

Researching One's Own War: Ethics, Positionality, and the Methodology of Insider Scholarship in Conflict Zones

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Abstract

Researching One's Own War: Ethics, Positionality, and the Methodology of Insider Scholarship in Conflict Zones examines the ethical and methodological tensions that arise when shared identity becomes a source of access, obligation, vulnerability, and epistemic authority. Centering South Sudan without treating it as exceptional, the study situates the case within broader debates in research ethics, reflexive methodology, and insider–outsider research dynamics. It develops the concept of *situated insider ethics* to explain how formal norms, institutional expectations, and lived positionality interact in the production of knowledge in conflict settings.

Drawing on a reflexive methodological memoir; systematic review of insider conflict research ethics literature; interviews with African scholars engaged in insider research; and the development and piloting of an ethics framework at the University of Juba Graduate College, the study advances three linked propositions. First, positionality should be understood as a methodological resource rather than a source of contamination. Second, shared identity generates distinct ethical obligations that extend beyond standard procedural norms. Third, insider research requires designs that prioritize safety, reciprocity, and accountability to researched communities.

The analysis addresses the central question of how researcher positionality shapes data generation, analytical frameworks, and the political uses of knowledge in conflict contexts. It shows that research practices, narratives, and institutional frameworks operate as political instruments rather than neutral processes.

The study concludes that ethical reform in conflict research must move beyond procedural compliance to engage the power relations embedded in knowledge production, and it identifies practical entry points for more credible, responsible, and context-sensitive insider scholarship.

Keywords: *Research ethics; positionality; insider research; methodology; conflict zones; knowledge production; South Sudan*

1. Introduction

Researching One's Own War: Ethics, Positionality, and the Methodology of Insider Scholarship in Conflict Zones begins from a puzzle that is often approached in excessively narrow terms. Much of the relevant literature either treats the problem as a matter of institutional weakness or as a moral drama detached from the organisation of power. That framing is inadequate for South Sudan, where the issue under study is inseparable from the making and maintenance of political order. What appears as failure, omission, or inconsistency often performs a recognisable political function for actors embedded in competitive coalitions, insecure institutions, and externally mediated reform environments ([\(Haraway, 1988\)](#); [\(BOURDIEU, 2003\)](#)).

The article therefore treats the ethical and methodological tensions created when shared identity is simultaneously a source of access, obligation, vulnerability, and epistemic authority not as an accidental side-effect of fragility but as a structured field of struggle. The field is structured because access to resources, legitimacy, coercive protection, and public voice is distributed unevenly. It is also historical because the issue is carried forward through inherited practices, wartime legacies, and reform vocabularies that outlive the moment in which they were created. The question is not only what went wrong, but how particular arrangements became useful to those who benefit from them and burdensome to those excluded by them ([\(Whimp, 2008\)](#); [\(Eschle, 2005\)](#)).

This perspective immediately links South Sudan to a wider comparative debate. The article does not collapse very different cases into one model, but it does insist that the South Sudan material becomes more intelligible when read alongside African insider scholarship across conflict-affected societies. Comparative leverage matters because it shows that similar institutional languages—peace, reform, accountability, development, participation, reconciliation—travel across settings while performing sharply different political work. Variation lies less in whether the vocabulary exists than in who can authorise it, interpret it, and enforce it ([\(Shah, 2006\)](#); [\(Cereda & Carey, 2012\)](#)).

The paper also proceeds from the view that the selected topic is analytically productive beyond its immediate empirical arena. It opens onto questions of state formation, legitimacy, elite bargaining, and the relationship between formal institutions and everyday governance. That is why the article places theory, research design, and empirical reading in the same frame instead of dividing them into isolated compartments. The intention is not to celebrate conceptual sophistication for its own sake, but to use theory to identify mechanisms that ordinary descriptive accounts frequently miss (Wood, 2006; Sriram et al., 2009).

The central intervention is captured through the concept of situated insider ethics. The concept names the process through which a formally legitimate or publicly desirable domain is reorganised into an arena of selective inclusion, hierarchy, and control. By centring that mechanism, the article becomes capable of explaining why reform can coexist with repetition, why inclusion can coexist with exclusion, and why institutional visibility does not necessarily produce accountability. The remainder of the paper develops that claim in dialogue with the topic brief's theoretical, methodological, and policy commitments ([\(Mauthner et al., 2002\)](#); [\(Kapiszewski et al., 2015\)](#)).

