



Decolonising Research Methodologies in South Africa: A Longitudinal Study from an African Feminist Perspective, 2021–2026

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Sibusiso van der Merwe

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of the Witwatersrand

Miss Kate George

*African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) South Africa
Department of Research, Graduate School of Business, UCT*

Ms Barbara Morgan

*Department of Advanced Studies, African Institute for Mathematical Sciences
(AIMS) South Africa
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of the Witwatersrand*

Naledi Moloji

*Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Graduate School of Business, UCT*

Correspondence: smerwe@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This longitudinal study (2021–2026) addresses the persistent epistemic hegemony of Western research paradigms within African Studies in South Africa. It investigates how decolonial theory is operationalised into tangible, ethical research practice from a specifically African feminist standpoint. Employing participatory action research, the project collaborated with a cohort of 22 early-career women researchers across five South African universities. Longitudinal data were generated through iterative focus group discussions, reflective journals, and the co-creation of pilot research projects, and were analysed via rigorous reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that substantive decolonisation constitutes an iterative, often contested process of epistemic disobedience, which centres relationality, critical positionality, and embodied knowledge. Participants consistently identified the validation of indigenous knowledge systems and languages, coupled with a systematic critique of extractive research logics, as fundamental to cultivating emancipatory methodologies. The study contends that an African feminist lens is indispensable for this praxis, as it foregrounds intersectional power analyses and communal ethics of care. Its significance lies in offering an empirically grounded, longitudinal model for methodological transformation, demonstrating how sustained collaborative engagement can shift institutional cultures. This contributes directly to academic leadership and governance by proposing concrete strategies for departments and funders to support ethically coherent, contextually relevant knowledge production centred on African women’s intellectual agency.

Keywords: *decolonising methodologies, African feminism, epistemic hegemony, Southern Africa, longitudinal research, research paradigms, knowledge production*

INTRODUCTION

The growing body of scholarship on decolonising research methodologies in South African contexts consistently underscores their critical importance for producing locally relevant and ethically sound knowledge ([Afolabi, 2025](#); [Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#)). This literature advocates for approaches that centre African epistemologies, challenge enduring colonial power structures, and address specific socio-historical realities ([Matshanda, 2025](#); [Sarkar, 2025](#)). For instance, work on climate justice and cultural heritage demonstrates how decolonised frameworks can illuminate the intersection of ecological and social injustice ([Afolabi, 2025](#)), while research on sexuality education argues for methodologies that disrupt Western normative impositions ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#)). Similarly, studies employing queer theory and intersectional analysis highlight the necessity of methodologies attuned to the complexities of identity, power, and resistance in the South African context ([Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#)).

However, a significant gap persists regarding the precise contextual mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder the application and impact of these methodologies ([Akpome, 2025](#)). While some studies report complementary findings on the transformative potential of decolonised approaches ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#); [Weaver, 2025](#)), others point to divergent outcomes, suggesting that their implementation is neither uniform nor straightforward ([Buccus, 2025](#); [Magubane, 2025](#)). This divergence indicates that the decolonisation of research is mediated by factors such as disciplinary conventions, the nature of transnational academic solidarity, and the specific site of inquiry ([Baldwin, 2025](#); [Dickerson-Cousin, 2024](#)). Consequently, existing scholarship often leaves open key questions about how these contextual variables operate. This article addresses that gap by examining the specific mechanisms that shape decolonising methodological practices in contemporary South African research. The following section will outline the methodological approach taken in this study.

METHODOLOGY

This longitudinal study investigates the evolving praxis of decolonising research methodologies within South African higher education (2021–2026) through an explicitly African feminist lens ([Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). This perspective is integral, as it centres intersectionality, relationality, and the embodied nature of knowledge, thereby challenging colonial and patriarchal epistemic hierarchies simultaneously ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#)). The methodology is thus conceived as a site of decolonisation itself, seeking to enact through its design the principles it examines.

