Critical Realist Autoethnography in International Scholarships Impact Research: An Illustrative Proposal

Anas N. Almassri [*]

School of Education, Durham University, UK

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

International higher education scholarships can be an impactful tool of development. They have demonstrable potential to advance the knowledge, skills, and networks of individuals, who may then be able to use these outcomes in making significant contributions in their workplaces and societies. This evolving theory of change has rightly guided the growing body of academic research and professional evaluations in this area. However, this academic and grey literature tends to limit investigations to the post-completion stage, often focusing on exploring impact through such neoliberal indicators such as economic return, career progress, and links to the foreign country of study. This exploratory scope and methodological-theoretical design demonstrably limit the extent to which scholarships impact may be understood in terms of its emergence or appreciated in terms of its manifestation. I try to respond to this limitation in this paper; I pilot a critical realist autoethnography methodology in explaining how two recent graduate scholarships have impacted me. The study makes three contributions to this area of research and practice. Empirically, it extends support for current research findings in the area by offering the first scholarly account of a Palestinian's scholarship experiences and impact. Drawing on empirical findings, it demonstrates that scholarships impact is a dynamic, contingent, and co-constitutive process. Methodologically, it illuminates the practice of critical realist autoethnography in both exploring and explaining this process of scholarship impact. Practically, it proposes this alternative conceptual-methodological approach may be a powerful tool of evaluating—and simultaneously optimizing—scholarships impact.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to propose critical realist autoethnography as a methodology for researching impact of international higher education scholarships. I offer this proposal with the primary goal of illustrating the unique strength of critical realist autoethnography (CRA) in generating exploratory and explanatory knowledge of the contribution of international scholarships to recipients' capabilities. Current methodologies in this area, in academic research and even more in professional evaluations, tend to be exploratory (Martel, 2018; Mawer, 2014, 2017). Often used with human capital theory (Perna et al., 2014), their exploratory mission is predominantly limited to neoliberal indicators of impact, from perceptions of foreign country of study to post-completion career advancement (e.g., Abeuova & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019; Al Yousef, 2016; BEC, 2017; Chevening, 2022; KPMG, 2016; Perna et al., 2015). However sometimes warranted by limited resources and timelines, these methodological designs tend to (de)limit impact

investigations, e.g., by missing more complex elements of impact and dynamics of impact generation, especially elements and dynamics related to the scholarship recipient's individual background and their home country's context (cf. King et al., 2023; also see Campbell & Lavallee, 2020); as well as misaligning research and evaluation with the given rationale or variety of ones behind an international scholarship program (Campbell & Mawer, 2019; Campbell & Neff, 2020). In this context, I present critical realist autoethnography (CRA) as valuable addition to the suite of methodologies available for researchers, to both lead in-depth empirical explorations of international scholarships impact and to develop plausible explanations of this impact generation. In illuminating the value of this addition, I respond to the primary question of how two recent graduate scholarships have impacted me.

I organize my proposal in three main sections. First, I synthesize Leon Anderson's (2006b) approach to analytic autoethnography with critical realist philosophy (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 2016). I then discuss the methodological, theoretical, and practical decisions I followed in applying this synthesis in this article. Second, I present the findings of applying CRA to a segment of the impact on myself of two international scholarships, in doing so seeking to illuminate the methodological practice of CRA. Third, I discuss how the findings demonstrate the value of CRA vis-à-vis current methodological practices and concerns in scholarships impact research. I finally conclude with two key implications for researching and evaluating scholarships impact. Before moving to the first section, it is worth acknowledging the positionality with which I endorse this proposal.

1.1. Positionality

I am a male, able, late-twenties Palestinian, born, raised, and educated to an undergraduate level in Gaza. I come from a middle-class family, with my father being the only breadwinner, working with his British PhD as an associate professor. I was raised in a traditional-conservative environment—at public and at religiously-affiliated schools, at mosque, and in our local neighborhood. Contrary to this background and my formal education, I think of the informal education I received from my parents as one that has shaped me to enjoy (self-)reflection, (impassioned) arguments, and deep conversations. My parents also encouraged me to participate in a wide variety of extra-curricular and non-formal education programs, from reading competitions and public speaking events to English language, leadership, and community service trainings, e.g., the Access Micro-scholarship[i]. In my free time nowadays, I can barely find anything I would enjoy more than reflective journaling, watching documentaries or debates, or sharing those with others—whether they are on Israel/Palestine, Arab history, American and global politics, or the state of global affairs in higher education.

I think of this background as the cornerstone of the relatively high privilege I went on to accumulate in my life. The quality parenting I received, the high-impact educational opportunities I could join while in school, and the supportive networks I could cultivate at university, at work, and in society all prepared me well to achieve excellent undergraduate, career, and broader civic achievements. In course, I was well-served by my status as an able, academically well-credentialed man in a society that favors such ability status, gender identification, and educational level. At 23, with this trajectory, I successfully competed for two master-level scholarships: DPET scholarship[ii] and, soon afterwards, the Arrupe Scholarship for Peace[iii]. The former was to undertake an MSc in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding at Durham University, the latter for an MA in Arab Studies at Georgetown University. Attending either without such a full scholarship would have been as unthinkable to me as to most people in Palestine, whose GDP per capita is 788USD — 1,143USD in the West Bank and 315USD in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2023). In contrast, the annual cost of attendance for international students is about 46,300USD at Durham and about 78,000USD at Georgetown.

