SOTL IN THE SOUTH

A journal dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning in the 'global South'

Volume 7, Issue 1 April 2023

Pages: 41-61

Research Agendas in an Ubuntu Paradigm

Maren Seehawer
ORCID: 0000-0003-4562-7942

MF – Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Norway

maren.seehawer@mf.no

ABSTRACT

The article contributes to the ongoing scholarly exploration of Ubuntu as an indigenous Southern African research paradigm. Building on an understanding of Ubuntu as humanness that embraces the interconnectedness not only of humans, but of all creation, the article emphasises that *how* we research is inseparable from *what* is researched. Being human in the sense of Ubuntu is not passive but depends on our continued enacting of our humanness through relating positively to others. On this basis, being/becoming human is understood as an inherent (research) agenda in the Ubuntu paradigm. It is proposed that Ubuntu accommodates research agendas that recognise the interdependence of humans with other humans, other species and our shared planet and that aim at balancing these relationships in search of humble togetherness. Ubuntu research agendas seek to contribute to the healing of our planet's human made colonial and ecological conditions locally or globally.

Submitted: October 12, 2022
Accepted: January 27, 2023

ISSN 2523-1154

Introduction

The present article is written as an invitation to think about, and do, research in a holistic manner by employing Ubuntu, a Southern African lived philosophy or worldview, as a research paradigm. To that end, the article continues the ongoing scholarly exploration of Ubuntu as an indigenous Southern African research paradigm (see the works of Muwanga-Zake, 2009; Khupe, 2014; Seehawer, 2018). The exploration takes as a starting point the critiques of extractive research practices that reproduce the coloniality of knowledge production and academic power hierarchies with centres in the global North (Smith, 2012/1999; Kovach, 2011; Chilisa, 2012). It also takes as a starting point the observation that we who engage in African indigenous knowledges research are still mostly guided by methodologies that do not correspond with the underlying epistemological assumptions of the researched knowledges (Keane, Khupe & Seehawer, 2017).

Conceptualising Ubuntu as a research paradigm is a stride towards decolonising research in the Southern African context, particularly, research involving indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world (in addition, as will be discussed, there might be scope to imagine intercontinental and interepistemological research cooperation, too). This decolonial stride does not imply constructing dichotomies, but grounding methodologies in Ubuntu epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies (accepting both differences and similarities between indigenous and so-called Western paradigms). Hitherto, such groundings have been explored in the realm of research ethics as well in the realm of data generation methods and processes (Mkabela, 2005, 2015; Mucina, 2011; Khupe, 2014; Khupe & Keane, 2017; Keane, 2021). The present article is written in honour of this pioneering work and intends to complement and extend it by focusing on the subject, aims and purposes of research undertaken in an Ubuntu paradigm, that is, on *research agendas*. The article asks: what kind of research is undertaken in an Ubuntu paradigm? What are the aims and purposes of such research? A central point is the holism of the Ubuntu paradigm. Thus, research agendas are not seen as separate from methods and ethics, but, quite the contrary, the aim is to arrive at the understanding that *how* we research is inseparable from *what* is researched and *why* the research is undertaken.

A note on positionality and coloniality

This article is written from the position of a committed outsider (Bozalek, 2011). I am a white European woman who did not grow up with Ubuntu. Instead, I was acquainted with, and experienced, Ubuntu through my work as a doctoral researcher in South Africa in 2015 and 2017. My continuous

engagement with Ubuntu guided my development into an academic and it affects my understanding of knowledge, work and life as such. Ubuntu is part of my lived relations with Southern African colleagues and friends. Yet, I continue to approach Ubuntu as someone who has been socialised into those ways of thinking that are cultivated in the Westernized University (Cupples & Grosfuguel, 2019). Therefore, for me, engaging with Ubuntu means learning as well as unlearning (Capran, Garbe, & Zöhrer, 2019). Learning about, with and from Southern African ways of knowing and being, cultures and languages; and unlearning my (colonial) presumptions about the same issues. This (un)learning journey is ongoing and the present article captures a certain moment of this journey. This moment includes distancing myself from an earlier made concession to the hegemonic atomistic understanding of knowledge due to which I treated research ethics, methodologies and agendas as well as Ubuntu's dimensions of being human and becoming human as separate, rather than inseparable entities (see Seehawer, 2018). I acknowledge the controversy regarding white academic engagement with Ubuntu that contributes to the persisting white dominance in academia in Southern Africa and elsewhere in the world (Dladla, 2017). Reflecting about my whiteness, privilege and discomfort (Le Bourdon, 2022), I ask: to what extent does my work reproduce the coloniality that it set out to address? Being written in a colonial language, English is just one of the ways it does so. Yet, the article is written in a hope that scholars across the globe may constructively learn, and engage with, each other's concepts and be allies in the struggle against prevailing conditions of coloniality. That they may enable each other to speak and to be heard. Furthermore, the hope is that the articles proposals and questions may be useful for those scholars who, disregarding skin colour or geographical origin, wish to situate their research in the Ubuntu paradigm.

In the following, I recapture, and elaborate on, what in the article is understood to be the central characteristics of Ubuntu. Thereafter, I present the theoretical perspectives that, in addition to Ubuntu, guide the further exploration of Ubuntu as a research paradigm. Drawing on these perspectives, I first present an overall conceptualisation of the Ubuntu paradigm and then focus on research agendas specifically. I discuss possible and impossible research agendas in the hope to spark further exploration and reflection.

