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RESEARCH

Challenges Facing African Social Work Researchers in Integrating Indigenous Research Ethics: Towards Ethical Reconstitution Through Decolonial Cooperation

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Abstract
Social work research in Africa continues to grapple with the dominance of Western ethical frameworks that marginalise Indigenous epistemologies. This paper explores the challenges African social work researchers face in integrating Indigenous research ethics, with a focus on Zimbabwe. The study aims to contribute to the development of an ethically inclusive and context-responsive research paradigm. Using an autoethnographic methodology, five experienced African researchers reflected on their lived experiences navigating both Western and Indigenous research spaces. Data were collected through written narrative responses guided by conversational prompts and analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis. Key findings reveal five interrelated challenges: the marginalisation of Indigenous ethics in social work education; ontological invisibility within institutional ethical regimes; the hierarchisation of ethical authority; donor-driven ethical compliance; and discursive decolonisation without ethical reconstitution. The study concludes that decolonial transformation in social work research requires more than rhetorical commitment—it demands ethical reconstitution through cooperative frameworks that recognise plural ethical authorities, relational accountability, and epistemic justice. The implications are significant for policymakers, academic institutions, funders, and researchers, calling for a shift from compliance-based to community-grounded ethical practices. This paper advocates for a Decolonial Cooperation Framework as a pathway toward ethical integrity and transformative, socially just research in African contexts.

Keywords Indigenous research ethics · Decolonial cooperation · Ethical reconstitution · African social work · Research challenges

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Introduction

Social work is a dynamic and evolving profession that has historically mirrored the sociopolitical and cultural transformations of the societies it serves. Originating as a globalised profession rooted in the philanthropic and reformist ideologies of the Global North, social work has long been shaped by Eurocentric epistemologies and practices (Garrett, 2024). Over time, however, the profession has undergone significant transformation in response to shifting needs, diverse cultural contexts, and calls for inclusion, justice, and equity—particularly in education and practice. In recent years, the push to decolonise social work has gained traction, especially in the Global South, where scholars and practitioners have increasingly challenged the hegemonic dominance of Western paradigms. Africa has emerged as a crucial site for decolonial practice in social work education. Strides have been made in revising curricula, incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, and promoting culturally grounded teaching and learning models (Gray & Coates, 2020; Madew et al., 2023; Muzondo et al., 2025). These efforts reflect a growing recognition of the need to affirm local epistemologies and dismantle colonial legacies embedded in social work education frameworks. Despite this progress in pedagogy and curriculum development, the decolonisation of social work research in Africa remains limited. One of the most critical yet underexamined areas in this regard is research ethics. While social work research globally continues to be guided by long-established ethical standards—largely influenced by neoliberal and Western scientific traditions (Gray & Coates, 2020; Rowe et al., 2015)—these frameworks often marginalise Indigenous ethical principles, including community consent, relational accountability, and spiritual worldviews. This epistemic exclusion presents a significant gap in the decolonial project.

This study seeks to interrogate the challenges faced by African social work researchers (focusing on Zimbabwe) in integrating Indigenous ethical frameworks into their research processes. Rather than proposing a wholesale rejection of existing ethical standards, the paper argues for developing a cooperative Global South-North research ethics framework—one that is inclusive, contextually relevant, and scientifically rigorous. This framework would seek to balance Indigenous epistemologies with global research standards, ensuring that ethical practices are not only locally grounded but also globally credible. Decolonial cooperation does not imply uncritical acceptance of Western norms; rather, it creates space for ethical dialogue in which Indigenous and Western systems can interrogate, refine, and strengthen one another. Cooperation becomes possible when both systems recognise their partiality and commit to ethical humility (Muzingili et al., 2025). Addressing this gap is critical, as ethical research is foundational to social work's mission of social justice, particularly in postcolonial contexts where knowledge production must be both liberatory and inclusive (Rowe et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2025).

Decolonising Research Ethics in Social Work Research

Research ethics in social work serve as the moral compass for conducting inquiry, especially when working with vulnerable, marginalised, or historically oppressed populations (Nabbumba et al., 2023). Traditionally, research ethics have been shaped primarily by Western epistemological frameworks, often rooted in Enlightenment ideals of objectivity, individualism, and universalism (Ferguson & Clark, 2018). These frameworks emphasise principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, autonomy, and non-maleficence—values that, while important, are not universally applicable across cultural contexts. In contrast, Indigenous ethics are often grounded in relationality, reciprocity, communal consent, spirituality, and respect for ancestral knowledge (Chilisa, 2017). This divergence highlights the epistemological tensions African researchers face when conducting social work research in environments that privilege Western ethical norms.

