

## 4. Producing knowledge on and for transitional justice: reflections on a collaborative research project<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

For me, what we really have to grapple with is the asymmetries where you say you are in a partnership, like a research partnership but you are from different contexts, say, you're from a country which is totally broken, a country torn apart by war [and] on the other end you have partners from the best country in the world, actually for us we call it heaven, where everything is there – [it is] peaceful, rich, intelligent, precise. I mean that is the divide. Even how the rules of the game are set, reflects that stability. If you are setting deliverables, the timeline and so on, they reflect that precision, that certainty. But then you have some partners [whose] context is characterized by uncertainty, fluidity, and you don't know what tomorrow brings you. So the rule of the game for us is flexibility, sometimes survival. So the ground rules simply do not reflect our reality.

This is an extract from a conversation we held as a research team at our final project workshop. The team consists of two South Sudanese researchers who conduct research in and on South Sudan, one Cameroonian researcher working on Côte d'Ivoire, one Ivorian researcher working on Côte d'Ivoire, one German researcher based in Switzerland conducting research on the African Union and one British academic based in the UK, Switzerland and France who conducts research in various country contexts on the subject of transitional justice, and who is also the project lead. By the end of the project we felt perhaps closer to each other than in the beginning – we had built trust and friendships, but we had also gone through the hiccups and less comfortable moments of partnerships in practice. In the following discussion we refer to the Global North and Global South as markers of our positionality and the varying access to resources and power it might stand in for. This is not to imply, however, that

within those ‘regions’ we are not also vastly different, as individuals, citizens and researchers. Importantly, it is in no way meant to imply a congruence of the experiences of Northern or Southern partners, for, as our colleague Leben has put it, Côte d’Ivoire and South Sudan – our two African partner contexts – ‘are geographically close but actually far away. We might come from the same region, say South, but in reality are distant from each other [...]’.

The discussion which follows is an attempt at a reflexive, thoughtful, honest and difficult exchange about the politics of knowledge of our own knowledge production. As the quote which begins the chapter illustrates, the research team is diverse: we have uneven access to research resources, we have different contexts of security in which we do our work, and we make assumptions about the differences between the places which we come from and the effect this has on our roles in the project. Our commonalities, however, should not be forgotten in this diversity. Our common desire to work together, to be respected and valued by other members of the team and the transitional justice scholarly and expert communities, and to contribute to how we know (and do) transitional justice, served as a vital glue during the four years of collaboration (2016 to 2020) and permeate the reflections that we present here.

Our project is called ‘Knowledge for Peace. Understanding Research, Policy and Practice Synergies’. It is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Development Cooperation and is headed by swisspeace, a Swiss peace research institution. It is implemented jointly by swisspeace, the University of Juba and the Centre Suisse de Recherches Scientifiques en Côte d’Ivoire [Swiss Centre for Scientific Research] in Abidjan. During this four-year project our research team conducted empirical research on the politics of knowledge in transitional justice contexts and the field of transitional justice itself. Being concerned with the practices and politics of knowledge in our day-to-day research work, and funded within a framework that encourages the implementation of the project under the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) Guiding Principles for Transnational Research Partnerships, we sought to take seriously the necessity of taking into account the knowledge politics within our own research project.

With this in mind, and while planning our contributions which can be found in the other chapters of this edited book, we decided that it would be remiss to avoid turning our gaze on ourselves. Therefore, at our final project dialogue workshop in Kampala in May 2019, we held an unstructured conversation between the team on the subject of our own politics of knowledge. Except for one researcher, the whole team was represented. The absence of one team member from Côte d’Ivoire is illustrative of some of the practical challenges we have encountered during our project, as he had been denied a visa despite submitting the required paperwork on time. In this final session we sat together, recorder in place, to discuss the questions of power and partnership

that shaped our research project, how we perceived our different roles and positionalities in it, and how we felt about the process of this collaborative project. The timing, we realized, was crucial as we might not have let 'our guards' down in the earlier stages of the project. The conversation took different turns, taking us from questions of 'outsider-ness' and 'insider-ness' in our research contexts, to the practical (near-) impossibilities and severe dangers of conducting research in the places that are the focus of our project, to the emotional demands of working with each other, and the requirements of trust and understanding that need to be balanced with the desire to be treated equally in these transnational research settings.

As the conversation unfolded it was clear that we had tried to take a collaborative approach, but that power structures, research management demands and personal and professional constraints that exist outside of and beyond our project have found their way into our interactions and day-to-day work as researchers. This chapter is an attempt at representing and reflecting on this conversation and thus our joint research process, which we considered a partnership but which we experienced in fundamentally different ways. In the framework of the demand and desire to create (the conditions for) more ethical research encounters, we reflect on our particular research project as one such encounter. We proceed by first providing a broad arc for our conversation by discussing the politics of knowledge and the tensions in the epistemic landscape that is transitional justice. We then zoom into the debates on research partnerships, both at the policy level and in academic debates, highlighting in particular the questions of positionality that have been identified in shaping these partnerships. The review of the literature concludes with a discussion of the emotional and ethical aspects of doing research partnerships. These strands of debate reflect the key themes that we, as a research team, identified during our discussion as driving, shaping, and complicating our relations: the multiplicities and tensions inherent in layers of positionality that we inhabit and the emotional and ethical implications of our work and conduct as research partners. Through these key themes the chapter works its way through the idea of the 'research partnership', not as an ideal or as it is planned on paper and in project management scenarios, but as it plays out in the realities of project implementation. The final section takes our empirical reflections back to the broader discussions about the politics and practice of research partnerships and the epistemic tensions that shape the field of transitional justice.

## TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE RESEARCH: FROM WESTERN-CENTRISM TO NORTH-SOUTH PARTNERSHIPS?

Dominant genealogies of the field now known as transitional justice have traced its roots back to the international legal practices that emerged through the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the end of World War II and the transition processes in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Teitel, 2003). Tied to this placing of transitional justice's origins in the moments of 'Western triumphalism' (Maddison and Shepherd, 2014: 260) is the observation that dominant transitional justice knowledge is produced largely in the Global North, at Northern universities, through international organizations like the New York-based International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), or by the United Nations (UN). The international transitional justice norm and many of the internationally sanctioned practices are, as a consequence, seen by critical scholarship as largely Western in nature both epistemologically and normatively (Sharp, 2018: ix–x).

The idea of and the term 'transitional justice' started to gain traction following the end of the Cold War as part of the 'post-cold war ascendancy of particular, culturally laden narratives about history, society, governmentality and justice' (Kagoro, 2012: 10). From a set of conferences,<sup>2</sup> and other similar encounters between practitioners and policy-makers on the one side and Western academics on the other, emerged a range of books and articles that have come to define the field. These include Orentlicher's 1991 'Settling Accounts', Krititz's three *Transitional Justice* volumes from 1995, Hayner's 'Fifteen Truth Commissions' from 1994 and Minow's 1998 *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, among others. Many of these built strongly on practice experience gained in the Global South. For example, the foregrounding of the Western expert over the non-Western expertise on which his/her expertise has been built is seen in Hayner's 1994 article on 'Fifteen Truth Commissions' of which only one, that of Germany, was based in the Global North. All others, i.e. the entire set of experiences based on which Hayner wrote her authoritative account of truth commissions, were based in the Global South. These examples exemplify a much broader pattern that persists in transitional justice scholarship whereby much research is conducted in, with and by the Global South, but it is published by Northern institutions and academics and renders their voices authoritative.

Kagoro has referred to this discrepancy between the visible, Western voice and the actual origins of the knowledge as transitional justice's 'knowledge imperialism' (2012: 12). As a consequence of these patterns of unequal access and representation the fast-developing field of transitional justice (Bell, 2008)

has, in its mere 30 years of existence, established both its dominant paradigms and undergone a legitimacy crisis, based on critiques of its modes of action, key actors, underlying power structures and normative assumptions. Lawther and Moffett (2017: 1) have thus described transitional justice as a 'self-conscious area of practice'. One strand of critique iterates the power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South in both the theory and practice of transitional justice.

The North-South gap has also been the subject of a workshop recently organized at Berkeley Law under the title 'North-South Dialogue: Bridging the Gap in Transitional Justice' (Fletcher and Weinstein, 2018a). The discussions in this workshop provide useful insights into the tensions that mark research in the field of transitional justice. Fletcher and Weinstein summarize the sentiment as follows: 'Those who are working in or with communities in which transitional justice interventions are contemplated or implemented – the Global South – are frustrated at how they are treated by international researchers, funders and policy makers' (Fletcher and Weinstein, 2018b: 3). This frustration speaks to various facets of the unequal encounter as it characterizes transitional justice research, including the invisibility of scholars from the Global South, the extractive nature of the research process, and the absence of organizational and funding structures that allow Southern scholars to take the lead in international research and engagement processes (*ibid.*). The extractive nature of research is perceived in particularly stark terms, as can be seen in this statement from Chris Dolan, who describes transitional justice as one field where 'the suffering of some creates opportunities for others' (Chris Dolan, referenced in Fletcher and Weinstein 2018a: 39):

For the purposes of provoking, I would suggest that the major transitional justice factories are located in the Global North, while much of the raw materials – as in so many other areas – are produced in the Global South. Transitional justice industrialists (sorry, I mean self-designated 'experts') go to do 'fieldwork' and harvest crops from seeds they imported and planted on a previous visit. Worse still, some of those seeds are genetically modified so that they only germinate when fertilized from the Global North. The 'value-added' is expected only to happen in the Global North, which sees itself as enjoying a monopoly on 'international expertise', while the Global South fills in the void in its 'local knowledge'.

One response to this has been the attempt to frame an African research agenda for transitional justice that:

is generally framed in terms of documenting local achievements. There is a preoccupation with demonstrating that local knowledge – meaning local culture, local intelligence, local experience – should be acknowledged and celebrated. This acknowledgement is not just a strategy for better information gathering. It is part of what is locally understood as the very purpose of transitional justice – rebuild-

ing African capacity in the wake of colonial destruction and correcting the global imbalance of knowledge and national dignity. (Hugo van der Merwe, referenced in Fletcher and Weinstein 2018a: 88)

Partly in response to some of these challenges, North-South research partnerships and collaborative knowledge production have recently become a priority for transitional justice and connected fields. Large funders of internationally oriented research now include more equal collaborations between Global North and Global South partners as conditions of funding. For example, international development money in the UK is now partly channelled through the Global Challenges Research Fund. This £1.5 billion fund is part of the UK's Official Development Assistance and requires that 'due diligence' is followed when taking part in research partnerships with overseas organizations. This means that while Global South partners are required to be on the team for the funds to be awarded, and collaboration between the partners is expected from the design stage of the project and throughout, there is an explicit concern that:

The risks relating to funding going overseas are much greater than for funding going to UK Research Organisations that undergo stringent audit checks. Due diligence provides a way to mitigate the risks, share good practice and have assurance that Research Organisations have the capacity and expertise to carry out the research or training.<sup>3</sup>

Similar concern for the nature and ethics of North-South partnerships is voiced by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries which defines 11 principles to take into account: set the agenda together; interact with stakeholders; clarify responsibilities; account to beneficiaries; promote mutual learning; enhance capacities; share data and networks; disseminate results; pool profits and merits; apply results; and secure outcomes.<sup>4</sup> These principles are designed to reflect a particular approach to knowledge production: 'Transboundary and intercultural research in partnership is a continuous process of sound knowledge generation, building mutual trust, mutual learning and shared ownership.'<sup>5</sup>

These examples of the principles of research partnerships are certainly a step towards more equitable knowledge production. The principles themselves are worthy in the ambition to share resources, acknowledge global research capacities, and for researchers in the Global North and the Global South to benefit equally from the outputs of the research. However, the way in which such partnerships play out in practice can undermine the principles themselves. Our own experiences as researchers grappling with grant submissions systems which are in English only, and require excellent internet connections, with grant awards that leave auditing and reporting in the hands of the Global North partners, and the difficulty in securing overhead costs for Global South

partners, are some of the small and yet significant ways in which inequalities persist and fundamentally affect the nature of the partnership itself.

