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Vulnerability in Missiological Research

A Challenge for Westerners in Empirical Intercultural Theology

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Abstract

Mission understood as a mode of witnessing in a context of difference inevitably involves the perpetual need for learning about the other. This is what the humanities are about. If a case can be made for mission to be informed by vulnerability so as not to abuse power, the same applies to research – in the context of intercultural theology as in the social sciences. Vulnerability here is understood as striving for epistemological justice. This is particularly relevant for Westerners in contexts of coloniality. People are to be understood on their own terms, both linguistically and experientially. This implies the learning of 'languaculture' and exposure to people's life worlds without giving material rewards.

This understanding of vulnerability was applied to an ethnographic study of the conceptualisation and practice of post-apartheid reconciliation in a multiethnic South African church. It directed the main research focus towards white people, led to a subsidiary study involving an isiXhosa-dominated township congregation and a linguistic concept study, and necessitated a constructivist research paradigm that was able to tolerate epistemological difference.

The paper will show how vulnerability informed both the process and the findings of the main and subsidiary study. The merging of the two studies highlighted areas where the multiethnic church had taken steps towards reconciliation-as-equality by acknowledging the value of vulnerability by white people. At the same time, the subsidiary study indicated the potential for greater change if vulnerability was given more room in the intercultural contact zone.

Besides clear advantages, vulnerability as a research paradigm comes with certain limitations. These are seen to lie primarily in the constructedness of the findings and the methodologically necessary exclusion of member validation in the study of cultural-linguistic diversity. The authority of the findings may thus by some be found to have feet of clay. This uncomfortable truth notwithstanding, the article concludes by

making a case for this 'vulnerability of vulnerability': Studies conducted in vulnerability can be regarded as valuable for the *perspective* they are offering. Furthermore, they can demonstrate the piecemeal nature of cross-cultural understanding and thus encourage ongoing cultural-linguistic learning in both academia and ministry.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Missiological, Research, Intercultural, Theology

1. Introduction

A few years ago, as I was conceptualising the study for a PhD project in Cape Town, I was faced with some methodological challenges. My goal was to work on post-apartheid reconciliation processes happening in multicultural South African congregations. Although I was particularly interested in the perspectives and roles of white people, the question was how to bring in the views of people from a variety of backgrounds in a way that is methodologically sound. Where did this awareness of methodological challenges come from and what did they consist in?

Prior to and in the course of writing the research proposal, I had engaged widely with issues of epistemological dominance in postcolonial intercultural contexts. I later learned to see them as expression of coloniality. This I understand as ongoing structures of inequality that are a remnant of the time of (in this case, Western) colonialism when people in different parts of the world became interconnected and interdependent albeit on unequal terms.

Epistemological dominance, also referred to as 'cultural injustice' by Chirevo Kwenda (2003:70), is significantly related to people's *languacultures* (Agar 2002:60) and whether there is room to effectively draw on them in a given setting. The concept of languaculture refers to the way reality is perceived, interpreted and responded to through cognition and language. It is related to *cultural conceptualisations*, which in Cultural Linguistics are understood as defining membership in a certain speech community depending on "[t]he degree to which individuals can participate in a group's conceptualised sphere" (Sharifian 2003:189).

I was aware of both the almost exclusive use of English in the multicultural spaces I sought to research and the fact that these communities were nevertheless marked by a 'latent' multilingualism. This had me grapple with resisting the perpetuation of the very linguistic dominance through my research that I set out to study as part of the challenge for reconciliation: "Can I find a way to significantly reduce epistemological dominance in order to access more genuine perspectives of those whose English is not rooted in secular Western traditions? And if so, what would it require of me as a white, foreign researcher in South Africa?"

