

Authentic Consent and the Decolonial Trouble of ‘Studying Up’

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Abstract

Studying gender in African Union and national politics, I came across a scenario in which my interview requests were ignored until someone from the donor community vouched for me. As field-based researchers, we often rely on our networks to facilitate access to interlocutors. How should we interpret situations where the relationship between the facilitator and the desired interlocutor is characterised by a degree of dependency and asymmetrical power relations? In this article, I build on autoethnographic vignettes of moments when consent was refused; when consent was given upon international donors’ intervention; when consent was given upon intervention by a “gender and development” community member; and finally, when consent was given upon intervention by national staff of a development partner. Theoretically, I grapple with how decolonial approaches to “studying up” may inform the notion of “authentic consent”, interrogating race and nationality, professional communities, and gender in knowledge production. By examining the implications of skewed North–South power relations for negotiating consent, the article examines the challenges of implementing decolonial research strategies when “studying up” in Ethiopia and Kenya. Drawing on my fieldwork experiences and the scholarship outlined above, I argue that authentic consent is both relational and steeped in complex and context-specific power relations.

Keywords: gender politics, elite research, decolonial methodologies, consent

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About the author

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Introduction

In 2019, I managed a high-level event at a hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A regional director of a United Nations (UN) agency, a partner and a sponsor, demanded to know why the head of an Eastern African inter-governmental organization (let's call him John) was not going to be on the panel as planned. I explained that after what had appeared to be a successful meeting, he gave his organization's endorsement for the event. However, John had become difficult to reach via email or phone since then, and he finally withdrew his participation with only a few days' notice. "If I could think of any way to make him come here, I would do it," I said apologetically and walked away. The UN agency director was irritated but nodded. The next morning, John was there, 9 a.m., looking tired and weary, apologising that he had cancelled. I was both pleased and conflicted. Pleased, because his presence was significant, and later I even got a bonus for an outstanding event. Conflicted, because it felt like John was perhaps unable to say "no" to his development partners. The donor had some leverage, which made me uncomfortable. At the same time, I had the impression that John had cancelled his participation to avoid scrutiny on the idleness of his organization, which numerous East African state actors had cited. To my surprise, I found myself in similar uncomfortable situations a few years later as a PhD researcher. This discomfort motivated writing this article.

I have offered this vignette to introduce the question of how complex power dynamics shape the authenticity of consent in the research process. I draw on two research projects. In the first, I sought to engage with actors within and around the African Union (the AU) – particularly bureaucrats, experts, civil society leaders, and other policymakers. In the second project, I interviewed national, regional, and UN gender experts as well as civil society leaders. In both cases, I perceived my interlocutors to be either in a position of power or horizontally positioned in relation

to myself. I understand 'authentic consent' as consent that is informed by the true aims of the research and freely given. Even though this opening vignette comes from outside of academia, it is significant as the first-time development partners leveraged their relationships to help me access policy actors, and I accepted. These moments left me consistently unsettled. If the interlocutors feel that they cannot refuse to participate in the research, it calls the ethics of the research and the validity of the data into question (Peters and Wendland 2016, 247). What renders consent inauthentic, then, is the perception that saying "no" is not a viable option because it can lead to significant social or material consequences.

My autoethnographic reflections are informed by calls to decolonize academia and research (Dunia et al. 2020; Marchais et al. 2020) and tackle the colonial legacies on knowledge production (Tucker 2018; Capan 2020; Shilliam 2021; Falola 2022, to name a few). I take a critical look at my positionality and standpoint as a European researcher seeking to understand the patterns and dynamics of African political institutions (Haraway 1988; Vanner 2015), particularly through interrogating race and nationality, professional communities, and gender in my research. Theoretically, I grapple with decolonial approaches when 'studying up' (Nader 1972; Holmes et al. 2019; Peters and Wendland 2016). Similarly to ethical debates in social science research, the decolonial turn assumes that the researcher (particularly from the Global North) is in a position of power and offers strategies for balancing power from this perspective. I nuance this tension by drawing on scholarly work on professional communities and obtaining consent. Methodologically, the article is grounded in autoethnographic reflections and analysis. Therefore, I offer concrete examples of when negotiating consent in Addis Ababa and Nairobi was unsettling. These instances provoke a discussion on relationality and power relations in pursuing authentic consent. The key argument of this paper is

primarily a provocation to deeply examine research practices. I argue that 'studying up' does not absolve us from interrogating our identity markers and embeddedness in unequal power structures. Yet, as feminist researchers, I contend that we remain responsible for finding ways to hold the powerful accountable and reveal the workings of cultures of power in political institutions – regardless of where they are located.

