CHAPTER 4

# A POSITIVE, AFRICAN ETHICAL APPROACH TO COLLECTING AND INTERPRETING DRAWINGS: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

All research is regulated by ethical principles that try to ensure that research participants are not harmed in any way by their participation in a research project. Universities and research bodies typically have robust ethical procedures and ethical codes that try to guarantee that researchers do ethical research. Ethical bodies at these institutions often have the power to enforce ethical requirements, and this results in researchers being coerced into ethical conduct that follows a trajectory of 'what I should do', rather than one of 'what, ideally, can I do?' Although we concur with the appropriate principles that ethical bodies legislate, this is not the focus of our chapter. We argue instead that ethical researchers need to be 'what-ideally-can-I-do'-minded. To this end, we focus on the notion of positive ethics (Bush, 2010; Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb, 2005) or commitment to interpreting the ethical imperative of 'do least harm' as, instead, 'do most good' (Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008, p. 114) and on the concept of African ethics (Murove, 2009b) or the normative, black African moral traditions and beliefs aimed at achieving fullness of humanity (Murove, 2009a; Prozesky, 2009; Shutte, 2009). Writing as we do from the perspective of three white women, we acknowledge, as Lather (2004) and Jansen (2009) did, that we could be on shaky ground in relation to taking up the idea of African ethics. However, in this chapter, we argue that researchers who use drawing as a methodology are ideally positioned to conduct research that both interrogates and celebrates the principles of positive, African ethics.

## POSITIVE, AFRICAN ETHICS

We conflate notions of 'positive ethics' and 'African ethics' in this chapter. Although this has not been explicitly done in the literature, and even though our intention is not to simplify two profound philosophies, we fuse them because of the compatibility of their premises and visions. To illuminate this harmony, we briefly define each.

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*Positive Ethics*

In essence, the concept of positive ethics speaks to an ethical fidelity that is integral to the researcher's *way of being* and not a way of doing as enforced by ethics committees (Handelsman et al., 2005). This way of being is rooted in personal values that are aligned with a deep commitment to the well-being of others and to transformational research (Mertens, 2009). What flows from this is an ethical integrity that is much more than an attempt to avoid lawsuits or censure.

An allegiance to ethical ideals is embedded in a deep awareness of personal and professional values and also the societal forces that shape these values. Positive ethics is not possible for anyone unless she or he confronts and articulates personal, professional, and socio-cultural values and considers what the possible social impact of a research agenda will be. In other words, positive ethics is intertwined with reflexivity (as is much visual research).

Implicit in positive ethics are the four core ethical principles of respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice (Bush, 2010).

*African Ethics*

African ethics also speaks to a way of being that informs the ways of doing. This way of being embraces a number of core values, including that of Ubuntu or reciprocal, respectful relatedness, community, and generosity (Mokwena, 2007; Prozesky, 2009). These values ideally encourage Africans towards acts that promote community-building and human dignity, and towards a fundamental respect of, and for, persons. These values also teach human interdependence and an awareness that humans do not have the luxury of acting only in their own interest (Munyaka & Motlhabi, 2009). Although the idea of Ubuntu values has been tainted by forces of colonisation, Apartheid, urbanisation, and the HIV&AIDS pandemic (Mkhize, 2006; Munyaka & Motlhabi, 2009) and, as Lather (2004) and Jansen (2009) argued, sometimes misinterpreted and abused by academics and researchers, nonetheless the idea remains central to the African ethical vision (Shutte, 2009).

*An Ethical Hybrid*

The concord between the values that underscore positive ethics and African ethics is apparent. Both celebrate commitment to human dignity. Both observe respect. Both command doing most good. Both honour an anthropocentric community of being and an obligation to contribute to the good and growth of this community (Bujo, 2009). Because of this harmony and because of our situatedness as researchers in Africa, we advocate an approach to generating, interpreting, and displaying drawings that is rooted in a positive, African ethical hybrid.