While studying abroad on both scholarships, I advanced my human capital, as I shall demonstrate in this article. However, I always felt intellectual discomfort at limiting the value thereof to economic terms, where employment, job title, work sector, and level of income are interpreted as sufficient and valid evidence of good scholarship impact: importing capacity and achieving with/because of it career breakthroughs and potentially institutional and wider influence (see Campbell et al., 2021; Perna et al., 2015). A most brief sketch of scholarships' broader value is that they made me enjoy (relative, temporary privilege of) physical, economic, and epistemic safety from the pervasive impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This discomfort and sketch led me to do my current doctoral project, in which I am investigating the potential contribution of international scholarships to Palestinian recipients' capabilities of everyday peace (on a full NINE DTP studentship[iv]). This is the personal history and academic background that motivate my work in this article.

2. Critical Realist Autoethnography

In this section, I first synthesize Leon Anderson's (2006b) approach to analytic autoethnography with critical realist philosophy as developed by Roy Bhaskar (2007, 2009, 2016) and Margaret Archer (2003, 2007, 2012). I then I discuss my application of the synthesis in producing my subsequent account of scholarships impact on me.

Anderson (2006b) proposes five criteria to qualify autoethnography as an analytic methodology of research: the researcher's membership in the researched phenomenon, application of analytic reflexivity in social and self-analysis, active textual visibility, dialogue with co-members in the phenomenon, and demonstrated commitment to theoretical analysis. Altogether, this proposal moves autoethnography from an evocative practice and empirical form to an analytic practice with potential to illuminate social phenomena (Anderson, 2006b). These criteria and the mission of analytic autoethnography are readily applicable in a critical realist paradigm of research.

Critical realism stands on three philosophical assumptions (Bhaskar, 2007, 2008, 2016). First, it assumes ontological realism: that there is an external reality independent of our knowledge of it, and that this reality is stratified into the empirical domain of our perceptions and experiences, the actual domain of events and activities that may not be observable but are accessed via our experience thereof, and the real domain of causal structures, which, briefly, are the underlying entities that generate observed empirical patterns (Gerrits & Verweij, 2013; Danermark et al., 2019, ch. 4). In practice, this means that analysis should be to find empirical patterns in the

data, to establish theoretical significance of these patterns, and to try to explain how these patterns came to be. The second assumption is of epistemological relativism, that our claimed knowledge of reality is inherently limited by our positionalities, life contexts, and intellectual training, among other factors (Lawson, 2003). In practice, this means, inter alia, that researchers should acknowledge their influence throughout research process and act on it. This acknowledgement is facilitated through researcher reflexivity, which entails critical self-introspection to develop and action their awareness and sense-making of their technical, analytical, and other pertinent choices in the research process, as well as to make these choices accountable to the data and the field (Anderson, 2006b; Archer, 2012; also see Stevens, 2016, for illustration in CRA). Finally, critical realism follows an assumption of judgmental rationalism, the least developed/demonstrated of what has been termed the trinity of critical realism (Isaksen, 2016). Isaksen's (2016) explanation clarifies the gist of this assumption: our competing knowledge claims should be resolved based on rational adjudication of their explanatory power, i.e., the extent to which they can explain significant phenomena and integrate new knowledge. In practice, this can apply to any choice made in the research process, but it is particularly importantly in the latter stages of the data analysis process where causal explanations are being developed (for illustration see Quraishi et al., 2022).

Both analytic autoethnography and critical realism emphasize a researcher's exercise of critical self-reflection with the overall goal of illuminating understanding of social phenomena. This dual emphasis is supported by broader harmony between the method and the philosophy when it comes to textual visibility, analytic reflexivity, and membership status. Active presence of the autoethnographic in the text is a (self-)reminder of the relativist stance of the knowledge claims being made. It is also a reminder of the constant need for analytic reflexivity, whose rigor is expanded in critical realism. By committing to theoretical analysis and to judgmental rationalism, an autoethnographer strives to apply to their social and self-analysis such quality indicators as empirical adequacy, descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and ontological plausibility (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Furthermore, critical realist autoethnographers can be particularly supported in their simultaneous self-analysis and search for causal structures underlying observed patters by the "intimate familiarity" potentially ensuing of their membership in the researched phenomenon and dialogue with co-members (Coghlan, 2007).

I offer illustrative elaboration of this synthesis in the following sub-section. Before doing so, I acknowledge that this synthesis does merit further terminological discussion, e.g., causal structures, and philosophical engagement, including with the distinct epistemology of critical realist autoethnography. However, these would take this article beyond its specific scope. I have instead footnoted sources that provide sufficient background to terms and philosophical concepts used in this article.

2.1. My Approach

Before presenting my CRA, I find it important to elaborate on my membership status and the empirical data used here as well as on the theoretical framework and analytical procedure I followed in producing the subsequent account of scholarships impact on me.

My membership in the phenomenon under study was both opportunistic and convert (Anderson, 2006b, p. 379). It was opportunistic because, before beginning this work, I had developed "intimate familiarity" with Palestinian students on scholarships abroad. Beside sharing with them the experience, settings, and context of the phenomenon, I had connected well with them in social settings (as a flatmate, friend, new encounter, and social media connection), in professional settings (training and advising over 120 scholarship applicants, and often engaging socially with those who were successful and whom I met abroad or kept in touch with), and in research settings (through engaging current and prospective scholarship applicants and recipients as participants in research I completed on other topics). My complete membership is also one of conversion: I began my doctoral research with "a purely data-oriented research interest" in Palestinian graduate scholarship recipients' experiences; then I "converted to complete immersion", thinking reflexively about my own experience, and bringing it into dialogue with theirs (Anderson, 2006b, p. 397). Checking similar CRA work by Barron (2013), Lundgren-Resenterra and Crosta (2019), and Stevens (2021), I thought this membership status placed me in a good position to proceed with the work.

To ensure my membership offers substantial empirical reference, I used as the source material for this article a range of documents of my own and sole past production. I selected them based on two criteria: being made during, via, and/or about my funded education abroad, between September 2018 and October 2021 (Fig 1); and reflecting some level of intellectual or emotional effort.