Decolonial approach to 'studying up'

Focusing on how gender governance is produced in African regional and national political institutions, I benefited from Laura Nader's (1972) foundational text on 'studying up' or on studying the few people within and behind structures of power that shape the lives of the many. She asked:

What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty? (Nader 1972, 5)

Political ethnographers have struggled with this call due to the centrality of ethnographic immersion and sensibility in anthropological theory and data (Schatz 2009). Participant observation in highly guarded political spaces is simply not always possible. How can researchers become 'insiders' of parliaments or government bureaucracies, and what, indeed constitutes an 'insider' position? (Schatz 2009, 6). My own experiences relate to those of Ortner (2010, 219). We both sought to participate in and observe public events where the subjects of our research interacted and publicly put forth representations of themselves, their work, and their motivations. Secondly, I also 'interviewed sideways' (Ortner 2010,

221–222), talking to people in relative proximity to the central subjects of our interests. Some of these interviewees struggled to get appointments with the decision-makers, just like myself. Interviewing sideways highlights the complex and relational character of 'up' or 'elites'. As Peters and Wendland discuss (2016, 244–45), 'up' is generally considered in relation to the researcher, which does not make the position more coherent. Rather, multiple and intersecting identity markers shape our situated social position, and most of us find ourselves, up, down, and sideways within one project.

As a researcher of gender politics in African regional governance structures, I found decolonial and feminist turns within international studies significant. Through calls to de-centre Eurocentric historical narratives, political theories, and research methodologies, and to reconsider the role of regionalisms and area studies as well as the agency of Southern actors (Tickner 2003; Chowdhry and Nair 2005; Bilgin 2008), scholars have sought to unsettle colonial patterns of power relations in knowledge production. The notion of decolonizing knowledge grew out of a Latin American philosophical movement which examined the centrality of knowledge production to the colonial project by producing hierarchies of 'civilization' (Quijano 2007; Lugones 2010; Mignolo 2021). The decolonial turn parallels both the reflexive turn in anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986) and feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Haraway 1988) in that both reject the idea that knowledge production, particularly in the social sciences, can be neutral and apolitical.

Decolonial theory's focus on the colonial and imperial ambitions of the political power centre has revealed how, for Indigenous, Aboriginal, and African peoples, research has been "a prelude to land loss, a spur to theft of treasures, a harbinger of cultural domination, and a tool of political control" (Overton 2013,

598). Today, the decolonial turn is concerned with recognizing and undoing exploitative practices, as well as colonial legacies, within knowledge production. In my research, I sought to align with the epistemological and ontological reconstruction of the field, including categories like 'global', 'local', and 'universal' (Blaney and Tickner 2017; Fonseca 2019; Gelardi 2020). I found Sabaratnam's (2011) strategies for decolonial research instructive. She invites researchers of international relations to call out discursive orientalisms; challenge Eurocentric historiographies; rearticulate subaltern subjectivities; diversify political subjecthoods; and reimagine social-psychological subjects of world politics. That said, research methods are not often at the centre of decolonial critique (Falola 2022; Kessi et al. 2020).¹ Decolonial methodologies may involve a refusal to impose theory and method on research context and rather "andar" (walk) with the interlocutors to where the research takes us (researcher and interlocutor) (Suárez-Krabbe 2015, 158–160). Suárez-Krabbe suggests we refuse to create and reproduce tools for (colonial) governing practices and, instead, create tools of resistance. Similarly, others advocate for non-extractive methodologies and co-production, whereby the interlocutors' capacity to generate scientific knowledge shapes the research process (Silva et al. 2022). Such methodologies deconstruct the authority of the researcher as the 'knower' and the interlocutors as subjects of analysis and as the 'other' that can be known from the outside.

Because governance research in the African region deals with people skilled in enacting agency and voice, its compatibility with the decolonial approach might be expected. However, in my research, numerous factors worked against my visions of decolonial methodologies. As Stepputat and Larsen (2015) have discussed, global political ethnography takes place in spaces where there are no true

'natives', and which are trans- or non-local. The actors become part of trans-local communities through networks related to processes and practices, structured by logics and norms of development cooperation and diplomacy. Development experts share parallel and intersecting experiences of class, biographical profiles, commitments, and anxieties and therefore constitute something akin to a "community" (Mosse 2011 a). In IR this relational ordering is understood as communities of practice (Adler 2008) and the focus on 'practices' has shown how institutional cultures and individual behaviour are mutually constructed (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen 2015). Such experts share cosmopolitan dispositions of elite education, transnational interpersonal networks, and access to international and institutional mobility (see Merry 2006). As a global or transnational elite, this class formation is rooted in shared "consumption, lifestyle and values" (Friedman 1997, 74; 2002). Therefore, the researcher can become part of the 'gender and development' community alongside national and international experts in ways that are inaccessible to others in their organization, locality, or social group.

In this context of relationality, I began to ponder what makes consent authentic. Scholars within African studies have critiqued the Eurocentric notion of informed consent, which assumes that interlocutors act as autonomous individuals, deciding on their participation in the research rationally and freely based on their knowledge of the project (Mkhize 2006; Msoroka and Amundsen 2017; Schoeman 2019; Appiah 2021; Miller and Boulton 2007). Appiah argues that collective decision-making and the role of elders and chiefs in African contexts are not entirely compatible with Western or international standards of consent-seeking (Appiah 2021). Yet much of this concern relates to research in contexts of poverty and rural lives, not among highly educated decision-makers. Similarly, most ethics guidelines and review

¹ That said, there some important discussions on language as central to localized knowledge systems.

boards assume the researcher to be in a position of power and provide limited guidance for studying the powerful (Peters and Wendland 2016, 245). This can affect the researcher's vulnerability to anything from undue influence to physical safety. 'Elites' is a complex and unstable category, highly subjective to researchers' own positionality. Considering someone as elite affects how we engage with them (Ntienjom Mbohau and Tomkinson 2022). Assuming that people have access to resources, power, and knowledge can lead to minimizing their context-specific vulnerabilities (Lancaster 2017). Rather, scholars tend to be more interested in how to penetrate their well-rehearsed answers and organizational scripts (Duke 2002; Mikecz 2012).