Decolonising research ethics, therefore, involves more than incorporating a few Indigenous practices into an otherwise Western framework. It is a fundamental reorientation of how ethics are conceptualised, negotiated, and operationalised in research involving Indigenous or non-Western communities. As Gray and Coates (2020) argue, decolonising social work involves challenging the "epistemic violence" of dominant paradigms that render local knowledge systems invisible or inferior. In research ethics, this means validating Indigenous ways of knowing as legitimate and central to ethical inquiry. For social workers, this is particularly critical. Social work is inherently a values-based profession committed to social justice, human dignity, and respect for diversity (Banks, 2020). To operate within ethical frameworks that marginalise Indigenous epistemologies contradicts these core professional values. As Hayward (2021) contends, ethical practices that ignore the historical and structural power imbalances shaping knowledge production reproduce the same colonial hierarchies that social work claims to oppose. Furthermore, the act of decolonising research ethics is also about restoring agency to communities in determining how, by whom, and for what purposes research is conducted (Chilisa, 2017). This is crucial in African contexts where research has historically been extractive and exploitative, serving the interests of donors, institutions, or foreign academics while offering little benefit to

local communities (Seehawer, 2018). A decolonised ethical framework would centre co-ownership, relevance, and community benefit as ethical imperatives.

In the context of Global South-North research partnerships, the failure to recognise Indigenous ethics contributes to epistemic injustice, in which knowledge systems from the South are treated as supplementary rather than foundational (Rowe et al., 2015; Chilisa, 2017). Developing a cooperative ethical framework that bridges these divides would foster mutual respect, shared accountability, and cultural competence. Such a framework would not only support ethical integrity but also enhance the scientific rigour of research by ensuring that it is grounded in local realities and responsive to community needs. Moreover, integrating Indigenous ethics in collaborative research enhances the cultural competence of Global North partners, equipping them to engage more ethically and effectively with diverse populations. It also challenges the uncritical export of universalist ethical standards that often fail to account for cultural specificity, spiritual worldviews, and collective identities prevalent in African societies (Clarke, 2023).

Social work research in Africa, therefore, stands at a crossroads. Continuing to rely on Western ethical standards risks perpetuating colonial legacies that undermine the profession's commitment to justice and equity. Conversely, embracing decolonised, context-specific ethical frameworks offers an opportunity to reclaim Indigenous knowledge, empower communities, and foster truly ethical research practices. Certain Global North practices—such as procedural transparency, data protection safeguards, and accountability mechanisms—remain valuable when adapted to local contexts. These elements can complement Indigenous ethics by ensuring rigour and protecting participants without overriding relational or communal obligations.

Indigenous Research Ethics: Philosophical Foundations and Ethical Tensions in Social Work Research

Indigenous African research ethics stem from a worldview that differs fundamentally from Western liberal traditions. Rooted in communal ontologies, spiritual interdependence, ancestral continuity, and relational accountability, these ethics are not merely alternative norms but expressions of epistemologies and moral orders that shape how knowledge is created, shared, and used. In social work research, these Indigenous frameworks are not only legitimate but essential, given the profession's commitment to social justice, human dignity, and cultural responsiveness. It is also important to acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge systems are not free of hierarchy; authority may be vested in elders, lineage leaders, or spiritual custodians. These hierarchies, however, are relational rather than bureaucratic, and their legitimacy derives from communal accountability rather than institutional power.

Relationality and Communal Responsibility

A foundational tenet of Indigenous African ethics is relationality—the belief that identity and moral obligations arise from one's embeddedness in a web of relationships with others, including ancestors, the environment, and the spiritual realm. This relational ontology is encapsulated in the African philosophy of Ubuntu: "I am because we are" (Nabbumba et al., 2023). In research, this worldview demands that ethical responsibility extend not only to individual participants but also to families, communities, and future generations (Chilisa, 2017; Nabbumba et al., 2023). This stands in sharp contrast to the Western principle of autonomy, which underpins the central ethical standard of informed consent (Ferguson & Clark, 2018). In Western liberal thought, individuals are presumed to be independent agents capable of making personal decisions about research participation (Rowe et al., 2015; Madew et al., 2023). However, in many African contexts, decision-making is collective, often involving elders or community leaders. A researcher who bypasses communal structures in favour of individual consent may be seen as disrespectful, even unethical, within the community. For social work, which often operates within collective systems of care (Banks, 2020; Kam, 2021), this tension calls for adaptive ethical practices that respect both individual rights and communal governance structures.