Other scholars have been reflecting on their first-hand experiences of such partnerships and the inequalities in knowledge production in transitional justice and beyond. The (Silent) Voices Blog was started in order to reflect

on ethical issues in fieldwork in conflict and post-conflict settings, and on the place and vulnerability of the researcher in such settings. The ideas conveyed in these blog posts serve as an indictment of the violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production. They argue that this process is, among other things, responsible for the dehumanization and the erasure of researchers from the Global South.<sup>6</sup>

In a 2019 post, Ansoms et al. (2019) write:

Many researchers based in the Global North who do fieldwork in the Global South engage research assistants based in our areas of research, close to or in the field. At best, their contribution is mentioned in a footnote of our articles or reports. At worst, they are kept completely invisible, this despite their own agency and crucial role in the research cycle. Recent debates in development and conflict studies have challenged the often institutionalised practices, mechanisms and requirements that keep research collaborators and assistants based in the areas of research silent and invisible. Yet, many of these debates are often limited to discussions between ‘lead researchers from the North’.

The mechanisms for designing, enacting and acknowledging the co-production of data are incredibly important and a regular stumbling block for North-South research partnerships. Datta (2019) has referred to genuine research partnerships as a ‘pipe dream’. Reflecting specifically on the GCRF funds mentioned above, Datta lists a series of substantial challenges: Southern partners cannot afford to say no to requests from Northern partners who often have an instrumental reason for needing to include them; Southern partners rarely have a say in setting the parameters of the project in the proposal stage due to time pressures; reviewers of grant proposals rarely care how the UK partners will approach partnership per se; and UK partners often feel that Southern partners are in need of capacity building but do not acknowledge their own capacity weaknesses. The concluding statement of Datta’s blog piece is damning: ‘In sum, I think we need to be honest about the type of relationship that UK researchers have with their Southern counterparts. And in many cases, partnership is not the word I would use to describe them’ (Datta, 2019). Indeed, in reflections on the overlooked value of South-South collaborations, van der Merwe et al. point towards resource flows and citation patterns to argue that international collaborations ‘hold the danger of simply reinforcing existing imbalances in knowledge development’ (2013: 2). The very fact of the gap in knowledge on South-South research partnerships indicates a structural

problem in the politics of knowledge production. This is even more pertinent in the field of transitional justice, where the Global South partners are likely to be based in the case study countries where victimization and marginalization, due to large-scale violations of human rights, are both the subject of the research and the context in which research takes place. Thus, while some funding and policy guidance has emerged that is aimed at creating more equal and sustainable North-South research partnerships in peacebuilding and transitional justice, the practice of these partnerships has not been sufficiently critically interrogated.

It is thus with these debates and tensions in mind that we aim in this chapter to make our own contribution to the literature on research partnerships, through a reflexive account of a conversation between our project team members. In conceptualizing this research project, the project partners had set out to ensure that 'KPFÉ principles will be applied throughout the research process' (Knowledge for Peace project proposal, scientific part) which involves, *inter alia*, setting the agenda together, promoting mutual learning, enhancing capacities, sharing data and networks, disseminating results, and pooling profits and merits (Swiss Academy of Science, 2014). Wanting to go beyond the basic requirements outlined in the KPFÉ we had set out for a more collaborative approach throughout the process. At our final team workshop it became clear that, at best, this had been only partially successful. We therefore held a group conversation with the explicit purpose of discussing the politics of our knowledge production and why a more collaborative process had faltered at times during the project. The conversation was planned but not structured, and the insights which it generated were not always predictable or even comfortable. For the purposes of this chapter we have gathered together the conversation points into three themes: positionality, emotion, and ethics. These themes make sense according to the spontaneous flow of our conversation and the issues that we had wanted to raise with each other. The conversation was between us as a team, but what became clear during the meeting, and as we reflected on the interview transcript, was that it was much more than this. It was also a conversation we were having with ourselves as individuals, posing questions about who we are and why we do what we do. It was also a conversation between the team and the broader communities in which we are embedded, posing questions and expressing frustrations about the factors which we see constraining our role and contributions to knowledge production on and for transitional justice. The following sections spell out some of the challenges, dynamics of power and positionality, and ethical and emotional concerns we have faced in trying to turn the ideal of a collaborative, ethical research partnership into reality – an endeavour we believe has succeeded only to a limited extent, but which could be more successful given different conditions and approaches that we elaborate in our concluding remarks.



## POSITIONALITY

[...] Positionality they call it: the unique identity coordinates of your particular constellation of markers. Marked – that is an apt phrase. Skin marked visibly by privilege, minds marked less obviously by memories of prejudice and exploitation. (Bourke et al., 2009: 97)

There is a multiplicity of identities and experiences each of us inhabits – some more visible than others – not only in our private and professional lives, but also, and specifically so, in our role as researchers who work in and on societies in transition. These identities shape our actions and interactions in the research process. They shape the questions we ask, who we ask these questions to and how we interpret their answers. But they also shape who we are able (or not) to gain access to for our research, how the research process affects us as emotive beings, and what is expected of us in this research process be it by our research subjects, collaborators or partners. While all of us are professionals in the field of transitional justice, this relates to varying forms of theoretical and practical expertise, perceived levels of power, influence and voice, to name but a few factors. In this section we will discuss three aspects of our positionality that have marked our (inter-)actions in and throughout this research project: our positionalities vis-à-vis the context we work on; our relations to each other; and our positionality vis-à-vis the broader field of transitional justice.