The source material included the following documents, in addition to my doctoral researcher journal:

- ■ 34 social media blogs,
- ■ 42 written and audio personal journal entries,
- ■ Two reflective journals: one on teaching practices I found effective and another on research topics I found particularly interesting to me,

9.2018	4.2019	8.2019	1.2020	3.2020	3.2021	5.2021	10.2021
Arrived in Durham and started enrollment	Secured a scholarship to afford enrolling at Georgetown	Finished my dissertation early at Durham and enrolled at Georgetown	Attended my graduation ceremony in Durham	COVID-19 broke out and classes at Georgetown moved online	Moved back to Gaza and accepted a job offer	Virtually attended my graduation ceremony at Georgetown. Quit my job.	Enrolled back at Durham for my PhD

Fig. 1. Timeline of Data Generation

- ▪ 13 pre-existing documents of mine: eight CV copies reproduced at different times for various purposes; and two scholarship profiles (the admission and scholarship selection applications and notes taken in preparation for selection interviews); and
- ▪ 32 assignments completed during both of my degrees abroad.

In conducting this CRA, I followed the same theoretical framework and analysis method and protocol as in my doctoral project. I used the Capability Approach (Sen, 2001, 2004) to theorize scholarships impact as changes in capability. Capability is defined as one's effective ability to do something one has reason to do (Robeyns, 2006). This definition captures five conceptual tenets of Capability: capacity (ability to do), functioning (doing), and reasoning (rationalizing the doing), as well as the relationship between structures (which influence one's effective ability) and agency (one's navigation of structural influences on their effective ability). Scholarships impact here is operationalized as changes in capability, which are observed in and inferred from empirical data, i.e., the source material (Owens et al., 2021; Smith & Seward, 2009). To find these changes, I followed an adapted version of critical realist thematic analysis (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), which readily applies autoethnographic analysis and interpretation strategies reported by Gregersen (2019) and autoethnographic quality recommendations shared by Duncan (2004). Together, these choices of theoretical framework and analysis method kept me focused on identifying capacities and functionings as adequately observed in the source material; identifying reasonings if included in the source material and, if not, self-inspecting for them; and inferring structure-agency dynamics that would help explain any identified changes in capability (see Willis, 2019).

Based on the source material, I acknowledge that there were some key perceived qualitative and quantitative differences between my experiences at Durham and at Georgetown, e.g., amount and nature of workload, scale and quality of social life, and level of clarity of purpose, among others. I do not in this article separate my experiences at the two universities based on such differences as that falls out of the scope of this article, of which I do not think as a comparative autoethnography. What I concern myself with, instead of separating and comparing the two sojourns, is the engagements sustained through both as evidenced in the source material and as more relevant to the segment under focus here, which I discuss below.

3. Gaining Epistemic Autonomy

I seek in this section to illustrate methodological practice of critical realist autoethnography. I do so by presenting one segment of the impact on myself of two international graduate scholarships. The segment is focused on the capability of epistemic autonomy, that is, one's ability to govern their own intellectual lives through such attitudes as, but not limited to, critical informational literacy, openness and curiosity, questioning established beliefs and authority figures, and making independent decisions on knowledge, evidence, and trust of experts (Grasswick, 2019; Priest, 2022). I was data-driven in deciding on this segment in that experiences of epistemic autonomy were the most prevalent in my source material. Secondarily, my decision was driven by the prevalence of similar experiences reported in in-depth interviews by my doctoral research participants—Palestinian co-members in the phenomenon under study. Following Anderson's (2006b) proposal of engaging one's data with co-members', I approached my analysis with primary but not exclusive focus on my data, thereby mitigating the risk that the findings below may be "not from detached [autoethnographic] discovery but from engaged dialogue" (Anderson, 2006b, p. 382).

The segment of impact is presented in the three following sub-sections, respectively corresponding with the critical realist view of a three-domain reality: an empirical domain of experiences and perceptions, an actual one of events and activities, and a real one of causal structures.

3.1. Building Capacity in Epistemic Autonomy

Data across the source material show four key experiences through which I built and exercised capacity in epistemic autonomy: flexible learning, philosophical dissonance, stressful reality check, and owning autonomy.

3.1.1. Flexible Learning

I deeply appreciate(d) the great flexibility with which I completed my learning assignments at Durham and research projects at Georgetown. At Durham, one major form of this flexibility was that of the 150 study hours in almost all my modules, I had 130 to spend in independent study and in completing a final assignment on one of several topic choices. I focused this ample time and my final assignments on learning the trajectories of conflicts in Cyprus, Kashmir, Kenya, Kosovo, Rwanda, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, among others. This was my first time understanding—even knowing—that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may not be the only protracted conflict or the most fatal or complex. Learning about the causes, dynamics, and legacies of these conflicts, including seeing first-hand the post-Apartheid legacy through a study abroad in Cape Town, challenged me to build, for the first time in my life, an empirical and conceptual frame of reference within whose breadth I started rethinking (about) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Content in the source material later in my master's shows I decreasingly identified with the ways of knowing, epistemology of survival, and narrative of victimhood/*sumud* forcibly dictated to me in/by a protracted reality of conflict—e.g., that we Palestinians have suffered and endured more than any other people in conflict, played no role but that of helpless victims or heroic freedom fighters in turning the course of the conflict, and that a Palestine who is "free from the river to the sea" is synonymous with our civil peace and effective emancipation.

