

Research From the Global South: The important role of context in international research activities

La recherche dans les pays du sud : l'importance du contexte dans les activités de recherche à l'international

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Article abstract

Researchers from various disciplines have become interested in the supposedly extreme differences in rates of research between academics situated in the Global North and South, specifically those on the African continent. Yet, having worked as a researcher and a writing coach in the context of one university in the southern African region for the past three years, I cannot identify with many of the explanations given for these differences in rates. So, by reflecting on two instances emerging from my own experiences as a researcher in this particular context, this Note from the Field discusses the important and critical role context needs to have in making sense of this phenomenon.

RESEARCH FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH: THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF CONTEXT IN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT. Researchers from various disciplines have become interested in the supposedly extreme differences in rates of research between academics situated in the Global North and South, specifically those on the African continent. Yet, having worked as a researcher and a writing coach in the context of one university in the southern African region for the past three years, I cannot identify with many of the explanations given for these differences in rates. So, by reflecting on two instances emerging from my own experiences as a researcher in this particular context, this Note from the Field discusses the important and critical role context needs to have in making sense of this phenomenon.

LA RECHERCHE DANS LES PAYS DU SUD : L'IMPORTANCE DU CONTEXTE DANS LES ACTIVITÉS DE RECHERCHE À L'INTERNATIONAL

RÉSUMÉ. Des chercheurs issus d'une variété de domaines ont commencé à démontrer un intérêt à l'égard de différences prétendument marquées dans les taux de production en recherche entre les pays du Nord et du Sud, particulièrement ceux du continent africain. Or, forte d'une expérience de trois ans en tant que chercheur et coach en écriture au sein d'une université située en Afrique australe, je ne peux souscrire aux multiples explications formulées pour donner un sens à ces différences. Suite à une réflexion portant sur deux cas tirés de mon expérience comme chercheur dans ce contexte particulier, j'explique, dans cette Note du terrain, le rôle important et fondamental du contexte lorsque vient le moment de donner un sens à ce phénomène.

As a researcher situated at an African university,¹ I want to reflect on some of my experiences studying and trying to participate in a social activity that has received a lot of attention over the past few years. This social activity involves researchers from only certain parts of the world being able to participate in research (Hofman, Kanyengo, Rapp & Kotzin, 2009; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Mouton, 2010; Tijssen, Mouton, van Leeuwen & Boshoff, 2006; Tijssen, 2007). It is an assertion that emerges from research and images, like the one below

(see Figure 1 below), which illustrate extreme differences in rates of journal article publication in international journals between researchers situated at universities and research institutes in the Global North and South.

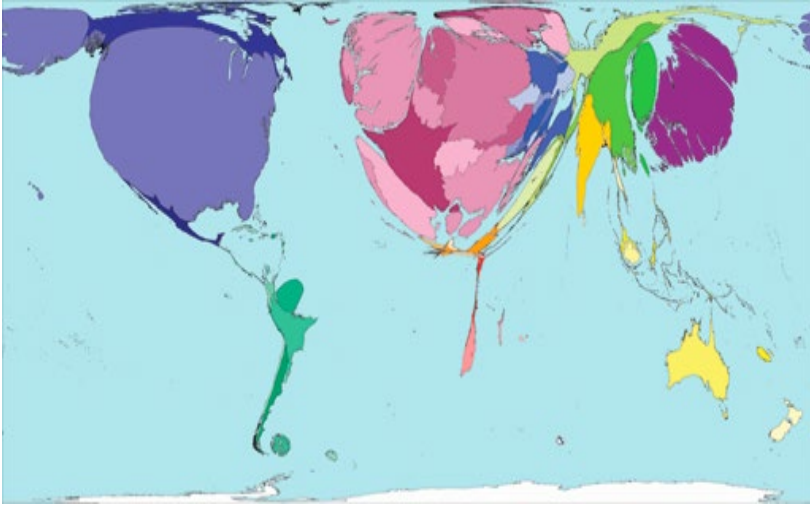


FIGURE 1. Territory size shows the proportion of all scientific papers published in 2001 written by authors living there (Worldmapper, 2011, Copyright Sasi Group [University of Sheffield] and Mark Newman [University of Michigan])

If we focus specifically on researchers working at universities in African countries, the differences become even more extreme with only 0.9% of international journal articles coming from this part of the world and 0.6% of these coming from South African researchers alone. This means that researchers in the 52² other African countries are responsible for only 0.3% of the continent's total outputs. In contrast, it is suggested that researchers in North America and Europe produce 32% and 30% of the world's research outputs, respectively (Lillis & Curry, 2010). Such extreme differences in global rates of publication, as well as their potential consequences,³ have led to many studies in various disciplines. The following section discusses four reasons often cited to explain African researchers' supposed low rates of publication,⁴ as well as their lack of relevance to my own research context in Southern Africa.