Our positionalities vis-à-vis our research contexts are marked at the most obvious level by whether we are ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ to these contexts. As Ulrike reflected:

one of the things I have struggled with, is always being a stranger in a context and [feeling] like you never really get it, so when I came in and started working on Mozambique, it was one of the reasons I shifted my focus. Besides the intellectual reasons, the feeling that the context is really inaccessible to me [...] and [the question of] whether that delegitimizes anything I can put out there anyways.

These concerns with positionality which had a direct effect on the way the research focus shifted during the project had not been outlined as potential challenges in the research proposal, and instead the proposal had focused on the anticipated difficulties with data collection in Mozambique. However, this sentiment also perpetuates

a positivist notion of knowledge in which the ‘insider’ interviewer is seen to have a closer, more direct, and hence in some way ‘truer’ access to knowledge, knowledge which is seen to pre-exist the research process and which is simply awaiting to be discovered by those with the appropriate cultural resources and skills. (Herod, 1999: 314)

Crucially, inaccessibility is also observable when the researcher is an insider – due often to security, bureaucratic, and other reasons. Narratives from colleagues from South Sudan show that even when the researcher is from the country or even the local indigenous ethnic group, this does not prevent them from experiencing insecurity. This insecurity and the related inability to access key informants and data also drives changes in the research focus. In the case of Cote d'Ivoire, the team had to shift the initial focus from topics on judiciary procedures or debates on transitional justice institutions (e.g. Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation Commission) that are very politicized and polarized topics to issues that, even though they are still very sensitive, generate less tension – such as social cohesion and reparation. The shift was the consequence of difficulties and insecurity in investigating the politics of transitional justice in a context of distrust between people.

This differs from another challenge expressed by team members, which relates to being insiders to both the context they are researching and, in some ways, to the subject of our research – transitional justice – through their engagement with ongoing transitional justice processes through consultancy work, public commentary or through the fact that they live in (supposedly) transitioning societies. They are thus also insiders to the idea and reality of societies in transition, with all the potential but also risk, uncertainty and insecurity associated with that.

However, those of us who are insiders in their contexts are also simultaneously outsiders. They are insiders as they are nationals of the same country, and perhaps even members of the same ethnic group their research focuses on, but they are rendered outsiders by their ability to leave, at least temporarily, the site of violence and suffering with which they engage professionally. The South Sudanese members of the team have moved part of their families out of South Sudan into more secure living situations, and during the project entered mobile and even liminal spaces of being in, but also escaping from, the field-work sites. Of course, this does not mean that they, as individuals and community members, have not suffered. They have suffered and lost, rebuilt and seen re-destroyed their and their families' lives. This suffering is not always visible to outsiders or even project partners – as Bourke et al. (2009: 97) put it, their 'minds [are] marked less obviously by memories of prejudice and exploitation', but they are marked nonetheless. However, besides being members of transitioning and conflicting societies, they also have professional lives that allow them to mitigate some of the effects of that violence, by withdrawing themselves temporarily. Like outsiders, they get to leave. These 'notions of difference' can contribute greatly to experiences in the field, for 'in the context of the field, the researcher is continuously challenged with the implications of what her/his body represents – difference and privilege' (ibid.: 95). This experience indicates not only the unstable nature of the insider-outsider binary and

its dependence on time, space and context (Henry et al., 2009: 468) but also the need for a more complex understanding of ‘researcher’ as a positionality marker (Bourke et al., 2009) that operates with and under ‘degrees of outsider-ness’ (Herod, 1999: 326).

The second aspect of our positionalities is our relations with each other. Three insights seem key to this particular dynamic of our collaboration. The first one is trust and the realization that starting to collaborate at the point of setting the research agenda (i.e. developing a proposal) jointly is important but not enough. According to Gilbert Fokou,

[c]oncerning our project [...] we reached here because of trust that was constructed between institutions and between people, even before the project. If we had to start the collaboration from scratch it would be difficult to reach a certain level of competence and trust. I think this is something important for setting up a team for collaborative research.

If our institutions or the individuals involved in this process had started collaborating only with the development of the research proposal, much of what we jointly and individually achieved during the project would simply not have been possible. Both the Centre Suisse de Recherches Scientifiques en Côte d’Ivoire and the University of Juba had been long-term partners of swisspeace (staff). These longer-term relationships which enable trust and understanding, not just good planning, were seen by our team as a vital foundation for the collaboration that took place over many years and many miles of distance.

The second insight concerns the power relations that permeate our research practices. One team member highlighted that

the research idea came from the North and this is also generally how knowledge is channelled. I think there is a need now in Africa to take another way round [...] to have a more balanced way of really co-producing knowledge so that everyone feels more comfortable [...] that people feel this is an idea we have produced [together]. (Gilbert Fokou)

This is but one indication of how our research process – in all its stages – is infused with power (Vanner, 2015). There is power in the development of research ideas, the ability to obtain funding, the hierarchies of project management, the requirements of adhering to the deadlines and project outputs as defined in the stability and certainty of the context of stable countries who fund research globally, and power in the communication of research results. This chimes with the broader debates in the literature on research partnerships and the more informal reflections expressed in blogs like *The (Silent) Voices*. The origin of ideas is important not only for being able to demonstrate and track collaboration but also for the feelings of partners that they have indeed

been part of the vision. In the case of our project, the idea came from Briony, a Swiss-based member of the team, who, despite collaboration with some of the members of the team who were to become project partners, was the one who submitted the proposal and became the project lead. The moment of the inception of the project set up the structures which conditioned the collaboration to come. While we had never discussed this previously, it is noteworthy that this issue was something of importance for the Ivoirian colleagues and they wished to raise it during our conversation.