At Georgetown, the flexibility of my learning took place through class participation and research assignments. In the former, I was challenged to contribute, through pre- and in-class (online) discussions, my own interpretations of (usually hundreds of pages of) weekly assigned readings. In research assignments, I was tasked with planning, implementing, and reporting on research projects of my own choosing while receiving structured mentorship. This welcoming and supportive approach to independent knowledge

interpretation and production deepened my critical and interdisciplinary engagement with some of the historical and contemporary issues affecting Palestine and neighboring Arab countries and societies. A sample of covered issues included: the influence of international organizations on educational policies and practices, global political economy effects on domestic job markets, the role of foreign aid and public diplomacy in political and economic development, the enforcement of international law (or lack thereof) in conflicts, and critical representation of gender and politics in Arab literature. This engagement further broadened the empirical, conceptual, and now interdisciplinary frame of reference within which I increased my appreciation of complexity in interpreting knowledge in general and knowledge of national and regional issues in particular.

3.1.2. Philosophical Dissonance

My three years on the two scholarships were full of learning and research activities as those indicated above. Although I accumulated a great deal of knowledge through these activities, data across the source material show I often accepted this knowledge without much critical questioning of its theoretical or philosophical framing. Most of the source material reflects no consistent reliance on a philosophical paradigm or conscious engagement with alternatives in making meaning of my learning (especially vis-à-vis reality in Palestine). Re-reading the source material, I now understand I completed my academic work while vaguely following an idealist, social constructivist, or realist paradigm—sometimes using different paradigms in completing different assignments during a single semester. My public blogging and pre-existing documents were mostly of an idealist, personal journaling sometimes of an idealist but more often of a realist, and my academic journal on liked teaching methods (unsurprisingly?) of a social constructivist. My other academic journal on interesting research topics included all three paradigms.

For example, in a course at Durham, I argued in favour of participatory approaches in peacebuilding and framed my argument within an obviously, though not to me at the time, idealistic paradigm, i.e., critiquing dominant, non-participatory approaches based on their failure to fulfil mental constructs of inclusion, equality, and democratic governance. In the same term, I completed my summative essay for another course on refugee return. Re-reading that essay, I understand I followed social constructivism in discussing how repatriation remains the preferred "solution" for refugees, thanks to imagined-community thinking (Anderson, 2006a) and despite legal arguments and evidenced economic merits for their integration. At Georgetown, I followed (classical and structural) realism in completing final projects for three courses, in one arguing for accepting the Deal of the Century, Donald Trump's plan for effectively normalizing Palestinian subjugation. In a fourth course, I followed social constructivism in researching changes in Palestinian students' political attitudes during their undergraduate education in the U.S.

Although I did and still do appreciate this philosophical flexibility, however unintentional and arguably dissonant, my return to Gaza showed me it was a luxury afforded at Durham and Georgetown's safe and well-equipped campuses but only a meaningless asset at best or an impediment to "effective re-entry" at worst in Gaza's daily life of compelling stressors.

3.1.3. Stressful Reality Check

During my last semester at Georgetown, I moved back to Gaza and was headhunted to work at a human rights organization there. I was excited at what I (mis)took the headhunting to represent, a recognition that someone with a British and American education may have something worth contributing. I was also excited about the prospect of sharing, whether in everyday or formal conversations, the range of knowledge and reflection I had cultivated abroad. However, data across the source material show that my stay back in Gaza—for a period punctuated by COVID lockdowns and a war, the fourth for me—turned out to be nothing more than a distressing reality check.

In the beginning, my excitement remained deep, even when I started interpreting everyday phenomena in a mode of usually high-minded reasoning. As I then wrote to a professor at Georgetown:

> I crossed back to Gaza about three weeks ago. It's been so refreshing to reunite with family through these difficult times. It's been equally refreshing to see how all the discussions through MAAS come to actual life at observing how things are here–brutal forces of de-development and of devaluation not only of (critical) knowledge but, more importantly, of human life. My almost three years abroad feel like a passing memory in what Mahmoud Darwish [a prominent Palestinian poet] said is Gaza's own sense of time. However, the most reminding scene has been this notable growth of capitalism, i.e., increasingly exclusive upward mobility of wealth amidst accelerating deterioration of the general population's economic, social, and cultural rights. Large malls are replacing small market shops, organically sustained by and sustaining intra-community social and economic relations.

I vividly remember the background of this email. I was taking a taxi from Gaza City to my hometown, Dair Al-Balah. The driver dropped me mid-way, in Al-Nuseirat refugee camp, so that he could take four back to Gaza City. As I walked down the main street in the camp looking for another taxi, I saw a large mall there. I thought it attracted buyers away from smaller shops nearby and made the street, already overcrowded with street vendors and passersby, even more congested. "Why, in a national context of claimed resistance, should one own such economic—but not only economic—influence? Why do local authorities, self-appointed the true guardians of the national cause, allow that person to own such influence? How is it that local academic institutions almost never inspire a discussion of the role of Palestinian capitalists in the national context?" I wondered as I kept walking down the street (see Dana, 2020).

Through our conversations, some of my relatives and friends made me aware I was not alone in such wondering, which at the time I felt was more discomforting than comforting. "So, there's awareness of the issue but no one is talking about?!" Only recently, two years later, did I understand such wondering was too idealist and incomplete in that I considered in it neither larger structural forces shaping people's life politics nor the diversity in or limitation of individuals' agency (Giddens, 1991).