These questions led me to consider *vulnerability* as both an attitude and a method. As a researcher in the field of reconciliation studies in intercultural and ecclesial contexts, I found this concept helpful and, in some sense, even necessary

to respond to the problem of inherited dominance. In the following section, I will provide a justification for and a definition of my usage of vulnerability as a concept before explaining its methodological implications. After that, the research project will be portrayed that employed vulnerability as a method while considering vulnerability's potential for the subject matter being researched. Vulnerability by its very nature comes with certain weaknesses or constraints. This is why the last major section will be dedicated to discussing vulnerability's limitations. The paper will be concluded by arguments why, in spite of that, this 'vulnerability of vulnerability' should be tolerated and striven for.

2. The reason for and the nature of vulnerability

My starting point in reflecting on the need for vulnerability in research may be an unusual one for the social sciences. Coming from a background of social anthropology and attempting to work on reconciliation from a non-normative position, I still found 'mission' to be the most adequate term to denote what I was dealing with as a subject and what I was ultimately involved in myself through my research. Christian mission I understand most fundamentally to be a mode of witnessing in a context of difference. A constructivist orientation engenders a keen awareness of the influence one's presence as a researcher has on the field one sets out to study. Being noticed as a researcher, being seen observing, asking certain questions – all of that lacks any sense of neutrality (citation – Charmaz?). It communicates something [check paramessages in Whiteman] and no matter how it is understood, as a researcher I *embody* a message. Therefore, carrying out research is a form of witnessing.

The extent to which the difference one encounters is to be called 'religious' or 'cultural' is up for debate (citation! Rynkievich? Masuzawa? Cavenaugh?) and of little importance here. What matters is that any engagement as a Christian with people outside the group(s) that one has close ties with in terms of one's ontological commitments and epistemological convictions, can appropriately be seen as intercultural theology in terms of "theological interaction" (Paas 2017:137). The differences I am faced with inevitably involve the perpetual need for learning about the other and a quest for understanding. This, then, is what research is about.

Many a case has been made for mission to be informed by vulnerability (e.g. Bosch 1992; Harries 2011; Hof 2016) – both to adequately communicate the gospel and to not abuse possibly inherited power. The latter necessity in particular but – in the context of the above – even the former may require researchers to also embrace vulnerability. Be it in intercultural theology or in the social sciences in general – self-critically examining one's potential power over people and seeking ways to reduce it can be warranted both for ethical and for methodological reasons.

Vulnerability shall here primarily be understood as striving for epistemic justice. This is particularly relevant for 'Westerners' in contexts of 'coloniality'. In relation to this language, I do concede the dangers of "mirroring and exacerbating the sort of cultural 'essentialism' that [decolonial] scholars deplore" (Vickers 2020:168). Nevertheless, non-dualist, non-secular knowledges of the Majority World are often being sidelined. Through the dominance of global, former colonial languages that are rooted in secular traditions, this is true even when people are able to make their voices heard *in* these languages. The question is, on whose terms they will be understood. Viveiros de Castro pointed out the fallacy of univocality – the assumption that a translation from another cultural-linguistic world would result in an "essential similarity [...] between what the Other and We are saying" (Viveiros de Castro 2004:10). If we want to avoid superficial or potentially misleading communication, we need to take steps towards understanding people on their own terms – both linguistically and experientially. Thus, it is required to embark on a journey of learning a people's languaculture that includes exposure to people's life worlds.

Furthermore, a kind of vulnerability that seeks epistemic justice requires a careful and considerate approach to using material resources. This is especially true in societies or contexts marked by stark socioeconomic differences and an emphasis on reciprocal or patron-client relationship patterns. It is always necessary to find an appropriate role when entering a different socio-cultural setting. Coming from a more affluent background, taking the role of a patron may well be what a community might expect of one (Davis and Dale 2024:62). However, even if this role is accepted, it must not be guided by naïve generosity that ends up being paternalistic and harmful (ibid.: 63). While few would take issue with that, being open-handed can also bear the risk of being detrimental to the building of relationships that are free from unhealthy dependency. Where there is the prospect of benefits (or the loss thereof) in the form of material resources, status or access to opportunities, the 'truthfulness' of what people are saying may be difficult to ascertain [citation: Trust and Vulnerability?]. Therefore, it may be advisable to seek vulnerability through restricting oneself to only using resources that are available locally, e.g. financial contributions (e.g. in a church service or for a funeral) that are 'normal', avoiding becoming a conduit for advancement, etc. How does such a posture engender vulnerability? To an extent it sidesteps expectations that people might have – and by refraining from using one's 'superior' resources one embraces relationships in which people are free to accept or to reject outsiders and their knowledge.