## A POSITIVE, AFRICAN ETHICAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Our approach to research is essentially transformative (Mertens, 2009). Because we seek to bring about social change, we advocate alternative data collection methods (like drawings) that give easier voice to marginalised groups or groups that might struggle in relation to language and literacy. Ethical rigour and allegiance to positive ethics (Bush, 2010) are central to this approach. From the perspective of African ethics, then, anything less than positive ethics, or, in other words, to an ethical commitment to the good of the communities and participants who participate in research projects, is unthinkable. This commitment is embedded in the processes of respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice.

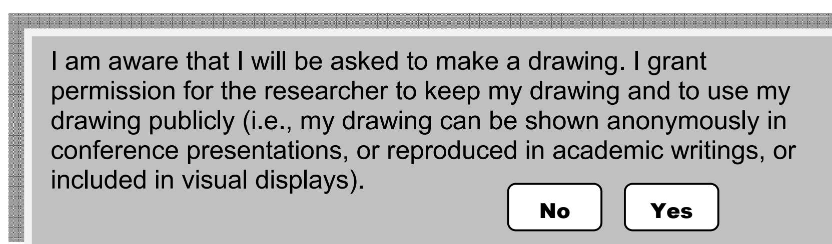
### *Respect for Autonomy*

Respect for autonomy acknowledges the sovereignty of every human being. Implicit in this sovereignty is the right to choose. From an African ethics perspective, such an acknowledgement relates to perceiving fellow human beings as other selves (Shutte, 2009): The right to choose is something that most individuals would hold sacrosanct for themselves, so seeing a fellow human being as "another self" (Shutte, 2009, p. 94) encourages respect for autonomy. In being positive ethicists, researchers respect participants as other selves.

In research contexts, respect for autonomy is most often reflected in practices of informed consent, in terms of respect for the free choice to either participate or withdraw from the research process at any point. When a researcher strives towards observing positive ethics, informed consent processes purposefully and painstakingly address the participants' right to decide to participate by providing exhaustive detail on what participation in the research project will entail, especially in terms of time, activities that will generate data, and possible disadvantages that participation may hold for them as participants. The question the researcher asks is "What, *ideally*, can I do to ensure that my participant is fully informed and supported to make an informed decision about participation and termination of participation?" The answer to this question lies, in part, in detailed dialogue (preferably in the participants' mother tongues) complemented with comprehensive letters of information that participants can keep. It also lies in active communication (both verbal and non-verbal) of respect for the participant's choice, whatever this choice may be, with regard to participating in the research process.

When the research process involves drawing, respect for participant autonomy extends to respecting participant willingness to draw (or not). To this end, the informative dialogue preceding written consent (and the letter of information) must make it very clear that participants will be asked to make drawings as part of their contribution to the project. To complicate matters further, the ethical dilemma of ownership and public display of visual artefacts arises when drawings are involved (Karlsson, 2007; Moletsane et al., 2008). This is tricky and needs to be negotiated respectfully with participants: Researchers who align themselves with positive ethics need to explore the acceptability to participants of keeping their drawings,

using them publicly, and even displaying them. Following this, the consent form must ask for *explicit* permission to keep these drawings and to use them publicly (e.g., in journals or in conference presentations):


I am aware that I will be asked to make a drawing. I grant permission for the researcher to keep my drawing and to use my drawing publicly (i.e., my drawing can be shown anonymously in conference presentations, or reproduced in academic writings, or included in visual displays).

No Yes

*Figure 4.1. Excerpt of a consent form.*

*Nonmaleficence*

When researchers champion positive, African ethics, they reframe nonmaleficence positively as 'do most good' (Moletsane et al., 2008, p. 114). In so doing, researchers actively seek out ways in which to protect and enable participants and thus facilitate a positive experience of participating in a research project. Thus, positive ethicists enter more profoundly into a community with research participants and, in this manner, celebrate participants' dignity.

