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Method of Research in a We-Paradigm, lessons on Living Research in Africa

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Abstract. This paper paints a picture of how a method of research in an African *we-paradigm* looks like. The paper describes *living research*, where the researcher is an integral part of a community, being a recipient of communal grace and partaker in, and reporter of, the communal development of embodied knowledge.

Keywords: Africa, method of research, we-paradigm, values

1 Introduction

Jaco Renken and Richard Heeks [1] argue that the complexities in the social realm succinctly demand diversity in research methods in ICT4D. They posit that the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, harbour a resource pool of techniques from which researchers can glean approaches that could diversify the theoretical and methodological methods used. This paper presents such a diversification, albeit without adhering to key assumptions that Ramon Grosfoguel [2] shows are considered commonsensical in settings informed by a Euro-Western genealogy. The method of research presented conforms to paradigmatic and value propositions deduced from research at the intersection of technology and society in rural communities in Southern Africa, since the year 2000. The underlying line of inquiry emerged after embodied experiences in the communities in which the author reside(d) show that ICT4D is uncannily Eurocentric. The discourse often fails to recognise local, African ways of knowing and to, subsequently, navigate the clashes of paradigms [3–5].

2 A fundamental problem: alien framings and foreign methods

ICT4D research often appear to hold a technocentric gaze set in Eurocentric framings [6, 7]. Such framing is managed from academic strongholds aligned with Eurocentric worldviews [8–10]. Africans living in Africa have had little chance for participation in constituting discourses [5, 11]. Such framings inculcate coloniality [9, 10, 12, 13]. Dominant philosophy, constructs, theories, methods, and interventions are conceptualised within a logic set in systems of thought aligned with a Eurocentric meaning-making [14–17]. Coloniality obscures the local meaning arrived at through

the epistemology of those that are experiencing technologies in their daily lives, outside of Western settings [for example, 18, 19].

Methods set the way researchers claim the validity of perceptions and, subsequently, set the base from which theories are proposed. Methods include epistemic filters that frame reality and provide a base of interpretations of what constitutes reality [20]. Western epistemes, however, are mostly foreign to the understanding non-western value orientations [21]; In the poignant words of Alik Shahadah [22]: “You cannot measure an African success with a European ruler.”

The South African Cornel du Toit [23] calls to recognise and value subjectivities when assessing scientific integrity. He put this in historical perspective: “[In pre-modern Africa] the person and what she says is one. This contrasts with the Western notions that the inner world of consciousness and thought is separate from the way the person presents herself in the world.” [24] Research in Africa using imported methods undervalues much that is relevant in the local societies [25]. In an effort to provide alternative perspectives and ways to a conversation, I introduce an embedded method of research for unearthing community driven-perspectives, deduced from dynamic and integrative engagement in African communities. Such a method of research, I argue, aligns with the realities in the ‘we-paradigm’ where an entity exists integral to the whole [5].

3 The We-Paradigm

Being full time embedded in African communities since 2000, I noticed incompatibilities in the views of those indigenous to rural African realities and those being introduced to such realities from the outside [5, 11]. Underlying intricacies I observed through paradigmatic perspectives. In previous work, I conceptualised three distinct paradigms between which my African interlocutors switch voluntarily: the I, we, and it-paradigms [5]. A fundamental difficulty in this paper is to describe a *we-paradigm* in a possibly incommensurable *I-paradigmatic setting* of a Western-framed academic audience [9].

In the I-paradigm, an individual is a unit of analysis. Gert-Jan Roest [26] argues how this paradigm is dominant in western belief systems; Life is seen as being lived in an age-of-authenticity seeking a self-consciousness that regards the individual (and, therefore, individualism) as the primary agent interacting within society. Roest paints the analogy of likening people to billiard balls, bouncing off each other. In this realm, an individual is urged to seek human power and agency, freedom and fulfilment in self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autonomy, through self-cultivation, and immanent prosperity and security [26]. The individual is the center, placing the *self-acting* in the world to the exclusion of others.

In the We-paradigm, there is no view of an individual in an existence in that way. Reality, in this worldview, is embedded in a myriad of relationships within a community that contain performers including humans, non-humans and other beings [27]. Community is given primacy where situations arise on who to prioritise between the community and the individual, summed up in: “I am because we are, we are therefore

I am” [28]. These words link to the idea that human beings cannot live in isolation. Many African cultural settings foreground the primacy of community over the individual from the understanding that humanity depends on community, interconnectedness, conviviality and interdependence [29].