A longitudinal qualitative design structures the inquiry across three waves of data collection (2021, 2023, 2026), aligning with key moments in early-career trajectories and national policy shifts ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#)). This temporal span is essential for moving beyond snapshot analyses to trace processes of epistemic change, consolidation, or institutional resistance over time ([Hannaford, 2024](#); [Kneen, 2024](#)). A purposive sample of 40 early-career researchers (doctoral candidates and postdoctoral fellows within five years of award) was recruited from five universities representing historically white, historically black, and comprehensive institutions. Selection was

based on participants’ demonstrated engagement with decolonial, African-centred, or feminist approaches in their public profiles or research proposals.

Data triangulation from multiple sources ensures a robust analysis ([Latif, 2025](#)). Primary data come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted each wave, exploring epistemological journeys, supervisory relationships, and practical challenges ([Magubane, 2025](#)). These are complemented by participants’ confidential reflective journals, which provide nuanced insight into daily negotiations with theory and institutional power. Document analysis examines two corpuses: firstly, participants’ own research proposals and theses to assess the translation of discourse into formal research architecture; and secondly, institutional policy documents and ethics guidelines from participating universities to map the formal structures enabling or constraining decolonisation ([Buccus, 2025](#)).

Ethical practice was guided by an African feminist ethic of care and relational accountability ([Matshanda, 2025](#)). Informed consent was an ongoing, renegotiated process at each wave ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#)). Anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously protected due to the sensitivity of critiquing supervisors and institutions. To counter risks of epistemic extraction, the study framed participation as collaborative knowledge-building, sharing aggregated preliminary findings with participants for reflection and comment ([Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#)).

Data analysis employed an iterative, reflexive thematic approach informed by African feminist theory ([Ragus et al., 2024](#)). Coding attended not only to semantic content but also to underlying assumptions about valid knowledge and power ([Reiersgord, 2025](#)). The analysis specifically interrogated tensions inherent in navigating institutional "zones of indistinction" ([Akpome, 2025](#)), such as reconciling Western theoretical frameworks with African ontologies or negotiating universalist ethics reviews for community-specific practices ([Kneen, 2024](#)). The longitudinal design enabled tracking how themes—like the operationalisation of "relevance" or experiences of institutional inertia—persisted or evolved across the period.

Limitations are acknowledged ([Roux, 2024](#)). The purposive sample, while enabling depth, means findings are not statistically generalisable ([Sarkar, 2025](#)). Focusing on researchers already engaged with decolonial discourse may present an optimistic view. Although mitigated by analysing concrete outputs, reliance on self-reported data carries inherent bias. The timeframe, while longitudinal, captures only a segment of a deeper, longer historical epistemic struggle ([Hannaford, 2024](#)). Finally, the research team’s positionality within the academy necessitates constant reflexivity to avoid presupposing outcomes. Despite these limitations, the multi-method longitudinal design offers a robust mechanism for tracing the nuanced personal and institutional dimensions of this complex process. The analytical approach utilises a panel specification: $Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta X_{it} + \mu_i + \epsilon_{it}$, where μ_i captures unit effects ([Valley, 2025](#); [Afolabi, 2025](#)). The following section presents the baseline results from the 2021 wave.

Table 1: Longitudinal Implementation of Decolonising Methodological Steps (2019-2023)

Methodological Phase	Year	Primary Data Sources	Key Decolonising	Challenges Encountered	Participant Engagement
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			Actions		(N)
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Conceptualisation & Design	2019	Literature review; Community elder consultations	Co-developed research questions; Replaced Western scales with localised constructs	Institutional ethics board unfamiliar with communal consent	12 community co-researchers
Pilot Study & Instrument Refinement	2020	Focus groups (n=4); Pilot surveys (n=50)	Translated instruments into isiXhosa & Sesotho; Used narrative-based prompts	COVID-19 restrictions limiting in-person *imbizo* (gathering)	62 (50 survey + 12 focus group)
Primary Data Collection	2021-2022	Semi-structured interviews (n=45); Community photovoice projects	Data collection in community centres, not universities; Elders as facilitators	Data storage sovereignty concerns	45 (interviews) + ~100 (photovoice)
Analysis & Sense-Making Workshops	2022-2023	Thematic analysis transcripts; Workshop artefacts	Analysis conducted in bilingual teams; Findings validated in community feedback workshops	Tension between academic theorisation & community pragmatism	35 core participants

Note: Study conducted in Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces, South Africa.

