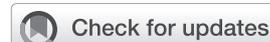


The scintillating scholarly contribution of Professor Leslie Swartz: How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?



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On the occasion of the retirement of Professor Leslie Swartz, this special issue is a celebration of a truly extraordinary academic career, characterised as much by generosity of spirit as intellectual brilliance. Surveying Swartz's academic and social impact achievements over more than 40 years, it is difficult to know where to begin. Seemingly boundless energy, creativity and razor-sharp analytical ability have led to more than 450 scholarly publications, a Hirsch index of 71 on Google Scholar, and recognition by South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF) as an A-rated scientist. Added to that is a catalogue of awards and honours far too weighty to list here; we will enumerate only some of them below. In the pages of this special issue are testimonies from many of Swartz's 50 successfully graduated doctoral students, as well as others he has inspired and supported, whose diverse research agendas reflect the bold curiosity of their polymath mentor.

Reflecting on this, and on Swartz's mentorship role in both of our lives, we recalled a favourite saying of his. In conversations about theory or a possible research project, the question would arise of how to conceptualise an idea or come up with a snappy title for an article. Swartz would look into the middle distance and muse, with characteristic wit and not a little irreverence, 'Well, how do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?' A moment's research reveals that this maxim is a metaphor for trying to grasp something beautiful, magical and elusive – something that can be felt, but never quite captured. With this, Swartz communicated several things, besides his ever-present taste for humour which wraps unmatched perceptiveness up with wit gleefully doused in the ironic and cliché. Foremost is a humble recognition of the limits of scholarship, in particular of our attempts to contain the complexity of human experience, especially of socially engendered suffering. Academic work in a trauma-ridden area, such as disability oppression, easily leads to an incapacitating form of performance anxiety, surrounding the fear that one will fail as a scientific communicator to do justice to the gravity of struggle in real lives. Swartz's unique response affirms that we should be appropriately modest in our claims – that the moonbeam of conclusive knowledge on any human issue can never be grasped. With this stance, both ourselves and countless others have been freed to simply explore the best, imperfect contribution we can make, all the while drawing on Swartz's guidance and deeply held belief that our work, our voice, is of value. What is modelled here is the combining of exceptional academic rigour with the playful and the humane, in a manner which balances excellence with radical inclusivity. At the heart of Swartz's career in the humanities and health sciences broadly, and disability studies in particular, is a combination of unerring compassion, a radical but realistic vision for social change, and at every step, the valuing of relationships built on mutual recognition and respect.

Readers of the *African Journal of Disability*, of which Swartz is the founding editor, may be unaware of how vastly his scholarly influence stretches across disciplines beyond disability studies. Trained as a clinical psychologist at the University of Cape Town (graduated 1982), Swartz began his life as a clinician and scholar at the height of the apartheid regime's structural, material and cultural oppression of South African people of colour. Social services such as health care and education showed profound, deliberate inequalities across race, while state-sponsored terror, mass forced removals and the everyday dehumanisation of legislated racial hatred caused incalculable, generational harms. In these darkest of times, Swartz quickly became a clarion voice as a researcher and advocate, bringing to light the devastating mental health consequences of the regime's actions as a member of the pioneering Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA). This work proved to be the foundation for a decades-long, ground-breaking contribution to the field of cross-cultural psychiatry globally, and Swartz's establishment as an international authority in the field of culture and mental health.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Growing disability studies on the African continent: The career contribution of Prof. Leslie Swartz' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Brian Watermeyer and Prof. Lieketseng Ned.

