



Knowledge production, research ethics and authorship in African contexts

GAPSYM16

13-14 November 2023

University of the Western Cape/online (hybrid format)

Call for papers

This 16th multi-disciplinary conference of the AUGent Africa Platform will be co-organized by the University of the Western Cape. It hopes to showcase how scientists, policy makers, engineers, artists, writers, opinion makers and educators reflect on the highly topical subject of knowledge production and authorship in Africa. This conference will explicitly be a platform to engage on this topic, also beyond the academia, including the organization of writeshops, round tables and seminars to rethink existing paradigms on the position African research takes in scholarly production.

In particular, we invite contributions elaborating on any of these identified subthemes:

Good practices across disciplines

In the last few years, interdisciplinarity has become a buzz word in academia. Collaborations on Africa-related topics across traditionally separated disciplines invite scholars to reflect on their own research practices in relation to other scholars, institutions, disciplines, and research cultures more generally. Interdisciplinary projects and approaches can inform scholars about their own research traditions in terms of methodologies, systems of knowledge production, research ethics, and perspectives on authorship. What can we learn from each other across disciplines? What are the merits and limits of specific disciplinary approaches regarding these questions and what are their epistemological foundations? How can we make good practices accessible to academic peers beyond the limits of our own discipline?

Stakeholders beyond academia

Academic conferences typically focus on sharing fundamental research results among scholarly peers. When it comes to research on and about the African continent and matters of knowledge production and authorship, however, other stakeholders are also concerned. Civil society actors, research participants, research collaborators, students, etc. play a crucial role in the process of data collection but are barely considered when it comes to the dissemination of research results. This conference invites scholars to think beyond classic academic platforms for scientific output and to reflect on research transparency and forms of science communication beyond the limits of the university.

Locations of knowledge production

Location in relation to knowledge production opens up many possibilities for reflection.

There is the obvious geographical dimension. The term globalisation with its idea that we are all becoming 'one village' suggests an integration and equality that does not exist. While North-based scholars in most cases can easily travel to African countries and encounter relatively few financial and logistical obstacles, Africa-based scholars are often confronted with unsurmountable visa problems, border controls and other hindrances if they want to visit the global North.

At the same time, North-based scholars usually travel to carry out research on Africa, while Africa-based scholars mostly travel for reasons of research capacity-building, with African research institutions only seldom co-operating with each other. This may be under some revision with shifts towards China and India, but also in these mobilities, similar hierarchical historical patterns continue to exist. It remains to be seen whether or not digitalization has the potential of overcoming these geographical hierarchies or is merely reinforcing them with the differences in quantity and quality of connections.

Another way of reflecting on location concerns the manner in which academic output is divulged. Out of frustration with the control mechanisms and North-based standards in academic journals and publishing houses, many Africa-based scholars seek other channels of academic debate, often located outside academia. Thus novels, films, blogs, twitter accounts and other unexpected channels may be crucial in the intellectual terrain. In the final analysis this even calls for other ways of defining academic knowledge production and locating epistemological models beyond academia.

Knowledge production/ challenges faced in international research collaborations

International research collaborations are often key when it comes to research in African contexts. Many research questions cannot be restricted to one context as they involve complex global relations. To mention just one important example: health problems are often not restricted to one country and international research collaborations are important to come up with innovative ideas to face these global challenges. Moreover, collaborations create opportunities to learn from experts in the field, while gaining a different perspective on research and developing international relationships. Nevertheless, cultural differences, lack of mentorship, leadership and distant working can be challenging. Also, an opportunity for international co-authorship sometimes means that the idea of one country/ university dominates because of funding and expertise. What should countries from the Global North and the Global South consider when engaging in research collaboration?

The publication market: power, access, bias, predation and other challenges

African scholars, and especially female scholars remain under-represented in science globally. Issues of unequal access or (linguistic or geographical) bias in the global academic publication 'market' need critical debate to address the fundamental challenges of scientific publishing and structural inequality of academic knowledge production.

With the academic transition towards open access publications, the number of open access journals has exponentially increased in recent years. As a side effect, predatory open access markets arose as a new trend, providing rapid publishing for high fees, often without proper review and with a problematic record in terms of scientific integrity (plagiarism, duplications, spam invitations etc). From their critical position of unequal access, African scholars are often explicitly targeted by these predatory journals, with high risks to their international recognition and the integrity of the entire scientific community.

Based on this critical debate, constructive ideas on potential solutions and future visions for African scholars, editors and publishers can be put forward.