*Expertise of the researcher.* One way of 'doing most good' is for researchers to ensure that they are competent in the methods they use (Mertens, 2005). As part of gaining and expanding expertise in the area of drawings, researchers should, of course, continue to read and participate in research forums focusing on the use of drawings and other visual methodologies. With regard to using drawings as a methodology, researchers themselves should draw (or should have drawn) what they are going to ask their participants to draw, both as a means of experiencing (to some extent) what the participants will experience and as a way of reflecting on the clarity of the prompt that will be used to guide the drawing. In rural African contexts, drawing might be an unfamiliar activity, so researchers will need to be sensitive about inviting drawing without distressing participants, in ways that are culturally compatible (such as drawing in the sand). Although drawing is a familiar activity in most communities, many adults last drew when they were children. In our experience, when adults are asked to make drawings, they often laugh nervously or protest that they cannot draw (see Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Some children, especially adolescents, do the same thing. Again, the onus is on the researcher to invite drawing in ways that celebrate the dignity of the participants.

It is vital to remind participants that they cannot be forced into making drawings, but that should they be willing to try, the focus is not on the quality of their drawings. As noted above, adults may be hesitant to engage in the process for fear of producing a child-like product. To further facilitate a positive experience of

the methodology, researchers must allow participants sufficient time to reflect and to draw: Not hurrying participants will help to 'do good'.

*Cultural sensitivity and awareness.* Linked to the above notion of researchers being competent in the chosen methodology is prior affirmation (ideally at the design stage of the research project) that drawing will be culturally acceptable to the participants, especially if the drawings are to be made on paper. We recognise that this is not always easy to enact, and it is important to consider the ways in which cultural stereotypes may operate. We also acknowledge that the idea of 'culture' in and of itself is complex. By collaborating with community elders or community representatives (Mertens, 2009; Wassenaar, 2006), it may be possible to gauge how culturally appropriate the method of drawing will be. Such a collaborative partnership also encourages opportunities for adjustments to the methodology. For example, in some rural communities with low levels of literacy, it might be more appropriate to diagram in the sand, as done in the innovative study by van der Riet (2008). At the same time, we need to be aware of the various power dimensions operating in the community itself and the question of who can speak, and about what? As Moletsane (2011) argues, for example, in a context in which the adult voice dominates, particularly in relation to such issues as sexuality, we need to think about what that might mean in our fieldwork with children and young people. Similarly, in the study of an issue such as gender-based violence, we need to think about the consequences of girls and women speaking out through their drawings. As Leach (2006) asked, how can we ensure a safe space for this work? In a context of heteronormativity and homophobia, how can we prevent our fieldwork from further marginalizing participants or endangering their lives? And following from the work of Jansson and Benoit (2006), how do we take up work involving young people and the sex trade in ways that protect the participants? We are not, of course, arguing against studies on sexuality and violence; indeed, we are calling for the use of participatory methodologies as being particularly appropriate in addressing issues that are difficult to get at through more conventional interviews. However, we *are* drawing attention to the cultural (and sometimes political) context of studies of sexuality and violence, regardless of whether it is through drawings or other visual approaches or through direct interviews and focus groups.

*Rights to privacy.* Partly because some participants are self-conscious about their drawings and partly because as researchers we need to respect participants' rights to privacy, when drawings are made in a group context, it is important not to show any drawing to the rest of the group (even as part of a verbal exploration of the research focus). Rather, on completion of the activity, participants should be asked whether they would be willing to share their drawing with the others in the group, and their choice in this regard should be respected. Researchers need to give careful thought to how they will report and/or use participants' drawings when they are reporting the findings so that participants do not feel stereotyped or maligned in any way.

*Artistic ownership.* One of the challenges of working with visual productions such as drawings relates to the rights of the producer to be recognised for his or her artistic work. Ethics committees tend to insist on anonymity and confidentiality, but there may be cases where the very opposite may be necessary. As Mak (2006) highlighted, participants may be very keen to have their names appear on their art work (see Chapter 6 in this volume). In contexts where collective principles (like Ubuntu) are honoured, artistic ownership becomes an even more complex issue and one in which the values of positive, African ethics need to be foregrounded.

*On the politics of group (or public) exhibition.* Some researchers have noted the usefulness of encouraging the public display of drawings and other visual images as a way of inviting participants to engage in their own analysis of the issues being explored (De Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007). Again, rights to privacy should be respected. People should not be forced to display their images in a more public setting. At the same time, researchers should consider the value of this approach as a way to be more participatory and respectful of the voices of participants in the analytic process.