RESEARCH EXPLAINING REASONS FOR THESE DIFFERENT RATES

Emerging from the literature, the first reason typically given is that African researchers lack access to research funding since many of their governments do not have national research granting councils, and universities do not make funding available at the institutional level. Before being able to focus on

publishing, this lack of funding limits academics' abilities to even engage in research activities (Teferra, 2004). In my particular context, I have encountered some challenges related to accessing research funding; yet, the Government of Botswana has a national research funding policy through its Ministry of Science, Technology, and Infrastructure, although it is still being implemented (Bailey, Cloete & Pillay, 2011). In addition, research funding is available from our university to support academic staff in their research endeavours. Although the amount of financial support is relatively small (approximately 30,000 Canadian dollars), it offers a source of support for small scale studies or academics beginning their research careers (University of Botswana, n.d.). In my particular situation, too, research funding has not been an issue because our Botswana⁵-Canadian research team has thus far secured two years of research funding from the American government's Medical Education Partnership Initiative (MEPI),⁶ which has provided us funding to investigate a particular medical education challenge we have observed at our school.

The next two explanations relate to issues of access. Firstly, African universities are often reported to have limited funding to pay for subscription fees to international journals. This then prevents their researchers from gaining access to their international disciplinary journals, further limiting their abilities to remain up-to-date with and draw from current thinking in their fields (Willinsky, 2006). Even though I am based at an African university, this is not my case. I find myself at a university with one of the best libraries in the Southern African region. The access I have to online journals is comparable to any Canadian institution at which I have worked or studied. If my library does not have the text (article, book, etc.), the librarians will order it from another one in the region via our well functioning interlibrary loan system. A second access issue that can be used to explain low publication rates is that many African countries have poor telecommunications infrastructure and policies. These then result in low internet bandwidth at universities and significantly limit their researchers' access to on-line journals as well as their abilities to connect both regionally and internationally with their colleagues (Esselaar, Gillwald & Stork, 2006; Valk & Fourati, 2013). In my particular context, bandwidth can, at times, be an issue, although I almost always have access to the internet at work and can access on-line journal articles, have Skype conversations, and access my email with relative ease.

While these explanations for African researchers' low publication rates are worth noting, it is the fourth reason suggested that concerns me most. As a researcher who studies the social activity of writing, I ask how writing does or doesn't make social activities happen, and how best to support writers with various writing tasks. Yet, there seems to be a growing trend of academics well outside the field of writing studies (often in fields related to development and research capacity building) suggesting that African researchers' supposed low rates of publication stem from their inabilities to communicate in English,

particularly their challenges with micro issues, such as grammar and sentence structure (see Adewuyi, 2008; Wight, 2005). This research⁷ assumes a normative conceptualization of writing, that is, that writing is a skill and any writers' challenges with writing come from grammatical ones (see Bryant & Diga, 2013). It also ignores the important need to think about context in these discussions. For example, at our institution English is the language of instruction, and most, if not all, of my Batswana colleagues have been educated at universities in the UK, US, or Canada. In other words, most of my colleagues are extremely proficient in the English language. In fact, one of my colleagues regularly edits my writing (e.g., journal articles, grant proposals) prior to submission. Using a social activity conceptualization of writing enables researchers to gain a more complex understanding of writing and what is happening with a particular writing activity that this technical and normative focus does not allow.

Now, although some of these explanations may resonate with researchers situated in other African countries and university contexts than my own, my intention in discussing and analyzing them in the context of my own experiences is to illustrate the need for more contextual and complex investigations of this phenomenon. To do this, researchers need to ask different questions about this issue, questions that bring African researchers'⁸ subjective experiences to the forefront, not only their challenges. In the remainder of this "Note from the Field," I will illustrate what happens when context and subjective research experiences are considered. I will do so by discussing two particular experiences I've had as a researcher working in my particular research context. By highlighting the complex role context plays in these two experiences, I intend to illustrate that Southern researchers experience very different challenges participating in the social activity of research than those discussed above.

