my autoethnographic account contributes a more situated, reflexive perspective that foregrounds the epistemic and emotional negotiations embedded in this journey. My experiences affirm what critical literature has long argued: that academic systems in the Global North are not neutral terrains but are structured around hierarchies of knowledge and legitimacy that often marginalise Southern scholars (Connell, 2007; Puwar, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2015). This study adds to the literature by showing how these structural inequalities are not only institutional or material but also epistemological, shaping how one's research is received, how one must 'translate' their intellectual frameworks, and how one's credibility is negotiated within systems calibrated to Western academic norms (Fricker, 2017). The value of this contribution lies in rendering visible the affective and cognitive labour involved in navigating these dynamics, something often flattened in policy-level or statistical analyses. Similarly, while much of the current literature identifies barriers or outcomes, fewer studies explore how Global South researchers actively make sense of and reposition themselves within these asymmetries. By interpreting my experience through the lens of epistemic justice and coloniality of knowledge, this chapter expands the conversation beyond

mobility as access or deficit; instead, it frames it as a site of contested meaning-making, identity reformation, and epistemic resilience. In doing so, it not only reinforces existing critiques of academic dependency but also responds to calls for more embodied, decolonial, and contextually grounded accounts of transnational scholarly life.

I also want to acknowledge that while it is tempting to frame the issues discussed in this chapter solely in terms of Global North gatekeeping, doing so would overlook the structural and institutional weaknesses within Global South contexts that also contribute to limited research capacity. For instance, in the case of Pakistan, the underdevelopment of academic infrastructure is not merely a matter of being under-resourced but is compounded by misaligned national priorities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and politicised funding mechanisms (Khan et al., 2021). Similarly, a significant proportion of public research funding continues to be directed towards STEM fields, aligning with economic development narratives, while the social sciences remain underfunded and undervalued (Khan et al., 2018). This prioritisation reflects both donor influence and domestic policy decisions that undercut critical inquiry and context-specific knowledge production. Furthermore, the absence of robust research training programs, competitive grant schemes, and peer-reviewed national publication platforms limits the ability of early-career scholars to engage meaningfully with international academic networks. This necessitates that Global South governments, including Pakistan, invest in transparent and inclusive research governance, supporting institutional autonomy and cultivating a research culture that values diverse epistemologies and methodological pluralism while pursuing international partnerships from a position of negotiated equity rather than dependency.

Moreover, this study reveals that exporting ethical standards developed in Western contexts to the Global South without modification is also a significant inherent risk associated with the notion of ethical universalism (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Given linguistic and cultural differences, more nuanced approaches to academic research are necessary to maintain ethical standards and adhere to academic protocols while also adapting to and respecting local contexts (Anane-Sarpong et al., 2018). Similarly, the plurality and situatedness of research ethics, as well as the geopolitical and historical specificities of the Global South, need to be considered by ethics committees and boards in the Global North when granting and reviewing ethics clearances (Wynn & Israel, 2018). Implementing these strategies could enhance and advance ethical research practices, reducing

the challenges faced by early-career researchers from the Global South who conduct research in the Global North.

The points highlighted above underscore the need for collaborative efforts between the Global North and the Global South to address existing disparities in knowledge production and improve the experiences of scholars transitioning from the Global South to the Global North. There is a responsibility on the part of the Global North not only to initiate and lead inclusive, collaborative efforts with the Global South but also to address the challenges faced by international students. The obstacles and disparities highlighted in this autoethnographic account advocate epistemological justice and underscore the need for academic structures to recognise and actively incorporate diverse research approaches, perspectives, and methodologies. Addressing these issues and challenges will benefit not only the Global South but also the Global North through enhanced mutual collaboration, the transfer of skills, and reduced dependencies.

Based on the reflections and challenges presented in this autoethnography, I also propose practical recommendations for first-time international PhD students entering the German academic system. Firstly, newly enrolled students should actively seek structured mentorship networks early in their programs, particularly by joining graduate schools or research training groups, which provided me with institutional stability, intellectual support, and helped me foster interdisciplinary dialogue, access to funding, and peer exchange. Secondly, students must familiarise themselves with the bureaucratic and administrative culture of German universities, which often requires proactive planning for visa renewals, insurance, and residence registration processes that are not always straightforward or linguistically accessible. Thirdly, to counter social isolation, cultivating both academic and informal peer networks is vital. For instance, participating in reading groups, attending departmental seminars, or engaging with student unions can provide both emotional and academic support. Fourthly, learning the German language, at least to a functional level, significantly improves one's sense of belonging and facilitates daily tasks, including interactions with university staff, landlords, and public services, and new students should be encouraged to enrol in preparatory German courses either before arrival or alongside their initial coursework. Finally, developing a realistic understanding of Germany's academic culture is essential, which includes adapting to its high value

on independence and self-initiative, managing expectations around feed-back timelines, and understanding cultural norms in supervisor-advisee relationships. There is also a need for international offices and supervi-sors to be more attentive to the distinct challenges faced by Global South scholars, especially around funding uncertainty, epistemic exclusion, and precarious migration status.