Mosse and Kruckenberg (2017) suggest that NGOs guard information about their inner workings due to a survival instinct to protect the interpretations and representations of their work. By consenting to participate in research and potentially reveal contested details about their work lives, policy actors risk their reputation, trustworthiness, and potentially their livelihood. As such, peoples' professional identities are at stake (Mosse 2011 a). While these observations about elite, professional, and expert interlocutors are valuable, they indicate that, unlike vulnerable groups, 'elites' can assert their agency, make autonomous decisions, and guard themselves against research-related harm. In practice, however, elites and experts largely depend on governments, donors, and other partners for their work and are therefore vulnerable to pressure from these actors. Drawing on these debates, the following examines how race, nationality, gender, and professional communities shape the power dynamics that inform authentic consent when studying up.

Autoethnography as a method

In basic terms, autoethnography redirects ethnographic methods towards oneself – the

researcher and the author. By systematically observing oneself and examining one's experiences in research interactions, there is an opportunity to interrogate one's positionality, privilege, and power as a researcher in action. Phillips et al. (2022) argue that 'thinking with' autoethnography is a useful strategy for reflexivity as well as fostering relational research ethics. Thinking and writing autoethnographically then, for these authors, "destabilises the voice of authoritative researcher" and allows them to "interrogate power/knowledge" (Phillips et al. 2022, 767). Together with these scholars, I turn to Bochner and Ellis (2016), who point to the analytical value of cohabiting and practising the roles of the storyteller and story analyser at the same time. Doing so facilitates 'thinking with' rather than 'thinking about' a narrative or a story (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 185–186).

This particular analysis has an objective of unpacking specific moments in my work life as a junior scholar of gender and politics in different African contexts. I reflect on instances of pursuing access and consent from people within the AU, as well as leaders of African regional and national women's organizations in Ethiopia and Kenya between 2020 and 2023. As is often the case when doing autoethnography, my analysis is informed by hindsight, retrospection, and introspection (Ellis et al. 2011). Ellis et al. (2011) point out that epiphanies and life crises are often the sources of autoethnographic analysis, and this paper is no different. Having sought to take a decolonial approach to my research, I found myself struggling to bridge my decolonial aspirations with what I perceived as neocolonial realities. While I was reckoning with what my whiteness, (Eastern) Europeaness, and Danish affiliation might mean in my political ethnographic approach, I was also aware that in many ways, my interlocutors had more in common with me than with the general population of their home countries. We came to the interview process

with different power resources and perhaps also in doubt about those of the other.

Approaching this topic from an autoethnographic angle has of course numerous shortcomings to be considered. Firstly, I discuss moments of consent-giving from my own experience and perspective rather than from those of my interlocutors. The interlocutors in question may have alternative views as to why they withheld consent on some occasions and then decided to participate later. It is also fair to assume that for many of those actors, their interaction with me did not have major meaning and they may not recall their reasoning at the time. Not least, it is likely they would not frame the consent process in any way that might offend me, and conversely, might be offended by the suggestion that their consent was an outcome of external pressures. The autoethnographic approach then serves as a catalyst for discussion and self-reflection and as a starting point for further enquiry.

Moments from the fieldwork

As Yacob-Haliso notes, researchers' relationships with interlocutors are shaped by intersecting identity markers and power relations, ranging from nationality, gender, and race to education and socio-cultural norms (2019). The following sections unpack these interlocking elements through autoethnographic narratives from my fieldwork in Addis Ababa and Kenya. The vignettes are not representative of my fieldwork but, rather, they are moments which unsettled how I saw myself as a researcher and the relationships between the interlocutors and myself. These are moments where I questioned the legitimacy of my research as an 'outsider' and the ethics of my laissez-faire approach to mobilizing my limited networks to enable my work. The four vignettes represent instances when consent was refused; when consent was given upon the intervention of international donors; when consent was given upon the intervention of a

'gender and development' community member; and finally, when consent was given upon the intervention of the national staff of a development partner.

I present the autoethnographic material in interaction with the existing scholarship on race, class, gender, and professional communities in academic research. The autoethnographic narratives offer context and background which was not always articulated in my fieldwork diaries. In a research process that was otherwise characterized by Covid-19, armed conflict in parts of Ethiopia, and the daily challenges of political ethnography, these instances stood out as challenging my own thinking around consent and power relations in research. Outside of these situations, I made inspiring connections with interlocutors but also sent countless unanswered emails and had meetings rescheduled and cancelled. In the ebbs and flows of research, the vignettes below stood out as instances where I grappled with my positionality, values, and research ethics. This article struggles to turn these unsettling experiences into a learning moment for myself and others.