REFLECTING ON THE ISSUE OF RESEARCH STUDY CONTEXT

Prior to discussing these two examples, though, I want to briefly reflect on the potential ways those of us in the academy (e.g., researchers, journals editors, and reviewers) value a research study because of the context in which it is situated. Specifically, I want to reflect on two possibilities: first, that editors and reviewers of international journals demand that findings from studies situated in the Global South and being done by Southern researchers must have greater global generalizability than findings coming from studies situated in the Global North; and second, that Southern researchers doing research in particular geographic locations in the Global South struggle more than their Northern counterparts to have their research questions and findings deemed important enough to contribute to the conversations taking place in their international research communities. These are two ideas I will explore in the next sections using examples from my experiences as a researcher situated in my particular research context.

QUESTION ONE: WILL MY CONTEXT ALLOW ME TO ASK INTERNATIONALLY RELEVANT QUESTIONS?

The first issue I want to explore arises from the medical education study our Botswana-Canadian research team are currently doing, namely, investigating our students' challenges with writing and learning for their programme. In 2009, our university opened the country's first medical school. Based on input from international partners, it was decided to implement a hybrid curriculum composed of a community-based, problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum. In 2011, as a researcher of writing and writing pedagogy, one of the School's new faculty members approached me to talk about the writing-related challenges he and his colleagues were observing in the weekly reflections they required their students to submit. These reflections had the students discuss what they had learned about and observed over the course of the week in their various learning contexts. Similar to most people outside of writing studies, the teaching staff assumed these challenges illustrated the students' lack of literacy (despite being some of the strongest students in Botswana). Encouragingly, this particular faculty member was open to my suggestion that perhaps the students were experiencing something other than literacy issues. Specifically, he was interested in my idea that they might be struggling with their transition from their first-year undergraduate programme in the sciences, which was extremely teacher-centred to their new problem-based self-directed, learner-centred curriculum at the School of Medicine. Also, perhaps they were struggling to participate in a genre that required them to reflect since they had most likely never been asked to use writing to reflect on their experiences during their entire academic careers. I thought that both of these things could be resulting in their writing-related challenges.

Armed with these possibilities, we co-wrote a grant application and successfully obtained funding to do a two-year qualitative study to investigate the students' experiences and what we could be done to enhance them. After doing participant observations in three of the six PBL learning groups over the course of an academic term, as well as interviewing half of the first-year 50 student cohort and six of the seven PBL facilitators, something very interesting has emerged from our study. It appears that our students are experiencing extreme learning challenges and require support to understand how to be self-directed learners within their medical school programme. Yet, this learning support doesn't necessarily need to focus on helping students with content issues; rather, it needs to help them learn how to learn, specifically for the context of medical school. Guided by this realization, we have set out to read everything that has been written on medical education and medical student remediation. Yet, I question, given my context of being situated in Botswana, a resource-constrained location in the Global South, will this question be of interest to the wider, international research community of medical educators? Can our team make any type of contribution larger than simply suggesting that for

a resource-constrained setting in the Global South, medical students need discipline specific learning support to become self-directed learners? I find interesting, however, that when I read the literature, namely, studies based at American and Canadian universities, these researchers don't seem to need to situate their studies in their contexts when they make claims about how best to remediate medical students or residents. For example, they don't need to say that in a non-resource constrained setting in the Global North, medical students need x, y, and z. And not only do they not have to make these types of statements, but we are also supposed to emulate the suggestions that emerge from their contexts and transpose them onto our own. So, from this experience, I'm left with two questions: 1) Are the questions we ask in the Global South not relevant to researchers in the Global North? 2) Why do the research findings coming from studies done in Global North seem to have universal applicability?

QUESTION TWO: WILL MY RESEARCH CONTEXT ALLOW MY FINDINGS TO GARNER INTERNATIONAL INTEREST?

The second example comes from my experiences as a researcher working on my doctoral study. When I first started working on my PhD, I was lucky to secure financial support to collect the data for my doctoral study from a large Canadian international development funder. A requirement of this support was to give an in-progress presentation about my research findings. This presentation happened after a very short analysis period that didn't give me much time to deeply reflect on my data. Yet, despite this, I realized that the typical reasons given for African researchers' supposedly low rates of publication (the ones discussed above) did not hold for researchers in my particular research context. Despite this realization though, at that particular point in time, I could not figure out what else I could say about my data. Finally though, only a day before the presentation, I realized that my findings could allow me to argue that how we were thinking about writing in this context was incorrect. We are assuming a normative understanding of writing whereas perhaps my study's findings are showing us that writing is a much more complex social activity.