Lastly, autoethnography as a methodology presented both challenges and opportunities in this study context. A key challenge was to main-tain a balance between my personal narratives and scholarly analysis. I mostly remained uncertain whether I was adding too much personal infor-mation, and I was trying to ensure that my personal experiences were not merely anecdotal but also highlighted the systemic issues and dispar-ities that exist in knowledge production and access to academic resources between the Global North and the Global South. Existing studies also highlight that researchers using autoethnography as a method need to embed their personal stories in and be informed by the broader cultural context (Denshire, 2014; Pelias, 2004). A further challenge associated with autoethnographic research is the potential for bias, as I, both as a researcher and a subject (Forber-Pratt, 2015), had to navigate the tempta-tion to present a one-sided narrative based on my experiences. I employed reflexive practices to mitigate this issue and situated my experiences within existing research and empirical data. Conversely, autoethnography offers several opportunities. Especially given the lack of opportunities for early career researchers like me to take part in discourses related to dispari-ties in global knowledge production and issues of epistemic injustices, autoethnography was a suitable method for me to share my multifaceted experiences as a researcher navigating the unique challenges and oppor-tunities present in two distinct academic and cultural spheres. Similarly, autoethnography offers an opportunity to uncover context-specific and nuanced insights that may be overlooked by more traditional methods (Pelias, 2004). Through my personal narrative, I was able to provide an in-depth account of the academic challenges and opportunities I encountered across the Global South and the Global North.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the discourse on decoloniality and epistemic justice from a graduate student's standpoint, where existing discussions are often dominated by established scholars with limited input from early-career researchers. Through this autoethnographic account, I share my experiences, and awareness of my current privileged position due to my institutional affiliation in the Global North, the challenges I have experienced, and the strategies I have adopted to cope during my academic transition from the Global South. This aligns with existing studies that highlight the need to dismantle and challenge institutionalised forms of coloniality and epistemic inequalities in knowledge production and offers a personalised account of a scholar transitioning from the Global South to the Global North, adding to limited resources on this topic. The stark disparities and challenges faced by the researcher are not individual troubles but rather symptomatic of structural disparities, epistemic injustice, and the prevalence of colonial legacies. This paper highlights the non-inclusive nature of Western academic institutions and their lack of preparedness for integrating international PhD students into the academic community. These insights challenge the assumption that the underrepresentation of Global Southern researchers in the global knowledge domain is due to a lack of skills, competence, academic rigour, and insufficient experience in scientific writing. Epistemic justice, a celebration of diverse methodologies, and acceptance of diverse ways of doing research and knowledge creation are key. Finally, by addressing the systemic biases and structural inequities that privilege certain types of knowledge over others and by embracing epistemological diversity, academia can better address the complex, multifaceted challenges of our global society, making the pursuit of knowledge a genuinely inclusive and equitable endeavour.

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Imagining the Future of Global South Research

Faith Mkwananzi

INTRODUCTION

The contributions in this book have offered critical and diverse perspectives on the lived experiences of Global South researchers. When the book set out, the aim was to explore the realities through the lived experiences of Global South social researchers. The interest was also to inspire transformative practices that recognise and value diverse epistemologies, ultimately reimagining the place of Global South researchers in global academia. The underlying motive was to account for the influence of contextual uniqueness in research building on well-documented experiences of underrepresentation and asymmetries in international research fora. Each Chapter presents a narrative that does just that. All chapters in the book highlight the unique and complex terrains the contributors navigate. These terrains are often diverse, complex, and contested, as Mutanga notes in Chapter One. While each Chapter offers unique

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insights grounded in specific contexts, bringing them into conversation allows for identifying everyday experiences, shared challenges, and potential possibilities. The synthesis allows for the narratives to be accessible to readers by offering a broader analytical lens and, importantly, opens pathways for dialogue and suggests directions for future initiatives that might support Global South Scholars. In doing so, the synthesis enhances the book's value as a reflection of current scholarship and as a guideline for what research by Global South scholars might look like in the future. Therefore, in sum, and building on the initial aims of the book, the aim of this Chapter is threefold:

- Share common themes emerging across the experiences
- Offer a conceptually analytical lens from an epistemic justice viewpoint
- Offer reflections on possible ways forward

Mignolo (2009), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Marovah and Mutanga (2023) and Mutongoza (2025), among other scholars, remind us that over time, most researchers in the Global South have operated, and some may continue to, operate under the unquestioned assumption that Western knowledge was the norm. Inherent to these assumptions are patriarchal, cultural, and colonial perspectives hidden in power. In *Southern Theory,* Connell (2007) demonstrates that the presumed universalism of knowledge produced in the North is not only one-sided but that such presumptions have marginalised academic knowledge production from societies away from the Global North. Mutanga (2023) makes a similar argument that Southern perspectives have been undermined, resulting in systematic erosion that renders communities in the Global South precarious. Furthermore, the same authors, Mutanga (2023), Connell (2007), and Santos (2014), highlight that the pursuit of a just epistemic system is more pronounced in the Global South, where academic structures (still) privilege Eurocentric ways of 'knowing' and 'doing' research. These observations are consistent with the narratives shared in the book. The epistemic imbalance, which thrives through *knowledge* dominance (Mutanga, 2023), is evident in each of the narratives, where contributors demonstrate ways in which they must perpetually navigate structural constraints and epistemic inequalities in pursuit of knowledge production that is ethical, relevant, and recognised

as valid. In Chapter One, Mutanga argued that it remains unknown how Global South researchers navigate these unequal terrains when doing research. Consistent with addressing that gap, the chapters across the book demonstrate how the researchers do so independently and collaboratively. In synthesising the researchers' approaches, I present themes from which other Global South social researchers might draw lessons, particularly in identifying the challenges and crafting strategies that others have used.