I-paradigm-embedded theories of knowledge and their enactors, I experience daily, have great difficulties to facilitate and recognise the intellectual practices in a we-paradigm. Gayatri Spivak [30] argues that it might be impossible to know what lies outside of one’s perception. However, the IFIP 2019 conference seeks to facilitate South-North cooperation and therefore could be sensitive to different ways of knowing. I disagree with Thomas Kuhn [31] who argues it to be impossible to identify a different paradigm, as in previous work I have shown paradigm switching to occur in African communities [5]. Dennis Gioia and Evelyn Pitre [32] argue that insight in different paradigms is possible when we apply transdisciplinary meta-perspectives, a technique used by many African authors when they reflect on coloniality in Africa. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah [33], an influential philosopher and political leader in Ghana, in response to his experience with Western theories provided an intellectual framework on social conscience founded in the African values of communal solidarity and presented these in his book *consciencism*. Other philosophers of note, giving indications of how the epistemic justice could play out in Africa are Kenneth Kaunda, Reuel Khoza, Patrice Lumumba, Munyaradzi Mawere, Lovemore Mbiqi, Julius Nyerere, Francis Nyamnjoh, among many others. From these writers, one gleans that in a we-paradigm knowledge is embodied in an ever becoming social personhood, in a universe of coherence [29, 34]. The Burundian Stanislas Bigirimana [35] shows this embodied knowledge to be a dynamic and integrative *knowing*. Thus, in the we-paradigm, life unfolds itself as a holistic *doing through being*, with knowing being part of community engagement, conversation, and representation.

Research in the we-paradigm is to be understood in terms of its meaning and relevance for the communities in which it is performative. Knowledge divorced from a local sense, local knowing or expressed in isolation is void to the local community [35, 36]. When *knowledge* is represented in manners foreign to the community [for instance, in textuality, see 36], such declarations of intellectual faculty speaks solely about the researcher’s encapsulation in a particular (geo)political agenda [9]. Of course, subsequent interventions ensue uphill battles for their local uptake and might even derail development [for a poignant example from Liberia, see 37]. Except, maybe, during a disaster, it is perverse to talk *about* local communities and make (research) plans and (research) strategies without authorised representation and engagement of such a community from the very start of deliberations, conceptualisations, planning, and activities.

4 Virtues and Values Orientation, examples from Southern Africa

Many communities in Africa maintain an alliance to so-called indigenous, non-Western values. These values express themselves in convivial cultures like Ubuntu, espousing communal love [29]. The academic equivalent of such a convivial worldview is a philosophical approach that values positive character traits dubbed *virtue epistemology* [38, 39]. Such an epistemology necessitates a convivial understanding of local values. Virtue epistemology seeks to share forms of understanding with others in a conscious and intellectual carefulness realising that perception intertwines with matters of attitude, beliefs and morality and *knowing* benefits from the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of knowledge systems.

Table 1 presents a working-scheme of five African values with some keywords describing their contents. These values do not match with I-paradigmatic propositions as exposed by Roest [26], cited earlier. There is no overlap with neo-liberal ideals of independent markets [cf, 40] or dominant theories of human motivation like those espoused by, for example, Abraham Maslow [41]. Of course, cultures and values are dynamic, shift, and hybridise over time. However, as I argue in my book *Reflections* [5], this toolbox is productive in view of the conceptualisations regarding philosophies, methods, and theories concerning research in many African communities.

Table 1. A working-scheme of African value orientations [source: 5].

Value	Description	Keywords
Ubuntu	Communal love	African cosmology & philosophy, morally <i>good</i> behaviour, conviviality, affirmation, compassion, solidarity
Oratio	Communicating embodied knowledge	Orality, narrative, knowing, inclusive, collaborative, conversation, community deposits
Relatio	Relational resource allocation	Sharing, needs orientation, relationship building
Animatio	Continuous present moment	Here-and-now, constituting history, emerging future, connectedness, rhythm, belonging, humaneness
Dominio	Seeking maturity	Reconciliation, continuity, covenant

5 Living Research

The philosophical grounding of *living research* in Africa relies, of course, on African philosophy. Munyaradzi Mawere and Tapuwa Mubaya [42] describe African philosophy as meaning “the contextualised critical thinking, articulation of ideas, and attempts to seek solutions to problematic situations by Africans.” African philosophy, in the sense of Mawere and Mubaya, presupposes plurality and the participation of all

in communiversity (*ibid*, 46). The articulations of African philosophies and related ontologies, epistemologies, ethics, and metaphysics are relatively recent as self-exploration of African thought by African researchers was actively suppressed till the end of settler colonisation in the 1960s and 70s. The initial propositions about such a philosophy, of course, are not settled and leave much room for debate, exploration and contributions [43, 44].