Pluralizing knowledge production: challenges and rewards of decolonization in practice

Western universalisms arguably constitute one of the most pervasive legacies of the colonial era. Effective decolonization needs to foster practices of knowledge production that are premised on epistemological pluralism. It demands new and creative ways of doing science as methods, sources and the very notion of research itself require revision. This is currently being pursued in various ways, ranging from including non-academic stakeholders in scholarly debates and validating indigenous knowledge, to diversifying editorial boards of scientific journals and appraising reciprocity as a key facet of research. Recent years have seen an increase in decolonization initiatives along these lines, whereby knowledge production on *and* in the African continent is no longer centered on *and* in the West. However, debates on decolonization tend to be prescriptive rather than reflexive: how decolonization unfolds, or fails to unfold, *in practice* is insufficiently documented and understood. In order to give insight into the nitty-gritty of decolonization, including its rewards and challenges, this stream takes stock of past and present decolonization initiatives in African Studies. It invites *both* contributions that deal with successful exercises in epistemological pluralism, as well as instances where such attempts have been challenging or unsuccessful.

Silent voices from the field: about power and knowledge production in fieldwork

How do we engage in transnational research collaborations in fieldwork in the Global South? Researchers foreign to the field often rely on local researchers for their fieldwork, as brokers, translators, collaborators. They generally play a vital role in facilitating and shaping research projects, especially in unstable and conflict-affected settings. Yet, there remains a relative silence on and lack of recognition and valorization of the important role and position of these research collaborators in academic knowledge production and the question of knowledge ownership. Apart from the obligatory footnote reference in academic publications, however, such collaborations often disappear from sight in research output. In the margins of the disciplinary mainstream, efforts are being made to 'come to terms' with this silence. For all their worth, such efforts often revolve around the 'foreign' researcher contemplating *about* such collaborations.

Serious engagement is needed with challenges that are inherent to this structure of research collaboration. How do these partnerships take shape, what do they produce and reproduce and for whom? What are the grounds for engagement in these partnerships? What are their ethical and practical challenges? How can we make visible and recognize the key contributions of local researchers to academic knowledge production?¹

¹ <https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-about/>

Relinking education and freedom

When it comes to questions of knowledge production, of who writes, who authors (also in the sense of making possible, making necessary) that production, the debate often turns to questions of “equity”: a proper ethical relation to one's research partners, a consideration of voice and diversity, a balancing of epistemological grounds or perspectives. In short, it becomes about a plurality of interests. Perhaps, it may be necessary to similarly rethink what the idea of freedom is in line with which such a sensibility is articulated. Unfortunately, the tendency has often been to rush to ground on recollecting the meaning of freedom rather than come to terms with how education might sustain the idea of freedom necessary for politics under conditions of a rapid expansion of technological temporal objects. Freedom, as Grovogui² reminds us, is a human affinity, not one that can be claimed from any perspective no matter how plural. Under this thematic, we welcome contributors to consider one of the abiding questions of postcolonial freedoms, one that is essential to any task of thinking the future, through asking about the interplay between the work of the university and democratic possibility: this is a question of pedagogy, of research, of invention, and extends necessarily across all faculties.

Bridging the genomic data gap in Africa: implications for global disease burdens

As an outcome of Africa's structural challenges of access and participation in knowledge production, several 'gaps' with regards to data as well as analysis remain in different domains of science. Human and pathogen genomic data from Africa for instance are extremely crucial to improve health. Africans have the most diverse population genetics but only a small percentage of African genomic data is available to contribute to ongoing efforts in global disease prevention and management. This creates a 'genomic data gap'. In most recent advances in medicine, such as precision medicine, personalized medicine and vaccine development, Africa has been left out, with genetic information available from American, European, and Asian populations. This is worrisome, as vaccines and cures are often effective in a particular population and less effective in others. Investing in unrevealing Africa's rich genetic diversity would also improve our understanding of genetic disease burdens. Also, genomic research of pathogens isolated from Africa lacks behind, for example barely 2% of the total SARS-CoV-2 sequence data generated came from Africa.

Genetic information derived from pathogens is an essential input for infectious disease control, public health and research. Insights from African human and pathogen genomic data will also benefit global populations, but will Africa be neglected by limited access to affordable benefits resulting from research that uses their data?

From this particular case, broader debates are welcomed on issues of data sharing, access to data and equal benefit from data-based research.

² Grovogui S.N. (2001) “Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics if Race in International Theory”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* Vol. 26, No. 4, Race in International Relations, pp. 425-448.



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Abstract submission

Abstracts should not exceed 500 words and have to be written in English or French. Submissions should be sent by e-mail and before June 1st, 2023 to Annelies.Verdoolaege@UGent.be mentioning "GAPSYM16 – abstract title". In addition to submissions for full papers, we also welcome submissions for round tables, panels or workshops, with testimonies on specific cases or with a focus on the sharing of expertise.

The full programme of the symposium will be made available in the course of August in order to allow participants to make travel arrangements.