Lin and Saito (Chapter Four) demonstrate that being a Global South researcher not only involves navigating the intersections of race, gender, class, and age within an academic environment, but also the strict rules, regulations, and organisational structures that govern higher education institutions. The magnitude of experiences such as language and cultural barriers risks being taken for granted as forms of epistemic alienation by accepting the differences within and outside academia as normal. Yet, for Yu-Chieh (Chapter Six), these differences were a cause for discrimination as an Indigenous student. The question of 'whose language' matters is more important. Acknowledging how Western ways of 'knowing' and 'doing' influence us as researchers and our response to the teachings is important. What is key is to think about ways to resist approaches and approaches that go against the societal values of the communities we work in, specifically in the Global South.

It is well documented (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Mutanga, 2023; Mutongoza, 2025) that the one-sided focus in knowledge production has for centuries marginalised local epistemologies, and a commitment to challenging dominant paradigms through situated, socially and locally sensitive scholarship is necessary (Patel, 2016; Smith, 2012). This book attempts to understand that knowledge is not neutral, nor is its production, which is demonstrated across all chapters. In knowledge creation, it is important to centre the people, context, and unique conditions under which it is created. Chapter One, with Tembo Mvura communities in Zimbabwe, and Chapter Five, with women living with disabilities in Botswana, illuminate this by centering the lived experiences of the specific communities. These two chapters show that knowledge is deeply entangled with power, identity, geography, and questions of justice. To highlight this, this book has brought together reflective accounts from across diverse Global South contexts, including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania, and Botswana.

Building on Haraway's (1988, 2013) concept of situated knowledges, the narratives shared serve as key epistemological tools that challenge forms of knowledge through locatable and critical knowledges. According to Bacchilega (2015), the narratives serve as sites of resistance and identity preservation, profiling who we are in the communities in which we experience life. In doing so, researchers demonstrate their agency within systems that often undermine or overlook their potential intellectual contributions. For Mbembe (2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), forms of alternative epistemologies emphasise social justice relationality. Thus, Mignolo's (2009) argument that how we see the world is not through objective understanding but through experiences influenced by collective and critical engagement researchers navigate, resist, and reimagine research is valid.

The intention here is not to repeat what has already been well argued by other scholars but to buttress through narratives situated in and reflecting local realities. The reflections embedded in the thematic presentation below offer critical and forward-looking insights, particularly in relation to how epistemic structures are shaped by the perpetual and resistant epistemic empire within academic spaces that have been built over hundreds of years (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Mushonga, 2024). Mutongoza et al. (2023) suggest that the challenge to confront the resultant state of the empire, as we witness it today, often stems from a reluctance to confront uncomfortable truths about historical injustices. Thus, the autoethnography approach employed by the contributors has helped make visible the hidden and usually silenced stories of Global South researchers, which can be seen as a form of resistance. The already mentioned challenges, such as the struggle for academic freedom, the persistent gendered barriers within institutions, the complex dynamics of international collaborations, and the precarity of underfunded research environments, present a stark reality of Global South researcher experiences. However, as the stories illuminate, acts of resistance, resilience, and creativity, showing how researchers forge their paths, build solidarities, and reimagine what it means to do meaningful research, they become a guide for others who might find themselves in similar circumstances. In the following sections, I highlight shared challenges, show innovative practices, and offer a forward-looking reflection on what it might mean to rethink knowledge production in theory and practice.

WHAT RESEARCHERS' EXPERIENCES TELL US ABOUT KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Other ways of knowing, such as indigenous paradigms, have successfully challenged the current knowledge status quo and shown different ways of existing and making meaning of the social world. Several cross-cutting themes emerge in the book that speak to the shared and often deeply personal struggles and strategies of Global South researchers. While geographical and institutional contexts might differ, the fundamental patterns of constraint, resistance, and innovation are extraordinarily resonant, as synthesised in the following sections.

Struggles for Recognition

One of the most persistent threads running through the book is the experience of epistemic injustice through the marginalisation of local knowledge, research approaches, and theoretical contributions supporting Global North paradigms. Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice becomes particularly relevant here as it brings to the core the impact of power relations on who is heard and valued as a legitimate knower (also see Mkwananzi and Cin, 2021). Mutongoza (2025, p. 2) refers to epistemologies of woundedness to refer to the knowledges that emerge from "experiences of pain, trauma, and oppression as a result of colonialism." According to the author, these epistemologies are necessary for transforming knowledge systems historically shaped by Eurocentric and exclusionary frameworks (Mutongoza, 2025). Yet, those who experience these 'wounds' struggle for recognition despite their potential to "contribute unique and valuable knowledge" (p. 2) to current scholarship. According to Fricker (2007), they suffer testimonial injustice when a Global South scholar is dismissed because of biases about their contextual background, like Yu-Chieh in Chapter Six.

