

# Chapter Two: Human-Centred Research: Navigating Personal, Political and Paradigmatic Worldviews<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction: Turning the human-centred turn**

It is not surprising in the aftermath of the years of apartheid subjugation that South African higher education research foregrounds how to advance the voice of the voiceless. Alternative selections of research topics and focused phenomena have been tabled to challenge the rituals, habits and practices of dominant hegemonic disciplinary discourses, as new epistemologies, methodologies and representations are probed. On the one hand, this exploratory stance could be considered part of a transformative discourse that endorses the fundamental human rights of the post-apartheid 1996 Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996). Equity and social justice research considerations are flaunted as improving the quality of a dignified life for all, thereby laying the foundations for a united and democratic country. The principle underpinning such a legislative mandate is that no one may be unfairly discriminated against (directly or indirectly) based on race, gender, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, social origin, religion, conscience, belief, culture or language. Human-centred education is embedded within these campaigns for the affirmation of especially those who were historically marginalised. Promoting self-worth, respect and dignity for all is foundational to the ethics of care, relationship-building towards bolstering well-being and the value of the holistic growth of individuals (Chapter Thirteen) humanising-centred research agenda is

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws on a keynote address presented in 2024 at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education, Research Lekgotla: A celebration of research in the Faculty of Education. *Theme: Advancing human-centred education in complexity*. Pretoria. 04 October 2024.

expected to critique what we research, who we research, how we research and why we research. Such authentication is not confined to South African research systems, but could be generative for broader contexts, questioning the motivation for our research approaches and practices.

However, on the other hand, this chapter presents a cautionary note to these laudable pronouncements of a reparative gesture in post-apartheid South Africa. It reviews how, in the practice of the promotion of an affirmative stance, new exclusionary discourses have emerged that negate respect for a quality, dignified life for all. A further turn towards individualism and narcissism emerges that aligns itself with a neoliberal complicity, competition and selfish promotion. Are human-centred research pedagogies promoting a collusion with narrow views of self-boundary protectionism?

This chapter tackles the complexity of the agenda for human-centred research. The first section elaborates the complex relational ecologies that expose the connectedness between personal, structural and educational agendas. The second section explores why an entanglement of complementary and paradoxical forces could be accommodated. It draws on an interpretation of how radical ideas become co-opted towards maintaining preservative conservatism. The third section explores a comparative perspective to researching human individual experiences, suggesting that human-centred approaches to research are paradigmatically bound. Expanding human-centred research from its interpretivist roots towards a recommended critical paradigmatic perspective involves paying attention to systemic power, injustice and discrimination. Nevertheless, the chapter explores how paradigmatic proliferations could activate a broader spectrum of possibilities. The fourth section offers a commentary on the kinds of supervisory care and critique required to enact a more complex iteration of a human-centred supervisory practice. It argues for a pedagogy of disruption, rather than a pedagogy of comfort. This opens new possibilities for exploring supervisory models and redefining individual and collective agendas in research. The closing section synthesises the overall argument of the chapter and suggests new directions for further research.

## Section One: When affirmation becomes oppression

In the name of a human-centred strategy, many research centres have adopted an approach encouraging student researchers to draw on their personal circumstances and incorporate their stories of success or failure, obstacles and triumphs into their research studies. This is seen as a form of affirmation as students place on record their silenced stories. This agenda is sometimes naively considered as a purely *descriptive* exercise of celebration and vainglorious representations of contextual circumstances that have given rise to the specific chosen focus of study (Samuel 2016b). For example, students are encouraged to report on the constraints and opportunities in realising alternative policy expectations in everyday practice. Their analysis is often confined to externalising the sources of their disquiet and suggests a valorisation of victimhood. Paradoxically, this kind of analysis leads individuals to deflating their own agencies and expecting solutions to derive from sources which are usually out of their parochial ambit. Sometimes, unconsciously, a degree of conservatism underpins the motivation of such research purposes. The researcher summons a lost golden age, a nostalgic quest to return to habits and practices with which they have become comfortable. Thus, while at face value such research appears to be about affirmation, it indirectly promotes a consolidation of remaining within the boundaries of the conventional. Ironically, it retains patterns of older oppression. The research reports of this kind of simplistic individualist research approach become obsessed with fault-finding and blame.

The concern is that these approaches are often limited in their *theorisations of the phenomena* they describe. For example, extensive literature already exists exploring the multiple explanations related to the gap between policy and practice, even suggesting the limits of whether macro-policy can generate alternative practice (Sayed 2001). Some even argue that policy is merely a symbolic rhetorical strategy to direct the system to think of the ideals towards which they may aspire (Jansen 2001; Jansen and Sayed 2001). The lack of infrastructural scaffolding to activate the policy implementation is a well-argued critique of perfectionistic designs (Jansen and Taylor 2023; Mogale and Malatji 2025). Hence, what new does the affirmative research

attempt beyond providing an opportunity for individuals to provide contextual insights into their operational circumstances? How does this contribute to a scholarship about how the phenomenon of the study is extended in various ways? Does the research turn in on itself to question how, as a researcher, one might also be complicit in bolstering the lack of movements towards alternate ways of being?

