Positionality at the Center: Constructing an Epistemological and Methodological Approach for a Western Feminist Doctoral Candidate Conducting Research in the Postcolonial

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Abstract

As a Western feminist supporting and researching gender equality in education in postcolonial contexts, I often wonder: Am I doing more harm than good? The privilege of my social location means that my efforts to support education in postcolonial contexts risk being patronizing, insulting, threatening, imperialist, and recolonizing. Yet neglecting and ignoring postcolonial contexts similarly reflects and reproduces a privileged position. I provide a tentative framework designed to address positionality, power, and privilege while creating an ethical research process for working in a postcolonial context. Beginning with an identification of positionality, the objectives of research, and guiding theoretical frameworks to situate the research in relation to the participants and context, I proceed to establish a methodology designed to minimize the negative effects of power and maximize participants' empowerment. I position myself as a *bricoleur*, layering feminist standpoint theory and postcolonial theory, and propose the collaborative data collection and analysis techniques, with particular attention to ethical and cultural sensitivity, using a social constructivist approach to grounded theory. This article highlights the need for Western researchers to reflect upon the power dynamics of their research in postcolonial contexts and develop a strategy for conducting empowering research that prevents the misrepresentation and exploitation of participants. Observations from my doctoral thesis data collection provide examples of how these concepts were operationalized in practice as well as reflections on the disconnect between theorizing and conducting ethical research in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords

postcolonial contexts, Western feminism, epistemology, critical research, bricolage, positionality, ethics

Introduction

As a Western feminist, I have supported gender equality in education in postcolonial contexts in numerous roles—from the perspective of a bilateral donor, supporting international, Canadian, and African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and as a researcher. Always political, positionality and identity are especially so for Western researchers in postcolonial contexts. For this article, the term "postcolonial" refers to a previously colonized space that is now technically independent. It can describe a nation-state or an area, group of people, texts, or ideas within a nation-state that may or may not be postcolonial itself. These spaces are officially decolonized but are usually characterized by a new imperialism (Harvey, 2003; Tikly, 2004) shaped by the economic, political, military,

and cultural hegemony of the West within the context of globalization (Tikly & Bond, 2013). Therefore, the Western researcher represents not only a colonial past but also a neocolonial present. In light of postcolonial critiques of Western researchers and international development, I have often wondered: Am I doing more harm than good? The privilege that accompanies my social location as a White, upper class, Canadian, academic woman means that, despite good intentions, my

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efforts to support education in postcolonial contexts risk being patronizing, insulting, threatening, imperialist, and recolonizing. This article will explore epistemological and methodological approaches to answer the question: Should Western feminists like myself do research in postcolonial contexts? And if so, how? It is widely acknowledged that the research process is infused with power, conceptualized here using a Foucauldian understanding of power as exercised and productive, dispersed through social interactions, operating at the microlevel, and best analyzed by examining strategies, tactics, and procedures (Elaber-Idemedia, 2002; Foucault, 1980). Strategies, tactics, and procedures that characterize power dynamics in research include participant selection, privacy, disclosure, interviews, observation, analysis, and the (re)presentation of research participants and their communities. Even with methodologies that seek input from participants and local stakeholders, the researcher is usually the primary decision maker and thereby the dominant figure in the research process. This is true of most research and acutely so for research with vulnerable populations. Due to the legacy of colonialism combined with ongoing neocolonial relations that characterize postcolonial locations, most research subjects in postcolonial contexts are considered vulnerable (Shamim & Quereshi, 2013), although to varying degrees. Patriarchal structures combined with colonial/neocolonial systems make postcolonial women a particularly disempowered and therefore vulnerable group (Spivak, 1988). Consequently, feminist research in postcolonial contexts has the potential to challenge and/or reproduce power inequalities; the latter is an especially strong risk for Western researchers who represent a physical and historical embodiment of colonialism and neocolonialism. Yet neglecting and ignoring postcolonial contexts because I am not a member of a community directly and negatively affected by colonialism and neocolonialism similarly reflects and reproduces my privileged position without drawing attention to or challenging unequal and oppressive structures. As Alcoff writes, the decision not to speak on behalf of others " . . . may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility . . . " (1991/1992, p. 17). In response to this deliberation, I provide a tentative framework designed to address my positionality and inherent power and privilege while creating an ethical research process for working in the postcolonial. Clarifying this framework prior to data collection, modifying it throughout, and then reflecting upon it afterward proved a useful process for reconciling my social location with my topic of analysis while crafting my identity as a researcher and academic and navigating the requirements of a doctoral program. The process of setting out an epistemological and methodological framework that integrates and accounts for the power connected to positionality is recommended for all researchers but particularly for new researchers seeking to establish the principles that will guide their research.