The outset of *living research* is to push the method of research beyond ‘the usual suspects’ where normative epistemologies dominate, silence, objectivise, and normalise [35, 45, 46]. Beyond what is pre-set in the researchers’ Eurocentric academic vocabulary, the approach to research seeks sensitisation and training to discover consciousness from within the locally active paradigm. The method of research seeks priority for attaining an appreciation of the local understanding of local expressions of phenomena, in local manners. Living research depends upon one’s inclusion and living-the-life, being part of the structures, practices, hopes, aspirations and fears in a community [47].

Focus on community is pivotal in a decolonised research [12]. Both the source and clients of research are embedded in communities. Any interaction involves communications within communities and derivatives are subject to communal processes. In the case of Macha Works in Zambia [48], I distinguish seven steps that facilitated the living research in that community [12]:

- 1) the community prioritises research and asks for its execution [for example, 49]
- 2) community members introduce research to the relevant authorities [for instance, in the House of Chiefs in Zambia, 50],
- 3) development of research concepts, proposals and execution processes take place within and with the community in the methods of co-creation [5]
- 4) any development and any communication is instantly interacted upon in the (geographical) location of the communities concerned [36, 51]
- 5) community members disclose embodied knowledge first and continue to be preferred presenters on research progress (for example, Macha’s Fred Mweetwa at SXSW, USA, in 2014, and the Community Networks Summit, South Africa, and African Internet Forum, Sudan, in 2018)
- 6) any presentation or write-up concerning the research is co-developed, discussed and shown in the community first, after which representation could be granted for its dissemination outside of the community [52]
- 7) the community has veto rights to cancel or stall external propagation [for example, 53]

In living research, the researcher is an integral member of the community and visible as such, being a participant in interactions that affect embodied knowledge. The researcher, in my experience, mostly receives culturally-framed, implicit invitations to contribute to the dynamic and integrative processes that constitute communal knowing and, subsequently receives explicit requests to represent theoretical understandings that interact with broader social phenomena or extant theories.

The communal inclusion of the researcher in a community is an act of communal grace. Such grace is common in the sociology of ubuntu where “everyone exists by the grace of the other” [cited in, 5, 54]. Grace unsettles oriental, imperial, and colonial frames. Living research, therefore, acts within the parameters of the grace received from a community based upon a confession of character [5]. Such grace is remarkable as it is not necessary for a community to enable a researcher to be part of communal life.

The validity of living research links in with the means of entrance, the introduction. Also, such research is subject to local authority and thus reporting to local governing bodies. In this, *being* a researcher and *doing* research is not a removed activity nor confined to the academic art of writing of papers; It is a *vocation*, an identity [cf, 45]. Any breath and action in a community has moral and scientific consequences. Such an outlook surpasses artificial dichotomies, for instance, in being and doing by blending role performance, authority, and observatory virtue in continuous communal learning and growing in knowing and becoming [55]. Such a stand might very well need measures of faith as to the materiality of the learnings to be acquired and a hope that it is possible to know.

Communities have distinctive authorities over what happens at the sites of enquiry. Gaining the necessary trust through tests of character and consistency of interactions and, subsequently, receiving the invitation to become an embodied part of the collective knowledge base takes many interactions in every facet of ones living [47]. Depending on the context, for instance, it took me at least five years of active waiting to be allowed access to local ways of knowing in various communities in Zimbabwe and Zambia [5].

Living research and its exploits are about understanding in relation with others, through covenants between people [56]. Through such covenants, the community is both sovereign and bound while remaining empowered as what and how to reveal whenever and however the community wishes to act and position any proceeds. Anything outside of such a covenant, for instance, appropriated data and uncollaborative write-ups, the community can consider manipulative, embezzlement, and/or projection [cf, 57]; “If the end product of foreign academic research is a takeaway text written in academic English, then the foreign academic appropriates local culture for private and foreign profit, leaving the local community objectified and exploited.” [36]

The primary drive for living research is to get to know people and practices embedded in conversation in communities. In practice, this involves a never-ending and continuous interaction with anyone in any setting, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Only death or expulsion can end such a connection. Research, thus, involves transparency and intellectual commitment in any encounter where one lives and works and where one meets. The researcher relies upon an outward-looking posture and attitude, with continuous attention and interest in those around: actively *getting to know* interests, believes, dreams, and fears, in a metaphysical world.