"This might be your only chance to speak to them"

In the summer of 2020, amid the Covid-19 chaos, I started contacting the AU gender desk by email. I received the name and contact details of an AU insider from an Ethiopian colleague participating in the Ethiopian-Danish collaborative research project. In response to my request, I was advised to address a decision maker within the relevant Directorate. To my surprise, an online meeting was arranged for early autumn 2020. Preparing for the call, one of my senior colleagues suggested: "If I were you, I would try to get as much out of this call as possible as you may never speak to this person again". Since I intended to negotiate access for organizational ethnography, I did not take this guidance to heart. Once on the call, five people from the AU were present, even though most

were primarily listening in. I was nervous and had dressed smartly. By now, I had followed numerous AU meetings online, participated in high-level meetings on the continent, and had a sense of what might be considered dressing professionally in this context. During the call, the decision maker appeared open to my request and asked if I would be willing to also produce policy briefs for the AU. This was going far better than I expected. I was asked to draft a couple of proposals so that the gender office could justify bringing me on board as an intern and rationalize my access to this highly political organization. I was beyond delighted with the direction of the call. While my supervisors warned me about the potential limitations of a close-knit partnership, I saw it as an opportunity to contribute to the efforts of the gender office's work and forge a reciprocal relationship with my interlocutor. This may have been naïve, seeing that the contributions of academic research to the development of a more just world cannot always be instantaneous. However, numerous decolonial researchers have highlighted the importance of building a research agenda with and for the communities we learn from (Tuck and Yang 2014; Suárez-Krabbe 2015). These hopes of reciprocity came to an end about six months and five follow-up emails later when I realized that the decision maker would indeed never talk to me again – as predicted by my colleague. Once in Addis Ababa, after numerous exchanges with an AU insider, I was gently informed that my not being a citizen of an AU member state is indeed a complication that cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the AU sometimes hires non-African interns as part of an agreement with a donor, but generally follows a policy of hiring African and diaspora experts. This was not brought up at the first online meeting and, in fact, only came up after more than six months had passed, with numerous follow-ups from me. Furthermore, not becoming an intern at the AU did not foreclose any alternatives for interviews with the AU staff.

Yet this signalled the end of my follow-ups for institutional access and the beginning of a more individualized approach.

Tuck and Yang discuss 'refusal' to participate in research from a decolonial perspective, laying out four axioms to consider (2014). The first of these is that the subaltern can speak but is invited to talk only of its pain (Tuck and Yang 2014, 226–232). They argue that much of the centring of Indigenous voices in social sciences documents harm and suffering. This hardly applies to African political institutions, whereby the emphasis is rather on corruption, misconduct, and mismanagement (Peters and Wendland 2016, 247). Locally embedded researchers are more likely to engage in policy-oriented research but working conceptually and critically is practically a requirement for Western-based researchers. If theories of bad governance and state fragility are what decision makers expect from foreign social science researchers, their suspicion towards us is unsurprising. Similarly, actors in the development cooperation sphere can perceive researchers, particularly ethnographers, as posing threats to their image as professionals and experts, which can directly impact funding flows (Mosse 2011a; 2011b). Even though criticizing the AU was not an explicit objective of mine, existing research on the organization suggests that its shortcomings and particularities are of central interest to scholars (for instance Zähringer and Brosig 2020; Tieku 2021).

Furthermore, I cannot ignore my Europeaness, whiteness, and 'otherness' in relation to the AU. Long before starting my PhD, I knew that my whiteness both benefited me and restricted me when working on the continent. Yet I still aspired to build relationships that would be 'colour-blind'. hooks (2014, 167) discussed how her white students struggled to recognize how and why their peers of colour could ethnographically and critically think about whiteness. She argued that historical experiences of controlling the "black gaze"

led her white students to consider white as the “universal subjectivity”: “They think they are seen by black folks only as they want to appear” (hooks 2014, 169–169). Wanting to determine how others see us is not malicious; however, believing we can do so can obscure very real power asymmetries between ourselves and the people we interact with. Nagar (2014, 57–58) eloquently described how, as a US-based Indian researcher, she was aware of how she dressed, behaved, and what information she revealed about herself to diverse interlocutors in Dar es Salaam. Regardless of this, she could not control their narratives about her.

When it comes to the African Union, I could not know for certain how my Europeaness would shape the course of my research. For instance, Vlavonou noted how the skin connection, being a young African man, allowed him to build rapport with government officials and create an informal, comfortable environment during interviews (Vlavonou 2021, 12). Yet he also noted that white researchers can be even more successful in accessing African policy actors than black, African, or local researchers (Vlavonou 2023, 15). In my case, my non-Africanness was quoted as the basis for refusing institutional access to the AU and consent to research. I proceeded by contacting AU experts individually for their specific perspectives, which led to a limited number of very informative interviews. Most of these I experienced as open and collegial, but one stood out as different. This instance will be discussed next.

“We fund a project on this, they should talk to you about it”

I had been in Addis Ababa several times and for extended periods, but I had never been ‘in’ with the expatriate crowd. Because my introduction to Addis Ababa came from a local small business I had been volunteering for, I did not realize the number of foreign diplomats and development workers who lived in the city. As a host of the headquarters of the AU,

of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and of nearly 100 diplomatic missions, Addis Ababa is sometimes referred to as the capital of Africa. In 2021, early on in my research, I found myself in the whirlwind of expat circles in Addis. One connection led to another, and it became clear that the encounters outside of work hours mattered as much, or even more, than scheduled meetings.

