

## Overcoming 'Minimal Objectivity' and 'Inherent Bias': Ethics and Understandings of Feminist Research in a Health Sciences Faculty in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

One day, three feminist academics from different disciplinary backgrounds met over coffee on a health sciences campus. Keen to work collectively with medical students, they devised a four-week special study module (SSM) called 'Intersecting Identities' that combined a variation of Photovoice, a participatory action research method, with seminars on gender, 'race', class, sexual orientation, and other identities. The end results would include a photo exhibition open to the university community, and a portfolio of student's work. Inherent in the SSM were tenets of feminist research and disciplinary curiosity encouraged by the field of medical and health humanities (MHH). In seeking ethics approval for the SSM, the shared challenges linked to feminist research and cross-disciplinary work in MHH was revealed. The ethics committee suggested that the SSM was 'inherently biased' and that there was 'evidence of minimal objectivity, which is not what research demands'. This article contextualises the SSM in relation to the medical curriculum and the nascent field of MHH and then analyses the committee's objections and the authors' replies to them. A discourse analysis and examination of this correspondence provides insights into a case study of inherent epistemic disciplinary violence, pedagogical clashes, notions of 'risk' in research, and the long road towards epistemic generosity and reciprocity.

**Keywords:** ethics, epistemic violence, epistemic generosity, medical humanities, Photovoice

### DISRUPTING THE USUAL USE OF SPACE AND PLACE

On an evening in 2016, the usually earnest atmosphere of an academic meeting and lecture venue was transformed by the sound of chatter, laughter, and exclamation, as people examined sketches of bones displayed on pin boards and observed, with varying degrees of interest, a group of students demonstrating a version of *surya namaskar*, the sun salutation, practised in yoga. On a table, copies of booklets containing poems and stories held the attention of those who stopped to read them. As the crowd made their way down to the lecture theatre to listen to music, singing, poetry, and spoken word pieces, they passed an exhibition of photos. Some participants cast a quick eye over the images, others stopped and looked, and read the captions underneath. The creators of these images engaged in conversations with the viewers – some of which were serious and some light-hearted. A similar scene – one that disrupted the usual use of space and place – had occurred in 2015 in another venue where other images addressing the experiences of being medical students in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT), in South Africa, were exhibited (**Figures 1 & 2**).

The writing, drawings, yoga, music, and photographs were all part of evenings showcasing month-long special study modules facilitated by the Primary Health Care Directorate and undertaken by second year medical students registered for the Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) degree. These special study modules were linked either to the field of Medical and Health Humanities (MHH); or feminisms as politics, pedagogy, and practice; or both.

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**Figure 3.** Staff and students looking at the photos chosen for exhibition by participants in the SSM, 2016. Photo by authors.

The ethics committee's insistence that a chosen methodology should be 'the most appropriate' did not come with any information on how, other than the obvious requirement that ethical concerns relating to human participants are addressed, appropriateness is determined, defined, or judged. In our reply we reasoned that Photovoice was an accepted research methodology that, while unusual in the Faculty, was not unprecedented having already formed the basis of other academic work on the campus, which had been referenced in the original proposal.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, we provided additional references to Photovoice projects that had been used in other health sciences research to document social inequality and inequity (Bredesen and Stevens 2013; London et al. 2012; Sanon et al. 2014). We asserted that the design was one that the convenors were most interested in pursuing and most appropriate in terms of building on, and contributing to, similar projects on campus. We also affirmed explicitly that 'research that is engaged with both exploring pedagogy and analysing the data from a certain type of methodology are by requirement inter-related'.