2. Theoretical debates and conceptual frame

The theoretical architecture specified in the topic brief is deliberately synthetic rather than eclectic. It brings together Research ethics (Guillemin & Gillam; Israel & Hay); reflexive methodology (Bourdieu; Haraway on situated knowledge); insider/outsider research dynamics (Mercer; Naples). Develops a systematic framework for conducting ethical, methodologically rigorous research on conflict societies by scholars with insider identities. Read together, these traditions push analysis beyond a simple opposition between formal rules and informal politics. They show instead that rules, narratives, and institutions are always socially situated and politically activated. Formal design matters because it authorises some claims and disqualifies others; informal practice matters because it determines how that authorised language is translated, bent, or ignored in concrete struggles over authority ([\(Guillemin & Gillam, 2004\)](#); [\(Dudouet, 2006\)](#)).

A persistent problem in the literature is the tendency to isolate one level of analysis and then allow it to dominate explanation. Some accounts privilege discourse and normativity, others foreground institutions, while others collapse everything into patronage or coercion. The result is partial explanation. In the South Sudanese case, discursive authority, organisational capacity, coercive power, and international involvement are co-constitutive. The article therefore adopts a relational approach in which actors, scales, and repertoires remain analytically connected rather than being treated as separable causes ([\(Haraway, 1988\)](#); [\(BOURDIEU, 2003\)](#)).

Table 1. Conceptual architecture for the article

Dimension	Analytical treatment
Problem field	the ethical and methodological tensions created when shared identity is simultaneously a source of access, obligation, vulnerability, and epistemic authority
Theoretical anchors	Research ethics (Guillemin & Gillam; Israel & Hay); reflexive methodology (Bourdieu; Haraway on situated knowledge); insider/outsider research dynamics (Mercer; Naples). Develops a...
Conceptual intervention	situated insider ethics
South Sudan focus	former child soldier positionality; community trust; data security
Comparative leverage	African insider scholarship across conflict-affected societies

The concept of situated insider ethics is proposed as a way of naming that relational configuration. It refers to more than symbolic contest or policy drift. It describes a patterned

process in which a domain with public legitimacy is reorganised so that it stabilises advantage for some actors while normalising silence, exclusion, or vulnerability for others. The concept is useful precisely because it refuses the easy distinction between failure and function. Arrangements that look normatively deficient may remain politically durable because they distribute benefits, protections, or reputational advantages in ways that elites and intermediaries can recognise ([\(Whimp, 2008\)](#); [\(Eschle, 2005\)](#)).

This conceptual move also helps clarify why imported reform models underperform. Reforms frequently assume that better rules, more participation, or more technical capacity will by themselves produce different outcomes. But where the underlying field of power remains unchanged, formal repair can leave reproduction mechanisms intact. The article thus treats reform not only as a technical design challenge but as a contest over who can authorise institutional purpose, whose interpretation prevails when ambiguity appears, and whose losses count as politically acceptable ([\(Shah, 2006\)](#); [\(Cereda & Carey, 2012\)](#)).

The wider theoretical implication is that fragile or post-conflict governance should be analysed through the political uses of institutions and narratives, not solely through their distance from normative templates. This is where the South Sudan material becomes especially revealing. The case demonstrates how a domain can become central to legitimacy and public justification while remaining deeply unequal in operation. That tension—between authorised form and selective practice—is the central theoretical hinge of the article ([\(Agee, 2009\)](#); [\(Author, 2009\)](#)).



Figure 1. Author-generated causal pathway for situated insider ethics.

3. Research questions and analytical expectations

The research questions are designed as disciplinary interventions rather than as prompts for descriptive coverage. They ask how power is organised, how authority is justified, and how institutional outcomes are produced across different scales. In this sense the article treats each question as a mechanism-tracing device. The questions direct attention to causation, strategic interaction, and historical sequencing rather than to the compilation of events or policy language alone ([\(Mauthner et al., 2002\)](#); [\(Kapiszewski et al., 2015\)](#)).

Research question 1 asks: How does researcher positionality — as a former child soldier, South Sudanese national, and academic — shape the data produced, the analytical frameworks applied, and the political uses to which research findings are put in the specific context of South Sudan's ongoing conflict? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive

checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about situated insider ethics ([Guillemin & Gillam, 2004](#)); ([Dudouet, 2006](#)).