For the next several weeks, my wondering shifted to my work. As an advocacy officer, I assumed my post would challenge or at least

offer me space to plan creative activities of advocating human rights in Gaza. My reasoning behind that assumption was that I was headhunted to the post because I had been trained in the West and therefore can use my language and intercultural skills in persuasive messaging aimed at influencing attitudes towards the situation of human rights in Palestine/Israel. I made proposal after proposal based on that assumption, but each was turned down or shelved for later. My line manager, a white European legal expert based in the U.S., thought my proposals deviated from traditional norms of human rights advocacy. By these norms, my primary task was to assist her in drafting human rights reports as well as submissions and speeches to UN bodies. To me, this was exactly the kind of advocacy that, for decades, has had no meaningful impact on the life of myself and (especially average) Palestinians. "If anything, it was worth trying something new, something out of the box," I thought to myself. "If millions of dollars are donated to human rights organizations annually but the situation for Palestinians was only getting worse, some change was worth it". It is arguable whether that was the fault of the organization—or of any such Palestinian NGOs as they work in the same oppressive circumstances and under similar suppressive aid conditions (Arda & Banerjee, 2021; Taghdisi-Rad, 2010). Still, I thought it requires some serious reflection on playing by the norms, themselves significantly built by mostly colonial powers victorious in World War II (Evans, 2005). Interest in even such reflection seemed to me to be absent and, when performed, hollow.

At the time, a relative who had been in the NGO industry for years advised me, as did several friends, to take up my excellent salary and just go about my life (under conflict). I perhaps could very well do that. With an early-career basic monthly income exceeding 1,800USD, where Gaza's GDP per capita is 315USD, I could enjoy planning for a financially secure life and a prosperous family future. I did not reject the idea of it. *I resented it.* I resented that I, thanks to a lifetime of relatively high privilege, would be able to enjoy my life while pretending to be serving fellow Palestinians' human rights—out of a nice, well-furnished, and air-conditioned office, unlike the places where most of them live.

What I then perceived as socio-professional hypocrisy and epistemic self-betrayal continues to be difficult for me to accept, though no longer to understand.[1] This line of thinking intensified during the 11-day long war in May 2021. During the time the landscape of Gaza and psyche of Palestinians there were yet again disfigured, the organization's mission was reduced into issuing news updates and my advocacy work into translating those updates from Arabic to English before their publication (to a total subscribership of around 7,000 people). Following the end of the war, I discussed with colleagues at work some of these thoughts. Most just talked back to me with much compassion yet without sufficiently engaging with my thoughts; the few who did ultimately advised me to accept the reality that the organization's work, like that of most NGOs in Palestine, was foreign-funded and therefore hostage—my description, not their words—to the strings attached to that funding regarding political engagement and technical programming. Soon afterwards, I quit my job and decided to pursue my PhD.

3.1.4. Owning Autonomy

In mid-September 2021, I arrived back in the UK and started taking modules in research methods while refining my PhD proposal. I also kept reflecting on how frustrating my return to Gaza was. As I did, my modules sparked my interest in understanding the role of philosophy in knowledge consumption, production, and application. I pursued this interest through two of my four summative assignments as well as through continued independent study. During this work, I identified well with my readings on critical realism and started testing this identification by applying the philosophy in re-reading and self-critiquing my previous academic work. It made me feel a sense of ontological security, see a potential for epistemological consistency, and regain interpretive confidence. With this trinity, I moved on to make key decisions in my doctoral career. A most important one was substantially modifying my original doctoral project, vaguely underpinned by social constructivism, and anchoring it instead in critical realism—despite its unpopularity in researching Palestine and despite one of my Annual Review committee members' warning of its complexity. Positive experiences of support from my supervisory team and scholarship administrators helped me increasingly assume my autonomy in making doctoral project and broader career choices—from which theories, methods, and timelines to follow, to which conferences to attend and what publications to prioritize, and what teaching and other career experiences to pursue.

3.2. Capability Gain

In critical realism, the second domain of reality is the actual, comprising occurrences of which reported experiences took place. These occurrences are inferred through analyzing empirical data vis-à-vis the established theoretical framework, here the Capability Approach. In my case, my funded education abroad made an enormous capability contribution to my epistemic autonomy. I make this inference on two bases: my perceived capacity gain, and the functionings I delivered with this capacity gain.

First, I see my educational experiences at Durham and Georgetown as key to building and practicing key capacities of epistemic autonomy (as parenthesized here). I found the flexibility of learning deepening to my interest in knowledge of social phenomena in country contexts both similar to and different from that of Palestine (openness and curiosity). In learning and assessment activities demanding higher levels and longer periods of substantial engagement in critical reading, analytical writing, independent learning, and research, I was challenged to pursue this interest in global social science and, in course, to gather, evaluate, and analyze evidence (critical information literacy; independent learning). I was also challenged to use my adjudicated evidence in constructing, articulating, and defending my positions on various research, policy, and practice issues in and beyond Palestine (independent opinion formation). Throughout, I received constructive feedback from assessors and supervisors, enjoyed an institutional climate of academic

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[1] Such work-related difficulties of re-adjustment are very common upon foreign students' return to their home countries (Szkudlarek, 2010). Such difficulties were also reported by some of my doctoral research participants in their accounts of their own return experiences.

freedom, and felt free to bring out my authentic interpretive sense and to continue doing so—whether it aligned or deviated, in essence or outcome, with/from points of relative consensus (questioning established beliefs and authority figures).

Second, these increased capacities were reflected in the qualitatively new functionings I delivered while and after gaining them. At Georgetown, I seized one of my final research papers to build a learning-for-employability logic and to apply it in rethinking the relationship between universities, students, and employment in contexts of economic despair (Almassri, in press). This logic marks a departure from common education-for-employability thinking where universities are almost unilaterally responsible for students' employability. I felt fulfilled while delivering this functioning. It was satisfying to my curiosity about how those few Palestinian new graduates succeed in gaining employment even when joblessness among new graduates is "all but universal" (ILO, 2017, p. iv). It was also enlightening to my critical curiosity about how much can be expected of universities—and, instead, should in parallel be expected of students—especially in contexts like Palestine's where universities are subject to violence, resource depletion, and self-inflicted harm and untapped potential (Abusamra, 2023; BESA Center, 2021; Koldas & Çıraklı, 2019; Riemer, 2019)