3. Methodological implications of vulnerability

In the course of conceptualising my research project, I had therefore become convinced that a high quality of my research data would require relating to and hearing from people on their respective cultural-linguistic terms. Since I saw white English and Afrikaans speakers at the church – like myself as a German – as

both being rooted in Eurocentric ontological traditions, I saw no problem with engaging with both these groups in English [sentence on my handling of multiple/hybrid/'coloured'/etc. identities?] or Afrikaans.[1] When it came to people of black African home languages, I was faced with a great diversity of backgrounds. To fully appreciate their perspectives on reconciliation in this multiracial church, not only my perceived whiteness might have distorted my data[2] but also my inability to relate to most of this diverse group 'on their terms'. Taking this realisation seriously strongly influenced the direction my study was going to take. If due to my own cultural-linguistic limitations I would not be able to adequately reflect the experiences of black people in the multiracial church, how then would I conduct research on post-apartheid reconciliation in an increasingly multiracial but in many respects white dominated church?

I drew two basic conclusions: Firstly, I chose to focus on white people's perspectives. I sought to establish to what extent white church members were cognisant of their 'cultural dominance' "in respect of language, cultural practices, theology and place" (Grohmann 2023:11 f.). This formed the backdrop to enquiring about white people's understanding of reconciliation in such a context and led to assessing their 'reconciliation practice'. A meta aim was to establish to what extent such reconciliation practice had the potential to contribute to 'decolonisation' – the dismantling of structural inequalities, both materially and epistemologically. Interviews with white congregants informed by robust participant observation in a variety of church activities formed the backbone of the study. Secondly, I made the learning of isiXhosa languaculture an integral part of my research project from the start. Through a relational approach and increasing exposure to Xhosa-dominated contexts I aimed at creating the conditions for a more contextually relevant engagement with people from a Xhosa (or the closely related Zulu) background. I accepted the limitation of not being able to take similar steps for all the black speech communities represented at the church. Choosing one – the dominant black African group in this part of South Africa – for me presented less an unfortunate restriction and more a rare and welcome opportunity to relate on a more profound level with at least one group represented at the church.

Furthermore, deciding to adopt a specific posture and research methodology of vulnerability was more than an optional or arbitrary – albeit well-argued – choice. Researching reconciliation in a context of white dominance, choosing vulnerability constituted a radical, provocative and potentially disconcerting approach. After all, similar to other suburban churches trying to foster racial reconciliation, the emphasis at my main research site as well was on inclusion (largely) through English and the sharing of resources with the underprivileged (Grohmann 2023: 6; 195 f.). Assuming significant cultural-linguistic differences and by implication,

1 I did offer to use Afrikaans in at least one interview situation but ended up conducting all interviews in English.

2 Explain Adida. Adida, Claire L., Ferree, Karen E., Posner, Daniel N., and Robinson, Amanda L. 2015. "Who's Asking? Interviewer Coethnicity Effects in African Survey Data." *Afro Barometer Working Paper No. 158*.

dominance in a multiracial but English-speaking environment, I needed to take steps to underscore my presuppositions with data. This is why I embarked on a subsidiary study in a cultural-linguistically different context. During the period of ethnographic research at my main research site, I regularly (round about monthly) attended the Sunday services of an isiXhosa-medium African Initiated Church (AIC) in a local township. There, I used participant observation and informal conversations with the pastor to learn about church and theology in a setting that was socio-politically and cultural-linguistically very different from contexts known to and frequented by the white research participants at my main research site. Becoming vulnerable as a researcher in this township context for me entailed making do with the linguistic and material resources that were the norm for the community that welcomed me in their midst. Practically, this meant using isiXhosa in all our interactions, including the times I was invited to speak or preach during the services, using public modes of transport or walk on foot and contributing to the church financially in accordance with amounts put forward by other church members. This subsidiary ethnographic study resulted in a small concept study of three isiXhosa-English pairs of terms that turned out to be of significance for my main research site. Learning about conceptual differences between the supposed equivalents in the two languages allowed for an additional justification of my research presuppositions. It also contributed to making my argument more compelling and giving my research findings more gravitas.

