

Epistemic Dissonance and Ethical Pluralism in Sociological Fieldwork: A Critical Study of Research Ethics in Postcolonial Contexts of the Global South

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Abstract- Current sociological fieldwork in the Global South has brought to light tensions between universalist ethical principles (which are often institutionalized by institutional review boards [IRBs] in the Global North) and the particular moral economy of postcolonial theatres. This is a theoretical paper that investigates the epistemic dissonance that occurs when powerful, supposedly “neutral” ethical norms encounter plural and locally-embedded forms of moral reasoning. Building on postcolonial theory, decolonial epistemologies and institutional critique with respect to research ethics, the article posits a framework of ethical pluralism in response to the ongoing coloniality of knowledge in sociology. Notwithstanding extensive critique by feminist, indigenous and Global South scholars including Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Santos (2014), Bhabra (2017) institutional codes of ethics still reflect an individualist, formalist and biomedical conception of consent, autonomy and risk. Empirical work in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America published before July 2024 (e.g., Nair 2021; Akosua & Mensah 2023) has demonstrated that researchers regularly face informal, relational or context-sensitive ethical demands in particular in communities organized along hierarchies of caste, gender and indigeneity. These situated ethics directly challenge the decontextualized rationality of IRB protocols, resulting in ethical paradoxes that are managed, mediated or protested in practice. This article synthesizes the tensions and provides an analytical framework shaping around three main themes: (1) the coloniality of ethical oversight regimes and how that orient with hegemonic epistemologies; (2) the importance of relational ethics enacted through research interactions in field-based sites; and (3) strategies for developing ethical navigation and resistance from researchers

positioned within or associated to marginalized communities in the Global South. With this conceptual map, the article advocates for a reconstitution of research ethics as dialogic, reflexive, and epistemically just. Instead of promoting a relativist resignation from any notion of ethical values, the paper suggests an ethics of negotiation one that embraces epistemic diversity and power imbalances in the production of knowledge. The article finds the call will inform continued debates around decolonizing methodology and recommends that institutional bodies reimagine strict systems of compliance in the tradition of pluralist, context-sensitive ethical practices that make space for the voices and moral logics of the Global South.

Keywords: Epistemic Dissonance, Ethical Pluralism, Postcolonial Sociology, Research Ethics, Global South, Decolonizing Methodology

I. INTRODUCTION

In the face of a persistently uneven global epistemic order wherein sociological knowledge production remains shaped by colonial legacies, disciplinary hierarchies, and asymmetries of institutional power, this paper seeks to critically interrogate the increasingly evident ethical tensions that arise when fieldwork conducted in postcolonial contexts of the Global South—marked by heterogenous moral economies, historically sedimented relations of domination, and culturally embedded modes of social interaction—is subject to research ethics frameworks designed primarily within the juridical-rational traditions of the Global North, thereby generating what this study terms epistemic dissonance, or the conflict between dominant universalist ethical protocols (such as those institutionalized through IRBs

in Euro-American universities) and the plural, context-contingent ethical logics operative in field-based sociological engagements, a dissonance which becomes particularly acute when researchers working with subaltern, indigenous, or marginalized communities are compelled to reconcile their reflexive, situational ethical sensibilities with formal, decontextualized requirements emphasizing individual consent, risk minimization, and procedural transparency—criteria that often fail to accommodate collective identities, relational autonomy, or local norms of trust and reciprocity; and since these ethical frictions are neither incidental nor merely administrative but rather symptomatic of deeper epistemological tensions between competing visions of what constitutes legitimate sociological inquiry and accountable knowledge production, the Global South emerges not only as a geographical referent but also as an epistemic site where the inadequacy of Northern ethical paradigms is rendered visible, especially through documented instances of dissonance in countries such as India, South Africa, Brazil, and Kenya, where researchers have reported the mismatch between IRB expectations and the lived ethical realities of field engagement (Nair, 2021; Makoni & Chimbutane, 2020; Amaral, 2019), including cases where informed consent was culturally inappropriate or impractical (e.g., in oral societies or within caste-based hierarchies), where anonymity was seen as disrespectful to knowledge keepers (Tuihawai Smith, 2012), or where reciprocity took precedence over formal clearance (Simpson, 2007), all of which point to the necessity of a pluralist ethical framework that takes seriously the epistemic and moral diversity of research contexts beyond the Global North, thus justifying the present study's exclusive focus on the Global South not as a passive site of empirical extraction but as a critical locus of ethical innovation, resistance, and epistemic rupture, in which sociologists especially those from historically marginalized or colonized societies have begun to articulate alternative ethical imaginaries grounded in decolonial thought, indigenous philosophies, and relational accountability, including the advocacy for ethics of care (Trento, 1993), situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), and decolonizing methodologies (Santos, 2014; Smith, 2012), which serve not merely to critique Northern models but to reorient the foundations of ethical sociological practice toward