Ubuntu

The present article builds on an understanding of Ubuntu as humanness that is expressed through *humble togetherness* (Swanson, 2009). This humble togetherness is holistic in that it encompasses

"the development of the whole person; physical, mental, spiritual and social" (Mkabela, 2015:287) and in that it recognises the interconnectedness of all parts of creation (Goduka, 2000). Humanness in the sense of Ubuntu refers to the humble togetherness of humans but extends beyond the anthropocentric in that humans as one part of nature are interconnected with all other parts of the universe's "multilayered and incessant interaction of all entities" (Ramose, 2009:209). Thus, humanness embraces caring relationships among humans (including the ancestral world) as well as among humans and other species, the surrounding environment and the universe. In short, Ubuntu's humble togetherness includes *ecological togetherness* (Murove, 2009). Ubuntu means "living with the appreciation that our existence is dependent on the existence of others" (Keane, 2021:23). Therefore, the community, not the individual, is at the centre of what defines us as humans. To demarcate a central difference to Western, Cartesian paradigms: what makes someone human is not rationality, but relationality; not *cogito ergo sum*, but the isiZulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which Mbiti (1990/1969) explains as follows: "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'" (106).

It is important to note that there are different lines of thought about what constitutes humanness in the sense of Ubuntu as well as about the relevance of Ubuntu for contemporary societies. Ongoing philosophical controversies reveal a tension between those who derive their understanding of Ubuntu closely from the Bantu languages and those who use it as a vessel for their philosophical reasoning more freely. For instance, Thadeus Metz (Metz & Gaie, 2010), who constructs Ubuntu as a moral philosophy can be situated in the latter category, while Mogobe Ramose's (2009), Queeny Mkabela's (2015) and Ndumiso Dladla's (2017) thinking belongs to the former. In Mkabela's explanation:

> African indigenous people developed integrated and holistic physical, social, intellectual, moral and spiritual orientations towards life. This is intertwined with their philosophy of communal life centred on blood-lineages or clan and social solidarity, as strategies of development for their descendants. Ubuntu epitomizes this holistic orientation of African indigenous people (2015:287; see Eze, 2019 and Pereira da Silva, 2021 for discussions of some of the controversies in ongoing Ubuntu discourses).

The present article aims at grounding research methodology in Southern African epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. Thus, conceptualisations of Ubuntu close to Bantu peoples' languages, cultures and lived worldviews are relevant. Ramose (2005/1999; 2009), Dladla (2017) and van Norren (2017; the latter two building on Ramose's scholarship) elaborate thoroughly on the grammatical composition of Ubuntu. Thereby, *ubu* refers to the general idea of be-ing, while *ntu*

refers to "a mode of be-ing in the continual unfoldment" (Dladla, 2017:51). Through the combination of grounding the verbal character of *ubu-* with the suffix *–ntu*, Ubuntu becomes an abstract verbal noun. This conceptualisation of Ubuntu as verbal suggests that the English term human*ism* is an ill-fitting translation of Ubuntu. As Ramose (2009) elaborates: any *ism-* "tends to suggest a condition of finality, a closedness or a kind of absolute either incapable of, or resistant to, any further movement" (308). Human*ness*, on the other hand, "suggests both a *condition of being* and the *state of becoming*, of openness or ceaseless unfolding", which opposes it to "any, '-ism', including humanism" (308, emphases added). It is because of this grammatical composition of Ubuntu as verbal, "that be-ing a human being is simply not given or passive" (Dladla, 2017:53) but always depends on "one's *doing* in relation to others" (54, emphasis added), as expressed in the phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

Some of the philosophical controversies about Ubuntu could be understood as a debate between essentialist and non-essentialist conceptualisations. Deriving an understanding of Ubuntu in close connection to Bantu people's languages and cultures may appear to suggest that no-one but Bantu (speaking) people may have Ubuntu. However, despite its connectedness to, or origin in, the Bantu people's worldview, the understanding of Ubuntu presented here is not an essentialist one, not only because indigenous lived philosophies akin to Ubuntu are found in many parts of the world (Goduka, 2000), but because humble togetherness may be found or strived for as an ideal (an "agenda") everywhere and by humans of all race and skin colour (see the stories collected by Caracciolo & Mungai, 2009, which cover Ubuntu research from different continents and contexts). Pereira da Silva (2021) characterises this position as understanding Ubuntu as "originally African, but also as an inspiration for all of humanity" (257). Before returning to this discussion as part of what may constitute Ubuntu research agendas, I draw on Southern African thinkers to present the further theoretical perspectives that inform the discussion. The following section outlines the article's understanding of decolonisation and how (de)colonisation relates to Ubuntu and the current status of our shared planet.

Ubuntu, decolonisation and the (possibility of) survival of our shared planet

With Chilisa (2012), decolonisation is here understood as process that:

> involves the restoration and development of cultural practices, thinking patterns, beliefs and values that were suppressed but are still relevant and necessary to the survival and birth of new ideas, thinking, techniques and lifestyles that contribute to the advancements and empowerment of the historically oppressed and of former colonized non-Western societies (p. 14, referring to Smith, 2012/1999).

This definition embraces the epistemological and ontological dimension, the *colonisation of the mind* (Ngũgĩ, 1986/1981), which has been powerfully articulated by African thinkers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and, more recently, by Achille Mbembe. In Mbembe's (2021) understanding, these thinkers conceptualised decolonisation as the struggle of "departitioning the world" that is "scattered [into] fragments and isolated parts" (44) through colonisation. Drawing on these thinker's scholarship and on Frantz Fanon in particular, Mbembe suggests that:

> [i]f decolonization was an event at all, its essential philosophical meaning lies in an active will to community – as others used to speak of a will to power. This will to community is another name for what could be called the *will to life* (pp. 2-3, emphasis in original).

