



# The Writer's Café: Foregrounding ubuntu, decolonisation and deconstruction

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## Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on the experiences of facilitating postgraduate and undergraduate seminars in the field of sociology through a decolonial forum we term the Writer's Café. The paper represents our attempt at grappling with issues of power by negotiating, distinguishing and finding our collective and acceptable regimes of truth through this forum. The frameworks of ubuntu and decolonisation became integral in the conceptualisation of the Writer's Café, as well as its implementation. As researchers in the fields of sociology of health and sexualities and gender studies, the Writer's Café offers opportunities to unpack the social and cultural bases of the subjects of both fields of study. Key to this analysis of the Writer's Café is the emphasis on agency, inequality, change, and understanding connections between epistemologies. As an African philosophy and practice, ubuntu offers the student in sociology an integrated experience of two fields of study that are deeply embedded in the experience of everyday life while addressing African realities. We use critical reflection as a method of inquiry by situating ourselves as research participants, using examples from the Writer's Café, as well as a selective review of literature on critical pedagogy and ubuntu to draw out the interconnectedness of both fields and their implications for decolonisation and a responsive pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, Gender, Sexuality, Sociology, Health, Ubuntu

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## Introduction: The Writer's Café and decolonisation

### Vignette 1

*Studies have shown that gender-related inequalities in health become more visible by adulthood. These inequalities are worsened by the politicisation of health and the gendered nature of health system organisations, which respond to and reflect broader gender inequalities, power struggles and hegemony in society. The fields of sociology of gender and sexuality and health comprise cultural, social bases of gender and how they affect illness and well-being experience, as well as access to healthcare. As illnesses produce and reproduce human societies, we adapt and develop unique ways of viewing and making sense of our experiences within our local communities. We ask, what is the value of a sociological perspective in understanding the gendered nature of health and health inequalities? Why should we bother researching these issues? How does this matter more now than ever? Are there inherent values in caring about perspectives? How do we identify other stakeholders who might have a say in the matter? These are some of the sociological issues we grappled with and deconstructed at the Writer's Café.*

To what extent might a critical reflection contribute to knowledge production in the fields of sociology of health and sexuality and gender? This section highlights how, within higher education, critical reflection and collective spaces in the spirit of ubuntu could potentially contribute to decolonisation and “knowing” in sociology. Using a teaching and learning project known as the Writer's Café, a weekly departmental seminar, we reflect on the ways in which sociology and its tools aid the deconstruction and unlearning of implicit assumptions while, at the same time, enabling identification of pathways through which we affirm debates that work against us. A good number of debates and discourses of decolonisation and postcolonial teaching/research involve experts and other thought leaders, particularly from the Global North. While the work done by researchers and academics in the Global South has been ignored or mostly unacknowledged by proponents of decolonisation

on the continent, indigenous researchers, academics and students, are constantly seeking ways of dismantling hegemony while, at the same time, becoming human and seeking the truth by negotiating and re-negotiating acceptable discourses that constitute truth (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017).

This paper is informed by our experiences of facilitating postgraduate and undergraduate seminars in the field of sociology. The paper represents our attempt at grappling with issues of power by negotiating, distinguishing and finding our collective and acceptable regimes of truth through the Writer's Café. Foucault notes that regimes of truth are products of scientific discourse and institutions that are constantly reinforced or redefined through the education system. However, in order to challenge power, one has to detach the power of truth from the various forms of cultural, social and economic hegemony within which it operates at the present time (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017). While we did not set out to study the experiences of participants in the seminar, understanding its epistemological underpinnings, the context of our embeddedness and its relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic, our positionality as health and sexuality researchers and the intersection of our scholarship and the experiences that were shared became grounds for a critical reflection. As Bassot suggests, "research should arise from personal experience as the researcher will be more inclined towards appreciating and learning from the experience" (Bassot, 2015: 2).