The last implication of adopting a vulnerability framework for my research project was the choice to work within a constructivist research paradigm, using grounded theory to generate and interpret data. Vulnerability in terms of its openness to different conceptual worlds embedded in and expressed by languacultures required the embracing of epistemological difference. This is in stark contrast to positivist approaches that ignore the contextual nature of hermeneutics [citation]. At the same time, it lends itself to ethnographic methods that emphasise "entering the lifeworld of others and observing how they make sense of the world around them" (Timmermans and Tavory 2011:498).

4. The research project

4.1 The process

Over a period of more than eight months, I carried out research at my main research site, an increasingly multiracial church belonging to the denomination Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church in South Africa.[3] I used participant observation both in Sunday services and small group church gatherings during the week (Grohmann 2023:59 f.). In addition, on the back of observations, interviews were conducted with the majority of white adult congregants as well as the black associate pastor, the latter for getting a complementary view from the church leadership. The data generated was concomitantly and progressively

3 Formerly known as Church of England in South Africa (CESA).

analysed using constructive grounded theory tools, like coding, categorising, memo writing, theoretical sampling and saturation (cf. Charmaz 2006).

During the same period, every 4-6 weeks, I attended and actively participated in Sunday services at an AIC congregation in a township context (Grohmann 2023:160 ff.). This church belongs to St John's Apostolic Faith Mission, a denomination that "incorporates practices from various streams of African religion and Protestant Christianity" (Thomas 1999:xv). Observations were discussed in informal conversations with the leader of that church.

Exposure to two very different church contexts and consistent learning of isiXhosa let to the isiXhosa-English concept study. Three pairs of terms were discussed with four isiXhosa home language speakers of different denominational, gender, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The interview data was transcribed and analysed in isiXhosa before another level of analysis was added and penned in English (Grohmann 2023:166 f.).

4.2 The findings

White research participants' awareness of their cultural dominance at the church was ambiguous.[4] On the one hand, socioeconomic inequalities were obvious to most and even the perception of the congregation as essentially being a 'white church' despite its ethnic heterogeneity and the desire of the church to become multicultural, was quite prominent. On the other hand, a dominance in the areas of languaculture and theology, where a strong Western English influence was unmistakable, was for many hard to make out. On the contrary, it was at times even justified and explained that orthodoxy was to take pre-eminence over cultural diversity, thus implying a separation of theology and culturally shaped epistemology.

Reconciliation in such a context was understood as moving towards equality and racial integration and involving both personal and structural aspects. There was a widespread desire to see the church embody unity across the – culturally and socioeconomically – diverse backgrounds the congregants came from. The strong notion, however, that transformation could and therefore should be achieved 'from within', limited the depth of potential change in structural inequalities: One was willing to accept "boundaries for possible change with respect to language and theology" (ibid.:194) in order to pursue the goal of making reconciliation happen within one's own, white dominated community rather than by joining contexts that were holistically dominated by black people. This ended up in change on terms that tend to be the norm for the vast majority of white people. It was enabled by 'leveraging' one's privilege for the benefit of others through sharing material and immaterial resources (like specialised knowledge). Symbolic actions served the same purpose, like occasional scripture readings or the (regular) singing of songs in African languages – integrated into the usual liturgy or style of the band.

