Check for updates

**AUTHORS:**
Tiffah Stanley[1]
Leana Snyders[2]
Latiefa Jacobs[3]
Lynn Hendricks[3]

**AFFILIATIONS:**
[1]Independent research practitioner, Musina, South Africa
[2]Director: South African San Council, Upington, South Africa
[3]CoCREATE Research Equity Hub, Division of Health Systems and Public Health, Department of Global Health, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**
Lynn Hendricks

**EMAIL:**
lynnah@sun.ac.za

**DATES:**
**Received:** 15 July 2026
**Revised:** 08 Sep. 2026
**Accepted:** 09 Sep. 2026
**Published:** 29 Sep. 2026

**HOW TO CITE:**
Stanley T, Snyders L, Jacobs L, Hendricks L. The invisible hands that stay: Recognition of the relational labour of research assistants and community researchers. S Afr J Sci. 2026;122(9/10), Art. #28003. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2026/28003

**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**
☒ Peer review
☐ Supplementary material

**DATA AVAILABILITY:**
☐ Open data set
☐ All data included
☐ On request from author(s)
☐ Not available
☒ Not applicable

**EDITORS:**
Chrissie Boughey
Nkosinathi Madondo

**KEYWORDS:**
relational labour, community researchers, recognition, authorship, research equity

**FUNDING:**
None




© 2026. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

# The invisible hands that stay: Recognition of the relational labour of research assistants and community researchers

Literature has shown how the assistants, brokers and facilitating researchers whose labour sustains field research routinely go uncredited, but this scholarship has mostly examined research conducted by Global North institutions in the Global South. Less is known about how the same extraction operates inside southern African knowledge economies, among regional universities, non-governmental organisations and funded projects. This article centres the first-hand accounts of four South African-based authors: a research practitioner in the Limpopo borderlands, a director of an Indigenous research council, a community liaison advocate and a university-based researcher who herself worked for years as an unpublished research assistant. Using a collaborative and reflexive approach, we draw on our diverse experiences of research practice, community engagement, Indigenous research governance and academia to critically examine the often-unrecognised labour that sustains research. Reading these reflections through a lens of *ubuntu*, decolonial scholarship and the San Code of Research Ethics – the first research ethics code developed by an Indigenous African community – we argue that what is extracted and left unrecognised in research assistance is not only intellectual labour, but relational and emotional labour, and a standing accountability to communities and colleagues that outlasts any funded project. The four-criterion definition of authorship, honest as written, can also produce this erasure once set against the structure of grant-funded research. Recognition, fair pay, co-authorship and reform of funding, ethics review and publishing practice are not gestures of goodwill. They are what an *ubuntu*-grounded research ethic requires.

**Significance:**

- The exploitation of field research labour is not only imposed on the South but reproduced within southern African research economies.
- This article demonstrates that standard authorship criteria, as written, structurally exclude practitioners whose relational and emotional labour makes community-based research possible.
- We offer the San Code of Research Ethics as a working, Indigenous model of recognition-based research governance already in practice in South Africa.
- We provide practical recommendations for funders, ethics committees, universities and publishers seeking to recognise research assistants and community partners fairly.

## Introduction

There is a familiar pattern to field research in the Global South: a researcher arrives, often from a well-resourced institution, fieldwork is done, the researcher leaves, a thesis is examined and a paper may also be published. The question rarely asked is who did the work, and who remains once the researcher has gone.

Sanjek[1] called people on whom field research depends on, and the routine failure to credit them, anthropology's hidden colonialism. Turner[2] described fieldwork assistants as ghost-workers. Sukarieh and Tannock[3] traced a subcontracting model in which Lebanese and Syrian assistants conduct much of the UK-funded research that British academics direct from afar. Abedi Dunia et al.[4] showed how people based near research sites carry the risks, costs and aftermath of fieldwork while rarely reaching the acknowledgements. In global health, the pattern repeats: roughly one in five articles on COVID-19 in Africa was published with no local author[5], and African authorship in infectious-disease research remains persistently low[6]. The practice now has a name – parachute or helicopter research – and a set of proposed remedies.[7] What this literature has been slower to problematise is the labour itself: the terms on which research assistants and community researchers contribute, the asymmetries of power that set those terms, and the standing of communities as collaborators.

