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Improvising Ethics? A Collaborative Autoethnographic Account of the Challenges Faced when doing Fieldwork in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

There are many challenges faced by scholars when designing research that is ethically compliant. These include issues of consent, confidentiality, and how to give feedback to participants, for example. However less is known about how non-South African researchers, specifically Zimbabwean doctoral students, navigate ethical dilemmas when conducting their fieldwork whilst being registered in South African universities. This gap is especially concerning given the high number of Zimbabwean doctoral students in South Africa. This paper poses the following questions: (1) What are the challenges encountered by a Zimbabwean doctoral student doing fieldwork in Zimbabwe whilst being supervised in a South African university? (2) How can these challenges be mitigated? In answering these questions, the paper uses a collaborative autoethnographic approach to empirically ground its arguments. The paper argues that South Africa's higher education institutions have a duty to ensure research integrity of its students even if those students are conducting fieldwork outside South African borders. We observe that there is often a disconnect between formal ethical administrative processes and what actually happens on the ground. Potential solutions are to increase the autonomy and improvisation of students and supervisors in overseeing and doing research in these contexts.

Keywords: *Migration; ethics; higher education institutions; Zimbabwe*

Introduction

South African public universities have been enjoying a steady increase in the number of foreign students (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015; Chinyamurindi 2018) and this has been a dependable source of revenue for most of these institutions. A large proportion of these students are from the Southern African Development Community (Smith and Khawaja 2011), with Zimbabwe making a significant contribution to this number (Chimucheka 2012). These students, especially in the social sciences conduct fieldwork in their home countries, are away from supervisory oversight. Even though ethical compliance certification takes place in South African institutions for practical purposes, the actual monitoring of the fieldwork outside South African borders poses challenges and is fraught with potential ethical issues. This is not to say a flouting of ethical principles wilfully occurs, but rather, the nature of the Zimbabwean political, social, and economic context means that the nature of fieldwork is very different from the South African context. More improvisation is required on such aspects like getting clearance from the gatekeepers, getting hold of the potential participants, and getting them to participate. Often there is a disconnect between formal ethical administrative processes and what actually happens on the ground

While there has been a considerable increase in the enrolment of international students in South African universities, little is known about their research-ethic related challenges and how they deal with these challenges, particularly those whose fieldwork is conducted in their home countries, Zimbabwe in this case (Iwara, Kativhu and Obadire 2017). Previous studies have focused on the how

the South African higher education context impacts international students (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015), factors hindering the socio-cultural integration of international students in South Africa (Iwara, Kativhu and Obadire 2017), factors that affect international students' choice of higher education institution (James-MacEachern and Yun 2017) among other studies. There seem to be a gap in extant literature pertaining to research's methodological and ethical challenges for international students registered in South African academic institutions conducting their fieldwork in their native countries, specifically in Zimbabwe.

Educational related migration is at its highest and is set to be increasing on a yearly basis. The 2012 statistics indicate that nearly 4.5 million students were enrolled in institutions outside their country of citizenship, more than double the number reported in 2000, with a yearly growth rate of 7 per cent (OECD 2014). Historically, the predominant destinations of educational migration has been English speaking countries, as well western European countries (Lee and Sehoole 2015).
All forms of migration, including educational migration, has been largely understood in the context of resources. The traditional push and pull model indicates students are 'pushed' out of their home countries due to inadequate or inferior resources relating to education and are 'pulled' to a foreign land in order to attain a better education (Altbach 2004). These factors are clearly articulated in subsequent paragraphs and sections.

Zimbabwean Students in South Africa

South Africa, like many other emerging countries, has become home to many international students. Crush, Tawodzera, Chikanda, Ramachandran and Tevera (2017) note that 13.2 per cent of Zimbabweans migrating to South Africa are in search of education. The internationalisation of the South African Higher Education (HE) system, as noted by Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing (2015), has seen an influx in the enrolment of international students, particularly from fellow African countries. The increase follows a decline in the number of students in historical destinations mentioned above, which has seen more students preferring to enrol in emerging economies, such as South Africa (Lee and Sehoole 2015).

