



*Publishing processes, especially in the social sciences, cannot be viewed separately from social and political influences, which raise questions of ethics and create power imbalances. These effects become visible when observing conventions of authorship and publication in critical research, like the deliberate omission of voices and the choice of (not) being included in et al. (et alii).*

Increasingly driven by principles of neoliberal capitalism, precarity makes it imperative for academics to publish. However, publications in the *wrong* journals or on the *wrong* topics can make or break young scholars' careers (Vossen 2017). Even established scholars with privilege in their respective disciplines become vulnerable when questioning powerful regimes and institutions on matters of principle and justice, as the refusal of appointment and tenure cases of Steven Salaita and Nicole Hannah-Jones in the US testify. Original critical research, and decisions about questioning the values and conclusions of senior scholars, are risky. The status quo rules. Safe compromise might involve theorisation without self-reflection; or complicity in racist and settler colonial discourses disguised as 'objectivity'; or a refusal to acknowledge that research can adversely affect vulnerable communities and precarious scholars.

While giving some lesser-known academics a way of raising their profile, social media also enable celebrity scholars to elevate their profiles further (Duffy/Pooley 2017; Turner/Larson 2015). Engaged intellectuals who take part in struggles over rights and justice face disincentives from remaining in the academy. Precarious and junior scholars and the communities they research seem to bear a disproportionate burden for challenging poor pay, biased citation, and peer review (Berg/Gaham/Nunn 2014; Peters 2011), while also fighting the erosion of rights and democracy, the occupation and colonisation of land, and the erasure of indigenous knowledges. The price of social and political critique falls more heavily on some shoulders than others, as does the work of representing diverse constituencies in the social sciences. While it is possible to see historical and geographical patterns of privilege revealed (Mott/Cockayne 2017), who is named, who is not named, who is cited as a major theorist, who is cited as **et al.** are not always straightforward matters (see **et al.**, Terhart 2023). Citational practices involve complex calculations of ideology, vulnerability and risk. In light of these concerns, via two vignettes drawn from the author's longstanding research, this paper asks what an attention to *et alii* – to naming practices and erasures in academic publication –

reveals about power imbalances between ways of knowing the world and between researchers *as researchers*, as *precarious workers* and as citizens.

This can be expressed better in the paper's guiding Research Questions: In what ways do researchers and writers reflect on their contribution, theoretical and political evolution and grasp of the research process, and what does this presence or absence reveal about power dynamics in fieldwork, in the arena of social justice, within research teams and between researchers and their subjects? In what ways do research contexts, ideological conflict and the dangers and imbalances of power, affect the writers' ability to include voices, to name places and events and stories, to dwell on the perpetrators and on avenues for redress?

### The unequal risks of critical research

I would like to take this opportunity to outline the ways in which different perspectives, needs, experiences and levels of ethical and moral commitment and political risk are subsumed under the notion of collaborative research on media and communications, by reflecting on two vignettes (Cross 2017; Humphreys 2005) of research and writing. More specifically I am going to focus those branches of *education studies* and *media and communications* devoted to analysing the role of media in governance and participation. First, while nominally situated in the field of media and communications, this work is intertextual, necessitating a deep dive into history, ethnographic observation, political theory, discourse theory and semiotics. Second, at the heart of collaborative research about the role of media technologies in fascist and/or democratic regimes, there necessarily sits a particular understanding of social science research as potentially normative. This normativity manifests in the prescription of a dominant orientation towards epistemology (and ontology) or in questioning and critiquing extant norms in those fields.

Of course, with particular reference to the second vignette, in ideal circumstances all parties in the research find themselves on the same normative wavelength, moving towards or co-constructing conclusions (Lingard/Schryer/Spafford/Campbell 2007) which all involved can endorse. In reality, many of us find ourselves caught up in messy collaborations dominated by neoliberalism, ideological contestation and scholarly egos (see *i.d.R.*, Musche/Grüntjens 2023). Some people's labour or experience is extracted by senior scholars. Some may go along with a line of argument that we do not entirely

subscribe to *because, hey, it's a publication!* And who has the time, especially as the fourth author, to argue the toss? Finally, but equally important, the experience of co-constructing research with multiple parties when what one is doing is politically risky or might uncover experiences of trauma, is not often explored. In particular, establishing in advance the shared goals and eventualities of the research, its pathways to authorship and dissemination, and the ultimate hope that it will reshape democratic policy, governance and practice, is much less fraught but also less pressing when there is no significant risk to life and reputation. In situations of significant risk, urgent questions arise about the research itself as a means and an end.

