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Review Article

Educational Research Ethics Committees as Space for Situated Learning in Higher Education

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This paper contributes a different perspective to the debates regarding the role of research ethics committees (RECs) in educational and social sciences research. It identifies limited explicit engagements from such debates about how academics who serve in RECs can learn from these committees towards academic growth and development in and beyond being ethical researchers. We (the authors) follow a duoethnographic method to reflect on our experiences of learning from one committee in a South African university. We argue that, notwithstanding the identified shortcomings in some of the REC committees, they can also be spaces for situated learning. Based on our experience, we identify several ways in which these committees can be resourceful. (1) They can empower the less experienced members through observation and interaction with the experienced. (2) They provide opportunities for the transfer of "knowledge power" to beyond the committee for quality research and postgraduate supervision practices. (3) They can be a solution to the limited research supervision capacity in some institutions. The paper also extends the understanding of the situated learning theory as we add 'visitors' as an element of the community of practice.

1. Introduction

Social scientists are angry and frustrated. They believe their work is being constrained and distorted by regulators of ethical practice who do not understand social science research [1].

Although the above epigraph does not apply to all social scientists, it is an example of some discourses about research ethics review committees (RECs) in social sciences and educational research. While there are scholars that defend and justify the work of RECs (such as [2, 3]), many that are in anthropology, sociology, and education criticise these committees [4–7]. Such criticisms note the imposition of a biomedical model of ethics review which limits academic freedom in education and social sciences [1, 8–13]. Lederman [7] argues that some institutional review boards (as they are called in America) motivate unethical and dishonest research, cynicism, confusion, and frustration among the ethnographic and other qualitative researchers because of the regulating documents that are designed with positivistic and political orientation.

The concern is the inappropriateness of some RECs to judge the merits of research in paradigms with which they are traditionally not familiar [12]. Often, ethical reviews are about compliance to policy; yet, there is a "distance between procedural compliance and actual ethical conduct in the practice of research" in qualitative research [14].

It is noteworthy that many educational and social science researchers do not refute the significance of ethical clearance reviews but do not agree with the once-off REC procedures that occur before the research commences [15]. For example, Head [6] notes that ethical codes, rules, and principles that are set by the RECs are not enough for educational research: "ethical issues in educational research go beyond a matter of compliance with rules, codes, and principles to the complex matter of ethical dilemmas that are organic, dynamic, and dependent on context and relationships, and which are often contestable."

In this paper, we contribute another perspective to the discourse relating to RECs. As educational researchers ourselves, we agree with the arguments against the homogenising tendencies of some RECs. However, we have come to realise that there is limited explicit engagement about how academics who serve in the RECs can learn from the committees towards academic growth and development in and beyond being ethical researchers. This silence surprises us for two interrelated reasons. First, academics work in a competition-filled, neoliberal environment where practices are quantitatively measured to determine performance and promotion [16–18]. Therefore, the literature about academics serving in RECs may shed light on whether such an activity enables or constrains their development in such an environment in various key performance areas. Second, academic REC members spend time reviewing the applications for ethical clearance. The value of time in the neoliberal and capitalist environment cannot be overemphasised [19–21]. How serving on such committees compensates for this quantitative time cannot be known unless academics' experiences are shared.

We write this paper from an advantaged position of having been in both sides: researchers who often apply for ethical clearance and academic REC members. N. Madikizela-Madiya (author 1) served in the committee before she obtained her Ph.D. (a permissible situation in her institution), while A. T. Motlhabane (author 2) served when he was already a professor in natural sciences education. Thus, we assume that our reflection will trigger discussions from other researchers and committee members across contexts for possible improvement in the operations of RECs.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a review is presented of the literature to identify an account of how RECs are perceived and the reasons behind such perceptions. Second, the situated learning theory is presented and contextualised to our experiences of serving in the RECs. The third section explains how the REC in our context is structured. This is followed by a discussion of duoethnography as a method we follow in the reflection. Next, we present our experiences as data for analysis. This is followed by the discussion of these experiences and the conclusions as the final section.