Going with this idea, I reformulated my slides and gave the presentation, although, in retrospect I'm not sure how well my argument was understood (both by myself and my audience). One thing I did accomplish in my presentation, though, was to offer an in-depth background about my research study context because I felt that some of its key aspects made it quite different from other contexts. Interestingly, I had two different reactions to my discussion of context. One came from my boss, who suggested that when I did come to write my PhD dissertation I could not ignore context and really needed to ensure that it had a least a chapter in my dissertation (interestingly, it is only now that I'm realizing how significant context is to my data). The second was the complete opposite, from a person who would later become my boss. He informed me

that my study's findings illustrate the inappropriateness of my study's context because it doesn't allow me to confirm the main ideas currently being used to explain African researchers' low rates of publication. He suggested that the context I chose to study has, as discussed above, more assets than universities in other African countries. This difference in context then makes it impossible for me to make claims about African researchers' low rates of publication.

As a novice researcher, I did not have much of a response at the time. But, at this stage of my research, I think my response would now be to ask why we want to maintain the same type of narrative for all countries / contexts on the African continent? This second response came from someone, who wanted me to maintain a simple narrative of disempowerment: Africans aren't publishing, they can't publish, because they do not have access to resources *x*, *y*, and *z*. But it was a narrative I didn't want to, and couldn't, maintain because the research context I chose (unknowingly, at the time) wouldn't allow me to continue to do so.

In contrast, I also wondered why my findings were not considered interesting. I believe they illustrate an instance of what all research should seek to do, which is to generate what sociologist Raewyn Connell (2007) calls "dirty theory". Her idea challenges the notion that data and theory have universal relevance, by instead suggesting the two should have a mutually informing relationship. She argues that theory and data should be used in two ways: "Not only do data criticise theory, theory also criticise data" (p. 207). "Dirty theory... is, theorising that is mixed up with specific situations", with "the goal... not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness" (p. 207). In constructing dirty theory then, the researcher no longer constructs universal generalizations about a social phenomenon, because although social scientists "produce generalisations... only the weak ones are universals. The power of social science generalisations is multiplied if they can be linked to the characteristics of a context within which they apply" (p. 207). So, if our goal in social science theorizing (and perhaps even outside this discipline), relies on Connell's notion, the value of theoretical generalizations comes from their specificity to a particular social and historical context (for studies situated in both the Global North and South), not erasing this relationship between theory and context of the study.

I end this Note from the Field by suggesting two ways forward: first, the need to do research that asks more critical, complex, and contextual questions about global rates of research publication; and second, the need for researchers and those of us engaged in peer review to critically reflect on how research context plays a role in the kind of questions we can ask and the findings we can arrive at in our research, and how these two things determine who is and isn't able to join international research conversations.

NOTES

1. I am a Canadian born and educated PhD candidate currently based at a university in Southern Africa. In this context, I do research for my doctoral study as well as work as a researcher in the fields of medical education and rhetorical capacity building. My PhD work explores assertions, like those above, by investigating African researchers' subjective experiences with the social activity of research. Although it is not the focus of this article, I would suggest I belong to a group of new or soon to be new PhD graduates participating in the emerging trend of reverse migration. These are individuals often from, and educated in the Global North, who are moving to the Global South to find academic positions. Various reasons can be given for this move, such as more exciting opportunities at Southern universities, increasing challenges finding stable, full-time academic positions in the Global North, and overly competitive and demanding working conditions of academic positions in the Global North.
2. At the time of Lillis & Curry's research, only 53 African countries were recognized as sovereign states. Currently though, 54 sovereign states are recognized since, in 2010, South Sudan attained its independence from Sudan.
3. Not much research has been done on the negative consequences of these supposed publication rates differences; yet, it can be assumed that many problems arise from only a fraction of the world's population currently being able to construct and share the vast majority of knowledge about all of the world's challenges.
4. A growing challenge is also emerging from researchers in the Global South for different metrics to be used to measure academic research contributions (see <http://www.scaprogramme.org.za/participating-institutions/university-of-cape-town/>). Although very important research, it's not the focus of this article.
5. Batswana is the term used to signify more than one person from Botswana.
6. Although there have been few to no issues for our particular study, numerous challenges can arise because of power imbalances within international research funding partnerships (see Obamba & Mwema, 2009).
7. I use the term "research" loosely to describe these individuals' work since neither have done any research on African researchers' writing practices to arrive at this suggestion.
8. Although not perfect, the term "African researcher" is used to describe a researcher based at a university in an African country for an extended period, though not necessarily originating from an African country.

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