South Africa, by virtue of it sharing a border with Zimbabwe, attracts a significant number of Zimbabwean students into its institutions of learning (Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera 2016). Such a development concurs, with the argument by the OECD (2014), that 21 per cent of international students enrol in institutions housed in countries sharing a direct land or maritime border with their homeland. Such patterns have been generally observed in many parts of the world, including Southern Africa (OECD, 2014). A 2014 report focusing on global connectedness, revealed that emerging economies take part in the majority of international interactions and that the top ten countries, including South Africa, with the highest increases in global connectedness from 2011 to 2013 were all emerging economies (Ghemawat and Altman 2014). These emerging economies are argued to be strong regional as well as emerging global players (Lee and Sehoole 2015). South Africa, as noted by Lee and Sehoole (2015), has been instrumental in building international human capital by receiving international scholars from abroad, especially from the south of the continent as a regional hub. South Africa's role as regional and continental hub, as well as its regional contribution in the development of human capital, should be understood in the context of its relative strengths compared to other African countries and the global south. South Africa is a middle-income and emerging market, an element with particular ramifications in terms of international migration (Crush, Williams and Peberdy 2005).

Another important factor to consider in educational migration, particularly with reference to South Africa, is university rankings. South Africa is home to some of the highest ranked universities in Africa. According to QS World University Rankings 2021, South Africa boasts of seven institutions in

the top ten of African universities (https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings-articles/world-university-rankings/top-universities-africa). Another source has six South African institutions in the top ten in Africa (https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/africa). By virtue of these rankings, South African universities automatically become lucrative to many aspiring scholars in Africa, including Zimbabwe.

Availability of scholarships is also another pull factor as far as educational migration is concerned. South Africa, as noted by Lee and Sehoole (2019), is generous when it comes to scholarships, including those for international students. Considering the difficulties in raising fees for tertiary education due to a poorly performing economy, funding for international students pursuing studies in South Africa is a welcome development for Zimbabweans. Tertiary institutions were not spared of the effects of the ill-performing Zimbabwean economy. Academics, who are critical stakeholders in institutions of higher learning, have been leaving the country due to its poor performance (Musungwini, Mugoniwa, Furusa and Rebanowako 2016), thus negatively affecting research output, an important element in university rankings. An emerging scholarship on qualitative research in Africa, led by African scholars and scholars of Africa in the diaspora, recognises the ethical minefields in conducting research in Africa, particularly when being supervised outside Africa (Ayentimi and Burgess 2019; Johnstone 2018; Azungah 2019).

This work builds on previous work on research ethics and researcher identity when conducting qualitative work in communities other than ones' own (Christians 2000; Warren 2000; Owens 2003; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen and Tahvanainen 2002). The key themes of this more established literature are extended and applied to the African context by African scholars studying abroad but finding themselves doing fieldwork in Africa. In South Africa, scholarship on what it means to do 'ethical' research, influenced by recent debates on decoloniality, has questioned the roles of university ethical clearance committees. Shange (2021) argues that these committees are often vestiges of colonial control that try and shape what is and is not considered ethical research. In doing so, he argues that they reproduce western ideals of what ethics and ethical practices are. Whilst his arguments are centred around the decolonising of knowledge systems, it does point to a resurgent interest of how we conceive and negotiate ethical practices as African researchers in an African context. These debates are encouraging us to view university's ethical clearance committees as more than serving only instrumental purposes of compliance. These committees should also be concerned with the actual lived experiences of researchers in the field (Shange 2021).

Premised on the above discussion of educational migration, inequities between Zimbabwe and South Africa, and the need for students to do fieldwork outside the country of the university at which they are studying, we employ a collaborative autoethnographic approach to explore the tension inherent in this practice. The aim of this paper is to highlight these challenges and suggest ways that these can be mitigated, as well as argue that South Africa's higher education institutions have a duty to ensure research integrity of its students, even if those students are conducting fieldwork outside South African borders.

Methodology: Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)

Autoethnography is a well-established qualitative method in the social sciences frequently used by scholars in the disciplines of education, psychology, and sociology (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). A form of reflexive inquiry that interrogates the researcher's own experiences of social phenomena. Autoethnographic studies provide rich contextual data of the 'field' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Recognition is given that there is no objective reality that is universal and knowable in the manner that positivists view the social world (Lapadat, Balram, Cheek, Canas, Paquette and Michalak 2020). What is known is the interaction of oneself with the social world and the meaning thereof. 'Auto'

refers to the self, 'ethno' refers to the social world and 'graphy' refers to the writing down of the interaction between the self and the world (Ellis et al., 2011). However, as Ellis et al. (2011) caution, this is not simply creative writing. The relationship between self and social phenomena needs to analytical and framed within appropriate scholarly discourse or theory. Scholars of autoethnography contend that self needs to be analysed through the lens of the 'sociological imagination' (Lapadat et al., 2020). Hence, the personal becomes political or conceptual rather than self-indulgent. Despite reassurances that the method, when applied rigorously, is trustworthy. Critics of autoethnography claim that the method is too subjective and leads to obtuse forms of interiority that is not 'scientific' (Ellis et al., 2011).

