Methodological decolonisation and local epistemologies:
Practical insights from the field

Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei[1] (iD)

[1] *Maastricht University, P.O. Box 616 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands;*
Vlerick Business School, Avenue du Boulevard 21, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

---

This paper describes some practical epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations, as well as shortcomings, in the efforts to decolonise research methodology in qualitative research. Through self-reflection, a critical component of qualitative research, this paper utilises diary entries kept by the researcher during her Ph.D. studies to interrogate methodological decolonisation based on her experience conducting virtual qualitative interviews. By exploring four major themes underlying a researcher's choice of data collection (epistemology, methodology, data collection methods, and ethics), this reflective piece underscores the importance of non-extractive ethics, recognising participants' agency, and carefully navigating social hierarchies in building trust in researcher-participant relationships, regardless of data collection channels. The analysis contributes to the methodological decolonisation literature by highlighting practical experiences through reflective diary entries, enriching methodological decolonisation processes and outcomes.

Keywords: decolonising research, qualitative research ethics, context-sensitive epistemologies, Ubuntu, virtual qualitative research

---

Background

Context matters. As such, context-sensitive epistemologies—Ubuntu, an African epistemology (Chilisa, 2012; Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019) and Kaupapa Māori, an epistemology of Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, New Zealand (Meredith et al., 2024)—have gained prominence as valuable frameworks for methodology and ethics that align with the epistemologies and values of research participants from majority-world contexts (Bilotta, 2022; Chilisa, 2012; Seehawer, 2018). Such context-sensitive epistemologies provide the appropriate cultural conditions to understand lived experiences, an antithesis to how universalised, western methodologies have problematised majority-world

experiences. However, Bilotta (2022) argues that recommending Ubuntu for social science research alone may be insufficient, as procedural and process ethics can limit researchers' methodological decolonisation efforts.

Rooted in postcolonial theory, methodological decolonisation critiques the dominance of western epistemologies and methodologies in research conducted in majority-world contexts (Chilisa, 2012; Gobo, 2011). Colonial power dynamics continue to shape contemporary research practices, as research can become avenues through which colonial legacies can be reproduced and sustained. Western methodologies have been critiqued for denying epistemic diversity and inferiorising the lives and experiences of majority-world societies (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Naude, 2019). Hence, the calls to decolonise research methods.

However, in pursuing methodological decolonisation, Hamann et al. (2020) caution researchers against becoming either a colony of conventional western approaches or an enclave limited solely to indigenous approaches. Konadu-Osei et al. (2023) also highlight the false dilemma in methodological decolonisation efforts, which suggests a need to choose between conventional, western approaches and context-sensitive epistemologies. Instead, they argue for epistemological contingency, which involves the fusion of "conventional Western epistemological approaches and local epistemologies" (Konadu-Osei et al., 2023, p. 2). Thus, for this study, I conceptualise methodological decolonisation as seeking to decentre western epistemologies and methodologies (not as a wholesale rejection) when researching majority-world contexts, and to critically interrogate whose knowledge counts, spotlighting, enhancing, and acknowledging the knowledge and ways of knowing of the majority-world.

This paper, therefore, draws on my Ph.D. field research conducted between 2020 – 2022 on the positive work identities of women in routine-tasked manual jobs in male-dominated industries in South Africa. The paper joins previous efforts (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Seehawer, 2018; Zavala, 2013) to provide a practical illustration of some epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations and shortcomings in implementing epistemological contingency within research praxis.

Rethinking methodological decolonisation

The universal application of western epistemologies and methodologies has been criticised for being insufficient to fully explicate experiences and obscure knowledge in postcolonial societies (Gobo, 2011; Mishra, 2013). The sustained uncritical application of western methodologies in majority-world contexts highlights colonial legacies and how the socio-political impact of colonialism persists. Therefore, power is a critical dimension in methodological decolonisation. Decolonisation in research challenges and disrupts existing power systems that privilege western methodologies (Barnes, 2018; Keikelame & Swartz, 2019).

To illustrate, researchers have called for the use of context-sensitive philosophies such as Ubuntu when researching African societies (Chilisa, 2012; Naude, 2019; Seehawer, 2018). Ubuntu was culled from a Nguni expression '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', loosely translated into English as "One is a person through others" (Mkabela, 2015, p. 287). Ubuntu hinges on two main principles: i) the communitarian principle, which demonstrates the collectivistic way of life in many societies in sub-Saharan Africa (Chilisa, 2012; Mkabela, 2015), and ii) the relational principle, which explains the interconnectedness of humans to one another and their environment, and that nothing exists on its own (Mkabela, 2015). As such, Ubuntu offers a decolonising framework that provides basis for epistemological shifts (challenging emphasis on individualism in prevailing western research paradigms) and methodological basis (shifting from western Cartesian models of knowledge where knowledge is generated and validated by individuals) when researching African societies, in challenging essentialist ways of doing research based in western paradigms.