We find ourselves at a critical juncture historically. The global far right has been emboldened. Governments from the US, France and the UK to Brazil, India and China have sunk so deep into racist and islamophobic rhetoric that the incarceration and death of Muslims, Black and Brown citizens and other ethnic minorities can all be defended based on a cry of *Freedom of Speech*. Meanwhile, scholarship from the civil rights tradition of Critical Race Theory, and from Global South and Black Feminist Theory which built on decolonizing scholars such as Franz Fanon, is cast as dangerous and other.<sup>1</sup> So, both geographically and historically, there is an element of serendipity in finding oneself a silent partner in research that carries significant risk or that aims to speak truth to power, or one whose voice sings through the research but is absent from authorship, or an **et al.** (et alii) or in allocating another scholar or even a participant into that role. So, invisible does not always entail deliberate exclusion: There may also be an element of protection, watching reactions before claiming the research, or of necessary humility. However, behind this formulation and practice there is a rigid structure with unwritten rules and risks that are unevenly shared between individuals and institutions, between publishers and authors and between research participants and research scholars.

### Vignette 1

On an interlinked series of projects exploring the articulation of traditional and social media tools with violence, discrimination and mediated discourses of propaganda, hate and disinformation in countries generally termed *democracies*, the lead researcher and their team members face multiple challenges. First, ensuring that the research is never of more interest or value than the lives and livelihoods of the research participants and subjects. This might involve agreeing not to discuss certain theoretically

interesting but triggering things to prevent further grief and trauma, creating space for both research subjects and researchers to think and feel their way into the experiences being shared and discussed. Second is the plethora of data in this sphere, the millions of subtly or openly hateful messages, GIFs, memes, videos and speeches generated and circulated by the right and the far right. Such data needs to be gathered, anonymised, analysed into taxonomies and structures to show parallels between different regions and languages, and written about in ways that will not trigger further trauma and pain in audiences or readers. Finally, there is the question of naming – many of the research subjects suffer from indescribable discrimination, dehumanisation, violence and injustice. Revealing this though policy and academic writing which is verifiable and reliable in a way that can both be used to further a retributive justice agenda but also prevent further trauma and victimisation means walking a precarious line between revealing and making invisible key informants and sources for the research. As one participant put it:

*I want to scream from the rooftops about what has happened to me, about the rape threats, the morphed sexual images of me that I get sent daily to my inbox, about the man who threatened my daughter on Instagram saying 'we'll get you, your mother is a feminist whore' but I have found that life is easier if I stay silent, don't rock the boat. Of course, I continue my activism, my work against misogyny and anti-Blackness, but I try to ignore all this additional pain, and hence I risk making it worse. That's why you can't name me.*

And as another participant in a different geographical region summarised:

*My work in representing this family (of the victim of a racist murder) relies on you not discussing or revealing details which will draw attention to us, to our struggle, to our connection to you. Even though we desperately need the support, we cannot afford a spotlight on this work. It's too dangerous for us. Every day another one of us dies or is imprisoned on false charges.*

Thus, in writing up and dissemination, there are multiple silent, almost invisible, et alii. Equally importantly, revealing the names of the research team members involves various forms of risk: Trolling and hate speech against them and their institutions, potential doxing and physical intimidation, threats to research participants, legal threat from ideological and

governance bodies, and incarceration or deportation. In an academic industry where the individualisation of researcher names and their academic *branding* is central, where transparency is viewed as an ethical necessity, the pressing need to *erase* the brand, the identity and names of scholars in order to protect lives and continue research poses tough and complex choices.

