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Too close -- too far? Does it matter who we are?

Reflections on positionality and knowledge production on disability in the Global South

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Introduction

- Huafeng has presented some challenges concerning quantitative knowledge production on inclusive education, and
- Rolf and Rune have disclosed some existing knowledge gaps.
- My focus: Challenges concerning qualitative knowledge production.
- Rolf and Rune bring up the decolonizing debate, and my research question becomes
- What does it matter who produces the knowledge in this field?



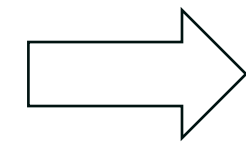
How may who we are affect knowledge production?

- The scientific ideal: disinterestedness, organized skepticism, and
- reproducibility of research – ensured by applying acknowledged scientific tools. (Merton)
- Yet, our personal experiences inevitably affect how we design, inquire, observe, process, and assess the data we collect.
- Proximity to research participants may heighten “empathy” – a blessing and a curse? (Milton)

Cognitive empathy:

Rooted in shared experience, helps understanding the participants’ situation and perspectives.

Blessing: Allows constructive approach, flexibility, and improves interpretation, accuracy, and thus relevance of research.



Affective empathy:

The capability of having an emotional reaction, that mirrors the emotional state of the research participant.

Curse: Challenges the disinterestedness ideal and scientific demand for skeptical distance.

- However, emotional distance can also be a curse: Historical tendency towards reductionism and an ethically challenging objectification of the other.



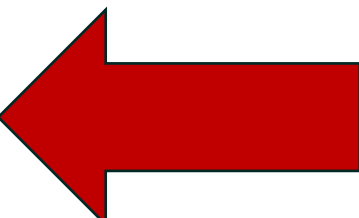
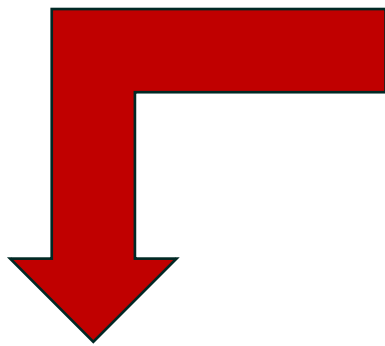
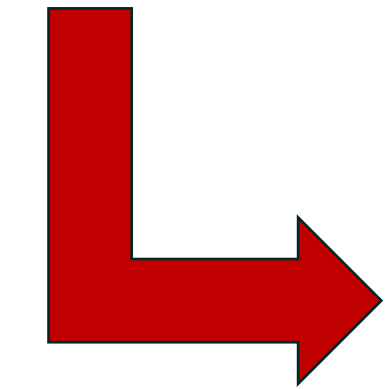
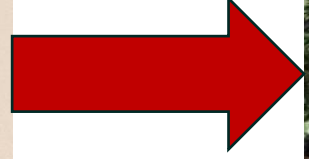


Four researchers, different positionalities

	Nationality/ Culture	Religion/ Values	Main Discipline	Experience/Perspective
Yacouba (M)	Nigerien	Muslim	Educational science	Teaching, all levels, Niger, Nigeria
Evelyn (F)	Ghanaian	Catholic	Public health	Nun, Science teacher, all levels, Ghana
Huafeng (F)	Chinese	Secular	Economics	Statistics, DHS data WG, China, Africa, Middle East
Anne (F)	Norwegian	Lutheran	Sociology	World Bank, 25 yrs. Disability/vulnerability Francophone West Africa



Methodology



Lessons

- Team members ***described*** the situations in the households similarly and in detail.
- Differences were observed in our...
 - understanding of participants' disability and *diagnosis*,
 - ability to locally contextualize their reasoning and narratives (cognitive empathy),
 - what affections this triggered (emotional empathy, trust/skepticism), and
 - consequentially, how we evaluated the *prospects of the participants*.





Case 1. Boy, 7, Niger

What is the disability?

- A: Intellectual, the behavioral issues are due to frustration. The mother's birth story indicates oxygen deficiency during a problematic birth.
- H: Hard to tell what was psychological or intellectual, could not see how he could learn anything in that environment.
- E: There is improvement. His hyperactivity can improve with time. The boy can do well in the future.
- Y: Speech and behavioral problems. He aligns with the father's recount: others in his family have caught up, he is much improving from his aggression problems. He will become "normal"
- Empathy? Y had local knowledge that helped him empathize with and understand the father better (cognitive empathy), but identifying with the father may have heightened also affective empathy. Did that affect his scientific skepticism?
- A and H were both skeptical. H: The father is in denial.
- But did we miss something? For what is "normal"?