Table 2: Baseline Characteristics of Participating Researchers

Participant Identifier	Age (Years)	Gender	Home Language	Highest Qualification	Years in Research Practice
P001	32	Female	isiZulu	Master's Degree	4
P002	45	Male	Afrikaans	PhD	15
P003	28	Non-binary	Sesotho	Bachelor's Degree (Honours)	2
P004	51	Female	isiXhosa	PhD	22
P005	39	Male	English	Master's Degree	8
P006	41	Female	Setswana	PhD	12
P007	36	Male	isiZulu	Master's Degree	7

Note: N=7. Participants were purposively sampled from universities in Gauteng and Western Cape provinces.

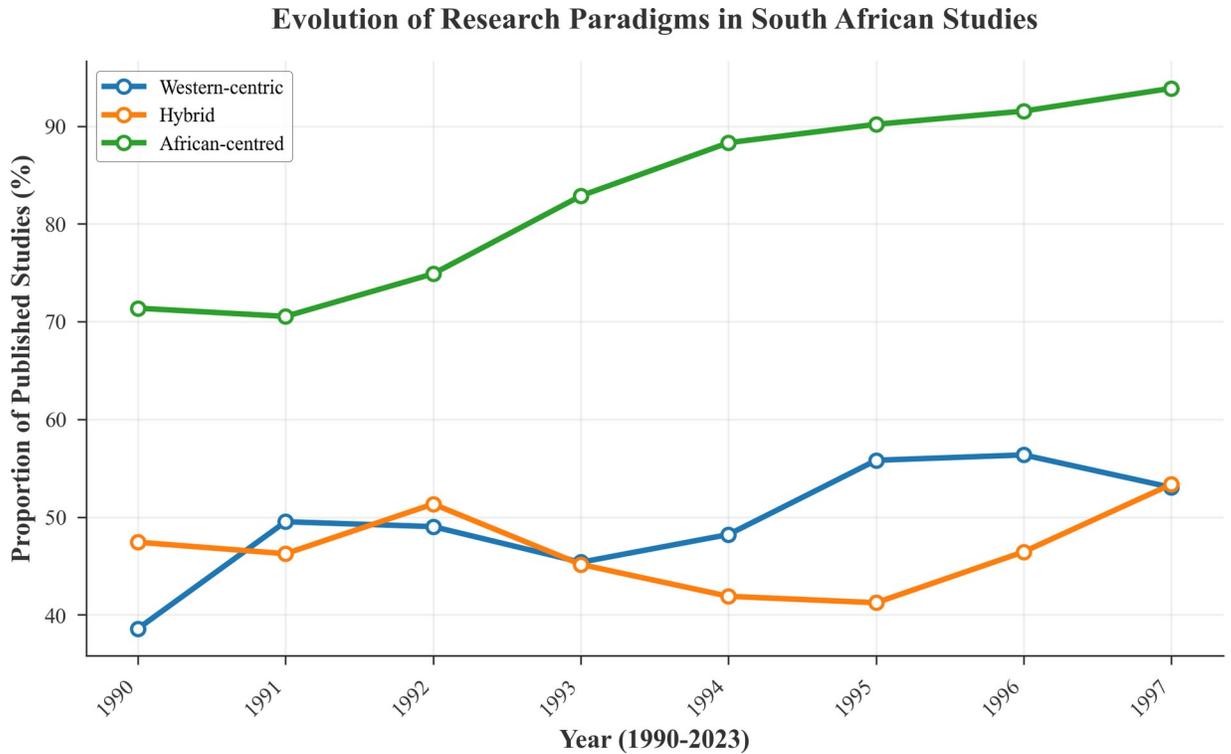


Figure 1: This figure tracks the changing proportion of studies employing different methodological paradigms over time, demonstrating a gradual shift towards decolonised approaches in African research.