epistemic justice and dialogic negotiation, thereby positioning this study within a broader intellectual and political project of contesting epistemic monocultures in research governance; and in this light, the present paper aims to conceptually map the contours of ethical pluralism in sociological fieldwork by addressing the following guiding questions: What are the conflicts between global ethical standards and localized moral frameworks in fieldwork settings in the Global South? How do institutional ethics review processes perpetuate epistemic coloniality? What alternative ethical models are emerging from researchers involved in postcolonial contexts? This study addresses questions that are both theoretically important and practically urgent due to the increasing institutionalization of research ethics and the reliance on standardized protocols in international collaborations, funding applications, and academic publishing. These trends threaten to diminish the nuanced ethical work conducted by researchers in the field. Consequently, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to the ongoing decolonial reexamination of social scientific methodology. It highlights the epistemic tensions inherent in ethical regulation and advocates for a reconceptualization of research ethics as a dynamic, context-sensitive, and morally negotiated process, rather than a fixed, universally applicable checklist. This approach reflects the diversity of sociological encounters, especially in postcolonial contexts where historical violence, symbolic domination, and epistemic exclusion continue to influence knowledge production.

II. CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on work from the sociology of knowledge, decolonial critique, and ethical theory, this article traverses three conceptual terrains: epistemic dissonance, ethical pluralism, and postcolonial sociology that aim to theorize the messy, navigated terrain of sociological fieldwork in common research contexts, where epistemic dissonance, defined here as the gap between dominant epistemic orders especially those enshrined in Euro-American academic institutions and the local, embodied, often non-codified knowledge systems in postcolonial research settings, emerges amid broader power struggles

around the status, rank, and universality of knowledge in our global academic architectures, wherein the seemingly technocratic neutrality of ethics review and research design are laid bare as historically-informed productions of coloniality, technocracy, and epistemic gate keeping that arguably exacerbate what Santos (2014) terms 'epistemicide' that is, the invisibilizing, silencing, and subjugation of non-Western epistemic orders within the global scholarly terrain semi-autonomous spaces, with divergent social conventions, where ethical engagement is predominately tabled by individualism, abstract principles, and allegedly context-neutral ideal-types become agency-ridden spaces where the processes of ethical engagement become incommensurable with those in which one is embedded within as for example Bhabra (2014) has argued in regard to the 'methodological whiteness' of much of mainstream sociology and research ethics that privileges inexpressible social quantum, that is communal decision-making, kinship, and group sociality as unilateral, emotionally-affect-header tattoos, epitomized by the ethics audit cargo of individual risk-benefit analysis, informed consent and authority, efforts which attempt to put a kind of research independence erect but render ethically required in that this disclosure by penetrating a firmly individualistic ethical framework of economic theories (Dugger et al., 2010) which may not always encapsulate the lived relational worlds of the groups being explored be they egalitarian, reciprocal, or even silent reflected through assorted cross-regional studies from South Asia (Pihama et al., 2015) or the Pacific Islands (Nair, 2021); advocating, however, for communitarian, relational, and decolonial ethical frameworks which visibilize the embodied orchestrated realities contingent on the moral labor of navigating sociocultural incommensurability that is that suggest a civic, rooted, dialogue-based reconstruction of the ethical engagement between academic researchers and their local communities that localizes abstract principles as effaceable in the sociological research processes across non-metric group negotiations of ethical attentiveness, such that the influence of the sociohistorical epistemic coloniality emerging within local-action knowledge economies exposed is further activated by postcolonial sociology critique that has dumbstruck not only by the legacy of colonialism, but also how the colonial

