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The Struggles for Research Ethics and Integrity in Rural Communities

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Abstract: Engaging with rural populations in African settings presents researchers with distinctive ethical and cultural challenges due to the community context of their research, their methods of investigation, and the implications of their findings. This paper explores the challenges related to research ethics and integrity in studies conducted with and about rural communities. The problem arises from the premise that dynamism informs the ethics of research, as no two rural spaces are homogeneous, and researchers may not necessarily be expected to adopt a monolithic approach. If ethical judgments, by their very nature, consider a variety of realities (both relative and actual) and are therefore diverse, this diversity foregrounds the plurality, fluidity, and multi-perspectival nature of rural communities. In this paper, we examine the research struggles of rural communities concerning ethics-related issues and integrity concerns. Drawing from a synthesis review on research and ethics in rural communities, we find that almost half of the publications make no reference, even in a tacit sense, to ethical issues. We conclude with the observation that the struggle for research ethics and integrity may create conflicting, competing, or crosscutting ethical obligations and ramifications, reflecting both the relative vulnerabilities of rural communities and the power implicit in these scholarly relationships, as well as the diverse ethical frameworks. Due to the uniqueness of different contexts, we advocate for a context-sensitive approach regarding the application of ethical principles in research.

Keywords: Education, research ethics, diversity, plurality, rural communities.

1. Introduction

Current research requires high integrity, ethical standards, and independence from external influences that could compromise the validity or objectivity of its findings (Lövestam, Bremer-Hoffmann, Jonkers & van Nes, 2025). In concurrence, Nguyen and Tuamsuk (2024) add that integrity stands as a fundamental principle and benchmark for the conduct of research and the dissemination of scholarly content. Researchers in rural communities are confronted with ethical challenges daily (Anderson et al., 2022). It should be borne in mind that research ethics provide guidelines for the responsible conduct of research. In addition, research ethics educate and monitor scientists conducting research to ensure a high ethical standard. Ramified struggles for research ethics and integrity may create conflicting, competing, or crosscutting ethical obligations, reflecting both the relative vulnerabilities of different individuals, communities, or populations, the asymmetries of power implicit in these scholarly relationships, and the differing ethical frameworks of collaborators representing other disciplines or areas of practice (American Association of Geographers, 2018). These struggles may also include researchers' safety, especially if they are members of a marginalized group, or in cases where research participants, funders, or sponsors are in a position of power over the researcher.

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Ethically speaking, the complexities of a rural culture suggest a more nuanced and culturally sensitive ethical approach (Louw & Delport, 2006) for researchers to bear in mind when engaging with rural communities (Palomin et al., 2023). A few examples exist where contextual considerations become imperative. Additionally, rural communities are generally regarded as vulnerable (Appiah, 2020; Louw & Delport, 2006). In concurrence with Palomin et al. (2023), the British Educational Research Association (2019) posits that:

> "…all educational researchers should aim to protect the integrity and reputation of educational research by ensuring that they conduct their research to the highest standards. Researchers should contribute to the community spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism that generates improvement in practice and enhancement of knowledge" (p. 12).

The history of ethics can be traced back to the Nuremberg Code in 1946 when the American military tribunal opened criminal proceedings against German physicians and administrators (Das & Sil, 2017). They had violated one of the ethical principles by conducting experiments on concentration camp prisoners without their consent. Following this, several declarations and guidelines were developed to protect individuals participating in research from abuse by researchers. Some key documents include the Declaration of Helsinki, insights from the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and the National Research Council in America, which promote research ethics and integrity aimed at ensuring safety and preventing harm (Kaestner, 2024; National Research Council, 2014; World Medical Association, 2024).