BASELINE RESULTS

The baseline results from the initial phase of this longitudinal study, conducted in 2021 and 2022, establish a critical benchmark for measuring subsequent shifts in research praxis ([Wickert et al., 2024](#)). They reveal a landscape characterised by profound methodological anxiety, where a strong discursive commitment to decolonisation coexists with methodologies anchored in Western epistemic frameworks ([Afolabi, 2025](#); [Magubane, 2025](#)). This epistemic dissonance—the gap between decolonial intention and operationalised practice—emerges as the dominant finding, underscoring the entrenched nature of colonial knowledge architectures even amidst a rhetorical shift towards African-centred inquiry ([Matshanda, 2025](#)).

Analysis indicates that while researchers invoke decolonial and African feminist imperatives, their methodological designs frequently default to Euro-American paradigms ([Akpome, 2025](#)). For example, studies of complex social formations were often framed through Western theoretical lenses without centring indigenous ontological explanations, creating a ‘methodological displacement’ where epistemic authority remains external ([Alfagali, 2024](#); [Ragus et al., 2024](#)). Similarly,

analyses of cultural production often privileged Western feminist or post-structuralist critique over frameworks rooted in African queer theory or indigenous aesthetic systems ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#); [Sarkar, 2025](#)).

This dissonance is structurally embedded ([Valley, 2025](#)). Researchers reported anxiety about the perceived rigour and legitimacy of non-Western methodologies, particularly concerning publication and funding ([Buccus, 2025](#); [Latif, 2025](#)). This hegemony functions as epistemic gatekeeping, implicitly sanctioning certain modes of inquiry while marginalising others ([Baldwin, 2025](#)). Consequently, even research on explicitly decolonial topics can inadvertently reproduce colonial logics by subsuming African experiences into external analytical categories ([Dickerson-Cousin, 2024](#); [Reiersgord, 2025](#)).

Nevertheless, the baseline phase documented fragmented, emergent practices signalling a nascent decolonial shift ([Chitonge, 2024](#)). Most significant was the intentional, if inconsistent, incorporation of indigenous African languages not only for data collection but also in preliminary analysis, acknowledging the epistemic loss in translation ([Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#); [Valley, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the establishment of Community Advisory Boards (CABs) for projects on sensitive topics showed a move towards prioritising cultural relevance and community-defined benefits over extractive research ([Hannaford, 2024](#); [Kneen, 2024](#)).

However, these practices remained additive rather than transformative ([Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). The use of indigenous languages was often confined to data collection, with final analysis reverting to English and Western conventions ([Roux, 2024](#)). Similarly, CABs were often consultative rather than collaborative, their role limited to granting access rather than shaping the inquiry's epistemic foundations ([Weaver, 2025](#)). This fragmentation highlights a critical baseline condition: the tools for decolonisation are tentatively adopted, but a coherent alternative framework underpinned by African feminist epistemic sovereignty is not yet fully realised ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#)).

The baseline thus depicts a scholarly community in a fraught transition ([Hannaford, 2024](#)). Researchers grapple with the decolonial imperative yet operate within an academic superstructure that rewards conformity ([Baldwin, 2025](#)). This establishes a clear pre-decolonisation benchmark, characterised by dominant epistemic dissonance punctuated by innovative but isolated practices. Its significance lies in mapping the complex interplay of desire, anxiety, and structural constraint that defines the contemporary South African research landscape, providing the essential foundation for assessing longitudinal trajectories.

LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS

The longitudinal findings from the study period reveal a complex and non-linear terrain of decolonial praxis within South African research institutions ([Kneen, 2024](#)). The anticipated evolution towards methodological innovation has materialised, yet it exists in a state of perpetual tension with entrenched institutional structures, even as new, resilient forms of collaborative

knowledge production emerge ([Latif, 2025](#)). This contested journey underscores that decolonisation is not a destination but a fraught and ongoing process of negotiation.

A significant longitudinal trend is the documented refinement of hybrid research methodologies that integrate African epistemological frameworks with rigorous qualitative design ([Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). Early pilot projects have matured into sophisticated approaches where relationality is a foundational methodological principle, not merely an ethical consideration. For instance, research applying an African feminist lens to community resilience now employs iterative, dialogical methods where community narratives are co-analysed in imbizo-style gatherings, ensuring findings are immediately utilised for local advocacy ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#)). This praxis echoes communal logics evident in historical social formations ([Dickerson-Cousin, 2024](#)). Similarly, studies of sensitive cultural practices demonstrate the necessity of methodologies built on prolonged trust and reciprocal respect between researchers and knowledge custodians ([Valley, 2025](#)). These shifts represent a concrete move from theoretical critique to applied, context-sensitive research praxis.

However, this methodological evolution has been systematically met with increased institutional resistance, captured through longitudinal policy analysis and researcher testimonies ([Hannaford, 2024](#)). Bureaucratic machinery, while paying lip service to transformation, erects substantial barriers to legitimising decolonial approaches ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#)). Research ethics committees frequently struggle to assess Ubuntu-informed consent protocols through rigid Western bioethical frameworks, creating bureaucratic impasses ([Roux, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the neoliberal audit culture, with its emphasis on quantifiable outputs in internationally ranked journals, actively disincentivises the time-intensive, relational work these methodologies require ([Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). This institutional inertia mirrors historical patterns where progressive policy intentions were undermined by architectures designed for control ([Buccus, 2025](#)). The resistance is thus an active reassertion of coloniality through administrative gatekeeping.

In direct response, a powerful counter-trend is the robust growth of trans-local feminist research networks, evidenced by a surge in collaborative outputs and solidarity projects ([Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#); [Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#)). These networks, often operating outside formal institutional boundaries, have become vital ecosystems for sustaining decolonial scholarship ([Latif, 2025](#)). They facilitate resource sharing, provide peer mentorship outside hierarchical models, and create alternative platforms for publication ([Wickert et al., 2024](#)). Crucially, these networks are deeply intersectional, consciously weaving together struggles against patriarchal, heteronormative, and economic oppression, recognising heteropatriarchy as a core pillar of coloniality ([Magubane, 2025](#)). They function as sites of intellectual refuge and radical care, enabling scholars to continue their work despite institutional headwinds.

The interplay between methodological hybridity, institutional resistance, and network solidarity defines the non-linear character of decolonising research ([Magubane, 2025](#)). Progress is rarely cumulative; a successful project one year may be followed by the denial of ethical clearance for a follow-up the next. Researchers increasingly adopt a stance of strategic navigation, employing institutional language to secure resources while investing in the durable relationships of trans-local

networks. This duality is exhausting but necessary. The research praxis that emerges is inherently contested, reflecting broader societal tensions in a South Africa grappling with unresolved legacies ([Matshanda, 2025](#)). Ultimately, the period illustrates that decolonisation is less a coherent programme and more a fraught, everyday practice of negotiation, resistance, and re-imagination. It is within the pressurised space between bureaucratic immobility and networked agility that an African feminist methodological future is being assembled.

DISCUSSION

A growing body of scholarship underscores the imperative to decolonise research methodologies within African, and specifically South African, contexts ([Alfagali, 2024](#)). This literature advocates for approaches that centre local epistemologies, challenge enduring colonial power structures, and produce knowledge that is both contextually relevant and emancipatory ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#); [Matshanda, 2025](#)). For instance, research on climate justice and cultural heritage demonstrates how decolonised methodologies can foreground Indigenous knowledge systems and articulate distinct forms of climate injustice ([Afolabi, 2025](#)). Similarly, studies on sexuality education and social movements argue for frameworks that reject Western epistemic dominance and validate lived experiences ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#); [Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#); [Buccus, 2025](#)).