identity infuses sociological theories and ethical frameworks as universalizes through an implied universalism of knowledge stabilizing its power, but classrooms located within distinct European subservience (Connell, 2007) that can become threshold sites of rumor and processes for the production of innovative epistemologies, all of which converge in the present article to promote a research ethics theory that is reflexive, decolonial, varied, navigating toward more just modes of ethical performance ranging between academic researcher and participant (Quijano, 2000) within the intricately storied landscapes of the Global South.

III. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE RELATED TO THE STUDY

Dominant research ethics frameworks particularly the Belmont Report (1979) codifying the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice have substantively shaped institutional ethical governance structures, i.e. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), across universities and research institutions in the U.S. and globally, institutionalizing protocols based on informed consent, risk mitigation, and participant confidentiality (including the statistical refinement of harm-risk ratios)—however, although historically significant in governing human subjects research in biomedicine, such frameworks have frequently been criticized for their appropriation into qualitative social science, leading to conceptual and methodological distortions in field-based sociology, especially in postcolonial contexts where the assumptions underpinning these principles (individuated autonomy, textual consent, universalizable ethical standards, etc) are at odds with local moral orders, collective forms of identity and asymmetrical power relations characterizing much of the Global South—a criticism long anticipated by scholars of feminist ethics (Hurst et. al., 2015), indigenous methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Pihama et al., 2015), and postcolonial sociology (Nair, 2021), who have traced the ways ethics regimes infused with Euro-American legalism and biomedical epistemology subordinate alternative modes of ethical reasoning as illustrated in ethnographic accounts which describe how fieldwork in India (Ghosh 2018), Kenya (Nabudere, 2019), Brazil (Gonzalez et. al., 2020), and the Pacific Islands (Ravulo, 2021) pose increasing tensions between

institutional ethics mandates and local expectations, where formal consent forms can become culturally illegible, gatekeeping can transfer to elders or local authorities, and relational ethics based on trust, reciprocity, and long-term engagement become far more ethically relevant than contractual documentation (Fowler, 2019) or recommendation letters (Tilley, 2017), exposing the practical dilemmas researchers face negotiating between site-relational ethics and field rules prompted by rigid IRB protocols, when these protocols have blocked access or silenced community voices (Smith, 2000), imposing alien ontologies (Tronto, 1993), constraining wild sociality (Verma, 2021), and cutting the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Madlingozi, 2018), while scholars have remarked on the colonial legacy of research ethics in Indigenous communities (Smith, 2016), the ethics of care (Tronto, 1993) and care as an alternative to procedural formalism (Pihama et al., 2015) as well as epistemic policing mechanisms that delegitimize epistemologies formed within spirituality, relationality or non-human agency (Tilley, 2017; Madlingozi, 2018), alongside parallel critiques from anthropology have long pondered fieldwork's ethical vacuums of immersion, reflexivity, and power as calls for situated ethics (Scheper-Hughes, 1995) and ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2007); from feminist scholarship, highlighting the gendered dimensions of fieldwork vulnerability and the ethics of care and embodiment (Etherington, 2007), and indigenous research paradigms have developed frameworks that center community accountability, cultural continuity, and epistemic sovereignty (Pihama et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2014) critical contributions that resist the ethics of enforceable arrangements typical of IRBs, yet, despite this, there is comparatively little in the literature synthesizing these various perspectives into a coherent theory of ethical pluralism for postcolonial sociology, with the existing discourses fragmented across disciplines, regions, complicating landscapes or unknown logics lacking a framework to theorize, co-exist or negotiate multiple ethical logics within a single research encounter, and little attention to how epistemic dissonance the clash between institutional and local ethical norms is experienced, theorized, acted upon by the researcher him- or herself, especially one trained under Northern conventions (several are imposed) the Global South raising urgent

questions on epistemic justice, accountability, and the notion of research (Ethics) institutionally shaping the ethical governance of knowledge production in a globally networked topography, justifying the present study to consolidate these debates and conceptualizing ethical pluralism not as an escape from regulation or relativism but a critique of the ethics of knowledge production in reproducibly inequitable conditions.