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the method, and control for the subjectiveness, two other forms of autoethnography have emerged. First is duo ethnography, which involves two researchers in dialogue with each other as an attempt to understand a specific social phenomenon. The premise of duoethnography is that there needs to be disagreement between the two researchers. It is upon this disagreement that the trustworthiness of the method pivots (Sawyer and Norris 2013). In resolving the disagreement on a social issue or empirical case, new ways of theorising and understanding a case is evoked. The disagreement also is a check and balance to control for the, sometimes extreme, subjectiveness of autoethnography. The second iteration of autoethnography is collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez 2016; Norris and Sawyer 2017). This method involves two or more researchers analytically reflecting on an empirical case. There does not have to be any form of disagreement, as in the case of duoethnography. However, there are guidelines to control the integrity of the method. Over the last two decades CAE has become a popular form of inquiry, particularly in western Europe, Australia, and North America (Chang et al., 2016). In South Africa, CAE is still in its infant stage and occurs mainly in the domain of education studies and sociology. The Figure 1 below, adapted from Chang et al. (2016), shows the CAE process and its dimensions.

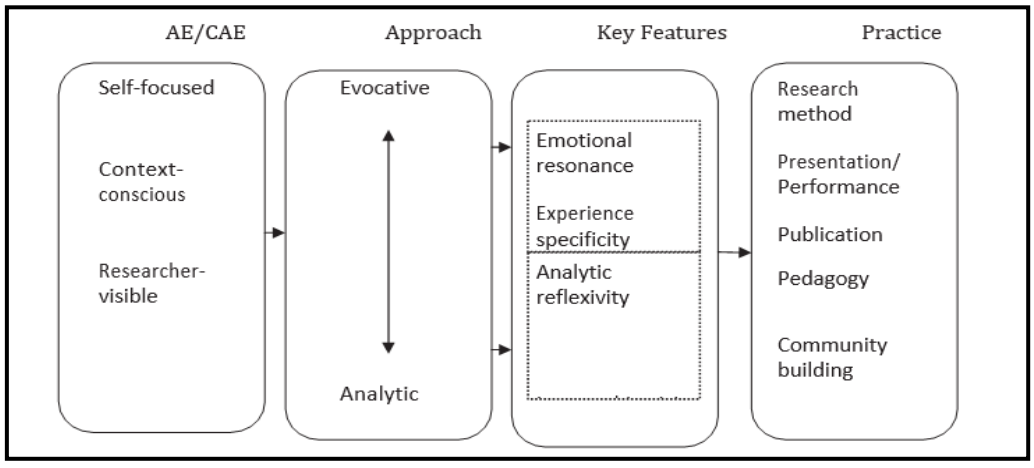

Figure 1: Common dimensions of AA/CAE.

The three main criteria of CAE are that one must be self-focused, context conscious, researcher visible, and critically dialogic (Chang et al., 2016). This paper complies by (a) focusing on the experience of the selves of FM and SR[1] as student and supervisor respectively, (b) provides and analyses the context of what it means to navigate ethical practices in an African context, (c) by focusing on oneself as a researcher, it also increases visibility and situates identities at the forefront of this study. Finally, the researchers engage in critical dialogue between themselves and the context

[1] FM refers to Farai Maunganidze, the doctoral candidate and SR refers to Shaun Ruggunan, the supervisor.

of doing and supervising ethical research in an African context. Our approach is along the spectrum of analytical and evocative. It is analytical because the researchers are trying to make empirical sense of what it means to do ethical research. It is evocative since the ways in which the researchers do this, is to evoke our individual relations and experiences in this sense.