One night I found myself at a birthday party of a North African diplomat. I felt quite out of my depth. They had rented out a well-known lounge with views of the city and diplomats, experts, and consultants from all over the world were converging there. It seemed like suddenly, behind the scenes, politics did not matter, and global and regional power struggles were all a farce. As an outsider, I was regularly introduced to people who asked me what had brought me to Addis Ababa. “I am here to research what the African Union does on gender equality issues, but let’s see what I end up with – they are very difficult people to get a hold of”, I would say. This produced diverse reactions, including both interest and dismissal of the AU as an organization altogether. One small state diplomat, however, nodded knowingly and said:

Oh, we are funding a project on violence against women in [a region]. I am sure they will talk to you about this. Did you speak to [a person]? Okay, well I can introduce you over an email and see what they say.

We exchanged email addresses and carried on with the evening, not discussing it further. A few days later, I followed up and was indeed e-introduced to an AU insider. I had reached out to this AU insider a few months before, and they had explicitly told me that their office does not work with anything that might be relevant to my project (global norms on violence against women, that is). I found their answer difficult to dispute precisely because

I knew it to be untrue. I knew the theme fit, but I was unsure of the actual work their office was doing. This is why I was also desperate to talk to them. After my introduction by the small state diplomat, an online meeting was agreed. The first call turned out to be a 'scoping meeting' for me to offer a better overview of my project so that the AU insider could prepare for the interview. During the interview, I was challenged on numerous occasions with the question "How is this relevant to your research?" I sensed that the AU insider was suspicious of me and concerned about how much they could reveal about the AU's inner workings. However, they accepted my explanations and provided insider information about their office. Regardless of the reservations I sensed, they were forthcoming enough for this to become one of the interviews I have often cited.

I have reflected on the circumstances of this interview frequently. I have wondered whether the interlocutor felt that refusing to participate in the research was not an option, or that it was too costly due to the relationship with the donor. On the other hand, I struggle to believe that my very loose connection to the donor, and an introductory email, could assert that level of pressure on this seasoned AU insider. Drawing on existing scholarship, we know that people are somewhat incentivized to engage with students and researchers from donor countries in contexts where international organizations "distribute resources". According to Vlavonou, both international interventions and colonial legacies shape the preferential treatment of white researchers in African contexts (Vlavonou 2023, 16). In this instance, such power relations were particularly visible.

That said, other aspects of researcher-interlocutor relationality deserve attention too, namely my access to the donor. Black and African scholars have argued that in accessing international NGOs and UN spaces, Africans need to prove their expertise and

professionalism, while for white expatriates this is assumed (Benton 2016; Vlavonou 2021). Indeed, unlike Vlavonou (2021), I rarely had trouble accessing such organizations. However, beyond skin connections that can facilitate research, there is also the expat privilege:

Expats thus constitute a class, in the sense that they enjoy a specific positioning with regard to production, resources, professional hierarchies, and power. In this case, class does not derive from ex-ante socio-economic positioning, as expats are not necessarily wealthy by international standards, and in many cases less wealthy than local elites. [...] However, it has an historical association with race, as the expat status has a colonial genealogy, and the privileges bestowed by belonging to that class are historically associated with being white (Marchais et al. 2020, 379).

In addition to accessing material infrastructures associated with elites, expat status has social ramifications. Eyben (2011) reveals that attending and organizing social events such as receptions, parties, picnics, or even day trips organically produces "the strategic inclusions, exclusions and reciprocities, the rituals of entry and exit into expatriate communities, and the circulation of 'prior reputation' between them" (Mosse 2011b, 15, commenting on Eyben in the same volume). I found the intertwinement of expat class and professional communities intriguing. Development experts, for Mosse, constitute a professional community, visible in the capitals of Global South countries (Mosse 2011a, 56). Like the expat class, they are connected by shared knowledge, lifestyle, and access to transnational infrastructure and goods. They also navigate their diverse identity categories, such as gender, race, nationality, or

age. Furthermore, working abroad, and in the development policy field, comes with diverse personal experiences of pressure, strained family relationships, and physical as well as psychological security concerns which expat development experts share.

Finding myself in diplomatic circles and the gender and development community was a novel social situation for me. Back in (post-Soviet) Estonia, my forefathers and mothers had limited social and economic capital. I never knew any intellectuals or anyone with transnational networks when growing up. Suddenly, as a researcher in Addis Ababa, I was an 'adopted' member of the expat cosmopolitan 'class' (Friedman 2002). In Addis Ababa, I became part of a WhatsApp group made up of Addis Ababa-based graduates from the university I attended, and on another occasion, some new expat friends held a dinner where they invited everyone they knew working with the AU. I can thus speculate that in addition to my professional pursuits in Addis Ababa, it was my cosmopolitan credentials, such as bonding over university experiences in the United Kingdom, exchanging stories of traveling on the continent, a shared interest in yoga and hiking, or passionately discussing international politics, which granted me access to the expat circles and development community. Accounting for these unstable and fluctuating sources of social capital in one's research is certainly a challenge, as they are situated and context-specific. While this brief encounter with a programme donor facilitated an interview, the dinner with other AU partners did not. This is to say that while my access to both the 'expat class' and the professional community of international development enabled my work, it fell short of offering causal explanations.