This vignette describes an ideologically and epistemologically cohesive, yet socially diverse research team of scholars of colour, several of us working class, many located in the global south, including activist scholars with histories of organising against gender, caste and race oppression or on issues of disability, sexuality and class. We worked with an equally diverse set of Afro-descendant, Indigenous, Asian, mixed and white or mixed Latinx communities across three continents. The impact of this collective politics on our research is manifold. We make decisions about using what anthropologist-poet Renato Rosaldo has called *deep hanging out* ethnography (Clifford 1996) – ethically committed qualitative research – and we make a collective commitment to our research subjects to strive for justice while also amplifying their voices, protecting them and constructing theory that will challenge the oppressors and change the minds of those who are silent bystanders. All of this also makes for an exhausting and agonising commitment. We find ourselves constantly falling short. We find ourselves shocked, unsettled and grieved by the disinformation and misinformation collected (the messages of hate are also targeted at people like us and our families). The notion of objectivity is constantly being interrogated as we make typologies and taxonomies of hate. Ultimately, *not naming* becomes an imperative to keep people safe. We cannot even name people in acknowledgments. In key instances we cannot even name ourselves in the outputs, which become policy and think pieces circulated to human rights organisations but without the usual academic fanfare. We refuse the kudos of publication in order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of our research subjects. Our **et al.**s dwindle correspondingly. While to be named is to bring fame or notoriety, and the possibility of other jobs, funding, and work, to be named is also to be in danger, to endanger and to bring danger into the field. Our work is on othering, and we other ourselves to continue to pursue it. In the second vignette, discussed below, a different dynamic of power, knowledge and naming plays out. It implicates a fundamental question about the positionality of experience and of situated knowledge in research teams shaped through different epistemological traditions.

## Vignette 2

On a cross-national project about citizenship (Banaji/Mejias 2020), young people and activism (which involves attention to mediated and pedagogic materials, to representational and pedagogic strategies for participation in democracy), a group of highly experienced researchers from different countries and social science fields find themselves struggling to agree on an epistemologically and ethically aligned definition of key terms and parameters. These definitions are needed to work towards a model showing the links between, and directionality of, particular forms of youth political and civic praxis. Among other issues, differences cohere around ideological allegiance to the struggles of historically marginalised identities and communities or a privileged allegiance to an implicitly white, capitalist and normative liberal view of citizenship as a set of rights and duties ensuring the current existing state of affairs. Bluntly, some of the senior scholars on the team lean towards a highly unreflexive and normative capitalist view of what constitutes *good citizenship*. This plays out in how they conceive of *responsible citizenship* and *illegal/uncivic behaviour*. Others have more critical and/or inclusive definitions. These positionings are of utmost importance in regard to the types of young activist communities who will be studied and for interpreting the findings and pathways to civic action. Despite these differences, early in the project a publication policy is agreed which aims to name as many as possible on every publication, in particular, junior researchers who need publications. *The politics of the research/researchers* continues to be an issue as the research progresses, expressing itself methodologically, tactically and thematically. There are strained discussions about the limits of quantification. Compromises get made in order to write and publish coherent articles, every one of which has a chain of **et al.**s. Several of the researchers are overwhelmed by the fieldwork, and discover that several of the research subjects are also overwhelmed by activism. Coherent patterns emerge. Ultimately pragmatism ensures that two divergent conceptual and epistemological trajectories with regard to civic and political socialisation are incorporated into the outputs. Some team members find themselves named for practical reasons on publications with whose line of argument, conclusions and epistemological assumptions they do not agree. Some decide not to be named because of an ethical stance towards these disagreements, and their labour and contributions disappear. All of these debates, tensions and feelings remain as ephemera.

Here, in vignette 2, a quite different dynamic is at play than in vignette 1. The team was almost exclusively white and European, with only three out of 37 team members being scholars of colour initially and only two by the end. While a number of researchers worked and still work in precarious jobs attached to and under the patronage more senior scholars, the class composition was generally middleclass. In parallel, reflecting the *extended networks* of the research team, the participants drawn into the research tended to be white and middle class, albeit with multiple commitments to different forms of equality and justice. There is a considerable weight given to quantitative studies and methods in the field, and some anxiety around qualitative and ethnographic work, especially that which draws on intertextual visual and historical methods. Practical political commitments to equity and justice are viewed by some as forms of theoretical *bias* (Hammersley 2000), although by the close of the project they were more implicitly recognised as important. When it comes to publishing, not all those named feel comfortable about the conclusions drawn based on the data they collected. The findings from the quantitative studies appear to be more precise, more generalisable and more technicist than those emerging from the qualitative work. And yet it is these strong conclusions that are seemingly most shaped by the troubling normative assumptions that the project set out to question. This theoretical and methodological messiness and hierarchy is invisible in individual publications (although it continues to be a haunting presence across the scholarly work emerging), while the multiple *et al.* authors of each piece lend an aura of egalitarianism.

