



KNOWLEDGE FROM THE SOUTH: A RESEARCH JOURNEY investigating youth and justice in **four** African countries

The demand for knowledge production from the South about the South is increasingly seen as a justice issue that strives for equality within the global intellectual marketplace of ideas. *Prof. Sharlene Swartz and Anye Nyamnjoh* describe lessons learnt from a recent research study investigating youth and justice with students in four African countries. These lessons affirm the importance of such endeavours, but also show that the task is not without its difficulties.

One of the pressing issues in South Africa today is the demand for free, decolonised and quality education. This struggle and the claims for it are not only a South African issue, but one that is intimately connected with Africa and the Global South. The core claims revolve around multifaceted issues of access, in relation to those within and outside of academia. In academia, issues of access are discussed in terms of epistemic injustice, which characterises the experience of exclusion among Southern scholars in the global academic space. Calls for decolonisation in academia are anchored in a desire to engage in

research that understands societies on their own terms. In addition, it is about establishing ownership of the resources and conditions in academia which are fundamental to carrying out autonomous knowledge production whether through independent research, institutions, methodological perspectives or subject matter.

Scholars' expressions

While this urgent task is rightly framed as an issue of justice, it is a monumental one. There is a need for scholars to share their experiences of the challenges of such endeavours. Considering an intellectual commitment to decolonising knowledge production, what are the challenges Southern scholars face while producing knowledge about the South? We describe the lessons from a recent HSRC research project titled "Moral eyes: Cultivating youth moral responses to privilege, injustice and restitution". The project included emerging and established Southern scholars looking to produce knowledge on responses to injustice in Africa. It interrogated identity based privileges and oppressions through the concept of restitution among students in

South Africa (race), Nigeria (religion/ethnicity), Sierra Leone (ethnicity) and Cameroon (language/geography). Across these four contexts, we dealt with questions such as how past histories of injustice are reproduced in the present, and what a process of restitution that restores dignity, opportunity and belonging in these countries might look like. Seventy-two students from diverse backgrounds (race, religion, ethnicity, educational discipline) were interviewed for this study.

Lessons learnt

In thinking about the lessons learnt from this project, we reflected on the how the research was conducted and funded, who we were as researchers, and considered the local and international response to our work presented at various conferences.

We identified three main lessons. Firstly, the necessity and urgency of producing 'knowledge about the South from the South' was reaffirmed. Secondly, some of the responses to our work show that as Southern scholars, we can perpetuate the very thing we seek to change. Most Southern scholars

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are products of Western education to some degree and can be blind to its decontextualised reproduction. Finally, knowledge production is a material as well as an intellectual activity. As such, publishing, as a facet of producing knowledge, is made easier by having engaged but non-intrusive funders.

How little people know

In conducting this research, we came to see just how much 'research about the South from the South' was needed 'internally' and 'externally'. Externally, we were struck by how little people knew about the countries we were writing about. In fact, one of the things we realised over the course of the research journey was that we ended up structuring our participation at international conferences in response to this problem. Our first international conference (held in Brazil) in 2015 was dedicated solely to providing country backgrounds and the historical context of identity based privilege and oppression. While some were familiar with the South African context, the same could not be said of Cameroon, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In the case of the latter, two participants had only vague ideas in relation to "terrorism and civil war" and "Ebola" respectively. Internally, ignorance about the South is unfortunately espoused by those from the South as well. In this regard, it is worth noting that our own understandings of these contexts improved as well, such that by the second conference (this time at Harvard University in the United States), each of us could speak on themes across these contexts with familiarity and confidence. This ended up being a project whereby in the process of writing about the South from the South, we bridged the epistemic gaps between North and South and within the South as well.

Complicity

Some of the responses to our project suggest that despite noble intentions,

we can be complicit in the very Western epistemic hegemony we seek to disrupt. Although the notion of restitution we use is not within African theoretical underpinnings (such as our understanding of personhood for example), one criticism of the monograph (from a Zambian peer reviewer) is that we relied almost exclusively on Western theories of change in our discussion of the role of dialogue in leveraging social change. When it came to deepening African theory, we were caught short. Finally, researching and publishing in Southern contexts is made easier by having accommodating and understanding funders. One of the most fortunate aspects of this research journey was the engaged, yet non-intrusive disposition of our funders.

Requires incessant reflexivity

In conclusion, this journey affirmed the importance of writing about the South from the South from an internal and external perspective. There is much room for Southern and Northern scholars to know more about Southern contexts. The task requires incessant reflexivity, embodied in a commitment to interrogate one's complicity in

reproducing Western epistemic hegemony, as well as patience with the audience with whom one is engaging. Failure to do so results in Southern knowledge being relegated to either only a Southern audience or a small committed audience. In contrast, our research when presented in Brazil and at Harvard attracted large audiences. Finally, research funders who share a vision for Southern knowledge production and who understand its difficulties, are key to promoting autonomous intellectual pursuits and academic freedom by being non-intrusive, while remaining engaged.

A monograph produced from the study, detailing the findings rather than the research journey has been published by the HSRC Press entitled *Moral eyes: Youth and justice in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa*.

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Anye Nyamnjoh and Jessica Breakey discussing their work on the book, *Moral Eyes: Youth and justice in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa*, at the annual conference of the Association for Moral Education at Harvard University.