

Towards Circular Consent in African Studies: Notes on Methodology

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Abstract

Consent forms are crucial in the approval of research projects by ethics committees within and outside Africa. However, the current formalization and standardization of consent inadvertently limits the ability of researchers and participants to expand the idea of agreement and navigate assent within and beyond the field. This intervention invites researchers to rethink the idea of consent – as an action, an approach, and a process – by exploring circular consent, which centres research participants in the research process. While broadening the idea of consent, circular consent offers an approach that expands participants' agency beyond one-off forms and pragmatically accommodates changing views in the research process. Beyond discussing its four 'legs' (i.e., reflexivity, feedbacking, incentivization, and flourishing), the paper identifies and discusses some dilemmas that make circular consent a difficult task in the current North-South research ecosystem. By raising the issue of power, funding, and timing in the research process, this paper contributes to the debate about the functionality of consent forms as prioritized in contemporary research processes. A reflection on methodological and ethical choices in the research process, this paper stems from the author's experience during two research projects in Ghana.

Keywords: informed consent, return, incentivization, reflexivity, timing

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About the author

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Introduction

Doing ethical research presupposes that voluntary and informed consent (hereafter ‘consent’) is sought by researchers from proposed participant(s) both within and beyond Africa. Given the shift in practice from research that sometimes grossly violated participants’ rights – such as studies conducted in Nazi Germany and the Tuskegee syphilis study in the United States (Singer 2003) – towards research that respects “the right to self-determination, or autonomy” (Laurie and Postan 2013, 372), consent has become an important element of the research process. This is reflected in the emergence of consent forms as a crucial element in the approval of research projects by ethics committees and institutional review boards (IRBs). As a cornerstone for research, therefore, these forms have come to “typically serve as the participants’ only written explanation of the studies in which they have enrolled and as important documentation for researchers and regulators of individuals’ consent to participate in a study” (Albala et al. 2010, 7), making them a sort of written social contract between the researcher and the participants on one hand, and the researcher and regulators such as IRBs, ethics committees, funders, and governments, among others, on the other hand. The formalization and standardization of consent, however, inadvertently limits the ability of researchers, participants, and regulators to expand the idea of agreement and navigate assent within and beyond the field.

Based on two research projects in Ghana, this article reflects on the methodological and ethical choices confronting researchers before, during, and after fieldwork. In both projects, I locate myself as an African, a Nigerian, and a male researcher with close connections to Ghana. I first visited Ghana for a conference in Kumasi in 2012, and since then I have completed one PhD and six other research projects on Ghana. In the process, I have developed a network of relationships in the country. Thus, largely based on reflections on the two projects,

this contribution invites researchers to rethink the idea of consent more holistically – as an action, approach, and process – by exploring circular consent, which centres research participants in the research process. Specifically, the paper engages with the question: What are the possibilities and limitations of ‘circular consent’ in expanding participants’ agency within research projects? While broadening the idea of consent, I offer circular consent as an approach that could expand participants’ agency beyond the one-off forms or verbal assent currently required in the ethical systems in most universities and institutions. By doing this, this paper offers an approach that attempts to accommodate the naturally changing views in the research process. Humans are not unchangeable. Research participants can change their views over time. This change could be because of miscommunication between them and the researcher, second thoughts, a need to clarify, or exposure to new or forgotten knowledge.

Structurally, the rest of the paper is divided into four parts. Section 2 discusses the problems with standardized consent in current research practice. By critiquing the idea of consent in its momentary and standardized forms in this section I lay the foundations for discussing circular consent. The section illustrates circularity by considering the connectivity of two separate research projects I conducted in Ghana. Using these examples, I discuss the circularity of the research process both for the researcher and other researchers within African studies. Section 3 discusses the elements of circular consent. These elements, or ‘legs’, are listed as reflexivity, feedbacking, incentivization, and flourishing. Section 4 examines the dilemmas of circular consent within the current research ecosystem. The dilemmas are categorized into three, relating to the issues of power, funding, and timing in the research process. In lieu of a conclusion, Section 5, while re-echoing the fact that standardized consent is merely a proposal to act,

invites further investigation and exemplification of circular consent.