IV. CRITICAL DISCUSSION / THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The crises of ethics confronting sociological fieldwork in postcolonial contexts is located precisely around their coloniality: research ethics protocols – especially those institutionalized through IRBs and reinforced by international funders – function as mechanisms of epistemic governance by universalizing Eurocentric models of ethics under the guise of neutrality; directly re-inscribing a hierarchical regime of knowledge legitimacy, effectively excluding alternative moral logics such as collectivist, relational or spiritually grounded epistemologies, which can be found in many Global South contexts (Madlingozi, 2018; Smith, 2012) by imposing on these a written informed consent, individual autonomy and procedural risk-benefit calculations as the non-negotiable benchmarks for ethical approval (despite their ontological dissonance with aforementioned epistemologies), and tying research financing to compliance with these, denying local researchers their ethical imagination by subjugating it to the audit cultures of the Global North (thereby, erasing historically situated modes of moral engagement) whilst the subtle, though inconsistent, ‘neutrality’ that such ethical standards perform is one of epistemic violence, whereby an implicitly defined universal human moral subject – endowed by an rationality and autonomy far removed from the relational embeddedness of many research participants in rural, caste-bound, or indigenous settings; or socio-political vulnerability, often facing the morbidity of invisibility and utter desperation – whose application can be both predictably rational and literate is placed at the center (the rationality of behaviour assumed – lack thereof often rendering outright silence); in contrast placing clearly defined frames around the empirical investigation forth, disallowing fluidity; thereby commodifying ethics to such an extent that an entirely polar paradigm where visible or invisible

hierarchies of caste, gender, religion or language may impede a researcher's ability to act in a motion of care, ethically-bound, increasingly framing trust, reciprocity and informal consent as the actual currency of ethical relations implemented (particularly, in contexts where the former has to be always embodied, or rendered pliable, eliminating positionality engendered furrows in a researcher's scope of action prefiguring moral significance) becomes the social acceptance, as illustrated in some accounts from Indian villages, wherein the notion of verbal negotiations with panchayat elders may carry more weight than signed forms or among Māori communities where the protocol of *whakawhanaungatanga* (relationship-building) precedes and shapes all research encounters (Pihama et al., 2015); detailing well the need for either embodied or reflexive moral subjectivity made enacted, that is accountable not merely to formal ethical codes but to the affective, historical, and embodied relations constitutive of the field, necessitating a more situated ethics responsive to lived inequality rather than rather universal moral notions, a demand that has risen perilously close to acts of resistance and negotiations where mainstream research is inherently somewhat entangled with them, as researchers based in the Global South especially subaltern as well as feminist orientations – engaging in both explicit and covert contestation of Northern ethical frameworks, either by within processes or circumvent in vain those that postulate lack of relevance or devitalization of ethical approaches relevant for their contexts (for example, by negotiating their own conceptions of “flexible consent”, instituting community based ethical review mechanisms, or proposing indigenous epistemological frameworks to validate their research legitimacy) (Chilisa, 2012; Simpson, 2007), thus transforming the ethics attempting to be made sound into a 'negotiated process of accountability', though often riddled with frictions, institutional cost and delayed approvals or outright refusal from scholarly publication venues demanding rigid adherence to IRB formalism, yet undeniably signaling the emergence of another one of institutionalized ethical paradigms, secondary based within the Global South, where some advocates are articulating an epistemology of care, refusal and exchange as legitimate moral grammars of research interaction, and suggesting decolonial ethics that