On the other hand, when people lack social recognition because dominant epistemologies exclude their ways of knowing, like Shah in Chapter Eight, they suffer hermeneutical injustice. Fricker (2013) illustrates how epistemic injustice may render an individual dominated through hermeneutical injustice. She uses an example of a case of long-term domestic violence before the time when it came to be understood that the victim's not leaving her violent partner was no indication that the violence was not severe or terrifying, no indication that the victim was

complicit in it, or secretly attracted to it, and so on. Inadequate collective understanding of the woman's experience helped delay for many years the legal move to construing cases of premeditated counterviolence on the victim's part as the result of long-term 'provocation.' This reveals the importance of achieving hermeneutical justice in legal fact-finding (Fricker, 2013, p. 1326).

As seen throughout the book, Global South scholars experience an injustice when their contributions are ethically and epistemologically devalued in ways that affect how they see and perceive themselves. From reflections on navigating epistemic borders to critiques of limited academic freedom in Global North institutions, authors repeatedly expose how structures of academia continue to silence and undervalue Southern voices, as noted in Chapter One. These experiences are both professionally limiting and deeply personal as researchers wrestle with feelings of invisibility, self-censorship, and the pressure to conform to dominant norms to be seen as credible. Fricker's (2013) example shows how individuals can be mistreated because their experiences are not understood, in this case, by researchers from the North. People can wrongly think that if one stayed in an abusive environment, it meant the violence was not serious. Because of this misunderstanding, it can take a while before relevant structures of power recognise that if an 'epistemic victim' fought back after years of abuse, it could be a reaction to long-term suffering. Sometimes, this fighting back is through researchers finding ways to creatively navigate these academic landscapes, as shown by Kisanga and Masawe in Chapter Three, where they discuss their attempts to navigate a predominantly male-dominated academic environment. In Zeleza's (2003) paper on academic freedom, the author points out that women often face additional challenges, including systematic biases hindering their academic progression. What is illuminated in Kisanga and Masawe's experiences could also be seen as 'systematic neglect' of women by higher education institutions, failing to implement measures that address the disparities. This neglect is a structural and historical pattern of exclusion, marginalisation, and undervaluation embedded within higher education's institutional, cultural, and epistemological foundations. Further, the evident disregard of those already on the margins is not merely about individual acts of discrimination but about normalising unequal power relations that render women's contributions invisible, limit their access to leadership, and perpetuate masculine norms of knowledge production and academic excellence in academia.

Within the broad academic sector, it was not until recently that researchers and academics started to speak about what it is like to be a researcher in the South and to live with epistemic violence based on identity and geographical location. What began as whispers of shame has become a powerful chorus of voices speaking bravely. Once silenced by fear and stigma because of hermeneutical and testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), researchers are now finding the courage to express how these injustices impact their everyday experiences of being and doing scholarship, as a result, stunting their potential contributions to knowledge. The space for this expression, such as the volume of collective stories and lessons, brings about collective change. This approach addresses the call to challenge injustices, where many were dismissed and wronged in their capacity as knowers. Thus, the growing chorus of voices helps correct these injustices, ensuring people are heard and understood in their contexts. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (2006) critiques how Western scholars tend to represent the marginalised scholars. In the Global South, specific structures reinforce the power hierarchies that must be challenged. These structures are embedded in everyday life and manifest in research contexts through patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, and classism. Even in cases where subaltern groups attempt to speak, for example, through gender awareness campaigns or equity initiatives, their voices are often reinterpreted, misrepresented, or misunderstood by those in positions of power. Therefore, this book documents these experiences so that fellow researchers can reflect on their own practices and consider how they might act differently, in their own contexts, to support a more just knowledge system.

The Politics of Positionality and Identity

In this book's opening chapter, Mutanga describes how experiences influence epistemic justice and decoloniality in challenging the power dynamics that shape global knowledge production. In earlier work, Mutanga (2023) argues for the position that one speaks, for example, from the standpoint of a disabled student in Africa, as this affects their knowledge and lived realities. Mutanga (2023) highlights how students and scholars from the Global South are often subjected to epistemic exclusion because of their marginal social positions, especially when their knowledge does not align with dominant Western paradigms. This marginalisation is not merely academic. It is rooted in identity markers

such as race, geography, and ability, which often determine whose voices are legitimised in knowledge production (Mutanga, 2023). In the context of this book, we have seen the importance of acknowledging and considering the standpoint of Global South researchers without dismissing their lived realities. Otherwise, the efforts to decolonise or create epistemically just conditions are futile if certain positionalities and identities are not considered necessary or valuable. In other words, in centering positionality, it is essential to make collaborative attempts to look beyond what is said to appreciate the standpoint from which it is told when counting what is considered valid knowledge.

Drawing on intersectional and decolonial feminist insights, contributors to this book show how the politics of positionality and identity are mediated by gender, race, and other embodied identities (Ahmed, 2012). The authors have critically reflected on how their positionality as early-career scholars, women, non-disabled men, migrants, or religious individuals shapes their research experiences and everyday negotiations within academia. These multiple and often intersecting identifiers shape one's understanding of the world and create a position through which one views the world. This view provides a framework for identifying and interacting with others. Understanding the interaction of positionality and identity is crucial in research and the processes of knowledge production, as it can question and drive inclusive practice in everyday practices. More epistemically inclusive practices can be promoted by embracing this diversity in knowledge creation. The discussions on gender and disability reveal how patriarchy, ableism, and academic culture generate layered exclusions, manifesting in marginalisation or erasure (Goodley, 2014). Yet, these same narratives illuminate how such exclusions can be confronted through solidarity, collective reflection, and ethical research grounded in relational accountability and mutual respect (Shotwell, 2016; Tronto, 2013). In doing so, the authors contribute to reimagining research as a technical process, an ethical and political practice deeply rooted in lived experience and shared struggles that create a shared identity. This approach supports a broader call for epistemic justice that affirms diverse ways of knowing and being and challenges the power dynamics embedded in global academic hierarchies (Mutanga, 2023; Mutongoza et al., 2023).