2. Background to Research Ethics Committees

The formal review of research proposals stemmed from the medical field following the exploitation and abuse of humans by the medical fraternity in historical times [22, 23]. The codes of research ethics were developed and declared in documents such as the Nuremberg Code of 1947, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report. Such codes were adopted to direct "the planning, conduct, and reporting of medical research involving humans and (to prioritise) the welfare of the participants over the aims of the research" [15]. Although such regulations were meant for physicians and later other medical researchers, the realisation of the vulnerability of participants such as students in education led to the spread of formal ethics reviews to other disciplines [15]. As such, the formal review of research proposals for ethical clearance is relatively recent in the social sciences and education [24, 25].

While such formal reviews are meant to regulate the protection of participants and researchers from harm during the research process, the concern has been how all research involving humans is treated the same regardless of its purpose and context. Van den Hoonaard and Hamilton [26] note the following: "even members of ethics review committees, as 'guardians' of ethics review processes, are not entirely happy. Mandating researchers to submit their research plans to ethics committees before gathering any data involving humans is often not a joyful or productive one for either party."

Amidst these concerns, the value of RECs in limiting unacceptable research practices and promoting ethical research practices is also acknowledged [2, 3, 27]. Bond [28] and Mertens [29] highlight issues involved in educational and social sciences research which require such research to be ethically cleared. First, educational and social sciences research "involves interaction with individuals and communities" [29]. Such interaction must be respectful, sensitive, relevant, and considerate. These issues might be overlooked by the researchers at times and the multiple eyes of the REC assist in identifying them. Mertens [29] further argues that "the concept of a researcher as an instrument brings to the fore ethical issues related to relationships that generally receive less attention or are not addressed in quantitative research studies." Second, Mertens [29] argues that educational and social sciences research is often conducted with vulnerable and marginalised people such as "[those with] less power in the researcher-researched relationship [. . .]." Therefore, research ethics should be ensured in considerate ways, considering the distinction "between ethics as a process of application and being an ethical researcher," according to Tatebe [27].

Many of these discussions, however, do not speak about how RECs can be spaces for situated learning in higher education, hence the conceptualisation of this paper.

2.1. The Theoretical Perspective. Our approach to this reflection is that while RECs can impose constraints on educational researchers, they can also enable learning and growth. Archer [30] argues, "We are simultaneously free and constrained [. . .]; the former derives from the nature of social reality, and the latter from human nature's reflexivity." It is this nature of reflexivity that motivates us to transcend our thoughts beyond the constraints to identify opportunities in REC practice. To do this, we regarded Lave and Wenger's [31] theory of situated learning as providing the best reflective tools. Lave and Wenger developed the situated learning theory to explain learning in practice and to theorise "the meaning and processes of learning as part of [a] social act" [32]. As such, Lave and Wenger [31] speak of learning as [a] a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice; the process of changing knowledgeable skills is subsumed in the processes

of changing identity in and through membership in a community of practitioners; and mastery is an organizational, relational characteristic of communities of practice.

In other words, the process of learning from the community takes time (ongoing social practices), changes identity, and involves paying attention to values and culture (relational characteristics).

The key concepts of the theory of situated learning are communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. Wenger et al. [33] define communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." Therefore, not all groups of people are communities of practice [34, 35], only those who interact regularly, learn from such an interaction, and become established in the knowledge and skills they share in practice. Iverson [34] notes that such a group of people may also have "divergent skills and possibly different departments within an organization that are formed to deal with a complex problem or to generate new knowledge." This divergence becomes a resource for learning and for practice.

The second key concept is legitimate peripheral participation, which explains that, in a community of practice, some are more experienced than others and this experience develops over time as they continue to participate in authentic practices.

Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice [31].

This comment suggests that membership in the community of practice is a process which comes through informal learning. Brown and Duguid [36] contend that the concept of legitimate peripheral participation challenges the assumption that learning only occurs through pedagogy. They argue that "the conditions of learning, rather than just abstract subject matter, [are] central to understanding what is learned. Learning, from the viewpoint of LPP (legitimate peripheral participation), essentially involves becoming an 'insider'." Thus, situated learning is about learning in practice in which the identities of the community members become transformed through interaction with and among community members.

