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Research Site Anonymity in Context

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Abstract

This paper utilizes critical theory to interrogate and problematize the practice of anonymising research sites as an ethical imperative. The contributing authors conduct research in and with various communities in southern Africa, position themselves and work from and within diverse areas and specialities of the social sciences. This article is developed from their rich and wide spectrum of field experience with a great diversity of communities, but mainly the poorer, under-resourced, socially and economically marginalized. The authors strongly identify with these communities whose anonymity in published research is seen as marginalizing. Such research sites are places and communities where these researchers grew up and live in, and thus not just as peripheral or 'out there' entities. Therefore, the naming of research sites in this context is deemed as being ethical, out of respect for participants, for a contextually embedded understanding, and for well-targeted interventions and policy influence.

Keywords

anonymity, reflexivity, research ethics, situated ethics, South Africa

Introduction

The importance of ethical considerations in conducting scholarly research with human participants cannot be overstated. Ethical guidelines imposed on researchers in the health, natural, and social sciences by institutional research ethics committees (REC) at universities and in government departments have been a gold standard for evaluating research integrity globally. In South Africa, the country's leading research funding body, the National Research Foundation (NRF) has established measures to "add impetus" not only to upholding research integrity but also to publication ethics in higher education (Pillay & Qhobela, 2019, p. 2). At the same time, however, debates on the decolonization of the very process of knowledge production have questioned the universality of ethical imperatives when conducting research in social and political contexts in which researchers have the responsibility to use their research to promote the well-being of communities in which their research is conducted. The question of research that contributes to social justice has entered these debates on decolonization, with the expectation that researchers should extend their role and use their research to contribute to the causes that concern research communities (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009).

A consciousness about social justice is imbued with a moral imperative to treat participants and their stories as partners in the knowledge generation process and to act in ways that enrich the lives of the people that reseachers encounter in their fieldwork. The failure of researchers to engage with their research at this broader, inclusive level, some scholars have argued, would be tantamount to perpetuation of epistemic violence (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018). The importance of ethical

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considerations in conducting research with human participants cannot be overstated. Equally significant is the prioritization of human rights and dignity of individuals and communities (Pillay, 2015). Thus, researchers have the responsibility to promote the well-being of communities, and not perpetuate epistemic violence (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018). An article in the November/December 2019 issue of the *South African Journal of Science* makes a determined assertion that the community of researchers in South Africa remains committed to ethical scholarly research and scientific integrity (Pillay & Qhobela, 2019). In line with the Hong Kong Manifesto, Moher et al. (2020) propose that the criteria for evaluating researchers be broadened. Among the proposed criteria for inclusion are having societal needs as a research goal, and complete and transparent reporting of research findings (Moher et al., 2020). These aspirational criteria for a good researcher, driven by ethics and integrity, have implications for the scope of disclosure and anonymity, and the embeddedness of the social value of research. The significance of this shift is pertinent for researchers in southern Africa, as well as research participants in this region of the world.

An issue of ethical practice that concerns us in this multidisciplinary paper is the question of the anonymisation of certain aspects of the data. Anonymity of research participants, the research site and other features of the study to mask the identity of participants and to limit the possibility of the tracing of the findings back to the study site is a practice accepted, and indeed required as integral to ethical research. Yet how can we apply the social justice lens if we adhere to the ethical requirements of anonymity imposed by ethics committees? As Black scholars who often work in economically marginalized communities with participants who may already be involved in efforts to reclaim their fundamental human rights in order to change their circumstances, we sometimes find ourselves faced with the question of whether imposing institutional rules of anonymity mutes the voices of participants, rendering invisible the very issue/s that they are eager to transform. This ethical challenge has been identified by Grinyer (2002) in a study in which participants rejected being dealt with confidentiality and anonymity, choosing instead to be acknowledged in order "to retain ownership of their stories" (p. 4). The concept of "epistemic violence" (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021, p.241) has been used to describe the disempowering process of inadvertently taking away the agency of participants in the interest of ethics guidelines in research practice. Insisting on anonymising the details of participants "impairs their epistemic agency" (Bunch, 2015, p.12) and may thus mute the voices of participants and deny them recognition of their contribution as partners in knowledge production.