Research question 2 asks: What ethical obligations do insider researchers have toward research subjects whose trust is partly conferred on the basis of shared identity — and how should these obligations be navigated when findings challenge the interests of political communities with which the researcher has personal ties? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about situated insider ethics (Haraway, 1988; Bourdieu, 2003).

Research question 3 asks: What methodological innovations — in terms of research design, informed consent practice, data security, community benefit sharing, and researcher self-protection — are required for ethical insider conflict research that does not reproduce knowledge extraction patterns? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about situated insider ethics (Mercer, 2007; Naples, 2003).

1. How does researcher positionality — as a former child soldier, South Sudanese national, and academic — shape the data produced, the analytical frameworks applied, and the political uses to which research findings are put in the specific context of South Sudan's ongoing conflict?
2. What ethical obligations do insider researchers have toward research subjects whose trust is partly conferred on the basis of shared identity — and how should these obligations be navigated when findings challenge the interests of political communities with which the researcher has personal ties?
3. What methodological innovations — in terms of research design, informed consent practice, data security, community benefit sharing, and researcher self-protection — are required for ethical insider conflict research that does not reproduce knowledge extraction patterns?

4. Methodological architecture

Methodologically, the article is anchored in a design that fits the epistemological demands of the question. It does not assume that a single method can exhaust the problem. Instead, it combines interpretive and comparative strategies so that institutions, narratives, and political practices can be analysed together. The topic brief specifies the following approach: Reflexive methodological memoir; systematic analysis of existing insider conflict research ethics literature; interviews with ten African scholars who have conducted insider conflict research; development and piloting of an insider conflict research ethics framework at the University of Juba Graduate College. This mixed architecture is appropriate because the issue under study is simultaneously historical, organisational, and political ([Shah, 2006](#)); ([Cereda & Carey, 2012](#)).

The design privileges process over snapshot. It seeks to reconstruct how actors identify stakes, mobilise language, navigate institutional constraints, and produce outcomes that later appear

natural or inevitable. Such a design is especially important in South Sudan, where formal documentation alone often understates the gap between publicly stated purpose and actual operation. Interviews, archival traces, institutional texts, and comparative materials are therefore treated as complementary sources for identifying mechanism chains rather than as isolated pools of evidence ([\(Agee, 2009\)](#); [\(Author, 2009\)](#)).

Table 2. Research design, evidence, and analytical payoff

Research question	Evidence base	Analytical payoff
How does researcher positionality — as a former child soldier, South...	Reflexive methodological memoir; systematic analysis of existing insider conflict research...	situated insider ethics
What ethical obligations do insider researchers have toward research...	Reflexive methodological memoir; systematic analysis of existing insider conflict research...	situated insider ethics
What methodological innovations — in terms of research design, inform...	Reflexive methodological memoir; systematic analysis of existing insider conflict research...	situated insider ethics

The comparative dimension serves two purposes. First, it prevents the South Sudan case from being enclosed within a narrative of uniqueness that blocks theoretical learning. Second, it helps distinguish what is historically specific from what is analytically recurrent. By reading South Sudan alongside African insider scholarship across conflict-affected societies, the article can show both the distinctiveness of the local settlement and the wider pattern in which formally legitimate domains become politically reorganised in conflict-affected or institutionally unequal settings ([\(Mauthner et al., 2002\)](#); [\(Kapiszewski et al., 2015\)](#)).

The design also acknowledges limits. Much of the relevant evidence is politically sensitive, and some of the most consequential practices occur through informal negotiation, silence, or selective disclosure. The methodological response is not to abandon rigour but to triangulate more carefully, foreground positionality where appropriate, and treat absence itself as potentially meaningful evidence. This is particularly important for a paper concerned with how visible institutional form can obscure the power relations that animate it ([\(Guillemin & Gillam, 2004\)](#); [\(Dudouet, 2006\)](#)).

5. Analysis

5.1. Positionality as method rather than contamination

Positionality as method rather than contamination becomes analytically central once the article shifts attention from declared purpose to political use. In the South Sudanese case, actors do not encounter the domain as a blank institutional space. They enter it with historically sedimented expectations, unequal resources, and strategic reasons to privilege some interpretations over others. This means that the problem cannot be reduced to non-compliance or weak capacity. It

is produced through patterned selection: who is authorised to speak, decide, classify, document, or allocate consequences within the field ([\(Haraway, 1988\)](#); [\(BOURDIEU, 2003\)](#)).