While Mbembe (2021) does not mention Ubuntu explicitly here, the understanding of Ubuntu as humble togetherness may be regarded to be at the core of his understanding of decolonisation as *will to community*. Such will to community includes, as will be discussed, community of, and cooperation between, the former colonised and colonisers. As freedom fighter, Steve Biko (1987/1981), explicitly formulated: "South Africa is a country in which both black and white live and shall continue to live together … on condition that they [the white people] respect the black people". Mbembe's understanding of decolonisation as will to community embraces community among humans and other species in the same way as Murove (2009) and others have emphasised that Ubuntu goes beyond the anthropocentric and includes ecological togetherness. Only such community may, according to Mbembe (2021), enable the continued habitability of planet earth:

> To reopen the future of our planet to all who inhabit it, we will have to learn how to share it again among humans, but also between humans and nonhumans, between the multiple species that populate our planet. It is only under these conditions that, becoming aware of our precariousness as a species in the face of ecological threats, we will be able to overcome the possibility of outright human extinction opened up by this new epoch, the epoch of the Anthropocene (p. 41).

Thus, according to the understanding of decolonisation as will to community that will provide further guidance for the discussions in the article, the struggle for decolonisation (and the quest for Ubuntu) are not a *precondition*, but ultimately the *same* as the struggle for the survival of our shared planet.

Ubuntu as a research paradigm

> We have a history of people putting Maori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define (Merata Mita, cited in Smith, 2012/1999:61).

Conceptualising Ubuntu as a research paradigm feeds into the larger project of resisting and addressing the coloniality of knowledge production in a Southern African context. The above quote reminds us of just some of the historical linkages between research and colonialism. Today, the power of the Westernised university to define the other, manifests in norms of what counts as knowledge and theory, in publication regimes that are bound to a few colonial languages and geographical centres and in a prevailing need to draw on "international" references and knowledge systems to validate one's research publications (Kovach, 2011; Du Preez, Ramrathan & Le Grange, 2018; Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019). Ethics protocols usually foresee protecting research participation through anonymization, disregarding epistemological contexts in which the knower cannot be separated from the known or in which anonymization might actually be an insult to the person who shared their knowledge. Relatedly, common research methods as diverse as the quantitative survey or the qualitative in-depth interview, cater to "an atomistic conception of society" and "the overrepresented role of the individual" (Gobo, 2011:423), rather than to communal understandings of society. As a result, Kovach (2011) concludes that indigenous communities and their knowledges "are still being 'researched', albeit with more political finesse" (28).

Research paradigms are based on specific ontological, epistemological and axiological positions, which, in turn, inform research methodology (Chilisa, 2012). In line with her above quoted definition of decolonisation, Chilisa (2012) conceptualises the aim of the indigenous research paradigm as challenging "deficit thinking and pathological descriptions of the formerly colonized" and as aiming at the reconstruction of "a body of knowledge that carries hope and promotes transformation and social change among the historically oppressed" (40). Hence, it is a paradigm that aims at overcoming physical, intellectual oppression and is by its nature decolonial (also see Smith, 2012/1999). This makes it, as will be discussed below, problematic to instrumentalise indigenous methodologies for agendas that cannot be placed within indigenous research paradigms Ubuntu as a paradigm is here not understood as different from, but as a regional contextualisation of, Chilisa's indigenous paradigm. Such contextualisation moves the centre of knowledge production and allows doing academia differently by assuming a non-Euro/Amero-centric starting point for knowledge generation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

What then are ontological, epistemological and axiological positions that inform methodologies in the Ubuntu paradigm? Considering ontology, Chilisa (2012) speaks of "[s]ocially constructed multiple realities shaped by the … multiple connections that human beings have with the environment, the cosmos, the living and the non-living" (40). Regarding axiology, she describes research as being "guided by a relational accountability that promotes respectful representation, reciprocity, and rights of the researched" (40). In an Ubuntu context, both speak to the understanding of humanness as outlined above. Our *being* human is always also a *becoming* human that is enabled through relating positively to others. Relational accountability means being answerable to "*all your relations* when you are doing the research". Rather than "answering questions of validity or reliability or making judgements of better or worse … you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? What are my obligations in this relationship?" (Wilson, 2008:177, emphasis in original).

Thus, ethics protocols evolve around relating respectfully and positively to those humans and non-human entities who are involved in the research both before, during and after the research process (see Seehawer, 2018 for an extended discussion and examples). Concerning epistemology in indigenous paradigms, Chilisa (2012) refers to knowledge and knowledge systems as relational. In an Ubuntu context, Mucina (2011) understands knowledge as "the codified essence of experience after communal discourse about its meaning within a specific worldview while using specific language symbolism" (1). Besides emphasising relationality, Mucina's definition of knowledge draws attention to the issue of language, which is central for the reproduction of coloniality. In his much-recognised explanation of Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu (1999) emphasises that the meaning of Ubuntu is difficult to translate into English; a challenge that is known to in other indigenous languages (see the experience of Kimmerer, 2013). English and other European languages are noun-based, whereas many non-European or indigenous languages are verb-based (Nisbet, 2003), which may lead to flawed translations and the promotion of hollowed versions of Ubuntu by white scholars that Ndladla (2017) critiques. "Does it matter that I cannot write in any Ubuntu language?", Mucina (2011) ponders. "If we were telling this story in ChiNgoni would it be the same? What would be different? What has been lost in translation? Is the story in the right context?" (12). These questions lay bare the taken-for-grantedness of epistemological assumptions when studying the *other* through the Western gaze. They also lead to the question whether *indigenous knowledge* itself is an appropriate term. *Knowledge* is a noun; it is something that can be possessed and commodified. *Indigenous ways of knowing*, in turn, is a verb-based expression that may capture more appropriately the relationality and enacted "activity" involved in knowing or coming to know (Aikenhead & Elliot, 2010).