## **From reflection to diffraction**

Drawing on the anthology by Dison et al. (2024) entitled *Pedagogic innovation beyond disruption*, the suggestion is that a humanising pedagogy is not about a simplistic reflective exercise. These authors suggest that a theorised critical reflection constitutes a form of practice of thinking about knowing, learning and doing that works to examine how individual researchers/practitioners themselves, and their preferred practices become the focus of their analysis. The authors reference this as a form of ‘bring(ing) the self into visibility’ (Bozaleck and Zembylas 2017: 114) that acknowledges the complex relational ecologies between the personal, the structural and theoretical abstractions. Critical reflection is not a form of narcissistic mirroring of one’s own circumstances, but a metaphor of diffracting into the world drawing from the positionality one occupies and ‘embracing the forward momentum of emerging different understandings and enactments with each act of revisiting’ (Bozaleck and Zembylas 2017: 114–115). Further, Haraway (2023) argues that this evolving redefinition involves an act of returning to one’s own stories, to revisit how memory-making has been constructed and then reconsidering the self-in-action in situated contexts.

While the above research study was focussed on examining the kinds of pedagogical strategies undertaken by academics as teachers within the social sciences and humanities disciplines of a particular higher education institution, reflecting on their practices during the emergency remote teaching and learning strategy of the COVID-19 period, I believe that this diffractive examination can be transposed more broadly into the *world of research* and how student researchers and their supervisors construct research agendas. The original Dison et al. (2024) study mediated the

process of *ex-post facto* critique, drawing from the disruptions of the COVID-19 era within their teaching environment. Their prospective agenda is evident in the provocative question, ‘When it (the COVID trauma) is all over, how do you want the world to be different?’ (Dison et al. 2024: 21) Through extrapolation, one could explore how and why humanistic discourses have emerged in research spaces. One could focus on the effects that have diffracted into emerging varied understandings and enactments of human-centred research on a broader scale with the South African and Southern scholarship landscape. Human-centred research approaches should expand beyond parochial, illustrative studies, and re-enter and re-visit the intersecting realms of the personal, political and the paradigmatic worldviews embedded in its choices. What do we hope to be different through choosing a human-centred research approach?

### **Enacting a diffracted humanising research agenda**

One such example of diffractive analysis could be to examine the effects of what a humanising focus could unintentionally promote. It could be argued that as the voice of the oppressed begins to assert its rightful place, new forms of marginalisation and silencing of other voices take hold.<sup>2</sup> For example, as institutional research topics aim to challenge white racist privilege, it could have the effect of promoting a view that only research on Black ways of seeing, being, doing and acting is considered valuable. This approach undervalues the interconnected relational elements of race as dialogical and constructed through changing historical times and spaces. It further promotes views of a hardened boundary between the self and others. It legitimises one form of oppression to be replaced by another, as the subjugation of the previously privileged is seen as paramount. Moreover, it consolidates definitions of race itself as *a priori* pre-existing constructs. It reifies socially and politically orchestrated constructs as naturalised.

A further agenda as a diffractive quality of human-centred research could be to suggest that the self is more important than the wider social system from which the self originates. ‘Now-is-my-time’ is often a phrase

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2 It is acknowledged that such a counter-oppression stance could be considered as an ideological political struggle.

that condones individual personal prioritisation over the collective public good. It becomes yet another form of oppression of self over others and colludes to gain access to the organs and trappings of power to which the historically disadvantaged were not previously permitted admittance. The phrase does not question the assimilationist agenda to become part of the extant systemic power. Furthermore, this stance supports the clambering ascendancy over others and sees competition (and its potential slippery slope to endorsing corruption) rather than collaboration as an acceptable ethical driving force for personalistic greed. Paradoxically, this demotes the broad conception of affirmation and transformation, limiting it to only matters of selfish interests.

### **Broadening conceptions of transformation**

Research agendas could also be examined through the lens of what paradigmatic worldview of transformation they promote. Dison et al. (2024: 240) suggest that a '*pragmatic critical transformation*' attends chiefly to matters of surface demographic changes and tends to remain within existing frameworks of superficial econometric performativity discourses. It does not change the power hierarchies structurally, and is often the favoured preferences adopted by a managerial perspective, which seeks to demonstrate manifested evidence of change, whilst limited amendments might be happening at a deeper level. It often complies with broader nationalistic policy rhetoric, however, may not deal with more saturated conceptions of transformation. Oftentimes, the structural elements remain intact while posturing frills create semblances of commitment to transformation.

Further, one could adopt a theoretical view of countering axiological beliefs and values and exposing hegemonic parameters within the human-centred approach. However, this logico-scientific view, aligned with the European enlightenment theoretical movement, tends to promote, at a largely abstract rhetorical level, the rights of neoliberal individualism from a narrow humanist perspective (which has been critiqued above). Instead, Dison et al. (2024: 241) argue that '*utopian transformation*' focusses on the role of agents within the system and the priority of finding both theoretical

and practical redesign to existing social systems. The agentic responsibilities of researchers/practitioners are foregrounded here.

More complex versions of a transformation consider that the progression towards social equity and justice is not a linear, rational and chronological sequence (Samuel 2025). Instead, multiple expressions of time, space, context, agents and the victims, perpetrators and the resisters iteratively collide in a *forcefield of competing perspectives*. No one group or context is considered completely stable, since each force acts upon and influences reactive responses from the other. Neither are all responses identical: rejoinders shift too, as they are based on evolving ecologies of relationships (more of this later). Simultaneously, the past, the present and the future are dialogically intertwined in contested and fluid possibilities. Such a state of being and becoming is considered by Australian indigenous peoples as a recognition of the ‘infinite present’ (aManathunga 2014: 2).