Despite the calls to decolonise research methodology, there appears to be no consensus on what *actually* constitutes a decolonised methodology. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) state, "there is no standard model or practice for what decolonizing research methodology looks like" (p. 1). That notwithstanding, major discourses on decolonising research methodology exist. Barnes (2018) points out that some scholars advocate the complete rejection of western, mainstream research approaches in favour of indigenous approaches, while others call for the coexistence of mainstream and indigenous approaches. However, researchers caution against creating such neat dichotomies (Hamann et al., 2020; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023). Konadu-Osei et al. (2023)

argue that an 'either-or' approach to conducting research—choosing between mainstream epistemologies and contextual epistemologies—is a false dilemma. They suggest that practising epistemological contingency—fusing mainstream and contextual approaches—addresses the ethical concerns of applying western methodologies in majority-world contexts. By practising epistemological contingency, researchers can benefit from the rigour associated with mainstream western approaches, developed through years of continuous usage and critique, while adopting context-sensitive epistemologies (Briggs, 2013; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023).

Similarly, Barnes (2018) argues that:

"decolonising methodologies, like other methodologies, are not as straightforward...It is important, therefore, to interrogate the assumptions of decolonising methodologies ... If we do not do this, we run the risk of perpetuating a system of knowledge production that is at best powerless, and at worst continues to produce limited knowledge under a new guise" (p. 380)

Romanticising methodological decolonisation as a silver bullet to address all the shortcomings of mainstream methodological approaches in researching majority-world contexts does not build rigour. To build rigour, it is necessary to apply the tenets of previous research, document lessons learnt, and propose alternative ways of thinking about methodological decolonisation. Chilisa (2012) directs attention to limited institutional support for decolonised methodologies. Institutional support for methodological decolonisation can encourage more researchers from the majority-world to test and document their experiences, a vital approach to building rigour.

However, there are limited insights into how decolonised research methods are *really* implemented and how they affect research outcomes (Bhambra, 2014). Seehawer (2018), for example, is among researchers who reflect on and document how Ubuntu shapes ethics, agenda, and methodology; to illustrate, how ethical protocols rooted in Ubuntu are trust-based and emphasise relating positively with others. These evidence-based discussions are needed as a response to Barnes' (2018) call to "interrogate the assumptions of decolonising methodologies" (p. 380) in building its rigour and provide some clarity to researchers who may want to pursue methodological decolonisation.

Given that reflexivity and self-reflexivity occupy a prominent place in methodological decolonisation (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015) and qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Palaganas et al., 2017), this paper provides practical illustrations of the epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations and shortcomings in implementing epistemological contingency within research praxis, while conducting virtual qualitative research.

Context: Background of the researcher and her studies

This reflection draws on my experiences during my doctoral study outside my home country at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am an Akan (ethnicity) and Ghanaian (nationality) woman who was enrolled in a doctoral programme at a South African university. The doctoral study focused on identity work and workplace support based on the experiences of women (and their work colleagues) in routine-task manual jobs within male-dominated industries in South Africa. Preparations for fieldwork favoured an immersive and participatory approach, aiming to observe participants in their natural work environments—an approach aligned with interpretivist research principles (Saunders et al., 2016).

By February 2020, I had completed and passed the mandatory Ph.D. proposal defence and was poised to conduct in-person data collection in companies operating in the mining, and transport and logistics industries. These industries are considered male-dominated, as women constitute less than 25% of their total workforce (Campuzano, 2019). However, the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) significantly impacted the methodological choices and overall plan for the doctoral study. Travel restrictions and safety concerns necessitated revising data collection approaches from in-person observations to semi-structured interviews using tech-enabled platforms.

One major shortcoming of conducting virtual qualitative research was the inability to observe participants in their natural environment, leading mainly to reliance on what was verbally shared during the interview. This adjustment was significant, as I had hoped to embark on immersive, participatory research. Immersive research was important to me, as I did not intend to be a detached observer but to experience, co-learn

and co-produce knowledge with participants (Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015; Seehawer, 2018).

Hence, this paper aims to provide practical illustrations of the epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations and shortcomings in implementing epistemological contingency while conducting virtual qualitative research. These practical illustrations will be complemented by extracts from a reflective diary I kept throughout the period of the doctoral study.

Epistemology: What counts as knowledge?

Scientific versus everyday knowledge

I was inclined towards social constructionist thinking. I wanted to understand meanings rather than explain a phenomenon. However, the dimension of social constructionism that I had not engaged with very critically is "the notion of knowledge as relative to a particular socio-historical situation, and the belief that meanings are multiple—no single interpretation is more authoritative than another" (Hiller, 2016, pp. 112–113). Despite this inclination, at the start of my Ph.D., the word 'knowledge' evoked an understanding of that which is tangible and verifiable. As such, my conceptualisation of certain topics, such as identity, in an academic setting differed from my everyday knowledge of the concept.