Spirituality, Ancestral Knowledge, and Sacredness of Knowledge

Indigenous African ethics are deeply spiritual. Knowledge is not neutral or secular; it is sacred—a gift from ancestors, spirits, or nature—and must be treated with reverence (Chilisa, 2017; Nabbumba et al., 2023; Seehawer, 2018). Research is therefore not merely an intellectual act but a ceremonial and moral engagement, requiring humility, ritual observance, and moral worthiness on the part of the researcher (Seehawer, 2018). This contrasts with Western epistemologies that frame knowledge as objective, empirical, and value-free (Seehawer, 2018). Western research ethics emphasise confidentiality as a cornerstone—protecting participants' privacy and ensuring that data is anonymised and secured. However, in Indigenous contexts, knowledge—especially oral narratives, rituals, and social practices—is often public, relational, and collectively owned. The idea of privatising such knowledge through confidentiality may not

only be inappropriate but may also misrepresent the cultural meaning of the knowledge itself (Hayward et al., 2021). For social work researchers, the challenge is not simply about data protection but about honoring the spiritual and social significance of what is shared. This requires building ethical protocols that consider who can interpret, disseminate, and benefit from the knowledge, and how the community is acknowledged in its co-production.

Reciprocity, Beneficence, and Moral Accountability

Another central component of Indigenous African research ethics is reciprocity—the expectation that knowledge exchanges are mutual and that research must directly or indirectly benefit the community (Hayward et al., 2021; Datta, 2018). In Indigenous ethics, the researcher is not a distant observer but a participant in a moral relationship, accountable for what they take and what they give back (Datta, 2018). This notion aligns with the principle of beneficence in Western ethics—the obligation to do good —but it is broader in scope and more demanding in its moral expectations. In Western research ethics, beneficence is often operationalised through risk-benefit analyses that focus on individual well-being and short-term outcomes (Seehawer, 2018; Datta, 2018). Similarly, the principle of non-maleficence— "do no harm"—is often interpreted in biomedical terms, as avoiding physical, emotional, or psychological harm to participants (Ferguson & Clark, 2018). However, Indigenous understandings of harm include spiritual, such as disruption, social dislocation, and epistemic violence—the invalidation or misrepresentation of communal knowledge (Hayward et al., 2021). Thus, a study that extracts knowledge without proper reciprocity or that misinterprets cultural meanings may not cause visible trauma. However, it can inflict long-term cultural harm, erode communal trust, and perpetuate historical patterns of exploitation. For social work researchers, this is particularly important. The profession's responsibility to promote social justice and cultural dignity demands that research practices be evaluated not only by procedural standards but also by their transformative impact. A truly ethical study builds capacity, affirms identity, and contributes to collective healing.

Time, Continuity, and Intergenerational Responsibility

Indigenous African ethics conceptualise time as cyclical and intergenerational. Ethical accountability in research extends beyond the study timeframe and participants' lifespans—it encompasses future generations and ancestral legacies (Fournier et al., 2023). Researchers must consider how their work will be remembered, used, and interpreted in the future. Knowledge must be preserved with honour and integrity, not merely documented and archived (Chilisa, 2017). Western ethics, by contrast, are often framed within linear timelines, focusing on study duration, participant engagement, and post-study debriefings (Hayward et al., 2021). Ethical clearance typically addresses immediate risks and outcomes, with little attention to long-term cultural or historical consequences. For social work, especially in African postcolonial contexts, this short-termism is ethically insufficient. Interventions and research must be accountable to historical harms, ongoing structural inequalities, and the legacies of colonial knowledge production. A cooperative ethical framework must therefore integrate long-term moral responsibility, ensuring that research contributes to sustainable transformation rather than merely academic knowledge.

Methodology

Design

This study employed an autoethnographic research design, a qualitative methodology that integrates personal narrative with cultural analysis, allowing researchers to investigate their lived experiences as situated within broader social, political, and epistemological contexts (Orel, 2024). In this study, the researchers were also the participants, reflecting on their experiences as African social work researchers engaged in both Indigenous and Western research spaces. While traditional ethnography can risk objectifying the researched and positioning the researcher as a detached observer (Morrow & Kettle, 2024), autoethnography was more appropriate here. It enabled critical self-reflection, cultural grounding, and positional transparency—essential for exploring Indigenous research ethics from an insider perspective. This methodological approach also enabled us to examine how epistemic authority operates within and across our locations and how Indigenous ethical commitments can challenge and unsettle dominant research norms.