In discussing "cultural differences" in postcolonial contexts, it is overly simplistic to talk of community, language, daily functionings, and understandings of research, without also addressing questions of power, privilege, and position. The following outlines a two-pronged approach to navigating cultural differences for Western feminists conducting research in postcolonial contexts. The term "Western" is used as a simplified adjective for products, peoples, knowledge, and systems, emerging from Euro-centric high-income countries and cultures that are historically and contemporarily privileged by domination of global and local social and economic knowledge, power, and production systems, often at the exclusion of knowledge and perspectives of indigenous persons and/or groups originating in the global South. The first step is to identify the researcher's positionality, the objectives of the research, and the guiding theoretical framework(s) to situate the researcher and her research in relation to the participants and context. I position myself as a *bricoleur* (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), layering feminist standpoint theory and postcolonial theory to establish my positionality and research objectives. *Bricolage* is a phenomenon of leaning into the hybridity and cross-disciplinarity of research perspectives, stepping back from conventional understandings of research rules, and drawing from "numerous modes of meaning making and knowledge productions . . . " that are useful for understanding forces of domination and intersecting determinants of social location (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, p. 169). In this sense, the research process is developed to respond to the specificity of the local context and the critical theoretical perspectives driving the research. The second step is to identify a methodological design that will minimize the negative effects of power on the research participants and maximize their empowerment. I propose the integration of participatory and collaborative data collection and analysis techniques, with particular attention to ethical and cultural sensitivity, into a social constructivist approach to grounded theory. Privilege and positionality make undertaking research in postcolonial contexts difficult and risky but also, for me, essential to contribute to the empowerment of those disadvantaged by the same systems that have advantaged me.

The framework provided here is supplemented with examples and reflections from my doctoral thesis data collection, which consisted of two qualitative case studies of two public primary schools in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. My research examined the relationship between gender safety in schools (GSS) and student learning processes in Kenyan public primary schools. Building on the extensive literature demonstrating the high prevalence of gender violence in schools (GVS) in Kenya (Abuya, Onsomu, Moore, & Sagwe, 2012; Ruto, 2009; Wane, 2009) and sub-Saharan Africa more broadly (Parkes et al., 2013; Saito, 2013) and the recent proliferation of NGO projects seeking to eradicate GVS, my thesis seeks to elaborate on the factors that contribute to GSS and the relationship between GSS, GVS, and students' learning processes and outcomes. A gender safe school is defined by Stein, Tolman, Porche, and Spencer as a place where girls and boys:

> . . . have freedom to learn, explore and develop skills in all academic and extracurricular offerings to be psychologically, socially and physically safe from threats, harassment or harm in

all parts of the school ... [acknowledging and challenging] how conventional beliefs about masculinity and femininity constrain and undermine learning, participation and movement .... (2002, pp. 41–42)

Data collection methods included 7 months of participant observation, individual semi-structured teacher interviews and open-ended art-based individual student interviews with students age 11–15. Data collection took place in two schools, one in a town with a population of approximately 10,000 and the other in a nearby rural area. Both schools were coed public day schools with approximately 500 students ranging from nursery to Standard 8. Necessary government and university approvals were obtained at two stages: Initial approval was granted for participant observation prior to starting data collection. I then submitted another round of applications and received approval from the Kenyan government and my university's research ethics board (REB) for interviews midway through my participant observation stage. Submitting ethics applications and research permits after spending several months conducting observation allowed me to become more familiar with the context and obtain input from school stakeholders before finalizing the methodology for the more high-risk interview stage of the research. Interviews were audio recorded unless the participant preferred that they not be, which was requested by several teacher participants, in which case extensive notes were taken. Teacher interviews were conducted in English, but student interviews used a combination of English, Kiswahili, and Kikuyu with the assistance of a translator. The following includes a description of my methodological framework as well as reflections on the planned elements that ultimately needed to be adapted due to the requirements of either my Canadian university or the local context.

Positionality

There is no neutral or apolitical research (Halse & Honey, 2005; Lather, 1991; Mohanty, 1988). My opinions, values, beliefs, and social background accompany me through the research process, shaping each methodological and analytical decision that I make. I am a Canadian feminist and children's rights advocate; I believe that quality education leads to positive individual and social outcomes. I am particularly interested in education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, but most of my own formal education has taken place in Ontario, Canada. In my previous role as an education specialist at a bilateral donor, I felt mildly uncomfortable with the paternal systems through which we (the donor) dealt with NGO and recipient government partners, but I participated in them, eager to help facilitate what I believed was positive education programming for children and young people in postcolonial contexts. I now seek to question these assumptions and undertake participatory and emancipatory research to understand, from the perspective of children, parents, and teachers, what *their* vision of quality education is. Although my social position is a detriment to this research in some ways, I can use my position to leverage less

powerful voices to speak back to the powerful about their understanding of what education in the postcolonial is and should be. Said (1985) described a need for greater cross-disciplinary activity characterized by an awareness of the political, methodological, social, and historical situation in which intellectual work is undertaken, a commitment to dismantling systems of domination and a heightened sense of the intellectual's role in both defining a given context and in changing it. I therefore tentatively deduce that it is possible for me to research and write about the postcolonial, if I am aware of my influence, ensure that the representation of my participants aligns with their self-identities and emancipatory objectives, and continuously reflect upon the impact of my positionality and research on the participating communities.