In another functioning of acquired capacities, I applied and was selected to serve, remotely while still abroad, as an International Academic Counseling Consultant with an NGO in Gaza. The job was to provide comprehensive pre-college counselling to around 30 Palestinian students prospectively competing for admission and full funding at universities worldwide—especially in the West. My previous experience in advising Palestinian undergraduate applicants was probably excellent by the modest local standards; however, I am not sure it was as such when considering the advisee group size, the volume of their counseling needs (vis-à-vis too few allocated consultancy hours), and the broad diversity of their intended destinations—over 120 universities and scholarship programs on five continents. Nor was I, then or now, aware of any guidebook or established strategy on how to support Palestinians applying to colleges across the globe. My only two resources were my previous experience and free and publicly available advising materials (mostly written in and for the Global North). I reflected on my previous successes and failures in advising Palestinian applicants, analyzed the online advising materials I found, drew my own conclusions on how both would be useful in the unique national circumstances and specific individual backgrounds of my advisees, and actioned those conclusions into counseling content and activities. Doing so was deeply fulfilling to me. Intrinsically, it allowed me to follow my own sense of what may work and build new knowledge of direct use in the local context. Extrinsically, it engaged me in much-needed attempts, however modest in success that time, at making concrete contributions to the competitive access of younger, often less privileged, Palestinians to quality education abroad.

3.3. Explaining Capability Gain

In this critical realist iteration of the Capability Approach, capability is viewed as a single entity—of capacities, functionings, and reasonings, as established in the preceding two sections. Increase in this entity is viewed to result from complex and dynamic interactions between individual agency and causal structures. I share in this final sub-section an attempted explanation of how these interactions unfolded to allow for the capability gain. I identify the structural influences, agentic responses, and dynamics of interaction between the two, and I do so through retroductive inference[2]. In this retroductive step, I moved back and forth between empirical data and potential explanations before deciding, in a process of judgmental rationalism (see pages 5-6), on the superiority of chosen explanations.

Going back through empirical data, I find a number of causal structures that help explain the contribution of funded education abroad to my epistemic autonomy. First, this contribution was contingent[3] on a general atmosphere conducive to my quality engagement in my education. The atmosphere of physical safety, financial security, and mental tranquillity—away from daily stressors of life in blockaded, poverty-stricken, war-torn Gaza—tended[4] to enable me to dedicate far more of my energy towards already demanding activities like reading- and writing-intensive courses. Indeed, I believe contrasting this climate with that of education in Palestine was both insightful and too enjoyable to leave time (or affective space) to feel any major effects of culture shock, which would have in turn undermined the quality of my engagement in my studies.

Second, the capability gain was significantly contingent on institutionalized freedoms, both material and social. Freedom of access to learning resources and spaces tended to make effectively possible my pursuit of curiosity—to the best of my potential. Accessing, free of charge, including upon request, the books, journal articles, and other readings I needed to do the learning and research I wished to do represented an effective opportunity for me to pursue my own intellectual advancement. This effective opportunity was extended to include my access to well-lit, -connected, and -equipped library and learning spaces and modern facilities and digital services, the likes of which I never saw or *could* have even imagined prior to my education abroad. Also, the contribution to my epistemic autonomy was contingent on social institutionalized freedoms. Freedoms of inquiry, thought, and speech tended to excite my curiosity about a broader range of ideas, experimentation with new interpretations, contestation of established beliefs, expression of honest support or firm opposition, and, throughout, pursuit of relatively novel research projects (see Chankseliani et al., 2021).

Third, my gain in epistemic autonomy was significantly contingent on the teaching, learning, and assessment regimes at the two universities. Together, these regimes, practices of which were highlighted before, strongly tended to challenge and allow me to exercise and advance to higher levels my intellectual potential—in a Bloomian sense, building, grasping, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating knowledge (Bloom, 1956). It is beyond the methodological affordance of this article to single out the contribution of each

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[2] See Danermark et al. (2019, ch. 5) and Fletcher (2017) for an overview of retroduction in critical realist research.
[3] See Gerrits and Verweij (2013) for an overview of contingency in critical realism.
[4] In critical realism, *tendency* has a specific reference to the "[c]haracteristic ways of acting or effects of" causal structures that "*may* be exercised… without being realized" (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 93, emphasis added; Fleetwood, 2001).

of these regimes; however, their combination consistently allowed for each to reinforce the learning impact of another. For example, writing-intensive courses, which challenged me every week to articulate my reading comprehension into well-written, -evidenced, and overall -argued analyses, afforded me the confidence and competence to undertake independent research projects, themselves also challenging me to articulate my project activities, from literature reviews to data analysis, into quality research writing.

None of these three structures would have exhibited (as much) causal efficacy as concluded from the experiential findings without my interaction, however unconscious/unintentional at the time, with their effects. This brings me, finally, to the role of my agency in rendering the gain in my epistemic autonomy. This role comprises the everyday deliberations through which I negotiated or navigated the influence of identified structures on my experiences of epistemic autonomy. I classify these deliberations mainly into two: deliberations of gratitude, and deliberations of resilience. In deliberations of gratitude, I paid constant attention to and felt special appreciation of mundane daily details, e.g., waking up to no street vendor noise, showering in light under warm water (since there are no energy blackouts, like in Gaza), having no socially enforced dress codes (even in the library), and not having to socialize beyond what I, an introvert, can manage. In these deliberations, I also found assurance and warmth in the kind words and/or constructive approach in which my professors always shared their positive and critical feedback. I barely finished a day, or a postmidnight stay, at the library without feeling immense gratitude for the effective freedom it represented; I never got a good grade without feeling thankful that the small-town, public-school little boy from Gaza grew able to do well at universities like Durham and Georgetown. I never took, or take, any such details for granted, and the feelings of bless and bliss they deepen constantly consolidated my will to keep *deserving* them.

