

Researchers' reflections on ethics of care as decolonial research practice: understanding Indigenous knowledge communication systems to navigate moments of ethical tension in rural Malawi

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Abstract

This article is autoethnographic, based upon the authors' experiences and reflections upon encountered moments of ethical tension whilst conducting research in rural Malawi. Given that knowledge production, as a process, has been marred by colonial forms of power, the project was underpinned by efforts to achieve a decolonial approach to the research, including the research ethics. The authors share of their endeavours to counterbalance the challenges of power asymmetries whilst researching and working with an Indigenous community whose reality can be marginalised by the Western canon. The authors attempted to ensure that the values and customs of the researched community were respected and central to the research approach. When researchers are guided by local culture and customs, the participants are able to drive the research approach, incorporate their voice and share knowledge that is true

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to their context and reality. In this way, the research study is illustrative of how an ethics of care can help to facilitate decolonial research practice.

Keywords

Indigenous research, ethics of care, decolonial knowledge, Indigenous practice, knowledge communication systems, ethics in practice

Introduction

Within the realm of social science studies, few works have looked at the power disparities and implications of applying universal ethics guidelines in different and unique African contexts (see Vuban and Eta, 2019: 3). Furthermore, whereas most studies tend to focus on the ethical moments encountered during the interactions with participants, this article instead focuses on the ethical tensions encountered during the ‘procedural’ activities relevant for gaining access to participants, and before the commencement of the information exchange processes. The research project in question had an ambition to achieve a decolonial approach to research practice, including the research ethics. According to Datta (2018), practising decolonial ethical research is inclusive of ‘exploring, valuing, and using Indigenous knowledge and methods on an equal footing with Western knowledge and methods, and for integrating Indigenous and Western methods when appropriate’ (p. 3). Herein, the authors also lean on the notion of decoloniality as the unveiling of the dominant power systems, and the eventual path towards holding up other, and often Indigenous, systems as valid and legitimate forms of knowledge or ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012; Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Smith, 2021). With the goal of decoloniality in mind, the article addresses how the use of Indigenous Knowledge Communication (IKC) theory can lend itself to becoming a framework for an ‘ethics of care’ approach in pursuit of decolonial research activities in rural Malawi.

Our care approach is one that involves choices based upon morality and empathy for participants, as well as making choices thought to be in the best interest of, and benefit to, the participants (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; Pettersen, 2011). To avoid paternalism, we exercised choices during the ethically relevant moments of the fieldwork together with the participants (Brear and Tsotetsi, 2022; Pettersen, 2011). Furthermore, we enhanced our ‘ethics of care’ approach through the mitigation of power asymmetries between the researchers and the participants throughout the study (Datta, 2018; Kamlongera, 2021). This is undertaken by employing an ‘ethics of care’ approach guided by the IKC theory (Manyozo, 2018). The IKC theory (Manyozo, 2018), based on Indigenous knowledge communication systems (IKCS), proposes that several spheres of power determine the outcome of communication practices, including the level and type of the communicated message

within each sphere. 'IKCS are media and communications that are rooted in local and Indigenous epistemology, prior to being co-opted by external organisations and institutions' (Manyozo, 2018: 95).

Background and method

The broader research project was a PhD study undertaken by the first author, who is based at a Norwegian university and carrying out research in her home country of Malawi. The study explored the case of *Tisinthe* – a development communication initiative in Malawi. *Tisinthe*, in the Chichewa language, is a term which translates to 'let's change'. It is an initiative that reaches over 500,000 radio listeners and an estimated 17,000 people in attendance at different Radio Listening Clubs (RLCs). *Tisinthe's* campaign objective is to empower disenfranchised communities, especially marginalised women and children in Malawi. The broader study had an objective to explore the RLC participants' experiences and thoughts regarding *Tisinthe*. In an effort to seek knowledge that is de-linked from the criticised hegemonic narratives regarding African practices (Chilisa, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), the study sought to counter and circumvent research practices that would otherwise marginalise participants, their voices, and their roles in shaping the outcome of narratives about their realities (Chilisa, 2019; Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010).