The problem with standardized consent

In addition to providing potential participants with information about the research project, the consent form is a document intended to register whether participants would like to be part of the project or not. Thus, it empowers participants or at least attempts to balance the participant-researcher power asymmetry, where the researcher has historically been placed in a position of advantage over the participants. Indeed, a major advantage put forward in support of using these forms is that participants are given “the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset”, while researchers, too, are protected by “a signed record of consent if any concerns are subsequently raised by participants or others” (Bryman 2012, 140). But the use of consent forms has not been without its own challenges. For example, consent forms have broadly attracted criticisms that have dwelt on their level of clarity to participants (Mann 1994), their tendency to create hesitation in participation (Balkin et al. 2023; Thomson 2013; Bryman 2012), the fact that they are sometimes culturally or contextually inappropriate (Wynn and Israel 2018; Wynn 2011), and the insufficient information they provide to participants (Wiles et al. 2007). Such situations have given support to the use of verbal consent, which is also accommodated by some ethics committees and IRBs. However, this has not resolved the issue. The current formalization and standardization of consent, both written and verbal, inadvertently limits the ability of researchers and participants to expand the idea of what is agreed to and navigate assent within and beyond the field. Consent forms are both one-off and momentary, a point that can be illustrated with the emergence of the San’s ethics code for researchers.

On March 3, 2017, the San people of Southern Africa issued a code for researchers. That the code was developed was a wake-up call to researchers that it might not be sufficient for them to get ethical approval from their universities or other ethics committees and hold up signed consent forms and/or recorded verbal consent from research participants. Indeed, Hennie Swart, who was Director of the South African San Institute in Kimberley which helped develop the San’s code, reportedly noted that “It’s not a question of not doing the research. It’s a question of doing it right” (Callaway 2017, 475). Given that at the time the code was being developed, consent forms and consent had become a norm in research, its emergence was a clear invitation to researchers to rethink their understanding of research and consent. Wynn and Israel (2018) demonstrated in their work that one-off paper signing as a form of consent could evoke colonial or authoritarian memories. But the research that appeared to have prompted the San people to develop the code reportedly “filmed the San men giving verbal consent with the help of a translator” (Callaway 2017, 475). This demonstrated that paper and verbal consent may not be helpful in guaranteeing that participants understand what they have signed up to. Given this scenario, two important, interrelated, and urgent questions are raised for researchers globally. First, how can consent reflect the complexities and dynamism in the research process? Second, can participants withdraw their consent after signing it off in a piece of paper or verbally? The answers to either of these two questions quickly begins to reveal the limitations of the current approach to consent. In any case, both questions underscore the need to revisit the very idea of consent.

In research, consent can be described as an action, an approach, and a process. As an action, it is the act of granting permission to researchers by participants or their guardians to involve them in research. This performative

acceptance of participation is often demonstrated by signing or thumb printing a dated consent form (Manti and Licari 2018). As mentioned earlier, such consent can also be verbal. In this sense, consent sought in forms or verbally is a promise that expresses intention: i.e., the intention of a researcher to collect data ethically on one hand and the intention of participants to give the data on certain conditions that are stated (either in the forms or verbally). In essence, the standardized consent form is a 'kind of' promissory note. A promissory note does not lose its purpose after it has been issued, signed, or verbally expressed and accepted. It continues to be valid until the conditions (or intention) it stated have been actualized. As an approach, however, consent is built into contemporary research practices. In this, it is a method that, according to its proponents, not only makes research ethical but that also underlines the legality of clinical studies (Laurie and Postan 2013; Kadam 2017). Although many have questioned the extent to which the imposition of consent forms guarantees ethical research (see Balkin et al. 2023; Wynn and Israel 2018; Bell 2014), that assumption fits into a functionality perception that emphasizes the protection of both the participants and the researcher. As a process, however, consent goes beyond an action and method, entailing a network of procedures. As Macklin (1999, 83) aptly puts it, "When a researcher says, 'I've obtained the consent', waving a piece of paper in the air, it is apparent that a confusion exists. The confusion is between the process of informed consent, on the one hand, and the document the individual signs, on the other."

In the processual sense, therefore, consent is a network of actions that goes beyond the one-off signing of a paper or verbal agreement to participate in research to being a holistic procedure that covers the entire research process. An example of the processual approach is member checking, whereby participants are given the "transcripts or particles from the

narratives they contributed during interview sessions and are asked to verify their accuracy" (Carlson 2010, 1105). It is in this realm that I locate circular consent. Processual consent is not new. For instance, Klykken (2022, 801) illustrates how students that granted (standardized) informed consent to be part of her study "explicitly (re)negotiated consent and dissent" – or "implicitly (re)negotiated dissent" (Klykken 2022, 803), as the case may be. Generally, her work strongly supports the argument that (qualitative) researchers need to acknowledge that standardized consent forecloses the agency of both researchers and participants to navigate the dynamism and complexities of the field. Indeed, after standardized consent had been granted, she asked the students "if it was ok to place the camera with them and remind[ed] them that they could turn it off at any point" (Klykken 2022, 801). Offering the students the opportunity to change, renegotiate, and reconfirm their initial consent is what she describes as "continuous consent." A focus on such continuous consent and processual negotiations is not new (for instance, see Renold et al. 2008; Plankey-Videla 2012; Wong et al. 2021). Circular consent, similarly, goes beyond the field, and it offers another alternative to processual consent. What then is circular consent?