Recognizing that research remains an inherently hierarchical process, the researcher should continuously explore opportunities to work in collaboration with participants to respond to community needs and contribute in a sustainable way to enhancing opportunities for participants and other stakeholders, within and also potentially outside the immediate scope of the research project. For me, this involved exploring opportunities to give back by enhancing the skills of students, teachers, and community members in ways that were deemed valuable by those individuals, instead of the preconceived notions I had brought about how I might contribute. My contributions resulted in a makeshift assortment of computer training, child-centered teaching activities, editing scholarship applications, letter exchanges with Canadian students, career days that brought in local professionals to speak to students, and advocating on behalf of the schools to local government bodies. These contributions were made at the request or with enthusiastic interest from community members. They did not inherently shift the power dynamics at play but sought to use the advantages of my positionality to contribute positively to the empowerment and enhancement of opportunities and skills of interested participants and community members.

What Kind of Feminism?

Concern with power and representation is fundamental to almost all kinds of feminism, which is rooted in an exploration of the power relations that characterize social interpretations of gender. As Lather writes, " ... to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry" (1991, p. 159). Feminist research involves a reframing of traditional approaches to research (Marshall & Young, 2006) in order to be considerate and reflective of the "multifaceted nature of gender" that permeates all research and social systems and practices (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007, p. 199). Feminist standpoint theorists assert that the starting point of knowledge about the structures and practices through which girls and women are oppressed and empowered should be their daily lived experiences, from which feminist researchers can work upward to critique the principles, practices, and influences of dominant institutions (Harding, 2007; D. Smith, 1990). Feminist research's emancipatory objective seeks to

challenge and ultimately change power structures to become more equitable, in part, by illuminating the voices and experiences of the less powerful and enabling the expression of "subjugated knowledge" (Collins, 2000). Emancipation and empowerment, in this sense, are not conceived of as the liberation of participants by the researcher and her knowledge, but rather as a more subtle shift in opposition to oppressive social structures that arises through a process of individual and collective self-reflection, the deepening of social knowledge, and the development of critical problem-solving skills and resources (Reid, 2004). This process may be initiated by the researcher but is dependent on the active engagement of the participants and critical exchanges between the researcher and participant as well as between participants. Research participants' understanding of their own context should be enhanced through a combination of individual self-reflection and engagement with the researcher during the process; this, for many feminist researchers, is even more important than generating new knowledge and theory (Lather, 1991; Reid, 2004).

Some research designs extend the participatory process significantly beyond what is described here by engaging participants as researchers. This has been done in many types of research, including with children and other vulnerable groups (Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2012; Nind, 2011; Pahl & Pool, 2011). While a fully participatory process like this had initially been my goal, it was considered to be too ambitious and complicated for a doctoral dissertation. While it may well be feasible, the candidate would need to have significant resources as well as a thesis committee and ethics board that are willing to recognize the importance of a highly flexible methodology. As a doctoral student, I was not the only individual controlling the research decisions in relation to my methodology and I faced time and resource constraints that tenured professors may not. Therefore, a fully participatory approach (where participants act as researchers and are engaged in every step of the research process from development of the research question and methodology throughout the analysis and writing) was considered too ambitious for my doctoral dissertation. Thus, the researcher's positionality can be simultaneously highly privileged by social location in relation to knowledge, education, racial, and socioeconomic status but still be constrained by a relatively subordinate status in the hierarchy of the university.

Postcolonial Theory

Western feminists are often critiqued for an essentialist concentration on the category of "woman" without analyzing how gender intersects with other forms of marginalization, including race, class, nationality, sexuality, and ability. Consequently, White middle-/upper class feminist scholars often appear to speak on behalf of all women, obscuring the narratives of women whose lives are radically different and less privileged. When used in reference to postcolonial contexts, a simplifying and patronizing portrayal of victimized "Third World women" emerges in contrast to liberated (White) Western women. Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" critiques

Western feminists whose research nurtures this dichotomy in which the heterogeneous lives of postcolonial women are produced and singularly represented (Mohanty, 1988). The dichotomy is created through practices that portray women's oppression as a global phenomenon; ignore the effects of racism, colonialism, and imperialism; and depict postcolonial women as the subjects of power, dominated by legal, economic, religious, and familial structures without individual agency (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty's powerful critique pushes feminists, particularly Western feminists writing about a postcolonial other, to carefully examine their research and representation for these colonizing devices. Alcoff (1991/1992) similarly encourages academics to reframe their approach to "speaking for" people in less privileged social locations by first attempting to listen and critically examining the impetus to speak on behalf of others, deconstruct the social location from which one is speaking and the effects that the location has on the truth and content of what is said, being accountable and responsible by inviting dialogue, conversation, and critique from the people about whom one is speaking, and finally, analyzing the probable or actual effects of one's words.