*Debriefing.* Because it is possible (depending on the focus of the study) that drawings might trigger uncomfortable or painful memories or thoughts, researchers aiming to 'do good' must consider how they will debrief participants (Babbie, 2007). Although there is no recipe for this, since the contexts will vary, we need to think about the ways in which the act of drawing can trigger painful memories, and we need, too, to be alert to this in the workshop or research setting.

*Misuse (or abuse) of drawings.* Following from the points noted above, we have the obligation, as researchers, to make sure that drawings are used ethically. Because of the power of visual images, especially children's drawings, which are often used in adult-related advertising (e.g., for purchasing life insurance or banking), social campaigns, and so on, there is the risk that they will be misused or overused in research reports and publications. Mitchell, Walsh, and Larkin (2004), for example, discussed the ways in which drawings produced by young people to accompany HIV&AIDS messages suggest, in their child-like quality, innocence and hence the need for protection from information rather than access to such information. Similarly, they highlight the way that children's drawings are sometimes inappropriately used to promote adult causes (see also Chapter 5 in this volume).

*Beneficence*

For researchers rooted in a positive, African ethical hybrid, the need for asset- or strengths-based approaches to research, and the need for research that transforms and encourages positive change (Mertens, 2009; Schratz & Walker, 1995), is pivotal, so the ethical principle of beneficence or taking action to advance the well-being of research participants and their communities is emphasised.

In many ways, drawings provide a unique opportunity for such agency. The process of drawing involves and invites reflection and makes visible a lived experience, perception, or thought, and this process is often therapeutic to the drawer (Rose, 2001; Stuart, 2007). In Africa, as in many other development contexts, opportunities for therapy and advocacy are limited, so when researchers use participatory techniques, like drawings, competently, they offer research participants opportunities to engage in therapeutic processes of agency, reflection, meaning-making, insight, and catharsis. For example, in the Resilient Educators (REds) study (see Chapter 2 in this volume), rural teachers in under-resourced communities who generated drawings associated experiences of beneficence with drawing. These included opportunities to express emotional pain, to make meaning of loss, and to summon attention to the challenges of teaching in the age of AIDS. One participant explained this as follows: "What I like about the drawing is that it explained the pain I felt about those people who are infected by this pandemic disease and the family of those who are infected." Another verbalised how drawing her real-life experience of HIV and AIDS defied denial and gave her an opportunity to broadcast her reality: "It reminds others about this pandemic. It will be an eye-opener to all." Another participant noted that drawing was beneficent for her because it facilitated advocacy: "I like to show the people what is happening in my world." When drawings are used as part of data generation in a pre-test, post-test intervention design, opportunities for reflection (and concomitant personal growth) can be maximised when researchers ask participants to contrast their pre- and post-test drawings and reflect on what they see (Stuart, 2007; see also Chapter 11 in this volume).

As we noted earlier in the section on nonmaleficence, the advocacy that participants verbalise in association with how their drawings communicate their message can be strengthened and extended more broadly when participants' drawings are used collectively, as in, for example, an exhibition. In exhibition format, drawings that are displayed publicly, as has been done with other visual media like photographs (Moletsane et al., 2008) and participatory video (Mitchell & De Lange, in press; Weber & Mitchell, 2007), constitute, potentially, a powerful collective message. Especially when drawings give voice to pressing social issues, such public displays disseminate rich messages and urge—or provoke, even—action (see also Mitchell, 2006). Rose (2001) also emphasises the power of the visual. Displaying provocative drawings can be a powerful means of stimulating social change and, in so doing, advancing the well-being of communities and groups.