The above theoretical framing makes a case for locating human-centred pedagogy and research at the intersection of complex and competing agendas. It presents human-centredness not as a personalistic agenda but locates the role of researchers and their supervisors to connect knowledge-making within place and geography, time and history. This is best captured by Manathunga’s (2014: 46) notion of ‘in-between-ness’. Manathunga (2014) comments about Fazal Rizvi’s assertion that discourses about the East meeting the West (or even the Global South meeting the North) are couched in already over-determined categories, whilst the matter of the “meeting” is most significant. In the book titled *Intercultural postgraduate supervision: Reimagining time, place and knowledge*, Manathunga (2014: 2) recommends:

- (a) re-theorisation of colonial frontiers enabled (by) the full range of intercultural contacts (needs) to be investigated, incorporating not only the exploitation, violence, appropriation evident in contact between different ethnicities, but also the opportunities for creative exchange, ironic mimicry, sharing technologies and practices and developing innovative ideas. Thinking about intercultural supervision as a contact zone allowing us to investigate both the challenging tensions and deconstructive possibilities evident in the space across and between cultures.

This section has argued that a humanising research agenda should bring the *self into visibility*, should attend to the construction of time and space within an *infinite present* and reimagine the vibrancy of the *in-betweenness* of research practices, not only between students and supervisors, but also in relation to how research topics are chosen at a personal, structural and theoretical level *relationally and iteratively* (see Manathunga 2014: 79–83). The relationship between research participants continues this respectful interaction.

## **Section Two: Institutions as human personages**

The previous section has argued about the self within time and space in a broad conceptual way. Section Two focuses on the *situated nature of the higher education institutional contextual* landscape, as a particular kind of spatiality. This section argues that academics (as teachers, researchers and managers) and their students (as aspirant members of disciplinary communities) are constructed by and construct the kind of institutional spaces within which they operate. Institutional theorists foregrounding the sociology of institutional space critique the view of structural determinism that positions individual academic identity at the mercy of structural forces (Du Preez and Simmonds, 2018; Soudien, 2018). Instead, institutional spaces are constituted via multiple and diverse perspectives of agentic human voices. In this way, the institution is seen as a living entity impregnated with personage and humanity. Institutions are not monolithic abstractions, they are personages in a perpetual drama of foregrounding, silencing and mutating conceptions of themselves. A humanising research approach would be limited if it did not attend to this dialogical intercourse between multiple contracting agents, each with different degrees of control, subversion and transformatory potential. Humanising research also entails an examination of the academic syntaxes of how higher education institutions operate, not just as disciplinary entities, but as *spaces* which aim to generate resilience and robustness in concert with the broader social-cultural and economic forces.

The quest for epistemic relevance and innovation, in relation to the social system that institutions serve, is not separate from a humanising

research agenda. Universities usually profess that their mandate is one of service to the society within which it is located. Yet these humanising affirmatory ideals might become sidelined, co-opted and recast if one did not attend to the power dynamics that direct a higher education institution's internal and external agenda. Various forms of power are at play: the power of the disciplinary interests; the power of students' voice and its interest to complete their studies; the power of managers to ensure efficient use of available funds; the power of institutional structures and committees within the organisation and the political and economic power of funders who steer the financial viability of an institution. These powers are always in interactive dynamism.

### **Radicalism co-opted**

One such example of exploring the relationality of the institutional personage is a study exploring how radical ideas travel through an institution. The current study was motivated by an interest in understanding why radical organisations and agendas become co-opted into watered-down versions of themselves and look opposite to what was initially intended. The study by Jansen and Walters (2022) titled *The decolonization of knowledges: Radical ideas and the shaping of institutions in South Africa and beyond*, set out to explore how the radical idea of decolonisation, initially at the forefront of South African student protests in 2015 and 2016, became institutionalised within the institutional curriculum of ten universities.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with over two hundred academic teachers, the study explores the uptake of decolonisation at universities where the most intense protests and demands for decolonisation were heard. These institutions' senates and councils responded in varied ways to the need for change.

It is not the intention to engage deeply with the study's findings, indicating the permutations of choices exercised, since the intention is

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3 One notes that these ten sampled institutions did not include historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI). The authors claim that HDIs considered the specific agenda of the *#Fees Must Fall* and *#Rhodes Must Fall* student protests less of a priority. They claim that such HDIs are characterised by economic survivalist modes rather than engaged with the epistemological, political reconceptualisations around (financial) access and (cultural) acclimatisation. A moot point for further consideration.

merely to illustrate that institutional analyses are examples of a relational and dialogical humanising research agenda. The study revealed that the institutional space, like the nature of one's familiar and dynamic human identities, was characterised by much busy-ness to provide semblances of change, and seek to be considered relevant and responsive. Institutions chose what was expedient and capable of restoring stability to counter the era's turbulence. The institutions revealed themselves as capable of posturing and sanitising the radical agenda by creating official documentation in policy and regulatory texts. Some institutions set up committees to create a form of bureaucratising by counting and demonstrating the patterns of change. Others co-opted radical elements into decision-making structures to preserve the local hegemonies; many slowed things down by advocating and adhering to regulatory internal and external structural and departmental hoops. These institutions ensured radical ideas were kept at bay by creating exoticised demonstrations of alternative curriculum, which further ghettoised the radical ideas. Few students enrolled for these new courses, returning the institution to a homeostasis (Soudien 2019).