Since then, Swartz's unstoppable intellectual curiosity has taken his scholarship into a remarkable range of areas, creating globally influential work as he goes. What ties these contributions together, besides scholarship of the highest calibre, is a tireless commitment to human rights and a steady determination to make heard the voices of the most marginal. It has, for us, been an immense privilege to be mentored by someone able to discern patterns and connections invisible to others, which may take one by surprise today, but become building blocks of broad new insights in the months and years to come. Examining the course of a packed career, we might find Swartz pioneering social science research methods to respond to the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic in Africa, devising and driving large-scale research in public mental health across the Global South, developing and advocating for disability-inclusive broadcast media policy, developing assessment instruments to facilitate social support for children and adults with disabilities, coordinating large-scale projects investigating access to health care for disabled people across the continent, training disability activists from 10 African countries in emancipatory research skills, critically examining issues of culture and equity in health sciences education, co-editing successive ground-breaking African texts in disability studies, and, at every stage, training and mentoring young academics from diverse backgrounds in research methods, authorship and academic publishing, among very much else.

As an outspoken critic of epistemic injustice, a constant thrust of Swartz's work has been the validation and amplification of voices from the Global South, upending colonial hegemonies across disciplines from disability studies, public health and psychiatry to philosophy, clinical psychology and medical humanities. A list of honours too numerous to mention includes the Stals medal for psychology awarded by the South African Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Stellenbosch University Chancellor's Award, the Academy of Sciences of South Africa Gold Medal for Science-for-Society, election as member of the Academy of Sciences of South Africa, inauguration as a fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, shortlisting for the National Science and Technology Forum Lifetime Achievement Award, a visiting professorship at Harvard Medical School, appointment as Global Advisor to the Institute for Culture and Society (University of Western Sydney), and a seemingly endless list of invited keynote addresses at major academic gatherings and institutions around the globe. Somehow, amid all of this, Swartz has also found the time to fill the role of editor-in-chief of three journals, the *African Journal of Disability*, the *South African Journal of Science*, and the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*.

Beyond all of these accolades, however, what contributions to this special issue describe is a role model not only in the domain of the intellectual, but also in the everyday philosophy of kindness. In an age where the need for applied scholarship and the moral imagination of the critical public intellectual has never been more urgent, the example set by Swartz's ethics and determination has been a beacon for many, placing the right to human flourishing at its centre. Returning to the appropriately quirky and irreverent metaphor of holding a moonbeam in your hand, we recall that it is, in fact, a line

from the musical *The Sound of Music*, telling of how the heroine Maria's free-spirited, creative and unpredictable nature meant that she couldn't be contained or silenced by tradition and orthodoxy. Similarly, and with humour always nearby, the breadth of Swartz's intellectual engagement defies disciplinary boundaries and the security of familiar territory, and all of this while seeming to have more fun than anyone else involved. Ever-present in his work is the valuing of deep, inquiring understanding, bringing into relief dynamics and relationships which surprise our assumptions.

The special issue consists of 21 articles. The contributions we briefly review in the balance of this editorial reflect research and advocacy work with weighty social impact in a host of fields, embodying the work of scholars, practitioners and activists who have had the good fortune to be taught, guided and very often entertained by Prof. Swartz. There is more than one reference to time spent at his large and always welcoming kitchen table, a place where countless academic luminaries from around the world have enjoyed rich hospitality and even richer conversation over decades. The fields of study and group of contributors gathered here are by no means exhaustive and represent just a sample of Swartz's scholarship, mentorship and influence. Themes of gratitude, celebration and hope recur throughout, and we echo these sentiments deeply.

Rohleder (2025) considers the practice of research as one which often involves fostering relationships, and reflects on their relationship with Prof. Swartz, as a mentor, a supervisor, a co-researcher and a friend in the research area of disability and sexuality. The article foregrounds the importance of humanness in research. Sinason (2025) adds how Swartz takes an equal, two-way approach in working with these relationships. The following articles also showcase the humanness within Swartz and the diverse relationships he held with everyone he encountered in the various roles he played.