> After the Online Workshop with Dr Cassim, I continue to reflect on this innocuous word – knowledge. Ordinarily, the word knowledge in academic circles is associated with terms such as facts or information, which emphasise verifiability. However, they pointed to alternative sources or forms of knowledge that are unconventional, not easily verifiable, or often overlooked and argued that those sources could unearth new ways of understanding. (Reflective Diary, 04.2020)

> On my way home from Checkers, I was thinking about how my Christian faith helps me cope with stress. Faith is not necessarily tangible or factual; can it be considered a form of knowledge in an academic study on how recent Ph.D. students deal with stress? Will the researcher acknowledge my Faith as a valid form of knowledge source? I would. (Reflective Diary, 28.04.2020)

My exposure to research methods through formal education was predominantly western. Encountering alternative research approaches, such as Ubuntu, was enlightening. My previous academic endeavours trained me to be inclined to write 'scientific' articles. I did not consider knowledge from my everyday interactions or oral traditions to be valid sources for academic writing. My conceptualisation of the nature of knowledge and what counts as knowledge in my early days of the Ph.D. showed a somewhat divided view between what I considered 'scientific' knowledge, acquired through formal education, and everyday knowledge (Kasi et al., 2024; Oh, 2024). I considered my everyday understanding and scientific understanding as necessarily distinct, with limited synergies. The way I had constructed what can be known in my academic world excluded, invalidated, and marginalised ways of knowing that did not conform to dominant 'scientific' conventions (Lipscombe et al., 2021).

However, with methodological innovation as a significant outcome of my dissertation, I stumbled upon indigenous epistemologies, specifically Ubuntu. My experience with Ubuntu was confusing, interesting, and eye-opening.

> I know my study is interpretivist, but I'm not sure what exactly an Ubuntu paradigm looks like. Is Ubuntu different from interpretivism? Besides its sensitivity to context, how can Ubuntu contribute to methodological innovation in my study? (Reflective Diary, 05.2020).

An initial shortcoming was the application of Ubuntu (a concept I have an everyday understanding of) as a research methodology. As a Ghanaian, and more specifically, an Akan, Ubuntu was a familiar concept. Ghanaians generally have a communitarian and relational orientation, although this orientation is not labelled 'Ubuntu'. The struggle to apply Ubuntu as a research methodology made me realise how differently I think about life (everyday understanding) and how I approach academic research (scientific understanding). If I were to describe identity (one of the major concepts explored in my doctoral study) from an Akan perspective in a social conversation, I would lean towards a communitarian perspective very easily.

I realised that my 'research brain' approached the concept of identity in a way that was contrary to how I would in a social, non-academic setting. As a researcher who does not come from a society where the concept of identity holds the same meaning, whether

in an academic context or not, I realise that the culture in which I was brought up, my assumptions, and the way I think about research do not always align. However, aligning my predominantly communitarian assumptions about identity with my research enables me to glean the benefits of conventional and context-sensitive epistemologies.

This epistemological tension between western, 'scientific' knowledge and context-sensitive, everyday, and Indigenous knowledge enabled me to i) identify and interrogate dominant notions of valid knowledge and ii) embrace context-sensitive epistemologies that prioritise communal meaning-making as valid in academic pursuits. Thus, integrating context-sensitive knowledge and ways of knowing fosters methodological innovation and epistemic justice.

Formal education and knowledge production

Another significant consideration is how formal (western) education influenced my conceptualisation of concepts (for example, identity). The curricula inherited by former colonies reflect the ideological inclinations and epistemologies of former colonisers (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). As values and knowledge are transmitted through these curricula, Africans have been exposed to western ideologies that continue to shape the values and beliefs of both researchers and participants. Due to this exposure, African academics are, perhaps, more familiar with western methodologies.

At the start of my Ph.D., my epistemological assumptions about my research were not grounded in context-sensitive epistemologies. My Ph.D. research experience mirrors Seehawer's (2018) reflection: "I did not originally situate the study within an Ubuntu framework" (p. 454). I was initially inclined towards mainstream western paradigms such as Cartesian models of knowledge (which favour knowledge generated and validated by the individual), due to my exposure to these methodologies through formal education in western countries and the majority-world. At the beginning of my Ph.D. journey, I easily passed as one with a 'captive mind' — "trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, either directly or through their works" (Alatas, 1993, p. 308)

My initial internal struggle with methodological decolonisation stemmed from my limited appreciation of how Ubuntu (a concept that provides basis for human behaviour) could be relevant to academic research. Academic texts on Ubuntu as an African epistemology did not necessarily alleviate my struggle, but did provide some clarity on

how others have approached grounding academic research in African epistemologies. However, as I thought through how to integrate the Ubuntu epistemology into my study, I initially felt that this integration was merely an academic exercise. That notwithstanding, one of the prominent epistemological clarities I gained was that the Ubuntu epistemology views knowledge as that which is generated and verified by the collective rather than the individual (Swanson, 2012), seeking interpretation and understanding, rather than rationalism and verification (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018).

