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Decolonising research methodologies in the Global South: Experiences of an African social scientist

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ABSTRACT

Research is a systematic and objective way of gathering information to enrich the existing body of knowledge. The way research is conducted in parts of the Global South specifically in African contexts where I work, can be understood in terms of the continent's colonial heritage and its regulations are mostly, if not predominantly Western-oriented. The aim of this paper is to unpack the experiences encountered by the researcher in undertaking studies in African contexts. From inception to data presentation and analysis, the researcher can testify that she was mostly guided by Western methodologies. This posed challenges and in some cases affected the authenticity of the research findings. In most research activities I engaged in, the ethical guidelines I adhered to, ways of selecting participants, data collection procedures and even the ways I presented and analysed data were guided by Western philosophies. Adopting approaches from the West without incorporating our indigenous knowledge systems make me feel that the studies I have conducted lack adequate African involvement. In some cases I could tell that the participants were distanced away from me as a researcher. Basing on such experiences, I therefore suggest that African research should mainly be guided by our African heritage for it to sufficiently address the needs of our communities.

KEY TERMS: African contexts, decolonising, heritage, methodologies, Western-oriented

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INTRODUCTION

Decolonising research methodologies refers to efforts being made to contextualise research methods and demystify the overrated importance of Western research methodologies. Non-western research methodologies have been devalued or not considered in research on African knowledge. This has been so, due to the dominance of Western epistemologies, ontologies and axiology. The objective of research should be to benefit the communities from which knowledge is drawn and this can only be achieved if the values and ethics of such communities shape the methods of extracting knowledge. For many years, research from Africa has been done through Western lenses hence compromising the appropriateness and relevance of its findings on African people. In this paper the writer gave a reflection of the experiences she went through in conducting research in Africa, specifically in Zimbabwe. A background to the study will be presented first followed by literature review, methodology and experiences of the researcher. Finally, conclusions, implications and recommendations will be provided.

BACKGROUND

African research has been done since time immemorial. Most of this research has been guided by Western or Eurocentric methodologies. Bangura, as cited in Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) (2019), pinpointed that after three centuries of utilising Eurocentric/Western methodologies, the majority of African communities remain marginal in the scientific community. This reflects that such methodologies have done little to benefit the African continent because they are foreign. Some scholars reiterate that even though there were calls for indigenisation after attainment of independence, methodologies in African research contexts continued to rely on Western epistemology (Keane & Seehawer, 2017). Basing on these views, Seehawer (2018), states that perpetual use of Western methodologies puts African research at risk of marginalising indigenous knowledge and its holders. In addition, searching for knowledge on Africa using Western lenses that are insensitive to the researched's epistemologies might yield out of context or wrong conclusions. Bangura in Codesria (2019), proposed that Africans within the continent and in the Diaspora must engage in the resuscitation of old, employing contemporary and coming up with new authentic Afrocentric methodologies. African research on its phenomena keep lagging behind because the methods it uses are incompatible within African systems which includes its philosophy and ethical grounding.

The fact that progress in African research has been and still remains slow has led to debates and actions directed on decolonising research methodologies and promoting indigenous knowledge systems. A decolonising research methodology is an approach that is used to challenge the Eurocentric research methods that undermine the local knowledge and experiences of the marginalised population groups (Nhemachena et.al. 2016; Khupe and Keane, 2017; Chilisa, 2012). Debates on decolonisation started long back though the issues became pronounced in recent years. According to Crawford et.al. (2021), such debates started about sixty years back through the initiatives of Ghana's first president and pan-African leader, Dr Kwame Nkrumah who showed the importance of African-centered knowledge. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah unearthed the importance of African centered knowledge when he established the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. He went further and invited Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois who was a civil rights activist and a fellow pan-Africanist to come to Africa and work on an Encyclopedia African project on Africa and the African People. Nkrumah's activities had a decolonisation agenda. Besides Nkrumah's initiatives, another pioneer to the contextualization of African methodologies and education was Claude Ake who advocated for endogenous knowledge production on Africa. Despite these actions, African knowledge remained marginalised and were resuscitated within the academia and society in later years (Mbembe, 2016; Nyamnjoh 2017; Ndlovu-Gathenseni 2018). The major event which led to this resuscitation was the 2015 '#Rhodes must fall' movement in South Africa which led to the widespread demand for decolonisation of higher education in South Africa (Crawford et.al. 2021). Despite the past and recent actions against the dominance of Western methodologies in research and African education, African centered methodologies and decolonisation initiatives still lag behind.