However, in cases such as RECs, newcomers are not always and necessarily people that are inexperienced in the practices of the committees. As Lave and Wenger [31] put it, "everyone's participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect." Wenger [35] explains this notion further: whether we are apprentices or pioneers, newcomers, or old-timers, knowing always involves two components: the competence that our communities have established over time (i.e., what it takes to act and be recognised as a competent member), and our ongoing experience of the world as a member (in the context of a given world and beyond).

This argument elucidates a situation where at some point one is a newcomer in a new community and works towards learning and fitting into that community's definition of competence. Thus, this social learning is a system with subsystems (various communities) of knowledge exchanging through participation. Iverson [34] notes that learning from such participation does not mean a mere reproduction of what others do in a community of practice, but that "creative, innovative, and new forms of learning can occur through participation."

2.2. Modes of Belonging. The concept of "legitimate" in the phrase 'legitimate peripheral participation' signifies belonging to the community of practice. Wenger [35] identifies three "modes" in which belonging to communities of practice occur. First, there is engagement (interaction, working together, participating in various forms of production). Iverson [34] comments that without this engagement there is no community of practice:

Members must engage one another, and engagement can be used to define insiders from outsiders. However, all types of interaction do not count for mutual engagement, or CoPs (communities of practice) would be no different from other groups or communities.

Therefore, the engagement or interaction of a community of practice may intentionally be for the purposes of learning or learning can be "an incidental outcome of members' interactions" [37].

The second mode of belonging is imagination. This involves "constructing an image of ourselves, of our communities, and of the world, in order to orient ourselves, to reflect on our situation, and to explore the possibilities" [35]. Wenger explains that it is not always possible to engage with all community members, but we need to have an imagination of the world for the sake of our identity. Situated learning is about identity development. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner [38] argue as follows:

As a trajectory through a social landscape, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is the becoming of a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our trajectory through the landscape.

The third mode is alignment whereby "our local activities are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement" [35]. These three modes coexist but any can dominate a particular community of practice and may bring the experience that one has acquired to the home community, and the community members may take this experience to expand their knowledge as well.

There is also peripherality, which according to Lave and Wenger [39] suggests that membership or any position in the community of practice is dynamic:

Changing locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership [. . .]. As a place in which one moves towards more intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position.

Therefore, sometimes one can be in the periphery and not be empowered in any way, or in the core. For example, the members of RECs do not necessarily know all research

niches of the applicants: "we cannot be competent in all the practices in a landscape, but we can still be knowledgeable about them, their relevance to our practice, and thus our location in the broader landscape" [38]. Therefore, spending time with other community members improves competence in other areas in which a member was not knowledgeable. Serving in a REC is one such space for academic development where members interact directly with each other but also indirectly with students and academic applicants.

2.3. Research Context. The REC on which we reflect in this paper is in one college of a university in South Africa. In South Africa, the REC system is relatively new, particularly the formalised review practices in institutions [40]. The RECs in the country operate under the auspices of the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC), the body that was established in 2015 to oversee the health research practices and the composition and operations of the RECs [41]. According to the guidelines, principles, and procedures set by the Department of Health in South Africa, "the ethical acceptability of planned research [does] does not differ just because a different methodology is to be used" [42].

In our context, however, the REC concerned is in education and reviews applications related to educational studies for academics and students. This REC consists of representatives from 11 departments in the College of Education, as follows: Educational Leadership and Management, Psychology of Education, Inclusive Education, Educational Foundations, Curriculum and Instructional Studies, Open Distance Learning, Language Education Arts and Culture, Mathematics Education, Science and Technology Education, Early Childhood Education, and Adult Basic Education and Youth Development. This composition helps the members to address discipline-specific ethical concerns and issues rather than generalising. For example, applications in educational psychology may have specific ethical issues compared to those in mathematics education or educational foundations. Thus, the reviews are not fully homogeneous although they are based on the same guidelines. The committee is made up of 34 members who, in line with the NHREC constitution, have undergone online training on research ethics. The applications are emailed to the REC chair who then distributes them to the members according to discipline. Postgraduate students' applications are submitted by their supervisors.

The methodological strengths and areas of research interest are diverse in the committee, and all approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) are represented. The members' levels of experience in academe and in the institution differ. There are lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and full professors.