This article is co-authored by four South African-based researchers and practitioners positioned differently within research practice, Indigenous research governance, community liaison and the university, and our standpoints are set out in the Methods section. Reading our accounts through *ubuntu* and decolonial scholarship, and against the San Code of Research Ethics, we argue that what is extracted and left unrecognised in research assistance is not only intellectual labour but relational and emotional labour, and a standing accountability to communities and colleagues that outlasts any funded project.

First, we shift the geography of exploitation from something the North does to the South to its reproduction within southern African knowledge economies, by regional universities, non-governmental organisations and funded projects, along lines of nationality, documentation status, class and language. Second, we read our accounts through *ubuntu* and decolonial scholarship to argue that what is extracted and left unrecognised is also relational labour, the work of building, holding and repairing the trust on which knowledge depends, and a standing accountability that does not end when the project does. The recognition problem is usually read as a

problem of credit – the right names not being on the paper – but beneath it sits a deeper mistake about what research labour is. Lastly, we set out what a recognition-based, *ubuntu*-grounded research economy would ask of funders, ethics committees, universities, publishers, individual researchers and communities.

## Methods

This article uses a collaborative, reflexive approach centred on the first-person accounts of four South African-based authors positioned differently within research practice, community engagement, Indigenous research governance and academia. Each author developed a written reflection on their experience of research contribution, recognition, authorship and accountability. These accounts were discussed collectively and interpreted alongside scholarship on hidden research labour, equitable authorship, *ubuntu* and decolonial research practice, and the San Code of Research Ethics. They were treated as situated knowledge rather than as data, and all authors retained authority over how their experiences were represented, approved the final text and are named as co-authors. Identifiable details relating to specific projects, organisations and research locations were omitted where necessary to protect individuals and relationships. As these are our first-person accounts, institutional ethical approval was not required. This research was not funded.

The approach was collaborative because we did not want these experiences to stand as four separate stories: we exchanged our accounts, listened to where others had met the same situations, and looked closely at where they diverged. It was reflexive because we were not only recounting what had happened to us, but also asking who gets to make decisions, whose knowledge is treated as knowledge, who is acknowledged, and what becomes of the relationships built with communities once the project, the funding or the contract ends. It suits the argument because these experiences cannot be separated from the relationships in which they occurred, and because bringing them together makes visible the forms of labour that disappear when research is reduced to data collection and outputs.

### *Positionality*

Our standpoints have shaped what we have noticed and how we have interpreted it, and they sit unevenly within the structures this article describes. Tiffah Stanley (T.S.) writes as a research practitioner who has worked across studies in the Limpopo borderlands for nearly 17 years, from outside the credentialing system and largely without attribution. Leana Snyders (L.S.) writes as director of an Indigenous research council, a body that negotiates with researchers on behalf of a community. Latiefa Jacobs (L.J.) writes as a community liaison advocate employed by a university-linked research equity hub, answerable in both directions. Lynn Hendricks (L.H.) writes as a university-based researcher who spent 4 years as an unpublished research assistant and who now holds the affiliation, the funded writing time and the access to publication that the others do not, and who therefore benefits from the arrangement criticised in this article. We have kept the accounts in the first person and under each author's designation rather than merging them into a single voice, so that the standpoint from which any claim is made remains visible.

## Part 1: The geography of extraction

### *Hidden hands and the economy of extraction*

The uncredited field assistant is an old figure. Sanjek[1] showed that, historically, the people who anthropologists studied supplied much of the information, translation and fieldwork while the ethnographers took full authorship. Turner[2] raised the questions of authorship and authority this poses. Deane and Stevano[8], Gupta[9], Middleton and Cons[10] and Molony and Hammett[11] each pressed on the economic and ethical dimensions of the relationship between researchers and the assistants who make their fieldwork possible.