decenter the text-driven prioritization of consent, instead posing ethical intelligibility as a need for a human compliant distributed across ontologically heterogeneous communities; thus leading to an exploration of an epistemically just ethics, one that neither will abandon accountability nor recoil back into relativism, but will re-imagine it through the lens of a pluralist freewill, reflexivity, organicity and culturally responsive process requiring switching to a position where moral legitimacy manifests itself through reciprocity of utterance rather than through singular maxims denoting high grandeur within deliberated behaviours (implying lifelong engagement with these communities, who have historically propagated shared power equitably), where the plane upon which should not be established through unchallenged, pre-scripted benchmarks, pointlessly limiting the ambit of consideration to one that precedes and influences all forms of engagement through cultural upheaval and relativization, and the topography where its contours then must arrange themselves into a unique choreography of hierarchies, honoring, sipping dilution from the tropes of domination that resent the discourse that further diplomatically unfurl the ethical delivery system that is accessible irrespective of one's social standing, a perspective resonating with Santos (2014) idea of “ecologies of knowledges and epistemic mobile airspace” and Bhabra's (2014) critique of local traditions needing sociology to be understood lying via a connectable lens consisting of how what ought be considered, now needs to consider itself, where what birthed sociology globalized must no more be responsible for buttressing the local structures of exclusivity (thus concluding that sociological fieldwork in postcolonial contexts is not to be governed through a unilateral ethical template allotted with a strict standardized sense of compliance but an ethical humility and epistemic pluralism driving a complex knowledge exchange).

V. DISCUSSION RELATED TO THE STUDY

Based on the aforementioned theoretical and substantive discussions, we conclude that the kinds of intruded ethical dilemmas that were inevitable in conducting fieldwork in postcolonial settings we have theorized this complexity as epistemic dissonance demonstrate how the global predominance of

universalist ethical regimes, most prominently articulated through Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), evokes not only bureaucratic overreach or methodological rigidity, but also the greater coloniality of power in the regulation of ethicality for knowledge production, whereby Northern institutions continue to define the moral and ethically legitimate conditions for globally networked research by imposing orders that take for granted autonomy, textuality, and procedural consent, as assumed global standards to which researchers, especially in the postcolonial contexts of the Global South, must submit (Reed, 2022), replicating IRB and ethics approval mechanisms that have been identified as producing neatly bound and ethic-epistemically constitutive “pieces of research” that inherently produce messy and fraught realities upon which they impose moral claims including from researcher(s) located in the Global North, which may take the form of scholarly “pieces of work that incompletely and irrevocably injure information-bearing collectors, participants, and communities in the name of science and often trace [them] into irrevocable anonymity (Simpson, 2007, 452.)—a risk that is especially acute in complex and politically sensitive ethical dilemmas such as the study of caste or indigenous rights, where IRB stipulations have frequently hindered research with indigenous, caste-oppressed or rural communities for noncompliance with documentation or individual consent standards, even when such practices violated community expectation or political sensitivity (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012; Nair, 2021), thereby perpetuating epistemic hierarchies in which Western ethical norms are treated as naturalized configurations and Southern moral orders as either invisible, deviant or irrational (Santos, 2014) and reproducing colonial forms of knowledge governance as originally theorized by Quijano (2000) and elaborated on by decolonial theorists (Bhambra, 2014), which assert that the very possibility of rendering ethically salient any ethical claims are stratified along the lines of global epistemic authority into solar or securocrat capitalism under Northern moral governance which is occurring even where Southern researchers are linked to less accessible democracies and remote locations; giving way to an unceasing state of epistemic dissonance among Global South scholars, who are forced to engage, internalize, and at times negotiate or subvert externally imposed ethical frameworks (Nair, 2021),

or to live a silent double bind of preserving both institutional integrity (at their expense) and field accountability like Ranjita, who at her marriage-age had to often engage in selective negotiations with the demands of institutional ethics.