Feminism is not inherently Western but is historically rooted in postcolonial contexts as well as Western ones (Akin-Aina, 2011; Eltahawy, 2015; Mannathoko, 1999). Mohanty (2003, p. 46) reflects that global intercultural alliances are possible in an "imagined community of Third World feminism" comprised of women with diverse histories and social locations united by political opposition to systemic forms of domination. Community members recognize that race and gender are relational terms, disadvantaging some and advantaging others. This idea fits with other discursive understandings of gender as "always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined" (Butler, 1990, p. 139). The challenge for Western feminists is to expand their idea of social construction to include racial, colonial and neocolonial influences, as well as other forms of marginalization that contribute to different constructions of gender. Postcolonial theory is concerned with ways that power and language address the nature of cultural identity, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, and nationality in postcolonial contexts (Burney, 2012). The theory privileges postcolonial knowledge, both academically and in the research communities studied. Conventional research paradigms in European and North American universities are characterized by a set of values, attitudes, conceptualizations of time, space, subjectivity, knowledge, theory, language, and structures of power that frame them as superior approaches (Smith, 2012). To counter the historic roots of feminist standpoint theory and constructivist grounded theory (CGT) in Western intellectual traditions (Harding, 2007), postcolonial academic discourse can provide an effective critique that decenters Western knowledge assumptions. The research design should also be sufficiently flexible to adapt as it becomes informed by local forms of knowledge that emerge throughout the research process. Postcolonial theory is thus instrumental for me to analyze data and to critique my own research methodology.

Feminist standpoint theory is applicable in postcolonial contexts, given its emphasis on knowledge as locally situated and socially constructed and on producing knowledge for women instead of politically dominant institutions (Harding, 2012). While standpoint theorists have been criticized as essentialist (Flax, 1990), the attention brought by women of color and postcolonial theorists to the intersectionality of oppressions has forced standpoint theory to evolve and insist upon the recognition of multiple, often conflicting, experiences of women and feminists (Harding, 2007). The ''research context'' should therefore include microlevel forces that shape participants' understanding as well as macrolevel ones that influence the local community, aligning with Mohanty's call for an imagined community of feminists who encourage relational and systemic understandings of race, gender, and domination. Standpoint theory is possible in research about a community where the researcher is not a member, but it requires collaboration between the researcher and community members to ensure that the standpoint is properly understood, and the members of the marginalized group should always have the last word about their representation (Collins, 1991; Harding, 1993). To embrace the postcolonial, the researcher must deconstruct the power embedded in traditional approaches; recognize the validity of non-Western forms of knowledge; and integrate non-Western researchers, practices, and forms of knowledge through a process of intercultural collaboration that brings postcolonial perspectives and epistemologies to the forefront (Jankie, 2004; Swadener & Mutua, 2008). As theory establishes the groundwork for methodological choices (Marshall & Young, 2006), I now turn to an examination of the methodological, ethical, and analytical considerations with which I conducted research rooted in feminist standpoint and postcolonial theories. This discussion is accompanied by reflections on my experiences applying the framework in my thesis data collection and the inherent challenges and opportunities presented.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an analytical method with which to determine the essential themes and theory that emerge from a research project. Its methods are defined by Charmaz (2005, p. 204) as ''a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development.'' When the theory was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), its defining components included simultaneous data collection and analysis, analytic codes constructed from the data, constant comparison across data sources, the development of theory at each stage of the research process, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling. CGT maintains most of these components, but with a significant epistemological difference: A constructivist perspective rejects the idea that theory ''emerges'' from the data independently, recognizing instead the role of the researcher in shaping the narrative by drawing on her own experiences and beliefs and through her interactions with participants and the

data (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivism denies the existence of an objective reality, ''asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind . . . '' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). This is relevant for participatory research as it emphasizes the interrelationship between researcher and participant in the coconstruction of meaning (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

Grounded theory is frequently employed in feminist research (Clarke, 2012; Keddy, Sims, & Stern, 1996; Kushner & Morrow, 2003) and elements including an emphasis on direct quotes and the development of a situated theory based on the data align with feminist principles by emphasizing participants' lived experiences to build a legitimized theory and analysis (Arnot, 2006; Harding, 2012). While the researcher inevitably brings her ideological beliefs and assumptions to the project, the constant comparison between multiple data sources and simultaneous analysis and data collection allows the researcher to identify a theory that is empirically based, rather than imposing theory on the data (Clarke, 2007). The resulting theory is described as inductive or emergent because it is developed through an ongoing process while the researcher is situated within the data collection process, providing her with the opportunity to conduct regular member checks, discuss the analysis with participants and pursue relevant sources. The researcher brings her prior theoretical knowledge and perspectives with her (Bruce, 2007), but the immersion of the researcher within the data collection process allows the data sources to become the focal point which external theories are considered in light of, instead of a subsequent analysis which would be more likely to prioritize the theoretical perspective(s) and manipulate data to fit within them. As Charmaz states, questions from the coding process ''arise from [the researcher's] reading of the data, rather than emanating from an earlier frame applied to them'' (2006, p. 45). The emphasis on situated knowledge and the interrelationship between local and global systems makes CGT particularly relevant for postcolonial feminist research, described as starting with ''sensitizing concepts that address such concepts as power, global reach and difference and end with inductive analyses that theorize such connections between local worlds and larger structures'' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 256). Given its accordance with the principles of participatory, postcolonial, and feminist approaches to research, CGT is an ideal analytical method with which to scrutinize data and identify the relevance of feminist and postcolonial theories, while inhibiting the imposition of theoretical perspectives if they do not reflect the participants' lived experiences.