Participants

As previously indicated, the researchers were also participants in this study. The lead researcher established inclusion criteria to ensure that all participants had the academic and professional standing to contribute meaningfully to the topic. Eligibility required that each participant be a qualified social worker registered with a professional social work

body. They were also expected to have at least five years of active research experience, demonstrated by at least ten peer-reviewed publications, and to have served for at least five years as academic staff at a tertiary institution—regardless of whether they also had practice-based experience.

Participants had diverse academic trajectories and practice experiences. Although all were identified as African researchers, some were now based internationally. This diversity was intentional, enabling comparative insights into Indigenous and Western research frameworks. All participants had engaged in research and teaching that intersected with ethical, cultural, and methodological issues in social work. The five participants included researchers with qualifications ranging from master's degrees to PhDs, and peer-reviewed publications ranging from 11 to 63. Their academic experience spanned 6 to 14 years, and practice-based experience ranged from none to 24 years. This group represented a mix of academic and practice backgrounds, contributing depth and diversity to the study. All participants identified as of African origin. Including those with both African and international experience was important for exploring Indigenous research ethics from multiple epistemic locations. During analysis, we observed that African-based researchers emphasised everyday encounters with institutional constraints, while diaspora researchers highlighted tensions between Western academic expectations and Indigenous ethical commitments. These differences enriched the analysis by revealing how epistemic authority is negotiated across geographic and institutional contexts.

Data Collection

Data collection used a conversational guide, a flexible, reflexive tool that elicits open-ended, narrative responses. Unlike semi-structured interviews, which often follow a fixed sequence of questions, conversational guides enable natural, self-directed reflection and storytelling (Muzingili, 2026; Orel, 2024). This approach was particularly suitable given the autoethnographic design and participants' dual role as storytellers and analysts. The guide was collaboratively developed by the researchers and focused on three main areas: participants' understanding and application of Indigenous research ethics; challenges encountered in integrating these ethics into mainstream academic research; and suggestions for a Global South–North cooperative research framework. The conversational guide included open-ended prompts such as: "Describe a moment when Indigenous ethics shaped your research decisions," "What challenges did you encounter when applying Indigenous ethical principles within institutional systems?" and "How do you understand your ethical responsibilities to communities and ancestors?" These prompts encouraged reflective, narrative-rich responses rather than short factual answers. Each researcher submitted written responses to the guide. Individual responses ranged from approximately 1,200 to 3,500 words, reflecting the depth and variability of each researcher's lived experience. No word limits were initially imposed, allowing participants to write as extensively as needed to express their experiences and reflections. Although no interviews were conducted, the process was deeply dialogical, grounded in mutual respect, shared authorship, and a commitment to reflexivity.

Data Analysis

The study employed Reflective Thematic Analysis, a qualitative method that emphasises interpreting patterns in data through ongoing, reflexive engagement with the researcher's positionality, emotions, and assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this study, the data were the researchers' own written reflections. Each participant independently reviewed all five submissions, identifying recurring themes, tensions, contradictions, and metaphors across the narratives. All researchers read each submission in full and produced independent preliminary codes before meeting as a group. During collective analysis sessions, each researcher presented their interpretations, and areas of divergence were discussed until shared meanings were reached. This ensured that no single epistemic standpoint dominated the analysis.

Reflexivity was central throughout the analysis. Researchers critically examined how their social identities, cultural backgrounds, and emotional investments shaped their interpretations. After initial individual coding, the group held multiple online discussions to compare insights and negotiate shared meanings. Through this collaboration, key themes were refined and agreed upon. An agreement was reached through iterative dialogue rather than voting or majority consensus, reflecting Indigenous relational ethics, in which knowledge is co-constructed through respectful deliberation. This approach reflected Indigenous values of relational accountability and collective knowledge-making while aligning with social work's emphasis on co-production and critical reflection. All five researchers participated equally in the analysis, ensuring that the final thematic structure emerged from a genuinely collective process.

Ethical Issues

This study did not undergo formal ethical review by a university ethics board, as is common in Western research traditions. Instead, Indigenous ethical principles—such as relational accountability, reciprocity, and respect for communal knowledge—were followed throughout (Chilisa,

2017). All participants gave informed consent, fully aware of their dual roles as co-researchers and co-authors. Ethical care was demonstrated through transparent communication, shared decision-making, and collective authorship. Knowledge was treated as sacred and communally held. No data were extracted, interpreted, or published without mutual agreement, thereby upholding Indigenous protocols of honor, relational respect, and epistemic responsibility.