Reflecting on how everyday or indigenous knowledge can be utilised in academic research, I align with the argument of Okere et al. (2005) that "all knowledge is first of all local knowledge" (p. 3). According to this argument, knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by the people within that context. The calls for methodological decolonisation then became clearer as "the glitter and efficiency of the cosmopolitan science and technology mediated and propagated by the West (or the North) in the last few centuries as the one-and-only valid about the one-and-only universe, may sometimes unduly veil the local roots, cultural origins, history, and limited epistemological assumptions of that very science production" (Okere et al., 2005, p. 3). Methodological decolonisation, thus, challenges epistemic hierarchies by redistributing epistemic diversity and authority, enabling everyday or indigenous knowledge to be considered legitimate and valid.

This reflection reveals how western education continues to shape scholars from the majority-world's epistemological defaults, inadvertently leading to a distancing from context-sensitive knowledge and knowledge systems. The engagement with Ubuntu epistemology and critical self-reflection exemplifies the epistemic shift needed in methodological decolonisation. Interrogating the place of and centring context-sensitive knowledge and knowledge systems in academic research offers a pathway for validating knowledge from the majority-world.

Methodology: How do I do research?

The path to epistemological contingency

A critical aspect of a Ph.D. dissertation is the methodology, which is as important as the research contribution. Deciding on methodology depends not only on the research phenomenon under study but also on the researcher's worldview (Seehawer, 2018). Like Seehawer (2018), although "I did not originally situate the study within an Ubuntu

framework" (p. 454), I found the Ubuntu epistemology to be a strong basis for the methodology of a study conducted in a collectivistic society. My major consideration, however, was not merely making an 'emotional' argument—guided by Barnes' (2018) caution to critically examine assumptions in decolonising methodologies to avoid creating a powerless knowledge production system.

> With the Ubuntu methodology, I have a nuanced approach to doing research, which is still largely interpretivist: interpretivism with African characteristics, it seems. I reckon a fusion gives me the best of both worlds. I get the rigour associated with interpretivism, but in terms of practically undertaking data collection and analysis, I will be guided by the principles of Ubuntu, [communitarianism and relationality]. In preparing for data collection, I need to ensure that I seek the consent of all relevant stakeholders—the 4 types Chilisa discusses—and provide options for engaging in the local language (although this can be quite difficult to do over the phone) (Reflective Diary, 27.09.2020).

I concluded that merging interpretivism and Ubuntu allows for slight methodological modification, which was the premise for Konadu-Osei et al. (2023). This slight methodological modification aligns with the social constructivist approach, which was the initial approach that the Ph.D. study was anchored in:

> It is important to remember that this entire research started off as a constructivist research. Charmaz (2017) states that constructivist research "locates the research process and product in historical, social, and situational conditions...adopts earlier methodological strategies such as coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling. However, it shifts the epistemological foundations..." (Charmaz, 2017, p. 34), and this is where this research probably sits. The research does not seek to do away with mainstream processes but considers the epistemological basis as a potential pathway for decolonisation. And this is probably the thinking [redacted names of supervisors] want me to get to (Reflective Diary, 11.10.2020).

Berger (2015) argues that "the worldview and background of the researcher affect the way in which he or she constructs the world, uses language, poses questions, and chooses the lens for filtering the information gathered from participants and making meaning of

it, and thus may shape the findings and conclusions of the study" (p. 220). Therefore, having clarity about my research philosophy helped align my approach with my worldview and research aims. Understanding my research philosophy also clarified my position on ontology and epistemology. The alignment facilitated a clearer understanding of methods of data collection and analysis.

Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic

Researching during a pandemic

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions significantly impacted my doctoral research. Pre-pandemic data collection plans favoured an immersive and participatory process, including engaging translators to accommodate participants who might prefer to engage in their native language (Chilisa, 2012).

Restrictions and uncertainties significantly delayed data collection. Communications with companies properly picked up six months after the first nationwide lockdown. During this waiting period, tough methodological decisions were made to collect good-quality data adhering to social distancing protocols instituted by global, national, and institutional bodies, while prioritising participant and researcher safety (Roberts et al., 2021), and observing Ubuntu principles for research.

Researching participants with onerous schedules

My doctoral study explored relatively well-researched topics of identity work and workplace colleague support within a relatively less-explored population: women in routine-task, manual, male-dominated jobs in male-dominated industries, and their work colleagues. I quickly realised I was interviewing hesitant research participants (Fleming, 2018), mainly due to their onerous work schedules. Since the initial plan to observe participants in their natural setting (Saunders et al., 2016) could not be implemented, phone calls and tech-enabled platforms became the only safe and preferred mode of communication, due to the limitations associated with the pandemic. However, online interviews with the target population were not the most ideal.