Bassot further explains that reflection, in all its ramifications, involves the ability to process emotions and feelings that, in turn, foster greater self-awareness, the ability to learn from experiences (both positive and negative), and the role of writing in reflection, which aids in bringing assumptions to the surface, etc. Our approach to this reflection paper merges the African philosophy and practice of ubuntu with the decolonisation of our sociology seminar to facilitate self-awareness, increase learning from feedback, and bring assumptions to the surface through our collective reflection on our practices. As we co-create and facilitate a constructive space where students and faculty are able to debate and mirror their views and arguments, power is exercised, not possessed. Through our collective analysis of issues in South African decolonisation, we confront issues of agency, inequality, social injustice, change, and the connections between epistemologies. Through these processes, power is constituted through our collectively accepted forms of knowledge and truth (Letseka, 2014; Koenane & Olatunji, 2017).

Decolonisation as a global project manifests across time and place in various

ways, and the experience of engaging with students in our context, while similar, is different from other academic contexts in the Global South that are grappling with decolonisation. For example, Stein and Andreotti (2016: 5) noted that decolonisation efforts in higher education in Latin America have focused on growth in state-sponsored and autonomous intercultural universities that emphasise indigenous epistemologies and the importance of horizontal engagements in collaboration with local communities. They argued that, while these efforts are great, they replicate and reproduce an epistemological hierarchy where Eurocentric knowledges are presumed to be universally relevant and valuable, “while non-Western knowledges are either patronizingly celebrated as local culture, commodified or appropriated for Western gain, or else not recognized as knowledge at all” (Stein & Andreotti, 2016: 6).

Our goal at the Writer’s Café is to liberate students’ voices through a deconstruction of social issues by facilitating their understanding of sociological tools such as theories and methods. We do this through the application of ubuntu thinking alongside an interpretive interactionist method. An interpretive interactionist method is a process that enables us to examine the process we utilise in making sense of our world and giving meaning to our realities as African scholars in the Global South (Denzin, 1989; Chase, 1992). This process involves a self-narrative moment where each participant narrates an important event in their lives (Gergen & Gergen, 1984). Through these self-narratives, we understand the truths of students’ experiences and make sense of them through our own interpretations—prioritising the contexts of occurrence and worldviews, socialisations and unique lenses that shaped them. Bruner (2004) argues that experiences of this kind are often arranged in sequence. In addition, these narratives explain causation, make sense of personal experiences and give meaning to personal events.

In traditional seminar spaces, students in the Global South are encouraged to give up their narrative for that of others—often experts, subject-matter authorities and gatekeepers in the field. In such instances, they absorb every analysis of issues or discourse thrust upon them while withdrawing into the safety of their “illegitimate perspectives”, which creates a sense of hopelessness, victimhood and disempowerment. Oftentimes, knowledge production within these spaces bifurcates its generation, within research and practice, with insights derived from practice-related interactions, which students often regard as inadmissible informal knowledge. However, the Writer’s Café is a space where knowledge does not assume the position of power (Foucault, 1982). In what follows, we outline how the Writer’s

Café became a space where students and faculty are reoriented towards rejecting false consciousness, bias, agendas, positions and ideologies that oppress us (Heywood, 1994: 85).

## The Writer's Café: Ubuntu in practice

### Vignette 2

*Decolonisation is a priority in South Africa. Every year, universities in the country fund decolonisation projects. They invite scholars to talk about what they are working on and efforts made towards decolonising their scholarship and pedagogy. Students also get invited to these seminars. Universities are providing platforms where faculty and students can engage or exchange ideas, but while some academics are seeking emancipatory and communal ways to decolonise, indigenise and engage with the African struggle, others are decolonising through an adaptation of Western ideologies. What does our decolonisation space at the Writer's Café look like? It is a place where we collectively decolonise our minds as scholars through collective criticism by assessing our heritage and culture from colonialists and ancestors alike, dismantling the residues of the past while maintaining its memory and building new truths. This process leads to transformation and opens up new possibilities.*

A large majority of decolonisation efforts in higher education involve redesigning curricula and the introduction of inclusive pedagogies, led mostly by higher education leadership and administration. The contribution of academics and students contesting oppressive discourses often goes unacknowledged. This has been a persistent issue for students within graduate schools, as their voices remain unheard. As academics teach and theorise in classrooms, biases and ideas are projected, a practice that places students at a disadvantage as passive recipients of knowledge. While this tradition is intended to produce counter-hegemony, it becomes a causal pathway through which social structures are legitimised due to inherent power imbalances within the unequal teacher-student relationship of dominance or submission (Heywood, 1994: 101).