Findings and Discussion

From a decolonial perspective, cooperation is not a retreat from critique but a strategy for dismantling epistemic dominance while building ethical systems that are plural, dialogic, and contextually grounded.

Marginalisation of Indigenous Ethics in Social Work Curriculum and Pedagogy

Over years of supervising student research and participating in curriculum reviews, we have consistently encountered the systemic absence of Indigenous ethics in social work education. Despite the growing academic discourse on decolonisation, our lived experience as educators confirms that course outlines, reading materials, and pedagogical frameworks overwhelmingly reflect Western ethical paradigms. This is not limited to isolated modules; the absence is structural. We observed that ethical instruction in social work remains largely anchored in frameworks such as autonomy, confidentiality, and informed consent—principles rooted in Western liberal traditions and biomedical ethics. Even when students choose to research Indigenous knowledge systems or cultural practices, they are often required—implicitly or explicitly—to frame their ethical justification within Western norms that do not address the relational, spiritual, and communal dimensions of African worldviews. For example, one of our students researching traditional healing ceremonies was instructed by the ethics committee to "avoid engaging with elders unless individual written consent forms were signed," despite the ceremony being a communal practice where decisions are made collectively. The student later reflected that this requirement "felt like forcing a sacred communal process into an individualistic template," which ultimately led them to redesign the study to exclude the ceremony altogether.

This illustrates how ethical checklists—often requiring written individual consent, anonymisation of communal knowledge, and biomedical-style risk assessments—function as Western tools that constrain culturally grounded inquiry. As a result, students frequently abandon Indigenous methodologies, narrowing the scope and cultural relevance of their research. This marginalisation is not simply a matter of omitting content. By "ethical checklists that are wholly Western," we refer to templates built around individual autonomy, written consent, anonymity, and biomedical risk assessment. These checklists assume an individualistic worldview and therefore exclude relational, communal, or spiritual ethical obligations central to Indigenous research. This misalignment forces researchers to redesign culturally grounded studies to fit Western criteria, resulting in research that is methodologically constrained and culturally diluted. It reflects a deeper process of epistemic hierarchy in which Indigenous ethical systems are rendered invisible, invalid, or supplementary. In practice, this means that Indigenous ethics are not considered legitimate grounds for training, assessing, or supervising ethical research. The result is a kind of curricular hegemony, where Western epistemologies remain dominant and Indigenous ways of knowing are excluded from formal teaching and assessment processes.

Our experience aligns with that of Nabbumba et al. (2023), who explain that colonial education systems often delegitimised Indigenous knowledge as unscientific or primitive. Similarly, Gray and Coates (2020) highlight that many institutions in the Global South reproduce Western ethical standards even as they claim to pursue decolonisation. This contradiction has been evident in our own teaching: we speak of Ubuntu, relationality, and cultural competence, yet we assess student work using ethical checklists that are wholly Western in origin. The lack of Indigenous ethics textbooks, teaching resources, and institutional support makes it difficult to translate theoretical commitments to decolonisation into pedagogical practice. For a cooperative Global South–North research ethics framework to be meaningful, it must begin by rebalancing this epistemic inequality. Social work ethics education must move beyond lip service and embed context-specific, relationally grounded ethical frameworks in curricula. This does not mean discarding Western ethics entirely, but rather placing them in dialogue with Indigenous systems, so that students and researchers can navigate ethical complexity with cultural depth and professional integrity. Such a shift would not only honour Indigenous knowledge but also reaffirm social work's core values of social justice, respect for diversity, and accountability to local communities.