I applied CGT starting with the continuous and ongoing initial coding of my field notes and interview transcripts and memoing on the trends and themes that appeared to be emerging as I was still conducting research. To validate and explore the authenticity of my interpretation of the emergent themes from the initial coding, I held a series of member check interviews with teachers and students to ask them the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the initial findings and to explore them further. I chose a nontraditional approach to member check interviews by conducting them mostly with new

participants that had not been initially interviewed. The role of these member check interviews was not to validate the accuracy of our interview records or to confirm the direct interpretation of what had been said in a specific interview, but rather to verify that the emerging themes and analysis from the interviews reflected the lived experience of students and teachers in the schools. Morse (2015) asserts that the practice of sharing initial findings with other participants and asking how they relate to them provides a stronger assurance of reliability than sharing transcripts with initial participants by determining normative patterns of behavior and understanding. New participants and teachers were also used as a means of expanding the number of participants, as the interest in conducting interviews exceeded my expectations and I wanted to increase the opportunities for more individuals to participate. The validation process also took place through many nonformal conversations as I spent time in the schools on a daily basis. Sharing initial findings with participants and inviting their reflections helped me to correct assumptions and extend and sharpen emergent themes with both formal and nonformal input from participants, also serving as a form of theoretical sampling by strategically and specifically exploring theoretical categories previously identified for greater depth and detail (Charmaz, 2014).

Ethical Protocols

The ethical review process institutionalized in Western universities, and increasingly present in non-Western universities as well, is inadequate, particularly for research in postcolonial contexts (Kiragu & Warrington, 2012; Shamim & Qureshi, 2010). The review process is itself oriented toward a Western cultural framework and so conventional ethics review processes must be complemented by local ethical clearance (Schnarch, 2004; Shamim & Quereshi, 2013). Several models for establishing this complementarity exist, including Simons and Usher's (2000) call for "situated ethics" that reflects specific local practices. The specific local practices of a given context must be determined through continuous negotiation with research participants and community leaders in each individual research project, so that the community has the final say on what is and is not acceptable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Renold, Holland, Ross, & Hillman, 2011). This is not straightforward as communities are not homogenous and there may be conflicts or points of contention within the community. It is therefore important for the researcher to consider the repercussions of her decisions, particularly for the most vulnerable participants or affected parties, ask whose voice is being privileged and why, and always prioritize the safety and requests of community members over the depth of data collection. Ethical points of contention that may arise based on cultural context include privacy, disclosure, written versus oral consent, signed forms, and recording devices, among many others. These challenges vary by context, making a general postcolonial ethics procedure impossible; a situated ethics must be determined based on discussion and negotiation within the local context

and is not transferable to another locale. This is complicated, however, by the need to respond to the REB requirements of most Western universities prior to beginning data collection, meaning that the methods and ethical protocol have to be predetermined before approval for the project can be obtained, and that changes to be more responsive to the local context often result in a lengthy delay. One way to effectively address this challenge is to spend time in the community where data collection will take beforehand, discussing and formulating the methodology with the participants prior to the drafting a proposal or an ethics application. For graduate students, however, cost and time limitations can prohibit this early consultation from taking place. Breaking the ethical approval into two stages was an alternative approach that enabled me to first obtain approval for participant observation and during this time gain input from participants about the proposed methods and design for the interviews. I then reapplied for research permits and ethical approval for interviews after adjusting the methodology to respond to the local context.

To meet the REB requirements, some of the more participatory elements of the methodology had to be removed due to their concern over my inability to ensure confidentiality when discussing initial findings with groups of participants. Another major concern was the lack of clear protocol for reporting cases of child abuse should they be uncovered during data collection, as the legal obligations to report such abuse are much less clear in Kenya than they are in Canada. I was concerned, however, that an obligation to report could expose participants to more harm. Eventually it was agreed that, instead of declaring that I would or would not report cases of abuse, each case would be dealt with individually through joint consultation with my local Kenyan supervisor (also one of my thesis committee members), my Canadian thesis supervisor, and other local stakeholders if relevant. This protocol did eventually get applied in numerous cases where children were perceived to be in danger and one very complicated case in particular.