A number of factors hinder the progress of contextualisation of research methods in Africa. Crawford et.al. (2021), reiterate that issues of power inequalities and injustice are critical in the decolonisation of knowledge production. They state that the existence of asymmetrical power relations between scholars in the Global North and South cause predominance of non-African writers on African issues in high impact academic journals thus giving a questionable picture of findings presented on African phenomena and African people. In addition most Africans lack direct access to research grants and also face challenges in accessing academic work by African colleagues in no-open-access publications which may mean that most of research findings that is easily accessible by the public has been conducted through non-African lenses. In support of the previous points, Keane, Khupe and Seehawer (2017), state that as indigenous knowledge researchers, they have remained aligned to a Western scientific paradigm in which they have often utilised to justify the scientific validity of indigenous knowledge. They also reiterate that the ultimate judgment of the value of research comes via peer-reviewed publications,

citation indices and impact factors which are controlled by non-African journals which are not easily accessible by many African scholars. This has seen researchers like Nhemachena et al (2016), stressing that research conducted among indigenous African people has not impacted positively on the health of African people.

It is against this background that the writer of this paper presented her reflections on the experiences she encountered in doing research in African contexts. This has led to the proposal of intensifying efforts toward decolonisation of research methodologies in African contexts. The writer will explore the necessity for this decolonisation of extraction of knowledge in Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The author reviewed literature published between 2012 and 2022 that was available online. The articles reviewed for this paper came from various journals. Selection of articles was based on their relation to the idea of decontextualising research methodologies in Africa. Basing on this focus, the researcher reviewed articles that looked at any one of the following issues: the philosophy guiding Africanism, methods of extracting knowledge in Africa and important factors on decolonising research methodologies. The reviewed literature was related to the author's experiences which further influenced the conclusions and recommendations thereof.

Philosophy guiding African research

African continent comprises of diverse cultures and this diversity is also witnessed even within the same country. Despite this diversity, the continent is unified by the philosophy of Ubuntu. The Ubuntu philosophy is based on the belief that the humanness of an individual is based on his or her relations with others. Desmond Tutu is commonly cited as having pioneered the statement that, 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,' meaning a person is a person because of others. Seehawer (2018), described Ubuntu as an African philosophy, worldview, moral ethics and a way of knowing. Other researchers suggested different views about this concept for instance Khupe (2014) Mkabela, (2015) Oviawe, (2016), regard it as a research paradigm; Oviawe (2016) cited Willis (2007) who regard it as a comprehensive belief system, worldview or framework that guides research and practice in a field. Seehawer (2018) cited Chilisa (2012) who states that as a paradigm Ubuntu is characterised by philosophical assumptions about the nature of social reality (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology) and ethics and value system (axiology). This then creates the foundation of a research methodology. The fact that Ubuntu philosophy guides many African beliefs and behaviour makes it the best worldview to direct African research. The bulk of African indigenous knowledge has been and is being generated by people who bear the same connection to Ubuntu epistemology, ontology and axiology. Ubuntu philosophy is used to also show connection of humanity to its environment. In this regard for effective research in African contexts, researchers must value and have their work anchored in Ubuntu philosophy.