This research highlights that the origins of ethical principles began in Western countries, which are contextually different from African nations, particularly in rural environments. The current institutional ethics, often rooted in Western culture (Bain et al., 2022; Carniel et al., 2023), are inapplicable to African rural research (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023). This presents ongoing struggles for rural communities. For example, researchers working in rural African contexts frequently encounter ethical review processes that prioritise individual autonomy over communal decision-making, thereby disregarding the communal nature of African society (Appiah, 2021). In the South African context, efforts have been made to develop regulatory frameworks intended to assist in implementing ethics, including the National Health Research Ethics Council (2024). However, despite these efforts to adapt situational ethics to fit the African context, a noticeable gap remains, particularly sidelining rural communities (Konye, 2022; Metz, 2023; Udokang, 2014). This poses a challenge for rural researchers as they navigate ethical frameworks in rural areas. The core aim of this paper is to critically examine this gap and advocate for a more contextually grounded ethical approach that aligns with rural life.

1.1 Problem statement

Ramified struggles for research ethics and integrity can create conflicting, competing, or crosscutting ethical obligations. These reflect the varying vulnerabilities of different individuals, communities, or populations, the asymmetries of power implicit in scholarly relationships, and the differing ethical frameworks of collaborators from other disciplines or areas of practice (American Association of Geographers, 2018). These struggles may also encompass researchers' own safety, particularly if they belong to a marginalised group or if research participants, funders, or sponsors hold power over the researcher. Therefore, this paper is guided by one main research question, i.e., *what are the struggles regarding research ethics and integrity in rural communities?*

2. Lenses Couching Ethical Research in Rural Communities

Appiah (2021) views rural communities as "highly collectivistic social settings; individuals may also discuss aspects of their concerns with their family members or even other members of the community as part of the decision-making process" (p. 99).In this section, we explore two lenses aimed at framing

discourses around research ethics and integrity to better understand the struggles of conducting research in rural communities.

2.1 Ethical lenses

For this article, we limit our discussions to four theoretical universal lenses, namely, (1) utilitarianism, (2) deontology, (3) social justice and social contract theory, and (4) virtue theory. In addition to these foundational and universalised Western perspectives, we briefly reflect on the Afrocentric ethical lens. Utilitarianism places a higher value on results than on rules (Marseille & Kahn, 2019). For example, actions are deemed good or right if they maximise happiness or pleasure throughout society (Mitra, 2019). Therefore, the right course of action from an ethical point of view is to choose the means that produce the greatest amount of utility, welfare, well-being, or usefulness (Häyry, 2020). Grounded by policy imperatives, an action is considered ethical when the sum of utilities produced by that action is greater than the sum of utilities from any other possible act. In our view, this theoretical orientation may be critiqued for being amenable to a situation where the end justifies the means. In such cases, the harm or ill effect caused to attain the desired result is likely to be overlooked. However, Marseille and Kahn (2019) find that while fallible, utilitarianism is usually superior to the other alternatives.

In sharp contrast to utilitarianism, deontology is premised on the assertion that ethical intent and adherence to the right rules are a more desirable pathway to ethical conduct than merely achieving the desired results (Lingwall, 2022). Kant advocates for universalisation as a form of rational thought that assumes the inherent equality of all human beings. Consequently, the equality of participants becomes central to ethical research conduct. Thus, deontology requires us to prioritise duty, act rationally, and ascribe moral weight to the inherent equality of all individuals. Furthermore, advocates of social justice are concerned with parity of participation and distributive justice (Frazer, 2008). Hlalele (2012) maintains that social justice is undeniably grounded in efforts to circumvent provisions that seek to uphold ostracism and exclusionary practices, which have permeated South Africa and many other societies worldwide for extensive periods. Regarding the social contract, individuals relinquish certain rights to the government in exchange for security and common benefits (Sharma, 2012). This creates a continuous balancing act between human desires for freedom and the desire for order, a perpetual facet of human existence. Lastly, virtue theory values virtuous qualities over formal rules or useful results. Virtue ethics is viewed as a revived alternative to consequentialist and deontological theories (Athanassoulis, 2012). Virtue holds that desirable conduct in research is determined by reason and wisdom (Bowin, 2020) and that researchers must possess virtue or be virtuous (Grönum, 2015). Additionally, the Afrocentric ethical lens cherishes ubuntu as an indispensable principle that guides ethical research in rural African contexts (Nkosi et al., 2022; Molefe, 2016; Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2023). Observing Ubuntu suggests that, beyond securing ethical clearance approval from ethics boards, researchers in rural contexts must embody values such as compassion, consideration, empathy, kindness, equality, human dignity, and oneness.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses provide critical insight into the persistent struggles for research ethics and integrity in rural communities. With the adoption of a utilitarian approach, research should aim to generate the greatest overall benefit, not only for individual participants but also for the broader rural community (Mumcu, 2024). In this research, we propose ethical practices that predict the consequences and thus proactively minimise harm and promote happiness. Furthermore, from a virtue ethics perspective, rural researchers should recognise the inherent value of rural communities, ensuring they are treated ethically and with integrity, regardless of their unique challenges. The four theoretical lenses emphasise the implications of the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched. What is well established in ethics research and acknowledged across all four adopted theories is that the potential power imbalance between researchers and participants in rural communities compromises the caring relationships that