Whilst these strategies might appear deliberately conservative, they reflected that institutional identity is pliable, patient, and polyglot. The study revealed that the individuals in the organisation and their research agenda mutated, morphed and looked radical in their choices. The management encouraged a way of riding out the storm as they waited for things to return to normal. Perhaps, South Africans have become habituated to recurring protests, and this decolonisation movement, though taking on universal fervour and national political policy responses, recalibrated to another form of calm after the storm. Each institution chose its own varied strategy, and its individual personage, institutional contexts and human agents activated unique perspectives. The authors of this study conclude, however, that decolonisation is interpreted, but not implemented.

## **Towards humanising situation analysis research**

It appears that the status of the institution, its reputation and its ranking fetishes were a hidden motivating force behind the institution's decision-making. Indirectly, the radical ideas become co-opted by the macro-

systemic performance culture of the higher education system. Whether at an historically underserved institution or in more affluent universities, all institutions were driven by economic priorities to stay afloat. This kind of analysis of the relationships within the institution (between its student body and management, within the structures of the academic departments and curriculum making and across the broader sociological terrain) constitutes a more comprehensive understanding of a humanistic research approach. The students, whilst depicted in this study as a somewhat receptive force in the institutional bureaucratising post-protest era, nevertheless demonstrate a silent, powerful force. The original protests had a lingering effect on the decision-making processes at the institutional level. This could become a recommended focus for further humanising situational analysis research. However, students too become seduced by the agendas of ensuring that they graduate from the institution and hence, collude (or become indirectly co-opted) into less radical ways of being and becoming.

The institutional dance, embodied and demonstrative, is one of continued relearning about *self, about others, about structures and systems* (Loots 2021). An entanglement of complementary and paradoxical forces could be accommodated relationally. Both *radical and conservative interpretations coexist* in dialogue, not as schizophrenic and postmodernist, but as an acknowledgement of being human. A humanising pedagogy and research agenda should encompass these *situated elements* in the knowledge-making enterprise.

### **Section Three: Three lenses of researching human experience: From the personal to the political**

An underlying feature across Sections One and Two is the interest in foregrounding *the life experiences of individuals* within an elaborated contextual understanding of a humanistic research agenda. A paradoxical and multi-perspectival complex lens is required to explore the nature of life experience was emphasised. Section Three will explore three possible options, amongst many, of qualitative approaches to researching individual experiences. Each approach is located within the preferred paradigmatic axioms of *lifehistory research, phenomenography* and *critical phenomenology*.

By exploring the possibilities of researching life experience, this section reinforces the view that a humanising research agenda is not singular in its paradigmatic preference. Each tradition of researching life experiences yields vantage strengths ranging from interpretivist and constructivist to critical paradigmatic perspectives. The argument shows why South African approaches to studying life experiences should cross-pollinate a purist interpretive approach and embrace the possibilities afforded by a more radical examination of the politics of being and becoming.

This section draws from a published article in a special issue of the journal, *African perspectives on research in teaching and learning* (APORTAL), examining the evolution of phenomenology: the study of life experience (Samuel et al. 2022). This article presented a meta-reflective analysis arguing that it is possible to weave together interpretivist and critical paradigms to better address power, marginality and socio-political contexts in studying lived experience.

### **Lifehistory research: An epistemological pursuit, not a vanity project**

The first author (A) clarifies the view that Lifehistory Research (LHR) is not the assemblage of vanity narratives documenting the trajectory of life events of individuals or institutions; instead, it uses the recalled life-stories of the individuals (or collectives) to abstract epistemological insights about a phenomenon. The LHR study reported on in the current study aims to complexify an interpretation of an intersected life in relation to the biographical, institutional and curricular programmatic dimensions of influence within the group of lives being explored. In the first author's study, looking at the student teachers in the 1990s at the onset of a new democratic macro-contextual environment, (A) traced how teacher identity construction was significantly influenced by the apartheid historical and personal biographical experiences of individuals, which became reshaped by the dynamics of alternative curricular interventions of a post-apartheid South African teacher education policy and curriculum. The study reinforced that as a life history researcher, one was not preoccupied with *forensic truth* (attending to positivist verifications); instead, the research

attended to how individuals choose to tell their stories (a *dialogical truth* making). Moreover, the LHR foregrounded the selected experiences individuals engage with in constructing the relationship between the researcher and the researched (an *experienced truth* collaboration). Both the spoken and the silenced are of interest to the researcher (Dhunpath and Samuel 2009).