In addition to acknowledging the complexities and negotiations of informed consent when researchers are in the field, circular consent advances a post-field engagement with the participants in a manner that shares the research findings with those who contributed to its production. With reference to African studies, circular consent not only offers one a means of addressing the challenges confronted by standardized consent, but it also gives more agency to participants in the research process even where funding and/or the researcher comes from the Global North. Simply put, circular consent is a practice that views the process of informed consent beyond the field phase. It is a type of consent that does

not merely promise to do something but one that takes along the participants in the process of doing. In this sense, the researcher adopts a practice that enables him/her to return to the field after data has been collected and analysed. Returning to the field is elemental to circular consent and it is done after data have been collected and some level of shareable analysis has been conducted. It can be done physically or virtually, or through other means that may be accessible by participants, such as social media posts or messaging. The goal is to demonstrate to the participants that the promises made in the standardized consent are being kept, for instance anonymity, confidentiality, etc. Returning could be in terms of going back to respondents prior to publishing the research findings, wherein participants could be invited to a seminar, workshop, or roundtable to share their views. However, this goes beyond member checking, which merely focuses on “verification of transcripts or early interpretations” (Carlson 2010, 1105). Rather, returning, in circular consent, looks more like O’Reilly’s (2012) ‘ethnographic returning’, in the sense that it connects one piece of research to another and views qualitative research as a longitudinal process involving the researcher, participants, and other researchers. Thus, returning is not only about sharing pre-publication ideas with participants but it should also include sharing the final outcomes, like actual publication(s), with them, especially if the goal is to assure them that their data has been used in a manner agreed to in the standardized consent.

Understanding the concept of circular consent presupposes reimagining research in African studies as being circular not only for the researcher and his community but also for the research participants and their communities. Meanwhile, research is built on trust. While the academic community expects its members to conduct trustworthy research, research participants also have the same expectation. Some researchers have therefore

noted that consent forms are tools for building the trust of participants in research (Thomson 2013; although others like Wynn 2011 and Balkin et al. 2023 strongly argue that this can have an opposite effect). There is, however, another means of ensuring that such trust is built into the consent between the researcher and participants: circularity. My use of circularity in this paper borrows from the concept of circular economy, defined as “a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible. In this way, the life cycle of products is extended” (European Parliament 2023). Inherent in this definition is the idea of an economy where waste is reduced. Similarly, there can be research waste. This type of waste may not only be in terms of the waste generated from research funders’ decisions on what research to prioritize and what will be left untouched (Chalmers et al. 2014), but also in terms of the legacies left behind for future researchers (Calia et al. 2021) and participants and their communities (Callaway 2017) to grapple with after a research project has been completed. When a researcher creates distrust in a community or in his/her relationship with participants during a research project, this could lead the community or participants to be suspicious of future researchers. These are the legacies of research projects. In the case of consent, I therefore use circularity to mean an understanding whereby both the researchers and participants enter into relationships that are not one-off but that can morph into, and indeed influence, new relationships between the two and with anonymous others – i.e., people who are impacted by the research but may not be known or captured in the immediate term – in an ongoing manner that shapes current and future research contacts. By implication, circular consent attempts to respond to this dynamic relationship, looking beyond the one-off consent, the field, and in many ways the research project itself. I will illustrate this

circularity with personal examples. The examples are taken from two research projects conducted in Ghana.

The first project is entitled “Governance from Below? Non-State Actors and Chinese Environmental Footprints in Africa – The Case of Ghana.” It was supported by the German Ministry of Education and Research through the Merian Institute of Advanced Studies in Africa’s (MIASA) Individual Junior Fellowship based at the University of Ghana. Conducted between 2022 and 2023, this project will be referred to as ‘Project A’. Adopting a qualitative research design, Project A investigated environmental aspects of the Chinese presence in Africa using the example of Ghana and how non-state actors (i.e., individuals, groups and organizations that are not part of government or that do not receive direct funding from the Ghanaian government) have responded to the Chinese impact there. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with purposively selected non-state actors – like opinion leaders, journalists, representatives of civil societies, and experts in environmental issues – in Accra and Kumasi, two of Ghana’s leading commercial centres. Participants were recruited through stakeholder mapping, as in Oshodi (2023). This entailed typing keywords – like ‘environment’, ‘Chinese’, ‘China’, and ‘Ghana’, among others – into the search function of selected online news media to identify individuals, groups, and organizations that have been involved with issues relating to Chinese environmental footprints in Ghana. This involvement could be in terms of reporting, protesting, supporting, or engaging with the subject matter in other ways. The two media where the searches were implemented were Ghanaweb, a major news portal, and Graphic Online, the online platform of Ghana’s leading newspaper, Graphic, with an estimated 1.5 million readers per day (Zurek 2018).