The problem is that institutional REC leave little or no room for debate about the contextual relevance of ethical guidelines for the practice of research. Nduna et al. (2020) have identified the under-representation of representation of Black academic staff in REC as an obstacle to opening the space for discussion of this important matter. This paper includes reflections by researchers who identify as Black scholars, working with grassroots communities in southern Africa, and whose work oftentimes positions them as potential change agents. The authors bring a wealth of relational experience from diverse, but mainly poor, underprivileged, under-resourced, and socially and economically marginalized communities. As Black scholars, we enter an already defined ground, and find that they are corralled into predetermined 'protection' rules within ethics guidance documents. Yet some scholars advocate for flexibility that allows researchers to expand their work to include ethics that re-humanise research with human participants, which is a shift from a "defensive (do no harm) ethics" to a more proactive stance that calls researchers to prevent harm, a "pro-active (do some good) ethics" (Byrne, 2009, p. 215).

Therefore, this article considers the question of research site anonymity and explores the ethical conundrum associated with the anonymity of the research site as an enforced ethics principle. RECs have, to the best of our knowledge, rarely engaged in ideological discussions of the ethically challenging questions around research site visibility; that is, naming the site in the final research 'output' or publication. Although this article does not seek to reflect experiences of all Black researchers in South Africa, the present authors have all had to deal with the challenge of the limitations of ethical guidelines pertaining to research site naming. The research sites often seen and experienced as simpley being 'out there' aer our communities, it is where we come from and live. Research participants in these communities are our families and friends and not the 'other' who is seen as separate from the self. We reflect on our experiential research encounters and literature to illuminate the incongruences as well as the the irony embedded in the ethical principle of respect for persons, particularly on 'site anonymity', as an ethical principle to be observed when these principles are at odds with the circumstances on the ground.

Lessons can be drawn from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), and the Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) of the National Aboriginal Health Organization. In September of 1998, the Commission "brought together about 80 Aboriginal Peoples who were involved in research as academics, lawyers, graduate students, project staff and consultants, community leaders, and elders" (Castellano, 2004, p.98). The aim was to shape the emerging research agenda for the RCAP. Quoting one of the Elders attending the workshop, Castellano, (2004, p.98) found the statement that "[i]f we have been researched to death … maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life" to be illuminating. This position of indigenous communities researching themselves back to life in the face of research outcomes that Castellano has described as "often misguided and harmful" is profound wisdom for other groups seeking ways of empowering themselves with alternative approaches to conducting research. The National Aboriginal Health Organization developed the OCAP and Indigenous research methodologies (Anderson & Cidro, 2019). Similarly on the issue of relevance, in this article we argue for research site disclosure in order to avoid the potential for "epistemic violence" by inadvertently silencing the voices of research participants and denying them the right to claim their agency in the research findings. Thus, we argue that openly naming research sites in our work is not only ethical, but also serves a liberatory and decolonization function.

Regulatory Declarations and Statutes

Currently, researchers in South Africa are governed by the ethical principles prescribed by the South African Department of Health (DOH) (2014, 2015). With the intention to protect the participants and ensure scientific integrity, the DOH is guided by the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (WMA General Assembly, 2018) and Council for International Organizations of Medical Science (2002). The principles espoused here and in other relevant documents such as the Singapore Statement of 2010 (Resnik & Shamoo, 2011) and the Montreal Statement of 2013 (Anderson & Kleinert, 2013) promote research integrity, but do not discuss research anonymity and thus leave a lacuna. The South African National Research Foundation (NRF) is a signatory to the Singapore Statement (Pillay & Qhobela, 2019). Due to their ubiquitous application, these declarations tend to be isolated from the realities of researchers working with socially and economically vulnerable communities (see Said, 2016). An exception to this critique appears to be the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPS, 2008) who acknowledges cultural contextualization in the universal declaration of ethical principles for psychologists.