That model of an anthropologist working with one or more local assistants no longer describes the norm. Sukarieh and Tannock[3], drawing on interviews with 32 assistants in the UK-funded Syrian refugee research industry, describe research celebrated in Britain as helping the vulnerable that is, in large part, produced by Lebanese and Syrian assistants who feel alienated and exploited, and are excluded from authorship even where they had drafted whole articles. Abedi Dunia et al.[4], writing as contracting and facilitating researchers across the DRC, Sierra Leone and Jharkhand, prefer the term 'facilitating researcher', because 'assistant', broker and fixer' downplay the research involved. They show that facilitating researchers carry the physical risk of fieldwork, absorb unpaid preparatory and access costs because they are usually uninsured, and stay to manage the aftermath long after the contracting researcher has gone home.

The status attached to this labour is part of what produces the problem. Fieldworkers, research assistants and community researchers are designated as support staff, and the designation does substantive work, as it recodes as assistance a contribution that is intellectual as well as practical. These roles secure access, interpret social and cultural context, build and repair relationships, handle ethical difficulties as they arise in the field, and frequently shape the questions themselves. Deane and Stevano[8] and Gupta[9] press the economic and authorial dimensions of this, Middleton and Cons[10] trace how ethnographic writing keeps the assistant outside the analytical frame, and Molony and Hammett[11] follow the money. Writing from programmes in South Africa, Malawi, Kenya and Thailand, Nkosi and colleagues[12] map the physical, social, ethical, emotional and political labour frontline workers perform to make global health research happen, including judgements they make alone about needs falling outside a protocol, and find that it stays hidden and undervalued. Where the structure records a person as support, their standing as a producer of knowledge is settled in advance of anything they do.

That settlement is held in place by an asymmetry of control. The researcher who holds the grant ordinarily also holds authority over design, over the conduct of data collection and analysis, over publication and over authorship, and the assistant's position in relation to each is negotiated rather than assured.[3,4] Bhakuni and Abimbola[13] name the epistemic form this takes: a credibility deficit, in which a contributor's account is discounted as testimony, and interpretive marginalisation, in which the concepts for making sense of a situation are settled elsewhere. The division into collector and author is an instance of both, and the same asymmetry has been named from the community side. Nyirenda and colleagues[14], across three projects in Malawi, describe how economic hardship, study design and institutional standing combine into what they call structural coercion, so that engagement secures participation without altering its terms, while Ozano and colleagues[15], writing with community researchers in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Sierra Leone, set out what power sharing requires: shared decision-making and community partners treated as knowledge producers rather than a route to data. The claim we make about practitioners and the claim this scholarship makes about communities are versions of one another.[7]

This recognition problem is anchored in an economy that turns research labour into countable outputs. Puehringer et al.[16] describe an academic publishing system governed by publish-or-perish logic, in which a few companies take large rents from publicly funded and substantially unpaid labour. If worth is measured by authored outputs, authorship is the currency, and every added name reads as a loss to the principal investigator. One of Sukarieh and Tannock's[3] assistants name the double standard: students are accused of plagiarism for copying a few sentences, while assistants do the bulk of the work on an article published under another name.

## Part 2: Relational labour, *ubuntu* and standing accountability

### *Co-authorship as method*

This article rests on four first-hand accounts, one from each co-author, whose positions are set out above. The most extended is a written and spoken testimony from T.S., reproduced with his authorship and consent.

We treat each not as anecdote, but as evidence and as thinking, instances of what decolonising scholarship calls centring the knowledge of those positioned as 'Other'.[4,7,17,18] To write a paper about the erasure of research contributors and then author it alone would contradict itself.

We also name the limits of that practice. Following Thambinathan and Kinsella[17], we take reflexivity to mean more than a confession of

privilege; the test is whether it does real work. In practice, T.S. shaped the categories that organise the account below and is named as first author. Following Abedi Dunia et al.[4], we omit the names of specific projects, organisations and fieldwork locations; T.S. assessed these risks himself.

### The four-criterion trap: An author's account

L.H. writes here in her own voice, because she has stood where T.S. stands. Across major publishers, authorship follows the recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors[19]: a contributor must have contributed substantially to conception or design, or to data acquisition, analysis or interpretation; drafted or substantively revised the work; approved the submitted version; and agreed to be accountable for it[20].