Drawing on engagements held with Swartz in his purple kitchen or in a coffee shop, Marchetti-Mercer (2025) narrates their introduction to disability studies as a clinical psychologist working with transnational families, while Shabalala (2025) speaks to the supervision experience and scholarly development that took place around the same table. Pretorius (2025) similarly shares Swartz's instrumental mentorship in their academic journey to excel in the field of psychosocial disability research. Wiggett-Barnard (2025) reflects on their work as a disability activist and Managing Director of the non-profit organisation ChangeAbility, and how Swartz's scholarship shaped and guided their strategies for addressing disability-related barriers. Sunkel (2025) writes about the Global Mental Health Peer Network's work to develop leadership among those with lived experience of psychosocial disability. She links this to Swartz's work of demonstrating a deep commitment to meaningful and authentic inclusion of people with lived experiences of mental health difficulties in his teaching and learning at Stellenbosch University.

Some contributions showcase how engagements with Swartz often lead to landmark scholarly outputs. Richards (2025)

offers a creative piece on living with kidney disease. In this contribution, Richards reflects on the influence and mentorship offered by Swartz in converting their writing into an autoethnographic doctoral study, which opened many intellectual doors for them. Under the guidance of Swartz, Duncan (2025) narrates their journey of supporting the development of an occupational therapy textbook titled *Transformation through Occupation* (Duncan & Watson 2004), an exercise which shows the benefits of inter-professional collaboration and transdisciplinary theorising.

Capri (2025) draws us close to how Swartz's work embodies an ethic of care which guides one through complex arguments, while gently steering you away from potential pitfalls. This is further shown in the following articles. McKinney (2025) reflects on the National Mental Health Policy and Strategic Framework of South Africa 2023 – 2030, as well as scholarly conversations held with Swartz to highlight the prevailing challenges for persons with physical disabilities in accessing mental health services. On the same issue of mental health, Gibson (2025) speaks about the silencing of young people's voices in mental health as a historic issue in psychiatry and psychology. This is followed by Trafford (2025), who reflects on factors that may contribute to the marginalisation of children with disabilities, and the impact on resource allocation and public investment. The reflection is linked to Swartz's extensive scholarship in disability studies, which has consistently been focused on fairness, social justice and the centring of disabled voices. Using four projects co-led with Swartz, Mkabile (2025) provides a reflection on his influence in the field of intellectual disability in South Africa and the broader Global South, with a specific focus on issues of epistemic justice. Keikelame (2025) adds to this by reflecting on the mentorship they received from Swartz, and how it has been instrumental in shaping their own research approaches and fostering ongoing critical self-reflection in studying epilepsy treatment and epistemic injustice.

Kagee and Tomlinson (2025) re-examine the illustrious career of Professor Swartz in the context of a neoliberal model of the university. They argue that Swartz's contributions to society exemplify the challenges, pitfalls and victories characteristic of a scientist who is committed to engaged scholarship and social justice. Watermeyer (2025) describes how Swartz's intellectual curiosity and compassion offer a guiding example of engaged scholarship with marginalised groups, particularly citing his own experiences of being supported by Swartz as he trained as a clinical psychologist with severe visual impairment. Adding to this, Douglas (2025) reflects on a pertinent question once posed to them by Swartz: *What is the role of a clinical psychologist in South Africa?* – a question which marked a pivotal shift. The article delves deeply into how this challenge shaped their journey, and how the same question continues to be applied, in an under-resourced and vastly different context from the seminar room in which it was first voiced.

Other contributions draw on work carried out collaboratively with Swartz. Chiliza et al. (2025) review the work carried out with Swartz in the Western Cape to highlight the difficult yet pervasive challenges in providing adequate mental healthcare

because of language barriers. Honouring the roles played by Swartz in both the Equitable and the GeoHealthAccess studies, Munthali et al. (2025) dedicate to him an article which explores the challenges experienced by older persons in accessing healthcare in Malawi. Their dedication expresses gratitude to Swartz for influencing the growth of disability research. Schneider and De Palma (2025) highlight the importance of ensuring inclusion of people with psychosocial disability in national and global statistics, and describe the process of developing psychosocial functioning questions to make the inclusion of this group feasible. This article is also dedicated to Swartz, showing how he emphasised the importance of disability measurement, and the support he offered the first author to pursue this as an area of research.

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