Researching Architecture and Urban Inequality: Towards Engaged Ethics

This paper reflects on approaches to conducting 'ethical research' on architecture and urban (in)equality in cities in the global south. It focuses on two themes: the formalisation of institutional ethics procedures and protocols for conducting such research, and the need to move away from ethical frameworks that emerge from western structures for knowledge production. The paper will question whether ethical principles are universal or specific, and how they affect the possibility of knowledge co-production and its potential to generate pathways to urban equality. These questions arise from the history of contemporary research ethics procedures, which are rooted in the social norms of western modernity that views researchers and research participants as 'autonomous individuals'. The paper will suggest that exploring the relation of the individual to the collective and understanding social existence as relationality, is fundamental in formulating an alternative type of ethics methodology.

Keywords: research ethics; knowledge co-production; inequality; relational virtues; situated ethics; engaged ethics.

This paper reflects on approaches to conducting 'ethical research' on architecture and urban (in)equality in cities in the global south. It focuses on two themes: the formalisation of institutional ethics procedures and protocols for conducting such research, and the need to move away from ethical frameworks that emerge from western structures for knowledge production. The paper will question whether ethical principles are universal or specific, whether shared values can be arrived at, and how they affect the possibility of knowledge co-production and its potential to generate pathways to urban equality.

The paper draws on work in progress within Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW), a research programme that seeks to promote urban equality in thirteen cities in Latin America, Africa and Asia.[1] KNOW is a 4-year project funded by the ESRC and led by Prof. Caren Levi of The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. KNOW works to develop programmes of knowledge co-production for urban equality, by bringing together a collaborative international team, including academic institutions and civil society organisations. My work in KNOW is within a work package dedicated to the ethics of research practice, led by Prof. Jane Rendell of the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. The findings from two workshops and twenty interviews that were conducted with researchers participating in KNOW from all cities, underscored the problematics of institutional research ethics and the complexities of knowledge

co-production, and highlighted the need for alternative 'engaged ethics' that are situated and relational.

Between abstract principles and lived experiences

Our work within KNOW is informed by philosophical debates concerning applied and situated approaches to research ethics. Institutional research ethics procedures at UCL, where the KNOW programme was reviewed, and in many other universities, are rooted in the social norms of western modernity and apply legalistic and medical approaches based on three main principles: minimising harm, informed consent, and protection of privacy. These principles relate to western modes of thinking about ethics: informed consent and privacy protection are rooted in deontological ethics, which follow a universal moral code; and the principle of minimising harm is abstracted from consequentialist or utilitarian ethics, which focuses on ends-based thinking. Unlike these action-based approaches, a different focus is offered by virtue ethics, which is person-based and emphasises human characteristics and social skills.[2] However, there is a wide debate concerning the universality of personal characteristics, as well as questioning the reliability of an individual's moral character.[3] And for negotiating the co-production of knowledge, the area of care ethics opens up spaces of deliberation about the relational aspects of research partnerships.[4]

Many scholars question the relevance of legalistic or medical principles and guidelines for evaluating qualitative social research.[5] As argued by Chenhall et al., health science research ethics tend to relate to research that uses quantitative methodologies, which are often at odds with the changing and context-dependent methods of social research.[6] A range of ethical challenges are involved in qualitative social research, and particularly in the context of researchers from the global north working in the global south, ranging from power inequalities and cultural differences to oppression and exploitation.[7] A fundamental question in this context is how can we co-produce knowledge that refuses to re-produce colonial, raced, and gendered power relations in the academy and beyond?[8]

My impression while filling an ethics application for our work in the KNOW programme, and even more so when interviewing the KNOW team members, was that the institutional principles and processes fail to prepare us for unexpected and complex situations which come up in a multinational research project. Formalised guidelines and abstract values and principles provide no tools for handling the muddles, or mess, of human interactions and the dilemmas posed by 'everyday ethics',[9] evident in Guillemin and Gillam's notion of 'ethically important moments'.[10] Furthermore, they often expose tensions or even stand in conflict with the ethical dilemmas facing researchers, who instead rely on their tacit knowledge and fragmented intuitions and experiences.

An example of these contradictions is evident in the principle of informed consent, which is routinely documented in a signed form. As noted by Wynn and Israel, this procedure is based on western legalistic, cultural and political constructs of the contract and the authenticity of the signature. They point out that "written consent forms are historically and culturally specific artefacts that nevertheless masquerade as transparently neutral, and we locate this fantasy of 'transparency' within cultural histories of forms and bureaucratic documents".[11] Other researchers argue that the requirement to sign forms could arouse suspicion and undermine the creation of research relationships.[12] In light of such problems, our work in KNOW aims to develop a type of ethical methodology for researching the issues of urban inequality. We use case studies and lived experiences recounted by our colleagues as a departure point for understanding the relations of theory, principles and context in ethics.