Structural Constraints and Unequal Research Ecologies

The books' contributions demonstrate the structural limitations shaping much of the Global South's research landscape, as seen in Chapters Two and Eight. Gore's experiences highlight the complexity of socio-economic and political influences in research between countries in the same region. This disparity was long highlighted by Marginson (2010) when he alludes to the varying degrees to which even modern-day engagement of higher education internationally varies markedly between nations and regions. Decades later, these structural inequalities between borders still exist owing to a lack of commitment to resourcing and political grounding, among others. These experiences are not far from Zeleza's (2003) critical reflection on the then, and arguably, still current state of African intellectuals when African governments heavily relied on foreign influence, particularly the funding of higher education research. The narration clearly shows that the funding landscape now is no different from that of decades ago. Research priorities are often externally imposed, shaped by donor agendas that may not align with local needs or epistemologies, thus reinforcing asymmetries in the global knowledge economy (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Mama, 2007). This overreliance by the Global South on the Global North, evident in the growing pressure on researchers to secure external (Global North) funding for local research, perpetuates foreign influence and dependency, rather than reducing it. As Zeleza (2003) argues, this dynamic contributes to a loss of intellectual autonomy. The author's reference to the transformation of African intellectuals into paid native informants echoes the perpetual coloniality of funding serving Western interests and priorities, a tragic testimony to the collapse of nationalist projects (p. 158). Similarly, scholars have flagged the resistant epistemic empire and colonising epistemology that some postcolonial African elite justify as a need to be competitive internationally (Mushonga, 2024; Nyamnjoh, 2012). While attempting to be internationally competitive, these systemic constraints impact the quality, relevance, and long-term sustainability of the work done by researchers in the Global South. Yet rather than lamenting these structural inequalities, contributors use their narratives to critically interrogate the political economy of knowledge production by tracing how funding mechanisms, academic hierarchies, and neoliberal logic constrain scholarly autonomy. At the same time, they advocate for more context-sensitive,

locally grounded, and community-engaged research practices that challenge dependency and reassert the epistemic agency of Global South scholars (Santos, 2014). These calls signal a shift towards research models that are inclusive and accountable to the social and political realities from which they emerge.

Autoethnography as Decolonial Praxis

Building on Mutongoza's (2025) conceptualisation of wounded epistemologies and how they are necessary for disrupting traditional knowledge models by centring the lived experiences of communities impacted by historical violence, the autoethnographic accounts have centred the experiences of researchers who have experienced epistemic injustice in one way or another. In Chapter One, Mutanga provided a solid rationale for combining autoethnography and a reflexive approach, buttressing its resourcefulness in understanding epistemic justice and decoloniality through the researcher's lived experiences. Foregrounding personal experiences and positional reflexivity, as done through the chapters, not only acts as a deliberate rejection of 'neutral' objectivity (Pillow, 2003), often presented in some research, but also awakens the silences of those on the margins for long. This postmodern reflexivity holds present-day currency, as we have seen where researchers practice self-reflection, leading to self-awareness and disclosing their own subjectivity (Pillow, 2003). The silencing, or suppression as Mutongoza (2025) views it, remains evident in the accepted, perpetual systems delegitimising some Indigenous Global South languages, traditions, histories, and oral traditions. Wu (Chapter Six) draws our attention to the unique challenges Indigenous students often face in intercultural educational settings, where language and cultural differences usually disrupt their learning experiences and sense of belonging. These disruptions highlight the importance of autoethnography, allowing marginalised researchers to critically reflect on their experiences by foregrounding culturally situated knowledge and lived realities. Other authors in the book have attempted to disrupt dominant epistemologies and reclaim the 'subaltern ways of knowing.'

Furthermore, the authors have positioned their unique experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, avoiding the extractive tendencies of conventional research that various authors argue against (see Mkwananzi and Cin, 2022; Marovah & Mutanga, 2023; The May Group, 2025). This approach foregrounds voice and agency, which, in the context of

decolonisation, serve as a form of contestation against dominant knowledge traditions that have historically sidelined other ways of knowing. For scholars such as Chilisa (2012) and Smith (2012), foregrounding traditionally excluded or marginalised voices serves as an example of epistemic resistance. In this volume, the narrators reclaim the authority to present their realities, challenging dominant paradigms that have long silenced or distorted their experiences.

The May Group (2025) engages critically with the notion of 'voice,' highlighting its framing as a Global North concept often conflated with *sayability*- the capacity to be heard within dominant epistemic frameworks. They argue that voice is inseparably tied to epistemic (in)justice, as prevailing knowledge systems ensure that some voices are always more audible and intelligible than others. Drawing on the notion of *transrationality,* which accounts for both the sayable and the unsayable, they contend that pursuing epistemic justice requires engaging with 'voice' as a 'complex assemblage' (The May Group, 2025, p. 65). This involves working through discomfort, messiness, and pain, recognising that overcoming the logic of coloniality demands more than inclusion. It requires transforming the conditions under which voice is expressed, recognised, and valued. These arguments around voice as contingent, contested, and often denied resonate with writing the self into research. Autoethnography, as a form of epistemological disobedience (Tuck & Yang, 2012), refuses the silencing of embodied, affective, and experiential knowledge. In reclaiming voice through narrative, researchers challenge the colonial logic that divorces the knower from the known. This alignment between voice and self-writing as decolonial praxis underscores the call by Marovah and Mutanga (2023) for research to move beyond extraction, becoming a space for relational accountability and the legitimation of Southern epistemologies.