researchers, informed by care and empathy, often aim to establish with participants (Baus et al., 2018; Bain et al., 2022; Smith & Stillman, 2014). This research thus suggests that researchers observe ethical protocols in rural communities that maximise protection and avoid harm in their research practices.

2.2 The rural lens

Through the rural social space model, this research applied what is called a 'rural lens' (Wallace & Boylan, 2009; Newfoundland & Labrador, 2019). The concept of a 'rural lens' has been in use in Canada, particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador, since the 1990s and aims to ensure that there are no unintended policy outcomes for rural areas and that rural concerns and priorities are fully considered (Newfoundland & Labrador, 2019). In Australia, Wallace and Boylan (2009) proposed a rural lens as a reversal of thinking—beginning in rural places and looking outwards, rather than reacting to policies developed in other places and times. A rural lens, as understood in this research, is directed towards sustaining the social, cultural, and economic attributes of rural communities, as well as strengthening their community capacity-building options through the provision of contextually relevant services. This represents a deliberate and significant reorientation of research to explicitly place rural perspectives at the forefront (see introduction). It reverses what has historically been characterised as "spatial blindness" (Green & Letts, 2007, cited in Wallace & Boylan, 2009).

In the African context, rurality is a deeply contested and multifaceted concept, shaped by a way of life, a state of mind, and a culture centred on land, livestock, cropping, and community relationships (Hlalele & Molise, 2025). This framing highlights the importance of recognising rurality in terms of its resilience and cultural heritage, rather than solely through a vulnerability lens. Nevertheless, the persistent struggles faced by rural communities, often exacerbated by underdevelopment across multiple dimensions, present substantial challenges for researchers operating in these contexts (Mahosi, 2025). This recognition does not negate the pronounced heterogeneity of rural landscapes (Dax et al., 2023), which further complicates research engagement and underscores the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches.

2.3 Ethical considerations

In this section, we delve into the ethical considerations adhered to and the procedures followed during the research. It should be borne in mind that the current paper addresses the struggles for ethical conduct in researching rural people and communities. Therefore, a heightened level of ethical compliance is inevitable. This baseline study was submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Ethical clearance with original protocol number: 00021516.

3. Methodology

This study employed a literature synthesis methodology to explore the struggles for research ethics and integrity in rural communities. Literature synthesis is a method of critically examining, integrating, and thematically analysing existing scholarly works to develop a coherent understanding of a particular phenomenon. This synthesis allows for an in-depth conceptual engagement with published work to interpret trends, identify thematic insights, and build a deeper narrative around complex issues (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). This approach is particularly suitable for this study as it seeks to interrogate theoretical and empirical literature over the past decade to understand the ethical complexities researchers face in rural African settings.