Case-based reasoning is the basis of casuistry, a method for making contextualized ethical decisions, which critiques universally applicable rules, shifting the focus to the study of particular cases.[13] Jonsen and Toulmin trace the history of casuistry back to its peak century between 1550-1650,[14] and suggest that this method is still relevant in the contemporary discourse of ethics, since it deals with specific circumstances and 'cases of conscience', and can therefore redress the tendency to view ethics as a set of universal rules, definitions and generalities. They further argue for the development of 'moral taxonomy': a mapping of morally significant differences as well as likenesses between cases and between them and general principles.[15] A central point in their argument, which is relevant for research ethics in different cultural contexts, is that similar ethics conclusions can be arrived at from very different theoretical reasons, which stem from different religious, philosophical, or culturally-based 'general principles'.[16]

In order to explain casuistry as a mode of considering ethics, Jonsen[17] compares the viewing of an ethics case-study to that of a painting, using the example of Las Meninas (1656-7) by Diego Velásquez (fig. 1). The characters painted in the foreground are likened by Jonsen to the 'mess' of the case; the mid-ground represents the principles that give moral meaning to the factual circumstances; and the background symbolizes the ethical theory and cultural ethos. Although the background theory explains the emergence of the principles, values and rules of the mid-ground, casuistry views these rules not as universal, but rather as 'derived from and framed in terms of judgments about particular cases'.[18]

I find this reference to Las Meninas as a metaphor for ethical analysis beautiful and compelling. But nevertheless, Jonsen's seemingly arbitrary choice of this particular work of art as an analogy risks the detachment of ethical judgement from positionality and power relations. Indeed, Foucault observes of Las Meninas in his book *The Order of Things*, that as a representation, it is organised around an absent focus or blind spot - the unseen sovereigns King Philip IV and his wife.[19] Barely reflected in the mirror, their gaze, as well as their absence, are the ordering forces of the scene.[20]

This blind spot is also a result of the casuistic use of precedent and analogy between cases, since similarity depends on normative standards and social consensus about them. Spielthenner notes that casuistry has been criticised because it 'lacks a critical distance from cultural blindness and cannot be used to challenge established social views.'[21] Nevertheless, he suggests that 'formal casuistry' is useful in clarifying ethical debates, because considering whether cases are relevantly similar enables a discussion of the standards that are being used for judging them.[22]

Arguably, the blind spot of the lived 'ethics experiences' that we have gathered in the KNOW programme is the questionable assumption that there are shared standards, principles and concepts for understanding, relating and comparing them, given that values are socially constructed, and norms vary in different locations. I suggest that within the diversity of KNOW and similar large-scale international collaborations, the conditions for having shared values and principles must be further discussed. However, a case-based approach is nevertheless useful for recognising differences, and inspiring a search for alternative or multiple concepts and their definitions.

Alternatives

A helpful way for us to think about alternative principles and concepts has been to pose the question 'what does ethics mean to you?' to members of the KNOW team from all partner cities. This question addresses personal views, but also highlights differences between formalised ethics and lived experience, and between personal, social, cultural and geographical positions. Our question was posed as part of an exercise during two workshops: one was conducted in English at the KNOW annual conference in February 2019, which brought together fifty team members from academic institutions and NGOs from the different partner cities. The other was conducted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in July 2019, with a research team assembled by the Centre for Community Initiatives NGO, one of the KNOW partner organisations in the city. This team of twenty researchers included community members, local authority workers, NGO staff and university graduates. They worked together to conduct focus groups with residents of three informal settlements, aimed at understanding and measuring prosperity in order to co-produce pathways to prosperity with communities in Dar es Salaam. The discussions and responses from this workshop were translated from Swahili.

The aim of the workshop, entitled Ethics in Colour, was to explore existing ethics terms, add new meanings and concepts, and describe experiences of ethics dilemmas. We used colour as a means to highlight emotional aspects of ethical relations, and to allow for nuances of meaning. We were interested in spontaneous, immediate and intuitive replies, in contrast to the institutional carefully worded research ethics principles. 'Intuitive ethics' are defined by Haidt

and Joseph as 'the judgments, solutions, and ideas that pop into consciousness without our being aware of the mental processes that led to them.'[23] The plausibility of such 'moral intuitions' is contested,[24] but nonetheless, some scholars argue that intuitions play an important role in ethical justification, and that a large amount of moral functioning is intuitive and not deliberative.[25] We were interested in finding out whether shared 'moral intuitions' are possible across cultures, and whether they can form alternatives to the institutional ethics vocabulary.