## Discussion

Vignettes 1 and 2 are very different: In the first, the success and plausibility of the research are entangled with matters of life and death. The imperative to *do no harm* takes on both, material and psychic contours, and the pedagogy of the lead researcher in training and shielding others involved in the research process must be capacious enough to encompass the secondary trauma that younger and less experienced colleagues and audiences might take on when encountering the research. In the second, several researchers' distress, tension and confusion are real but removed from the work and lives of individuals and organisations, the possibility of doing harm remains at least partially discursive: A flawed model of youth civic socialisation may ultimately lead to the exclusion or stigmatisation of particular types of young citizens, but is not immediately life-threatening. However,

what both vignettes demonstrate – other than the messiness of social science research at its conjuncture with real life – is the importance of edges and invisible currents, ideas, persons. The contestations involved in epistemological standpoint, interpretation and argumentation have inevitably shaped the outcomes of research and the theoretical models arising from it in multiple ways.

The science of teams and team building is, of course, a crucial factor in both vignettes, since it is imperative that the teams trust each other's ethical and political priorities as well as respect each other's epistemological training. As Cheruvelil et al. (2014: 38) argue in their piece on the importance of diversity in research teams,

“developing the skills to build, maintain, and lead high-performing collaborative research teams must be recognized as one of the important skills to be learned in order to become a successful scientist [...] members of the scientific community must redefine research success to include collaborative outcomes“.

However, there remains a more fundamental consideration in both cases which transcends but also influences team building, research dynamics, silencing and visibility in social science research involving human subjects: Research as praxis, as project, as outcome and as an adjunct to individual's careers is contingent on the politics of researchers. I will return to this point via a slight digression. In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks (2000: 114) notes that

“[b]ourgeois class biases have led many feminist theorists to develop ideas that have little or no relation to the lived experiences of most women[...]. Yet [we] need to know that ideas and theories are important and absolutely essential for envisioning and making a successful... movement that... will mobilise groups of people to transform this society”.

While this critique is aimed squarely at what hooks sees as the [white] bourgeois feminist movement and the anti-intellectualism of the mass of working-class women of colour who reject feminism because they feel alienated by visible white feminists, we would do well to apply it to the two vignettes above and to the challenges and issues faced by researchers wishing to engage in transformative social science praxis.

## Conclusion

Depending on the writer, the topic and the field, research reports, books and papers can be fiercely eloquent and compelling or markedly dry and laboured, theoretically dense or theoretically accessible, evidenced meticulously or light on data. Some are simply poorly conceived and written, while others are repetitious and labour an argument that the renowned author has made multiple times. Some will have repercussions for policy and reverberate beyond the academy, catapulting their authors to fame or notoriety. Others will get cited a few times and sink quietly or make it into footnotes. What will be true for almost all contemporary social science papers – in fields such as sociology, media and communication and education science – is that multiple more or less muted voices of participants, researchers, collaborators, mentors and many more have contributed to the ideas embodied therein. Some will be cited directly, quoted, named as authors or **et al.**; a few remain significant via guiding principles – anonymous but powerful nonetheless; and some are consistently erased or choose to erase their own names for reasons of safety and/or integrity.

Writing of the ways in which research for her doctoral thesis with vulnerable communities of Black youth in South African townships demanded a *more intense ethical engagement* and commitment, Sharlene Swartz (2011: 47) outlines strategies such as

“choosing appropriate research activities; deliberately building relationships with research participants; conveying researcher subjectivity; developing mutuality and flattening the power gradient; considering how language is used and representations are made; and planning “research-as-intervention””.

Echoing the need for such strategies scholars must commit to honoring the motivations and genealogy of **et al.**, of othered, excluded or hidden and protected voices in the research process, for those interested in reading beyond the obvious in any academic collaboration. The multiple identities and positionalities of named and unnamed research participants haunt scholarship and advocacy material. This, of course, begs the more practical question: What steps are higher educational institutions, funding bodies, think tanks and research institutes taking to ensure that vulnerable social justice researchers are protected from material and psychic repercussions of their courageous work while those repeatedly in the theoretical public eye

cede a fair amount of the limelight to the younger and less powerful others who are involved in producing research?

## Notes

- 1 Please see, for instance, URL: [kurzelinks.de/0mgd](https://kurzelinks.de/0mgd) [28.09.2021] and URL: [kurzelinks.de/jpy2](https://kurzelinks.de/jpy2) [28.09.2021].

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