What are methods and methodologies that derive from these ontological, axiological and epistemological positions? Research in an Ubuntu paradigm has been characterized as community-based, relational and participatory (Khupe, 2014; Mkabela, 2015). Mucina (2011) suggests storytelling; a method that is currently explored in a Zimbabwean context (Buckler, Chamberlain, Mkwananzi, Dean, & Chigodora, 2022). Seehawer (2018) draws on the works of Paulo Freire (1988/1982; 1996/1970) to suggests participatory action research to be compatible with Ubuntu. In the Northern American context, indigenous scholars have used conversations and sharing circles as relational research methods. Conversations allow mutual exchange and learning (Kovach, 2011), while sharing circles, though resembling conventional focus groups, cater for the possible presence, and participation of, spirits (Lavallee, 2009). Importantly, Ubuntu methods are not defined through their difference to conventional methods and not all indigenous research is conducted using specific indigenous methods. What is decisive is the adaptation of the chosen research instruments to the specific context (Khupe & Keane, 2017; Seehawer, 2018). In considering their experience with community-based indigenous knowledges research in Southern Africa, Khupe & Keane (2017) suggest that speaking of a *research process* may in fact, be more appropriate than to single out individual methods.

Ubuntu research agendas

As an invitation to think about, and do, research in a holistic manner through Ubuntu as a paradigm, the article is written in the understanding that *how* we research is inseparable from *what* is researched; that research agenda, research ethics and methodology are inseparable. The term Ubuntu is an abstract verbal noun that, as explained by Ramose (2009) and Ndladla (2017), includes a condition of being human as well as a state of becoming. This means that we could understand Ubuntu as encompassing an inherent "agenda" in the same way as it encompasses an inherent "method" or "ethics". Being human is nothing passive or given but requires us to continuously enact our humanness by relating positively to others. Translated into the language of research methodology, we could say that becoming human or upholding our humanness is our research agenda. This agenda is guided by relational accountability and operationalised through relational methods or processes of striving for humble togetherness with both fellow humans (living and once living), other species, the surrounding environment and the universe. In line with the ceaseless unfolding of humanness, the research agenda inherent in Ubuntu is never completed, even if, in the world of research, a certain research project comes to an end. As Mucina (2011) writes about knowledge generation in the Ubuntu paradigm:

> … let me say that the story of using storytelling was here before me. I was born into the story … I have added to the story, I am sharing this story with you and … although I will leave the story the story will go on. This is our story, we co-author it. Is has no beginning and no end (12).

Research in an Ubuntu paradigm is neither inherently good, nor is it innocent business. Precisely because research is not separate from the rest of life but engages people as *whole persons* rather than just *participants*, power imbalances or other conflicts between those involved in the research may affect the research process (Seehawer, 2018). Finding constructive ways to address such challenges is not a mere means to an end, but a central part of the agenda to be/become human. There is scope to understand Ubuntu as an ideal to strive towards both in terms of the research process and in terms of the envisioned agendas. "Many in Africa (the supposed home of ubuntu) are living outside ubuntu ideals: the violence, abuse of political power, corruption, you name it. And sometimes we (ab)use ubuntu to privilege the powerful", writes Khupe (personal conversation, 21. July, 2022). Her account mirrors the experience of other scholars (see Keane, 2008; Naude, 2013; Eliastam, 2015). Yet, the same scholars also found that, despite Ubuntu's co-existence with *un-ubuntu* (Eliastam, 2015), many Africans still share and appreciate the values of Ubuntu. Considering the prevailing colonial damages and conditions coloniality in contemporary African societies, a central theme of current Ubuntu research agendas (in Africa and beyond) is therefore:

> …an urgent need for healing—healing within self, community, and the wider socio-political and educational contexts in which we live. Finding ways to uncover and speak the buried histories of those that have been "othered"—denied their essential humanity through oppression, becomes an essential tool to begin the broader healing of both the oppressed and the oppressor (Caracciolo, 2009, p. xii; also see Seehawer, 2018).

The quote also speaks to Mbembe's understanding of decolonisation as a *will to community* that guides the article's explorations. As said, Ubuntu research agendas aim at being in, or establishing, togetherness through research processes that are guided by relational methodologies and relational accountability, that is, being answerable to all our relations. Consequently, Ubuntu research agendas are explicitly normative. They exclude all forms of extractive research that aim at, or result in, advancing certain humans on the cost of other humans or on the cost of other species or our shared planet. Such extractive research has been at the core of the critiques of outsider researchers studying indigenous communities through the epistemological, ontological and axiological assumptions of Western paradigms (Smith, 2012/1999). These assumptions included a presumed ability "to know all that it is possible to know of us [indigenous peoples], based on their [the outsider re-searchers'] brief encounters with some of us" (Smith, 2012/1999:1). Such encounters are the opposite of relational research. They led to the experiences of indigenous peoples of their

knowledge being stolen (Smith, 2012/1999) and the notion that "[i]f research does not benefit the community by extending the quality of life for those in the community, it should not be done" (Louis, 2008:131). A resulting question that will permeate the final section of the article is how narrow or broad to define the "community" to whose wellbeing research should contribute.