The synthesis was conducted through a rigorous selection of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly reports published between 2014 and 2025. Key databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were systematically searched using keywords including "research ethics," "integrity," "rural communities," "gatekeeping,"

"informed consent," and "power dynamics." After filtering for relevance, quality, and thematic alignment with the study objectives, a total of 514 scholarly sources were included in the synthesis. The literature was analysed inductively, focusing on recurring ethical concerns and patterns of researcher-participant interactions in rural settings. Through thematic categorisation, four major areas of ethical struggle were identified and structured as the key results of this study: respect for rural people and communities, voluntary informed consent, gatekeeping dynamics, and power struggles and contestations. These themes underpin the findings presented in the "Presentation of Results" section, offering an integrated, contextualised understanding of the ethical tensions characterising rural research environments.

4. Presentation of Results

Results from the secondary data are synthesised around respect, voluntary informed consent, gatekeeping, and the power struggles and contestations that emerged as significant challenges for research ethics and integrity in rural communities.

4.1 Respect for rural people and communities

Despite the successful international acknowledgement and adoption of the Nuremberg Code of 1949, vulnerable populations continue to be exposed to unethical research studies (Madanhire, 2018). Respect for well-being serves as an ethical foundation, actively affirming the responsibility of researchers to use their work to enhance the well-being of others, especially those who are most vulnerable to harm. The principle of respect acknowledges that all knowledge is situated and is most likely to be successful when it entrenches relationships informed by an ethics of care for the well-being of both human and non-human lives, as well as the places and environments they call home (AAG, 2021).

Moletsane (2012) questions why rural communities in South Africa are still plagued by seemingly insurmountable challenges, with no change in sight for those who need it most. Despite the many interventions that have been implemented, real transformation remains elusive. Moletsane laments the dominant deficit paradigms adopted by many researchers, leading to interventions that are developed for rather than with or by the rural people and communities. The issues raised by Moletsane are concomitant with a disrespect for rural people and communities. Additionally, Balfour et al. (2008, p. 101) noted that research on rurality is mostly concerned with "… space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalisation, depopulation, conservatism, tribalism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion." Considering the flipside, researchers may need to focus on the assets that rural people and communities possess, and interventions should be informed by these strengths.

In some instances, certain researchers seem to have a sense of the communities in which they conduct research. Casale (2013) argues that in order to maintain high scientific standards of research and effectively 'get the job done' on the ground, it is necessary to respond to fieldwork challenges that arise as a cohesive team, with timely, locally relevant, and often creative solutions. However, this realisation falls flat as it still emphasises high standards as if these are compromised in rural communities. Furthermore, the researcher's outsider view is not disputed. Rural communities are seen as 'the ground', and it is clear that rural people, in this regard, are not seen as true participants. Studies suggest that strong community participation during a programme's development and implementation is more likely to assure its long-term viability (Hlalele & Tsotetsi, 2015).

4.2 Achieving voluntary informed consent in rural communities

Informed consent is regarded as a cornerstone of ethical research that seeks to ensure that participants are informed and provide voluntary agreement to participate in research (Thompson, Gonzales & Ruiz-Casares, 2025). According to the British Educational Research Association (2018),

researchers are supposed to ensure that participants' voluntary informed consent to be involved in a study is secured before data collection commences, and that researchers remain sensitive and open to the possibility that participants may wish, for any reason and at any time, to withdraw their consent. The struggle for voluntary informed consent is well documented. This includes the researchers' reluctance to translate documents into a local language and the participants' understanding. Informed consent is one of the principles that is important in the protection of participants from harm. The participant needs to be fully informed to the extent that they understand whether to participate in the study or not. One of the challenges that researchers face in rural areas regarding informed consent is the high level of illiteracy. According to Alaei et al. (2013), in one of the research projects, they realised that illiteracy is a barrier that can lead to poor comprehension and a lack of understanding of informed consent, especially in rural areas. As Krosin et al. (2006) indicate, this leads to poor understanding and misinterpretation of informed consent. In some instances, researchers give participants insufficient information, taking advantage of the participants in rural areas and coercing them to participate in the study.