One aspect of beneficence that is probably not afforded enough attention is the issue of how researchers are positioned. If as researchers we wish to advance the well-being of research participants, how do our positions as outsiders in terms of language, race, class, gender, sexuality, education, religion, ethnicity, and so on—and often powerful outsiders from moneyed or influential institutions—contribute to, or detract from, the well-being of the participants? Furthermore, because part of the fabric of traditional African ethics is generosity towards, and tolerance of, outsiders (Prozesky, 2009), what are the implicit pitfalls of this for the participants

themselves? One caveat of this generosity is that researchers who are determined to encourage beneficence need to be sensitive to the ethical positions of African participants, especially when it comes to inviting drawing (which might not be common to their daily practice, but which participants could be loathe to refuse to do because this might imply lack of generosity to an outsider). Precisely because of the ethic of African generosity, we, as researchers, need to be cautious to position ourselves in such a manner that we do not behave rudely and thus exploit and abuse participant generosity.

*Justice*

The fourth core principle of positive ethics is ensuring the "fair, equitable and appropriate treatment" (Beauchamp & Childress, as cited in Bush, 2010, p. 25) of research participants. African ethics urge social justice, too (Mazrui, 2009). This is partly achieved by being sensitive to the needs and cultures of the participants and respecting them as co-knowledge producers and research partners. When drawings are used in the research style of 'draw and talk' (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Guillemin, 2004; Mair & Kierans, 2007), research participants are key to knowledge production. One of the criticisms levelled against visual methodologies is in relation to interpretation itself (i.e., how meaning is made of the visual) and the probability that different viewers will make different meanings out of what is visible (Guillemin, 2004; Rose, 2001). However, when participants themselves are asked to make meaning (provide a first-level analysis, if you like) of their drawn product, two things happen: On the one hand, the participant is then a co-researcher (justice) and, on the other, the research process becomes more trustworthy because the researcher is not superimposing her understanding of what was drawn onto the drawing. Where researchers go on to make so-called second levels of analysis, they should, of course, take into account the original meaning-making provided by participants and should consider, too, taking their new readings back to those participants to both verify them and to offer opportunities for truly collaborative meaning-making.

The process of 'draw and talk' allows research participants a safe opportunity to make pressing social issues visible and, in that way, give voice to their reality. Especially when communities partner researchers at the design stage and help shape the research focus, drawings provide real opportunity to concretise issues that shape (and even disrupt) daily life (Mertens, 2009). As noted previously, when these drawings are brought back to the community from which the participants come (in ways that will not threaten the participants), justice is experienced in the public airing of the messages embedded in the drawings (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Participants can actively help to shape this dissemination process by leading researchers to choose which drawings to foreground in such displays, where best to display them, and which forum to use. (For example, should displays be part of a public debate or education process, or should they be used for reflection? Are there any risks to the well-being of participants, either individually or collectively, if the drawings are displayed in a public venue?)