This resonates with CAE's key features of emotional resonance by sharing the researchers' specific experiences and analyse them through critical self-reflection. Lastly, we see the outcome of using this method as a way of critically reflecting on the research question "How do students and supervisors navigate the ethical and practical challenges of remote supervision in an African context?" Through this publication, the researchers disseminate potential themes or 'findings' that may resonate with other scholars in similar positions. This may then initiate further conceptual and empirical work in the area, developing the scholarly debates on ethics beyond debates on compliance only. The nature of CAE means that the convention of scholarly writing in the third person is eschewed. The sections that follow are personal narratives reflections of FM (doctoral student) and SR (supervisor). The centrality of identity to the CAE method means that a brief autobiography of each author is needed to contextualise the study. FM is a is senior lecturer at a Zimbabwean university. He did his PhD at a South African university from 2013 to 2017. His thesis was entitled "The changing nature of professional work in Zimbabwe: Comparative case studies of lawyers, engineers and chartered accountants." Although he had registered as a full-time student, he could not be granted leave by his employer since he was not yet tenured, thus he had to mainly operate from Zimbabwe. He however spent the last three months in South Africa for his write-up. SR is an associate professor at UNIX university. FM was his first Ph.D. student to conduct work outside South Africa.

Data Collection and Analysis

Given the reflective nature of CAE, the data consisted of:

- Three Zoom (online) conversations between FM and SR that were focused on the research question of this paper. They lasted on average between 45 minutes and 60 minutes each and occurred during the month of February 2021. The researchers reflected on FM's doctoral study process, specifically both our experiences on issues of ethical practice and fieldwork. The researchers made notes during these sessions.
- A corpus of WhatsApp text chats and voice notes between FM and SR that are further reflections on issues of challenges in doing research that is ethical, when remotely supervised occurred from 3 of February 2021 until 17 of May 2021, was the second source of data.
- FM's final doctoral thesis, especially the chapter on methodology served as a source of data.
- FM's field notes and correspondence with the researcher during his fieldwork was also a rich source of data.

Data analysis was thematic, iterative, and resulted in four themes emerging. We recognise that the findings cannot be generalised given the qualitative nature and method used. Nonetheless, we consider the findings suggestive rather than conclusive as is the nature of exploratory qualitative studies. It is hoped to prompt debate in the area, especially given the theme of the special issue for which the article is submitted. The trustworthiness of the findings lies in the boundedness of the research aim and question. The next section presents FM's account of his experience in navigating ethical challenges during his doctoral work. This will be followed by SR's reflection as supervisor. SR has organised his section to reflect the emergent themes from the data.

FM Reflects on Negotiating the Ethical and Practical Challenges

The researcher's thesis focused on how professions have been changing in Zimbabwe and specifically focused on legal engineering and chartered accounting professionals. To adequately address the

research questions, there was need to interview professionals themselves, members of their respective professional associations, as well as senior members of staff in their respective departments at universities. Furthermore, there was also a need to tap into existing documents such as annual reports and magazines, especially from the professional bodies.

It was mandatory for the researcher to obtain an ethical clearance before engaging in fieldwork (see Musasa, 2021; Yallew and Dipitso, 2021). The researcher had to submit a completed ethical clearance (EC) form, which was to be accompanied by their interview schedules as well as letters from the gatekeepers. Their study sample included professionals, engineers, from the Ministry of Public Works, meaning they had to get approval from the Government of Zimbabwe. To obtain a gatekeeper's letter, the authorities at the ministry asked that the researcher bring their interview schedule as well as proof indicating that the researcher was a bona-fide student at the mentioned tertiary institution. This was to confirm the authenticity of their request. Even after availing all the required documents, obtaining ethical consent was not easy, as it took other interventions to eventually get it. The bureaucratic nature of the way government entities operates, coupled with a diminished respect for research, was responsible for the delay. The researcher had to submit more than three sets of the required documents at different occasions, frequently being told that they went missing along the way, forcing the researcher to submit again.

Having discovered the challenges and the fact that time was moving to their peril, the researcher had to come up with some other avenues to get the clearance. The researcher realised they had a former student who had spent a year with the Ministry during his work-related learning. After locating the former student, the researcher told him of their ordeal and clearly indicated that they wanted him to help. He agreed and after engaging with some of his colleagues from within, the approval was ready for collection within a week. The importance of social capital in a bureaucratic environment cannot be over-emphasised (Gokah 2006; Azungah 2019). In similar cases, some PhD indicated that they end up bribing their way out, paying some authorities to make sure one eventually gets the much-needed documentation for ethical clearance. Some junior personnel, as this study can establish, have a tendency of shutting the doors for one to see their superiors under the pretext that they are busy or are not around, just to ensure that one pays them. Yet, in some cases, the junior officers may just make someone feel indebted by blowing their efforts out of proportion. They may claim to have been sacrificing a lot, to the extent of putting their lives and work at risk for the clearance.