Context: The field and methodology

The research was conducted in Southern Malawi's district of Phalombe which is a rural area that has retained a semblance of local traditional and cultural values. Although locals have their respective languages, the national languages, Chichewa and English are also spoken by many locals (Nelson et al., 2018). The Phalombe region is noted as consisting of many residents who are either small-scale traders or subsistence farmers. The area is home to several ethnic groups, including the Yao and the Nyanja, whilst the largest ethnic group is the Lomwe, whose people traditionally follow a matrilineal system of inheritance.

The methodological strategy included the use of visual approaches, such as photovoice (Nykiforuk et al., 2011), drawing elicitation and observation. In addition, the researchers used discursive approaches, namely focus group discussions and individual photo-narrative interviews. This methodological design was selected to provide thick data through a participant-driven process to obtain extensive information and achieve co-creation of knowledge. Furthermore, a participant-centred methodology mitigates the power disparity whereby the researchers have more power over the researched knowledge outcomes. Lastly, by adopting an

approach where participants are co-creators of their own knowledge, participants are involved in the research as legitimate knowledge owners. In this manner, the participant voice and narrative is privileged over that of the researchers. This methodological design therefore facilitates the ‘deprovincialising’ of a specific group of African participants; Africa (or the local context of Malawi) is centralised as an epistemic site whilst subsequently pursuing the goal of globalising knowledge from Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 4).

In terms of pursuing knowledge that is de-linked from heterogenous narrations of reality, especially those of marginalised and othered communities, it is argued that this is possible if the means of arriving at the knowledge are themselves not replicas of the colonial process (Chilisa, 2019). Thus, the current article outlines the onto-epistemological justification of the chosen ethical approach for its possibilities of decolonising research practice, as well as outcomes of research pertaining to Indigenous Malawians (Khupe and Keane, 2017).

Moments of ethical tension and choices exercised

Cognisant that not all moments involving ethical choices are pre-empted during the process of attaining institutional approval for research, the researchers adopted a deliberately reflexive approach. This involved taking into account the power disparities in research and ensuring that measures are ongoingly implemented to mitigate this ‘coloniality’ of power, including in ethical conduct during fieldwork (Guillemín and Gillam, 2004; Rossman and Rallis, 2010). The authors will now highlight the navigation of several moments of ethical tension encountered in the early stages of setting up the study.

Procedures prior to conducting the research

Prior to embarking on the research, the Principal Researcher (PR) sought approval from the affiliate university in Norway, in addition to following the steps required to obtain approval from the Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, NSD). To acquire approval from the NSD, the PR provided detailed information on the research objectives, methodology and treatment of data during the research and after the research project. Once these details were submitted to the NSD and were found to comply with the standard of conduct, the PR embarked on the journey of obtaining authorisation to pursue the research in the research country, Malawi. At this point, the first moment of ethical tension arose. Indeed, the body providing the initial approval of the research is the authority in Norway, but assumptions about correct conduct therein may not translate well to the research context in Malawi (Msoroka and Amundsen, 2018). Furthermore, whilst procedural ethics is based on the values of respect and beneficence, and aimed at minimising risk for research participants, a universal approach

to procedural ethics is inadequate for the diverse range of contexts within which researchers find themselves working (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2018; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Msoroka and Amundsen, 2018; Vermeulen and Clark, 2017). The application of universal ethical approach in Indigenous contexts is often further complicated by issues of language, literacy and cultural protocols; such factors require the researchers to adjust their ethical approach if they are to be successful with their research pursuit (including safeguarding the well-being of participants (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2018; Banks et al., 2013; Ndimande, 2012)). Thus, the application of, and adherence to, ethical guidelines set by committees or review boards are complex issues, depending on the context of the research. There is consensus amongst researchers that conceptual frameworks aiming to make sense of all 'in-field' moments which a researcher often encounters are scarce (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2018; Datta, 2018; Gray et al., 2017). However, this peculiar and vaguely-guided in-field space is what most qualitative researchers report to work within, exercising what, according to Guillemin and Gillam (2004), is termed 'ethics in practice'. Ethics in practice refers to everyday ethical moments that arise while conducting research. It is concerned with the researcher's role, how they conduct themselves, and how they respond to the obligations they have to participants (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