Case 2. Boy, 9, Ghana.

Classified with a cognitive impairment. But is it?

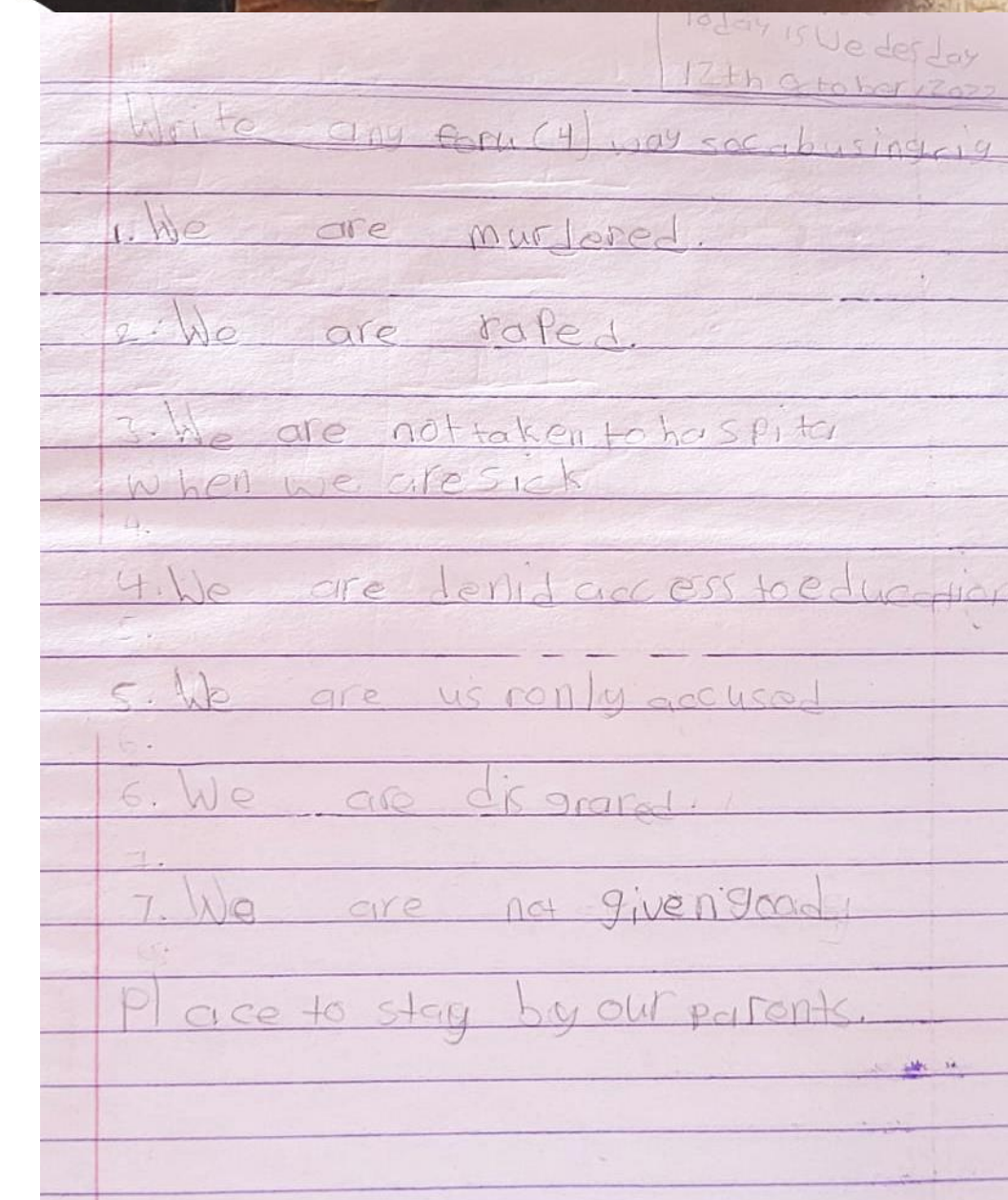
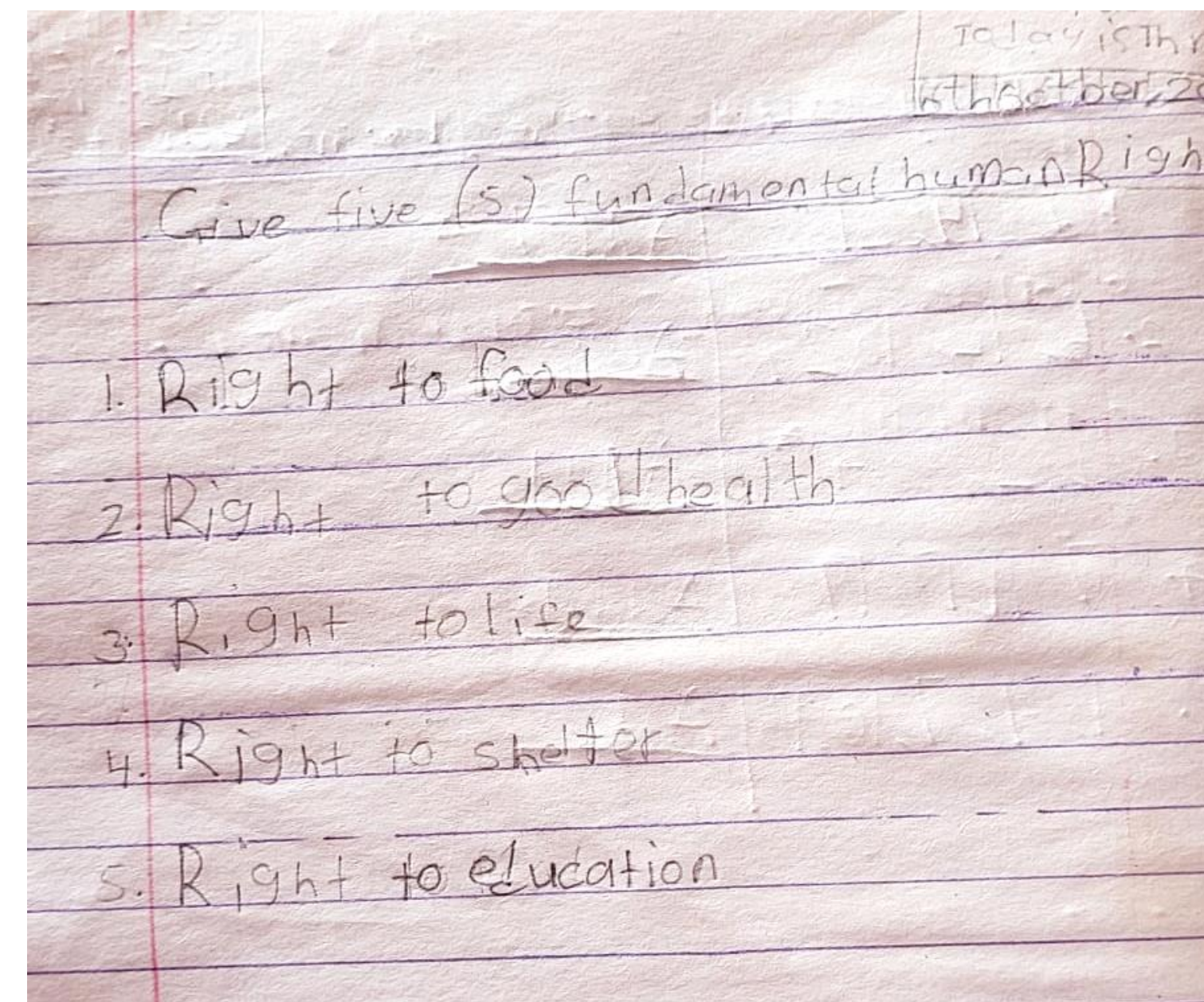
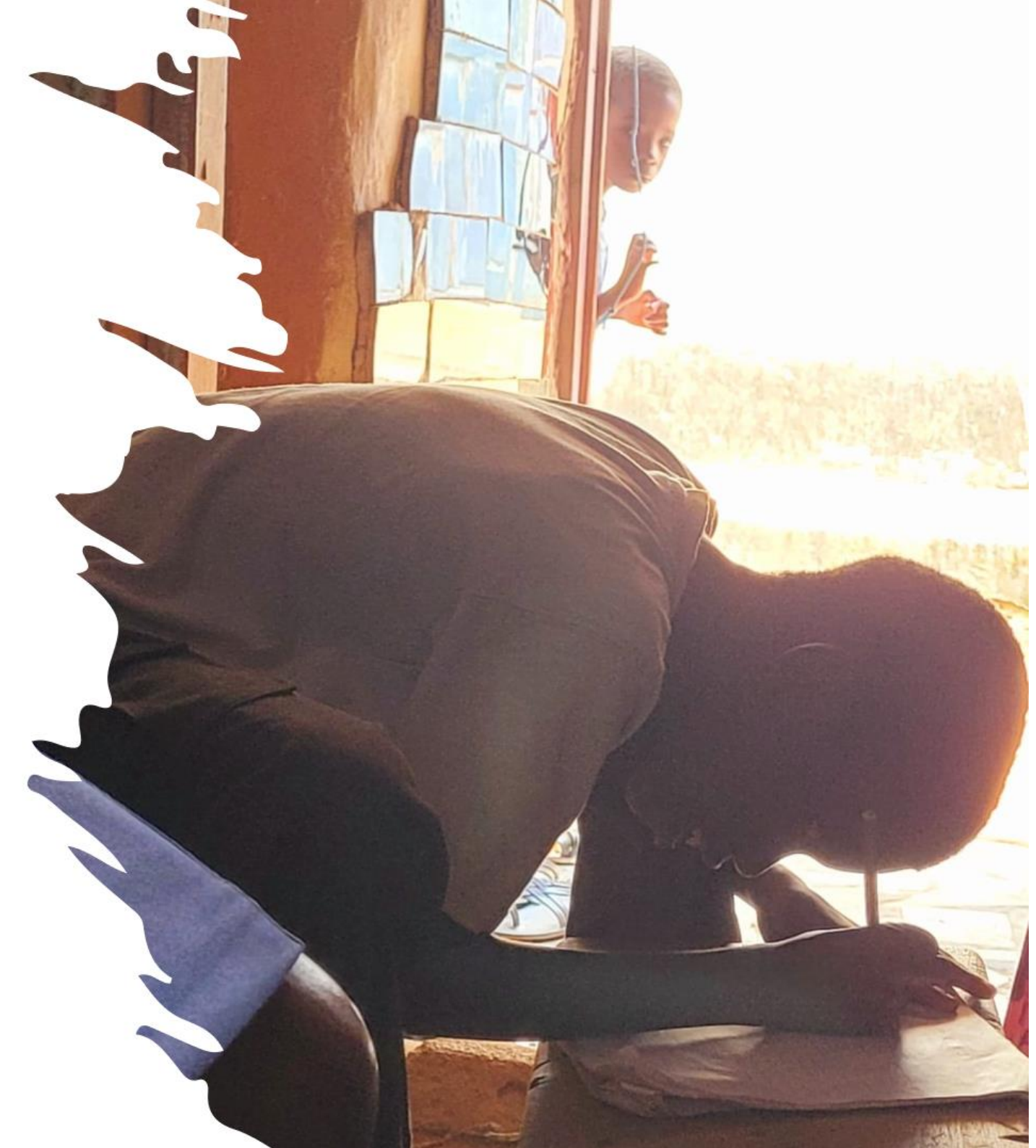
And what are the prospects?

A: less concerned with intellect, more with vision and possible ADHD. Or trauma. The mother seems unstable and violent. Safety a precondition for learning. May run away.

H: Admires how still the children are sitting. About the beating: She is used to seeing that, but not while someone is watching. The mother lacks the qualifications to support the boy's schooling.

Y: The mother needs more stable condition with the father, who is reluctant to marry her. He is uncertain of how this may go.

E: Mother is very supportive, helping w/homework. He can learn with the way the mother is serious, wanting him to learn.



Implications for the debate on decolonizing disability research in the Global South?

Do researchers from the Global North necessarily reinforce colonial knowledge production?

Do researchers from the Global South necessarily produce decolonized knowledge?

Do non-disabled researchers necessarily produce knowledge fitted to keep controlling the narrative of disabled people?

Do disabled researchers necessarily produce decolonized disability knowledge?

The decolonizing debate: The origin of the research tools matter!



A Circumplex model for decolonized knowledge production: Socio-cultural distance vs. origin of knowledge production tools