All this would be meant to make the student reciprocate by giving money or something related. The assumption is made, by some junior officers, that when one is learning outside the country, they are financially stable and exposes the PhD student to possible abuse and indirect force to pay bribes for research clearance. The trials and tribulations associated with obtaining research clearance in government and other state-owned enterprises, has seen some PhD students changing or adjusting their topics or methodologies to avoid official channels (Iwara and Obadire 2017). In one instant, a PhD student had to by-pass the Ministry and asked the participants to respond in their personal capacities (Ph.D. Fieldwork notes, 14 May 2018). Whilst both the supervisor and the institution would be waiting and wondering why the student is taking so much time to obtain the clearance, the latter would be busy building bridges through negotiating, and in extreme cases, bribing. Obtaining approval in Zimbabwe, especially from government ministries and state-owned entities, has been a nightmare for most PhD students registered in South Africa (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015).

In such an environment, ethical guidelines, as prescribed in research, becomes difficult to observe in their crude form. There is need for one to be patient, flexible, and pragmatic to get approval in a financially unstable environment where some people in authority take advantage of any possible avenue to earn an extra money, especially when they perceive the researcher to be financially sound. The researchers experiences, and that of other PhD students and former students, resonate well with

the work of Chege (2015) concerning the participants' expectations of gaining something from the research process. Paying a close attention to the pre-interview discussions and communications, either with the potential participants or gatekeepers to the potential participants, one would clearly note the emergence of some subtle expectations of certain gains, especially of a financial nature. On a related note, some legal professionals and audit-chartered accountants clearly indicate that they work for money, and bill on an hourly basis, leaving the researcher with no choice but to compensate for their time in one way or another. The practice of offering payment in any form to research participants remains controversial with scholars, arguing about the extent to which warrants payment coerce to unduly induces individuals to take part in a research activity (Largent and Lynch 2017). The need for patience, flexibility, and pragmatism relates well with the reflexive ethnography, which was the main method used to gather data in this study. Reflexive ethnography, among other tenets, emphasises the need for flexibility and programmatic approaches, as opposed to the rigid and conventional ways of conducting research.

Power Dynamics and the Ethics of Fieldwork

The actual phase of data collection also had its unique challenges in the study. The study's participants were engineers, legal professionals, and chartered accountants. According to Maunganidze (2019) these are elite professionals, thereby having a bearing on the dynamics of power between the participants and the researcher. The power dynamics were tilted against the researcher, who was seen as of an inferior academic standing. The insider-outsider dichotomy was at play, with the professionals being the insiders and the researcher the outsider. This challenge is in line with the sentiments shared by Voldnes, Grønhaug and Sogn-Grundvåg (2014), when they highlighted complications in business related inter-cultural research. Getting them to agree to an interview session was not easy and, in most cases, the researcher had to rely on social capital once again. The researcher had to use colleagues or acquaintances in these fields to gain more access. These had to liaise on the researcher's behalf with their fellow professionals. It was easier for one professional to convince a fellow professional to participate before the researcher is cast into the limelight. In return, the researcher had to buy the colleagues and acquaintances, as well as the participants, some lunch. The dilemma, as noted by Slevitch (2011), calls for ethnographic researchers to engage in real discussions with relevant stakeholders of the study, including participants.

Although the study was not of a political nature, years of a polarised political environment has led to challenges of trust issues. Some participants were not comfortable being recorded, even after narrating the elements of confidentiality, thereby forcing the researcher to take notes during the interview. A case in point was when a legal professional refused to be recorded by saying the following.

> *You know I am a lawyer and I talk a lot. I may drift into dangerous waters and this being Zimbabwe, you will never know who will have access to this audio. Any discussion has political dimensions to it, especially here in Zimbabwe. In addition, maybe you [referring to the researcher] are there in South Africa on Presidential Scholarship and you may spill the beans against me. Please let us just talk, no recordings.*

The issue of a politically polarised environment and its effect on research, has also been alluded to by some researchers (Nhodo, Ojong and Chikoto 2021). Depending on the perceived political depth of the issues under discussion. Some participants may agree to be recorded but are constantly in fear, hence, they end up giving conflicting responses and information (Nhodo et al., 2021). Uneven distribution of power between the researcher and the participants, emerged as another ethical and practical challenge. In some instances, during interview sessions or just before the interview starts,

a participant would just indicate that she/he will give the researcher 10 or 15 minutes, as opposed to an hour which was agreed upon during the pre-interview discussions. This automatically meant some items on the interview guide were not adequately addressed.