Who is community? Questions of local and global togetherness

Ubuntu as a research paradigm accommodates inquiries that recognise the interdependence of humans with other humans, with other species and our shared planet and that aim at balancing these relationships in search of humble and caring togetherness. What might such agendas address or encompass in practice? And what kind of research agendas do not have room within the Ubuntu paradigm? How narrow or broad should we define community? The present article is theory driven. Ubuntu and related theoretical lenses are used to conceptualise an emerging research paradigm and no examples are known to the author in which a research agenda has explicitly been formulated through the lens of Ubuntu. The examples or possibilities discussed below spring from the author's imagination and are therefore necessarily limited. However, the intention is to make the proposed idea of Ubuntu research agendas more tangible, point to some challenges and complexities and thereby to serve as a springboard for further reflection and exploration.

The local level: Communities as agenda setter and agenda

The most natural definition of community to whose wellbeing Ubuntu research agendas should contribute, may be local and often rural communities. It was extractive research on such communities that led to indigenous peoples' perception of research as a dirty word (Smith, 2012/1999) and to approaching researchers with questions such as:

> Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? … Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix up our generator? Can they actually do anything? (Smith, 2012/1999:10)[1]

Accordingly, scholars who explicitly grounded their research methodology, ethics or theoretical framework in Ubuntu, often engage in what could be characterised as holistic, decolonial community-based research (see the studies of Keane, 2006; Khupe, 2014, Mpofu, 2016; Hollekim,

[1] While Smith writes within a Maori context, the questions and experiences may be relatable and useful in a Southern African context, too.

2017). These studies have in common that they, due to academic requirements, started from a pre-defined research objective (an "agenda"), with which the researcher approached rural communities in Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe. For instance, Keane's (2006) research question was, *What is relevant science for your community?*, while Khupe (2014) asked how worldview and indigenous knowledges in the researched community could be integrated into science education. Thus, the studies aimed, on an abstract and aspirational level, at strengthening these and other communities' wellbeing through the vehicle of education. In addition, the researchers aimed at ensuring community members' tangible benefit by giving back in a variety of ways ranging from initiating NGO support, celebrating culture, co-publishing, to financing girls' education (Hollekim, 2017; Keane, Khupe & Seehawer, 2017). Keane's (2006) research process included her research question being countered by the community's statement, *We are hungry*, an experience that led her to conclude that relational accountability in an Ubuntu context requires asking "What does my community need from me?" (Keane, 2021:299). Khupe (2014), in turn, realized that some of the issues that were raised and considered relevant by the community through the collaborative research process, were not, in fact, answers to her original research questions. These experiences all correspond with Higgs' (2010) understanding of African community-based research, in which communities are recognised as active agenda setters. However, in addition, a conclusion from the above studies could also be that even if this was not formulated explicitly in the above studies, *community itself* became part of the actual research agenda (Seehawer, 2018).

Communities of practice

The author of this article and her co-researchers, five science teachers in the South African city of Makhanda, did not conduct research in a rural community, but in a school and university setting. Their research explored how the teachers could integrate some of their learners' indigenous knowledges into teaching the regular curriculum. While Ubuntu and community had not been part of the official research agenda, community was, as suggested in the previous section, one of the outcomes of the study (Seehawer, 2018). Over time, the research team grew into a *community of practice* and experienced that developing new relationships and developing new knowledge were two sides of the same process: a shared quest for a more humane future by enacting togetherness (Seehawer, Nuntsu, Mashozhera, Ludwane & Speckman, 2022). It is proposed here that such communities of practice may also be part of Ubuntu research agendas (Seehawer, 2018). Schools, classrooms or entire education systems could be understood as communities and research may aim at strengthening humanness through these communities in a variety of ways. Teachers could engage

in teacher action research or autoethnographies to inquire into their own humanness and community with their learners or colleagues; research could aim at epistemological relevance by integrating learners' indigenous knowledges (Seehawer & Breidlid, 2021) or at strengthening educational community in a holistic sense, by (re)involving community members such as parents or elders into education. This was done by Nuntsu (2020), whose study explored the involvement of traditional healers in the teaching of science education. Such studies, in turn, may feed into a broader academic agenda of re-thinking African education through Ubuntu (as pursued by e.g. Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuvaza, 2017 and Takyi-Amoako & Assié-Lumumba, 2020). These suggestions stem from the field of education, because this field is known to the author, but similarly, we could imagine workplace research; health or well-being related research or research with and among spiritual communities.

Societal level: Learning to live together in contemporary societies

Can we think of nations or societies as communities and link the individual's humanness to relating positively to others in an even broader frame? Could Ubuntu encompass decolonial, anti-racist, feminist or anti xenophobic research agendas? Because of its verbal nature, Ubuntu is in the present article not regarded as a backward-looking concept that romanticises, and promotes returning to, precolonial times (see e.g. the critiques by Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013). Quite the contrary, in that humanness is understood as constantly unfolding through one's own relating to others, there is scope to utter critique and actualise Ubuntu for contemporary societies. For instance, Manyonganise (2015), applying an African womanist perspective, analyses the partial exclusion of women from Ubuntu. She seeks to update the concept, "so that it ceases to be steeped in the past, especially in gender relations" (2015:6; see Seehawer 2018 for further elaboration).