The second project, ‘Project B’, is entitled “News media and Nigerians in Ghana: Exploring the Prospects and Challenges of

Peace Journalism”. It aimed to understand the extent to which the media (essentially used to mean newspapers) contributed to cordial or tenuous relationships between Nigerians in Ghana and their Ghanaian hosts. It was supported by the New York-based Social Sciences Research Council’s (SSRC) African Peacebuilding Network Individual Research Fellowship, awarded between 2023 and 2024. Like Project A, Project B adopted a qualitative design that involved IDIs with purposively selected participants. This was complemented with archival research. The IDIs were conducted with Nigerian migrants in Ghana, former Ghanaian migrants living in Nigeria, Ghanaians who had lived with Nigerians in Ghana, journalists whose media houses had reported on Nigerians in Ghana, and experts from universities in Accra and Kumasi.

The fellowships for both projects officially lasted for six months, and ethical clearance was sought from the Ethics Committee for Humanities (ECH) at the University of Ghana. Each application cost US\$500, plus a GhC400 fee per project for an expedited ethics review. For both projects, I was required to adapt and use a consent form that is available on the ECH’s website (Ethics Committee for Humanities n.d.). The form has three main sections. Section A provides the “background information” to the research, and it includes the title of the study, the investigator’s name and address, and the certified ECH protocol number. Section B is the “consent to participate in research”, and it includes subsections on general information about the research, benefits/risks of the study, confidentiality, compensation, withdrawal from study, and contact details for additional information. Section C is the “participant agreement” where participants and the researcher sign. This section also has a space for witness, in cases where the participant cannot read or understand the form. Although Project A and B focused on different issues (i.e., Africa-China relations and intra-African migration, respectively), they

exemplify the circularity I refer to in circular consent. Circular consent is divided into four interconnected phases: first, a commitment to circularity and a 'beneficiality statement' (i.e., a stated commitment in the ethics application and consent form to ensure that research participants benefit from the knowledge generated from the research project); second, fieldwork negotiation of informed consent; third, the return; and fourth, the legacy for future research and researchers. However, circularity occurs at two levels: the first is researcher-centred, and the second is the research legacy.

In terms of researcher-centred circularity, the two projects are connected not only in terms of their focus on Ghana but also because of the category of participants that were interviewed. For example, not only were some of the participants in Project A invited to participate in Project B, but there was also a need to reach out to some of the participants in the former to support dissemination activities for the latter (i.e., inter-project snowballing). It is likely that I experienced a positive response from the participants in Project A because they felt included and respected throughout the research process, and they were consequently more inclined to participate again when I approached them for Project B. My experience of this circularity would have been likely to have been deeper if I had been working on Africa-China relations in Project B. Thus, for researchers working on longitudinal studies or continuously in a small community – e.g., a close-knit Yoruba migrant community in New Town, young farmers in Dawhenya, or fishing communities in Cape Coast – circularity could be more the norm than an exception. In my case, circular consent meant that I returned to the participants after our initial meeting(s) on the field to share insights from my research findings with them – and to invite their engagement. This commitment was developed prior to going to the field but it was operationalized by the inclusion of a 'beneficiality statement' in my standardized consent forms. The statement

read: "The knowledge that will emerge from this study will be shared with you. Specifically, I will share a summarized version of the research findings with you as well as inform you about online dissemination activities (e.g. webinars, blogs, and media reports)." The ECH's adaptable consent form allowed for the inclusion of this statement. Without such freedom, perhaps I would not have been able to clearly state this commitment.

The 'beneficiality statement' used for Projects A and B promoted circularity. It was included for three main reasons. First, I wanted to carry participants along the entire project life cycle – rather than limiting their connectedness to the research to the field. Therefore, prior to data collection I included the statement in my ethical applications to the ECH. Second, I wanted them to engage with the findings of my research and possibly invite their responses – responses that I believed could shed a deeper light on their thinking at the time the interview was conducted and explore the extent of changes in their views. As consent forms tend to promise that data will not be used unethically, post-field returning to participants for a 'second consent' is a way for me to demonstrate to them how I have used their data – and to show them its final forms. For example, I shared the link to a podcast and a hybrid presentation on my research findings with participants. Unlike member-checking, which is only open to participants, this approach also accommodates non-participants. For example, I invited journalists whom I had interviewed in Project B to a pre-publication data sharing session with other journalists in what I called the Ghana-Nigeria Media Collaborative Roundtable (G-NMCR). The G-NMCR included eight journalists, four each from Ghana and Nigeria. This approach enriched my understanding and allowed the journalists to engage with views different from their own in a respectful and confidential manner (i.e., the discussions were not recorded). By doing this, I wanted to avoid conducting