Thus, when we think about the Writer's Café, we consider two things: first, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the site where the Writer's Café takes place every week, as not only a dialogical space but a "safe" one, owing to its history of struggle against discrimination, hegemony, oppression, and marginalisation (Maseko, 1994). Secondly, we consider the students, who are predominantly multicultural and diverse in terms of gender, nationality, and religious, racial and socioeconomic group. A combination of these aspects produces a progressive dialogical space where participants are not only "seen" but "heard" and understood. The Writer's Café operates in a sociology department within a multiracial public university that was established through the 1959 University Education Act. UWC was established to accommodate coloured students who were not allowed at non-ethnic institutions during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Research has shown that some of the staff and members of the governing body of the institution were loyal to the Black Consciousness Movement (Thomas, 2005).

From a decolonial point of view, the Writer's Café seminar format and our unique ubuntu-style process of engagement reflect and respond to the history of UWC. These are significant for a few reasons. Firstly, deconstructing sociological theories and prior knowledge through a reflective process and within a space that places no pressure on the students helps them unlearn some of the things they learned prior to the seminar. Secondly, it fosters self-interrogation, enabling a sort of disciplinary awareness and skill mapping of the kind that allows students to take stock of the utility and relevance of sociological knowledge. This process helps students come to terms with the thoughts, ideas and opinions they had about human societies or social groups, which they had to do away with in order to learn the truth for themselves through the Writer's Café. Thirdly, letting everyone voice their opinion without fear exemplifies and espouses ubuntu fairness.

For example, in designing the Writer's Café, we took cognisance of socio-cultural and political processes that create power imbalances in traditional seminars. In the past few years of decolonisation efforts in higher education in South Africa, the words "Africanisation" and "ubuntu" have become greatly rooted in most institutions' discourse. This has to do with the fact that exhibiting compassion and humanity could potentially ease trauma and feelings of victimisation or vengeance. These words now symbolise equality and inclusion. In other words, regardless of our social hierarchy, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, creed, rank or academic status, the possibility of being wrong exists, but sociology aids our

understanding and analysis of the issues (Metz, 2011). They refer to being a “part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world” (Metz, 2011: 548).

As an institutional goal, ubuntu is the spirit of interconnectedness—the capacity to affirm our humanity through recognising and celebrating others who are different from us while maintaining a flexible sense of self that allows us to mirror each other for the purpose of co-creating shared values. Ubuntu was an underlying philosophy of the Writer's Café, a space where decolonisation and deconstruction are not embedded solely in us as academics but bestowed upon students as well. This is important to recognise and assert in a university such as the one described above. The events of the 2015–2017 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements changed the nature of student–lecturer interactions. It became clear during this period that knowledge is not only embodied but is transformative when collectively shared. It can be argued that the 2015–2017 period of student protests was a battle not just with decolonisation but with the praxis of ubuntu.

## **Ubuntu, decolonisation and the cultural construction of inclusion**

At the core of our engagement with students at the Writer's Café is ubuntu, an African practice and worldview that is grounded in humanness and dignity (Metz, 2007). Metz argues that ubuntu is regarded as the very essence of true and authentic human existence. He conceptualises ubuntu as “typical human beings having dignity by virtue of their capacity for community, understood as the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them, where human rights violations are egregious degradations of this capacity” (Metz, 2007: 536). Ubuntu highlights that one's aim in life should be to exhibit humanness, which is done by valuing collective relationships with others.