Participants in our workshops were also asked to share their experiences of 'ethically important moments', a phrase coined by Guillemin and Gillam to describe difficult points in which problems surface such as tensions, sensitivities, or gaps in expectations. In such moments, research participants may become distressed, reveal a vulnerability, disclose a troubling experience, or expose something that gives cause for concern about them or someone else.[26] Such moments confront the researcher with dilemmas about how to respond ethically and work through the difficulties. To this discussion we added another layer, that examines the difficulties of collaboration and knowledge co-production between researchers working across multiple locations, disciplines, cultures and languages. In our workshops we wanted to draw such ethical dilemmas out of the lived experiences of the participants, and explore the relationship between the specific 'ethical moment' and the general debates and complexities of the ethics of research practice, allowing theory to emerge out of specific situations and encounters.

In the workshop at the KNOW annual meeting, many of the respondents suggested ethics terms and words and provided definitions for them that had to do with interpersonal relationships. Some answers were linked with what Banks et al. have termed 'relational virtues',[27] which are qualities of character commended by virtue ethics, but also social practices performed by people who are 'beings-in-relation', a term suggested by Robinson in her analysis of care ethics.[28] Words such as 'integrity', 'transparency', 'respect', 'responsibility', and 'honesty' that came up in the workshop represent these approaches. Some of the 'difficult moments' recounted were about relationships with research participants and the complexities of managing expectations, building trust, hearing multiple voices, and dealing with group dynamics. The related ethics words were conducive to handling such situations: 'honesty', 'flexibility', and 'cultural sensibility'. Other experiences shared by the team related to moments of misunderstandings and disagreements, and words that were suggested described the difficulties: 'co-option', 'selective hiding', 'invasiveness', 'trade-offs', and 'unintended consequences'.

Some responses related to the universal dimension of ethics, defining it as 'a system of shared values', or referred to tensions between the universal and the specific, suggesting that ethics is 'a set of universal principles that have to be worked out in context.' Several people raised the difficulties of collaborating in a mixed global north-south team, highlighting 'respect' and 'meaningful relationships' as basic terms. In the workshop in Dar es Salaam, some experiences related to misunderstandings and power relations, using words such as 'fear', 'worry', and

'harassment' to describe the problems, and 'patience', 'listening', 'respect' and 'commitment' to express 'relational virtues'. One of the definitions given for the word 'discipline' revealed its relational nature: 'When you do your things in a disciplined way, you must consider: love, respect, wisdom, being honest.'

These words, however, should be read with differences in language and culture in mind. For instance, the term 'consent' was interpreted by the team in the KNOW annual workshop in accordance to its institutional use, as representing agreement by the research participants to take part in the research. In Dar es Salaam, 'consent' was defined by one of the groups as agreement by the researcher to abide by social norms: '[Consent means] to be involved with the community. It is ethical to join them in what they do if you are invited, for example eat together if you are offered food, participate in their activity.' This shift allows for reflecting about who determines the terms and settings of the research, and who agrees to abide; and what is the role of the researcher in the context of collective life.

Thoughts about the autonomous individual

In order to reflect about shared values, it is useful to consider the idea of the 'moral habitus' in the thinking of Bourdieu. His notion of habitus describes the formation of subjectivity within the social group or class, and the complex relationship between the individual and the collective. The habitus is 'an embodied memory of previous experiences turned into a generative scheme that provides the skills and background for agents to make sense of current situations.'[29] It controls individual agency, and is a mental structure so internalised that it governs human dispositions.[30] Bourdieu described it as 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations'[31] within which the individual operates. If our subjectivity is shaped by our location within social structures, and operates through improvisation as well as intuition, it is questionable, within the diversity of individuals working on the KNOW programme, whether our different habitus can be transcended.

Some scholars argue that although habitus allows for individual agency, this is only possible within the constraints of the group. Meisenhelder suggests that '[t]he mental structures of the habitus allow an actor to become an individual but only through how she uses the subjective presence of the collectivity. In this sense, habitus 'decenters' human subjectivity'.[32] Others argue that transcending the habitus is possible, as suggested by Cantwell: 'the agent is disposed, but not constrained, capable of origination within the range of individual imagination, an horizon of social possibility, and the immediacy of situation.'[33]

It is the 'moral habitus' which shapes morality.[34] The 'moral habitus' is structured by ethical dispositions, and therefore it is a feature of social life – a social practice. One way to address ethics as a social practice then, is to consider Emmerich's suggestion that 'we should not

focus our concern on the ethics of practice but, instead, consider the practice of ethics.'[35] In this context, Emmerich suggests that practice contains the condition for its own critique: 'The ethics of social research needs to find a way of engendering ethical dialogue between moral actors who may have differing moral perspectives, perceptions, and standpoints.'[36] This approach, I would argue, is relevant not only to the practice of ethics, but also to the practice of the ethics of research.