helicopter research, where a researcher comes into the field, presents a consent form, collects the data, and disappears without sharing with the participants how he/she did indeed keep to the agreement in the consent form. Generally, helicopter research is viewed as a relationship between researchers in the Global North and participants in the Global South, where the former use the latter for data collection (Haelewaters et al. 2021; McIntosh et al. 2023). But the idea of helicopter research should not be limited to co-researchers; it can also happen when participants are discarded by researchers after data collection. Third, I was consciously sowing a seed for future research engagement and trust. Indeed, having conducted my PhD and other work on Ghana prior to 2022, coming back to Ghana from Nigeria, where I reside and work, after Project A to do Project B further demonstrates the point that one research project can lead to another. I wanted to build relationships that went beyond a single research project. This personal view about my research in Ghana, as a network of continuous investigation across themes and subjects, motivated me to build the ‘beneficiality statement’ into my consent forms.

On research legacy, I must clarify that all research leaves some kind of legacy for other researchers, good or bad (Calia et al. 2021; Chalmers et al. 2014; Callaway 2017). My goal was to implement the ‘beneficiality statement’ in a manner that demonstrated a deliberate effort to carry the participants along through the research process – i.e., from data collection and analysis to publication and beyond. I wanted to go beyond the momentary field contact and contract. By doing this, I assumed that my approach could create a sort of baseline effect that could motivate a similar expectation among participants from other researchers. Although I must mention that my research participants in Projects A and B were generally educated and connected individuals, I believed that ‘beneficiality statement’ was equally important to them too. Benefits such

as financial incentives have been suggested “as a necessary means of increasing recruitment” (Zutlevics 2016, 137) and can be used to encourage participants to grant consent and participate in research (as we found in Langer et al. 2017). But financial incentives for this group of participants, I believe, could have a negative impact on their participation and on the quality of information. For example, giving financial incentives to renowned journalists or to the university professor I interviewed might have appeared to them as underrating their original interest in contributing to knowledge, a value stated in the consent form. Unlike financial incentives, therefore, circular consent that involves participants in the dissemination of research findings could create an intrinsic motivation to participate in further research and demand the same circularity or post-field return from other researchers.

The legs of circular consent

It is generally assumed that research sheds light on the unknown. If the outcome of research is typically unknown at the time when consent is sought from participants (Wiles et al. 2007), it then becomes problematic for the researchers and/or participants to know the outcome or ultimate use of the data collected. If the researcher does not know the outcome of the research while in the field, then it is paradoxical to assume that the participant signing the consent form or giving verbal consent in the field already knows that the researcher will indeed adhere to what he/she has promised, either in the document or verbally. In this circumstance, how can researchers demonstrate to the participants that they have kept to their agreement or promises in the co-signed consent form? Appreciating this unknown, rather than deflating or foreclosing it, introduces some dynamism into the idea of consent. The agreement consented to by the researcher and the participants is based on trust but this must be demonstrated. This demonstration cannot

be provided at the point of acquiring consent in the field – and indeed could take a longer time to be attained. Consent in the field is thus at best an expression of a desire that everything will be done as promised – perhaps the same aspiration that the researchers had when they were recording verbal consent from the San people. If I had not fulfilled the promise of sharing the findings of Project A with a participant, how could the participant trust me to do the same in Project B? Circular consent – which offers post-field researcher-participant contact – is therefore an opportunity to demonstrate in practice the promises (such as anonymity, doing no harm, etc.) made in the consent forms. In this way, the research participants, and not the researcher, ethics committees, or IRB, becomes the judge of whether the condition for granting the first consent has been met. This is a key argument for circular consent.

There are, however, four elements or legs upon which circular consent stands. First, circular consent calls for reflective practice and reflexivity. Being reflective is being drawn to the untold, that which is considered negligible, or to forgotten issues (Bolton 2010). Yet it also means aiming to understand “the forms of intelligibility by which the world is made meaningful; in the heuristic context of the research work, reflecting means to elucidate the epistemic acts developed in the midst of inquiry process” (Mortari 2015, 1). Reflexivity also requires the researcher to locate him or herself in the research. With reference to circular consent, this means that researchers must continuously ask themselves questions about how they limit or empower their participants. Researchers must be wary about how their own tacit assumptions and positionality influence the research encounter and knowledge production. In my case, my answer was to invite participants and share my findings with them. I believed that this could help me check my own over- or under-interpretation of their data. It was interesting for me to understand the

extent to which my interpretation made sense to those whose perspectives I was analysing. In this sense, I do not believe that academic conferences, publications, or citations are the only means to put one’s work out. As Ben-Ari and Enosh (2011, 152) aptly noted, “reflective processes may refer to deliberate awareness involving both a contemplative stance (state of mind) and intentional activity aimed at recognizing differentness and generating knowledge (active engagement).” In the case of circularity, the differentness must accommodate the participants’ views vis-à-vis the researcher and the research process. In this way, the researcher must continuously think about the meanings of consent and how it can be made more meaningful to participants. In devising the approach to adopt for circularity, the researcher must be reflexive. To do this, one-off consent becomes untenable. This leads to the second leg of circular consent: feedbacking.