Seen this way, the issue is anchored in a chain of mediation. Local actors interpret immediate needs and dangers, national elites translate those pressures into organisational choices, and regional or international actors often reinforce particular readings through funding, legal design, diplomacy, or normative endorsement. The field thereby acquires a layered quality: everyday practice and high politics are not separate levels but mutually reinforcing sites through which the ethical and methodological tensions created when shared identity is simultaneously a source of access, obligation, vulnerability, and epistemic authority is organised. The consequence is a recurring divergence between publicly endorsed principles and the distributional realities experienced on the ground ([\(Whimp, 2008\)](#); [\(Eschle, 2005\)](#)).

This becomes especially visible in the article's chosen empirical arenas—former child soldier positionality; community trust; data security; University of Juba ethics piloting. Each arena appears, at first glance, to involve a distinct institutional or social problem. Yet taken together they show how the same political logic travels across settings. Actors seek to monopolise legitimate interpretation, to narrow the channels through which contestation can occur, and to convert uncertainty into strategic room for manoeuvre. The domain under study therefore becomes a relay between immediate governance practice and broader settlement maintenance rather than a detached policy sector ([\(Shah, 2006\)](#); [\(Cereda & Carey, 2012\)](#)).

The comparative material strengthens the claim. Across African insider scholarship across conflict-affected societies, the same general pattern is visible even though the institutional idiom differs. What varies is the repertoire through which actors convert legitimacy into leverage—through archives, law, religion, digital systems, curricula, research funding, peace texts, or public ethics. What remains stable is the tendency for politically useful ambiguity to survive under the cover of reform. That is why the paper treats this subsection not as a descriptive branch of the argument, but as a mechanism-specific demonstration of situated insider ethics ([\(Agee, 2009\)](#); [\(Author, 2009\)](#)).

5.2. Ethical obligations created by shared identity

Ethical obligations created by shared identity becomes analytically central once the article shifts attention from declared purpose to political use. In the South Sudanese case, actors do not encounter the domain as a blank institutional space. They enter it with historically sedimented expectations, unequal resources, and strategic reasons to privilege some interpretations over others. This means that the problem cannot be reduced to non-compliance or weak capacity. It is produced through patterned selection: who is authorised to speak, decide, classify, document, or allocate consequences within the field (Mauthner et al., 2002; Kapiszewski, MacLean, & Read, 2015).

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Table 3. Multi-scalar analytical terrain

Scale	Illustrative arena	Core mechanism	Reform concern
Local	former child soldier positionality	Interpretive authority and immediate practice	research ethics review
National	community trust	Institutional translation and selective enforcement	data protection
Regional/Global	data security	Normative endorsement, funding, or diplomatic leverage	community benefit sharing
Public sphere	University of Juba ethics piloting	Visibility, silence, and reputational effect	researcher safety

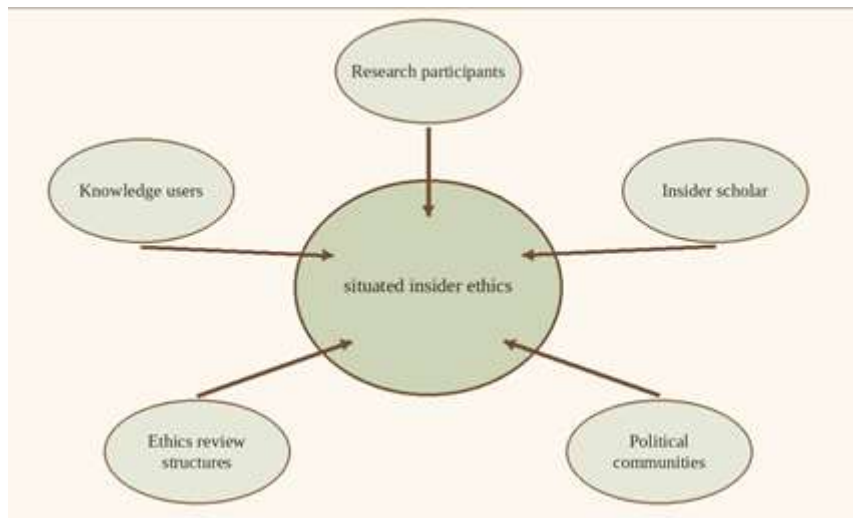


Figure 2. Author-generated field map of actors, institutions, and pressures.