Thirdly, and this relates to power dynamics but also goes beyond them, is the question of knowledge transfer that was raised by Leben:

I think the other element is what is knowledge transfer? [...] I have to be honest that I come from a non-transitional justice background, so by being part of this I learnt a lot. And what we did is develop [the project] for Kuyang to do a PhD and now focus on transitional justice coming from a legal background. So that is the transfer of knowledge that we hope will become stable [...] she will [probably] be the first person in South Sudan grounded in this. So from Briony to her it is direct knowledge transfer [...] we wanted someone grounded in these theories and practices and she will be the first.

While Briony did not perceive herself to be entering our debates and interactions from the perspective of a transitional justice expert, but rather saw herself as an academic with the related, very specific academic skillset, she was perceived by Leben as a conveyor of knowledge in this particular field. Interesting here is also the way that participation in this research process, and the PhD degree it would culminate in, is read as an inference of expert status – one that is built on the acquired fluency in global transitional justice debates. This is reflective of the observation that one will only be considered an authoritative voice in transitional justice debates with the right type and level of degree, reinforcing the perception of transitional justice as both ‘an expert concept’ (Gilbert Fokou) and an expert practice.

This brings us to the third overall aspect of positionality that shaped and was shaped by this research project: our positionality vis-à-vis the field of transitional justice. As we saw above, Briony had a transitional justice ‘expert’ status conferred on her by partners, who were hoping to learn from participation in the project and to contribute to this new field in South Sudan scholarship. In fact, it is noteworthy that none of the Global South partners was comfortable describing themselves as transitional justice ‘experts’ and rather saw themselves as lawyers, sociologists or political scientists more generally.

The varied ways the team members saw their expertise came through in the conversations. As Kuyang reflected:

I think that then when I look at the range of expertise that came together to deliver the same output I ask myself who am I? Whatever it is we are doing now it is an opportunity to share our grappling with initial ideas and concepts. As a lawyer working in the development field on access to justice issues, have I moved somewhere new? What will I do afterwards? What professorship will I do? [...] On the issue of the knowledge production itself, I think in my work I am constantly trying to say is it a new field, an old field? But it is new in South Sudan.

The inbuilt inequality between us all in terms of who was considered, and considered themselves, to be a transitional justice ‘expert’ often determined how we would comment on each other’s work, and how meetings and agendas would be set. This was further reinforced by the roles decided upon at the proposal stage, i.e. who would lead the project and hold the budget. As is so often the case with North-South partnerships, one area where the relationships of ‘expertise’ were reversed is that of knowledge of the field. Returning to Kuyang’s reflections, her self-doubt regarding the newness of the field of transitional justice was not reflected when she spoke about her empirical work in South Sudan: ‘There is very little scholarship coming from South Sudan, but now the few of us who want to do this we have to put our work to be reviewed by another who does not understand my context. I will accept the review, but do they understand my context?’

These three aspects of our positionality vis-à-vis our contexts, each other and the field we seek to speak to through our research create not only challenging instances for the aspirational endeavour of creating ethical North-South research partnerships, but they also call for us to rethink positionality as an assemblage of differences (Bettez, 2015: 937), that changes not only depending on the time, and the place and the people involved, but also on the entry point of the analysis. It involves the relations within the research team and between the team members and their lived professional and personal environments. A layered thinking about positionality thus seems to be a more useful analytic for moving forward not only our understanding of the concept of positionality, but also our grasp of how positionalities affect research collaboration that, firstly, manoeuvres North-South knowledge and power relations, and that, secondly, and additionally, operates in vastly different, at times highly uncertain and insecure, contexts. Reflexivity, understood as an awareness of and reflection on ‘the relationship between facts, theories, methods and the researcher’ (Nouwen, 2014), remains rare in transitional justice but seems to offer itself as a useful entry point for critical epistemic and methodological enquiries into transitional justice theory and practice and as a lens that shapes our thinking

in planning, implementing and evaluating collaborative, North-South research partnerships in the field.

## EMOTION

And who talks about the emotions of research? I have gone to locations where I have cried. Who am I? At the end of the day I am a person? [cries] Yeah I am a researcher but I break down because I am a human. As I console them who consoles me? (Kuyang Logo)

Our conversation was at times emotional, and we all displayed varying degrees of distress, anger, confusion, guilt and awkwardness as we tried to carefully navigate our experiences of working together, and our experiences of working on the subject of transitional justice. It has been acknowledged by other scholars that transitional justice research requires a substantial amount of emotional labour (Simić, 2016), fitting with a more general ‘emotional turn’ which has challenged objectivity and detachment in the social sciences (Blakely, 2007: 60–1) and has seen the development of emotional methodologies in geography (Bondi, 2005), anthropology (Beatty, 2005) and sociology (Blackman, 2007). This body of work importantly sees emotion as a conduit to knowledge, as Lupton (1998: 1) expresses:

Our concepts of our emotions are often integral to our wider conception of ourselves, used to give meaning and provide explanation for our lives, for why we respond to life events, other people, material artefacts and places in certain ways, why we might tend to follow patterns of behaviour throughout our lives.

With this in mind we reflect on the times when we expressed emotion, and what this tells us about the way we experienced and managed our research partnerships in the day-to-day life of the project. As we found, this was partly about expressing feelings and partly about the unsaid, what we chose not to share with each other until we had the opportunity and trust to do so.

In the day-to-day of the project we were focused on discussing the planned outputs, timetable, upcoming events, and while we were able to build friendships on the few occasions that we were in the same place we did not plan ongoing dialogues about how we felt in the context of our individual work or the research partnership. It was only in holding the conversation at our final project workshop that we realized the importance of talking about ourselves as part of the knowledge production, and not just about the project as something ‘out there’ which was somehow independent from us. We all agreed that our ability to undertake the project successfully was as much dependent on the

friendships which underpinned it and emerged during it, as it was the mechanics of project design, fieldwork and writing. Kuyang commented:

The only thing that keeps me going for me it is the friendships and the understanding. Just look at the way we are managing the money? I told Prof. Leben that if we did not take the money out of the university this whole thing would have collapsed. When we do a dialogue workshop like this you don't know what it means, to be able to pull it off.