The reviews are conducted through formal meetings once a month from February to November, following the terms of reference and the standard operations procedures. The members of the committee are given seven days to review applications before the whole committee meets to discuss them. Such prediscussions are mainly discipline-specific or held by members of related disciplines. All members sign the confidentiality agreement; those with a conflict of interest cannot be part of the meeting during the discussions of such applications. The review reports are consolidated and discussed during the meeting in which the decision is taken.

2.4. Duoethnography as a Research Method. Because we reflect on our experiences of participating and interacting with other REC members in the committee for periods long enough to learn, the reflection follows a duoethnographic design. Duoethnography is a relatively new form of collaborative, embodied, and dialogic research method in which two or more researchers reflect on their personal experiences of a phenomenon [43]. Sawyer and Norris [44] describe duoethnography as a research process in which researchers "work in tandem to dialogically critique and question the meanings they give to issues and constructs" thereby "excavating" "the temporal, social, cultural, and geographical cartography of their lives, making explicit their assumptions and perspectives." Duoethnography is located in the poststructuralist worldview, thereby rejecting "the notion of a single, fixed, and absolute reality existing independently of human consciousness and imagination" [43]. It is framed as a lived curriculum, a lived space in which researchers "deconstruct and reconceptualise their narrative perceptions" [43]. It draws from discursive formations such as narrative inquiry, narrative identity, critical theory, Currere, and posttheories whose focus is on power and interrelationship subjectivity [45].

In following this method, we interrogate our experiences of practising in the RECs as a lived space and "curricular text in order to evoke, interrupt, and create new perceptions and meanings in the process of interrogating such" lived space [43]. Our experiences are "the subject of analysis" [46] as we reflect on, interpret, and identify "similar and different meanings to" serving in the committees [47].

2.5. Trustworthiness in Narratives. Regarding trustworthiness, we follow the tenets of duoethnography in that we do not "make claims for the "Truth" or validity" of the stories we tell and the interpretations we make of such stories [48]. Instead, we explicitly declare these as our "explicit, subjective, vulnerable, and honest narratives about our experiences" [46]. In this way, we do not "bracket" ourselves out, but we situate ourselves "centrally within the meaning of the text [we] are creating, thus promoting the inquiry goal of researcher/reader self-reflexivity" [43]. Following Le Fevre and Sawyer's [49] suggestion for attending to trustworthiness, we disclose much about ourselves as members of the ethics committee, "recognising that [our] lens or point of view is part of the research." Below we discuss how we went about reflecting on this paper.

2.6. Developing the Duoethnography. In March 2020, N. Madikizela-Madiya invited a few colleagues in the College of Education where she works to develop papers on her own research ethics to contribute to a journal that had issued a call

for papers. A. Motlhabane accepted the invitation, but the process of developing the paper was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic shock and lockdown. In February 2021, the conversations were more organised and focused on what was common between us (N. Madikizela-Madiya and A. Motlhabane) in terms of the research ethics topic: serving in the RECs. We started meeting with Microsoft Teams every third week and exchanging emails to discuss the topic and to decide together on the readings we needed to focus on. After a number of back and forth conversations about what we could contribute, possible topics included the following: establishment of RECs in education (because more literature related to this topic focuses on the medical and psychology fields but is limited in education), nonunanimous decisions about the outcome of ethical clearance applications, and centralisation or decentralisation of ethics committees (e.g., to have one committee for all faculties in a university). We also considered reflecting on the experiences of working either alone or with an administrative assistant in chairing the committee. Because N. Madikizela-Madiya was not a professor when she served on the committee, we also considered writing about reviewing senior colleagues' work. We then decided that we should think of an umbrella topic in which all or some of these possibilities might come up as themes for reflection.

Then, we would meet and discuss each other's reflections, each considering how the other's reflection applied or did not apply to another's experiences. Like Le Fevre and Sawyer's [49] understanding, "we told and interpreted our stories to each other" relating how we experienced and learnt from the RECs. We would read the first reflection, and in the process of reading, the dialogue would come in, as presented below.

2.7. Reflection on Our Experiences. The question that our reflection addresses in this paper is what we learnt from the committee that contributed to our development as educational researchers and academics. We consolidated our reflection into five aspects, as discussed below.