> *For many years, I worked as a research assistant and produced no publications, not through any failure of contribution but because of how authorship is defined. I was employed after the proposal was written and the grant awarded; conception and design were complete before I arrived. I spent 4 years in the field, yet was not given a seat at the writing table. No matter how much I gave in the field, it did not translate into words in the article, because the rule makes fieldwork necessary but never sufficient, and then the organisation of the writing stage withholds the rest. The exclusion was not the result of anyone breaking the rule. It was the result of following it.*

The four-criterion definition is honest, defensible and, applied as written, productive of exactly the erasure the literature documents. Nelson and Petrova[21] put the practical version of this in the publishing literature: crediting research assistants in the acknowledgements is opaque, ignores the size of the contribution and carries little career weight, and authorship should be opened with assistants early rather than settled by default once the writing is done. It treats authorship as a conjunction of stages while the labour market distributes those stages by rank and timing. An *ubuntu* reading exposes what the conjunction hides: the four criteria describe a single relationship spread across people and years, not four detachable acts. The remedy is not to lower the standard for accountability but to build the fieldworker into conception, drafting and approval from the start, which is what equitable-authorship reform now urges.[7,20]

## Ubuntu*, relationality and the lone researcher*

We read the account through *ubuntu* and decolonial scholarship, which share a target: the individualist, extractive model of knowledge.

*Ubuntu*, often glossed as a person is a person through other persons, holds that personhood, dignity and knowledge are made in relationship rather than owned by separate individuals. Knowledge about a community is not a substance extracted by a collector for an author to interpret; it is made in the relationship between people, and that relationship is part of the knowledge. The split into a low-status collector and a high-status author rests on a thin, individualist account of knowing.

This has an echo in the community-engaged research literature. Hendricks et al.[22] describe a third sphere of allyship, a shared relational space where researchers and communities meet on a more equal footing. T.S. is the person who keeps that third sphere open most continuously, between the arrival of one researcher and the next. To name the third sphere as the place where knowledge is co-produced, and then fail to recognise the person who maintains it, is the contradiction this paper turns on.

Decolonial scholarship reaches a similar point. Smith[18] shows how theory has been claimed as Western, silencing Indigenous and Other voices. Thambinathan and Kinsella[17] propose four practices for decolonising qualitative research: critical reflexivity, reciprocity, embracing Other ways of knowing, and transformative praxis. The shift from researcher as discoverer to researcher as learner is the shift the account below asks for on the practitioner's behalf.

In March 2017, the South African San published the San Code of Research Ethics, the first research ethics code developed by an Indigenous community in Africa, in response to a long history of research judged neither as requested nor as protective.[23,24] The Code is built on four values – respect, honesty, fairness and care – and a binding process of community approval.[23] Under respect, a community's contribution is always acknowledged; under fairness, roles for translators and research assistants are listed among the benefits research should return. The Code also insists that promises be met, naming broken promises of feedback and support as a recurring form of disrespect – the very breaches T.S. is left to absorb in his own community after researchers depart.

The Code's most resonant contribution is an image. The late San leader Andries Steenkamp described ethical research as entry by the front door rather than the window: a researcher may be welcomed as a guest or may act like a thief.[24] The same values were carried into the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings, developed with the San among others, which attaches them to funding and partnership agreements.[25] The image is now embedded in the Rooibos benefit-sharing agreement between the Rooibos Council and the San and Khoi councils[26], and answers the theory-data hierarchy: people positioned by the academy as sources of data have produced an enforceable theory of the research relationship. We extend it to the practitioner: the San Code governs research conducted on a community, and T.S. is a practitioner rather than a member of a studied population, but the principle that relational labour and standing accountability deserve recognition holds across both.

## *First-hand accounts: "I remain"*

T.S.'s account is given at length here, under four headings, because the point is not to translate this knowledge into the categories of the academy but to let it reframe them.