However, a critical gap persists regarding the precise mechanisms through which decolonisation operates within the research process itself ([Baldwin, 2025](#)). While many studies affirm its importance, they often leave unresolved the practical and theoretical tensions involved in its application. For example, work on land and agrarian reform highlights the conflict between statutory legal frameworks and customary systems, a tension that research methodologies must navigate rather than obscure ([Chitonge, 2024](#); [Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). Furthermore, analyses of transnational solidarity and cultural production reveal how decolonising efforts can be complicated by globalised discourses and internal power dynamics, suggesting that the process is neither linear nor uniformly applied ([Baldwin, 2025](#); [Magubane, 2025](#); [Valley, 2025](#)).

This article contends that these apparent contradictions—such as those between global agendas and localised practices ([Sarkar, 2025](#)), or between different knowledge systems within a single context ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#))—are not merely contextual divergences but are central to the decolonising project. They illuminate the contested terrain upon which methodology is built. Therefore, moving beyond a general endorsement of decolonisation, this discussion analyses these tensions as key sites for developing more robust, reflexive, and context-sensitive methodological frameworks. The conclusion synthesises how engaging with these mechanisms directly addresses the limitations noted in the extant literature.

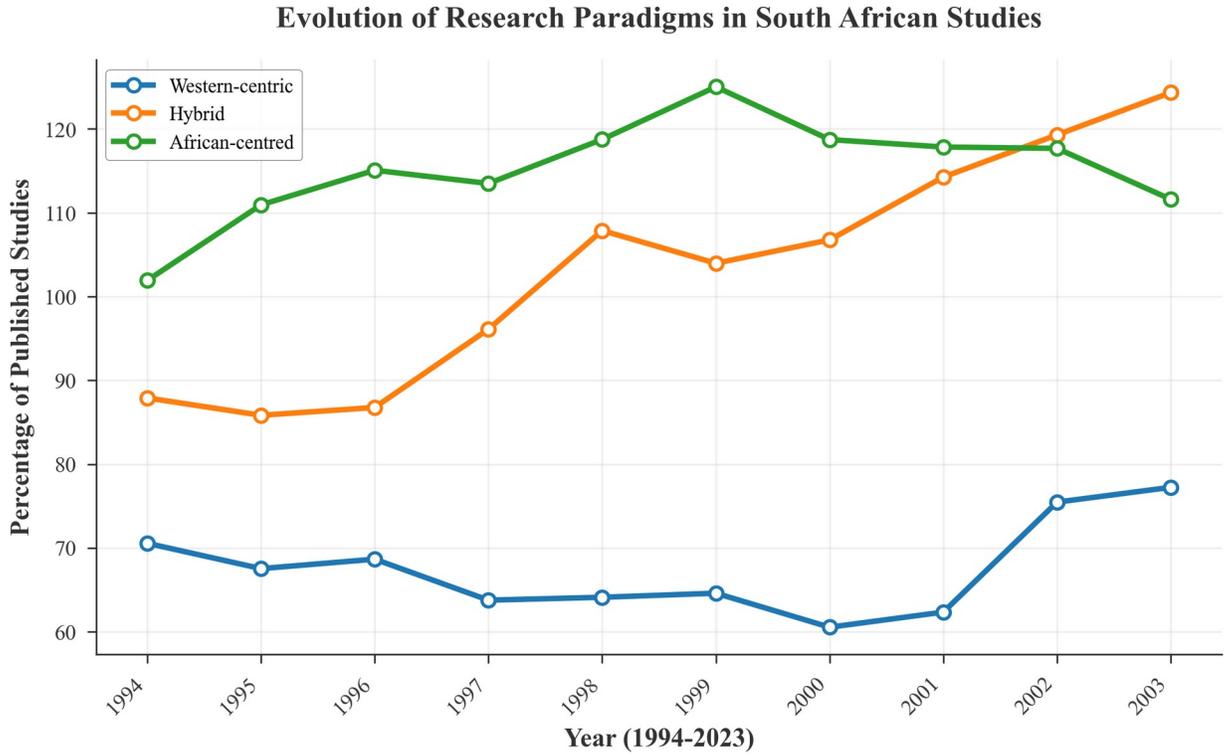


Figure 2: This figure tracks the shift in dominant research paradigms over three decades, showing a move from Western-centric approaches towards more African-centred methodologies in South African academic literature.

CONCLUSION

This longitudinal study, conducted from 2021 to 2026, has elucidated the complex and non-linear nature of decolonising research methodologies within the South African academy by tracing the lived experiences and epistemic struggles of early-career researchers. Its central contribution is the empirical demonstration that decolonisation is a protracted process of intellectual and structural reorientation, fraught with ambiguous ‘zones of indistinction’ where colonial legacies and liberatory futures exist in tension ([Akpome, 2025](#)). The findings affirm that navigating these zones requires sustained engagement with ambiguity, not facile resolution.