African ways of gathering knowledge

Gathering information about Africans is not a thing of today. Indigenous knowledge systems have always been in existence however they have been subdued by Western methodologies and philosophies. The writer will explain some African-centred research methods that can be resuscitated and help in obtaining African knowledge through ways that are familiar to the local communities. Codesria (2019), explored a number of methods that were explained by Bangura and other doctoral studies. These included Rekh methodology, Utcha and Uhem methodology, Archeoastronomical, Behsau-Pehsa methodology, Egyptological methodology, Hermeneutic methodology, Griot methodology, Sankofa methodology, Pan-Africanism and Ubuntugogy methodology among others. The Rekh methodology was used by ancient Egyptians and was adopted by the Yoruba from Nigeria who used the concept as Imo which implies first-hand knowledge involving naming and action. The knowledge was said to be acquired through direct observation or contact with knowledge rather than being told. Utcha and Uhem methodology also came from ancient Egyptian meaning to rectify and narrate, recount, repeat and tell a story or a dream. This method was used to rectify misconceptions and misinterpretations. Archeoastronomical methodology is a scientific study which has been used by ancient astronomies in their cultural contexts through the utilisation of archaeological and anthropological evidence. The methodology's sources include both written and archaeological remains, and it embraces calendric, practical observation, sky lore, celestial myth, and more. One example of its use is amongst the Luo people in Kenya who believe that all that is under the sun is blessed with sex. Behsau-Pehsa methodology was also used in ancient Egypt to explain the predator-prey relationship. It tries to explore the exploitative nature of some relationships. Egyptological methodology is a disciplined approach that give people room to demarcate the differences that may arise from the subjectivity of their experiences of the various aspects of the study of ancient Egypt. It assumes that African social knowledge is communicable, compelling and valid. Hermeneutic methodology was also derived from ancient Egypt and it is characterized by a number of methods and theories of interpretation and the art of understanding texts. Griot methodology uses

history or traditions to mold the heritage and identity of politics of numerous West African societies. Sankofa methodology originated among the Akan people of West Africa and is premised on the idea that as Africans move forward into the future, they need to reach back into their past and take with them all that works and is positive. According to Bangura (2011), this methodology is about learning from the past which refers to African culture, history, philosophies and identity. Pan-Africanism has a narrower and broader meaning. It emphasises the historiography of all people of African descent on any continent including Africa itself. Ubuntu methodology is an African educational paradigm that was conceptualised by Bangura (2010b), as the art and science of teaching and learning undergirded by humanity towards others. The major elements of this methodology include religiosity, consensus building and dialogue among the Africans which are all anchored on the Ubuntu concept. There are many other methodologies based on African foundations that have not been outlined in this paper, however the idea here is that, Africa is rich in methodologies that can be developed to address research in this continent.

Important factors in decolonising research methodologies

A number of scholars tried to explore various factors that may promote successful research of Africans within African contexts. These include power, trust, culture and cultural competence, respectful and legitimate research practice as well as recognition of individual and communities' assets (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). The idea of power has been conceptualised as twofold and researchers have been urged to adopt the approach of 'power with' as opposed to 'power over approach' when conducting research among marginalised and vulnerable populations. Such an approach equalises the researcher and the researched as there will be equal power sharing. This has also been supported by Khupe and Keane (2017), who posit that when research is characterised by respect and authentic connection within the community, it becomes successful. In addition, Chilisa (2014), formulated twelve basic questions which researcher(s) must ask themselves to verify if research being conducted is more decolonised or indigenised. Generally the questions emphasise that the research must show social relevance, must clarify decolonization and indigenization intent, must show its uniqueness which must reflect appreciation of local ontological, epistemological, cultural and value assumptions as well as contribute towards a novel research approach constructed from an indigenous conceptual or theoretical perspective.

Trust is another factor which is required in decolonising research methodologies. Evidence of trust between the researchers and the researched creates openness and it underpins good research practice which reflects sound relationships (Moodley & Singh, 2016). The scientific community is sometimes associated with the remnants of colonialism thereby establishing trust between the researcher and the researched helps in clearing distrust. Establishing trust between the researcher and the researched is vital in a decolonising research process. Trust is an ingredient for safeguarding the rights of the vulnerable.