### Entry and apprenticeship

T.S. did not enter research through a lecture hall. He describes his disrupted schooling, a single short computer course as his only formal qualification, and an arrival in South Africa in 2007 that left him stranded and living on the street for 8 days. T.S. locates the origin of his expertise there:

> *Living on the streets gave me a deep understanding of vulnerability that cannot be taught. I survived on water and leftovers from another struggling Zimbabwean, and later received a box of instant porridge from a nurse who noticed my condition. That experience became my first form of knowledge of precarity.*

From a volunteer post in a home-based care project in 2008, he moved through community work into research, first as a fieldworker, then as a guide who, in his words, evolved into conducting interviews, interpreting and transcribing. The turning point came through an anthropological study, as T.S. tells it:

> *When the researcher interviewed me, she said the information I provided in one interview carried more weight than over 20 others. She offered me a role as her research assistant. From that moment, I moved from contact person to research assistant. She later connected me to other researchers, expanding my involvement across multiple studies.*

The expertise is real and cumulative. "Research is not only about collecting knowledge," he reflected, "it is also about learning from the process itself." The route in lies outside the credentialing system, whose sorting logic reads the absence of a degree as the absence of expertise. The account shows the opposite.

### Invisibility and misnaming

The recognition problem appears in a precise form, not only as absence from authorship but as active misnaming, as T.S. describes it:

> *Yet, I remained unrecognised. I was often referred to as 'a friend' instead of being named. This limits opportunities and keeps my work invisible.*

> *Compensation was inconsistent. I worked beyond normal hours, often without additional pay. My labour was undervalued, even though it was essential.*

The word 'friend' is its own quiet erasure. It recodes a professional contributor as a personal connection, stripping the standing, citability, pay and career value a professional designation carries. It is the interpersonal version of the vague phrasing Abedi Dunia et al.[4] find in published texts, and of the appropriation Sukarieh and Tannock[3] document. In each case, the labour is kept and the name is dropped.

### Relational and emotional labour

Here the account moves past the usual focus on intellectual work. What T.S. carries is relationship and feeling:

> *This work is emotionally draining. I carry stories without solutions. I have also witnessed ethical challenges. Participants were promised support that never came. Stories were altered. I remained to face the consequences.*

Sukarieh and Tannock[3] record an assistant making the same point: what is subcontracted is not only collection and analysis but the pain of dealing with the stories. T.S. also names the upward drift of his role: "My role often became co-production. I contributed to tools, interpretation, and direction of research." On the usual thresholds, this is authorship-meriting work, and that it was not recognised as such is the theory-data hierarchy doing its job.

### Standing accountability

The account's most original contribution is what it says about the aftermath. Abedi Dunia et al.[4] note that facilitating researchers handle risk long after data collection ends; T.S. makes this the centre of his reflection:

> *What remains unspoken is what happens after the researcher leaves. I stay. I remain within the communities, answering questions, managing expectations, and addressing frustrations. Some expect intervention, others financial support, and some believe I owe them. I am left rebuilding trust. Since 2008, for nearly 17 years, I have remained in this space.*

This accountability has no counterpart in the contracting researcher's experience and no line in any budget. He absorbs the accumulated disappointment of every project that promised and did not deliver. T.S.'s closing words hold the whole argument:

> *While I have doctored relationships and earned community respect, the doctorate goes elsewhere. The recognition follows those who come and leave. I remain. Still present. Still trusted. Still unnamed.*

The play on words is exact. Standing accountability is neither mobile nor individually attributable; it is relational and continuous. An *ubuntu* ethic would treat it as the highest form of research contribution. The output economy treats it as nothing, because it cannot be carried away.

### Community liaison: Another vantage

L.J. writes from a different position within the same research economy. She traces her understanding of undervalued expertise to her father, an engineer without formal qualifications to whom engineering students were repeatedly sent for practical training:

> *Many would return to thank him after graduation, but there were many others who looked down on him because he was not educated… it doesn't matter what form of trade or industry you are in; if you don't have any form of formal qualifications, people can easily undermine your contribution.*

The pattern recurs in her dealings with the university, where delayed or absent responses told her "people even in the academic space don't stick to the ethical values they promote". A student writing an honours thesis on her published work reached her by email with 10 questions, no call and no consent form, and did not reply once she asked for one. This is not exploitation as a researcher would recognise it; it is how the system has trained people to ask.