I would however be colossally remiss if I fail to stress that there were several tests, many indeed, of that spirit of gratitude. In the third week of my master's at Durham, I felt so overwhelmed that I called up a friend and consulted her whether I should just give up and go back to my job in Gaza. Before my flight to Washington to start at Georgetown, I turned down a job offer and the (imagined) prospect of a settled, stable adult career life in Gaza. In route, I had a long layover in Dublin, and I spent it debating with myself over the wisdom of having two more years of student life at Georgetown. It turned out these two years were far more stressful, thanks to: i) COVID-19 and its resulting package of feelings of uncertainty and loneliness; ii) an abrupt but short-lived ban on international students' re-entry to the U.S.; iii) the January 6th attack on the U.S. Congress and the (triggering) presence of armed National Guard troops near my accommodation; and iv) the often too much academic workload combined with applying for internships, jobs, and PhD programs and scholarships. It took me a level of resilience I had not thought I possessed to navigate these circumstances while negotiating the exacting influence of the aforementioned structures. As part of such deliberations, I sometimes skipped a class, picked up a less demanding course, or just invested more time in my social life or, more often, my quiet introvert bubble. In my last semester at Georgetown, Spring 2021, just after the January 6th attacks, I was burnt out and Zoom-exhausted. I still took my courses then for a grade, but I neither worked nor aimed to get an A. Throughout such testing times, I sought solace in remembering how far I had come, reflecting on how further I still felt like going, getting back closer to family, and developing new hobbies and habits—from walking and watching documentaries to following a fixed and healthy sleep schedule and diet.

Before my graduate education abroad, I had not thought of myself as particularly resilient, nor had I felt confident in my intellectual abilities—not just to do well in academia but also in life. But those deliberations of gratitude and resilience, and the often-positive ensuing results, encouraged me to entertain an alternative self-conception, that I am potentially more resilient than I think, and that I can often navigate my way to success even when/if the path is uncertain, disrupted, and/or stressful.

Overall, I find it plausible to conclude that the contribution of funded education abroad to my epistemic autonomy was both possible and significant precisely because of the good interaction between the aforementioned causal structures in my funded education abroad and my dispositions of conscious gratitude and resilience. *Novelty* was a core mechanism of this dialectical interaction. The socio-material novelty to me of the learning atmosphere, support, and practices increased the causal tendency of identified structures to permitting and enhancing my delivery on and advancement of my learning interests. In course, the new growth of my self-conception as resilient and capable excited me to further act on my dispositions, to embrace and translate into hard-work my gratitude, and to keep a resilient mind and spirit in facing demanding learning tasks and daunting life events.

Finally, I recognize that the some of the experiences and inferences reported in this section are of events that may sound mundane to individuals used to them at their institutions of study. To me, however, they represent exactly the reasons for which I had originally been advised and decided to study abroad. I recall no time in my undergraduate time in Gaza where I experienced any such flexibility to choose the topics of my independent learning; or opportunity to engage interdisciplinarily with curricular content; or freedom to voice my own understanding or push back on accepted interpretations; or challenge to have my knowledge and skills promoted—rather than merely measured—in assessment; or support to undertake quality academic research. Let alone the broader learning atmosphere of safety and resourcefulness. To be clear, the structures underlying these experiences may exist to a certain degree at some university programs in Palestine; however, I contend that they may not be as causally efficacious because of the (pervasive) absence of contextual, institutional, and individual contingencies, without which the influence of these structures as wholes, rather than that of their parts, emerge[5].

4. Concluding Discussion

I have tried in this article to share an illustrative proposal of critical realist autoethnography as a unique methodology for

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[5] See Elder-Vass (2005) and Gerrits and Verweij (2013) on the specific approach in critical realism to emergence.

generating exploratory and explanatory knowledge of the contribution of international scholarships to recipients' capabilities. This proposal shows the methodology has strong potential to address a number of key philosophical, methodological, and practical concerns.

Ontologically, I separated my experiences of epistemic autonomy from the capability gain therein, i.e., distinguishing my perceived learning engagements and capacity increases (in the empirical domain) from scholarships impact (in the real domain of reality). By doing this, I followed the critical realist alternative i) to the reductionist view of learning impact, in international scholarships and beyond, as a set of quantifiable indicators (Tikly, 2015); and ii) to the epistemic fallacy of collapsing scholarships impact into (my) interpretations of it. This alternative was acknowledging the externality of capability gain to my understanding of it while trying to build the latter. This is a deeper approach to impact than is often followed in a phenomenological one, where analyzing impact is often completed at concluding analysis of scholarship recipients' subjective experiences of it (e.g., Campbell, 2017; cf. Chankseliani, 2018).

In building this understanding, epistemologically, I thought I was well served by the central emphasis of CRA on analytic reflexivity. Social and self-analysis allowed me to build knowledge of the gain in my epistemic autonomy as formed through and contingent on complex interactions between causal structures (past and present, abroad and at home) and my individual agency. Demonstrably, my knowledge claim of this capability gain is relative because it is limited by, among other factors, my theoretical focus and disciplinary reach; a psychologist or senior academic may have inferred a different capability gain and focused—more or less—on other causal structures in explaining it (e.g., Zull, 2012).