To pursue the research component of the PhD study, the PR needed to secure approval for conducting the research project in Malawi. However, at the time of the research, Malawi was experiencing some structural and political upheaval. Though the researchers had gained approval from an international board to proceed with the research, it would have been desirable to obtain additional permission from a local ethics approval body. This provoked another moment of ethical tension in that, despite making efforts to obtain guidance on the path to be followed in this unique case, no final answer was attained on how to proceed. In lieu of this formal guidance, the operational ethics for the study was informed by the guidelines indicated in the Malawian National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities framework (NCST, 2018). While the guidelines were vague, permission and ethical review was sought from the local body through which the research was to be conducted (in this case, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) granting access to its community and participants). Following a brief introduction to the affiliated partners, the PR was given extra training to understand the local protocols for research and the NGO's code of conduct. Once the ethics and conduct documentation had been reviewed, the PR signed an agreement stating that the conduct would be in accordance with the ethical requirements of the local NGO. By signing the code of conduct, the PR agreed that she would not bring any harm or disrepute to the NGO, or any community members involved in the programme. The PR was also introduced to a Manager who would later be the guide and official gatekeeper to accessing participants in the local communities.

Relationships and relating as sources of conflict

Securing an entity through which to seek out participants for the overall study also presented moments of ethical tension. Firstly, the PR was presented with the challenge of balancing participants' well-being with serving the NGO's interests through the study. It has been claimed that research involving humans starts from a point of ethical tension, since, in most instances, research participants do not seek out the research or study, as was the case with the current work (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 271). The researchers set the goal for this research; the study was unelicited by the local population. How could the researchers ensure that participants benefitted from time spent participating in a study they did not elicit? The authors describe how this quandary was addressed in the discussion section.

Selecting a research assistant

Based on her understanding of the local cultural practices within the Malawian context, the PR decided to acquire the assistance of a research assistant (RA) who was familiar with the research location and was male. Additionally, the selected RA was chosen for his educational background, familiarity with qualitative research, fluency in English and Chichewa and familiarity with local Malawian cultural protocols. Noting that it might have been ideal to have both a male and female assistant working with participants, the moment of ethical tension herein was related to the selection of only a male assistant (the reasoning for this choice is discussed later in the text).

Gatekeepers and accessing participants: Relational autonomy

On the date agreed upon for recruitment of participants, the NGO Manager introduced the researchers to the school and the premises where the *Tisinthe* RLC meetings occur. Since the researchers were 'visitors' to the school property, they were required to sign in (each day of their visit) by indicating the purpose of their visit and their contact details. The research team explained their role to the RLC attendees as '*anthu a kafukufuku*', which, in Chichewa, is a phrase used in reference to a researcher or investigator. This term was employed because it is much easier for locals to understand.

Although the researchers were given access to a recommended site from which to draw the research sample of participants, the presence of the programme representatives and the relationships they had with the community possibly affected the RLC attendees' decisions to participate in the study (Henderson et al., 2007). On the one hand, whilst the presence of the gatekeepers might have endorsed the

researchers and their mission, this same presence might have also resulted in pressure to participate amongst the RLC attendees. Thus, this instance of relational autonomy was another ethically important moment. To become a participant in this specific research project, community members had to volunteer of their own free will. Therefore, the researchers formally recruited participants once the gatekeepers had left the room. In an effort to further exercise ethics of care, the researchers emphasised the individual's right to consent to participate in the study. Informed consent is an ethical obligation in research and the researchers exercised care by ensuring potential participants had ample opportunity to find out what the research would involve. This included clarity regarding any potential challenges associated with being a participant in the study and demands the study may have placed on the participants' time, as well as the benefits, if any, of participating in the study. Therefore, despite there being some expressed hesitation and uncertainty about participating in the study, the researchers were able to secure 10 community members who were willing and interested in signing up to participate in the study.

Discussion

Herein, the authors endeavour to highlight challenges of power asymmetry that may arise when applying universal ethics to work with an Indigenous community whose reality is often marginalised via a Western gaze (Manyozo, 2018). Todd (2017) forewarns that silences and continued norms which (a) do not question the origins of thought or (b) tend to validate and attach credibility to works filtered through Eurocentric intermediaries 'play a role in shaping narratives that erase ongoing colonial violence' (Todd, 2017: 15). It is argued that coloniality persists in the unequal power dynamics whereby Western knowledge and ways of knowing are heralded as superior to alternatives (Vermeulen and Clark, 2017). Furthermore, it is argued that the 'Western' or Eurocentric 'universal' ethical principles are more challenging and possibly damaging to follow when working with, and researching, marginalised communities (e.g. Tauri, 2018). Countering these challenges is perceived as achievable if 'diverse experiences and perspectives are treated in the same manner as euro-patriarchal ways of knowing' (Brear and Tsotetsi, 2022: 4). South African scholar Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocates the need for decoloniality within the African context, specifically moving towards a fully 'humanising' academia wherein Africa is 'deprovincialised'.