This captures what humans should value in life, as profoundly expressed in “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” or in an Igbo proverb “*Onye ch'à ya s' ya èbiri*”, translated as “tolerance is a necessity for communal living”. For instance, the traditional Igbo culture in West Africa recognises ubuntu and inclusive philosophy. This is evident in their traditional institutions, which comprise the extended family, Umunna (clan), Umuada (female offspring born in a town but married out), the Okpara system (eldest male), age grades (assembly of the people) and Amala (council of elders). These institutions are often taken into account during meetings,

mediation or conflict resolution (Egenti & Okoye, 2016). Ubuntu is a philosophy that is constituted by humanness, personhood and selfhood. *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* emerges from an ongoing and interlinked process of developing our personhood. Drawing on Metz (2007), ubuntu goes beyond claiming that human survival or well-being is dependent on others. Within this framework, ubuntu mirrors what humans should value most in life, with regard to values, to become a (whole) person, a (higher) self or an authentic human being.

The authenticity in being our higher selves here denotes the exhibition of humanness and being explicit in how we relate to others. Ubuntu can be thought of as being a shared humanity, which is brought about by entering more deeply into community with others (Shutte, 2009). Shutte (2009: 5) notes that, generally, ubuntu represents a more inclusive philosophy—one whose goal is personal fulfilment but excludes the kind of selfishness that is inherent in Eurocentrism. Inclusion needs to be situated within the context of ubuntu. An inclusive ubuntu worldview or African philosophy of humanism is one that values human interconnectedness and is devoid of one-sided, individualistic ideas of success or instant gratification, which have been identified as drawbacks of most Eurocentric philosophy (Gade, 2012).

An ubuntu worldview is defined by inclusive, constructive engagement with other people. Gade (2012) suggests that it is a life in community with others with the goal of transformation, growth and social change. We attempted to achieve ubuntu ideals through the Writer's Café. Returning to ubuntu at the Writer's Café means that even though we have different identities, agendas and narratives, when we convene within that dialogical space, we become aware of our biases and recognise our assumptions and how our emotions define perceptions of others. In return, that awareness enables us to see the limitations of our interpretation of engagements as well as how our history, culture and social backgrounds blind us to other people's truths.

At the Writer's Café, ubuntu is expressed within the context of how our collective dialogic space influences participants positively. The advent of colonialism and Eurocentrism substituted African communal values with materialism, individualism and greed. In the words of Ehlers (2017: 5), "A person might make decisions on their own out of free will about themselves and how their decision affects the community, but a community who makes decisions, collectively validated decisions, acts on collective wisdom and consensus". The implication of this for the Writer's Café is that the group, regardless of the differences that exist, holds a shared understanding and collective values, thus making moving together possible.



## **Deconstructing and reconstructing gender, sexuality and health in the Global South**

Given the heteronormative context under which we operate in the South African higher education landscape, it is often challenging to address issues relating to diverse genders and sexualities. Culture, religion, prejudices and stereotypes immediately come into play, often undermining any efforts to introduce debate and alternative views of sexuality and gender. The Writer's Café thus becomes an important forum and method to introduce difficult and challenging oppositional views relating to diversity and inclusion. We use this space and the opportunities that the framework of ubuntu practice and ethics offers to collectively engage and unlearn. The fields of sociology of health and sexuality and gender are constantly developing and shifting. Within the Writer's Café, these shifts are interrogated through self-narratives and robust conversations that dismantle binaries and how knowledge is produced.

In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualised health as a product of multiple social, economic, behavioural and genetic factors (WHO, 2008). By 1999, after due consultations to include indigenous perspectives, health was reconceptualised as “both a collective and individual intergenerational process which comprises a holistic perspective that constitutes four distinct shared dimensions of life which include: the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical” (Mji, 2019). Linking these key aspects, Mji argues that “health and survival manifests itself on multiple levels where the past, the present and the future co-exist simultaneously” (Mji, 2019: 1). This means that teaching, theorising and doing research within the field of sociology of health entails deconstructing, uniting and clarifying variations or differences in epistemologies.

Sociology of health draws from biomedicine, public health, psychology and social work. Within the discipline of sociology, health/medical sociology intersects with gender, sexuality, family, environment, labour and most sub-disciplinary areas within the field because of its focus on the social context of health and the political economy of healthcare. It has been argued that within the field of sociology of health and social determinants, gender and sexuality provide key analytical lenses through which one can understand the causal pathways of inequalities in health, its access and illness experiences (Wharton, 2009). Gender and sexuality provide ways of looking at health in relation to their effect or expression and how they affect health-seeking behaviour or health outcomes among populations. Just like health,

gender and sexuality operate at ecological and multi-dimensional levels—individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Wharton, 2009: 7).