Coercion may come in different forms, which may include using incentives; it is important to distinguish between ideas of coercion that are essentially moralised and those that are neutral (Johnson, 2024). According to Ngwenya et al. (2020), coercion may also arise through incentives due to the socio-economic vulnerabilities of participants in rural areas. In one of the studies conducted by Ngwenya et al. (2020), participants were given food vouchers of R100.00 each, a snack pack (water, apple, biscuits), and T-shirts. In Western contexts, this can be regarded as incentives that may also be considered benefits for participating in the study; whereas, in rural contexts, this may also be construed as coercion or a bribe to force the participants to participate because of their socio-economic situation. They do not have a choice but to participate to have something they can eat. Coercive measures often result in adverse outcomes for those subjected to them (Hallett et al., 2024). Although policies that permit or guide such practices vary significantly, many incorporate elements of coercion, either overtly or through more subtle mechanisms (Johnson et al., 2024).

4.3 Gatekeeping

As Singh and Wassenaar (2016) indicate, a gatekeeper is someone who controls access to an organisation or institution. A gatekeeper has the power to either grant or deny access. In rural contexts, villagers are governed by an induna, a chief, or a king (Appiah, 2021). Due to their positions, they serve as gatekeepers. Therefore, it is important for researchers to know whom to approach as gatekeepers in these villages. These individuals have their own culture and expectations when people visit them, which differ from those in Western countries. Consequently, researchers need to be aware of the protocols and expectations of indunas, elders, chiefs, or a king when seeking access for research in rural communities.

Gatekeeping presents a challenge for researchers who must acquire permission at various levels to reach the key informants of their study. Depending on their perception of research, gatekeepers can either facilitate or hinder researchers' access (Maluleka, 2024). Access protocols are often diverse across rural communities and can sometimes be overwhelming. This aligns with Maluleka's (2024) assertion that part of gatekeeping involves frustrating one's chances of advancing in their career. Initially, researchers must study the culture of the community under investigation. Researchers (Maluleka, 2024; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023) often report needing to undergo thorough cultural exploration before the actual study begins. This involves briefing gatekeepers about the research process and potential outcomes. Additionally, researchers must establish good relationships with the study's informants, who will, in turn, assist with a better understanding of their cultural norms. Gaining access to rural communities while upholding ethical principles and research integrity presents a struggle for researchers. For example, even the issue of consent is overseen by community leaders or elders (Appiah, 2020; Msoroka & Amundsen, 2017). While gatekeeping can be positively

perceived as an adventure in research (Maluleka, 2024), it is often associated with delays in achieving research results; the processes of learning the culture and establishing good relationships, while consistently seeking permission at every stage, can be exhausting.

Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023) shares her experiences negotiating for access in rural areas, where people lead communal lives under the authority of indunas, chiefs, elders, and kings (Appiah, 2021). When approaching the indunas, chiefs, and king, a researcher is expected to bring a gift, as no one can see a chief without one. In the Western world, this may be interpreted as a bribe and deemed unethical, but in rural contexts, it is an accepted practice. Another challenge that Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023) encountered was regarding her attire. The clothes she wore did not align with the cultural expectations of the people. She needed to wear something that was considered acceptable before she could negotiate for access. Therefore, when negotiating for access in rural settings, it is important to consider the local culture and the type of attire researchers wear. Flexibility is essential. In our experiences as researchers in and with rural communities, establishing rapport (relationship building) between us and the various rural communities is crucial.