Following Mbembe's understanding of decolonisation as a will to community, Ubuntu research agendas could aim at societies learning to live together, seeking to be and become human across colonial rifts. Recognising the interconnectedness also of colonisers and colonised, Mucina (2011) formulates this vision:

> What Whiteness has done has affected me and what I am doing will affect Whiteness. I acknowledge that my efforts to decolonize will affect not only me but also Whiteness. Now that we are linked by this story, where do I end and where do you start? Could it be the sacred, spiritual cycle of breath that connects the past, the present and the future into one, Ubuntu? (12)

Dladla (2017) explains that Europeans "are generally considered to not have Ubuntu"; a judgement not based on racial considerations, but on ethical considerations based "on the historical interaction between the indigenous conquered people conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation (*abantu*) on the one hand and their colonial conquerors (*abelungu*) on the other" (54). As quoted above, Biko (1987/1978), understands South Africa to be a country for peaceful co-existence on the premise that white people respect black people. Ubuntu agendas that aim at healing from colonialism and towards realising Mucina's or Mbembe's vision of community, may include research into linguistic justice. This agenda encompasses a shift towards knowledge production in indigenous languages that are spoken by the majority or people and that reflect better the epistemological, ontological and axiological underpinnings of the inquiry.

To Eze (2019), being a person through other persons provides an invitation to interculturality, which, in turn, could invite research agendas on intercultural exchange and learning from one another within and across national borders. Ubuntu research agendas may provide normative directions for current decolonisation movements within tertiary education. For scholars in the global north seeking to be allies active allies in such decolonial movements, Ubuntu research agendas may include researching into addressing the coloniality of knowledge production at the Westernised university.

Ecological togetherness

Recognising the interdependence of humans with other species and the universe, Ubuntu encompasses research agendas that aim at ecological togetherness, while researching in holistic ways that are sensitive to the earth and the involved epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. For example, when Mpofu (2016) researched about indigenous knowledges about plant healing, consulting with ancestors and using their input as data was part of the research process. Research agendas or processes that would harm nature would not fit with the Ubuntu paradigm. It might be worth extending some of the above quoted questions about benefit and ownership of the study (Smith, 2012/1999) to considering the role of nature and the implications of the study and the research process for the environment.

Studies aiming at ecological togetherness and balancing life of humans, animals, plants and other entities, might include both local small-scale and large(r) scale explorations. Because of their holism, indigenous ways of knowing have long been recognised for their "sustainable" potential by environmental scientists, educationalists and decolonial thinkers alike (see e.g. Odora Hoppers,

2000; Vargas, 2000; Breidlid, 2013). Until very recently, however, their voices have been ignored by mainstream development discourses in the same way as indigenous ways of knowing were denied the status as proper knowledge by the Westernised university. However, the UNDP's 2020 Human Development Report, written under the impact of the global Covid 19 pandemic, prominently recognises indigenous people's knowledges as a way of balancing the needs of humans and the biosphere. The report calls for interweaving knowledge systems for the pursuit of sustainable development within planetary boundaries (UNDP, 2020). Relatedly, recent academic initiatives aim at instrumentalising indigenous research methodologies for realising mainstream international agendas such as the Sustainable Development goals (SDG's) (Mbah, Johnson, Filho & Ajaps, 2022). Such recognition could be regarded as a welcome decolonial step towards diversifying academia and as part of Ubuntu research agendas. However, the SDGs' marginalisation of indigenous ways of knowing is well documented (van Norren, 2017, Cummings, Regeer, de Haan, Zweekhorst & Bunders, 2018) and despite international consultations, the SDGs continue to promote a business as usual approach to development that is rooted in Eurocentric modernist enlightenment ideas (Telleria, 2021). Thus, the underlying epistemological, ontological and axiological assumptions of international agendas and definitions of sustainability should be analysed carefully. Are indigenous methodologies involved because of a genuine interest and in support of mutually shared agendas, or are they instrumentalised for purposes that are not in line with Ubuntu's holism? Such instrumentalisations would not disrupt the coloniality of knowledge production, but, actually, contribute to its continued reproduction (Seehawer, Khupe & Keane, 2022).

Global level: Collaborations for planetary togetherness?

Is there scope to think not only about larger societies but about all of planet earth as one community? On the one hand, Mbembe (2021) speaks about planetary entanglements and the impossibility to think the local without the global and vice versa. He emphasises the need to draw on more than just one knowledge archive to enable the continued habitability of our shared planet. Relating to his idea of decolonisation as will to community, this would imply inter-epistemological community. Likewise, according to Breidlid (2013), only (research) collaborations across epistemological borders may solve our planet's global ecological crises. On the other hand, Jones and Jenkins (2008) ponder whether such "[w]hite/settler enthusiasm for dialogic collaboration … might be an unwitting imperialist demand – and thereby in danger of strengthening the very impulses it seeks to combat" (471). Similarly, Smith (2012/1999) accounts for indigenous peoples' cynicism concerning arguments of research for the benefit of humankind. Unsurprisingly, some

indigenous scholars refuse to be instrumentalised for *settler futurities* or the modernist project of *Can the subaltern save us?* (Mendoza, 2018), which could be connected to the above-mentioned 2020 Human Development Report. Indeed, while Mbembe articulately critiques European imperialism, his position may be a more favourable one for Europeans, because of his advocacy of planetary community. As we share one planet, settler futurities and indigenous futurities are, eventually, interdependent, however. Is it possible to think about international and inter-epistemological collaborations while being cautious of colonial and imperialist pitfalls? Mbembe (2021) advocates for understanding democracy involving not only humans, but animals, plants and all of ecology, thus, he outlines what could understood as a planetary community in the sense of Ubuntu. Can Ubuntu assist us to imagine agendas aiming not at benefit for mankind but benefit for our shared planet?