Focusing on the interconnection between health, gender and sexuality allows for the binaries of access and lack of access, justice and discrimination, and inclusion and exclusion to be disrupted. In a world where humans see themselves as connected, as we seek to maintain in the Writer's Café, even the binary of student and teacher is dismantled. These binaries exist to govern and bring "order" and often mark what is "normal" and what is not. In many cases, the values upon which these binaries are based are external to how people in specific contexts understand themselves. What is considered healthy in one society may be deemed unhealthy in another. Similarly, an orientation towards multiple genders or same-sex sexuality may be frowned upon in one context and considered a norm in another. Thus, to bridge these gaps in knowledge, familiarity and contexts, the concept of ubuntu, as an ethic, philosophy and practice rooted in African contexts, becomes useful. Tarkang, Pencille and Komesuor (2018) argue that ubuntu opens up space for justice, inclusion, acceptance, feelings of safety and moving away from stigmatisation, particularly in relation to HIV in Africa.

This is evident in people's perceptions of risk with regard to sexual health and access to healthcare. Sexual health unmask the connection between sexuality and health at many levels. At an individual level, there is already an assumption and understanding that one's sexual health is connected with and sometimes determined by another's or others'. However, this lack of agency or self-determination with regard to sexual health is rarely considered. Women's vulnerability to sexual health is not determined solely by their actions but also the circumstances under which they exist. Studies on women who have sex with women and bisexual women show how access to women's sexual health information is limited and heteronormative, often putting women at risk because of environmental restrictions, prejudice, attitudes from health care workers or even basic lack of general knowledge (Paschen-Wolff, Reddy, Matebeni, Southey-Swartz & Sandfort, 2019). Understanding the interconnections between individuals is key to understanding health, including at an institutional level.

When transgender people seek healthcare in public institutions, they are met with many prejudices. While the underlying notion of gender as binary is increasingly disrupted, there remains a strong hold at the institutional level on how society can be restructured without the gender regime. Starting from the registering of babies

at birth, a child's sex is assigned and marked according to how people in power or authority see that small body. That marker grows into a gender as the person develops, giving one an identity and a particular relationship to the state. When transgender people or intersex people present themselves to the state, for various reasons (including getting an identity document, applying for a bank account, seeking medical care, or being in conflict with the law), they are forced to fit into a box that prescribes male/female or man/woman. A combination, fluidity or existence beyond these categories is not catered for. The demand is that the body must present in a way that conforms to its assigned sex. As with the sexual health of lesbians or gay men when seeking healthcare, the agency of transgender and intersex persons is stripped away. This encounter with institutions is violent. These difficulties in engaging with the state make it impossible for transgender, intersex, and many lesbians, bisexuals and gay men to seek medical care (Müller, 2017).

### **Liberating students' voices and negotiating health and sexuality**

Self-narrative enables the emancipatory potential of ubuntu to be implemented at the Writer's Café. Through these narratives, we are able to deconstruct each participant's experiences and arrive at a collective truism. At one session of the Writer's Café, we met with twelve graduate students to facilitate the telling of personal stories that expressed our challenges with the healthcare system and how sociological knowledge can aid our understanding of such issues. Each participant made notes and had five minutes to share their experiences. Participants chose to share experiences of health (seeking) behaviours, their broader determinants and intersections; incidents where their personal biases, health beliefs or socialisation prevented them from seeking care or continuing treatment; and incidents where they had to seek biomedical intervention after being persuaded to do so by their spouse or where they had to convince their spouses to seek care.

After each participant had shared their experiences, we attempted to deconstruct all the stories by identifying and questioning dominant discourses and tried to find an alternative perspective. We also tried to uncover the extent to which every identified discourse supported the dominant health beliefs, biases, norms and interests. Such dominant health beliefs and interests are often regarded as unquestioned truths, which advances the interests of one group over the other or maintains hegemony and inadvertently breeds social inequality that shapes or drives inequities in health. One

such dominant discourse that had infiltrated the thinking of two heterosexual married men is the notion that their wives are their caregivers and (pseudo) physicians.