Collaboration and Knowledge co-Ownership

Research undertaking raises complex ethical quandaries which researchers are often compelled to negotiate and renegotiate in the field (Nduna et al., 2016a, 2016b; Posel & Ross, 2014). Quandaries embedded in sociopolitical contexts make it difficult to disentangle an understanding of ethics from the very society and/or community. At the center of fully embracing the indisputable principle of participant respect, is the collaborative role of participating individuals and communities (CIOMS & WHO, 2016; Theron, 2013). Such a collaboration also means co-ownership of emerging knowledge, research processes and decision-making. By contrast, site anonymity serves to effect the distancing of the participants from their data and knowledge, thus alienating them from their own research and rendering them *silent* and *invisible*. Addressing site anonymity will tackle the potentially inherent inequalities between the researchers and the researched communities, and will as a result achieve the ethical imperative of care and eliminate epistemic violence.

The Role of Funders and RECs

The responsibility to remain accountable and responsive to societal needs has to be jealously guarded by the researchers against other role-players who may have different agendas (Bray, 2014; Cluver et al., 2014; Pillay & Qhobela, 2019). Such role-players may include research funders and RECs (see Bain et al., 2018). We argue here that ethical dilemmas may be accentuated by funding organizations, research bodies and ethics gatekeepers, and these may prevent researchers from engaging in research that is meaningful for the development of contextually relevant and transparent research. The competitive process of winning grants may sometimes place the researcher and the research agenda at the mercy of the funding partner and their grant reviewers. According to Chilisa & Mertens (2021), it is the exclusion of the researched individuals and communities from the funding agreements between researchers and funders that creates the undesirable tension. When people are excluded, a gap is created where they are not afforded an adequate opportunity to give input towards an accurate understanding of their problems, their priorities, and designing appropriate interventions that are responsive to their context (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021). What must therefore be secured is an obligation to be socially responsive, responsible, and demonstrate an ethics of care and compassion (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009). Subsequently, researchers would need to reject traditions of secrecy, and instead promote free and open dissemination and knowledge sharing (Guenther, 2009; Uys, 2008).

As the implementers of the codes of ethics that guide researchers, RECs are established to ensure that the rights and interests of communities are protected (Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018; Nduna et al., 2020). However, our collective experiences suggest that sometimes RECs have tended to see their role as protecting the reputations of the institutions at which they are based almost at the expense of the host research communities. This may be a function of what Bain et al. (2018, p. 1) describe as "bureaucratic bottlenecks, financial interests, inadequate competency, and lack of control and coordination of their functions". Resultantly, little consideration is given to the needs of the participating communities and the benefit the research stands to yield when findings are transparently published. The challenge is that research is conducted with the specificities and concomitant expectations of purpose. There are various types and functions of research and applied science in the form of participatory and evaluation research undertaking is also instrumental for addressing and making recommendations for improvements in communities (Bray, 2014; Cluver et al., 2014). This is where *context* and ethics intersect (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009).

Since the primary purpose of RECs is to *protect* research participants and communities from harm, including the shame and stigma that emanate from the biomedical model (Knight, 2019; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011), it is necessary to interrogate the socio-historical context which gave genesis to the current research ethics order of business and the present-day drivers of its uncritical implementation, insistence and policing. The present rules, regulations and laws enforced by RECs seem not to have been developed as a motivation for greater humanity and well-being promotion, but were a reaction to the barbaric atrocities of the Second World War, and more recently, the Tuskegee study (Freimuth et al., 2001). The Nuremberg Code was formulated in 1947 from a judgment against Nazi doctors (Shuster, 1997). This document, referred to by Shuster (1997, p. 1436) as "the most important document in the history of the ethics of medical research", continues to have a towering influence on subsequent codes such as the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA General Assembly, 2018). It appears that, sometimes some of the legally entrenched RECs of South Africa, which, in our experience, are mainly concerned with granting clearance and not much else, would be silent about the nuanced contextually embedded interpretations and implementation of context respecting, re-humanising and proactive research ethics that advance positive social change (Byrne, 2009; Mertens, 2016; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). In an attempt to address this, there is work that interrogates what RECs in biomedical research in South Africa do (Silaigwana & Wassenaar, 2019; Tsoka-Gwegweni & Wassenaar, 2014), albeit it has not yet covered research site anonymisation.