Instead of a conclusion

Do these imaginations contribute to drawing Ubuntu in many directions or to give the impression that anything goes? My answer is that not everything goes. Ubuntu research agendas exclude extractive research and the instrumentalization of methodologies for agendas that do not align with indigenous research paradigms. Yet, there are many unanswered questions. What if there are competing or contradictory agendas, where the interests of global and local communities misalign? Instead of a conclusion, the article ends with the proposal that Ubuntu as a research paradigm accommodates agendas that recognise the interdependence of humans with other humans, other species and our shared planet and that aim at balancing these relationships in search of humble togetherness. In other words, Ubuntu research agendas seek to contribute to the healing of our planet's human-made colonial and ecological conditions locally or globally. They strive beyond healing, but towards thriving. Towards being human through enacting our humanness. The article ends also with a call for continued exploration, revision and development of the proposals made and questions asked.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for my Southern African "research family" and I thank Moyra Keane and Constance Khupe for the encouragement concerning the present article. I also thank my two anonymous reviewers for their thorough work and constructive critique.

References

Aikenhead, G. S. & Elliott, D. 2010. An emerging decolonizing science education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education*, 10(4), 321–338, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14926156.2010.524967.

Biko, S. 1987. *I Write What I Like*. Harlow, UK: Heineman. (Original work published 1978)

Bozalek, V. 2011. Acknowledging privilege through encounters with difference: Participatory learning and action techniques for decolonising methodologies in Southern contexts. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(6): 469–484, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2011.611383.

Breidlid, A. 2013. *Education, Indigenous Knowledges, and Development in the Global South: Contesting Knowledges for a Sustainable Future*. New York: Routledge.

Buckler, A., Chamberlain, L., Mkwananzi, F., Dean, C. & Chigodora, O. 2022. Out-of-school girls' lives in Zimbabwe: What can we learn from a storytelling research approach? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(2): 195–215, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1970718.

Capran, Z. G., Garbe, S. & Zöhrer, M. 2019. A conversation about decolonization, processes of unlearning and 'aha moments' in institutions of higher education. *Acta Academica*, 52(1): 76–88, http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i1/SP5

Caracciolo, D. 2009. Introduction. In D. Caracciolo & A. M. Mungai (eds), *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research*, pp. xi–xv. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Caracciolo, D. & Mungai, A. M. (eds). 2009. *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Chilisa, B. 2012. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Cummings, S., Regeer B., de Haan L., Zweekhorst M. & Bunders J. 2018. Critical discourse analysis of perspectives on knowledge and the knowledge society within the sustainable development goals. *Development Policy Review*, 36: 727–742. http://dx.doi.org/doi.org/10.1111/ dpr.12296.

Cupples, J. & Grosfoguel, R. (eds). 2019. *Unsettling Eurocentrism in the Westernized University*. London: Routledge.

Dladla, N. 2017. Towards an African critical philosophy of race: Ubuntu as a philo-praxis of liberation. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 6(1): 39–68, https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v6i1.3.

du Preez, P., Ramrathan, L. & le Grange, L. 2018. On the hegemony of international knowledge in Tier 1 high-impact literature: A meta-study of citations in Indilinga (2008–2017). *Journal of Education*, 73: 4–9, http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i73a01.

Eliastam, J. L. B. 2015. Exploring Ubuntu discourse in South Africa: Loss, liminality and hope. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 36(2): 1427, http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4102/ve.v36i2.1427.

Eze, M.O. 2019. Ubuntu/Botho: Ideology or Promise? In M. I. Spariosu & J. Rüsen (eds), *Exploring Humanity: Intercultural Perspectives on Humanism*, pp. 147–195. Taipei: Taiwan University Press.

Freire, P. 1988. Creating alternative research methods: Learning to do it by doing it. In S. Kemmis & R. McTaggart (eds), *The Action Research Reader*, pp. 269–274. Victoria: Deakin University. (Original work published in 1982)

Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1970)

Gobo, G. 2011. Globalizing methodology? The encounter between local methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14: 417–437. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2011.611379.

Goduka, I. N. 2000. African/indigenous philosophies: Legitimizing spiritually centred wisdoms within the academy. In P. Higgs, N. C. G. Vakalisa, T. V. Mda & N. T. Assié-Lumumba (eds), *African Voices in Education*, pp. 63–83. Cape Town: Juta.

Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru, O. & Makuvaza, N. 2017. Re-thinking education in postcolonial Africa: Education munhu/umuntu in Zimbabwe. In E. Shiza & N. Makuvza (eds), *Re-thinking Post-Colonial Education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st Century*, pp. 85 –104. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Higgs, P. 2010. Towards an indigenous African epistemology of community in education research. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2: 2414–2421. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro. 2010.03.347.

Hollekim, N. T. 2017. Community based research: A case study of ontological dynamics in developmental collaboration with rural women in Karamoja (Unpublished Master dissertation). Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway.

Jones, A. & Jenkins, K. 2008. Rethinking collaboration: Working the indigene-colonizer hyphen. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln & L. T. Smith (eds), *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, pp. 471-486. London: SAGE.

Keane, M. 2006. Understanding science curriculum and research in rural KwaZulu-Natal (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa). Retrieved from http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/1508.

Keane, M. 2008. Science learning and research in a framework of Ubuntu. In C. Malcolm, E. Motala, S. Motala, G. Moyo, J. Pampallis, & B. Thaver (eds), *Democracy, Human Rights and Social Justice in Education*, pp. 49–60. Johannesburg: Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD).

Keane, M. 2021. Research ethics and diversity of worldviews: Integrated worlds and ubuntu. *SOTL in the South*, 5(2): 22-35, https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v5i2.194.

Keane, M., Khupe, C. & Seehawer, M. 2017. Decolonising methodology: Who benefits from indigenous knowledge research? *Educational Research for Social Change*, 6(1): 12–24. https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2017/v6i1a2.