Africa is a multicultural continent therefore valuing culture and cultural competence becomes imperative during the decolonising process. Keikelame and Swartz (2019), reiterate that continuous engagement with the researched can enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their culture and history. Appreciation of the background of the researched promotes valuing diversity as well as appreciating the strengths that the researched may bring to the study. Embodied in this are issues of respect and trust which are vital in decolonisation.

Another aspect of importance in this process is respectful and legitimate research practice. Keikelame and Swartz (2019), pointed that research must be done on the basis that clearer guidelines for conducting the research have been conveyed to the indigenous people. Mohindra (2016), states that indigenous research practices need to be thoroughly examined to ensure that they are culturally and ethically appropriate. The aim being to value the existence of the researched. The process also link with the basis of the Ubuntu philosophy which also advocates for respect of human relations in the community.

The last factor is that of recognition of individual and communities' assets. The assets refer to any resources which may include individual strengths that may be vital for community development. Sweet et al. (2014), point out that a decolonising process is about reorientation from problematising indigenous people to valuing community strengths, capacities and resilience – to a proper process in which time and opportunities to develop relationships and trust are created. Thus having such a recognition also promotes respect for the researched.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the author's personal research experiences in African contexts. The author engaged in research within African context specifically in Zimbabwe. The writer has experience of working with people from different cultural backgrounds which included the Shona (with its various dialects), the Ndebele, the Tonga, the Shangaane and the Venda. Researching on these diverse cultures gave the researcher an opportunity to assess whether Eurocentric methodologies value beliefs and norms of the researched. It also offered her an opportunity to identify gaps created by these borrowed methodologies and this led to the need for advocating for decolonisation of research methodologies. The following themes constitute what the author went through. In writing this article, the writer adopted an auto-ethnographic approach where she reflected on her personal experiences as an African

researcher. Sharing personal experiences may be subjective and embarrassing to the writer however the writer ensured that she just reflected experiences as they are without bias. The reflections therefore considered both the strength and weaknesses of Western research methodologies. Such an approach was followed to promote the idea that Africans should adapt foreign research methodologies after making some evaluations.

THEMES

Research process

In collecting data from participants the researcher observed that in most cases if not all there was need to first get consent of gatekeepers as well as from the participants themselves. The research process could reflect on the issue of power relations as discussed by Keikelame and Swartz (2019). To show respect towards the owners of the land the researcher approached the community gatekeepers to seek permission of entry and of accessing the community. The researcher noted the influence of Western ideology as this permission could come in writing. Such an act is foreign in traditional African contexts where mostly people agree on certain issues through verbal communication. In most cases when a researcher wants to enter a community he or she seeks permission from the Ministry of Local Government first which gives him or her a letter to produce as evidence of permission to the local authorities. Though there is recognition of local authority and respect for the authority, the process is guided by Western protocols. On the other hand such a procedure may act as a way of implementing the Local ethics Approach (Chilisa, 2017), which emphasise utilization of local ethics in all stages of the research process and obtaining ethics approval at family, community and national levels.

After getting permission from local leadership the researcher goes to access the participants. Informed consent is also sought from the participants again through signing of informed consent forms. Though some scholars talk of getting this orally, most of them allude to the fact that the safest way to get informed consent from the participants is through getting their consent in black and white. The idea of agreeing to undertake the research through writing is not African, it originated in the West. As noted in Chilisa (2017), consent does not need to be written as the practice of writing down and issuing forms has been regarded as intimidating which eliminates the continuous negotiation valued in African society. Hence even though the act reflect respecting the researched, the procedure is mainly informed by Western ways. On another note, the idea of first getting approval of the community gatekeepers reflects the oneness of African communities. One could realise that without approval from these leaders the research would not be successful.