Linked to the ethics committee's concern with 'desirability' were notions of 'risk' and an underlying perception of risk not necessarily linked to research participants, but in our view intended to maintain a certain *status quo* at the institution. What was suggested were risks that were presupposed to be harmful and not risks that might potentially be helpful. Ethics committees should be concerned with ensuring that participants are exposed to as little risk as possible, but as Hammersley has argued, there is 'a matter of degree and appropriateness' that is required which recognises that humanities and 'social research, generally speaking, involves nothing like the same degree of intervention by researchers or the same danger of serious harm' (Hammersley 2010: para. 1.10). Haggerty's discussion of decisions linked to risk and harm recognise that while harms are possible and can occur, the pronouncements of ethics committees are 'more akin to a subjective imagining of potential scenarios unconstrained by empirical evidence', and as such, 'decisions about future potentialities are much more subjective and ad hoc than one might have concluded from the discourse of "risk" used in [ethics committee policies]' (Haggerty 2004: 402,403).

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<sup>7</sup> See Kessi, S. and Cornell, J. (2015). Coming to UUN: Black students, transformation and discourses of race. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 3(2), 1-16; and Cornell, J. and Kessi, S. (2017). Black students' experiences of transformation at a previously "white only" South African university: A photovoice study', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1882-1899.





Epistemic generosity recognises the unique skills, methodologies, and understandings that different disciplines or groups of people possess without engaging in competitive assertions of superiority or ‘truth’ aimed at judging that which is new or unknown. By doing so, it recognises that there are general commonalities that can be commented on and rigorously engaged with (processes, logic, flow of argument, use of substantiating evidence, development of arguments) while also recognising the limits of disciplinary specificity. Epistemic generosity requires a sufficiently self-reflexive, critical engagement with the ‘historiographies’, methodologies, and practices of one’s ‘home’ disciplines to understand both their limitations and their untapped potential. This form of epistemic generosity also requires epistemic humility that recognises when to approach others with different knowledge/s for assistance and additional insight in the interests of mutual growth and benefit for all concerned. In doing this, epistemic generosity requires an acknowledgement that specialist knowledge may also come with specialist ignorance of areas outside of our usual purview.

It is a rigorous generosity that contributes intellectually what it can from specific disciplinary perspectives while remaining respectfully open to learning from other disciplinary perspectives. As such, epistemic generosity is characterised by epistemic curiosity for one’s own disciplinary space and the disciplinary spaces of others.

Along with epistemic generosity comes epistemic reciprocity – a commitment to learning from others and contributing knowledge in return, in a spirit of collaboration. Configured in a collaborative (not competitive or combative) form of work, epistemic generosity is rooted in an understanding that the sum of the parts, may constitute a whole that is greater than the constituent parts and may therefore change those parts. At a basic level, within ethics committees, epistemic generosity may be achieved by doing something as simple as sending MHH or other interdisciplinary proposals to other faculties for review and/or accepting the decisions of other faculty’s review boards. Alternatively, *ad hoc* members with knowledge of other faculties, disciplines, or methodologies can be recruited onto the committee to provide feedback on methodological or pedagogical practices that permanent committee members may not be familiar with. Trans- or interdisciplinary proposals that straddle disciplines and/or faculties require different combinations of knowledge. Currently, in our faculty, an anonymous reviewer can reject a proposal with little explanation or substantiation and the onus is on the researchers to explain and justify their choices. In the spirit of epistemic reciprocity and shared learning, efforts should be made to ensure that the process is dialogical and if necessary, can be mediated through meaningful discussions.

Reflecting on 20 years of experience in academia linked to Women’s, Gender and Feminist Studies, Cardoso (2018), in her review of Pereira’s book, indicates that the points of intersection between the personal, the socio-political, the economic, the systemic, and the personal as political have been acutely felt. Many of the characteristics of ‘the toxic climate within the ossification of the performative university’ (Cardoso 2018: 2) seem exacerbated in a space of rigid epistemic hierarchy and epistemic violence. Partaking in the constant battles at these points of intersection distract from the work of creating and imagining how feminist, trans- and interdisciplinary MHH-related praxis could evolve, thereby potentially hampering innovation and threatening stagnation. Those of us trying to establish new fields would do well to try and learn from experiences mirrored elsewhere. In doing so we could critically reflect on depressing similarities and energising opportunities to do things differently. It remains to be seen if the move away from epistemic violence to epistemic humility, conversation, and generosity is possible in our context.

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