In this quote Kuyang alludes to alterations in the financial procedures to allow the research funds in South Sudan to be transparently protected – flexibility which is not allowed by all funders who often require institution-to-institution administrative relationships regardless of the potentially shifting institutional contexts for Global South partners. During the timeframe of our project the University of Juba has been under substantial pressure and there had been a number of personnel changes.<sup>7</sup> Less static funding arrangements are then necessary to enable excellent scholars in all parts of the globe to be equal partners and to manage their own budgets. Importantly, Leben added:

And yet we don't want to be judged by different standards, we want to be judged by everybody's standards. So, if you've got partners who don't have that consideration that trust in you, that patience, then you are in trouble.

This is a view shared by the Western partners: 'What you say about relationships is key because you only have good communication with good relationships' (Briony Jones) and communication is a prerequisite for balancing the need to treat all partners equally and accommodating the challenges of specific contexts. Research collaborations then cannot only be built on 'expectations of the exchange of expertise' (Levy Paluck, 2009: 50) but they also carry, implicitly and explicitly, an expectation of the exchange of trust. However, the different conditions for accessing resources and the tendency to apply different measures of success not only has practical implications and consequences, as Leben elaborates:

So the ground rules simply do not reflect our reality. And this, this may be about power but it's also about psychology of people, about people's emotions. You know, I've been in a [collaboration] where even good friends [were] telling me that somebody from my country cannot be accepted for publication [...] So then what are the implications? The implications can take so many directions. But how do people respond in this asymmetry of positions, or circumstances? You could be judged by different yardsticks or you could feel you have to prove yourself more than other people because of the different circumstances you come from and this can really have different consequences for how projects go, how partnerships go. So if you are with partners who are not understanding, not, I don't know whether I can use the word kind [...] For example, if a partner sends me an email two or

three times in a day and I don't reply – maybe he doesn't know that I hadn't had internet for a whole week, and it is very easy to pass a judgement 'you know, that guy is very lazy'. These different contexts of your resources become very crucial [...]. (Leben Moro)

His account at once speaks to the perceived and self-imposed pressure to 'prove themselves more than other people' and the paternalism, arrogance and detachment that partners are at times met with when encountering problems in implementing research projects and partnerships. Both positionalities and contexts then not only have practical implications for how research partnerships can be implemented but they also shape the relations among partners in potentially unforeseen ways. The flipside to this is the ethical struggle experienced by researchers in the West, as expressed by Briony who says that she has 'always been reluctant to have a different approach to partners regardless of their context because I've been wary of seeming patronizing. I don't want to go into it with an assumption, I want to know that from [the partners]'. In Briony's view this makes these open conversations, which we sought actively only at the end of the project, an important part of the entire life cycle of a research process. The interpersonal aspects of research partnerships, which are all too clear in our conversation and indeed are well known by all researchers who participate in them, are however glaringly absent from funder guidelines or published principles on research partnerships.

The emotions of the partnerships thus refer to the friendships, trust and ways of communicating which enable the partnership to operate. There is also, of course, the issue of the emotional labour referred to earlier. Transitional justice research concerns human rights violations, the conducting of fieldwork and analysis of data, and attempts to write about and name that which easily defies understanding bears an emotional cost for those who undertake the research. This emotional cost will play out differently for those of the team who are physically and emotionally closer to the field contexts:

Even in this meeting here there were interesting things being discussed. But maybe people didn't know they were also talking about us. Maybe some of us have witnessed atrocities. There are people that have been shot near me, we have been put in a firing line. So we got lined up to be shot. Then we come to produce [an] ID. And we were lucky because I belong to a different tribe. So when we are discussing issues of recording atrocities the images come back, very quickly actually. So when the images come back you have to sit there, sometimes you have to be a bit blank, you don't know what they are talking about. So we struggle a lot with issues of trauma, and our own ways of dealing with trauma. We have academic discussion, write articles but we always have to struggle. (Leben Moro)

Leben here refers to the open part of our final dialogue workshop which took place the day before our reflective team discussion. The dialogue brought



together South Sudanese scholars, activists and practitioners of transitional justice and the content of the discussion touched directly upon acts of violence that had also been experienced by our South Sudanese members of the team. Following this, the two Swiss-based members of the team (Ulrike and Briony) wondered whether they had assumed that the 'local' team would find engaging with the materials easier because they were from the region, or whether they had taken this aspect into account in the way the workshop had been planned and executed. With the intention of demonstrating respect for their research partners, Ulrike and Briony had stepped back from the logistics and indeed emotions of the process of planning the dialogue workshop on South Sudan, inadvertently also stepping back from any responsibility to demonstrate care for the emotional labour of Leben and Kuyang. Ulrike posed the question to them: 'So is not doing these kinds of projects an option? Or not working on these issues? Or including psychological counselling?' and Kuyang responded:

In all of this, again, who am I? We have ambitions and that's why we are doing it [...] like we wanted to be something at a certain point and how are we going to follow these ambitions? I had been looking for a PhD that suits a woman where you can be [a] mother, wife, all these things. So why do we keep going back to these contexts? We have to, at the end of the day, meet our dreams.

She continues, 'If you include psychological counselling, for whom? In a society where everyone is traumatized?', 'Who heals whom? Who would understand me?'