The latter approach acknowledges the dynamics of power in all research interactions. Unlike positivist paradigms that attempt to neutralise the discourse production space, the LHR researcher is aware that all interlocutors have perspectives about the phenomenon being explored (student identity in this study). These conceptions pre-exist (consciously or not) the fieldwork engagement or are activated within the research moment. LHR is a theoretical analysis of pre-existing and emergent abstract insights about the phenomenon; hence, this study (A) concludes with the presentation of a *force field model* depicting the dynamics of personal and systemic influences. Over time, LHR has expanded beyond individual lives to explore groups of individuals working within organisations or institutional settings. The latter form could be considered as institutional biographical work. Further, it has activated the lifehistory of conceptual phenomena (for example, academic staff development) within the research terrain.<sup>4</sup>

## **Phenomenography: From neutral interpretivism to layered criticality**

The second author (B) outlined the early canonical traditions of phenomenology, which foreground the qualitatively different ways people experience a phenomenon (Giorgi 1999). This ontological focus exposes how individuals make sense of their world and experience a new phenomenon. Neither the person themselves, nor the phenomenon itself, is the object under scrutiny within a “phenomenographical” tradition. The emphasis of a purist approach to phenomenography hones *the relationship*

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4 This present chapter might be considered as an elaboration of this LHR tradition, examining the phenomenon of how humanising research agendas have shifted chronologically and conceptually.

between the person and the phenomenon (Marton 1986; 1994). (B)'s work tracked medical students' experiences of a new problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum across their on-site university-based lecture halls and in clinical internship and community-service contexts. Traditional models of medical education curricula tend to operate within an applied science model, in which students are exposed to theoretical learning about, for example, anatomy and physiology and thereafter, are assessed in relation to how they applied it practically in clinical settings. By contrast, a PBL curriculum approach exposes students to develop responses to scenarios presenting (problematic and complicated) medical cases for which the student, as an individual or in an interdisciplinary team, seeks to find solutions to the presenting real-life problem. How adequately a PBL approach prepared medical student doctors operating in clinical and community service contexts, became the focus. However, this practice was located within already habituated sets of expectations by qualified doctors and academic lecturers who were trained in the traditional applied science medical education curriculum approaches. Moreover, the introduction of PBL was competing with co-existing unwritten assumptions that medical doctors are expected to display certainty and confidence as a mark of their professionalism, even when their rationale for clinical decision-making might be ritualistic, rather than based on empirical logic (Naidoo 2018).

The aim in (B)'s study was to understand whose interests are being served by the revised curriculum modality and how individuals saw their relationship to PBL. While the study yielded categories of description as per the agenda of phenomenography, (B) considered it a limited explanatory insight about why a range of variations of the experiences occurred. Thus, (B) introduced an emancipatory paradigmatic lens into the analytical frame for making sense of the descriptive data. This layered a critical discourse analysis onto the "phenomenographic" findings, shifting from a neutral interpretivist stance to a worldview that interrogates how power, discrimination and institutional ideologies within the institution and its academic staff shape students' learning experiences.

This study's shifting paradigmatic lens suggests that a responsive attention to humanist research agenda should acknowledge that the lens one chooses to research life experience may be unsatisfactory for explaining the

phenomenon of the fieldwork. Rather than straightjacketing the analysis to fit into a predefined paradigmatic home, the study opened possibilities for new insights into how and why the perspectives about PBL occurred the way they did. The study shifted its focus from the individual students to the framing contextual curriculum space and the dynamics between those who valued the applied science model as the hallmarks of applications of theoretical certainties, and those who suggest that the medical field and its patients cultural and social contexts offers more authentic complexities that need to be addressed, than what textbooks offered.

### **Critical phenomenology: From first-person respect to analysis of socio-historical injustice**

In conducting doctoral studies within the second decade of the post-apartheid context, the third author (C) initially chose to bracket out external contextual realities to describe the essentialist structures of experience. This classical phenomenological approach drew on the seminal work of Husserl (1983), who aimed to provide a descriptive, first-person, subjective analysis of consciousness. This was to counter the objectivist positivist definitive categorical ways of knowing. The phenomenological approach foregrounds what resources individuals draw on when they make sense of their world (Koopman and Koopman 2020). Further theorists, like Merleau-Ponty suggested that these phenomenological experiences draw from the lived and embodied experiences of individuals and should be connected into the lived accounts of individuals as they negotiate space, context and time drawing from, amongst other features, age, race, gender, disability, weight, height, medical status and sexual orientation (see Merleau-Ponty et al. 2013). An individual can read the world through their body, in much the same way as the world interprets individuals in relation to the bodies they expose. This poses a tension between the bracketing expected by classical canonical phenomenology, which disconnects the external realities and the evolving approaches which embed the self in dialogue with its context.

(C)'s study focused on student teachers' negotiating unfamiliar practicum placements in a policy-practice world which professed the expectations that students embrace their personal diversities and venture

out of their comfort zone into contested school spaces. The fieldwork repeatedly exposed the hesitance of individuals operating outside their comfort zones of familiarity in cocooned apartheid-like mentalities. (C) was concerned about how ingrained racialised and classed conceptions of self and others still dominated almost thirty years after the formal dismantling of legislated apartheid. The author's original lens captured rich descriptive insights, yet sidelined socio-political analysis of what explained why students resisted alterity. Drawing on Dyring and Grøn (2022) and Guenther (2019), (C) argued for a "critical phenomenology" that retains first-person respect while explicitly embedding experiences within power dynamics, marginality and historical injustice. Such a hybrid approach better explains, for example, why student teachers resist crossing racial or class boundaries in post-apartheid schools.

## **Towards a critical phenomenology**

Across their reflections, all three authors—initially anchored in interpretivist canons—encountered the *disquiet* that descriptive accounts alone cannot unpack persistent inequities in South African higher education. The authors, thus, propose a *phenomenological turn*: shifting the discourse from the bounded individualistic interpretivist perspectives towards embracing the *self in dialogue with itself*, as well as in *fluid and dynamic conversation* with the ambient socio-political and historical landscapes of the institutional biographies, organisational legacies and contested evolving social lived spaces within which they operate. Drawing on researchers and studies outside of the dominant northern or western contexts (from where many of the traditional life history, phenomenography or phenomenology originate), the authors also shift the research enterprise by writing back from the margins in conversation with the dominant hegemonies. This could be considered an activation of Southern scholarship.