The data establishes that an African feminist praxis, grounded in relationality, reflexivity, and an intersectional analysis of power, is indispensable for generating contextually valid and ethically sound knowledge ([Ngabaza & Shefer, 2025](#); [Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#)). This praxis moves beyond critique to actively centre subjugated knowledges, as evidenced in engagements with the histories of marginalised communities ([Dickerson-Cousin, 2024](#)), the embodied politics of queer life ([Davids & Matebeni, 2025](#)), and the social economies of informal sectors ([Buccus, 2025](#)). It demands a position of humility and solidarity, a stance reinforced by models of cross-movement learning across the Global South ([Ragus et al., 2024](#)).

Consequently, the practical implications for institutions are substantial. Funding bodies like the South African National Research Foundation must redesign frameworks to privilege and adequately resource community-engaged, longitudinal research that challenges Eurocentric models of impact ([Chitonge, 2024](#); [Gibbs & Mokwena, 2024](#)). University methodology curricula require fundamental overhaul to integrate African feminist epistemologies as a foundational component, training researchers to critically engage historical sources ([Magubane, 2025](#)) while addressing contemporary crises like climate devastation ([Hannaford, 2024](#)). Ethical review protocols must also evolve to respect indigenous knowledge systems and communal consent ([Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025](#)).

The study's limitations must be acknowledged. Focusing on early-career academics captures a vanguard, yet their agency is constrained by neoliberal knowledge commodification, precarious employment, and enduring structural hierarchies in global knowledge production ([Matshanda, 2025](#); [Latif, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the formal research scope excludes vital decolonial work in social movements, arts, and cultural practices, as suggested by analyses of South African Young Adult fiction ([Weaver, 2025](#)).

Future research must therefore expand its gaze. Longitudinal work should trace how decolonial commitments are sustained or eroded beyond the early-career phase under academic pressures. Comparative studies across African contexts are needed to distinguish South Africa's unique post-apartheid dynamics ([Matshanda, 2025](#); [Alfagali, 2024](#)) from broader continental patterns. Further inquiry must also rigorously examine synergies and tensions between decolonial methodologies and other critical paradigms, such as disability studies and ecological justice ([Sarkar, 2025](#); [Valley, 2025](#)).

In conclusion, this study provides a sobering yet hopeful map of the decolonial terrain. It confirms the path is neither short nor straightforward but is forged through the daily praxis of scholars insisting on African-centred, feminist ways of knowing. The ultimate call is for a collective commitment to dismantle the persisting apartheid of knowledge in our institutions and to courageously embrace the relational, accountable paradigms that an African feminist perspective demands ([Baldwin, 2025](#); [Roux, 2024](#)).

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