The present drivers of research ethics and ways of enforcing them are as problematic as the circumstances of their origins in the contemporary period, such as the Nuremberg trials. RECs seek to advance the protection of participants by discouraging, amongst other things, mentioning the name of a research site in the proposals, research instruments and research publications, where a study is deemed to be sensitive. These seemingly restrictive and oppressive rules arise because of the RECs' interpretation of the ill-conceived high overlap between ethical considerations and legal matters in South Africa. Such an unnecessary legal-ethical overlap can only instill fear not only among researchers but also in REC members, and perpetuate a culture of uncritical application of 'defensive ethics', to borrow a term from Byrne (2009). An additional layer is accounted for by the trappings of the academic enterprise in which prospects of promotion and higher income are linked to research outputs. Thus they may be motivated to protect institutional reputation of the places of their employ by decontextualizing controversial and sensitive research. In this academic enterprise, communities may simply become researched entities whose identity and being are meant to be concealed and therefore dehumanized. These tendencies rob the research communities of their deserved visibility as the primary contributors and beneficiaries of research that is about them. Such a practice may continue to be experienced by researchers regardless of the 2015 research ethics guidelines provided by the SA-DOH. According to the SA-DOH (2015, p.9), the legally mandated NHREC (from which registred RECs draw their authority) "firmly supports ethical practice of health and health-related research and asserts that research should reflect core values of respect, scientific merit and integrity, justice and beneficence".

Community Research Contexts

Knight (2019, p. 14) acknowledges that 21st century "researcher-participant relations are more complex". Reflections on our experiences illustrate the nature and enormity of this complexity. The experiences of community-based (fieldwork) scientific investigation shared in this article has its origins in research conducted in bleak social realities characterized by neglect, poverty and inequality; the very real empirical realities of the field sites which we work *in* and come *from*. Experiences such as violence, abuse, racism, being a member of a sexual minority, poverty, gangsterism, school dropout, xenophobia, family dysfunction, mental illness, HIV and AIDS, unplanned teenage pregnancies, abortion and father (dis) connections are etched on our collective psyche (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009; Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) Secretariat, 2016; Kheswa, 2016, 2017; Kynoch, 1999; Makusha & Richter, 2016; Mfecane, 2014; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2016; Sithole, 2015; Skinner & Mfecane, 2004; Ward et al., 2015). Our home towns and villages also form the research contexts in which we work. Becker (2007) refers to this practice as "citizen anthropology". This integrated researcher–community embeddedness is not uncommon amongst African researchers, and not only does it shape how we respond but also heightens our consciousness for social responsiveness (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009). Therefore, citizen-anthropology renders researchers intrinsically intertwined in their context, making it impossible for them to extricate themselves from places they are organically part of, as this creates artificial distanciation.

Thus, we identify with Knight's (2019, p. 14) assertion that "researchers no longer exist in ivory towers distant from participants". As the research landscape changes, and as more Black scholars emerge, continued reflection on some ethical principles is necessary (Chilisa et al., 2017). Our declared position of coming from and belonging to communities that are very similar to those in which we also conduct social research dovetails with the relational ethical framework proposed by Chilisa (Chilisa, 2012; Chilisa et al., 2017). This framework encourages researchers to see the 'self' as a reflection of the researched *other*. This stance is expressed by honoring and respecting the researched and feeling a belongingness to the researched community. Its requirement for fairness emanates from responding to societal needs, among other characteristics. More importantly, it "promotes socially relevant research by people, with the people to address their needs" (Chilisa et al., 2017, p. 328). Thus, from a relational epistemological perspective, an apparent objective distance between the researcher and their research context is ill-advised. In fact, relational indigenous methodologies encourage collaborative research that is inclusive of communities' voices. Naming the research site/setting/context is also aligned with the identity narratives practized in a sociocultural African relational context. In this African ontology of connectedness and relatedness, one's sense of self is intrinsically intertwined with one's "physical space, cultural location, ecological connection and relationship to others and the living and non-living" (Chilisa et al., 2017, p. 333). The significance of this reality would at its fundamental essence, render the practice of anonymising contextual settings effectively an unethical practice. As Chilisa et al. (2017, p. 334) remind us, "social reality cannot be divorced from self in relation to others, the spirit and the environment".