Emerging Possibilities for Global South Research

While this book lays bare the systemic inequities embedded in global research structures, it also offers inspiring glimpses of possibility in how Global South researchers express agency, pursue autonomy, and resist the limiting confines of dominant academic norms. Following Keet et al. (2017)and Martinez-Vargas's (2020) caution, the book is careful not to reduce the decolonial discourse to everyday familiar rhetoric. The

authors believe that sustaining genuine decolonial attempts in education (including research) requires that these attempts be embedded in collaborative intellectual efforts involving academics and students. Therefore, in the same line of thought, approaches to research practices ought to embed pragmatic approaches that move away from reinforcing epistemic imbalances, as shown throughout the book. Various scholars have suggested different methods, including the co-creation of knowledge with communities (Chikozho et al., 2021; Mutanga, 2023), ethical reflexivity and positionality, promotion of indigenous languages to challenge linguistic imperialism, promoting alternative and indigenous methodologies in research (Marovah and Mkwananzi, 2020), and investing local funding in research, among other practical attempts. While researchers' acts of resistance shown in the book are not always visible, they are meaningful, creative, and often deeply relational. The following section discusses the practical ways small steps can be taken to address issues the volume's authors raised.

Creating Supportive Research Communities

Individual and shared narratives often provide a glimpse into ways, usually unsaid, in which researchers have nurtured informal care, mentorship, and collaboration networks to survive and thrive within hostile or under-resourced academic environments. Whether through writing retreats, research circles, or solidarity among women academics, these forms of support provide vital emotional, intellectual, and practical sustenance. Kisanga and Masawe share how collaborative efforts can help navigate predominantly traditionally rigid academic environments, often anchored on patriarchal structures. Smith (2024) views this as background structural injustice, an enabler of various epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007). Resisting such societal structures, often hidden in norms and expectations, requires collective responsibility (Smith, 2024). Their argument for solidarity among women academics, mentorship, and supportive networks exemplifies what transformative collective agency can look like in higher education. Such collective action could lead to access to opportunities often reserved for those with power or authority over others. This access can lead to the advancement of other opportunities, resulting in public good aspirations beyond the individual (Mkwananzi and Cin, 2020). Sannino (2022) further reinforces the potential of collectivity by stating that issues of equity and social justice, such as those experienced by

Kisanga and Masawe, call for a multi-agency approach across sectoral and hierarchical boundaries. This type of agency challenges dominant academic cultures hidden in hierarchy and patriarchy and creates alternative spaces where women or other marginalised groups can redefine successes and promote epistemic justice. Kisanga and Masawe demonstrate how grassroots academic collaborations can disrupt exclusionary norms and contribute to more inclusive knowledge systems by foregrounding relationality and mutual support.

Reclaiming the Epistemic Space

A recurring thread in the chapters is the conscious effort to move from extractive research models to more reciprocal, participatory, and co-constructed approaches. Particularly, Mukhopadhyay and Moswela, in Chapter Five on disability and positionality in Botswana, call for a shift from researching 'on' to researching 'with,' grounded in the principles of *Ubuntu*, emphasising human dignity, interconnectedness, and respect. This reorientation foregrounds ethical relationality (Mutanga, 2023) and affirms the agency of contributors as active epistemic contributors. Moreton-Robinson's (2011) position highlights that lived experiences of marginalisation are not limitations but vital epistemic resources, enabling the reclamation of epistemic space through resistance and reformation. These experiences generate alternative ways of knowing that challenge and destabilise dominant hegemonic narratives. Therefore, the call for inclusive approaches should not be seen as just an alternative methodology but an ethical approach to engaging others who know, live, and practice differently from us. In this line of thought, Marovah and Mutanga (2023) highlight an ethical research approach reflecting Global South scholars' deliberate effort to reclaim epistemic space by resisting colonial legacies and asserting contextually grounded, decolonial ways of knowing. For example, by embedding the principles of *Ubuntu* in our research practices, we advocate for accountability to the communities we engage with and redefine academic rigor to encompass care, reciprocity, and contextual relevance. This approach challenges the dominance of detached, individualistic models of knowledge production and affirms relational and community-rooted epistemologies. It actively reclaims the epistemic space for local knowledge systems, experiences, and values, thereby advancing epistemic justice and disrupting the hierarchies of knowing imposed by colonial and Eurocentric frameworks

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Mukhophadhyay and Moswela demonstrate how scholars with various forms of privilege can navigate the complexities through transparency and a willingness to learn from community partners. They contribute to a broader scholarly drive to reimagine research as a dialogic, justice-oriented, and transformative practice.