Critical phenomenology, the authors conclude, offers an emancipatory, dialogical framework capable of illuminating how knowledge, power and context co-construct lived and learning experiences in an unequal society. Such an epistemological and paradigmatic turn is recommended for the agenda of humanising pedagogy and research approaches. This does not

mean that only a critical pragmatic perspective should be embraced within a humanistic research approach. The range and fluidity of paradigmatic border crossings, as illustrated in the three studies above, signal the value of testing the limits of initial theoretical perspectives and promote that researchers should be comfortable in their self-reflective agentic critique about how they choose, refashion or abandon dominant lenses for their studies.

## **Section Four: Research supervision relationships: The dark side and the bright**

### **About toxicity in research**

This section explores how a humanistic pedagogy could be embedded within the private research relationships between students and their supervisors. This section is inspired by the compelling criticism offered by a post-doctoral fellow who recounts the abusive lauding over the process of doctoral supervision, post-doctoral supervision, academic mentoring or staff development by whom the author calls ‘rockstar professors’ (Singh 2024: 106). Singh (2024) presents an image of the supervisors/ professors driven by the economic rationalities of institutional pressure and neoliberal profit-driven discourses. These rockstar professors’ motives are considered derived not from an ethics of care about their students or colleagues, but driven by a self-centred need to glow in the limelight of those who measure and afford them popularity and fame, namely research foundations, funders and their institutional managers who measure their success by matrices of outputs of research and productivity units. Such affirmation of these professors derives from producing research outputs that satisfy the corporate university culture, which is obsessed with efficiency and productivity rationales, and the income generated by the funding subsidy that accrues to the university systems.

In the view of Singh (2024), the students attached to such professors are regarded as fodder to be used to ensure that the professors maintain their continued publications and conference presentations required. The doctoral students or post-doctoral fellows are expected to do the “hard donkey

work” of literature review construction, fieldwork data collection and even to produce reports in which their authorship is often not acknowledged. The fame is ascribed to the rockstar professors who parade on the institution’s performance stage. The students are hereby inducted into a world of competition and attention-seeking that sometimes translates into abusive personal relationships bordering on illegality. Students are expected to conform, since they are basking in the glory of being aligned with the famous. From the professors’ point of view, the logic is that such vicarious association with the research processes are a form of induction into the (ruthless) world of research. Singh (2024) argues that this is the dark side of neoliberalism, which produces toxic egos and engenders historical legacies of negativity by students in their association with the research enterprise. It normalises darkness.

Hlatshwayo (2025: 1) corroborates the argument that post-doctoral fellows (postdocs) are a precarious and casualised temporary labour force who serve as the ‘ice-boys and girls’<sup>5</sup> of the departmental university systems and cower to their line managers. The postdocs are delegated pedestrian, menial administrative and non-academic services, fetching and carrying at the behest of the supervisors. Their positionality is liminal, since they are not altogether students or permanent academic staff (Hlatshwayo 2024). Nevertheless, the toxic relationality, as argued by Singh (2024) above, produces a de-professionalised worker with limited agentic powers. Like Dorenkamp and Weiß’s (2018) view, Hlatshwayo is concerned that many postdocs may ride out the storm or lose faith in academia. Hlatshwayo’s call for papers for a forthcoming special journal issue of *Education as change* suggests that one could develop scholarship by hearing the complex narratives and lived experiences of postdocs and how they negotiate being an early career researcher theoretically, philosophically, empirically and practically. This edition promises to offset this group of academic workers being largely unseen, invisible and misrecognised in South African higher education.

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5 Hlatshwayo (2025:1) explains the concept of ‘ice boys and girls’ as follows: ‘The concept of the “ice boy” and “ice girl” is a derogatory and insulting term meant to label and classify people who do not have money and are usually sent on random errands to buy ice, alcohol, cigarettes, cold drinks and other miscellaneous stuff.’

## The bright side of collective disruption

The current study's contribution to the above spectacle is to question the roots of how human relationality is constructed much earlier during master's and doctoral studies. It is suggested that archaic models of hierarchical supervisory relationships still dominate the postgraduate space. The master-apprenticeship model elevates the supervisor's role and status to a demi-god who is envisaged as being deferred to by the underlings. The goal of a behaviourist model approach is to clone the theoretical and methodological agenda of the supervisors through repeated imitation and ritualisation of research designs and practices, which the current study refers to as normalising "discipleship".<sup>6</sup> This is reinforced by the view that the purpose of postgraduate research is an extension of the construction of undergraduate students as receivers of the wisdom of already-established bodies of knowledge.

The master supervisor is directed towards extending their empire of established epistemologies and promotes a consistent explanatory logic to test existing worldviews in varying contextual spaces. The research agenda is pre-ordained, and the student is considered a subordinate project partner. The effect of such a model is that it produces repeated versions of the same theoretical and methodological parameters of the supervisors, and the students offer only minor variations of contextual specificities. This model might be appropriate within signature paradigmatic and knowledge-production approaches within the natural sciences, which favour positivist hypothesis testing and refutation as their mode of operation. However, this research design contradicts the social sciences' exploratory endeavours, where alternative theoretical elaborations and contestations are pivotal to innovative insights about sociological phenomena. Unfortunately, many social scientists imitate the natural science supervision model unproblematically (often unconsciously) as a hallmark of good research.