2.8. Learning for Research Improvement. Research is one of the determinants of academic development in higher education [50]. Therefore, any interaction or practice that serves to improve research skills and knowledge is important for academics. Based on this understanding, we asked ourselves whether serving in the REC was of any help towards development in research and we agreed that it was:

> N. Madikizela-Madiya: I was working with professors in that committee and I was still doing my Ph.D. Therefore, the REC became a learning space for me. I considered everything that they would say to critique the applications. I would also look at the applicants' proposals and think "Oh, wow! Therefore, this is what can be done. This is how this topic can be approached."

This comment suggests that N. Madikizela-Madiya's involvement in the REC before she obtained a Ph.D. helped her to learn beyond just the REC procedures and practices but also to understand the diversity in research.

> A. Motlhabane: There is a lot of eye-opening taking place in the REC. Even the mistakes that the applicants make improve our reflections about quality research.
>
> N. Madikizela-Madiya: I agree with you. Sometimes when the committee discussed applications, I would realise my ignorance. I remember when one applicant was proposed to do research about the marginalisation of gifted learners in normative classrooms. I was very ignorant about that topic because as researchers we often focus on finding solutions for those who have learning difficulties.
>
> A. Motlhabane: Yes, there is always an element of ignorance on some research topics and methods, especially if they are not in your field, even if you are an experienced researcher.
>
> N. Madikizela-Madiya: Exactly! Probably the members that were in the field of inclusive education were not surprised by such a proposal, but I was.

This conversation suggests that serving in the REC in our context helps members to realise the shortcomings of working in isolated disciplines. Members' ignorance of the discourses of other disciplines is exposed, a situation that can improve their individual research endeavours. It also indicates that learning about research is continuous and that the RECs can be good spaces for development in that regard. The conversation also suggests that having academics of different disciplines and different levels of experience to come together to review the applications was resourceful for our academic development.

2.9. Informed Research and Postgraduate Practice. Postgraduate supervision is not a skill that one can master in isolation. It requires learning in practice as well as intense mentorship. Sometimes those to whom the inexperienced look up for mentoring and guidance "may be unable to do so effectively because of the structural constraints of their role" [51]. Serving in the REC helped us to attend to this void:

> N. Madikizela-Madiya: It has become easy for me to supervise my master's and doctoral students on the process of ethical clearance application because I have first-hand information on what the REC wants to see.

A. Motlhabane also commented that he learnt firsthand the reasons behind the decisions given by the REC to the applicants. Apart from learning to identify errors for our students, we also realised that serving in the REC placed us in an advantaged or powerful position:

> A. Motlhabane: I have compiled a list of errors that led to disapproval or referring back.
>
> N. Madikizela-Madiya: This is what I call "knowledge power," A. Motlhabane, because when one is an applicant, one gets feedback only to that particular application. Therefore, one would make other mistakes in future

applications, but for the REC members there is a broader spectrum of knowledge of errors.

A. Motlhabane: Yes, but I also conduct workshops to alert all researchers and supervisors in the college to these errors.

N. Madikizela-Madiya: In that case, the REC is a source of knowledge and empowerment rather than an oppressor, as we often perceive it. It is about improving the quality of our work.

A. Motlhabane: Not only for us as researchers, but for our students as well. I review my students' applications and provide them with feedback before the applications are submitted to the ethics committee. Therefore, I can advise my students on errors.

From this conversation, we realised that sharing our experiences in this paper may encourage membership in the committee in our context and in similar contexts where academics are reluctant to serve due to the amount of time it takes. The committees have the potential to improve research supervision as well as an extensive understanding of ethical errors in educational research. However, we also interrogated the issues of power that seemed to arise from the above conversation:

N. Madikizela-Madiya: Therefore, because you compile the list of errors, does that mean your students are at an unfair advantage of having their applications approved?

A. Motlhabane: Although I am aware of the errors and I provide support to my students, this is not a guarantee that their applications or my application will be approved. In fact, to date, all of my students' applications together with my applications were referred back for revision and clarification.

N. Madikizela-Madiya: I agree, but what about the power dynamics in this case? Does your position as the committee chair not influence the members' decision on your and your students' applications?