This honest and challenging account from Kuyang at once questions the possibility of ever 'helping' as a Global North partner, while showing clearly how important such considerations are. In reflecting on hearing this, Ulrike and Briony also posed themselves the question of whether they had inadvertently added to the trauma of the partners in the way that they spoke of violence, and whether or not their expectation that the field would somehow be made 'legible' to them by the Southern partners adequately took into account these affective aspects. In quoting Lévi-Strauss, Nouwen writes that fieldwork is the 'mother and nursemaid of doubt' (2014: 234), not only in the sense of drawing into doubt our understanding of the research object, but much more fundamentally in terms of one's own position, legitimacy and person. Kuyang's repeated questioning of who she was, of who could offer comfort, and the discomfort and self-doubt of the Swiss-based partners was part of a calling into question of our legitimacy in the context of the research partnership with each other. We realized that we had made demands of each other, had made assumptions about each other, and had partially shielded or kept from each other our emotional experiences.

## ETHICS

With transition here we do not necessarily mean to imply the idea of a linear transition from war to peace, but rather a messy embodiment of the conflict curve, in which conflict increases and decreases in intensity, incomplete transitions lead to new or renewed conflict, and fragile peace can lead to long-term peace and stability or to more conflict and even war. This idea of fluctuation, uncertainty, insecurity, etc., also marks their research environment. [...] the rules of the game are set they reflect [the] stability [of a country like Switzerland]. If you are setting deliverables, the timeline and so on they reflect that precision, that certainty. (Leben Moro)

Where can I conform to those research ethics in South Sudan? Can I conform to them in Juba? How far does my methodology move in contexts where everything is burnt and people are looking around to see if they can speak or not speak? (Kuyang Logo)

These introductory quotes summarize some of the ethical discussions and concerns we have been grappling with as a research team. In the course of our conversation it became clear that these have to do with not only questions of conducting research in line with ethical and methodological standards, but also the ideals of ethical research partnerships that we had hoped to strive for. Furthermore, it showed that these questions of ethical research partnerships not only play out in the dynamics of our North-South partnership but equally challenging questions are having to be negotiated by our Southern team members and their research subjects based on the different roles and positionalities they inhabit. Here we will briefly discuss the ethics of administrative and methodological requirements set in the Global North in practice, and the ethical dimensions in our North-South and researcher-researched relations.

The first set of challenges focuses on the requirements of research ethics, which, as Leben has pointed out, are being developed and promoted by researchers and research financing institutions such as donors or governmental and non-governmental grant-making institutions. While there are obvious and good reasons for these ethical standards and the enforcement mechanisms that are in place to safeguard and monitor them, they can make research in (post-)conflict locations considerably more difficult. Consider for example the requirement to share data among partners which is given by the Swiss National Science Foundation as a condition for its grants and which the KPFE principles – designed specifically to ‘promote [...] increased, effective and equitable research cooperation with low and middle income countries’ – also support. However, neither of these guidelines accounts for what this means in the context of sharing the primary data that has been collected in an insecure environment. How can the practical, ethical and potential security challenges associated with this for researchers in the specific context be adequately

accounted for and addressed? Often these challenges are interlinked and cannot be overcome merely through practically oriented solutions:

and where we are talking about sharing our data is that going to be a lot of work for me? Because when we are going into a context that is very tough I am writing handwritten notes and I can understand them but for me to put it up I need to clean it up. Do I have the luxury to record, do I have the luxury to use my computer? I have my recorder and it is always tucked under because we are checked manually [at the airport]. (Kuyang Logo)

A second example includes the need to use one's multiple professional identities, for example as a researcher, consultant and academic, to gain (safe) access to specific field locations. While the highest standard of transparency is maintained with respondents, what does the need to frame one's work and the intention of travel in one way and not another mean for Southern researchers' relationships with their governments? This speaks to the relationship between the researcher, the research context and the researched – under-explored especially in its emotive effects on the researcher in contexts of insider positionality. Additionally, there are the ethics negotiations between the Southern partners and their research subjects (through differing roles), and they are often shaped by Northern ethics processes which cannot cope with certain fieldwork 'realities'. Mertus elaborates that while do-no-harm principles for research have been fairly well established,

less acknowledged, but equally important, is the responsibility of researchers to anticipate and counteract the potential harm to oneself. The types of harm that may await researchers include not only the kind of harm to physical security that gun fire, landmines and natural disasters invoke, but also the physical and psychological damage inflicted by detention and imprisonment, sexual harassment and other mistreatments designed to derail the possibility of working in the area. Additional critical concerns result from the severe stress of working with traumatized populations, living under watch of an authoritarian state, travelling in highly militarized zones, and exposing oneself to continual danger. (Mertus, 2009: 166)

While some of these questions ought to be addressed through ethics committees and a thorough planning of the research process in the conceptualization phase, it seems that the ethics processes created from the context of stability, predictability and planning that mark many contexts in the Global North might be inadequate for dealing with the realities of doing research in (post-) conflict and transitional societies. Furthermore, certainty of the ability to implement a project and concerns for institutional reputation have occasionally been reported to drive ethics committee decisions more than the 'duty of care toward and, integrity of the researcher and their research participant[s]' (Hemming, 2009: 21).

To what extent, then, can the field of transitional justice look to other fields such as migration studies (Clark-Kazak, 2019), peacebuilding and so forth to adapt its methodologies and ethics processes to account exactly for this state of transition, and thus uncertainty, fluctuation and insecurity that is mentioned in the introductory quote to this section, and which are presumed to be significant characteristics of transitional societies? Considering the dominance of the Global North in transitional justice research, that the rules of the scientific game are written in the North and that much of the funding comes from there, how can we, in practice, ensure that the methodologies and ethics processes that shape the field's scholarship take seriously the social, political and security realities that are at the heart of the contexts and processes we study?

