

Think Piece

**Building, repairing and maintaining trust in research relationships:
Towards an ethics of trust**

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In this think piece, I ask what it takes for research relationships to be centred on trust. My reflections are divided into three sections in which I share some lessons learnt from various research projects. At the end of each section, I pose a series of interrelated questions about the values, principles and practices that are indispensable to building, repairing and maintaining trust in research relationships. To conclude, I outline how these reflections will be brought together in my keynote address.

Building trust

As higher education researchers, including facilitators of participatory research processes, we do not subject ourselves to the same levels of vulnerability as participants. I learnt this from a year-long project where I worked together with three colleagues and 12 student activists at the University of the Free State. The purpose of the project was to co-create and co-promote a localised conceptualisation of 'universities as sustainable communities' (Martinez-Vargas, et al., 2024). One of the research methods we used was Digital Storytelling, which involves activities like storytelling circles to elicit powerful narratives from participants. In our case, we were interested in stories that explored the role of protest, activism, and collective action in transforming universities into more sustainable and decolonial institutions of learning. Some of the digital stories were deeply personal and sensitive. For instance, in his story, Tshepang asked 'What is the price of activism?' as he reflected on his participation in the #Feesmustfall protests and how his mental health was affected. In 'Activism without a forest' by Tshiamo, we heard about the deep sense of loneliness he experienced as a permaculture activist who struggled to find like-minded people to work with. And in 'Run, Siphila Run' our attention was drawn to what some students perceive as the criminalisation of activism when they are arrested for participating in protests on campus. Whilst we may have facilitated processes that enabled student activists' narrative capabilities or 'the substantive freedom to deploy one's narrative capital in order to be heard and acknowledged' (Watts, 2008: 100) – as facilitators, we did not subject ourselves to the same levels of vulnerability that it took for the student co-researchers to tell their stories. This brings attention to the complexities of facilitating educational participatory research projects (Martinez-Vargas, et al., 2025) and raises questions about reciprocity in building trust and about fairness in participatory research practices:



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Should we as facilitators subject ourselves to similar levels of vulnerability that participants are subjected to? Is it fair to encourage participants to trust us with their deeply personal stories, when we do not share ours with them? Can we build trust more fairly by being more vulnerable as researchers?

Repairing trust

Working with diverse stakeholders is important in participatory research projects. As one of the stakeholders, gatekeepers play a key role in facilitating access to potential participants and research sites, but they can also hinder progress. I learnt this from a project where a colleague and I investigated the dynamics of pursuing higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion. The project involved 12 youth from Freedom Square, an upgraded informal settlement in Bloemfontein in the Free State province. The project also involved a community-based organisation that acted as a gatekeeper to Freedom Square. In the project, we applied photovoice – a participatory method where photography is used to capture visual narratives that raise awareness about community challenges (Wang & Burris, 1997). In our case, the youth developed visual narratives to show what attempting to access higher education looked like for them, and how their attempts, successes and failures were affected by where they come from. A key objective of photovoice is to stimulate critical dialogue. However, we found that discussions that were emotionally or politically charged, and critical of the government, were discouraged by the founder of the community-based organisation. They were unfamiliar with, and therefore mistrustful of the photovoice research process. This ultimately led to a breakdown in our relationship with the community-based organisation. Fortunately, we had built a solid relationship with the participants, so we were able to continue with the project. What we were not able to do, however, was repair the loss of trust by the community-based organisation. The breach in trust meant that the narrative capability of the youth was hindered; they were deprived of the effective opportunity to freely tell their stories and fully share their critical reflections during the workshops. This has implications for the development of epistemic courage (Fricker 2007) which is stimulated through speaking out, having a point of view, and expressing oneself with confidence. Moreover, hindering narrative capability compromises the potential contribution photovoice can make to epistemic justice (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). This raises further questions about building and repairing trust in our research relationships:

How can we initiate relationships differently to ensure more trust between gatekeepers and researchers – not only at the onset, but also during the implementation of projects? And when it is broken, how do we begin to repair trust between gatekeepers (or other stakeholders) and academic researchers?