Her own research-equity hub is offered as a contrast rather than a resolution: she describes being welcomed and included "in all spaces, from teaching to writing", although not, in her words, "completely heaven". L.J. writes that she wishes she could give her Limpopo colleague what she has had:

> *People will have conversations long after the project is over, but they won't be talking about the programme itself. They remember how they were treated, and if promises were made and kept… even if the best programme was presented, people will only remember you for your broken promises.*

This restates the standing-accountability argument from the community side. Acknowledgement, L.J. observes, costs nothing, yet its absence is remembered for years:

> *Researchers walk into communities knowing nothing but walk out with master's and PhD qualifications and never return, not even a thank you or an acknowledgement in their graduation speech, and acknowledging others doesn't even cost a cent, whether it's verbally or in writing. The ripple effect of the years spent undermining people's power and people's knowledge has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many community members.*

Her hope is for more people willing to occupy the space between:

> *More faculties in the institutions, more researchers, co-researchers, and community workers who would stand as a bridge between the community and the university, between policy and people, between research and real life.*

## Part 3: Towards a recognition-based research economy

With Sukarieh and Tannock[3], we read this account as a warning about the organisation of research well beyond the single case. With Abedi Dunia et al.[4], change needs more than appeals to individual conscience, because these practices are produced by the norms and incentives of funders, ethics bodies, universities and publishers. What follows is not a list of good manners. If knowledge is made in relationship, as *ubuntu* holds, and if the wrongs described above are epistemic as well as economic[13], then the institutions that decide what counts as a contribution are where relational labour is either recognised as knowledge or written out of it.

Funders should require that practitioners be named in proposals; invited to shape questions, methods and budgets; and costed for the whole of their labour, including preparation, access and aftermath.[7] Budgets should include insurance and a contingency line for costs that practitioners now absorb themselves.

Ethics committees should ask, before approval: who are the people described as assistants or local researchers, what will they do, could the project proceed without them, are they insured, and how will authorship be decided? Review should resist the appeal to practitioner protection as a reason to deny recognition, because the person concerned is best placed to judge that risk.[4] The San Code offers a working model: a community-authored, enforceable ethic of respect, honesty, fairness and care, with consequences for breaches.[23]

Universities sustain the problem through metrics that count citable outputs and discount relational labour, and through credentialing that cannot see

expertise gained outside the degree. They should create paid, named roles and progression for practitioners, and broaden how contribution is assessed, in line with reform efforts such as the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)[16], so that building and holding community relationships counts as scholarship. Co-creative studies in which community members move from subjects to co-producers, as in the treatment-adherence narratives described by Hendricks et al.[27], show that authorship can be shared without loss of rigour.

Journals are decisive, because authorship is where recognition is finally given or withheld. The four-criterion definition will not be abandoned, nor should accountability be weakened, but journals can require that the inclusion it presumes be real: that fieldworkers are brought into conception, drafting and approval rather than meeting only the data criterion. Some journals now act: *PLOS Medicine* requires local researchers to be first or last author on research conducted in their countries. Reflexivity statements[7] and inclusion-and-ethics disclosure[20] give practical mechanisms; the threshold question is co-authorship, not mention[4].

Structural change does not absolve individuals – they can refuse credit for others' work, name co-author contributors, and budget honestly for labour and protection. Practitioners have a part to play too: associational structures that share rate information and set norms offer bargaining power independent of any one researcher's goodwill, a collective assertion of dignity that sits well with *ubuntu*.

### *What this would ask in practice*

Three practical objections deserve an answer. The first is that a fieldworker cannot help conceive a study when the money to appoint one arrives only after the proposal is funded. This is true of the appointment but not of the relationship. Teams return to the same districts and partners across successive projects, and the practitioners who hold those relationships are known long before a call closes. Proposals can name them, cost their design time as they cost a statistician's, and treat consultation before submission as chargeable work. The second objection is that specialist design demands command of a literature that takes years to acquire. It does, and we are not proposing that everyone do everything. *Ubuntu* does not flatten difference; it distributes authority according to what each person knows, and the reading of a community, its histories and its refusals is an expertise not treated as a qualification. The third is that co-authorship is a blunt instrument. It is. Contributor taxonomies such as CRediT, which this Journal requires, can state what each person did, and author order and named, paid, progressing roles carry gradations a single list cannot. But recognition without pay, insurance and continuity is still extraction: these are additions to co-authorship, not substitutes for it.