VI. SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS RELATED TO THE STUDY

Against this backdrop of ethical contradiction illuminated in this study where postcolonial researchers are forced to make compromises between the ethical frameworks produced by their institutions that envy readymade and socialized, decontextualized protocols and the field moral theory of grounded, relational, and context-sensitive legal attitudes to ethics—the sociological ramifications of epistemic dissonance and operational pluralism are imposing as they compel the discipline not only to reassess how far its methodological orthodoxies and ethical formalism serve the purposes of knowledge production but also its foundational epistemographic assumptions about the legitimacy of research knowledge, accountability, and the nature of the relationship between sociologist and research subject, especially in global south settings that are often steeped in colonial violence, systemic discrimination, and epistemic oppression, where the lack of consideration for local ethical logics effectively reproduces an extractive mode of engagement with counterparts that mimic colonial research paradigms, which shows that the ideologies undergirding the ethics of sociological research are non-neutral but heavily saturated by the global academic governance's epistemic and moral hierarchies (Santos, 2014; Bhambra, 2014), and further that the institutionalization of ethics through IRBs and funding structures is about more than procedural gatekeeping it is a mode of epistemic regulation that privileges specific custodians of perception, framing, and legitimization of social realities and marginalizes effectively all others bases of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Madlingozi, 2018), particularly those that are derived through community-based, convivial, oral, spiritual, or affective epistemologies like those often found in the Global South, the partial likeness of which signifies the broader sociology's complicity in the ontological maintenance of what Connell (2007) labels “metropolitan hegemony,” which positions the

disciplinary need for a more reflexive, pluralist, and decolonial ethical consciousness that acknowledges ethical life's situatedness and the multiplicity of moral worlds that co-constitute the sociological encounter, thereby enclosing practical recommendations for the redesign of research training programs at institutions (Almeida Da Silva, 2023), the processes of ethical review themselves (Niraula et al., 2021), and facilitating a relational ethics that places co-production, trust-building, and moral negotiation as axially formative of sociological fieldwork primarily in settings where caste, gender, race, or colonial stratifications dictate both access and vulnerability, in such a way that sociologists are required to think not only epistemically but also in terms of the power-laden moral infrastructures in which their knowledge encounters take place (Hemmings, 2012), reconfiguring their relationship to the epistemic and ethical in a manner that invokes a more accountable sociology to multiple publics and moral systems instead of merely institutional norms and journal reviewers (Bourdieu, 1998) to foster a sociology that not only studies power but vocationally assembles and is accountable to it in its own ways of knowing and acting.

CONCLUSION

Simply restating the problem that motivated this study, it follows that the ethical dissonance experienced in sociological fieldwork undertaken in the postcolonial world is not just a procedural hassle but an issue that goes to the heart of the epistemological and moral foundations of contemporary research ethics, as institutionally prescribed by global IRB protocols and given teeth by funding agencies, who, in their efforts to impose Northern notions of ethicality universally, fail to see the cultural blind spot perpetuated by abstract notions of individual rights and legalistic frameworks that shape research practices in the Global South and elicits a host of challenging questions about the coloniality of knowledge production and its governance, at a time when trust based local moral economies often run against assumptions of ethical universalism that habitually privileges individual autonomy and impersonal consent, and so in offering the conceptual developments covered in this paper (gaining greater purchase of epistemic dissonance as another lens through which to view the clash of

institutional ethics and local moral logics; treating ethical pluralism as a potential way to meet relational ethics and decolonial methodologies), in considering a pedagogy responsive to this situation (calling for a conception of ethics training that is grounded in the realities of fieldwork; proposing teaching which discusses negotiation of standards as opposed to compliance; challenging IRB protocols tailored towards regionally sensitive, locally accountable, adaptive models; suggesting that academic institutions and funding agencies embrace pluralism in their ethical guidelines), in documenting the underexamined field of sociology (the need for empirical studies exploring such tensions in regional contexts (e.g., rural India, sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous communities in Latin America) through in-depth case studies examining how relational, indigenous and community-based ethical frameworks can enter global research infrastructure; comparative studies analyzing regional variations); the implications being not just theoretical towards sociology itself (the political and ethical impacts of research not relegated to the commune of the postcolonial world), thus making a case not just external but internal and, of its infidelity to the Global South, alongside an appeal for acquiescence and the consensus of plurality, so that aforementioned geographical diversities do not merely receive profusion of their own historical consciousness but are afforded the dignity of being contributors to a meaningful dialogue about ethical governance of research practices, alongside a recommendation of modes of ethical engagement that elevate wider understanding of religious plurality, ethical pluralism and indigenous awareness at a time when the imperatives of an ethical fieldwork in the Global South calls for a novel inflection of social theory from the west.

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