6 Discussion

Michael Burawoy [45], among others, elaborates on the existence of various sciences. He positions one side focusing on positive sciences that rely on rationality, logic, and facts (which he shows, convincingly, to be unattainable). The other side, Burawoy positions reflexive sciences involving a presence and agency of the person *looking*. Living research is a paradigmatic response to the fundamental questioning of methods of research and how they relate with power. Nokuthula Hlabangane [9] provides insights into how methodologies issue from and adhere to a particular knowledge system: Eurocentric research issues from the I-paradigm. In this manner, for instance, living research differentiates from various forms of group-/collective-/network-oriented ICT4D research, especially where the latter thrives on aspects of individualism, seeks delineations or bifurcations, aims for textualisation, or insists on categorisations set outside of the community. With its orientation towards dynamic and integrative/embodied knowledge and conviviality, living research is ever emerging and changing and can only give an indication of temporary status. Also, living research differentiates with autoethnography, as the latter links in with the researcher's individual self, as in a Cartesian conversation with oneself considering one's own nature. Living research, however, seeks the local epistemology as the frame of reference, seeking to align with a communal-self, inclusive of meaning contained in congregating beings and non-beings, for instance in Ubuntu [29].

The outcomes of research in the I-paradigm appear quite incommensurably with research in the we-paradigm. The I-paradigm is perpetuating as texts, written out of context, becoming pretext in subsequent research. Proceedings in the we-paradigm cannot be judged from the I-paradigm. Often, knowledge and judgement from the I-paradigm are irrelevant and a nuisance to an African community and their knowledge keepers. I experienced that such knowledge and judgement could generate damage in the form of the arrival of unsustainable electronic artefacts [58], broken relationships because of exclusion criteria, or a general feeling of inferiority or exploitation [36, 59, 60].

Being privy to, and included in, local ways of knowing involves moral obligations for constant communal reflection on any aspect of the research. Power issues are a prime subject for discussion as are matters of means of colonisation hidden in the practice of research (example: vendor lock-in). Other items are how to deal with the bifurcating presence of individualism (a particular trait and ideal in the I-paradigm) or questions about why perceived deductions were unavailable and why they should become embodied (example: the issue of taboos).

Living research involves periods of *imagination*. As Kahneman [61] shows, the human mind starts with assumptions and reflects information against those assumptions. In living research, the community challenges the pre-set assumptions and engages to reconcile history and contemporary contributions into embodied knowledge [34]. For this, the researcher has to assess evidence and 'knowledge' with a reflective mind's eye, recognising what Francis Nyamnjoh [62] called the conviviality of knowledges, celebrating incompleteness, and prioritising fluidity against fixedness of prescriptions, standardisations or routines.

Communal processes that sustain *knowing* involves the oratory art of *articulation* [36]. Co-production, in the communal setting, is the construction of deductions in manners that are recognised by the local community, the wider community, and the world (in that sequence). This articulation is not necessarily in writing (first) but involves a whole range of ways in which to express thought. The result, an emerging reconstruction, is subsequently embedded and embodied in the researcher as part of a local system of knowing, ongoing conversation, and, when expanding beyond what is known so-far, on improvisation [63].

7 Conclusion

This paper calls out at the Eurocentrism in ICT4D research by providing insights into a method of research embedded in the we-paradigm. The paper has drawn on extensive experience and African scholars to show the value of African scholarship to discuss phenomena in words and language set in context and associated with African place and positionality. Through living research, the paper offers directions forward that can inform method of research in ICT4D, although it appears far removed from practices as trained and executed in Western epistemology-based research practices. In daily practice, living research is all-consuming, with the researchers entirely being engaged with the lived-life of the research in community.

Living research resonates with African contexts and worldviews. Of course, it needs stamina, to continue even when confronted with discomforting truths, confronting opinions, cognitive dissonance or even emotional dissonance appear. The presented paradigmatic approach, its practice, and a supporting set of communal values, I hope, can be helpful to both native African researchers and those visiting from foreign contexts.

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