Khupe, C. (2014). Indigenous knowledge and school science: Possibilities for integration (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Khupe, C. & Keane, M. 2017. Towards an African education research methodology: De-colonising new knowledge. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 6(1): 25-37, http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2017/v6i1a3j.

Kimmerer, R. W. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed.

Kovach, M. 2011. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Lavallée, L. F. 2009. Practical application of an indigenous research framework and two qualitative indigenous research methods: Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1): 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 160940690900800103.

Le Bourdon, M. 2022. Confronting the discomfort: A critical analysis of privilege and positionality in development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221081362.

Louis, R. P. 2008. Can you hear us now? Voices from the margin: Using indigenous methodologies in geographic research. *Geographical Research*, 45: 130–139. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2007.00443.x.

Manyonganise, M. 2015. Oppressive and liberative: A Zimbabwean woman's reflections on Ubuntu. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 36(2): 7. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i2.1438.

Matolino, B. & Kwindingwi, W. 2013. The end of Ubuntu. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 32: 197–205, https://doi.org/10.1080/0 2580136.2013.817637.

Mbah, M., Leal, W. & Ajaps, S. (eds). *Indigenous Methodologies, Research, and Practices for Sustainable Development*. Cham: Springer

Mbembe, A. 2021. *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mbiti, J. S. 1990. *African Religions and Philosophy*, (2nd revised and enlarged edition). Gabarone: Heineman.

Mendoza, B. 2018. Can the subaltern save us? *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 1(1): 109-122. https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1551462.

Metz, T. & Gaie, J. B. R. 2010. The African ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for research on morality. *Journal of Moral Education*, 39: 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497609.

Mkabela, Q. N. 2005. Using the Afrocentric method in researching indigenous African culture. *The Qualitative Report*, 10(1): 178–189. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2005.1864.

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

Mpofu, V. 2016. Possibilities of integrating indigenous knowledge into classroom science: The case of plant healing (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation) University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Mucina, D. D. 2011. Story as research methodology. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 7(1), 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011100700101.

Murove, M. F. 2009. An African environmental ethic based on the concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu. In M. F. Murove (ed), *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, pp. 315–331. Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press.

Muwanga-Zake, J. W. F. 2009. Building bridges across knowledge systems: Ubuntu and participative research paradigms in Bantu communities. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(4): 413-426, https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300903237198.

Naude, P. J. 2013. Am I my brother's keeper? An African reflection on humanisation. *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 54: 241–253. https://doi.org/10.5952/54-0-360.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. 2018. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa. Deprovincializiation and Decolonization*. London: Routledge.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London, UK: James Currey. (Original work published 1981)

Nisbet, R. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*. Free Press.

Nuntsu, S. N. 2020. Mobilising stories about cultural beliefs and practices on traditional foods to contextualise the topic on nutrition in a Grade 6 township class (Unpublished master's thesis). Rhodes University, South Africa.

Odora Hoppers, C. A. 2000. The centre-periphery in knowledge production in the twenty-first century. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 30(3): 283–291, https://doi.org/10.1080/713657471.

Pereira da Silva, F. 2021. The community and the paths of critical thinking in the global periphery: The cases of sumak kawsay/suma qamaña and Ubuntu. In R. Bourqia, M. Sili (eds), *New Paths of Development, Sustainable Development Goals Series*, pp. 246–261). Cham: Springer.

Ramose, M. B. 2005. *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books. (Originally published in 1999).

Ramose, M. B. 2009. Ecology Through Ubuntu. In M. F. Murove (ed), *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, pp. 308–314. Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu–Natal Press.

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, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579. 2018. 1432404.

Seehawer, M. & Breidlid, A. 2021. Dialogue between epistemologies as quality education: Integrating knowledges in Sub-Saharan African classrooms to foster sustainability learning and contextually relevant education. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 4(1): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100200.

Seehawer, M., Khupe, C. & Keane, M. 2022. On the impossibility of instrumentalising indigenous methodologies for the sustainable development agenda. In: M. Mbah, W. Leal, & S. Ajaps (eds), *Indigenous Methodologies, Research, and Practices for Sustainable Development*. Cham: Springer.

Seehawer, M., Ludwane, A., Mashozhera, F., Nuntsu, S., Speckman, M. 2022. Creating a sense of belonging: Enabling transformative learning through participatory action research in an Ubuntu paradigm. In A. Nicolaides, S. Eschenbacher, P. T. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch, M. Misawa (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation*, pp. 469–481. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smith, L. T. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed. (Original work published 1999).

Swanson, D. 2009. Where have all the fishes gone? Living Ubuntu as an ethics of research and pedagogical engagement. In D. Caracciolo & A. M. Mungai (eds), *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research*, pp. 3–22. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Takyi-Amoako, E. J. & Assié-Lumumba, N. T. 2020. *Re-Visioning Education in Africa. Ubuntu-Inspired Education for Humanity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Telleria, J. 2021. *Deconstructing Human Development. From the Washington Consensus to the 2030 Agenda*. London: Routledge.

Tutu, D. 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London: Rider

UNDP. 2020. Human Development Report 2020. The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene. Retrieved from http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report, 10 April 2023.

Van Norren, D. E. 2017. *Development as Service. A Happiness, Ubuntu and Buen Vivir Interdisciplinary View of the Sustainable Development Goals*. Blenheim, NZ: Prisma Print.

Vargas, C. M. 2000. Sustainable development education: Averting or mitigating cultural collision. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20(5): 377-396, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593(99)00081-4.

Wilson, S. 2008. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.