4.4 Power struggles and contestations

Wood (2017) cautions that compliance with ethical requirements becomes crucial, bearing in mind that researchers wield considerable power and privilege. Nkosi et al. (2022) also caution that "...real power differences and social and political vulnerabilities underscore the ongoing need for the protection of participants in research, ensuring that persons who are susceptible to physical or psychological harm, exploitation, or coercion, are recognised as such and safeguarded while entitled to meaningful engagement and respect" (p. 1). The preceding discussion suggests a situation where the spaces become central and remain a ubiquitous facet throughout the research process. In addition, van der Riet and Grant (2009) concur with Wood and state that "power dynamics in the research interaction are inevitable, particularly in research in rural contexts" (p. 1). The authors further reiterate the power imbalances or differentials between the researcher and the researched. In our view, the researcher's inherent and somewhat unintentional or unconscious deportment, at least in contrast to the rural *researched*, tilts the power scales in favour of the 'knowable and powerful' researcher. Coming from an inherently powerful institution (i.e., the university or research councils/centres), the researcher is undoubtedly very powerful. Therefore, Frazer's notion of 'parity of participation' becomes a consideration that all researchers should not only be mindful of but also ensure imbues their research conduct in rural communities. The question is whether research engagements are carried out with genuinely mutual and reciprocal probability. In an attempt to circumvent or ameliorate the power differentials, several authors (Cunningham et al., 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2019; Nduna, 2020) suggest the use of participatory rural appraisal methodologies while conducting research with rural people and communities to mitigate their disempowerment (Tauri, 2017). According to Hlalele and Tsotetsi (2015), a crucial element in ensuring the success and sustainability of a research project is the community's engagement in it; in other words, the participation of individuals, community-based organisations, rural communities, and institutions that would be affected by the endeavour is vital to its success. We, the authors of this article, further contend that a struggle that is often ignored is the ownership of the problem, the process of finding a solution, and the outcome of the research project.

5. Discussion

Delving into the struggles for ethics and integrity in research with rural people and communities requires both the researchers and the researched to consider certain issues as discussed in the aforementioned sections. Firstly, rural communities exist in their own right, are diverse [as indicated earlier in this paper], and are "…sites of knowledge with their own ontologies as well as epistemologies/knowledges" (Teffo, 2013, p.188). This supports the assertion that rural communities, with their respective ontologies and epistemologies, deserve respect. However, Tauri

(2014, 2017) laments the marginalisation of indigenous approaches to knowledge construction and dissemination through ethics reviews. Not only do researchers need to pay attention to the data generation process and their conduct, but also to the processing and acknowledgement of such knowledge. Proponents of re-centring marginalised rural bodies of knowledge (Nkambule et al., 2011) argue for social justice as a humanising gesture (Hlalele, 2012; Hlalele, 2019).

Secondly, being mindful of respect (Millum & Bromwich, 2020) for rural people, as well as their autonomy (Varkey, 2021) and dignity (Allan & Davidson, 2020), as one of the ethical principles (Marceta, 2019) for rural communities, is paramount and should characterise what we [authors] call 'respectful research'. According to Motloba and Mkawakwa (2018), autonomy is construed to include independence of thought—the ability to 'think for oneself', make decisions, and determine preferences and moral assessment for oneself; (ii) autonomy of will or intention, regarded as the ability of a moral agent to decide on their plans of actions and activities; and (iii) autonomy of action, which involves doing what the agent thinks and intends to do. We contend that, in tandem with the desired reciprocity in rural research, autonomy applies equally to both the researcher and rural communities. This means that researchers should expect to find and respect 'independent thinking' and wisdom amongst rural participants. To sum up, respect should be accorded to both rural spaces [social and physical].

Thirdly, the struggle for voluntary informed consent remains complex. Motloba and Makwakwa (2018) assert that failure to sufficiently engage participants as equal partners throughout the entire "process" of decision-making is tantamount to paternalism. It should be borne in mind that the attributes accompanying the inherent power wielded by researchers should always be kept in check, as this is more likely to lead to involuntary consent. Furthermore, the research process must use language understood by the rural participants, who may not be well-versed in English, which is likely to be the medium of the research process. This may alleviate struggles to consent to participation in research. Based on our personal experience as rural researchers, some elderly rural participants may request the presence of a trusted ally—sometimes one of their children. Some researchers may find this practice strange. This means that researchers should pay special attention to the distinct categories of participants in rural communities. Supporting this assertion, Ngabirano, Saftner, McRee, and McMorris (2020) advocate for special consideration in the struggle to secure voluntary informed consent among adolescents due to their psychosocial and emotional development. Felzmann (2009) also raises contextual issues, such as schools. The author contends that schools involve multiple stakeholders, which may give rise to peculiarities in the struggle for voluntary informed consent. In some rural schools, parents may live far away, making it difficult to contact them for parental assent procedures.