Feedbacking means that a researcher includes in the consent process a promise to return to the participants after consent and data have been collected. As noted earlier, returning is central to circular consent. In my case, this was built into the ‘beneficiality statement’. Where this was not included in the consent form, the researcher could still reach out to participants to explain the findings. In my case, return is not necessarily to a physical location in Ghana where the researcher and participants first met. It can be at a different venue or can be virtual. For instance, I invited participants to join my online presentation of the findings for Project A. Researchers may also consider recording their presentation, uploading it to YouTube, and sharing a private link with participants. I also shared a link to a podcast on some of my research findings with them. Indeed, one participant, who could not join my online presentation, asked for the slides I used during the presentation. This could be viewed as an invitation by that participant for me to *return* on his terms. Sending the slides to the participant could

become an empowering legacy. It could empower the participant to demand evidence (on how data collected from him was used) from future researchers. A chain of community legacy among participants will have been built if this participant demands the same evidence from other researchers that he encounters. I must stress, however, that I was able to invite the participants to the online presentation of the findings because they had access to the internet and understood the language of dissemination. Thus, feedbacking could also mean physically going back to communities if that is the most pragmatic approach to circular consent. For example, a researcher working with participants in a rural setting may need to return to that same community physically to demonstrate the fulfilment of the verbal or written consent received in the field. Unlike in my case, where participants gave their contact details and I was able to send them webinar invitations and links to blogs, it could be more appropriate for the researcher to return in person to the field to demonstrate adherence to the contents of the consent form co-signed in the field. The idea of being reflective therefore involves a consideration of how best to return to the participants given their circumstances, and building that into the consent process.

A third leg of circular consent is incentivization. This is important because circular consent is not limited to the researcher and the participants alone. It also aims to build a legacy for current and future researchers to inherit and improve upon. The San's case illustrates the point that one researcher or a group of researchers may leave behind them legacies that could impact future researchers coming to the research site. The long-term nature of circular consent presupposes that researchers commit to leaving behind benefits that outlive the research project. As pointed out earlier, the incentive could be the sharing of research findings with participants – or the inclusion in the consent form of a statement that participants can request access to research

outcomes such as slides. An incentive could also be that the researcher invites participants to other spaces following the field contact. For instance, I invited a few participants to share their knowledge with students in my master's class in the Department of Political Science at Lagos State University, where I teach a course entitled Global Governance. The course outline includes environmental and migration issues. Serving as invited lecturers on the course serves as my acknowledgement of their knowledge and its relevance for teaching postgraduate students. While such incentives could lead to future collaborations, it nonetheless illustrates going back not only for the research but also for knowledge sharing with others, like my students. In circular consent, therefore, participants' knowledge production goes beyond the field, and beyond member checking to validate data.

The fourth leg of circular consent is flourishing. Circular consent aims to ensure that there is a flourishing relationship between the researcher and the participants on one hand, and between the participants (or their communities) and future researchers on the other hand. Yet, as VanderWeele (2017, 8149) rightly noted, flourishing must not be reduced to a one-off ideal or "a momentary state but also as something that is sustained over time". To achieve this in the case of circular consent, the researcher must set out to empower participants in their decision to participate in research both during and after fieldwork. Circular consent also gives a researcher an opportunity for more nuanced coverage of the decision of participants to participate, covering both the initial researcher-participant contact and co-signing of informed consent form, and the return or confirmation/post-field contact to demonstrate that the promises in the form have been adhered to. In this case, the researcher benefits in that trust is built and the participant benefits in that they are empowered in the research process beyond merely granting (or refusing) standardized consent

in the research process. In this way, circular consent supports the researcher-participant relationship advanced in ethnographic methodology (Gerard Forsey 2010; Robards 2013; Edirisingha et al. 2017).