The second ethics-related concern our conversation raised relates to the ethics of the partnership itself. This plays out firstly, and to varying degrees, in the partnership relations between the research partners. This aspect is particularly important as research ethics debates tend to focus on the relationship of the researcher to the researched and to a much lesser degree on the relationships and well-being within research teams (Levy Paluck, 2009) or the questions of 'how collaboration might affect research methods and ethics' (ibid.: 40). In our case the debate around this quickly turned to the tension between formal requirements such as deadlines and outputs which at times are driven by the demands of Northern research partners, and the question of 'how much pressure does [this] put on the person?' (Kuyang Logo) when specific project outputs require processes that put Southern partners at physical risk. This in turn brought us to questions of mutual understanding and the limits of this understanding considering the vastly different life-worlds within which our lives, including our professional lives, take place: 'When we do a dialogue workshop like this you don't know what it means, to be able to pull it off', '[so] does Briony understand this? Does Ulrike understand it? Does Gilbert understand it?' (Kuyang Logo). While everyone on our team was aware of these different possibilities of understanding one another, and despite what we believe were good intentions by all partners to bridge these divides, the ethical challenges and dilemmas raised through these debates remained unresolved.

## CONCLUSION

The challenges we have discussed indicate the multiple positionalities at play in North-South partnerships and transitional justice research more generally. They also speak to the emotional labour involved in researching human rights abuses and their aftermath, especially in transitional, and thus fluctuating and often insecure, contexts. Lastly, we have discussed the ethics of doing North-South research partnerships both in terms of the (im)possibility of existing ethics procedures to account adequately for the challenges of transitional

contexts, and in terms of the negotiations of ethical and emotional relations between and among research team members.

North-South research partnerships have been envisaged, by transitional justice scholars, donors and policy-makers, as one means to overcome the disparities and inequalities in access to resources but also in the voice and influence differently located researchers hold in the field. 'Celebrated for enhancing knowledge transfer between academics and higher education institutions in the two geographic regions' (Mago, 2017: 163) these types of partnership are seen as one way of addressing the North-South research divide. The reflections presented above, however, indicate that while there might be a two-directional knowledge transfer taking place, there are a broad range of factors and challenges that might well be standing in the way of truly collaborative knowledge production, which goes beyond knowledge transfer and which could provide redress for transitional justice's research divides.

These challenges bring forward a number of broader concerns that the funders, planners and implementers of research projects need to grapple with if they want to ensure that these partnerships do indeed have a positive impact. These revolve around the need to acknowledge and account for, both conceptually and in practice, the vastly different circumstances and contexts within which we work while also treating everyone equally if we do not want to fall into patronizing and presumptive gestures that will only contribute to feelings of marginalization.

What, then, do our discussions on positionality, emotions and ethics contribute to our understanding of research partnerships and the epistemic worlds that shape transitional justice? It seems that addressing the challenges outlined above will be critical if North-South research partnerships are really to be a means of overcoming the North-South research divide in the field of transitional justice. On the one side, the partnership project succeeded at overcoming the extractive nature that marks many transitional justice studies by having research teams based in different countries that were also the subject of our research, and by ensuring that we all own our research outputs individually or collectively. However, the current conceptualization of North-South partnerships as conduits of knowledge transfer and collaborative knowledge production seems to fall short when viewed from an empirical standpoint. On the other side, the partnership project did not succeed in overcoming the many dynamics and practical obstacles which cause frustration for Southern partners and which are caused by restrictive structures as much as by difficult interactions. The case of our project has, despite all good intentions, shown that the idea of a partnership is not sufficient if it cannot be implemented. Research into other North-South partnerships, their epistemic, emotional and practical implications, challenges and inequalities, is required to flesh out further the positive and negative impacts these have on addressing the knowledge production gap

in the field. Importantly, North-South partnerships also have the potential to produce South-South encounters and partnerships. As Leben states, a project like this one ‘made it possible for us in the South to meet, talk, [and] discuss’. Thus, while they might be funded and led by Northern partners, projects of this type also have the potential to foster South-South partnerships and networks.

Lastly, speaking to the politics of knowledge and expertise in transitional justice – itself considered as an ‘expert concept’ (Gilbert Fokou) – a research project like the one discussed here is ultimately one way of participating in and inserting oneself into this expert world that is transitional justice. As Gilbert has expressed, ‘if you are in the UN system or NGOs or civil society that are dealing with the concept, manipulating the concept’, you are considered an expert. If (collaborative) research projects – by way of awarding (PhD) degrees, teaching collaboration skills, allowing access to expert discourses, networks and spaces – are entry tickets into the professionalized marketplace of ideas that is transitional justice, it is all the more important that they are designed in such a way that they allow access for all partners, and not only those who are already in privileged positions.

## NOTES

1. The research project from which these reflections emerged was kindly supported by a grant from the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development, which is jointly funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).
2. Three key conferences were organized between 1988 and 1995 in Wye (USA), Salzburg (Austria) and Cape Town (South Africa) to bring together ‘international lawyers, political actors, human rights activists and numerous global observers’ (Mouralis, 2013: 91) to share and exchange experiences. They were organized by the Aspen Institute and were followed by the ‘Project of Justice in Times of Transition’, run originally by the University of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, the Law School and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. The conferences and project proved an important milestone in the development of the field of transitional justice (Mouralis, 2013).
3. ‘Due Diligence Guidance’, accessed 12 February 2020 at <https://www.ukri.org/files/funding/due-diligence-guidance-for-ukros-pdf/>
4. Guide accessed 12 February 2020 at [https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20190807115818\\_1565139307\\_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7](https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20190807115818_1565139307_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7). For a further discussion of these principles, see also Chapter 3 by Goetschel in this book.
5. Guide accessed 12 February 2020 at [https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20190807115818\\_1565139307\\_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7](https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20190807115818_1565139307_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7)
6. The (Silent) Voices Blog, accessed 26 March 2020 at <https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog-bukavu-series-eng/>

7. See for example <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/12/south-sudan-academic-suspended-over-opinion-piece> and <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190317100035147>, accessed 20 March 2020.

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