"Thanks for reaching out again"

I met Claudia (name changed) at the birthday party of a European diplomat. She was working on women's rights within a UN agency and part of her portfolio was to collaborate with

the AU. We sat in one of my favourite cafés in an area known as Olympia. Owned by an Ethiopian/foreign couple, they made coffee the way *farenji's* ('foreigners') like it, with espresso from local beans and perfectly frothed fresh milk. There were a handful of places like this in town at the time. Claudia and I hit it off in the café and decided to keep the conversation informal. She confessed that as a European, she found earning the trust and respect of her colleagues inside the AU challenging. At first, she was regularly left out of the loop as the 'outsider' and people would not pick up their phones. At some point, she was told off for calling her contacts too often: "Who do you think you are?" they asked. Over time, however, relationships developed and now she felt that there was not only mutual respect but perhaps even friendship between her and some of her 'insider' colleagues.

I also shared my plight with her openly. I had been in Addis Ababa for five months and my access to the AU was more than limited. However, I had developed a new focus area – the drafting of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in the early 2000s. The drafting of the Protocol had taken place within the auspices of the AU, and through research as well as 'snowballing' (see Cohen and Arieli 2011), I had identified numerous individuals who were personally involved in the process. Many of them were not situated in Addis Ababa but were active in the region. There was a particular director of a regional women's rights organization that I was trying to recruit for an interview. I had emailed the director and followed up three times since. Claudia was surprised to hear that. She had been very impressed by the Director in question and considered her as a real champion of women's rights in the regional space. Claudia offered to introduce me. She made it clear that she could not promise anything as there might be other reasons why the director had not replied to me. Claudia sent her a brief email and

I received a response from the director within hours:

Dear Karmen Tornius, sincere apologies. It has been a crazy period for us. But thanks for reaching out again. We can speak sometime next week if that works for you. Let me know. Warm wishes, (name removed).

We scheduled an interview for three days later. During yet another informative interview, I sensed that some of my questions she had answered before, and that she had a 'public relations' version ready for me. Yet, building on this, we arrived at a more substantial conversation during this interview.

This moment in fieldwork was puzzling to me for different reasons than the above. While the UN and regional CSOs are certainly entangled in dependency relations, Claudia's own experiences of being excluded indicated to me that she did not have much leverage over her partners. In this context, I was surprised by how quickly her vouching for me turned the tide with this director. Here, I felt it was my temporary adoption into the gender and development community that mattered. Eyben (2011, 144–145) described how development professionals and national elites, national members of government, consultants, and NGO leaders come together to form the international development community, characterized by access to the same knowledge, upper class infrastructure, and professional spaces. Similarly, gender and development professional communities are made up of national and international experts, with different levels of situated 'insiderness'. To Eyben, these professional networks also function as knowledge resources, influencing "the choice of consultants and analysts to inform me about the political and social situation" to ensure a shared position on issues in the country (Eyben 2011, 140). I find the logic of the

gender and development community useful in considering my encounters with Claudia and the director.

The social world of development experts is underwritten by pressure to foster the right relationships which they can leverage for career opportunities, access to, and presence at other bureaucracies, as well as NGOs, and to facilitate their own tasks. In Mosse's words:

Theirs is the messy, practical, emotion-laden work of dealing with contingency, compromise, improvisation, rule-bending, adjustment, producing viable data, making things work, and meeting delivery targets and spending budgets. In doing so, they have to negotiate national identity, race, age or gender. (Mosse 2011a, 16)

The conversation with Claudia in a coffee shop in Addis Ababa illustrates this point well. As a women's rights expert at the UN, she had been negotiating her 'outsider' position in relation to the AU. The shared experiences of work trips (or 'missions') engendered bonds between Claudia and her colleagues and facilitated her carrying out her professional duties. Eyben's chapter also reinforces that actors depend on their networks to identify whose knowledge and analysis matters (Eyben 2011). That people would take the time to introduce me personally signalled to the interviewees that I was part of the same community, and that, to an extent, I had already been initiated and accepted by other members of the development community. I became part of the gender and development community, even if by proxy.

Looking at consent from the perspective of gender and development community challenges both the idea that consent is an individual matter, and that relationally negotiated consent is explicitly an African or non-Western phenomenon. Appiah (2021) and Plankey-Videla (2012) have argued that seeing

consent as an individual matter stems from Western ontology and that negotiating consent is indeed a relational process. Focusing on African research contexts, others have argued that consent negotiations involve not only individual autonomy but also collective autonomy (Visagie et al. 2019). While Visagie et al. focus on rural communities, as much of the Afro-communitarian critique of consent does, I suggest thinking of these particular ethics in relation to the gender and development community. While my interlocutors were not bound by the same institutional rules, norms, and constraints, they were, nearly without exception, part of the same community of practice. Being vouched for by members of the community could thus be interpreted as part of a relational consent process whereby consenting to research is not considered an individual matter but rather one embedded in the norms and social realities of a professional community. Realizing authentic consent might then involve consulting with other community members and considering how the interview or research process might affect their priorities and well-being. That said, unequal power relations are also present in professional communities and, thus, sensitivity to the power dynamics that structure the consent process remains important for considering the validity of the fieldwork material.