While this assumption can help in advancing interpersonal health promotion within the context of spousal support, studies have shown that social arrangements driven by this kind of belief have the potential to impact negatively on health outcomes among married heterosexual people, more so for the women (Molarius & Janson, 2002). This is due to gender power dynamics and hegemony in marriages, which perpetuate health inequality by affecting access to resources and determining who controls resources and how such resources are utilised for health benefits. Oftentimes, because these assumptions are taken for granted, they continue to work against health outcomes/goals and social justice objectives. Illuminating and scrutinising these dominant discourses—which, in our context, were ingrained and unquestionable health beliefs—helped us destabilise them and co-construct the truth.

Fook (2005) argues that dominant discourses lose their power and dominance when they are exposed and questioned. In addition, self-narratives were used at the Writer's Café to foster a narrative of becoming and seeking truth (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017: 84). This ensures fairness, harmony and truth. At one of the sessions, one female participant talked about having to persuade her husband to go for annual medical check-ups, while another male participant described his wife as his “caregiver”, adding that her marital obligations include being his “personal physician” and making referrals to his GP (persuading him to seek biomedical intervention). This brought attention to poor self-health assessment, interpersonal health promotion and how social support can contribute to an understanding of health-seeking behaviour and, in essence, the differences in life expectancy or mortality between men and women.

Furthermore, her analysis raised awareness of how gender power dynamics and norms perpetuate health inequality by disempowering individuals while preventing others from seeking care. The increased responsibility and expectation put women in heterosexual relationships in a more vulnerable position while worsening health outcomes for men. It is worth noting that participants were informed that the purpose of having the Writer's Café as a dialogic space is not to legitimise their health beliefs and other normative practices that influence access to health or its resources but to explicate their experiences and analyse them sociologically in order for individuals to develop new ways of being, doing and thinking about health and its intersections.

Also, disempowering elements of participants' experiences are often identified at the Writer's Café and reconstructed accordingly.

Another vibrant discussion ensued in one of the sessions. During this discussion, Mr B, a West African married Muslim, declared that as part of his responsibility as a man and husband, he insists on going with his wife for her health checks. He never agrees to get himself checked because he believes there is nothing Western medicine can do for him. Prayer, or taking herbs, is what he believes in. Sharing such personal practices of health and care is not uncommon in the Writer's Café. As a way of responding and engaging with Mr B, Ms M, a married West African woman and self-proclaimed born-again Christian, shared that her doctor was a gay man and that her husband was not very happy about the doctor's sexuality and asked her to change doctors. At this time, Mr B interjected, declaring that he would never let a gay male doctor or lesbian doctor touch his wife. The discussion brought about by these narratives raised a number of issues that are worth exploring and have become significant collective moments of engagement within the Writer's Café.

It has become accepted that in most parts of Africa, deviations from heterosexuality and heteronormativity are considered "unAfrican" and ungodly. As such, many countries on the continent continue to enforce stringent colonial laws against homosexuality, some even imposing death, stoning or long-term jail sentences. Popular notions around homosexuality disregard forms of knowledge and the existence of diverse sexualities and genders in precolonial Africa. While it is believed that Africa is homophobic (and transphobic), Tamale (2011) corrects this notion by arguing that homophobia did not emanate from Africa. How this imposition of norms and laws about sexuality become ingrained into social narratives about what it means to be African and be in Africa is beyond the scope of this paper. Most urgent is what we do every day in the learning space to dismantle ideas about exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination, and subtle or even overt violence.

What we learn and how we learn play a significant role in what we are socialised to be and understand. Negative ideas around gay men and lesbians are not without context. As already mentioned, many African people are socialised to believe that heterosexuality is synonymous with what it means to be African. Thus, a negation of gay men, lesbians, and transgender and intersex persons is regarded as something that contributes to the continuation of a society that already values heterosexuality and heteronormativity. How, then, do we intervene in a learning space that is similarly heteronormative? Msibi (2013) argues that while the South African higher education

space attempts to address transformation through race, it remains untransformed when it comes to other identities. “The lack of appropriate, positive teaching on queer issues in higher education greatly inhibits a broadly inclusive transformation agenda” (Msibi, 2013: 68), thus contributing to making the space homophobic and transphobic.