Maintaining trust

In my ongoing research project that began in 2021, I am investigating how university education helps or gets in the way of transforming rural communities, if at all. The project documents through narratives, what life after university looks like for rural youth, including the complex challenges they face, and the trade-offs they need to make in pursuit of various aspirations. Each year, I interview the 35 participants and then hold workshops to reflect on and write about their experiences. One of the participants is a young man from the Eastern Cape province who graduated with a Social Work degree from Walter Sisulu university in 2019. Over the years, he has become more candid in our conversations, and more willing to share very personal reflections on how he is affected by being unemployed. I asked him about a day in his life, and what he observes about young people in his community. He responded:

You will find a Grade 9 learner and then they will be sitting there; you are at the same tavern, and they'll be sitting there buying a lot of alcohol on Sundays. And then [I ask] when are you going to do your homework? When are you going to read your books? If I see you sitting right there drinking... . And then I feel like as a graduate I have failed myself to be a good example to these guys. Because they'll be drinking, and I'll also be drinking here with them in the same space ... being in the same environment ... I feel like I've failed myself to be a good, positive role model to them.

Most research participants do not find it easy to share these kinds of self-critical reflections. When we work quickly to initiate, implement and wrap up research projects, so that we can start publishing from them as soon as possible, we compromise opportunities to slowly build trust and sustain it over time, which has implications for how honest participants are willing to be. This raises further questions about building and maintaining trust in our research processes:

In a world where time is treated as a precious commodity, how can we learn to trust each other when we barely have time to get to know each other? How do we build trust in short-term research projects? And how do we maintain trust in our (short-term or longitudinal) research processes?

Towards an ethics of trust


As alluded to in my reflections above, I have learnt that vulnerability, reciprocity, humility and time are indispensable to building trust-centred relationships in research. I based my reflections on lessons learnt from various projects that focused on the use of stories for knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing purposes. I have hinted at the idea that participatory research projects can reproduce the epistemic injustices that they are so well positioned to rectify. And that this is likely to happen when, in the interest of completing projects on time (and meeting other priorities in research processes) fleeting relationships are established between researchers and gatekeepers, research

participants or co-researchers. When this happens, there is not enough time to build a sense of trust between those involved in the research process, which in turn compromises the quality of the data gathered, its integrity and impact. In my keynote address I bring these reflections together and attempt to: 1) outline a framework for an ethics of trust in research relationships, and 2) highlight how such an ethics could strengthen the potential for participatory research to contribute to narrative capability expansion and epistemic justice (Walker & Boni, 2020). In taking up this task, I draw ideologically on Ubuntu, and conceptually on Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1999) Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) and Michael Watts' writing on narrative capabilities (Watts, 2008).

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Author Biography

Mikateko Mathebula is an Associate Professor at the SARCHI Chair's Higher Education and Human Development Research Programme, University of the Free State, South Africa. Her work examines through a capabilities lens, the relationship between processes of higher education, 'development' and human flourishing in the South African context, with a focus on youth from low-income households and/or rural areas. Recently completed projects include a photovoice scoping study on pursuing higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion, working with youth from an upgraded informal settlement in the Free State; and a study with student activists where digital storytelling and participatory video were used to capture students' aspirations for universities as sustainable communities. Her current project investigates the contribution that universities make to the transformation of rural communities, by exploring, describing, and documenting through narratives, the post-university life trajectories of youth from rural areas in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces. Her latest book, 'Low-income students, human development and higher education in South Africa: Opportunities, obstacles and outcomes' which is co-authored by Melanie Walker, Monica McLean and Patience Mukwambo is based on the longitudinal *Miratho* project which examined the factors and dynamics that influence higher education access, participation and outcomes for low-income youth from rural communities and townships in South Africa. 

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