***"We had a good meeting with
Karmen on Thursday"***

I embarked on a short research project in Kenya once I had formally completed my project on the AU. I had never worked in Kenya or Nairobi before, but based on experiences elsewhere, I assumed that it would go the way it often goes with fieldwork: you try to set up interviews ahead of time, but people would rather try and squeeze you into their schedule knowing that you are in the area. Working on a short-term policy study, we had only four months to do the research and deliver the outputs. With a limited fieldwork budget, Kenya was the place

where I could hope to get the most done and connect with people I had already interviewed online. One of our major concerns, however, was the Nairobi-centric approach we had almost fatalistically adopted. We were aware of the criticism of gender-related policies being primarily an affair for actors in the capital and had also discussed it. Yet connecting to organizations or activists beyond the capital was a challenging task – especially within the seven days I had in the country. Considering those limitations, we approached our colleagues at a European embassy ahead of time to ask for help: could they think of any 'local' organizations outside of Nairobi that I could reach out to, even if only over the phone? Within days, a Kenyan colleague at the embassy put me in contact with an executive of a partner organization active in one of the country's regions. I shortly received an email from the executive affirming that there would be an opportunity to meet during my visit. She even had a trip to Nairobi already planned.

Once I had arrived in Nairobi and was confirming the different interviews I had lined up, the executive became difficult to reach. Halfway through my trip, I met with a group of national embassy staff for lunch. I was yet again taken aback by how elegant and put-together these Kenyan women looked. As I looked at my cracking nail polish I felt, once again, out of place. Before saying our goodbyes, I was asked whether I had managed to get an interview with the executive. I said, honestly, that I was working on it and had not been able to reach her since I had arrived. The embassy staff member was visibly annoyed but did not say more. In a few hours, I got a WhatsApp message from the executive, detailing the time and place for our meeting the next day. During the interview, the executive was rather stern at first, commenting that she was tired and had had a very busy day. I could feel myself being measured up and down for a while, but again, during our conversation, the executive opened up and softened. She provided a level

of nuance and perspective that stood out from and challenged some of our other interview material. Once the recorder was turned off, she asked me more questions about myself and my connection to the embassy. I left with an invitation to join her for dinner and to visit the organization in the regional office. It felt like an achievement. The next day I was cc'd into an email addressed to the aforementioned embassy staff member:

Dear (embassy staffer),

We had a good meeting with Karmen on Thursday. Best regards,

(signed by executive)

It was clear that regardless of the rapport established during the interview, the executive felt the need to report back to the embassy and make sure that their favour was noted.

Reflecting back, I can see how the African national staff working in European embassies have to play the role of gatekeepers and brokers for their European funders. The relationship between the executive and the Kenyan staff member at the embassy was one characterized by unequal power relations, but also by some degree of reciprocity. African studies research has noted that partners and scholars in African institutions are often expected to facilitate Northern scholars' access to and security in 'the field' (Tilley and Kalina 2021). Tilley and Kalina show that privileged people can be put under pressure to aid Northern researchers, too. Gatekeepers are mostly discussed as being akin to a 'local partner' who would facilitate access to an entire community of people – in a particular institution, field of practice, or geographical location (Campbell et al. 2006; Singh and Wassenaar 2016; Tilley and Kalina 2021; Clark 2011; Kalina and Scott 2019). During my fieldwork in Ethiopia, this dynamic was inconsistent at most, but our relationship with this specific embassy meant that the Kenyan

staff members were expected to mobilize their networks for our benefit.

Kalinga's (2019) work suggests that my unsettling experiences of negotiating consent were not necessarily specific to my research project and approach, but common for researchers in foreign-funded collaborative projects. Her reference to 'research fatigue' is particularly relevant to my experience and those of experts in the gender and development community (Kalinga 2019, 270). While refusing and postponing interviews is usually explained by not having time, the fatigue of accommodating researchers was palpable among more senior interlocutors. The tell-tale signs could be the tone and language used, references to previous publications, or admitting their surprise at how much they enjoyed the process.

Finally, my gender, perhaps surprisingly, was the factor I paid the least attention to. I took my insider position within womanhood for granted. However, interviewing of women by women is a gendered situation, too (Reinharz and Chase 2001). Earlier feminist researchers have highlighted the 'sisterly bonds' they created during woman-to-woman interviews due to shared experiences and mutual understanding. The feminist research ethics of non-exploitation are sometimes perceived as nurturing relationships beyond the research process. However, this kind of romanticized perception has been challenged by the reality that not all women like each other and that fostering 'sisterly bonds' cannot be the aim of an interview process. Instead of bonding, rapport with the interlocutor became the goal of the interviewer. My unexamined assumption of gender connection perhaps led me to nurture unrealistic expectations toward some of the interlocutors and to discount how junior a woman I am.