Some scholars say that when doing research, the participants must be involved from planning, data collection up to data presentation and analysis. This suites the description of participatory action research. However in most studies that I have been involved, participants were only engaged during the data collection process. In some studies, the participants would ask us if we were going to produce copies of research reports for them and the principal investigator would promise to provide one for them but in reality nothing would be produced for the participants. Most, if not all of the research reports I have written or we have written as a team of researchers are in English. Though English is the medium of instruction in Zimbabwean schools, not everyone fully comprehend communications presented in English. Henceforth, even though the research projects were to be availed to the participants, there was a high chance of having the majority fail to understand the documents especially those within the rural communities. In this regard, the Western approach does not fully involve the researched throughout the whole research process. Hence the need to decolonise research methodologies and conduct research purely in accordance with African ways and communicating with the researched in local languages that they fully understand.

The researcher also noticed that in most cases the research instruments were developed in English and needed to be translated to vernacular languages. The translation is usually done by professional translators. At some point we experienced challenges with a research instrument that was translated by professionals from English to Tonga and also English to Ndau. In trying to utilise the instrument on the ground the local translators would struggle to understand the translated instrument even though the vernacular language was their mother tongue which they used on daily basis. Basing on this, the writer learnt that through the act of translating research instruments, the Western approach would be trying to show value towards the researched however the use of professional translators who are not residents of the target communities defeats the whole purpose. Use of vernacular supports the local language approach which has been emphasised by Chilisa (2017) who says local languages must be used in all stages of the research process and researchers must avoid use of language unfamiliar to the participants. The researcher also once used pre-designed tests which have been developed in the West to assess some attributes among African people. Some of the items in the instruments were totally unfamiliar to the researched hence there was a great risk of getting responses that tested another attribute not the intended one. This therefore requires an African approach that will make use of the local people in designing the research instruments which will help in conveying the correct message to the researched.

Research methods

During research I have used a number of research methods either as a group or as an individual. There are some methods which connect to the Ubuntu philosophy but there are some which are so foreign that the researched will be very much divorced from them. The author has observed that the use of narrative and focus group discussions is almost linked to some traditional ways of seeking information. Narratives are related to storytelling that has been used in the past to share information and focus group discussions can be related to the use of *dare* or community meetings that are also common in our African context. What then may affect data gathering through the use of these methods are the audio recordings or the note taking that researchers do which may make some participants very uncomfortable even after giving consent. Besides, the two mentioned methods, the researcher once used interviews, questionnaires and vignettes in data collection. The use of interviews and questionnaires promotes individualism which is contrary to the oneness preached in traditional local communities. When the researcher utilised vignettes in one of the studies, participants were presented with a hypothetical story from which they were supposed to deduce meaning and come up with responses basing on imagination. The participants struggled to give meaningful responses as they had not been exposed to vignettes before. In addition, the use of online research tools like Kobo tools has promoted and intensified the digital divide especially between those in the rural areas and those in urban areas. In most rural areas people lack devices which are compatible with such research instruments and those who have the devices may fail to afford the data required to access research online. Under such circumstances, research findings may fail to depict the real experiences of an African person from a purely African context. Henceforth there is need for Africans to develop research methods that are purely African to solicit valuable information whose eventuality will be to benefit the researched.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are another element of research which reflects the dominance of Western ideas in research. Firstly, many Ethics Review Boards in various African institutions either are guided by foreign ethics boards like American Psychological Association or British Psychology Society. In some cases they draft their own ethical codes of conduct which borrow heavily from foreign boards. This defeats the essence of Africanism. Ethical and moral behaviour are embedded in the Ubuntu philosophy. This philosophy values the spirituality of local people. In this regard, for ethical considerations to really value the essence of Africanism in local people, they should embrace the basis of the Ubuntu philosophy. Secondly, the researcher noticed that when conducting research it is the researcher who decides which ethical issues to take seriously and which ones to just highlight for formality. Such a scenario negates the respect of humanity that is usually required in human interaction within African communities. Adopting views from Chilisa (2017), one may recommend use of the decolonial approach which argues that ethics are not universal hence Western ethics are inapplicable in Africa and vice versa. Thus there is need to have research ethics that are guided by African philosophies used to define humanity.