4 This paragraph draws on Grohmann (2023:192 f.).

These aspects were more or less in line with how similar churches have tried to contribute to the 'reconciliation project' in South Africa (ibid.: 5 ff.), exceptional only perhaps in the degree of consistency and passion shown by the church leadership. Intriguing, however, was white people's reflections on possibilities of countering their socio-economic or epistemological dominance – where perceived – other than through inclusion. It is here where the notion of vulnerability resurfaces and takes a central place in relation to this paper's argument. Apart from the dominant, inclusion-oriented approaches for 'reconciliation', some lesser strategies could be identified that sought togetherness on the terms of 'the other': "[T]he two analytical categories 'Needing exposure' and 'Becoming vulnerable' represented a resistance against limited conceptualisations of unity that were mostly sought on languacultural, socio-economic and theological terms that took for granted that which is culturally Western or the norm for most white Christians in South Africa." The former conveyed "the conviction that the dominance of these norms made for an obstacle to actual, deeper unity and better understanding of the other and that power needed to be given up to overcome this hindrance." The latter acted on the realisation "that if socio-economic, racial and cultural divides are to be overcome for the sake of reconciliation, 'upliftment' strategies are not always the most effective ones". These two strategies therefore prioritised exposure to other cultural-linguistic, socio-economic and theological contexts over togetherness in one's comfort zone. The vulnerability necessitated by this approach arguably embodies a key strategy of self-depowering, of weakness, that could facilitate reconciliation to a greater extend.

This was reflected in the isiXhosa-English concept study in at least two ways. Firstly, the factor that was central in enabling this study in the first place was the perseverance in acquiring the necessary language (or languacultural) skills. Its significance lies less in the required determination than in becoming a child-like learner which the language acquisition entailed. Accepting to be 'nurtured' into a new languacultural community cultivates epistemological humility, which is the second way in which the concept study reflected the potential of vulnerability in enhancing reconciliation. In this – sometimes disconcerting – posture of a 'cultural apprentice', glimpses into a different ontology emerge which then have the potential to relativise one's own convictions by seeing things in a new light. The study brought to light contextual differences in understanding and using the concepts 'to preach', 'to pray' and (starting a) 'marriage' vs 'ukushumayela', 'ukuthandaza' and 'umtshato'. It indicated not only the problems associated with the translation of words when contexts differ (and particularly if this goes unnoticed), but also the potential for the seeking of greater equality if the risk of epistemological dominance is recognised. Often, the dissertation showed, cross-cultural understanding based on ostensibly sharing the same language is taken for granted. At the same time, it showed that measures can be taken to mitigate the severity of the problem up to the extent exemplified in this paper, the learning of another languaculture through exposure to the respective context.

It was concluded that at the main research site, the intention had indeed been to reduce structural inequalities in people's bid to further reconciliation. Due to ignoring their extent, however, the quest for reconciliation can involve "stipulating conditions for such togetherness that in some respects privilege one group over others" (Grohmann 2023:201). The scope of transformation is therefore partly contingent on the context and its inherent limitations where change is supposed to happen. Especially the concept study part of the thesis highlighted the potential to transgress such limitations. It was seen in seeking change, i.e. structurally transformed, 'decolonised' relationships on the terms of the other. This means including the possibility of realising it *outside* of one's community, *outside* of one's usual linguistic and theological framework, by making oneself vulnerable to contexts, customs and practices that are the norm for others.

The same is true on a meta-level for research itself. Not taking into account and dealing with epistemological inequalities or different cultural-linguistic worlds not only risks accepting injustices, it can also be detrimental to the quality of one's research data and findings. Adopting the above-defined stance of vulnerability in missiological research attenuates epistemological biases and enables more thorough analysis of people's lived realities.

5. Limitations of vulnerability in cross-cultural research

Its advantages notwithstanding, researching from a positionality of vulnerability comes by its very nature with some inherent weaknesses. Here, I will not be referring to the time investment and lifestyle choices necessary when learning a black South African language as an adult in urban South Africa. These are commitments the researcher may be required to make. Rather, the focus shall lie on the limitations of vulnerability in cross-cultural research in relation to the scope and the expected validity of the findings.