This paper thus advocates for 'situated ethics' which promotes the notion that all ethical acts are constructed and practized in particular contexts where researchers make in situ decisions (Ebrahim, 2010; Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018). This notion resonates with the mantra that the most loving thing to do is the right thing (Kunhiyop, 2008). This reflection on situated ethics is not exclusive to any one professional discipline. The authors of the present contribution span a range of the humanities, social sciences and health sciences. Khumalo and De Klerk (2018) suggest that situated ethics could foster an ethical, collaborative and respectful research climate. We hold that this is especially true given the research contexts and spaces within which we find ourselves as researchers.

Site Disclosure v/s Identity Protection

Evidently, the need to protect the identity of the participants is a universal fundamental human right to which the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) prescribes in Section 13, which states that every person shall have the right to their personal privacy, which shall include the right not to be subject to searches of his or her person, home or property, the seizure of private possessions or the violation of private communications. Be that as it may, it is also important to note that human rights are not absolute and without limitation, as contemplated in Section 33(3) of the South African Constitution (1996). Those who uncritically apply the ethical principle of anonymity in research find an easy leverage in the expressed right to privacy contained in this South African Constitution. This practice occurs without any consideration of the finer nuances and peculiarities of community-based social science research.

Philosophically speaking, the world harbors no absolutes. This practice of anonymising the research site is favored by some researchers even when the sample and the study do not appear to be of a sensitive nature (see Matlakala et al., 2019; Parkes, 2007; Ravhuhali et al., 2019). However, anonymising research sites and participants ought not to be a universal and normative principle. Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) indicate situations that may negate anonymity: where research participants are active agents for change, where excluded communities, such as the differently abled, may want their voices to be heard, and where researchers have to account to the funders of their projects. Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011, p. 200) further acknowledge that those researchers involved in ethnographic, emancipatory and participatory research work may find themselves in a "tight spot" where anonymity is seen as a methodological and ethical given.

As researchers, we have the privilege of responsibility towards the researched communities and individuals (Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018). In this article, we observe and reflect on this responsibility because we believe that the experience of a 'sensitive' study and/or a 'sensitive sample' is and should be culture-respecting and context-appropriate. We believe that refined and *situated* ethical guidelines should spell out on how these issues could be addressed. Such guidelines would prevent the practice of *carte blanche* rejections of proposals and papers based on a study or research sample being deemed 'sensitive' as sometimes experienced by the authors. Notably, the advice to shy away from identifying a community by its name does not seem to have philosophical or theoretical grounding (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

Rather, instead of being a grounded ethical decision, the principle seems to fit with what Posel and Ross (2014) describe as a "detached sphere of ethical regulation". We see this practice as aligned with a 'gaze' that regards research communities as the 'other', and we therefore argue that the researcher, the research lens, the researcher's relationship to the study and the purpose of the study should be considered in allowing the researcher(s) to name a research site. We believe that the so-called 'best practice' in the pursuance of universal and hegemonic ethics in this regard could inadvertently promote, valorize and universalize the values of some researchers and discount the experiences of others. The irony of the anonymity regulation in academic research is that it waters down the scientific rigor embedded in responsible site revelations (Haggerty, 2004). In this way, we argue that knowledge of the research site provides an opportunity for a rich description of the context in which the people's experiences are embedded. Similarly, the communities with whom the researcher worked reserve the right and authonomy to choose whether or not to be identified, as they also co-inform the limitations of the usage of their data.