In addition, our reflections on gatekeeping and power differentials have shifted from actual physical access to include digital access. While elders, chiefs, and traditional leaders remain custodians of access to rural communities, the digital world complicates this struggle. While the use of digital technologies may be viewed as contemporary and familiar to younger generations, it may expose them to exploitation and unmitigated risks (Fecke, Schlütz, & Zillich, 2020).

The desirability to strive for credible, reliable, and trustworthy research findings remains a rudimentary and indispensable facet of ethics and integrity. Reid (2021) makes a case for an adaptive approach to ethics and integrity in rural research, stating that "…an ethical approach to rural research is one that recognises the effects of geography and location on the design, funding, implementation, and reporting of research" (p. 247). In other words, while universal ethical principles should be upheld at all times, ethical practices must be attentive, sensitive, appreciative, and adaptable to the unique attributes of the rural research space, its people, and communities. Furthermore, place consciousness in research is an ethical concern for both researchers (Downes et al., 2021) and participants (Thabethe et al., 2018). Downes et al. (2021) further argue that the "…consideration or

omission of the peculiarities of rural places has the potential to either benefit or harm people, places, and their communities" (p. 265).

At this juncture, we, the authors of this article, would like to point out that several studies also advocate for a differentiated approach to ethical practice. For example, Mutenherwa, de Oliveira, and Wassenaar (2019) suggest a specified ethical approach associated with human immunodeficiency virus transmission dynamics research, while Silaigwana and Wassenaar (2019) highlight ethical issues pertinent to biomedical research. McCradden et al. (2022) examine ethics in artificial intelligence.

We further contend that, due to the arguably complex nature of rural spaces and the understanding that no two rural contexts are identical (Hlalele, 2012), the struggle for ethical research and integrity in rural communities is expected to juggle a plethora of rural diversities and unique geographies. Wood (2017) cautions that compliance with ethical requirements must take into account that researchers wield considerable power and privilege. Nkosi et al. (2022) warn that "...real power differences and social and political vulnerabilities underscore the ongoing need for the protection of research participants, ensuring that individuals who are susceptible to physical or psychological harm, exploitation, or coercion are recognised as such and safeguarded while entitled to meaningful engagement and respect" (p. 1). The preceding discussion suggests a situation where the spaces [situations] become central and remain a ubiquitous facet throughout the research process. To support this view, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) (2021) highlights the struggles researchers must navigate at all times: "...ethics are not based on absolute standards but are situational. This means considering the contextual peculiarities of a research project. Consequently, researchers must weigh competing ethical obligations to research participants, students, professional colleagues, employers, and funders, among others, while recognising that obligations to research participants are usually primary" (p. 11). Sadly, Fournier, Stewart, Adams, Shirt, and Mahabir (2023) lament the fact that research involving indigenous [inherently rural] people is often of little or no benefit to their communities.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that the struggle to uphold the highest standards of research ethics and integrity while researching rural communities is a collective one. On the one hand, researchers need a heightened sense of ethical practice. On the other hand, rural communities may need to rely on their assertiveness. Refusing, withdrawing, or refining participation in research should become the norm for these communities. Therefore, understanding the purpose of the research and pondering the balance between benefits and maleficence, as depicted in the theoretical lenses discussed in this article, is crucial. We further wish to reiterate that research ethics and integrity must permeate the entire research process. While research ethics committees bear the unenviable responsibility of ensuring that ethical standards are upheld with a deep understanding of rural communities' prior ethical clearance approval, it is the duty of all involved to ensure post-approval integrity.

7. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (D.H.); Literature review (D.H. & L.T.M.); methodology (D.H.); software (N/A.); validation (D.H. & L.T.M.); formal analysis (D.H. & L.T.M.); investigation (D.H. & L.T.M.); data curation (D.H.); drafting and preparation (D.H. & L.T.M.); review and editing (D.H.); supervision (N/A); project administration (D.H.); funding acquisition (D.H.). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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