Rethinking Institutional Priorities

The book raises questions on institutional policies, how they might mirror the lived realities of the communities they serve, and how they are articulated and translated into action through supporting social researchers. Without robust institutional support, researchers are likely to remain isolated, under-resourced, and often compelled to tag-team with peer researchers with funding opportunities, often those from the Global North, exposing them to the risk of continued epistemic injustice. This requires institutions to rethink their priorities, which may not always be represented as driven by local needs as much as influenced by the internationalisation agenda.

Calls for structural reforms and transformation in higher education are rooted in recognising that Global South knowledge systems, particularly in Africa, have been marred with historical and systemic marginalisation within global academia (see Zeleza, 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The importance of local knowledge systems is noted by Hoppers (2001), who states that such (often undermined) knowledges represent a national heritage and resource that should be protected, promoted, and developed. Murove (2018) calls for an Afrocentric quest for recognition in a globalised world that embraces an inclusive appreciation of diverse global knowledges, recognising that all knowledges are context-specific and largely contribute to local and broader human wellbeing. Suppose we consider Hopper's (2001) and Murove's (2018) arguments that such knowledge is integral to culture and human flourishing. In that case, HEIs have a responsibility to put in place systems and measures that promote the advancement of such knowledge and its sharing with the rest of the world, its interaction with, and contribution to other knowledges. The contributors' cries of underfunding of social science research and researchers are an alert mechanism to the current risk of the potential extinction of such knowledge. The limited capacity of universities in the Global South to engage in sustained and contextually relevant research

raises questions on current institutional priorities and whether they negate what is locally valued.

In addition to funding, the chapters call for equitable partnerships. Mkwananzi and Cin (2021) argue that while equitable partnerships are often a myth, this can change when research partners commit to ethical and political responsibility in challenging the colonial foundations that continue to shape research culture. In other words, it is crucial to acknowledge that power asymmetries exist and will likely persist; the key question, however, is how power can be used to uplift others. This principle also applies to institution-to-institution relationships. How can institutions in the Global South remain locally relevant while engaging with Global North institutions in ways that do not require them to sideline their contextual priorities? How can the differing priorities of institutions be brought into conversation in ways that support meaningful development in each context? Addressing these questions requires the ability and willingness to redistribute power, whether it stems from funding, prestige, or geographic positioning. These efforts align with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2021) call for meaningful decolonisation, which must go beyond symbolic gestures and entail deep transformations in policies, practices, and institutional structures, as highlighted by Mutongoza (2025).

Where to from here? A Conceptual Reflection

Building on shared researcher experiences and the discussed possibilities for Global South research, I offer a conceptualisation for a more nuanced understanding of inequalities in global knowledge production. I do so by conceptualising epistemic inequalities through two interrelated dimensions: *vertical* and *horizontal*. These dimensions provide a broader lens for examining the structural barriers perpetuating epistemic injustice across multiple levels of focus.

Vertical Inequalities: Global North–South Inequalities

Vertical inequality manifests as the structural dominance of the Global North over the Global South in knowledge creation and dissemination processes. This dimension operates primarily at the international level, as demonstrated in some chapters that captured marginalisation and systematic misrepresentation of Southern epistemologies. The vertical dimension

captures how geopolitical hierarchies translate into epistemic hierarchies, wherein Northern institutions maintain gatekeeping functions over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and how it circulates globally.

Horizontal Inequalities: Intra-Southern Inequalities

On the other hand, horizontal inequalities persist within the Global South itself, demanding equal analytical attention. These inequalities manifest across local, national, and regional levels as multi-dimensional social stratification intersecting with class, gender, ethnicity, and linguistic categories. Such intersectional factors fundamentally shape access to knowledge production and dissemination within Southern contexts. For example, rural-based scholars and women researchers frequently experience systematic exclusion at the local level due to intersecting historical, economic, and institutional constraints. At national and regional scales, institutions with advanced infrastructure and established networks with Global North counterparts are strategically positioned to engage more effectively in knowledge production than those lacking equivalent economic, social, and political capital.

Disrupting Structural Inequalities

Disrupting both vertical and horizontal dimensions of epistemic inequality would transform the landscape of epistemic justice by dismantling gatekeeping mechanisms that restrict diverse knowledge contributions. Such transformation aligns with Martinez-Vargas's (2020) conceptualisation of a pluriversal knowledge system. The author advocates for a 'pluri-versity' of methodological approaches that promote diverse epistemological frameworks, which, in the cases presented here, include incorporating researchers sidelined due to gender, geographical location, historical background, and race, among other factors. Martinez-Vargas contends that 'diversifying our practices as researchers and combining them with traditional research practices is the only way to promote a pluriverse nurtured by diverse knowledge systems' (2020, p. 112). Dolavale, in Chapter Seven, contributes to this discourse by bringing to the fore the value of indigenous Fiji methodologies, which emphasise relationality, reciprocity, and ethical engagement. This approach represents a substantive pathway towards decolonising knowledge creation through structural inclusivity.