Reflecting on these experiences and how they are told by each participant and subsequently jointly deconstructed and reconstructed not only validates the participants’ experiences, but the entire process empowers each participant to open up to their capacity to evolve into active agents within their social worlds—a process of decolonising the mind (Fook & Morley, 2005). The Writer’s Café opens up space for participants to interrogate their own cultural assumptions while recognising African experiences, knowledge and perspectives. These experiences illuminate the diverse influences that participants carry with them throughout their graduate careers. While these may sometimes be discriminatory, marginalising and work against equity, in the space, we collectively negotiate new ways of crafting how to be together as humans. In this process, we also collectively deconstruct and reconstruct some implicitly held biases and health beliefs.

To uncover these experiences and biases and allow for a process of relearning, alternative spaces that break down hierarchies and barriers to learning and knowledge production have to be created. Through the Writer’s Café, we assert the importance of such pedagogical methods and claim a space where decolonisation and liberation are possible. In addition, using ubuntu as the theoretical foundation of the Writer’s Café fostered fairness and harmony while liberating participants from normative health beliefs and understandings of sexuality and enabling them to reconstruct “new” truths.

The Writer’s Café is diverse and multicultural. There were 25 participants of various nationalities, genders and ages. There were seven doctoral students, five master’s students, ten honours students and three members of faculty in the seminars. In terms of age, among the doctoral students, four were between 47 and 55 years old. Among the master’s students, four were younger than 40 years and one was older than 40 years. Among the honours students, those older than 23 were in the majority. Among the faculty, the youngest was under 40 years old. All faculty had PhDs specialising in gender, sexuality, social movement and health.

In terms of gender and nationality, all the doctoral students were males from Zimbabwe, Uganda, DRC and West Africa. Four of the five master’s students were

females—one from Rwanda, two from West Africa and two from South Africa. Eight of the ten honours students were females and South Africans. To summarise, the demography of the Writer's Café represents the profile of most sociology departments in South Africa at the moment. Sociology departments are becoming more diverse and multicultural. However, the limited number of LGBTQIA+ participants would seem to suggest that inclusion remains a challenge.

## Conclusion

This paper presents our attempt to reflect on how we implemented the ubuntu framework to conceptualise decolonisation and knowing in sociology in South Africa. Decolonisation, in this context, is applied to the Writer's Café, a departmental seminar at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, which is a diverse and multicultural environment. At the Writer's Café, interpretive narrative accounts of participants are collectively engaged with and used to formulate new structures and discourses that are empowering to everyone. What is it about the Writer's Café that makes it different from other seminars? What kind of experience did ubuntu foster within participants, and how is this different from decolonisation efforts in other contexts? These are some of the questions we've grappled with throughout the seminars and in our attempt to ensure continuity.

Illuminating hidden discourses within the interconnectedness of health, gender and sexuality allowed us to develop discursive ways of reconstructing and doing health. For most of the participants, it helped them model new ways of thinking, talking or assessing their well-being, that of their loved ones and the burden their behaviours place on the health system. For others, it enabled them to build an active understanding of their (unmet) health needs and the intersection between health, gender, sexuality, age, place, culture and religion, otherwise known as social determinants of health (SDOH). The Writer's Café also empowered participants to become knowledgeable of their agency and choices and to develop new ways of resisting their participation in dominant discourses that disempower, deepen inequities in access to healthcare or produce poor health outcomes.

At a time when indigenous knowledge systems are being looked down upon, there is a need for relational ethics of the kind that emphasises "relationships of interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, relationality, community friendliness, harmonious relationships and other-regarding actions such as compassion and

actions that are likely to be good for others” (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Ubuntu provided a framework for counteracting internalised, hegemonic and Eurocentric values within decolonisation efforts and reconstructing, as well as replacing them with new truths. The Writer’s Café was intended as a space for the achievement of this goal. Decolonisation is a process that is currently evolving. It is about reconstructing new discourses and structures.



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