Ontological Invisibility within Institutional Ethical Regimes

As researchers and educators embedded in university systems, we have long participated in ethics approval processes that centre formal institutions—university ethics boards, national research councils, and civil society organisations—as the only legitimate gatekeepers of ethical research. In practice, this has meant that ethical approvals issued by

traditional leaders, community elders, or Indigenous governance structures are frequently dismissed or considered insufficient on their own. Even when community-based approvals are obtained in line with Indigenous protocols of consent, they are not recognised within institutional frameworks unless validated by top-down structures. Indigenous protocols of consent typically involve collective deliberation, consultation with elders, and recognition of spiritual authority, rather than individual signatures. Consent is therefore relational and communal, reflecting shared responsibility rather than isolated personal choice. This dynamic reflects more than a procedural gap—it reveals a deeper ontological marginalisation. The worldviews that underlie Indigenous ethical systems—relational accountability, spiritual continuity, ancestral authority—are not acknowledged as legitimate grounds for ethical decision-making. Unlike institutional hierarchies that centralise authority in formal structures, Indigenous hierarchies are embedded in social relationships and collective responsibility. Their purpose is not to exclude but to safeguard communal wellbeing and intergenerational continuity. Instead, formal structures continue to operate through Western secular logics, assuming that only certain types of knowledge, authority, and consent are valid. We have witnessed dissertations being rejected or delayed because ethical approval was obtained only through traditional leaders, even when the research was conducted in Indigenous contexts.

In one case, a postgraduate student researching customary child fostering obtained approval from the village head and family council—an Indigenous protocol of consent that involves collective deliberation and affirmation. However, the university ethics board rejected this approval, insisting on individual consent forms from each household member. This exclusion of communal authority not only delayed the research by several months but also caused distress within the community, who interpreted the rejection as a dismissal of their governance structures. Such incidents demonstrate how institutional disregard for Indigenous consent processes undermines social cohesion and erodes trust between communities and researchers. Excluding elders and community authorities disrupts established decision-making structures, leading to confusion, mistrust, and emotional distress among participants. At a social level, it weakens communal cohesion and undermines the collective wellbeing that Indigenous ethics are designed to protect.

This aligns with Chilisa (2012), who argues that Indigenous research ethics are grounded in collective identity, intergenerational responsibility, and spiritual stewardship. These are ontological commitments, not just alternative methods. When institutional frameworks ignore these commitments, they enact ontological erasure—a form of structural violence that invalidates how Indigenous communities understand what it means to know, to relate, and to be ethically accountable. For social work, which purports to uphold cultural humility, local relevance, and community empowerment, this contradiction is untenable. Our ethical codes must reflect not only procedural fairness but also ontological inclusivity—recognising that ethical legitimacy can reside in elders' blessings, spiritual protocols, or communal consensus, not just bureaucratic approval letters. A truly cooperative Global South–North ethical model must expand the boundaries of what counts as valid ethical authority. It must pluralise ethical recognition, allowing Indigenous systems to stand as equals—not subordinates—within the broader landscape of social work research ethics. This shift is not about rejecting institutional review but about reconstituting it to reflect the full spectrum of ethical life in African communities.

Legitimacy, Politics, and the Hierarchisation of Ethical Authority

In our roles as social work educators, researchers, and supervisors, we have observed that ethical legitimacy is not equally distributed. Formal institutions—university ethics boards, national research councils, and professional associations—are positioned as the ultimate authorities on research ethics. Meanwhile, Indigenous ethical systems, including those rooted in traditional leadership, community consensus, or spiritual protocols, are often treated as supplementary or symbolic. Even when Indigenous leaders are consulted, their role is frequently limited to granting access rather than shaping the ethical reasoning or methodologies used. This reflects a deeper hierarchisation of ethical authority, in which institutional voices dominate, and community-based ethical knowledge is marginalised. We have seen students and colleagues advised that ethics approval gained through elders or cultural protocols is not "formal" enough, despite those very approvals being contextually appropriate and morally grounded. Such practices reassert the dominance of Western paradigms and devalue Indigenous ways of knowing. One of our colleagues recounted how a community-driven project on land inheritance practices was deemed "ethically risky" by an institutional board because it involved discussions with spirit mediums and lineage elders. Although these actors hold recognised authority within the community, the board classified them as "non-expert informants," thereby restricting their participation. This form of epistemic violence not only delegitimised Indigenous authority but also produced policy recommendations that ignored spiritual and relational dimensions of land governance. Local leaders later disliked the findings, stating that "the research spoke about us without us," highlighting how hierarchical ethical regimes can produce socially irrelevant or harmful outcomes.