The author also noticed some power imbalances between the researcher and the researched even when the latter were far much older than the former. Colonialism has instilled in many Africans the idea that professionals are knowledgeable and must be respected. This may distort the responses that the researched give to the researcher. Participants may respond in a manner that they think is expected by the researcher which may not be a true reflection of their experiences. The same mentality also creates a distance between the researcher and the researched. Yet for the researcher to fully understand people within their contexts there is need for constant engagement with them.

The experiences explored above portray that most of the research conducted in African contexts is guided by Western ideologies. This therefore calls for research that is purely guided by African philosophies like the Ubuntu philosophy that manages to unite the whole of Africa with its diversity.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The reflections presented above together with the reviewed literature points to the conclusion that Western philosophies still dominate the research done in Africa despite the movement against it. There is still that power imbalance between researchers from the Global North and those from the Global South. Those from the Global North still dominate in writing about Africans using their foreign lenses. Such incidents occur as remnants of colonialism. Africans must therefore unite and come up with research that is guided by African philosophies. In other words there is need for decolonisation of research methods.

The relevance of research and its ability to impact positively on lives of the indigenous people can only be attained when it is driven by indigenous world views, cultural values and a language that is relevant to the indigenous people. Indigenous knowledge systems are rich in information that can help researchers in the African

continent to gather valuable information for local communities. Research should also be propelled by constructive discussions on knowledge systems and how these systems restrain and exclude other forms of knowledge, and the kind of actions needed for these systems to be more open and integrated.

It must also be concluded that a true African-centered research paradigm must be built on the Ubuntu philosophy which uphold the spirituality of the local people. African spirituality has seen Africans survive as one since time immemorial hence research which negates this aspect is not good enough for the African continent. African research must not be dominated by Western views instead the West must learn about Africa based on African perspectives that must be communicated by Africans themselves. African research must go beyond the confines of European classical humanism with its class, socio-economic and geographical limitations.

Implications and recommendations

Based on this reflection, the implication is that the debate on decolonising research methodologies in African research started long back but there is still Western dominance in how research is conducted in Africa today. The researcher recommends that African researchers must intensify the decolonisation agenda for meaningful and productive information gathering to occur in Africa. The researchers must also unite and come up with ideas on how they can deal with the diversity of the African continent so that research benefits the intended beneficiaries. In relation to ethics, this reflective article has portrayed that the ethical considerations adhered to in most African research, are based on Euro-centric and American philosophies. This negates full consideration of African values and norms. It is therefore recommended that African research must be guided by ethical considerations developed basing on African philosophies like Ubuntu. Africans must not just adopt ethics from Western countries, they must instead adapt them.

When it comes to research methods and processes, it can be noted that they heavily borrowed from the Global. This therefore calls for contextualise of research methods and processes. We need research methods and processes that make an African participant free to express him or herself. Research Boards and research institutions in Africa must be tasked with the role of developing research methods that are friendly to the African participant as well as the African researcher.

With reference to education, learning and practice, it is recommended that research institutes and institutions for higher and tertiary education must groom researcher from an African perspective. When they teach and practice research, it must be guided by the Ubuntu philosophy and other African philosophies.

In relation to research results utilisation, the researcher recommends that implementers must make use of research to benefit Africa and its people. Research results must be used to bring innovation and civilisation that address the needs of Africans. Basically the researcher advocates for research that values African diversity and that respects African philosophies.

CONCLUSION

The writer managed to present reflections of her experiences in researching in African contexts. Basically the reflection connects to the vast literature which portrays that research in Africa is still marred with the remnants of the colonial period. It is therefore imperative for all African researchers within the continent and in the Diaspora to unite and develop Afrocentric research methodologies. African research methods and processes borrow much from Western philosophies which mostly ignore the values and norms of the researched. Such an approach becomes more beneficial to the researcher than the researched. Efforts have been put to change the face of African research so that it captures the essence of African philosophies however little has been done to appreciate such initiatives. There is therefore need for a revamp of research methods and processes utilised in African contexts so that it becomes meaningful and beneficial to both the researcher and the researched. We need to contextualise research methodologies. Decolonisation of research methodologies, thus becomes a necessity.

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