Within the KNOW programme, our work package has focused so far on working with partners in Kampala and Dar es Salaam. We began to assemble a bibliography of African scholars who address issues of research ethics, in order to begin to understand the relevance of western principles in other frameworks. It is questionable whether there is a single set of philosophical and ethical principles common to all African cultures.[37] Nevertheless, our starting point is that an examination of approaches to research ethics that differ from the western cultural concepts is crucial for co-producing knowledge. As argued earlier, institutional research ethics are based on western norms of the 'autonomous individual' and the precedence of the individual over the communal. In contrast, some African scholars refer to a different and far more complex view.

The role of the community in relation to the individual is widely discussed in the literature relating to the concept of human nature and the complex relationship between communal orientation and individual self-determination.[38] Mbiti's much cited statement: 'I am because we are; since we are therefore I am'[39] emphasises the primacy of the community and contends that personhood is fully defined by the communal structure.[40] Other scholars disagree with this interpretation of personhood, and suggest that the social and the personal are not exclusive.[41] Gyekye rejects the interpretation of 'radical communitarianism' and instead makes a case for 'restricted or moderate communitarianism', which 'sees the self as both a communal being, and an autonomous, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice.'[42] This view has been critiqued on the grounds that it merely reasserts the problem of radical communitarianism.[43] Obioha warns against the use of radical communitarianism to legitimise community or state violation of the basic rights of people in the name of the ontological primacy of the community.[44] Another problem is raised by Oyowe and Yurkivska, who criticise the gender neutrality of the communitarian idea of personhood, arguing that

> As long as unchecked traditional belief systems continue to enable, sustain and perpetuate gender-blindness and the exclusion of feminist voices, their uncritical acceptance continues to conceal the discrepancy between the theory of African personhood, which is gender-neutral, and the African reality, which is not only explicitly gender-oriented but also gender-oppressive.[45]

Ujewe calls for replacing the concept of autonomy within institutional ethics frameworks with 'ought-onomy', which does not impose 'universal' moral values, but rather 'aligns the

decision-making process to the ethical framework of the relevant society.'[46] The debates around notions of personhood and relations of individual and communal further highlight the questionable relevance of western individually-based ethics principles in different cultural contexts.

Thoughts about the meaning of words

Following our work in the KNOW programme we aim to co-produce a lexicon of ethics words, terms and concepts that frame our research, particularly those coming from the team members and their research participants, as a tool for discussing situated and engaged ethics relevant for studying urban equality. The lexicon will reflect differences in meaning, allowing for deliberations about ethics as a practice.

The task of co-producing a lexicon entails thinking about the multiple cultural and linguistic ontologies linked with the lexical entries. Meanings are not easy to capture across languages and cultures.[47] As argued by Moltmann, they are tied up with the ontological categories and structures that a speaker implicitly accepts when using a language.[48] Cimiano et al. term the ontology-dependent meaning of a lexical entry an *ontology-lexicon*.[49] They argue for a dynamic rather than fixed set of word-senses, allowing for lexical meanings in the ontology-lexicon to be added as required, so that the ontology 'supports a generative process […] by which further aspects of the meaning of a word can be derived from the ontology.'[50] The multiple meanings of words in our co-created lexicon will draw attention to their links to different ontologies. However, the limits of such a project have been pointed out by Carli Coetzee, editor of the Journal of African Cultural Studies:

> A keywords project for our contradictory times will not lead us to congratulate ourselves on the equal and mutual success of our ethical collaborations; instead it will bring to the surface the complaints, the gossip and the discontent that structure and underpin what some call 'African studies'.[51]

Our work in the KNOW programme is guided by the search for such forms of discontent and their linguistic expressions. We propose to supplement the written text, which is the core of most lexicons and keyword projects, with visual materials that came out of our workshops. In addition to the colour wheels described above, we have also used co-produced drawings, cutting and collages in order to encourage engagement and participation. These methodologies offer creative ways to extend beyond the limits of language and translations in exploring and discussing ethical knowledge production. They open up further possibilities for mediating between lived experiences and general ethics principles, and for reflecting upon practising ethics as a form of collective life.

Figure 1. Las Meninas, by Diego Velasquez, 1656.[52]

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[3] See for example Emmerich 2018.

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