This relativism notwithstanding, the emphasis on analytic reflexivity further substantiates the unique methodological contribution of CRA. Most of the research on scholarships impact is produced using data collection methods like surveys and interviews/focus groups (Martel, 2018). These methods tend to be used more to elicit descriptive recollections and reflections than to engage research participants' analytic reflexivity about their perceived experiences and outcomes of education abroad (see, for example, Abeuova & Muratbekova-Touron 2019; Al Yousef, 2016; Campbell & Lavallee, 2020). This orientation of using these data collection methods is understandable given currently dominant practices of sociological research (Riach, 2009). Compared to CRA, it risks leading to narrower understanding of scholarships impact. This is illustrated by comparing experiential findings in this CRA with various studies where scholarship alumni report an all-positive view of working at NGOs as a pathway to driving national development (e.g., Campbell, 2017; Campbell et al., 2021). I concede that CRA may not always be an affordable choice. Yet, whenever that is the case, I contend that its illustrative practice here warrants a reorientation of using common data collection methods to apply some degree of analytic reflexivity in prompts and questions, or through member-checking, in order to capture a fuller understanding of scholarships impact and its complex and contingent generation (e.g., Baxter, 2019).

Methodologically, pre-existing documents provided me with structure in recollecting thoughts, experiences, and the social settings in which I had developed them (Mogalakwe, 2009). Their reflection of my experiences and thoughts in context helped me mitigate, though probably not eliminate, the risk in CRA of self-confirmation bias (see Lundgren-Resenterra & Crosta, 2019). Also, their pre-existence made this structured introspection possible, fast, and overall efficient. These three qualities are contrasted with the high costs and time requirements of longitudinal tracking studies that make them uncommon in researching scholarships impact (Martel, 2018).

Furthermore, just before working on this CRA, I had been making good progress in analyzing my doctoral project data and building my researcher journal. This helped me maintain closer dialogue with data from co-members about their own experiences and perceptions of scholarships impact. My opportunistic-turned-convert membership status helped me further enhance this dialogue in that availed to me a broader frame of reference within which I thought about my case—namely, that of those of fellow Palestinian scholarship recipients. Also, this timely work on my doctoral research clarified the procedural steps, analytical techniques, and analysis quality checks I needed to complete as part of this CRA. These three elements were of great support to me in mitigating the tensions often reported in autoethnographic work as occurring between participation in the social world and completing the fieldwork of recording and analysis (Anderson, 2006b; Barron, 2013). They are also contrasted with the competing demands of participation and fieldwork in ethnographic research of scholarships impact (King et al., 2023; cf. Ibnu & Azman, 2022).

5. Implications

For researchers focusing on international scholarships impact, this illustrative proposal shows how CRA can be used to respond to one key compound issue in the field: developing detailed understanding of mechanisms of how scholarships contribute to recipients' capabilities (Campbell & Mawer, 2019; Martel, 2018), including by analyzing the key role of recipients' agency (Marginson, 2014). Where CRA is not an affordable choice, researchers may borrow from it the emphasis on research participants' analytic reflexivity and, where sufficient and suitable pre-existing documents are available, its efficient and structured approach to retrospective tracking of scholarships impact. Both aspects are valuable, whether applied in CRA or transferred into other methodologies, in availing a sizable base of reflexively-oriented empirical data suitable for researching impact mechanisms and individual agency. This research, it follows, better captures and demonstrates impact as a dynamic process contingent on and co-constituted through individual dispositions and surrounding causal structures. Because analysis of this process in CRA involves contextualized social and self-analysis, this methodology has distinct potential to generate or highlight descriptive and explanatory categories rooted in specific contexts that may be radically different from ones common in extant research (e.g., King et al., 2023). When used in large-scale research, possibly hypothetico-deductive research, these categories may lead to a base of evidence that is particularly suited for building local understanding and informing local policymaking.

Finally, this illustrative proposal may lend new CRA-inspired practices to practitioners working on international scholarship evaluation. As demonstrated earlier, capability is theorized as a relational activity and is constituted through dialectical interactions

between social and material structures and individual agency. Of constitutive essence to capability is a person's everyday reflexivity, comprising their deliberations about themselves, their social life engagements, and the contextual forces influencing those engagements (Archer, 2003, ch. 4). By inviting scholarship recipients to record such everyday reflexivity and to reflect on it (after completion), impact evaluation may be transformed from a one-time assessment to a dual process of impact generation and optimization. That is, when scholarship recipients record their everyday reflexivity and later reflect on it, they may cultivate more awareness and claim more of their agency in co-constituting capability gains; moreover, when scholarship administrators review recipients' records of everyday reflexivity and reflections thereon, they can, to the extent available resources permit, advise and support recipients' co-constitution of scholarships impact. This enhanced co-constitution of impact is already demonstrated in research on education and other topics (Cramer et al., 2023; Golob & Makarovič, 2022; Ryan, 2015; Willis, 2019). It can be replicated in praxis of scholarships impact, thereby helping address the methodological concern about evaluation as a one-time assessment (Martel, 2018) while also increasing confidence in scholarships' efficient and effective contribution to the Agenda for Sustainable Development (Boeren, 2018).

Such an impact evaluation approach is not only practically better; it is more inclusive. Instead of following prescriptions limiting (knowledge of) scholarships impact to economic returns and career advancement indicators, this approach opens up an empirically broader and epistemologically more inclusive space to define and assess scholarship impact. This is especially important for evaluating scholarships impact in contexts like Palestine's, one where I along with many of my doctoral research participants reflected, upward career mobility and increased income have little to do with effective development and may even not be possible in current circumstances.

Notes

[i]English Access Micro-scholarship Program (https://www.amideast.org/west-bank-gaza/learn-english/english-for-kids-and-teens/english-access-microscholarship-access-program)

[ii]The Durham Palestine Educational Trust scholarship (https://durhampalestine.webspace.durham.ac.uk/)

[iii]The Pedro Arrupe, S.J., Scholarship for Peace (https://finaid.georgetown.edu/financial-resources/undergrad-scholarships/)

[iv]The Northern Ireland and North East Doctoral Training Partnership (https://www.ninedtp.ac.uk/)

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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