A. Motlhabane: The committee independently reviewed my student's applications and discussed them in my absence and took an independent decision. In all cases, my students' applications were referred back and my students had to resubmit, and the committee will sit in my absence again and take an independent decision.

We were excited to have engaged in this conversation because it spoke to pertinent issues that might cause conflicts in the RECs as well as suspicions about their operations. The conversation made us realise the power we had as the REC members and this realisation strengthens our ethics and can guard against ethical behaviour in the RECs.

2.10. Research Ethics Committee as Informal Mentors for Postgraduate Supervision. In our college, there can be hundreds of master's and doctoral students at a time. Therefore, there are never enough experienced professor supervisors to supervise these students. Yet the university requires staff to cosupervise their first students with experienced professors. Having the developing supervisors in the RECs proved to be a solution to this problem:

N. Madikizela-Madiya: There were few experienced and professor supervisors in my department who could cosupervise with me. Therefore, I supervised my first master's student alone and he passed. The committee was my mentor. [. . .] Not only did REC help me to supervise for ethical clearance applications, but I would listen to the discussions and take that to improve my entire supervision process.

A. Motlhabane: You were lucky, N. Madikizela-Madiya. At the time when I started supervising the postgraduate students, the formal ethics committee did not exist. Although my students passed, my supervision now, as a member of the REC, is better compared to the time when I was not.

This conversation suggests that somehow the members of the REC were our mentors even though we were not necessarily conscious of this mentorship.

2.11. The Extensive Nature of Research Ethics. Serving in the REC opened our eyes to many aspects which, although related to research, we did not regard as having much to do with ethics:

N. Madikizela-Madiya: Among other things, I learnt that research ethics is a contentious topic. It was not until I served on this committee and worked with the professors that I understood that inconsistencies in the methodological proposal can have ethical implications. For example, some applicants would not explicitly state that they would do classroom observations, but, maybe, in the section where they speak of data collection, as a reviewer you get to see that there would be some observations.

A. Motlhabane: Yes, also for me it was not until I served in the committee that I became aware of the statement in our research ethics policy indicating that if the methodology is flawed, then the ethics is flawed.

Two issues could be drawn from this conversation. First, we learnt the ethics in aspects of research methodology to which our attention was limited. Second, serving on the committee forced us to read and understand institutional policy, which is one of the requirements for all staff members. This would help us to grow in the area of policy awareness.

2.12. Learning from the "Visitors". As N. Madikizela-Madiya mentioned earlier, communities of practice can go beyond just the committee members in the case of RECs. She would see the topics in the proposals and reflect on that. Therefore, the applicants are somehow visitors who occasionally come

into the REC community, but a member can still learn something from that periodical encounter. This issue came up again in the following comment:

> N. Madikizela-Madiya: As committee members, we would hold workshops with academics to explain what was expected in each section of the application form. In this process, I would learn from the questions, engagements, and views of the academics in the workshop, in addition to those that were committee members.

Our view, therefore, is that the situated learning theory should include the role of "visitors" in learning within the situated environment.

A. Motlhabane also shared an experience where he learnt to use the REC's policy and terms of reference to manage the power dynamics inherent in the leading committee. He abides by the policy in terms of receiving applications regardless of whether the applicant was in a position of power or not. That situation became clear from the conversation below.

2.13. Learning to Manage Conflicts. The reflections went to a point where we paid attention to social relations between the committee members and the applicants and between the members of the committees. We asked, "We review our colleagues' applications: What does this do with our relationships with these colleagues?"

> A. Motlhabane: Sometimes there are tensions, especially when the application is rejected or sent back for revision. This happens especially when a supervisor does not agree with the feedback given to a student's application. Irrespective of the tensions, I have learnt that I need to remain professional.
>
> N. Madikizela-Madiya: What do you mean by remaining professional?
>
> A. Motlhabane: I refer the unhappy applicant to the policy and guidelines.
>
> N. Madikizela-Madiya: I see. I also learnt that sometimes colleagues would appeal the decisions of the committees about their applications. An appealing applicant would be asked to attend a one-on-one discussion with the committee chair. From such a discussion, both sides would realise which side made a mistake. This process curbed possible quarrels that could ruin social relations.
>
> A. Motlhabane: Yes, both sides can make mistakes. Particularly, I have realised that even when feedback is negative, if it is timely, applicants tend to appreciate it than complain.