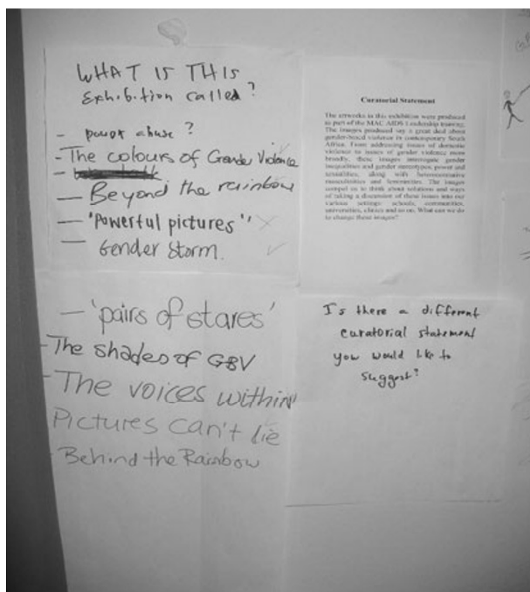



*Figure 4.2. Public exhibition in action: A democratic process.*

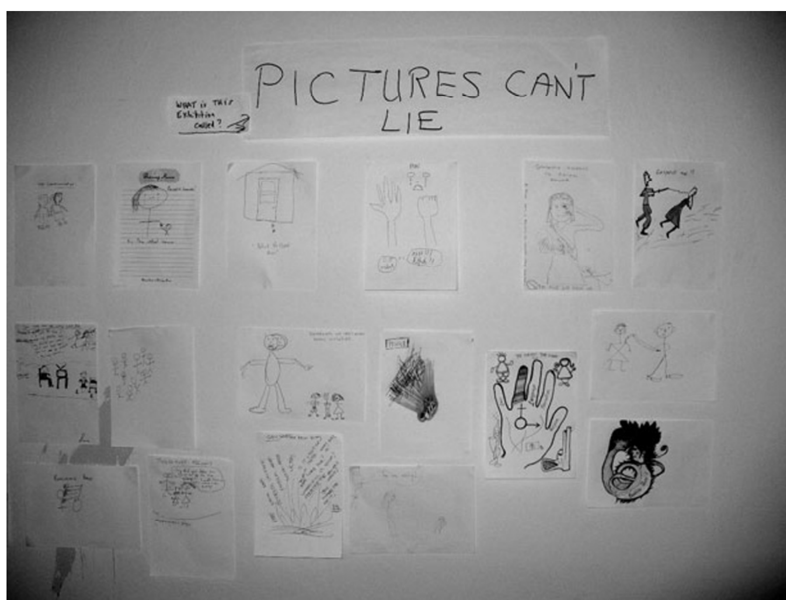



*Figure 4.3. Public exhibition in action: A veridical process.*

Interpretation and the democratic process of interpretation are integral to justice. Figure 4.2 depicts one aspect of an exhibition of drawings of gender violence and illustrates how participants' meaning-making can continue into a second level of interpretation in a situation in which drawings by individuals are displayed collectively. If researchers offer those who produced the drawings the opportunity to present and arrange their drawings as they see fit and to develop their own title and curatorial statement, the democracy of the research with, and into, the drawings is enhanced. Participants' perspectives are captured, participants are positioned as knowledge producers, and they are able to suggest ways forward in relation to images that may have been depicted originally as socially negative ones. There is no diminishing of the researcher's ethical responsibility when the exhibiting and meaning-making of drawings is democratised and due caution is needed to ensure that such a process does most good. But a possible advantage of opening the process to participants in this way is that open conversation about ethics can be broadened into including the participants.

In a very real sense, even though they are powerful and veridical, drawings provide 'nondogmatic answers' (Creswell, 2007, p. 206) to research questions because they literally reflect participants' views. This moves the researcher away from the traditional paternalistic position of being all-knowing, and it flattens the researcher-participant hierarchy that so often characterises research. And although the drawings may seem to 'speak for themselves', they often invite participants to say more about the issues than we as outsiders might see. Concrete 'non-dogmatism' encourages justice since it recognises the participants' truths.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, researchers who employ 'draw and talk' (or 'draw and write') as a methodology (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Guillemin, 2004; Mair & Kierans, 2007) are well positioned to advocate the fundamentals of positive, African ethics. Respectfully inviting participants to draw, to interpret, and to participate in the dissemination of their drawn messages can facilitate powerful opportunities for participants and their communities to engage in research experiences that celebrate their autonomy, that focus on doing most good, and that promote justice. Throughout this chapter, we have suggested that this, of course, is far from simple and that the critical issues of addressing poverty, inequalities, sexuality, and the many pressing concerns of social research demand to be attended to in ways that respect and protect individuals and communities. When researchers operate from a positive, African ethics paradigm in ways that make the complexity of this work central to the research at hand, the potential for transformational, participatory research can be realised. We acknowledge that the full potential of this approach remains under-studied, and as a research community we do not know enough about the actual or perceived risks and harms of vulnerable populations participating in research that deals with sensitive issues. Furthermore, we often do not know enough about the full benefits—which may only be realised long after the fieldwork has been completed. These are areas to be studied, and as Leadbeater and

Glass (2006) noted, there is a need to "raise the profile of research on ethics" (p. 262). In proposing a positive, African ethics paradigm, it has been our aim to contribute to this project of raising the profile of research ethics. In this chapter, we have highlighted the idea of researchers and participants being able to say as one, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*"[i] and offer it as a (if not 'the') respectful way of doing visual research specifically and community-based research more broadly.

## NOTE

[i] "A person is a person through other people."

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