Near the end of my data collection, a teacher informed me that a Standard 6 girl at one of the schools where I was conducting data collection (not an interview participant) was being regularly raped by her stepfather who was rumoured to be HIV positive. The teacher was unwilling to report the incident to the Children's Services Department responsible for dealing with these issues for fear of dangerous repercussions. I therefore worked with my supervisors and my translator/research assistant to determine a solution whereby we could report the case so that the girl would be removed from the abusive situation without revealing the identity of the teacher. After months of pursuing the case, ultimately it was reported to Children's Services, the father was arrested and the girl was taken to the hospital for a medical exam. She reported the same story to the police that she had to the teacher, but the next day the doctors proclaimed her to be a virgin with a mental illness that caused her to make up the story. Both the girl and her father were released and returned home but there remain questions about the veracity of the medical report and the potential for corrupt influences. At the time of submission, we continue to

struggle to determine what is true and to guarantee the girl's safety. This case points to the fact that the obligation to report child abuse should not be taken lightly. The researcher assumes responsibility to protect her participants without necessarily having a clear mechanism for how to do so. I take this opportunity, however, to recognize the incredible support and dedication of my research assistant, Mary Nyambura Kimani (hereafter referred to as Mary),[1] whose conviction, perseverance, and ingenuity in navigating local official and nonofficial systems to guarantee the girl is safe and protected has garnered my eternal gratitude and admiration. Mary has been instrumental in helping me better understand the local context and relevance of our data more broadly but has been particularly crucial in advancing this case. We are now seeking assistance from a local child protection NGO and remain hopeful that our ongoing efforts will achieve a solution where we can rest assured that this child is safe, protected from harm, and receives necessary medical treatment and social support.

Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity

While there are many variables to consider in determining how to make a research project culturally situated and ethically strong, I focus on three elements commonly identified as central to postcolonial research ethics: language, consent, and giving back to the community. Language is a clear starting point for making the research process more accessible and comfortable for research participants. As a linguistic expression of culture and the main mode of communication, language is a critical factor through which to demonstrate respect for indigenous cultures. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) asserts that the cornerstone of cultural preservation and the "decolonization of the mind" [in Africa] are African languages. Thus, the use of local languages in research demonstrates respect for the local community and culture and commitment to decolonization, helping to develop trust between the community, participants, and researcher (Griffiths, 1998). A multilingual research project is inevitably characterized by a struggle for the researcher and research participant to understand each other. By using a local language, combined with translation to enhance accurate understanding and representation, the struggle for self-expression falls on the shoulders of the researcher and not the researched. The researcher should provide numerous options so that the language decision can be made by the participant(s). Teachers adamantly told me they wanted the interviews to be conducted in English, firmly turning down the option to do them in Kiswahili or Kikuyu. For the student interviews, Mary and I together introduced the art-based draw–write–narrate method (Ogina & Nieuwenhuis, 2010) to the class of participating students in each school, explaining the process in English and Kiswahili to ensure accurate understanding. During the individual interviews, students were presented with the option of doing the interview in English, Kiswahili, or Kikuyu. Most selected to use a combination of the three languages, and Mary provided clarification between us where necessary. Mary accompanied me on the interviews

and conducted the transcription and translation of audio recordings so that the words were not taken out of context. Critical to the success of the project was a strong working relationship between Mary and myself, so that she fully understood the objectives of the project and had the opportunity to contribute to and critique the process and the emerging analysis formally and nonformally. This was essential for guaranteeing that both the translation and my interpretation of the data captured the nuances of the participants' voice. That said, translation always holds the possibility of miscommunication and loss of nuance (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittewaye, 2007) and my lack of Kikuyu and Kiswahili language abilities remain a limitation of the research.

Guaranteeing the full consent of research participants, the fewest possible risks to participants and that participants fully understand existing risks is possibly the most important ethical consideration. Most projects solicit consent from participants at the outset, usually through a written consent form or a recorded oral statement. Shamim and Qureshi (2013) claim this is inadequate and that continuous negotiation and reaffirmation of participants' comfort and commitment throughout the research process is more appropriate. Kiragu and Warrington's (2012) study in Kenya provides some positive practices and points of consideration. To ensure that their child participants fully understood the consent forms, the authors started individual interviews by briefing their participant on the project and providing written ethical guidelines in the language of her choice (Swahili or English). They then asked her to explain in her own words what she read and ask some questions to ensure that the participant understands the significance of the consent form. They also stressed the voluntary nature of the project and that she would not get into trouble if she declined to participate. But the authors ran into an ethical dilemma when, during the interviews, they learned of potentially harmful situations some girls were facing. Feeling bound to the confidentiality they had entered into, they did not disclose the situation to others in the school or the community but, in retrospect, decided that in future they would renegotiate consent and ask the participant for permission to share her information with a person in authority. Conceptualizing consent as continuously negotiated might have avoided this dilemma, as they would have been prompted to discuss consent with the interviewees during and after the interviews, at which point they could address the situation with the participants.