Under 'Methodological implications of vulnerability' I described how I had to limit the study of reconciliation at my main research site to the perspectives of white congregants. This, of course, had its own analytical value. Nevertheless, with strong emphasis on non-racialism, inclusion and representativeness in post-apartheid South Africa [citations], this choice required justification. To claim that I will not be able to study everyone and *do justice* to representing their views *adequately,* raised questions both from white people and people of colour. The reason here was not only the fear that some voices might be overly represented, and others excluded. To some extent, this vulnerable research approach also undermined what was taken for granted in my research field. In the words of a white research participant:

> I think the [black] students who come to the church are fairly good in English. They study in English; they write their exams in English. So, I don't think it is too much of a problem to have to contextualise it [i.e. make theological teaching relevant to a certain cultural context; note from the author]. (Grohmann 2023: 184)

Choosing to carry out research from a positionality of vulnerability potentially also impacts the validity of the findings as expected or desired by third parties. Since the core reason for vulnerability in attitude and methodology is the awareness of the fact that we attempt to describe reality through empirical research, this is necessarily "mediated through the filters of language, meaning-making and social context" (Oliver 2012:374). This implies that the representation of our data cannot be objective, even though in my research project, for instance painstakingly tried to ground my theory in data. Another implication is "that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we [...] construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (Charmaz 2006:10; italics in original). The starting point is epistemological humility – working on the assumption that our own perception of reality is neither absolute not objective nor neutral. It finds expression in the "analyst's commitment to representing *all* understanding, all knowledge(s) and action(s) of those studied—as well as their own—as *perspectival*" (Clarke 2005:5; italics in original).

For research such as the isiXhosa-English concept study, this vulnerability-driven paradigm implies another limitation. If the description of reality can ontologically not be more than perspectival, the same must be true for the comparison of cultural-linguistic concepts. As a student of isiXhosa, it had been recommended that I have my data analysis and ultimate findings 'validated' by a Xhosa home language speaker or academic (cf. Grohmann 2023:166). After careful consideration, I realised that this would have gone against the grain of my interpretative research methodology and purported a positivist universality which the very adoption of vulnerability in research sought to expose as misguided. Instead, I had two English speakers validate my findings who were well acquainted with isiXhosa but rooted in Eurocentric ontological traditions. Their assistance helped in answering the central question, "How can the three isiXhosa terms under investigation be better understood in (Western-based) English?" (Grohmann 2023:167). I did draw on advice by Xhosa people regarding hard-to-understand phrases and a grammatically correct translation of quotes into English. These discussions were held in isiXhosa. However, proper member validation of my actual findings would compounded the problem I tried to highlight with the study: Validating my results in English would have counteracted "my assumptions of the validity and legitimacy of non-English languacultural categories" (ibid:168). Using isiXhosa for validation, though, would merely have enlarged my data set with the resulting requirement of renewed analysis and interpretation.

Consciously adopting vulnerability in research may therefore lead to studies which are more limited in scope and handle *ex ante* validation differently than what would usually be expected. Employing a vulnerable approach to research can therefore lead to – or bring to the fore – the researcher's own vulnerability in face of his research field and the academic community. Acceptance of the work consequently rests on clearly communicating assumptions and methodological choices, transparency in the research process and to what extent the researcher

succeeds in "construct[ing] an argument that will be found compelling in light of the data [...] used" (ibid.:68). In the case of my study, this meant inviting research participants and the wider community at my main research site for an *ex post* engagement with my findings. I also provided opportunity for isiXhosa speakers to discuss my concept study conclusions with me.

6. Conclusion: Embracing the vulnerability of vulnerability

- authority isn't in the findings themselves (neither in main nor subsidiary study)
- findings are a perspective – aims:
  - main study:
    - to offer a compelling argument
  - subsidiary study:
    - taking note of these 'semantic possibilities' can expand people's horizons and encourage similar forms of vulnerability in cross-cultural research and ministry
    - only 'seeing a part' shows need for ongoing cultural-linguistic learning

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