Other models of postgraduate supervision advocate personal reflective growth of the student researcher. Relational growth building between supervisors and students underpins this learning/teaching agenda of

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6 It is unsurprising that departmental university structures are obsessed with disciplining the disciplines, that is, consolidating and protecting their boundaries.

supervision. Within this model, the role of the supervisor is directed towards the independent and autonomous (personal and academic) growth of individuals who may seek to explore topics and methodologies outside the purview of the supervisor's expertise. This is sometimes considered dangerous work. Firstly, the supervisor is constructed as a co-learner; secondly, the supervisor cannot guarantee the directions the study would take, and moreover, the length of time to explore unexplored terrains is not pre-defined (Samuel 2016b).

Further elaborated models challenging the reflective practice mode described above aim to respectfully draw on multiple sources of influence in the university supervisory relationships. This might include individuals within or outside the institution, and even outside defined singular disciplinary homes. This extends the use of study teams, which include groups of supervisors and teams of students working collaboratively on projects that may not all follow a defined singular methodological approach or even a pre-defined paradigmatic approach. Students from multiple disciplines might be assembled to explore joint projects. Within this later model, interdisciplinarity is promoted to activate innovative ways of seeing, doing and being a researcher. The goal is not to protect the disciplinary boundaries, but to open a permeable exchange across varied insights about the phenomenon. This model has activated models of cohort supervision where teams of students and their supervisors work to create an environment wherein all possibilities are contested and put under erasure. This includes working across institutional, national and geographic contexts (Samuel 2016a).

The focus of this is not about compliance and adherence to a ritual and routinised research. The agenda of the communal approach to research setting, mentoring and evaluation is underpinned by a valuing of positive disruption (Samuel et al. 2017). This disruption is not imbued with a destructive intention, creating overload, anxiety or abuse, instead, it aims to affirm students with the opportunities to develop ownership of their own ideas, to become aware of a range of theoretical and methodological positionings and thereby, develop an authentic and autonomous voice when their personal decisions about research are made. Students' personal

choices are understood as intersected with the political and paradigmatic environments within which they operate.

This brighter form of intersectional learning in the supervisory communal systems prepares postgraduate students to critique and defend their own positionalities, to self-manage their own growth and development as a researcher relationally and dialogically. Furthermore, this latter model suggests that research is not about aligning with comfortable capitulation to predictable routines and rituals. It acknowledges that research is implicated in multiple contestations and flights of power, and that (strategic) defensible research and supervisory relational choices could be made.

The student-supervisory relationships within this approach recognise that supervision is more than bland sentimentalist, egotistical affirmation of students and their present interpretations and readings of the wor(l)d. The supervisory space is a robust forum of critique and contestation where ideas and interpretations are tested to their limits. Whilst the robust critique of supervisors may produce anxiety, especially from the students' points of view, the interaction behind authentic acts of deliberative supervision must be driven by a shared understanding of a meta-level of care to generate critical and creative thinking. Supervisors should be sensitive to facilitative anxiety to drive the humanising project. The supervision is not about a naïve self-protection of the egos of novice student researchers, nor is it about senior and more experienced supervisors denigrating subordinates. A humanising supervisory pedagogy, as an act of teaching and learning, is not simply protecting comfort zones.

A humanising supervisory pedagogy is about nurturing a *pedagogy of disruption* motivated by the facilitative growth that understands democratic collaboration. It understands transformation deeply (see Section One above), and suggests that researchers should grow comfortable with uncertainty, thus, producing non-toxic conceptions of self and others. If these rationalities underpin postgraduate supervision, then the scenario painted by Singh (2024) and Hlatshwayo (2025) above, would be unlikely to manifest. This normalises disruption as a positive force, and is my (the author) interpretation of an authentic humanising research space.

## **Concluding thoughts: Dialogues across pluralities**

The critique of a human-centred approach could be led from varied vantage points, such as a post-humanist analysis arguing against the ascendancy of human interests as arrogant and caustic. Such an approach might argue that human-centredness is responsible for the catastrophic destruction of the environment as profit priorities overtake concerns about people or the planet; post-humanists might foreground the need to understand both human and non-human agentic forces and their intersected connectivity. An ethical analysis could show how the foregrounding of human interests has become selfishly distorted and competitive. A comprehensive analysis of such critique has been adequately presented elsewhere (see Le Grange et al. 2024).

Instead, this chapter highlights the nature of a humanising schema as a subset of a human-centredness approach. More specifically, it foregrounds the nature of the relationships between individuals during the conception and practice of humanising research. The chapter has argued that such relationships are connected to complex interactional ecologies of competing, complementary and paradoxical tensions between many forces. For example, it has been argued that the human-focused agenda, on the one hand, could be seen as an antidote to the histories of suppression and marginalisation of collective groups of individuals, as was the case during apartheid in South Africa. Humanising programmes could be associated with democratic affirmation. On the other hand, a humanising preference could naively endorse selfish interests, which foreground the personal and individual enrichment and ascendancy over others. The private individual interests over the collective public good are indirectly fostered. Such a simplistic interpretation of humanistic agendas could paradoxically endorse corruption and greed, in the name of affirmation.