An unexpected challenge I faced in negotiating consent was the cultural premium in Kenya given to welcoming and accommodating to guests, which was particularly pronounced in relation to me as a White person from a Western country with the support of the local and national Kenyan government. When I first introduced the concept of consent to a group of teachers prior to commencing participant observation, explaining to them that they can tell me they do not want me to observe their class at any point, the room full of teachers burst out laughing. One teacher then assured me in front of all the staff, "You are here to help. I think we will not say no to you." While this welcoming attitude was appreciated, it made it difficult to

determine when an individual was actually consenting to participate and not conforming to the expectation that they will do what I ask them because I am a high status guest. I adapted my protocol to make an individual request to observe a specific class each time and would back away at any sign of hesitation. Through this process, teachers did tell me that they were uncomfortable at various points, for example, because they were planning a review session and wanted me to watch the more structured lesson planned for later in the week. I also learned that few people would tell me outright that they did not want me to observe a class or conduct an interview with them, but that many would resist scheduling a time. In these instances, I would try to reschedule once or twice and if this proved unsuccessful, I took it as a cue that the unavailability of the participant represented her discomfort with the interview or observation and made the decision to exclude the individual from the study. For both students and teachers, we asked them to self-identify whether they wanted to do an interview by writing yes or no on a blank paper with their name and contact or parent's contact information. With students, Mary then contacted the parents and orally explained the interview process and the risks and opportunities to obtain their consent. We only interviewed students who both had indicated their consent to participate and whose parents had also provided consent, but we then paid close attention to their comfort level during the interview. After stressing at the outset that they can stop at any time and asking some questions to ensure their understanding, we asked students who appeared uncomfortable whether they wanted to stop during the interview, assuring them that this would not be a problem. A few took us up on this option while others stated they preferred to continue.

Feminist scholars assert that projects must give back to the research communities so that the community and participants benefit from the research project, but there are multiple interpretations of how to do so: with gifts, volunteer work, or other support; by raising awareness within the community about the research topic; by building the capacity of the research participants; by bringing critical attention to the research topic within the community; and ultimately influencing structural and policy changes related to the struggles of the community. I believe that all these elements are important and can be explored based on the needs of the community, but that one of the most significant is the development of the capacity building and critical reflection of the participants. A condition of marginalization is often unequal access to certain forms of knowledge (Wylie, 2004); thus, while the local population may be experts in understanding local power relations, they are often unaware of how oppression they face originated and is maintained (Narayan, 1988). The capacity building and critical reflection of participants is therefore essential, so participants can effectively engage with the researcher and contribute to the analysis and so they can become critically aware and able to advocate at the local level if they choose to following the project's completion, ideally in collaboration with the researcher. "Catalytic validity" is the extent to which research "moves those it studies to understand the world and the way it

is shaped in order for them to transform it" (Lather, 1991, p. 159).

Attempts to integrate opportunities for participants' critical reflection into the methodology again were challenged by the need to respond to my university REB's concerns regarding potential risks to the participants from collectively discussing the sensitive topic of gender safety and violence in school. The project had initially intended to host focus groups and participatory discussions with school community members throughout data collection to collectively discuss the emerging themes and their relevance to the schools and participants. This concept had to be eliminated, however, as it was felt by the REB that it posed too great a risk to the participants to be discussing even broad findings about issues of safety and child protection without being able to control confidentiality. Thus, for the protection of the participants, the focus group discussions were eliminated in favor of individual student and teacher interviews. Results were instead presented separately to different stakeholders; teachers, students, and government administrators were met separately to share findings and collect feedback. In doing so, all mention of teacher malpractice was removed for the protection of the students and staff. For the students, we held a reflective activity where the findings about what the students liked and did not like about their school, based on the interview data from both schools, was presented in child-friendly language and students worked in small groups to come up with strategies about how to make their schools safer. The students' strategies were then presented to the class and we discussed their strengths and opportunities. The teachers were not forthcoming with feedback in a large group setting, but critical reflection occurred more informally on an individual basis, with certain teachers discussing the findings with me before and after the interviews, on an informal basis throughout my time in the school, and following the presentation of initial findings. The catalytic validity was therefore not present in the open and obvious way that had initially been planned, but in a subtler and simmering process that some teachers selected to engage in while others did not choose to share their reflections with me. This alternative conception of catalytic validity resulted from a necessary flexibility and adaptability required to meet the principles and objectives of the methodology while respecting and prioritizing the safety of the participants.