Discussion of the Reflections

We argue that sometimes the ethical principle of research site anonymity may create an unnecessary mystery out of our normal and familiar life experiences. This argument is also premised on our identities as Black (South) African scholars from the very same communities as the researched, and second as scholars and researchers. So, we simultaneously have filial relations as well as ethical obligations to these communities. We are part of these very communities that live with the pain of violence, abuse, racism, inequality, diseases, lamppost abortions, and the shame of the burden of unattended mental ill health every day (see Cluver et al., 2014). We are familiar with the poverty and the other social ills that partly result from the legacy of colonial and apartheid South African rule, as experienced, and not only as 'academically' observed and theorized about. Conducting and reporting our research on these experiences using pseudonyms for places create an uncomfortable, confusing distance as if we were writing about the 'other', yet the pain and shame of research participants from these places are akin to ours. This creates unnecessary cognitive dissonance and distance within the research process, and within us as researchers.

Therefore, our experiences and social embeddedness cannot and should not be discounted from our discursive positionalities and identities as researchers. In the 2011 South African Census, Black Africans reported an average annual income of R60 613 per household, while Whites reported an annual income that was six times more than this, with an average of R365 134 per household (Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) Secretariat, 2016). Similarly, Black academics have had direct and vicarious experiences with the brutality of apartheid (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016), and its violent impact remains evident in the daily lived realities reminiscent of the experiences of the holocaust. Whether it is the shame and stigma of HIV and AIDS or the deadly drug resistant tuberculosis (TB) (Fana et al., 2013; Skinner & Mfecane, 2004), Black South African researchers have first-hand experience of these indicators of structural violence (see also, Cluver et al., 2014).

Secondly, the problems and questions which our research explores are real and daily struggles experienced by us and our communities. Therefore, we have a filial and moral duty towards our society. The assertion by Cluver et al. (2014) is particularly poignant, that when it comes to research and writing about rural, township and informal settlements, this is our life, this is where we, as postgraduate students, fieldworkers, research coordinators and researchers, come from and continue to belong. Some of us remain attached and are big part of our communities. Save for our mortgaged houses in the suburbs, we maintain strong emotional connections to our communities. Although our suburban houses may provide the necessary quality-of-life comforts, they also give a reality of estrangement and the (re)location creates 'back-to-home' communities, which are not just physical spaces that are sources of research data, but hold, for us, emotional and meaningful attachments. Hence, we affirm that these are our communities, even when we sometimes reside in the suburbs and work at (elite) universities and science councils. The façade that is created by our places of work and residence does not detach us from the emotional bonds with our communities. This makes it an important issue to link ethics with societal and political issues. When our own and our postgraduate students' applications to conduct research are disapproved by often White and male-dominated RECs (see Nduna et al., 2020) on the basis of the research being regarded as "sensitive", the de-identification of research sites and by extension the participants becomes a recommendation for approval. Not only is this practice disappointing, but it points to the transference of 'other' people's values, shame and guilt into our scholarly work, and attempts to render the communities to which we belong the 'other' in relation to ourselves. We have no intention of hiding our lived experiences, and insistence on de-identification of the research sites may be an admission on the RECs' side that they are ashamed of the everyday pain that these communities go through as a result of their structural conditions. One may also argue for suspicion that the anonimasation of these communities as direct sources of scientific knowledge may be a way of dissociating them from the prestige of scienfic publications, while disguising to be caring and protective of them.

As Black (South) African scholars we recognize our painful past, continued marginalization and systematic exclusion as critical in shaping our scholarly work and thinking. We should not and cannot be drawn into the politics of the difference in perspectives and experiences that inform some of the social science research practices from the Global North, while conducting research in the Global South (see Raffaelli et al., 2013). The ethical uneasiness among others with the conditions that slavery, colonialism and apartheid created ought not to be transferred to the scholarship of indigenous researchers and communities who have had no culpability for the human onslaught that these political systems created. The already mentioned case of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is an example of how indigenous researchers can reassert research ownership towards well-being promotion, and not death.