Dilemma of consent

Circular consent challenges the norm of standardized consent as it has been built into contemporary research governance processes and structures. From the foregoing, this could be conceived as an attempt to disrupt the powers of research ethics committees and IRBs. Yet this is not the case. In fact, there appears to be a movement, albeit disorganized, towards some sort of circular consent in many places. For instance, when the term ‘research impact’ (a term gaining traction among funders and in many universities’ research policies) is invoked, what they talk about fits into circular consent. Researchers are being asked to engage people with their research more, beyond the traditional academic publications. The question then is how research impact can be holistically ascertained when the participants who provided the data are not carried along, except for their one-off agreement to participate? Rather than disrupt the existing system, I therefore argue that circular consent merely invites the researcher to state, in the standardized consent form or verbal recording or non-recording of consent, that deliberate efforts will be made to *return* to the participants to confirm that what was agreed to in the field (e.g., on how to analyse data, anonymity, etc.) has indeed been implemented post-field. The return is not only for the sake of building trust in the moment, but for extending such trust and expectations to future researchers.

By implication, circular consent is a way of empowering participants to decide on whether or not to confirm the consent that they gave during the field contact when there was limited knowledge about the capacity of the researcher and the participants to fulfil

the conditions on the consent form. Indeed, it offers participants the option of withdrawing or adjusting their initial consent when the outcome(s) of the research is presented to them. Now, this is where the dilemma begins to materialize. Standardized consent considers the researcher as the sole determinant of the research analysis and outcome(s). Conversely, circular consent reminds the researcher that the participants should have a say. It reminds the researcher that there might have been changes in the circumstances of the participants that may make such changes in perception crucial. As such, the notion of return makes circular consent a difficult approach. Three of these dilemmas are worth discussing: funding, power, and timing. Though separate, the three are quite interconnected and are discussed as such.

The first issue is funding. Every researcher understands that going to the field – and returning to the field as advanced by circular consent – requires some kind of funding. While some funders provide special funding for post-research dissemination and engagement, others do not. The funding requirements for returning can be different. For example, sharing the link to a podcast with participants (for Project A) is not as expensive as bringing eight journalists together in Ghana (for Project B). Returning for the G-NMCR would have been a very difficult task if I did not have the SSRC’s financial support. Thus, funding remains a central issue in circular consent, where the research is self-sponsored or on lean funding. Yet this raises other important questions. For instance, can circular consent be possible without external funding? Are Africa-based researchers able to push for a return when the available funding is being reduced or cancelled (see Caelers and Okoth 2023)? While these questions go beyond the focus of the current paper, it is sufficient to state that researchers who are conducting research without some form of financial support will most likely hesitate where the cost of

returning to the field means flights, accommodation, etc.

The second issue is centred on power in African studies. Scholars have drawn attention to the contestation of knowledge production in African studies. This often gains expression in the need to decolonize the curriculum, libraries, and discourse. While the issue of decolonizing African studies has waxed and waned over the years (e.g., Ake 1979; Mbembe 2021), the fact that substantial research funding in Africa comes from the Global North is not new – and has generated some concerns (Mendizabal 2023). Given that a significant portion of research funding in Africa comes from the Global North, the extent to which an issue falls under the research interests of the funders, their budget, and their approach to ethical issues all contribute to the form of consent that can be implemented. Thus, there is a complicated situation in that circular consent will not only require that there is an understanding of the need to carry participants along through the research process but also to return physically if that is amenable to the category of participants. To be sure, the case is not necessarily different from that of local funders, like South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF) or Nigeria's Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund). Circular consent would therefore require the buy-in of both local and external funders in cases where the researcher will have to travel from one country to another to fulfil the return. The power to return is thus not with the researcher alone.

The issue of power in circular consent, however, remains reductionist if it is limited to the conversations between African researchers and funders in Global North. Indeed, there is the need to bring research participants into this debate. Just as it is often the case that African scholars are not involved in the development of funding programmes, it has been difficult for participants too to be involved beyond their role of giving data to researchers from within and outside Africa. Circular consent

confronts this same reality, as the dominant research governance and regulatory practices do not at present offer a structure for participants to influence the research after standardized consent has been given. Meanwhile, empowering the participant during the return, when the researcher's analysis is presented, could raise unexpected issues or demands. The cliché that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, may also be true with some participants where circular consent is being implemented. In other words, participant empowerment through circular consent could have an undesired effect when there are unrealistic demands – such as for financial incentives from the researcher before progress can be agreed. As Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, in his Simon Initiative Distinguished Lecture entitled "Scientists, Power, and the Power of Scientists", notes, "It is indeed impossible to claim some power without its counterpart, namely, to accept to be held responsible" (Bourguignon 2017). But such participant empowerment has to be experienced first, before it is deemed to be responsible or not. Trusting that the participant will be responsible is like the participant trusting the researcher to stand by the agreement in the standardized consent forms. Although I did not experience any unrealistic demands from participants in Projects A or B, they could confront a researcher who adopts circular consent.