The authors take guidance from Smith (2021) and Ndimande (2012), who maintain that the values and cultural protocols of the research community should be emphasised and central to the researchers' conduct and the research study itself. Furthermore, drawing from the IKC theory facilitated a critical and decolonial approach within the study informing all observations and shared knowledge

generation, including that from the nuanced exchanges present within the Malawian cultural context, as well as informing the ethical conduct and justification of the study.

IKC proposes three spheres of knowledge communication, each with a distinct type of communicated message and power dynamic. These include:

Sphere I, wherein *common knowledge* is communicated and discussed. This sphere can either be private or public and includes communication practices such as friendly and polite chats, news, gossip, and entertainment.

Sphere II wherein *technical and non-specialised* knowledge is communicated and discussed. The purpose of knowledge within Sphere II is to create an identity and sense of belonging for those in the community. This might include issues ‘such as marriage, punishment, disease/crime prevention or funerals and its available resources (such as land, trees, water, grass)’ (Manyozo, 2018: 402).

Sphere III, wherein *specialised knowledge* is decided upon, communicated and shared. Not everyone in the community is able to contribute within this sphere, as it is only for those with the power of holding the privileged and specialised knowledge.

In understanding these spheres, our study was guided by a framework that highlights the communication and practice networks that inform the participants’ daily reality. The IKC theory additionally offers a guide for the researchers’ ethics in practice which will now be described and discussed.

Respect for elders and authorities: Taking guidance and navigating Sphere III

Gaining entry to the community required expressions of respect towards all parties. Within the Malawian cultural context, it is especially important to show respect towards elders (those in Sphere III), regardless of gender. There was, therefore, a need for the researchers to acknowledge the important, though unofficial, role of the Vice-Headmaster as an authority in the community. The Vice-Headmaster’s approval for the use of the property where the study was situated, as well as the researchers’ presence at the school, was an essential practice that enabled the conduct of the research; had he denied the researchers permission to be present, then the RLC meeting would have continued without the researchers. Within these Indigenous contexts, elders command more respect and, as such, wield more power than others. In this case, the Vice-Headmaster can also be classed as a gatekeeper who determined what occurred within Sphere II of non-technical communication practices. Having observed that the Vice-Headmaster was a figure with formal authority, as well as an authority within the Indigenous realm of local community practices, the researchers ensured that they started by

acknowledging him on each day of research activity in the local area. This type of power dynamic, whilst not overt, is illuminated when there is understanding of the local realms of who grants access to what, and to what extent. By following the local channels of power, the researchers avoided disruption of ongoing relations between the participants and local gatekeepers. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, emphasis was placed on reminding participants of their right to consent participation as individuals and as RLC community members, as well as the fact that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Considerations of the participants' interests and time

In the Malawian context, guidelines highlight the importance of considering the amount of time that participation will take and how this may affect participants' source of livelihood or income (Gordon et al., 2018). Within the rural setting where the research was conducted, participants were subsistence farmers with various kinds of participation in small businesses (Nelson et al., 2018). Therefore, participation in the research disrupted their livelihood activities. In an attempt to counter socio-economic loss (due to time spent on research tasks), the researchers reimbursed participants for costs incurred due to participation in the study. This decision was in line with the structure set up by the NGO running the RLC, where they would give back to RLC members in kind (household supplies) at the end of each weekly RLC attendance.