Participatory Research

My interpretation of participatory research focused on providing space for participants to influence the research process, including the design, data collection, analysis, and writing stages. The researcher must use a flexible design, open to adaptation and redefinition of methodology—and even the research questions—as feedback from participants shapes the researcher's understanding of the culture and relevance of the research design (Hernstrand, 2006; LeCompte & Goetz, 1984). This interpretation reflects Smith's (1992) power-sharing model for research undertaken by nonindigenous researchers about indigenous peoples, whereby the research seeks the

community's assistance to meaningfully support the development of a research project. The model can be facilitated either by establishing a research committee made up of a selection of participants and community members (such as students, teachers, parents, the head teacher, and community leaders) who are consulted at each stage of the project or through the more informal but continuous negotiation of the research process with participants and community members. Participatory processes are sometimes criticized for compromising the analysis so that the results can be easily understood by participants (Morse, 1988), but they ultimately prioritize analysis that, at its essence and in its most basic terms, can be understood by the research community. This echoes the principles of feminist and postcolonial research described above as well as Lather's (1991) measure of "construct validity," which is determined when constructs are actually occurring, rather than existing solely in the researcher's perspective. Member checks that share initial analysis with participants to solicit their feedback have been called "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Participatory research is undeniably complicated and challenging, but the choice to use participatory approaches is one concerned with both the empowerment of participants and the reliability of results. If the researcher seeks to empower the communities they work with, they "cannot sloganize the people, but must enter into dialogue with them, so that the people's empirical knowledge of reality, nourished by the [researcher's] critical knowledge, gradually becomes transformed into knowledge of the causes of reality" (Freire, 1970/2012, p. 210). With CGT, the researcher(s) are continuously analyzing data for emerging theories and identifying new sources that may support or contradict an emerging theory. A participatory approach would have the researcher discussing her thoughts on emerging theories with her participants or committee, gaining feedback, conducting member checks throughout, and asking participants for help identifying new data sources that could otherwise go unrecognized. This could be taken further by involving research participants directly in analysis so that the narrative is coconstructed and the participants become more involved and invested in the process and outcomes of the analysis (Coad & Evans, 2008; Koelsch, 2013; McIntyre, 2008).

My experience attempting participatory research demonstrated to me that the concept of participatory research can itself be a Western researcher-driven initiative that is irresponsive to the participants' interests. It is a concept based on the premise that participants or local stakeholders *want* to be involved and contribute to the research process. What if the participants do not want to be researchers? Just as a nonparticipatory process can be imposed on participants who desire to be involved, so too a participatory process can be imposed on participants who do not want to be. This realization became abundantly clear to me during an early consultation with a group of teachers to gain their input on the proposed interview methods in order to adapt them to become more suitable to the school priorities and context. In response to my explanation and questions, only one teacher offered a suggestion. Most

looked bored and frustrated to be kept during one of the few breaks in their busy day. One teacher put her head down on her desk and slept through the consultation. I met similar issues trying to meet and consult with the administration alone. The schools were highly welcoming toward me and open to my research; many teachers and students were visibly eager and enthusiastic to participate in the interviews and observation. Yet the teachers and administrators had little interest in contributing to the research design, which they perceived to be my job and responsibility. Ultimately, I informally discussed the methods with teachers and administrators on an individual basis. On several occasions, a participant would then demonstrate significant engagement, input, and even follow up to adapt the methods to enhance their relevance. But this was always done on an individual basis when there was visible interest and enthusiasm. The reluctance to contribute to the research design may have been due in part to the fact that the research topic arose out of demand from donors and NGOs and a perceived knowledge gap as opposed to demand from the local community. Had the process been participatory from the beginning in the formulation of the research topic and question, participants may have been more interested in contributing to the research process.

Conclusion

To do research in postcolonial contexts, feminists from all social locations but particularly Western feminists who carry a legacy of privilege must maintain vigilance in analyzing the power dynamics of their research process to avoid misrepresenting, exploiting, and endangering their participants. The research should be responsive to the local community and driven by an emancipatory objective that is rooted in dialogue with participants and other community members. A perspective that embraces a combination of feminist standpoint theory and postcolonial theory provides a useful framework with which to conduct postcolonial feminist research, but it must be accompanied by the adaptation of research methods to be culturally sensitive using situated ethics. CGT and participatory research principles can guide the research design, data collection, and analysis processes to ensure that research is rooted in the local context, considers data from multiple perspectives, and puts participants at the forefront. This discussion intentionally avoids specifying whether traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation, or more innovative methods such as art-based or participant-led inquiry should be utilized, as the ideal methodology will be different for each project. Similarly, the ethical and cultural considerations must be locally situated and cannot be automatically transferred. Issues of inequality, violence, poverty, and oppression are among the most important challenges our inherently global society faces today. For Western researchers with unearned privilege and authority, to ignore these challenges is to reproduce and strengthen unequal structures. Mohanty's (2003) call for an alliance of Third World feminists from all social locations to collaboratively confront political structures of

inequality reverberates internationally. All feminists who are willing to critically examine themselves and their privilege should respond to the call with humility, openness, and eagerness to work together and learn from each other. Research is infinitely complicated; the more researchers of all social locations learn to lean into discomfort, invite criticism, and genuinely reflect upon it and the more we establish cross-cultural partnerships and understandings, the greater the potential contribution of our work for the participants, our partners, and ourselves. The reflexive processes described here are a fundamental undertaking for all researchers but are especially informative for new researchers establishing and modifying practices that will set the stage for a lifetime of ethical research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. Mary has read this paper and provided consent for her name and the descriptions of her work to be included. We are currently preparing an article focused more directly on the art-based student interviews that we will jointly publish.

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