Epistemic Interdependence and Reciprocal Knowledge Systems

This volume advocates for reconstituting epistemic relationships within and across national boundaries towards more reciprocal forms of knowledge production. Such reciprocity resonates with Ubuntu philosophy (Mutanga, 2023) and concepts of interdependence and shared responsibility (Mathebula and Walker, 2025), collectively informing what I term epistemic interdependence. Mathebula and Walker (2025) theorise interdependence through a political economy lens, demonstrating how individual freedoms are intrinsically linked to collective freedoms through relationships embedded within shared structures of co-existence. The authors' emphasis on co-existence becomes particularly striking, as it recognises and values human diversity (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011) in ways no singular worldview can adequately capture. Therefore, recognising diverse forms of human existence and fostering interdependent engagement across these differences can facilitate pathways towards both epistemic and social justice. Such interdependence (and reciprocity) accepts and respects the value of existing in differences, learning from them, and viewing them as an ecological system where plants, soil, water, and animals are not the same, yet their interaction sustains life. None of these elements can flourish in isolation from others. Similarly, the co-existence of multiple epistemologies, shaped by varied histories, geographical contexts, and worldviews, generates more robust and resilient epistemic systems. Rather than pursuing epistemic dominance, this view values mutual contribution and encourages collaborative knowledge construction that better represents global human experiences.

Pluriversal Vision and Systemic Transformation

The interdependence approach reinforces Martinez-Vargas's (2020) pluriversal vision wherein multiple ways of knowing coexist mutually, enriching one another while contributing to more equitable, inclusive, and contextually relevant knowledge creation processes. Ultimately, this volume's central argument, developed consistently from Chapter One, emphasises that epistemic plurality does not seek to replace one hegemonic system with another but instead promotes diversity while redressing inequalities perpetuated by existing systems (Martinez-Vargas, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This transformation towards epistemic

justice requires structural reforms and paradigm shifts that acknowledge knowledge as fundamentally relational, contextual, and collaborative rather than hierarchical and exclusionary.

On Internationalisation

In an increasingly globalised and internationalising higher education, institutions face pressure to align with international teaching, learning, and research approaches, often dominated by Western methods (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2015). While these efforts might ultimately result in institutional recognition for some, they also have unwelcome implications for the broader Global South higher education landscape. Over the years, the internationalisation process has often marginalised local epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems as universities strive to gain legitimacy through global rankings and prestige metrics (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; Stein, 2016), which hardly capture the local realities of Global South countries. Following this, the competitive environment fostered by rankings has created an institutional culture characterised by inter-institutional competitiveness among Global South universities (Hazelkorn, 2011). This competitive dynamic subsequently permeates the student and staff culture, seen through the intensification of competition between individual academics and students.

Specific to staff culture, scholars are increasingly evaluated by metrics such as publication output, conference attendance, and grant acquisition, all promoting individualistic rather than collaborative behaviour (Hazelkorn, 2009, 2018; Marginson, 2018). These dynamics are further exacerbated by institutional reward systems that prioritise productivity over collective engagement. When institutions systematically incentivise and celebrate such non-collaborative, individualistic behaviours, the foundational principles of interdependence and mutual reliance face significant erosion (Chilisa, 2012; Keet, 2014).

While the modern-day realities, such as the need for job security by staff and institutional expectations, are real and daunting, the pursuit of epistemic solidarity demands that academics move beyond rhetoric and symbolic gestures. Thus, such contexts call for internal transformation, a shift from externally driven academic practices to those grounded in ethical responsibility and community-centred knowledge creation (Heleta, 2016; Santos, 2015). Practices embodying values rooted in Ubuntu, grounded on shared humanity and mutual care, require

intentional and visible resistance from individuals deeply committed to alternative ways of knowing and being (Letseka, 2012). Without such interventions, acts of collaboration, such as those exemplified by Kisanga and Masawe in their joint scholarship, become exceptions rather than the norm.

Some Concluding Thoughts

This book began with personal narratives. As it draws to a close, it does not offer easy answers. Instead, it opens space for deeper questioning of ourselves, our institutions, and the research cultures we inhabit. It invites ongoing dialogue and solidarity in our collective efforts to imagine and work towards just and pluralistic knowledge systems, with co-creation offering a feasible and relational starting point for building trust, sharing epistemic authority, and valuing diverse ways of knowing. While the book is grounded in Global South experiences, the issues raised resonate globally. Researchers everywhere, especially those on the margins, can find common causes in the struggle for more just research environments. Building solidarities across regions and institutions is essential for dismantling the isolating effects of the competition, precarity, and exclusion that neoliberal academia perpetuates.

The vision ahead is grounded on an ongoing struggle and hopeful imagination. The contributors to this volume are already living this work, negotiating complexity with humility, forging new paths with creativity, and refusing to be silenced. Their narratives remind us that reclaiming the epistemic spaces is not just a scholarly endeavour but a political and ethical imperative. Importantly, this book does not argue for a replacement of Western knowledges. Instead, it calls for an acknowledgment of epistemic oppression, as evidenced by the lived experiences of its contributors. Its uniqueness lies in its focus on first-hand accounts, diverse theoretical reflections, and the transformative lessons drawn from these encounters. These experiences do not merely document struggle; they extend an invitation to act, reflect, and imagine otherwise. With that in mind, it leaves those committed to advancing more just, inclusive, and decolonial research futures with reflective questions:

a. How might institutions in the Global South reconfigure themselves and not duplicate Western models but bring their own scholarly, cultural, and societal priorities to the table?

   b. What forms of interventions are needed to support researchers, particularly those navigating layered oppressions related to gender, race, class, disability, or migration?
   c. What would it take to dismantle competitive research cultures and replace them with ecosystems rooted in solidarity, reciprocity, and shared growth?

These are not questions with definitive answers. But they are questions worth reflecting on as Global South researchers and our allies as we continue navigating the complex terrains of knowledge production.

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