This dynamic is not ethically neutral. It reproduces the very power imbalances that social work seeks to challenge. As Hayward et al. (2021) argue, the privileging of institutional authority reflects colonial legacies that continue to structure knowledge production in the Global South. From an anti-oppressive social work perspective, this undermines the agency and voice of Indigenous communities, reinforcing systemic marginalisation under the guise of ethical rigour. Anti-oppressive social work practice calls for the redistribution of power, the centring of marginalised voices, and the dismantling of hierarchical systems that perpetuate inequity. In the ethics domain, this means recognising Indigenous ethical authorities as equal partners—not as cultural consultants or gatekeepers, but as co-creators of ethical meaning. It also means challenging the assumption that Western institutions alone can define what constitutes ethical research. A cooperative Global South–North ethics model must therefore move toward horizontal legitimacy, in which Indigenous and institutional ethical systems stand in dialogue rather than in a hierarchy. Such a model affirms that ethical authority is contextual, relational, and plural—and that true ethical accountability lies in shared respect rather than in imposed standards.

Donor-Driven Ethical Compliance and Methodological Subordination

As supervisors and collaborators on donor-funded research projects, we have repeatedly witnessed how international funding structures shape the ethical contours of social work research—often in ways that marginalise local methodologies and Indigenous frameworks. Ethical approval processes tied to donor funding are frequently governed by Global North institutions that impose standardised protocols rooted in Euro-Western biomedical ethics. These protocols, while presented as universal, often disregard the ontological and epistemological foundations of African communities, including relational accountability, spiritual ethics, and collective consent. This dynamic reflects what Chilisa (2017) calls the "coloniality of research," in which externally imposed ethical frameworks perpetuate knowledge hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. Shearman et al. (2022) similarly critiques donor-driven research for preserving extractive knowledge systems that serve funders' agendas more than local communities. Within these systems, ethical compliance becomes a bureaucratic performance, in which researchers prioritise institutional approval over contextual relevance.

In our experience, we have seen students and early-career researchers redesign projects to meet donor expectations—by excluding Indigenous methods, simplifying complex cultural concepts, and avoiding community-led ethical processes. For instance, a donor-funded project on community resilience initially proposed using storytelling circles—a culturally grounded method aligned with relational accountability. However, the funder required the team to replace these circles with structured individual interviews to "ensure standardisation." This shift not only disrupted communal knowledge-sharing practices but also produced fragmented data that failed to capture collective experiences of resilience. Community members later commented that the research "felt like extracting stories rather than building relationships," underscoring how donor-driven ethical compliance can compromise both methodological integrity and community wellbeing. These adjustments are not minor; they reflect a deeper methodological subordination that positions African researchers as implementers rather than as intellectual agents. As Fournier et al. (2023) argue, academic dependency often forces Global South scholars to conform to Global North epistemologies to be seen as credible. From an anti-oppressive social work perspective (Dominelli, 2012), this is deeply problematic. It reinforces power asymmetries, delegitimises local knowledge, and erodes the ethical core of socially just research. Ethical integrity cannot exist where researchers are structurally disempowered. A cooperative Global South–North ethical framework must therefore disentangle ethical legitimacy from donor authority. It must create space for epistemic justice (Fournier et al., 2023) by recognising locally grounded ethical frameworks as both valid and vital. This requires funders and institutions to move from compliance-based ethics to context-responsive, co-created ethical practices, grounded in mutual respect and accountability to the communities involved.

Discursive Decolonisation without Ethical Reconstitution

In contemporary social work research, particularly in African contexts, the language of decolonisation has become increasingly prevalent. Numerous scholars have called for the decolonisation of knowledge, curriculum, and practice—emphasising Indigenous knowledge systems, community-led methods, and epistemic justice. Authors such as Gray and Coates (2020), Chilisa (2017), and Rowe et al. (2015) have significantly shaped this discourse, offered compelling critiques of colonial legacies, and advocated for Indigenous-centred approaches. However, our experience reveals a persistent contradiction: while the rhetoric of decolonisation is embraced, the ethical infrastructures that guide research remain rooted in Western paradigms. Many social work publications reference decoloniality yet still rely on institutional ethics approvals that exclude communal consent processes, Indigenous epistemologies of care, or spiritual

accountability. Even well-meaning researchers often default to Euro-Western ethical codes, such as individualist informed consent, anonymisation, or universalist notions of harm—norms that may be misaligned with the relational, collective, and spiritually grounded ethics of many African communities. However, we have also witnessed instances where Indigenous protocols were meaningfully incorporated. In one collaborative project on community-based child protection, researchers began by participating in a cleansing ceremony led by elders, followed by a communal consent process where families, youth, and spiritual leaders collectively discussed the purpose and boundaries of the research. This process established relational accountability and resulted in high levels of community engagement, with participants later noting that "the research felt like ours." The project produced culturally grounded recommendations that local social workers adopted, demonstrating the transformative potential of Indigenous ethical protocols when respected and integrated.