I experienced reluctance, willingness to participate, and outright rejection (Gokah, 2006). Most potential participants verbally committed to participating. Judging from the tone of phone conversations, I gathered that some were ambivalent—they were willing

to participate but unsure they would make the time. That notwithstanding, I informed them of the duration (30 – 45 minutes) and assured them their participation was worthwhile, similar to what Gumede et al. (2019) encourage researchers to do: to "have an ethical responsibility for ensuring that individuals are given all the information needed to make informed decisions about whether to participate in research or not" (p. 2)

There were instances in which I genuinely felt bad for calling several times in a month to secure interview slots:

> This is exhausting! I feel like I am a thorn in their flesh. Yet, I can't be overly sentimental about not getting responses. I also need to get the process running. Finding a good balance between remaining on participants' agenda and not being a nuisance is tricky…(Reflective Diary, 27.01.2021).

A strategy I used to reach the population was to work through the companies' Human Resources (HR) offices. Going through the HR offices of the companies was useful, particularly for demonstrating their buy-in and for providing me access to participants during physical distancing. However, I was also aware that participants could consider me to be working for and in the company's interest. The HR Offices indeed facilitated access to participants. In my interactions with potential participants, I stressed that I was working independently of the company (i.e., not contracted by their HR office) and was 'only' a doctoral student. This strategy enabled me to perform approachability, presenting myself as nonthreatening (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Despite this disclaimer, I still sensed hesitation among some participants when the HR office facilitated my connection to them, as some participants had been identified through snowball sampling. Thus, affirming my status as an outsider to the company (a doctoral student) helped to put participants at ease.

Due to participants' job demands, data collection was time-consuming. That notwithstanding, I thoroughly enjoyed speaking with participants. Their work schedules make them an inaccessible population, yet they are "incredibly willing informants" (Fleming, 2018, p. 93). It was always heartwarming when participants expressed positive sentiments after the interview and apologised for the delays in granting it. In those

instances, I was relieved that my persistence had paid off, and the interviews left me with positive sentiments.

Researching participants with onerous schedules highlights the challenges as well as the ethical complexities of engaging often understudied populations in academic research. The different strategies used and the outcomes realised affirm the need for researchers to accommodate participants' time, realities, autonomy, and social positioning (Gumede et al., 2019). Navigating gatekeeping structures and building trust —not acting in the company's interest—enabled me to embody the decolonial ethos, emphasising reflexivity and co-producing knowledge with participants.

Procedural and process ethics

Institutional and procedural ethics (usually defined and shaped by an ethics review board) tend to emphasise informed (written) consent, harm reduction, and confidentiality. While these are necessary, ethics review boards tend to mirror western notions of doing ethical research, which may not consider communal, relational, or situational ethical considerations essential to decolonial methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Seehawer, 2018). Methodological decolonisation emphasises ethical practices negotiated with participants, based on reciprocity, trust, and context. Thus, major ethical considerations that guided preparations for the field included: i) possible conflict of procedural ethics versus ethics-as-practice, ii) the role of language, and iii) social hierarchies.

What does consent look like?

The study received ethical clearance from the Research and Ethics Committee (Social, Behaviour and Education) of Stellenbosch University (17082). The research was conducted in line with ethics protocols established by Stellenbosch University and the companies, as well as the principles of Ubuntu research ethics. A major dilemma I faced was securing written consent. Procedurally, I committed to obtaining signed informed consent forms from both companies and participants. Companies provided signed consent without issues, affirming their participation and granting access to their staff.

However, participants' experiences differed. Some signed the informed consent form before granting interviews, others offered to sign the informed consent form based on their assessment of the interview, and others considered verbal consent sufficient:

I received Mtsabi's [pseudonym] signed informed consent form (Reflective Diary, 28.01.21)...

In reiterating my ethical commitments, Nosipho [pseudonym] informed me to carry on with the interview since she's not sure when next she could have the interview and that she would send me the signed informed consent form at a later date (Reflective Diary, 08.03.21)....

George [pseudonym] remarked, "'but if I didn't want to participate, I wouldn't have scheduled the interview today. Let's go on, my sister'". Although this threw me off initially because his response did not align with what I had committed to procedurally, I had to respect his decision to go with his verbal consent, which was equally as good, especially since I had begun recording (Reflective Diary, 12.08.22).

Seehawer (2018) refers to 'doing ethics the African way', which emphasises the importance of establishing personal relationships. While signatures are important, personal relationships with participants are more meaningful and facilitate access. The decision to sign an informed consent form or not also reflects participants' agency as they redefine what access and consent could look like. This redefinition shows participants are not merely passive information-givers but are empowered to enact their agency in giving or withholding consent. This consciousness aligns with calls to facilitate participants' active role in shaping the research (Igwe et al., 2022; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023).

Therefore, decolonising research methodology calls on researchers to move beyond institutional checklists to embrace ethics-as-practice, which is situated, flexible, and co-constructed with participants.