From this conversation, we identified that there were power relations between ourselves as the REC and the applicants. Such relations would ruin the social relationships if we (the committee) did not manage them through openness to negotiation, further discussion, and adherence to policies and guidelines. These are principles that could be applied across our social relations.

3. Discussing Reflections

We realise that we had developed academically through our involvement in the REC. Although we had not joined the REC with the aim of learning, learning happened through legitimate peripheral participation [31] in REC. In accordance with Lave and Wenger [31], this implies that our participation was "dispositionally adapted" to produce learning. Lave and Wenger argue that participants can learn even if they were not attempting to acquire or inculcate identifiable skills through their participation. Our learning occurred in a participatory framework [31]; therefore, it was mediated by the differences in perspectives [31] of the REC members. The differences in perspectives can be attested to by our experiences in terms of different viewpoints expressed during the REC meetings. In line with this framework, our type of learning experiences could be viewed as a special type of social practice associated with "legitimate peripheral participation" [31]. Therefore, the REC as a community of practice positioned us as legitimate peripheral participants [52]. Similarly, we agree with Hasrati's [53] research findings as our legitimate peripheral participation in the REC also contributed positively to our supervision skills of master's and doctoral students.

In line with the notion of community of practice, we developed ways of doing things, dealing with power relations, and ways of talking [31]. We align ourselves with Shaheen et al. [54] who say that "communities of practice are a powerful strategy for supporting knowledge sharing amongst members working in a common field." This is because the REC as a community of practice was central to our learning experiences because it "embrace[d] the idea of communities of practice as locales of learning and knowledge management and thereby promote[d] situated learning" [55]. Our learning experiences confirm the assertion by Lave and Wenger [31] that "learning is located or situated within everyday practice." Therefore, for us, the REC became "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" [31].

Our experiences are consistent with the argument by Roux et al. [56] that learning does not entirely occur through acquiring knowledge in a conventional sense, but rather through social interaction and relationships. The fact that we were active participants in the practice of the REC as a social community and were able to construct our own identities in relation to such a community is in agreement with the notion of legitimate peripheral participation [37]. We started as learners who were novices and moved from the periphery towards full participation. Therefore, as newcomers, we transitioned

as we learnt through legitimate peripheral participation [31] from our interactions and relations with "old-timers," that is, experienced professors who are knowledgeable.

Our learning experiences in the REC are in agreement with Wenger's [37] references to "learning as doing" and "learning as experiencing." We further align ourselves with Jung [57] in that our involvement in the REC has helped us to build our own sense of identity and interpret our learning as a process of becoming something new. Although the context of our study differs from those of Jung [57] and Teeuwsen et al. [58], our experiences are similar and point towards academic development and identification with the academic community as a community of practice.

4. Conclusions

Five conclusions can be drawn from our reflections presented in this paper. First, RECs have the potential to do more than just validate research proposals in education. When the REC is composed of persons with diverse experiences and disciplines, it can become a space of empowerment for less experienced members and of knowledge extension to beyond the disciplinary boundaries. Second, RECs can be a resource for institutional management where there is a shortage of staff for research and postgraduate supervision. They can play a crucial role in the informal mentoring of inexperienced supervisors through observation, interaction, and participation. Third, when conceptualised in similar ways as in our context, RECs can be incubators of knowledge for all stakeholders; they can share and empower staff and students. In this way, power is decentralised for quality research and postgraduate supervision practices. Fourth, through serving in RECs, the members are empowered for other social and management roles. They can gain skills and knowledge in terms of management and policy analyses. Fifth, RECs, as communities of practice, provide opportunities for members to learn not only from other members of the community, but also from the visitors. This is an addition to the situated learning theory, and it depicts social circumstances in which communities are not self-sufficient. It is clear, therefore, that there is a positive side to RECs in education and this side can be exposed through the reflection of the community members.

Data Availability

No data were used to support this study.

Disclosure

This study is a part of University of South Africa.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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