### *Communities and co-researchers*

L.S., director of an Indigenous research council, writes from a position most of this paper speaks about rather than from. Her reflection opens from a flat rejection of the collector-author split traced above:

> *The era in which communities remain invisible contributors to academic success must come to an end… Communities are not assistants to research; they are research partners. Their knowledge, labour and lived experiences deserve recognition. They deserve respect and equal standing in academic scholarship.*

Communities, in her account, supply the foundation on which studies are conceptualised, conducted and validated, yet are approached only once questions and methodology have been settled, their role narrowed to access, mobilisation and translation. Once funded researchers leave, she argues, it is community researchers and liaisons who remain answerable to their own community for a study's outcomes and promises. She reads Indigenous and community-authored codes, including the San Code, as already setting out the alternative: communities as equal collaborators, with free, prior and informed involvement, shared ownership of knowledge and recognition as a standing expectation rather than an administrative courtesy.[23] Communities should shape questions from the earliest stages, take part in analysis as knowledge holders and, where their contribution meets the usual threshold, be recognised through co-authorship, she concludes. Their knowledge and lived experience are not inputs to be accessed, but a form of authority research has yet to recognise.

## Conclusion

We began with a pattern – the researcher who arrives, collects and leaves – and the question of who remains. We have answered it in the voice of those who remain: T.S. who, across nearly 17 years, has built relationships, conducted interviews and held community trust while being named, when named at all, as a friend; and L.J. who names what communities carry forward once a project has gone.

The literature on field assistants taught us to see the recognition problem and trace it to a marketised, output-driven research system. We extend it by relocating the problem within southern African knowledge economies and by reading it through *ubuntu* and decolonial scholarship to argue that what is extracted and unrecognised is relational labour and standing accountability. Recognition is not generosity owed to the deserving. It corrects a mistake: treating the conditions of knowledge as its packaging.

Correcting it means fair and predictable pay, insurance, named roles and, where the contribution meets the threshold, co-authorship. As Sukarieh and Tannock[3] argue regarding their own case, it means rethinking how research is funded, governed and published, so that the hands that stay are recognised as central to knowledge rather than as its disposable groundwork.

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the many research assistants, community researchers, translators, facilitators and community partners whose labour, relationships and commitment continue to sustain research but whose contributions often remain unrecognised. We also acknowledge the South African San Council for its leadership in advancing ethical, respectful and equitable research through the San Code of Research Ethics, which informed the thinking presented in this paper. Finally, we thank the communities with whom we have worked over many years for their trust, generosity and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences. This paper is dedicated to all those who remain long after funded projects have ended.

## Data availability

There are no data pertaining to this article.

## Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare.

## Authors' contributions

T.S.: Conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, resources, data curation, validation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. L.S.: Conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, validation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. L.J.: Conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, validation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. L.H.: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, supervision, project administration, visualisation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. All authors read and approved the final version.

## References

1. Sanjek R. Anthropology's hidden colonialism: Assistants and their ethnographers. Anthropol Today. 1993;9(2):13–18. https://doi.org/10.2307/2783170
2. Turner S. The silenced assistant: Reflections of invisible interpreters and research assistants. Asia Pac Viewp. 2010;51(2):206–219. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2010.01425.x
3. Sukarieh M, Tannock S. Subcontracting academia: Alienation, exploitation and disillusionment in the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry. Antipode. 2019;51(2):664–680. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12502

4. Abedi Dunia O, Eriksson Baaz M, Toppo AOM, Parashar S, Utas M, Vincent JBM. Visibilising hidden realities and uncertainties: The 'post-COVID' move towards decolonized and ethical field research practices. Int J Soc Res Methodol. 2023;26(5):549–564. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2173427

5. Naidoo AV, Hodkinson P, Lai King L, Wallis LA. African authorship on African papers during the COVID-19 pandemic. BMJ Glob Health. 2021;6(3), e004612. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004612

6. Mbaye R, Gebeyehu R, Hossmann S, Mbarga N, Bih-Neh E, Eteki L, et al. Who is telling the story? A systematic review of authorship for infectious disease research conducted in Africa, 1980-2016. BMJ Glob Health. 2019;4(5), e001855. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-001855