Language as a knowledge tool

There have been sustained calls to encourage research participants to express themselves in the languages they are most comfortable with, including using native languages, during data collection (Chilisa, 2012; Louis, 2007). To apply this Ubuntu research ethic during data collection and participant recruitment, I offered participants the opportunity to

participate in their preferred language (for which I would provide a translator). Among South Africa's 12 official languages, I found Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, and Zulu are the dominant languages in the localities where companies were based. As such, I consulted the University's Language Centre for translation services. However, all participants spoke English fluently and indicated they wanted to express themselves in English; therefore, translation was not needed. While preparing for the field, I personalised and reflected on my language preferences regarding research interviews:

> ...If someone asked me to participate in an interview in Twi, [a language spoken in Ghana], I would struggle. Not because I can't speak Twi, but unconsciously, I speak Twinglish [a mix of Twi and English]. Won't I give the researcher extra work if I spoke more English than Twi? I actually think in English, but every now and then, I would borrow words from Twi to express certain ideas... that may be the case for my participants. South Africans generally express themselves very well in English (accents get in the way sometimes, but it's fine)... (Reflective Diary, 07.11.2020).

Linguistic inclusivity is a critical ethical consideration in methodological decolonisation (Chilisa, 2012) due to the power vested in language in knowledge production. Therefore, offering participants this choice respects their epistemic agency. Although English was ultimately preferred, in very few instances, words from participants' native language were used. I asked them for the literal and contextual meanings to allow me to better appreciate the use of the expression in the context of the study. This offer challenges dominant monolingual norms by recognising the multilingual realities in postcolonial societies. Preparations made to offer translation also reflect a decolonial ethic of care, contextual responsiveness, and reflexivity.

Hierarchical relationships

While preparing for data collection, I was aware of my positionality and its influence on researcher-participant relationships. Throughout the research process, I aimed to decentre the voice of the 'knowledgeable expert' (researcher), amplifying participants' voices as "the experts on their own lives/worlds/experiences and our job is to learn from them

whatever they will share" (Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015, p. 659), a significant tenet of methodological decolonisation (Frers & Meier, 2022; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023). I was also conscious of suppressing social hierarchies that could arise from, for example, educational background, citizenship, and professional experience, which could shape researcher-participant relationships.

I found the credibility and approachability analytical framework (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) useful in making sense of my field experiences. Credibility refers to how researchers present themselves to be perceived as trustworthy, while approachability refers to how researchers are perceived as safe and nonthreatening (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). An introductory letter from my primary Ph.D. supervisor significantly facilitated access to participating companies. Due to participants' onerous schedules, I established and performed credibility by presenting myself as an ethical and credible academic researcher (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020) to assure them that their participation would be worth their while. During participant recruitment, I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student. While I saw myself as a humble researcher, some participants attributed more power to me based on my educational status. One participant even referred to me as Doctor, to which I quickly retorted, "*Please call me Obaa. I'm not yet a Doctor*" amidst smiles.

While my educational status could deepen hierarchical relations, I explained to participants that they were the real experts and that I was ready to work with how much they were willing to share. The delicate balance of establishing credibility while honouring humility came easily to me due to my communitarian orientation as a Ghanaian. That notwithstanding, I projected my identity as a doctoral student from Stellenbosch University to establish credibility – and, like Adams, "carefully navigating his place as an outsider deserving of their time, information, and respect" (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020, p. 4). I reckon this status served me well. Conversely, I deliberately downplayed my outsider status – a non-South African – although some participants enquired about how similar or otherwise I was to them: "Where are you from?", "Why this topic?", "Why South Africa?", "Are you married?", and "Do you have children?" In the spirit of reciprocity, I equally shared my motivations and family status with those interested in knowing more about me (Igwe et al., 2022; Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015).

As a researcher, I sometimes felt participants were oversharing. I could not pin down a particular reason for that level of confidence in sharing; it could be that my identity as a non-South African woman pursuing a doctoral degree at a well-reputed institution was nonthreatening, or that assurances of confidentiality, or the semi-anonymous nature of the interviews, bolstered participants' safety.

> I really enjoyed Msuenzi's [pseudonym] interview… He gave very specific, useful, and, in my opinion, non-incriminating examples of how companies pay lip service to the gender, diversity, and inclusion agenda. As much as I am not disclosing the company's name or his actual name, I feel my research will be richer with such an example. But what if someone from the company comes across my published articles? Will they be able to point out who exactly Msuenzi is from the job title? Will they be fine with such an example being shared with an outsider? Will it be prudent to exclude such examples from my research? But then again, what will be the benefit of shelving non-incriminating pieces of information if it will yield a positive change in organisational behaviour? What made him so comfortable sharing such information with me? I need to be objective in presenting the good, the bad, and the ugly because I am not on a praise-singing mission (Reflective Diary, 20.09.2021).