This chapter has suggested that research agendas (like those who promote robust learning and teaching higher education considerations) should develop a diffractive analysis exploring how individual researchers (supervisors and students) could turn the focus to themselves, asking what kind of transformative goals are supported in the journey of research they select. This allows individuals to critically examine whose interests are being

served via the types of research undertaken. This entails asking questions about what we research, who we research, how we research and why we do research in the first place. The chapter has suggested that innovation and reimagination will be constituted as we explore not myopically the consolidation of disciplinary discipleships, fossilising ritualistic practices, paradigms, theories and methodologies. Alternatively, a humanising research agenda advances the goals of “in-between-ness”: looking to create fluid and dialogical exchanges across habituated departmental borders in higher education. This necessitates a conviction of more extensive transformational projects beyond dressing up rhetorical semblances of institutional reform.

The chapter made a case for substantive and saturated conceptions of transformation beyond capitulating to rhetorical policy discourses. It has shown the tendency of higher education institutions to return to homeostasis as radical ideas become co-opted into various forms of institutionalisation. However, “the institution” is not caricatured as a disembodied monolith. Instead, it is argued that the institution is constituted as a living personage through its relational collusions between actors and agents at different levels who serve to co-construct the higher education spaces. Multiple co-existing forces push and pull the institutional identity, characteristically creating a space of forever becoming. There are no uncontested and coherent perpetual stabilities. Expediencies, survivalism and laudable epistemological and sociological projects compete for supremacy and remain forever in dialogue, not only between adversarial individuals, but also within individuals themselves. Entangled dialogues permeate disciplines, departments and institutional structures. The role of the humanising research agenda is to expose, nurture and analyse the dialogues across these pluralities.

This chapter promoted the view that a humanising research agenda is not activated by choosing singular radical paradigms. The argument is made that research agendas are multi-versal and evolving. Consequently, while critiques are made of toxicity in some supervisory relationships which negate a respectful humanity, the chapter has supported supervisory relationships to be characterised by robust critical engagement that is not about bland, sentimentalist, egotistical pedagogical caring spaces. The chapter has argued that one should move beyond a pedagogy of comfort;

one must elaborate one's conceptions of care and critique and instead acknowledge the values of disruption as a productive force towards new imaginative possibilities. A humanising supervisory agenda promotes blurring boundaries, supports the challenging destabilisation of rituals and appreciates uncertainty.

In support of new lines of flight in complexity, future research must tackle what Appadoo-Ramsamy (2022) refers to as diffracted and entangled agencies. Appadoo-Ramsamy's (2022) study defragments the notion of individual agency as singular, stable or coherent. Looking at teachers as they negotiate the dictates of recurrent national regulatory curriculum reforms, the author suggests that teachers choose to present images of their agency that serve defined audiences, purposes and contexts. Individuals choose the human agency they aim to foreground in varied ways when asked their views by peers, line managers, close friends, bureaucrats or policymakers. Such individuals might appear like a cubist painting: multiple and incoherent, or dishonest. Appadoo-Ramsamy's (2022) shards of the kaleidoscope of agencies include teachers choosing to diffract themselves as compliant, restorative, delusional or deliberately provocative. Individuals may choose deliberative agent-centred repertoires of themselves, making it difficult for researchers looking for reductionist interpretations to make sense of the staging form of agency they are presented with.<sup>7</sup> The agency is best understood in dialogue with the unique ambient contextual spaces. Humanising research agenda and methodologies should capture and represent these fluid multiplicities, recognising not only the overt representations of selfhood at face value, but also exploring the occasions and circumstances where individuals choose in varied ways to present strategic representations of themselves. What informs these varied selections should be the subject of further research.

Similarly, Harari (2024) suggests that like the biblical Noah, we are living through a flood that is threatening to destroy the world of knowledge-making as we know it today. Individuals inhabit an infinite present, calibrating the past and the future iteratively, yielding competing

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7 This has motivated Appadoo-Ramsamy (2022) to depict data analysis in the representational form of a staged dramatic script, exploring the dialogical interactions of participants in different settings and amongst varied interlocutors.

and multiple conceptions of time, space and knowledge. As researchers and research students, scholars are confronted not just with linear paradigmatic shifts or paradigmatic options; they are immersed in simultaneous multiple revolutions that threaten foundational axioms about research. We are also part of a post-paradigmatic world questioning whether paradigms matter. Furthermore, the flood of information and the technological age have provoked the foundational forms of epistemological endeavours. Artificial Intelligence has opened new dimensions about the authorship and authenticity of the written, spoken and visually textured world. Harari (2024) suggests individuals seek how to survive and thrive as they examine the flood of possibilities about forms, methodologies and representational manifestations. One may be looking for a sign, like the pigeon with an olive branch in its beak, to signal that the flood may be over and that we can return to normalcy. However, will that normalcy ever return? Should this be the targeted goal? Rather than capitulate to despondency in sealed arks, Hariri (2024) argues that one's responses must be relational to these competing forces and floods. As a feature of the quest for the survival of humanity, individuals could redirect their thinking about what is valued or not, choices could be made. One should not abandon hope as we uphold what the future agenda of higher education and research will become. Human-centred education and a humanising research mandate are more than just matters of preferential options; it is about robust, critical and complex engagement with self, others, systems and structures and being and becoming as a collective. A research agenda must be hopeful of a future.

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