5.3. Designing safe and reciprocal insider research

Designing safe and reciprocal insider research becomes analytically central once the article shifts attention from declared purpose to political use. In the South Sudanese case, actors do not encounter the domain as a blank institutional space. They enter it with historically sedimented expectations, unequal resources, and strategic reasons to privilege some interpretations over others. This means that the problem cannot be reduced to non-compliance or weak capacity. It is produced through patterned selection: who is authorised to speak, decide, classify, document, or allocate consequences within the field ([\(Shah, 2006\)](#); [\(Cereda & Carey, 2012\)](#)).

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6. Policy and scholarly implications

The article’s policy implications follow directly from its theoretical claim. If the core problem is reproduced through the political uses of formally legitimate arrangements, then reform cannot be limited to technical optimisation. Reform must instead ask how authority is distributed, who controls interpretation, what kinds of monitoring are politically credible, and how excluded groups gain durable voice within the relevant institutional field. Without such shifts, improvement at the level of procedure is likely to remain reversible or cosmetic ([\(Haraway, 1988\)](#); [\(BOURDIEU, 2003\)](#)).

This does not imply that technical design is irrelevant. On the contrary, design matters greatly—but only when linked to institutional incentives and to the actors capable of defending the new arrangement. Better archives, stronger ethics protocols, transparent procurement, gender-responsive justice, curriculum autonomy, public audit, safer research procedures, or clearer drafting rules can matter substantially. The argument is that such instruments work only when they are embedded in coalitions that can protect them against selective implementation and elite capture ([\(Whimp, 2008\)](#); [\(Eschle, 2005\)](#)).

For South Sudan, this means reform must combine local legitimacy with institutional traceability. Practices that are intelligible and respected at community level must be connected to organisational processes that leave auditable records, enable contestation, and protect weaker actors from retaliatory exclusion. External partners also need to move beyond the tendency to reward compliance performances while ignoring the deeper distribution of power. The challenge is to support institutional redesign without reproducing the external dependency that often narrows reform to donor-manageable indicators ([\(Shah, 2006\)](#); [\(Cereda & Carey, 2012\)](#)).

Table 4. Institutional and policy implications

Domain	Institutional shift	Intended effect	Accountability logic
Research Ethics Review	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Data Protection	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Community Benefit Sharing	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Researcher Safety	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace

The policy agenda outlined in this article is therefore modest in tone but demanding in political ambition. It does not promise a rapid transition from fragility to coherence. It proposes instead a sequence of institutional shifts tied to research ethics review, data protection, community benefit sharing, researcher safety. Each shift is evaluated not by whether it sounds normatively attractive in the abstract, but by whether it redistributes interpretive authority, increases accountability, and reduces the room for politically productive ambiguity in the domain under examination ([\(Agee, 2009\)](#); [\(Author, 2009\)](#)).

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that the ethical and methodological tensions created when shared identity is simultaneously a source of access, obligation, vulnerability, and epistemic authority should be analysed as a politically organised field rather than as a mere symptom of fragility. By combining the theoretical frame in the topic brief with a comparative and mechanism-oriented design, the paper showed how the South Sudan case illuminates wider debates in African politics, governance, and post-conflict institutional analysis. The concept of situated insider ethics captures the process through which formal legitimacy and selective political use become bound together ([\(Mauthner et al., 2002\)](#); [\(Kapiszewski et al., 2015\)](#)).

The contribution is scholarly in at least two senses. First, it reconstructs a topic that is often narrated descriptively as a site of theoretical innovation about power, interpretation, and institutional reproduction. Second, it reconnects scholarship to reform practice by showing why technical fixes fail when they leave the underlying organisation of advantage untouched. The South Sudan evidence is therefore not merely illustrative; it is constitutive of the article's broader conceptual claim ([\(Guillemin & Gillam, 2004\)](#); [\(Dudouet, 2006\)](#)).

What follows for future research is clear. Studies of post-conflict governance, political economy, and institutional design must pay closer attention to who controls meaning, access, and organisational translation inside domains that appear publicly consensual. Future policy work must do the same. Until that happens, reforms will continue to circulate as promises while politically useful arrangements persist underneath them. The article closes, then, not with a technocratic checklist, but with a call to take power seriously in the analysis and redesign of institutions in South Sudan and beyond ([\(Haraway, 1988\)](#); [\(BOURDIEU, 2003\)](#)).

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