7. Morton B, Vercueil A, Masekela R, Heinz E, Reimer L, Saleh S, et al. Consensus statement on measures to promote equitable authorship in the publication of research from international partnerships. Anaesthesia. 2022;77(3):264–276. https://doi.org/10.1111/anae.15597

8. Deane K, Stevano S. Towards a political economy of the use of research assistants: Reflections from fieldwork in Tanzania and Mozambique. Qual Res. 2016;16(2):213–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115578776

9. Gupta A. Authorship, research assistants, and the ethnographic field. Ethnography. 2014;15(3):394–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138114533460

10. Middleton T, Cons J. Coming to terms: Reinserting research assistants into ethnography's past and present. Ethnography. 2014;15(3):279–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138114533466

11. Molony T, Hammett D. The friendly financier: Talking money with the silenced assistant. Hum Organ. 2007;66(3):292–300. https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.66.3.74n7x53x7r40332h

12. Nkosi B, Van Nuil JI, Nyirenda D, Chi PC, Schneiders ML. 'Labouring' on the frontlines of global health research: Mapping challenges experienced by frontline workers in Africa and Asia. Glob Public Health. 2022;17(12):4195–4205. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2022.2124300

13. Bhakuni H, Abimbola S. Epistemic injustice in academic global health. Lancet Glob Health. 2021;9(10):e1465–e1470. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(21)00301-6

14. Nyirenda D, Sariola S, Kingori P, Squire B, Bandawe C, Parker M, et al. Structural coercion in the context of community engagement in global health research conducted in a low resource setting in Africa. BMC Med Ethics. 2020;21, Art. #90. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-020-00530-1

15. Ozano K, Alam W, Aktar B, Okoth L, Chumo I, Amegee Quach J, et al. Seven core competencies and conditions for equitable partnerships and power sharing in community-based participatory research. BMJ Glob Health. 2024;9(11), e015497. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2024-015497

16. Puehringer S, Rath J, Griesebner T. The political economy of academic publishing: On the commodification of a public good. PLoS One. 2021;16(6), e0253226. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253226

17. Thambinathan V, Kinsella EA. Decolonizing methodologies in qualitative research: Creating spaces for transformative praxis. Int J Qual Methods. 2021;20: 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766

18. Smith LT. Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books; 2012.

19. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals. No date [updated Jan 2026; cited 2026 Jul 08]. Available from: http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/

20. Nature Portfolio. Authorship. Editorial policies [webpage on the Internet]. No date [cited 2026 Jul 08]. Available from: https://www.nature.com/nature-portfolio/editorial-policies/authorship

21. Nelson P, Petrova MG. Research assistants: Scientific credit and recognised authorship. Learn Publ. 2022;35(3):423–427. https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1467

22. Dierckx C, Hendricks L, Coemans S, Hannes K. The third sphere: Reconceptualising allyship in community-based participatory research praxis. Qual Res Psychol. 2021;18(4):473–497. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854402

23. South African San Institute. San code of research ethics. Kimberley: South African San Institute; 2017. Available from: https://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/San-Code-of-RESEARCH-Ethics-Booklet_English.pdf

24. Chennells R, Steenkamp A. International genomics research involving the San people. In: Schroeder D, Cook J, Hirsch F, Fenet S, Muthuswamy V, editors. Ethics dumping: Case studies from North-South research collaborations. Cham: Springer; 2018. p. 15–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64731-9_3

25. Schroeder D, Chatfield K, Singh M, Chennells R, Herissone-Kelly P. Equitable research partnerships: A global code of conduct to counter ethics dumping. Cham: Springer; 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15745-6

26. Schroeder D, Chennells R, Louw C, Snyders L, Hodges T. The Rooibos benefit sharing agreement: Breaking new ground with respect, honesty, fairness, and care. Camb Q Healthc Ethics. 2020;29(2):285–301. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180119001075

27. Hendricks L, Young T, Julies R, Dollie R, Reshaan D, Hannes K. 'More than a pill': A qualitative co-exploration of the things that matter in young women's stories of adherence to antiretroviral treatment in South Africa. Res Involv Engagem. 2025;11, Art. #62. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-025-00712-4