I recognise that I performed approachability by being an 'acceptable incompetent' researcher willing to accommodate as much as participants were willing to share (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). I attribute the sense of freedom participants felt to the fact that I was an 'unknown' outsider, coupled with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

The credibility and approachability framework enabled me to interrogate my choices in centring and fostering participants' epistemic agency, while actively disrupting hierarchies between researcher and participants (Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015). The different strategies enabled me to negotiate power, trust, and humility, which align with decolonial imperatives that value relational ethics, participant agency, and the co-production of knowledge grounded in respectful engagement and local contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

Methodological decolonisation may be experienced differently by researchers. Documenting these experiences is critical for building the rigour associated with decolonial methodologies and for offering researchers various pathways to ensure high-quality research that elevates the voices and experiences of the other. These reflections contribute to the broader discourse on decolonising research methodology by centring methodological decisions that are theoretically rigorous and epistemologically and ethically grounded in context (Chilisa, 2012). Integrating Ubuntu epistemology offered a critical decolonial perspective, rooted in the communal and relational way of knowing within the context of study.

The caution against romanticised notions of 'local knowledge' while resisting western epistemic dominance (Barnes, 2018; Hamann et al., 2020) is reasonable. Epistemological contingency (Konadu-Osei et al., 2023) indeed allows for the application of Ubuntu principles, such as communitarianism, mutual respect, and humility, while adhering to institutional imperatives for conducting ethical research. This approach contributes to the co-production of academic research that is both ethical and context-sensitive.

A major consideration for decolonial research methodology is centring participants' voices. The ways participants enact agency may not necessarily align with procedural ethics, yet may not undermine research integrity. The relational and responsive approach to negotiating consent exemplifies ethics as practice, as argued by decolonial scholars (Seehawer, 2018; Smith, 2012), and contrasts with institutional ethics that often do not recognise the different ways consent can be given. Highlighting alternative ways consent can be given does not downplay institutions' efforts to ensure that participants' rights are respected throughout the research process. The point is to underscore how participants' understanding of consent may differ from that of an ethics board. That consent may be a negotiated process, which may not necessarily appear, for example, in the form of signing an informed consent form at the participants' recruitment stage of the research process.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing decolonial discourses in qualitative research by engaging in an epistemological interrogation of research conducted in majority-world contexts. This paper also illustrates that, beyond concept adoption, decolonial intent in research requires ethical and methodological attentiveness to agency,

power, and context. The reflection is also a call to other researchers to document, reflect on, and share their experiences of practising methodological decolonisation, thereby contributing to the ongoing reimagination of doing ethical, situated academic research using context-sensitive epistemologies in majority-world contexts.

References

Adu-Ampong, E. A., & Adams, E. A. (2020). "But you are also Ghanaian, you should know": Negotiating the insider–outsider research positionality in the fieldwork encounter. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *26*(6), 583–592.

Alatas, S. F. (1993). On the indigenization of academic discourse. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, *18*(3), 307–338.

Barnes, B. R. (2018). Decolonising research methodologies: Opportunity and caution. *South African Journal of Psychology*, *48*(3), 379–387.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219–234.

Bhambra, G. K. (Ed.). (2014). *Connected sociologies*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Bilotta, N. (2022). Confronting social work worldviews: Ubuntu and procedural research ethics with persons experiencing refugee status. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, *19*(2), 124–152.

Briggs, J. (2013). Indigenous knowledge: A false dawn for development theory and practice? *Progress in Development Studies*, *13*(3), 231–243.

Campuzano, M. V. (2019). Force and inertia: A systematic review of women's leadership in male-dominated organizational cultures in the United States. *Human Resource Development Review*, *18*(4), 437–469.

Charmaz, K. (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(1), 34–45.

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Sage Publications Inc.

Ezeanya-Esiobu, C. (2019). *Indigenous knowledge and education in Africa*. Springer Open

Fleming, M. A. (2018). Researching truck drivers: Difficult data collection and proving oneself amidst a culture of suspicious masculinity. In S. W. Kleinknecht, L. K. van den Scott, & C. B. Sangers (Eds.), *The craft of qualitative research: A handbook* (pp. 92–97). Canadian Scholars.

Frers, L., & Meier, L. (2022). Hierarchy and inequality in research: Practices, ethics and experiences. *Qualitative Research*, *22*(5), 655–667.

Gobo, G. (2011). Glocalizing methodology? The encounter between local methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *14*(6), 417–437.

Gokah, T. (2006). The naïve researcher: Doing social research in Africa. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *9*(1), 61–73.

Gumede, D., Ngwenya, N. B., Namukwaya, S., Bernays, S., & Seeley, J. (2019). A reflection on ethical and methodological challenges of using separate interviews with adolescent-older carer dyads in rural South Africa. *BMC Medical Ethics*, *20*(1), 1–12.