Understanding and respecting gendered practice: Adherence to Sphere II

In the formal academic sphere of research, the PR holds the power to influence conduct and determine the overall approach to the study. However, within the local Indigenous context of this research, to mitigate power disparities between the researchers and participants, several power shifts ensued. For example, culturally appropriate gestures for showing respect towards elders or authority figures included visible gestures such as kneeling when greeting the elders and authorities. This act was exercised by the researchers during introductions to all parties as well as during each greeting with participants. These verbal and embodied displays of respect resulted in momentary 'shifts' of power within the research context. During these shifts it was the participants and their context that drove the direction of behaviours and in turn, the research practice. For example, although the PR was in charge of the study, the RA, who was older than the PR, demanded a different level of respect. Adherence to these Indigenous power shifts, meant the elders within the local context could relate to, and easily communicate with the RA. Furthermore, in this case, the decision to appoint a male RA was a conscious

choice to help extend the PR's access to contexts where her gender and age might otherwise have proven restrictive (see also Kamlongera, 2021). Western feminist assumptions of a universally-oppressive patriarchy might view the decision to select a male RA as being one that reinscribes patriarchal stereotypes (see Mohanty, 1988). However, as a male and female team, the researchers were adequately equipped to enter both women-only and male-only realms. Additionally, the male RA, being older and with children, could engage in productive dialogue with participants based on the relatedness of being parents, which was a commonality the PR did not share.

Issues of trust: Exploring communication practices in Sphere I

While the researchers' affiliations with the local gatekeepers encouraged participants to be open to the research, there was still a need for them to gain the full trust of participants so they could become willing co-creators of knowledge. An understanding of the functions within the common knowledge realm facilitated the researchers' ability to gain trust by utilising language that was familiar to the participants. For instance, the researchers would clasp their hands as they spoke during introductions and farewells; such gestures were seen as a sign of respect and inspired trust. Secondly, through intonations in the Chichewa language that are common to the participants' community, rapport was fostered within Sphere I via verbal and non-verbal etiquette. Non-verbal ethical moments would have been difficult to navigate had the researchers insisted on engaging in English or with a translator. Having familiarity with the Indigenous way of life allowed for extra forms of expression through the spoken language, as well as in alternative forms of showing respect by evoking a certain pitch, for example, whilst assisting with certain gestures.

What these shared instances illustrate is that familiarity with the IKC theory (Manyozo, 2018) can aid understanding and navigation of the Indigenous contexts with consideration of the power dynamics that determine knowledge and communication practices. This conceptual framework lent itself well to the study's objective of providing 'thick descriptions' within the research context of rural Malawi (Freeman, 2014). It additionally offers the opportunity for researchers to pursue decolonial study with a socio-culturally sensitive ethical approach. In this way, the IKC helped the researchers to avoid the sorts of power asymmetries associated with colonial research approaches and knowledge generation. Secondly, the IKC provides the academic language needed for explaining practices within the participants' cultural context. These are practices that the researchers took note of and incorporated to contextualise and to guide their decolonial approach.

As per the IKC theory (Manyozo, 2018), everyday customs, such as those of the participants, are established in Sphere III of specialised knowledge and communication. These set practices are maintained by the community and evidenced in Sphere II, and are integral to a shared identity. General and common knowledge is exercised and communicated within Sphere I in the shape and form of news, gossip and formal/non-formal conversation. Understanding these spheres of knowledge, and the communication systems therein, aided the researchers to conduct ethical research within the participants' cultural context.

Conclusion

The premise of this article was that knowledge production, as a process, has been marred by colonial forms of power (Chilisa, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Smith, 2021). Coloniality reinforces power disparities within knowledge creation, or knowledge discovery, that result in loss of voice, displacement, marginalisation or othering of one party (see Chilisa, 2012). Such displacement can be overt or covert, exercised by hegemonic forces that normalise and 'other' certain types of knowledge. Our experiences show how researchers, as moral agents, cannot be inherently neutral. Rather, in an effort to counterbalance the coloniality of power within research practice, the researchers undertook proactive steps under the remit of an ethics of care, based upon reflexivity and values, and with consideration of researcher-participant relationships (Banks et al., 2013). In this way, the research approach was decolonial because it embraced locals' knowledge and cultural practice, whilst also relying on their voice to shape the research practice and co-created knowledge (Chilisa, 2012: 14). In being led by local customs, the research approach was driven by the participants, their needs and their context.

Additionally, the sharing of our experiences acts as a further means of mitigating power disparities; by revealing our reflexivity on the decisions that were made, we show how context-specific decisions have influenced and shaped the outcomes of the research. Ultimately, the decolonial ambitions and success of the research were reliant upon the establishment of trust and respectful relationships with participants and their local community gatekeepers.

Ethical approval

This research was reviewed and approved by the from the NSD -Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The research project was approved under reference number – 215609 (date of approval: 14 March 2019). A copy of the approval letter has been submitted to the journal. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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