To put this into context, the study was conducted during a period when Zimbabwe was faced with an acute shortage of basic commodities such as fuel, bread, mealie-meal, among others. One would receive a call that fuel has been delivered somewhere and they would abort the interview or simply start giving short answers, which are usually difficult to make sense of. In such cases, if the participant agrees, the interview was rescheduled and would continue when they have time, however, the flow of the interview was greatly compromised. Similar encounters were also witnessed when the researcher was interviewing legal practitioners. Court times would change, and they had to rush and attend court sessions, or in some cases, a walk-in client would just come, and automatically attention was shifted from the researcher. In some cases, the participant would just be kind and allow the researcher to call and ask them to clarify on some aspects later, hence the requirement to be flexible in environments, which rendered the researcher less powerful. Råheim, Magnussen, Sekse, Lunde, Jacobsen and Blystad (2016), as also revealed in this study, acknowledges that in some qualitative studies, the researcher has less power and can be vulnerable to manipulation.

A Supervisor's Perspective

FM was the supervisor's first Zimbabwean doctoral student doing fieldwork in Zimbabwe whilst registered in South Africa. The nature of his Ph.D., which was a qualitative study examining the changing nature of professions in Zimbabwe, meant that he needed several gatekeepers' letters to secure university ethical clearance. (Email correspondence, June13th to October 11th, 2017). In critically reflecting on the process of ethical clearance application and the subsequent fieldwork in Zimbabwe, the supervisor identified four themes that emerged from this process. These are resonant with the themes identified by FM. The themes are:

1. Negotiating Bureaucracy of UNIX

As Shange (2021) argues, the development of ethical clearance committees at South African universities and their attendant bureaucracies, are an outcome of historical colonial processes. The existence of such committees has historically and currently allowed the conduct and publication of unethical research. For example, the University of Stellenbosch's ethics committee approved a questionable study of the cognitive functioning of Coloured women in South Africa. As Strode, Freedman, Essack and Van Rooyen (2021) show, all the bureaucratic checks and balances of an ethics committee were not sufficient to prevent a deeply racist study from being conducted. A similar case occurred with Nicoli Natrasse's study on Black students' career choices, that was both conceptually flawed and racist, yet approved by the University of Cape Town's ethical clearance committee (Adesina 2020).

At the same time universities are concerned with protecting themselves from litigation. It may also be too cynical to suggest that universities are not concerned with the actual ethics of the research process. The massification of higher education in South Africa, with an increased number of students doing empirical research, means added administrative burdens in processing ethical clearance applications. Massification of student numbers, coupled with a decline in staffing and senior academic staff, often means EC processes are slow and cumbersome. In most cases, applications can take three months at least, to process before permission is given. This added to the time taken to develop and define a research proposal means that often a full academic year has passed, with the only outcomes being the research proposal and ethical clearance. This may not be an issue, if not for the pressure to graduate doctoral students in the minimum completion times of three years. From the supervisor's experience, the recent introduction at UNIX of an online ethical application portal has not reduced the time it takes to obtain EC, but it has made for better record keeping and

accountability.

In overseeing FM's EC process, it occurred to the supervisor that an unintentional consequence of EC application systems was for students to view EC as a negotiation of a processual bureaucratic system rather than an opportunity to learn about ethical research. The teaching and learning of EC is a process autonomous from the bureaucracy of it but the supervisor's experience of it with FM and a fifteen-year-long career of supervising research students, shows that these have become conflated processes.