The third dilemma is time. Circular consent is time consuming. Yet time is limited for the researcher. For example, researchers cannot be on the field perpetually, and they sometimes share the time spent on fieldwork, data analysis, and writing with other commitments like teaching, community service, and family. This is separate from other expectations and responsibilities like conference presentations, manuscript submissions, and reviews, among others. Yet researchers are not the only ones to be considered when the issue of research timing is being discussed. In my case, I had to apply for ethical clearance at a particular time during

the six-month fellowships in Projects A and B. Given that I had only six months for Projects A and B and would have to return immediately after the fellowships to teaching at my university, I had to pay for expedited reviews. The ECH at the University of Ghana assisted with saving my time, particularly during Project B (relative to Project A) because I was able to apply in advance for my ethical clearance without first having to travel to Ghana for it, as was the case when I had the residential fellowship at the University of Ghana. For Project A, I first travelled to Ghana and resumed my fellowship at the University of Ghana before applying for the ethical clearance and expedited review, a situation that would have required more time and money if repeated in the non-residential SSRC fellowship for Project B. More importantly, the funders of Projects A and B had accommodated the time spent on applying for ethics – and the SSRC-APN even granted my application for an extension of my research project by almost three months to enable me to complete it. The ECH has its own timing – with its committee composed of researchers with their own responsibilities, aside from reviewing applications – and the preferred time for application is given on the ECH website. However, such extensions by the funders of Projects A and B and the expedited reviews by the ECH might not have been possible in other contexts or scenarios or with other funders or ethics committees. Yet the fact that circular consent calls for additional time to return to participants upon completion of a research project can indeed become a problem, where such a return is expected to be physical. In any case, the funders may not support such a return, and the researcher, meanwhile, is similarly pressed for time to publish his/her research findings.

Despite these dilemmas, circular consent offers a useful approach to involving participants in the research process and leaves a

positive legacy for other researchers. Indeed, the dilemmas I have identified are not insurmountable for stakeholders in the research process. For instance, one way to address the issue with both local and external funders is for researchers to begin to include returning to the field as an integral part of their deliverables when writing their research proposals. To mitigate the dilemma of using circular consent, researchers could also clearly state the nature of the return, what to expect, and what not to expect in the standardized consent form. This, however, does not eliminate the uncertainties in the field that circular consent aims to accommodate. Thus, researchers should also aim to document and publish their experiences of using circular consent. This will ensure that lessons are shared, and best approaches begin to be crystallized. Universities and research institutions should, on their part, begin to accept returning to the field to meet with participants to discuss the findings as one of the tenable research outcomes, like publications, conference presentations, and science popularization. Indeed, some universities in Europe have begun to emphasize research impacts and benefits. Circular consent should be connected to this. Funders must also devise means to be more flexible in their timing. In my case, the two funders both offered six-month fellowships, but they both accepted me continuing to work on the project even after the official fellowships had ended. Funders can also create some incentives to encourage researchers to include circularity in their work. A variegated timing of projects could help to address the issue. For example, while researchers who adopt standardized, field-based (written or verbal) consent are given six months to complete their projects, funders could give those that adopt circular consent eight months to one year. By creating this incentive researchers can devote the additional time to (planning and implementing) their return to the field.

In lieu of a conclusion

This article is based on reflections on my field-work experience during two research projects in Ghana. It discussed what I see as circularity and circular consent in research. Broadening the idea of consent, circular consent offers an approach that expands participants' agency beyond one-off forms and pragmatically accommodates the changing views and circumstances of participants in the research process. While I hope that this intervention contributes to the debate about the functionality of standardized consent in modern research and governance processes, I acknowledge that circular consent will need more investigation and exemplification to further determine its usefulness in African studies. Indeed, as I have noted, the very idea of circular consent hinges on the availability of funding, power, and time. Although these issues are knotty, they should not deter researchers. By returning to the field, they are offering participants the opportunity to engage with research findings and are

not practising helicopter research. Circular consent confirms the extent to which the researcher and participants have kept to their parts in the promissory note signed in the field. It also offers the researcher an opportunity to reflect on participants' views over time and on their recurring assertions, and possibly to review or emphasize particular voices. This could in fact enrich the researcher's work as it offers a time-based assessment of consent, agreement, or disagreement. Such post-field engagement could lead to new ideas, new knowledge, and new research projects that could further deepen existing knowledge. Yet circular consent can only become usable when there is an acknowledgement by the stakeholders in African studies – i.e., researchers, ethics committees/IRBs, funders, and participants – that consent on the field is only a proposal to act in a particular manner. The confirmation of whether that is the case must be left with the stakeholders, who must include the participants.

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