Gender intersects with other status markers that are socio-culturally informed. Vlavonou (2023, 7) discusses the intersecting norms of seniority and maleness in African

contexts, which create exclusions for younger men and women. Similarly, Bouka discusses how her gender, age, and even marital status intersected with race in creating and moulding dynamic power relations with her respondents (Bouka 2015). Her status as a married woman lifted her from being 'the girl' to someone worthy of acknowledgement. Citing Amadiume, Yacob-Haliso points out the significance of motherhood in African contexts where gender is not the primary determinant of one's social position (Yacob-Haliso 2019, 172). Indeed, motherhood can bestow a woman with respect, social standing, and seniority and, connected to this transition, can also facilitate being seen as an 'insider' with other women. To that extent I was very much 'the girl', unmarried and child-free, roaming the continent by myself. Yet my Ethiopian colleagues have repeatedly pointed out to me that white women are not subjected to the same social expectations as African women and our lifestyle choices are often put into a black box of 'cultural difference'. It is therefore possible that my marital status and age were under a different kind of scrutiny than those of Bouka.

Conclusion: Authentic consent

The four narratives have offered opportunities to think about how to untangle the intertwined threads leading to authentic consent in qualitative research. I have argued that authentic consent is well-informed by the research aims and is freely given. Through the vignettes, I have interrogated the complex power relations which enable or disable the latter. The vignettes described four instances where my sense of integrity as a researcher was unsettled because of the particularities of the consent negotiation process. These reflections were motivated by the tension between the assumption that when 'studying up', the interlocutors are in a position of power, and my lived experiences of doing fieldwork. I have interrogated this unease in this article by discussing the complexities of

North-South power imbalances, race, nationality, class, professional identities, and, finally, gender in fieldwork. To conclude, I will revisit the methodological, theoretical, and empirical contributions of the article.

Methodologically, autoethnography has offered the opportunity for critical self-reflexivity. To Nadarajah et al. (2022), critical self-reflexivity presents a move towards decolonizing knowledge production, unmasking the role of sex, class, gender, ableness, and race in research. Autoethnography gives a particular value to hindsight, as well as to the intentional centring of researcher-interlocutor relationships. It is an opportunity to look back on the muddy waters of fieldwork and reflect on our self-image, research practices, and outcomes from a safe distance. Writing autoethnographically and linking our experiences with existing scholarship can be transformative for our ethical, normative, and political commitments as researchers, but also for reconciling with perceived experiences of failure.

Theoretically, this article has sought to bridge decolonial theories with those of 'studying up' for advancing the notion of 'authentic consent'. By pairing insights from the decolonial turn, elite and expert research, and professional communities with vignettes from my own fieldwork, I have examined authentic consent as both relational and steeped in power relations. Acknowledging that decision makers and leaders are possibly not convinced but pressured by their partners and peers is rarely discussed in the existing literature. With experts, policy makers, and technocrats as my main interlocutors, this analysis goes beyond problematizing consent in African studies as a matter of engaging with rural, semi-illiterate and powerless 'communities' and raises questions about the implications of power relations when 'studying up' in the gender and development community (see a discussion relating to "exploitation of the ignorant" in Frimpong-Mansoh 2008). By sharing instances where consent was refused, and where it was given

upon the intervention of an international donor, a gender and development community member, and the national staff of a development partner, I have examined the fluctuations and instabilities in the power relations between the researcher and interlocutor. My social capital was always relative to the person I interacted with and the same applies to the interviewees. As highlighted by the vignettes, factors like race, class, gender, seniority, and profession, but also dependency relations and colonial legacies, mould the relational social capital of the researcher and the research participant.

Understanding authentic consent as relational is the central conclusion of this analysis. That consent processes are steeped in power relations, networks, and professional communities contrasts with the notion of consent as an individual matter, undertaken by a free and autonomous person. I also contend that the relationality of authentic consent is not the purview of remote and rural 'others' somewhere in Africa and has implications for fieldwork-based research more broadly. While my interlocutors were not all bound by the same institutional rules, norms, and constraints, they were part of the same world of development experts. No doubt race, gender, age, and other factors are also at work both in the expat class and in the gender and development community. That is why researchers do instrumentalize their social capital and intersecting identities to foster more equal power relations with elite interviewees. I committed time to shopping for 'smart clothes' before heading to Addis Ababa. Being aware of my status as 'the girl' (young, unmarried, and childfree) I did

so to relate to the accomplished women I was about to interview. In hindsight, this strategy for enforcing the shared experience of 'womanhood' could also have spoken to wanting to indicate a shared class belonging. In parallel, introductions by development experts and diplomats were intended to signal my belonging to the same community and to raise the credibility of the research I was carrying out.

That said, the vignettes in question rightly grappled with the question of whether approaching a person in a position of power, enmeshed in North-South power imbalances, for access to 'the field' compromises the voluntary and authentic nature of the consent. Does it limit the option to refuse to participate in the project? While existing research on studying up acknowledges that researchers may require "sponsorship by a powerful member" of a professional community (Plankey-Videla 2012, 6), it rarely considers the underlying power relations and inequalities at play. Finally, as we interrogate the power relations that shape authentic consent, we must acknowledge the agency of the interlocutors in that process. That African experts would only engage with a researcher after an introduction by a partner is also strategic, guarding their time, information, and networks. The familiar tension between structure and agency is ever-present in understanding the relationships that underpin academic research. Examining how complex power dynamics shape the interview event and the way knowledge, emotion, and insight are shared will sharpen our analytical process and create avenues for more equitable research practices.

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