The discomfort that is experienced in research site disclosure is not universal. Fisher and Ragsdale (2006) recommend what they have termed "goodness of fit" context-appropriate research ethics, through which they express that research risks and benefits should be conceptualized as a product of both research design and participant attributes. This therefore calls for greater contextualization in which ethical ways of working are derived. Where the relations of power amongst researchers still exists, understandings of what research findings could stigmatize a community begs a few questions. To whom is it stigmatising? Where will the source of stigma come from? Will this include self-stigmatization by researchers who are also members of these communities? Or will the stigma come from those who view the research community as the 'other' and find unfamiliar descriptions uncomfortable? This is the reason why there is a necessity to establish indigenous research methodologies with a strong emic approach to demystify the imposed stigmatization of research outcomes (Chilisa, 2012).

Thirdly, there are different purposes for conducting research. Sometimes research undertaking is for the purpose of obtaining a higher degree, such as a master's or a PhD, sometimes it is tied to one's job and thus a performance indicator (Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018; Mayisela, 2016). Some of these studies contribute to basic science and the authors may be less interested in the social impact of their studies. Other scholars endeavor to influence change that will benefit the target community, enhance its quality of life and contribute to well-being promotion (Cluver et al., 2014; Khumalo & de Klerk, 2018; Posel & Ross, 2014).

We therefore argue that advocacy research that is reflexive, meaningful and relevant, and of which has the goal to shift discourses, provide evidence and influence interventions, should be identifiable to the target audience. For example, Cornell et al. (2016) were forced to consider the erasure of participant identity as a violation of dignity, ironically by the participants themselves. This University of Cape Town study by Cornell et al. (2016) provides a case of how the apparent ethical uncritical and non-reflective insistence on anonymity can have the unintended and undesired consequence of dehumanizing, disrespecting and undermining the dignity and autonomy of participants. Using photovoice, Cornell et al. (2016) collaborated with student participants to explore student experiences of violence. The exercise resulted in the participants producing photographs which placed the researchers in an ethical dilemma, as the participants "were adamant that they did not want their photographs to be blurred" (Cornell et al., 2016, p. 101). In fact, they report that one of the participants, commenting on the ethics of publishing, "indicated that she would consider it violent if the researchers used any technique to conceal her naked body on the photograph" (Cornell et al., 2016, p. 101). The researchers acknowledge that if they had manipulated the photos, they would have contributed to further silencing and marginalizing of this student community.

In the absence of identification, policymakers may find it difficult to know where the problems are. For example, in a publication where the research site is concealed, the research sample is described as 'members of a rural community', with no mention of this community, and yet in the conclusion the government is lobbied to "strategize on ways to encourage fathers…" (Matlakala et al., 2019). This is for a topic that has population and context variability as regards father (dis)connections and it would benefit local institutions to know where the intervention is needed. Otherwise, if a keyword search that mentions them yields no evidence, how are services going to reach the intended communities where a need exists? Some of us write to mobilize resources for communities that are burdened with pain and shame so that their problems are addressed and hopefully ameliorated. How will budget votes favor these communities if we shy away from mentioning Bonteheuwel, Chatsworth, KwaMashu, Lavender Hills, Nyanga, Embalenhle, Diepsloot, Lenasia, KwaZakhele, Duncan Village, Qwaqwa, Turfloop, the list goes on, as study sites? For example, a study will be conducted in a village, which is a community north of Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, north of Johannesburg – 30 kilometers away from Temba, a township in Hammanskraal. This is how the community will be described in research – without a name. On the way to Makapanstad there are more than ten other villages which are also north of Hammanskraal.

In studying children's experiences, the anonymity of a research site that has hidden forms of abuse of children, for example abuse in school(s), church(es) and other institutions, may perpetuate children's vulnerability, render them voiceless and deny them citizenship and their rights. Academic institutions guard against such research under the guise that they do not want to be involved in the legal conundrum that is likely to follow the research (Mayisela, 2016). It is therefore essential that academic institutions join hands with the broader community and use research and its procedures to address the needs of our communities, and such needs cannot be addressed if research sites remain anonymous (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012). Furthermore, the practice of anonymising can be a time-consuming, inefficient and 'silly' task of RECs because, without the authors mentioning names, as readers we oftentimes know where a study was conducted. For example, in a study that was conducted at the University of Venda, the authors were adroit at not mentioning the name of the university and described the sample as "comprised of first year male student teachers drawn from a population of male student teachers enrolled in B.Ed. Foundation Phase (FP) program in a rural university in Limpopo Province" (Ravhuhali et al., 2019, p. 289).