This dynamic reflects what we term "discursive decolonisation without ethical reconstitution." As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) caution, decolonial discourse can be co-opted by dominant systems, becoming a fashionable language that allows institutions and researchers to appear progressive without committing to genuine structural change. In social work, this is particularly concerning given the profession's stated commitment to justice, equity, and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2012). When decolonisation is invoked without rethinking who holds ethical authority, whose values shape research, and who decides what is legitimate, it risks becoming performative. As Seehawer (2018) acknowledges, there is a gap between calls for decolonised practice and the continued reliance on Westernised ethical frameworks in international social work research. True ethical decolonisation requires reconstituting ethics from the ground up—in partnership with communities, elders, spiritual leaders, and Indigenous scholars. It involves legitimising refusal, embracing plural ethical systems, and engaging in relational, context-responsive accountability. Until this happens, the decolonial turn in social work risks remaining a rhetorical gesture, rather than a transformative reimagining of how we do research.

Conclusion: Towards Ethical Reconstitution Through Decolonial Cooperation

Across the five themes, we have argued that while social work research is increasingly framed through the language of decolonisation, its ethical architecture remains stubbornly colonial. Institutional ethics review boards, donor-driven compliance, and methodological gatekeeping continue to reflect Western moral frameworks, even within research conducted in Indigenous, African, or other Global South contexts. This results in what we have called discursive decolonisation without ethical reconstitution. From an anti-oppressive and decolonial social work perspective, this is a critical failure of ethical imagination. Social work, as a profession rooted in justice, dignity, and collective well-being, cannot claim ethical integrity if it continues to marginalise Indigenous knowledge, silence community authority, and prioritise institutional legitimacy over relational accountability. What is needed is not just more inclusive discourse, but a reconstruction of ethical frameworks through cooperation—where Global South and Global North actors engage as equals in shaping ethical norms, processes, and responsibilities. Such cooperation must be grounded in epistemic humility, shared decision-making, and contextual responsiveness. It must also be willing to legitimise ethical refusal and to redistribute power in all aspects of research—from design to dissemination. The examples presented across the findings illustrate that epistemic violence is not abstract but lived—shaping what research is possible, whose voices are heard, and how social work policy evolves. Conversely, when Indigenous ethical protocols are honoured, research becomes more relational, culturally resonant, and socially impactful. To support this shift, we propose a Decolonial Cooperation Framework for Ethical Social Work Research, outlined in Table 1 below:

This framework is not a checklist, but a living, relational guide. Decolonial cooperation, therefore, rests on the premise that ethical transformation requires both the disruption of epistemic violence and the selective integration of practices that enhance justice, accountability, and community benefit. It is a process of ethical co-creation rather than assimilation. In embracing it, social work research can move beyond rhetorical decolonisation and towards a transformative, cooperative ethics that genuinely honours the people, lands, and knowledges it seeks to engage.

Limitations of the Study

This study is based on the authors' experiences as African social work educators and researchers. It may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across the continent or the Global South more broadly. It also draws primarily on qualitative, reflective, and theoretical insights, without empirical data from broader stakeholder groups such as funders, ethics committees, or community members. Additionally, while we critique Global North ethical frameworks, we acknowledge that not all institutions or researchers operate uniformly. These limitations suggest the need for further empirical, cross-contextual research to expand, nuance, and test the cooperative ethical framework proposed in this paper.

Table 1 Decolonial cooperation framework for ethical social work research

Key Pillar	Key Actions Needed	Stakeholders	Expected Outcome
Plural Ethical Authorities	Recognise elders, spiritual leaders, and community councils as legitimate ethical actors.	Universities, ethics committees, and community leaders	Ethical legitimacy no longer centralised in Western institutions
Contextual Ethical Review	Co-create ethics protocols with local communities and cultural gatekeepers	Researchers, community members, and traditional authorities	Ethics processes grounded in local moral systems and relational accountability
Epistemic Justice & Knowledge Equity	Fund and legitimise Indigenous methodologies and ontologies	Funders, universities, and research councils	Indigenous knowledge systems are treated as coequal in ethical decision-making
Ethics of Refusal	Recognise the right to say no—by researchers or communities—without penalty.	Supervisors, funders, journals, communities	Protection against extractive or harmful research practices
Relational Accountability	Shift from compliance-based ethics to relationship-based accountability	All stakeholders: researchers, institutions, communities	Ethics as an ongoing dialogue, not a one-time approval

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Declarations

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