2. Negotiating Access and Building Trust

EC committees require gatekeepers' letters as part of the EC application process (Johnstone 2018). In countries such as Zimbabwe, these become difficult to procure. When they are procured, as FM did, it is generally an onerous and time-consuming process. More so than obtaining these letters from South African organisations. The expectation of bribes for these letters is high. EC committees see gatekeepers' letters and assume that this equates to access, but as FM's experience shows, a second round of access, sometimes even a third, must be negotiated when actually in the field. These subsequent negotiations of access are documented by Azungah (2019) and Gokah (2006) in their own work as Ph.D. students doing fieldwork in Africa. This is not documented in any official EC application or follow up and remains within the domain of the relationship between the student and the supervisor. It further lends to the belief in the mismatch between the formal EC process and what occurs in the field. Building of trust is an essential strategy even after obtaining official gatekeepers' letters. The building of trust, as in FM's experience, often overrides official gatekeeper's letters, and requires social and psychological capital, emotional intelligence, and astuteness to navigate. These are qualities not all doctoral candidates possess and are qualities over which supervisors have no control. As Masvaure and Maharaj (2014) show in their fieldwork work at a Zimbabwean mining company, often an unofficial gatekeeper(s), from a community, are needed to actually negotiate access, despite the securing of official gatekeepers' letters. Securing these gatekeepers is an exercise in trust building.

3. Negotiating Infrastructural Limitations and Borders

Zimbabwe has been described as a failed state, and when compared to South Africa, the resource and infrastructural base is severely lacking (Skalnes 2016). This had implications for travel between the countries and within the countries when doing fieldwork (Ogbonna 2017). The nature of qualitative fieldwork requires face to face interviews. In FM's case, this meant extensive travel throughout Zimbabwe in precarious conditions. The supervisor was often incommunicado with him during these periods due to lack of electricity and communications infrastructure. Supervisory oversight was not possible in real time or even in the same week. This highlights the tension between South African universities wooing and accepting foreign African students, but often not having deep insight into their prospective lived experiences of fieldwork in their home countries.

4. Physical and Psychological Distress

Much is made of the safety and comfort of participants in research (Råheim et al 2016). Most university ethical clearance committees insist on ethical clearance applications demonstrating that no harm comes to participants (Råheim et al 2016). In some cases, counselling needs to be offered to participants that may have been triggered by the interview or questionnaire, especially in areas considered sensitive (Råheim et al 2016). However, very limited to no attention is given to the mental and physical well-being of the researcher. This is especially important when the student is conducting fieldwork outside South Africa in under resourced or dangerous conditions. The official protocols of

ethical clearance committees are not designed to consider these conditions.

Improvisation in the field becomes the norm. As work by Ayentimi and Burgess (2019), Gokah (2006), Johnstone (2018) and Azungah (2019) show, concerns for researcher safety in Africa, especially when conducting qualitative research, is under explored in the literature on fieldwork and ethics. In FM's case, being unable to communicate with his supervisor in real time, to confirm if improvisations to the fieldwork were acceptable, and his supervisor not being able to join in him the field, which is a standard practice of their doctoral supervision process, led to much anxiety. This 'fieldwork anxiety' causes psychological distress that is compounded by distance and difference in national cultures and not accounted for in formal ethical clearance processes. In Ayentimi and Burgess's (2019) work (2019), they describe how a Ghanaian student registered at an Australian university but conducting fieldwork in Ghana, experiences this form of fieldwork anxiety.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to answer the question, "How do student and supervisor navigate the ethical challenges of remote supervision in an African context?" Through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, reflecting on both the researcher's and supervisor's experiences, they have identified four themes, which should be explored further in future work. These themes show that there may be two parallel processes in the practice of ethical fieldwork by students conducting fieldwork outside South Africa away from supervisory oversight. First is the official South African university ethical clearance process, which is structured and formal, which then grants permission for fieldwork to take place once compliance with its criteria is met. The second process occurs post this process, where improvisation in the field is needed inevitably to complete fieldwork. This improvisation exists in a liminal space between what is allowed and not allowed by formal ethical clearance committees.

This study is not critiquing the sterling work done by university ethical clearance committees. Rather suggesting that debates and discourse on ethical practices in the field be expanded to capture experiences of foreign African students registered in South Africa that have to have their field work remotely supervised in their home countries. These students' fieldwork often exist in a liminal space between formal and informal strategies to complete fieldwork. The study prompts discussions at universities about these experiences to recognise that they do happen. This will allow students to feel supported and affirmed, prepare supervisors for these experiences, and suggest ways to negotiate these liminal ethical spaces. Ultimately, this leads to greater integrity of ethical research processes of a student cohort that is a critical comment of the South African higher education system. A second contribution is the use of collaborative autoethnography as a method between student and supervisor to critically reflect on their supervisory relationship as a means of developing a toolkit for qualitative researchers doing fieldwork in challenging contexts.

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