Lastly, a body of evidence is collated through review studies. Sometimes these studies are reviewed to assess the extent of evidence from a place and to determine where the knowledge gaps are. Research findings that are anonymised do not lend themselves to a review that is informative in terms of where evidence comes from and where there is a need for further and more studies. This article suggests that one of the ways to allow for contextual variability and respect for local researchers is to desist from what Khumalo and De Klerk (2018) call one-size-fits-all approaches to ethics. We further hope that this conversation will form part of a free and accessible online research integrity module (Pillay & Qhobela, 2019).

Recommendations and Research Agenda

While the West has successfully laid the foundations for research ethics standard operating procedures (SOP) and best practice (CIOMS & WHO, 2016; WMA General Assembly, 2018), which are critiqued and objectively embraced by the contributors to this article, it is clear that these cannot be the apex of ethical practices for the (South) African context. Through the reflective processes, researchers have recognized and voiced their impinging discomfort that comes with the universal and cut-and-paste implementation of these standard operating procedures (SOPs) of ethics and principles as adapted by RECs in South Africa, as if the contexts where they are applied bear similar histories, cultures and politics. Indigenous researchers can no longer afford to be oblivious of the unbalanced power dynamics imposed on the knowledge-generation supply chain. More important, and central to the issue of site anonymity in social research, is the denial of the benefit of recognition of the sources of information and knowledge under the guise of the protection of research participants. In this article reflections from our research experiences were used to argue for the establishment of a research approach and methodology that affords trust in the integrity of indigenous community researchers, based on the values and principles of ubuntu, and which acknowledges the contributions of research participants and their context to research and knowledge production. RECs need to reflect on their practices, positionalities and guiding principles and aspire to be helpful and contextual.

Educational Implications

Through training, research students and researchers can be encouraged to consult targeted research communities more actively and establish and work with community advisory boards (CABs) (Thabethe et al., 2018; Theron, 2013) in making the collective decision on whether to render the research site anonymous or not. This would inadvertently build community engagement with science and require that researchers train their communities in research ethics. Further, communities need to be fully informed about the social and economic value of the knowledge they contribute through their participation in research, so as to inform their decision on community anonymity in the research. Sharing such information with research participants will enlighten communities on the value of visibility to scientists and policy makers.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to catalyze and contribute to a debate on the need to shift from a defensive posture, in particular the (defensive) exhortation to de-identify research sites that is sometimes adopted by RECs. Probably, contrary to the intention of being ethical, the ethical practice of site anonymity contributes to the a-contextualization of research findings, which has, in many instances, the consequence of disempowerment. This paper makes an argument for the way in which research site anonymity betrays the spirit of being ethical by limiting collaboration, empowerment, ownership, contextualization, targeted dissemination, intervention and policy influence. This reality is more pronounced in the contextually embedded realities of communities in the Global South, especially in southern Africa. In such contexts, the nature of research relationships accommodates the researcher's multi-layered identity, which includes being from and belonging to, and being a change agent, as much as they also are a contributor to knowledge generation. While giving feedback on the pros and cons of naming the research site, RECs should allow the researcher(s) to explore a fair balance of risks and benefits in relation to this matter. Researchers could be encouraged to consult the community where the research is planned; but this should not halt ethical clearance for applicants. The decision to anonymise or not should be left to the researcher(s) in consultation with the community concerned. This decision, made by the researcher together with the community, would be guided by ethics including principle seven of the 12 principles outlined in the joint statement of ethical and scholarly publishing practices that was jointly issued by the ASSf, CHE, DHET, DST, NRFT and USAf (ASSAf et al., 2019).

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