Hall, B. L., & Tandon, R. (2017). Decolonization of knowledge, epistemicide, participatory research and higher education. *Research for All*, *1*(1), 6–19.

Hamann, R., Luiz, J., Ramaboa, K., Khan, F., Dhlamini, X., & Nilsson, W. (2020). Neither colony nor enclave: Calling for dialogical contextualism in management and organization studies. *Organization Theory*, *1*, 1–21.

Hiller, J. (2016). Epistemological foundation of objectivist and interpretivist research. In B. L. Wheeler & K. M. Murphy (Eds.), *Music Therapy Research* (3rd ed.). Barcelona Publishers.

Igwe, P. A., Madichie, N. O., & Rugara, D. G. (2022). Decolonising research approaches towards non-extractive research. *Qualitative Market Research*, *25*(4), 453–468.

Kasi, Y. F., Widodo, A., Samsudin, A., Riandi, R., Novia, N., Sukmawati, W., & Shidiq, A. S. (2024). Integrating local science and school science: The benefits for preserving local wisdom and promoting students' learning. *Paedagogia*, *27*(1), 24.

Keikelame, M. J., & Swartz, L. (2019). Decolonising research methodologies: Lessons from a qualitative research project, Cape Town, South Africa. *Global Health Action*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2018.1561175

Konadu-Osei, O. A., Boroş, S., & Bosch, A. (2023). Methodological decolonisation and local epistemologies in business ethics research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *186*, 1–12.

Lipscombe, T. A., Hendrick, A., Dzidic, P. L., Garvey, D. C., & Bishop, B. (2021). Directions for research practice in decolonising methodologies: Contending with paradox. *Methodological Innovations*, *14*(1), 1–11.

Louis, R. P. (2007). Can you hear us now? Voices from the margin: Using indigenous methodologies in geographic research. *Geographical Research*, *45*(2), 130–139.

Mayorga-Gallo, S., & Hordge-Freeman, E. (2017). Between marginality and privilege: Gaining access and navigating the field in multiethnic settings. *Qualitative Research*, *17*(4), 377–394.

Meredith, C., Haitana, T., McKerchar, C., & Pitama, S. (2024). "Thank you for listening" Kaupapa Māori methodology as a facilitator of culturally safe research with Māori mothers experiencing perinatal mental illness. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241307584

Mishra, R. K. (2013). Postcolonial feminism: Looking into within-beyond-to difference. *International Journal of English and Literature*, *4*(4), 129–134.

Mkabela, Q. N. (2015). Ubuntu as a foundation for researching African indigenous psychology. *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, *14*(2), 284–291.

Naude, P. (2019). Decolonising knowledge: Can ubuntu ethics save us from coloniality? *Journal of Business Ethics*, *159*(1), 23–37.

Oh, P. S. (2024). How a student uses knowledge as a resource to solve scientific problems: A case study on science learning as R rediscovery. *Science and Education*, *33*(1), 213–247.

Okere, T., Njoku, C. A., & Devisch, R. (2005). All knowledge is first of all local knowledge: An introduction. *Africa Development*, *30*(3), 1–19.

Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, M. V. P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). Reflexivity in qualitative research: A journey of learning. *Qualitative Report*, *22*(2), 426–438.

Roberts, J. K., Pavlakis, A. E., & Richards, M. P. (2021). It's more complicated than it seems: Virtual qualitative research in the COVID-19 era. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 1–13.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2016). *Research methods for business students* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.

Schreiber, R., & Tomm-Bonde, L. (2015). Ubuntu and constructivist grounded theory: An African methodology package. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *20*(8), 655–664.

Seehawer, M. K. (2018). Decolonising research in a sub-Saharan African context: Exploring ubuntu as a foundation for research methodology, ethics and agenda. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *21*(4), 453–466.

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

Swanson, D. M. (2012). Ubuntu, African epistemology and development: Contributions, contradictions, tensions, and possibilities. In H. Wright & A. Abdi (Eds.), *The dialectics of African education and Western discourses: Counter-hegemonic perspectives.* (pp. 27–52). Peter Lang.

Tavernaro-Haidarian, L. (2018). Deliberative epistemology: Towards an ubuntu-based epistemology that accounts for a priori knowledge and objective truth. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, *37*(2), 229–242.

Thambinathan, V., & Kinsella, E. A. (2021). Decolonizing methodologies in qualitative research: Creating spaces for transformative praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 1–9.

Zavala, M. (2013). What do we mean by decolonizing research strategies? Lessons from decolonizing, Indigenous research projects in New Zealand and Latin America. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *2*(1), 55–71.

About the author:

Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei (Ph.D) is a Teaching Fellow with the Global Studies Programme at Maastricht University, The Netherlands and a Research Fellow at the Vlerick Business School, Belgium. Her main research areas include women's engagement in male-dominated jobs, methodological decolonisation, and youth development. She is also interested in how qualitative research methodology can advance epistemic justice.