



Open Restitution Africa | Research Methodology and Methods

Open Restitution Africa's work is varied and multivocal, and primarily seeks to centre Africa in the conceptualisation and practice of restitution. Our goal is to articulate restitution knowledge in a way that acknowledges the diversity of positions and experiences of Africans, and promotes dialogue, advocacy and education. Our further goal is to generate restitution-process data in ways that enable knowledge driven approaches to restitution, particularly for African stakeholders.

Through consultations with African and Africa-based academics and cultural practitioners¹, who regularly work with marginalised knowledge and knowledge holders, as well as digital infrastructure, we have developed a robust methodological approach to research. Our research methodology has the capacity to simultaneously capture and represent eclectic - and at times conflicting - perspectives and experiences of restitution in Africa. The following document offers a breakdown of existing methodological frameworks, which defensibly meet the standards of validity, reliability, credibility and ethics in qualitative research, have informed our approach to research, and shaped our methods.

Case Study:

Definition:

A case study involves an inquiry into a real-world occurrence or set of events,

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with the intention of providing in-depth analysis and understanding of how a theory lives, falters or dies in a 'real world context'.² Existing literature can be used to frame the propositions which are tested, however, findings may provide 'an alternate explanation of a phenomenon'; opening up a space for new theories.³ Through this approach one is able to answer 'how and why type questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated'.⁴ . A good case study is usually defined by an actual and distinctive event, supported by multiple sources. These events become the evidentiary 'unit' through which a researcher explores, deconstructs and develops theory.

Core Elements Of Case Studies:

As a form of inquiry, case studies include the use of various types of sources which provide a range of information on the occurrence of particular events. These may include archival records, existing literature, observation and interviews. The types of sources used may be dependent on the kind of data that is available for each unique case. Within the literature on case studies, rigorous research processes are framed to ensure validity, with particular emphasis on verification of the presented evidence. A valuable process that may enhance one's verification of data is the triangulation of information from multiple sources. This essentially involves a consistent questioning of the accepted narrative, and an openness to conflict and positionality that endorses the idea of a continued curiosity .

How This Applies To Methods:

The case study method enables us to develop knowledge from and with a range of people actively involved in restitution processes, as it invites the

² Robert K.Yin., 'A very brief refresher on the case study method', in *Applications of Case Study Research* (SAGE, 2011).

³ Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2008) Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13, 544-559. (p555).

⁴ Ibid. (p556).



researcher to interrogate restitution as a phenomenon through context-specific occurrences thereof. We rely on a multiple-case design method, each including various sources and source types. Our selection of case studies has also been based on the availability of existing information, from multiple sources, that is accessible. From the multi-source information gathering process, data can be presented, organised, and most importantly triangulated. Case studies have emerged as the most holistic and evidentiary 'unit' for tracking restitution data seeking to unpack how processes / activities that underpin the restitution of African belongings and human ancestors occur. This is particularly helpful in the context of limited Africa-centred theorisation and data available on these processes.

Methods:

- Using past or current restitution journeys that have or are occurring in the real world, to test and develop our understanding of restitution processes and practices.
- Using oral interviews and desktop research (which includes multiple source types in its ambit) to triangulate and develop our data about a restitution case.
- Paying close attention to outlying information (discrepancies, silences and absence) to highlight the limitations around current theorisations of restitution and in our own present understanding of the processes that underpin restitution.

Oral History:

Definition:

Oral history uses a set of interviewing techniques to elicit and record people sharing their memory and understanding of past experiences. Oral history has



deep roots,⁵ but emerged in academia in the 1960s in East Africa⁶, and in the 1980s in Southern Africa as a particular challenge to the domination of written historical sources, and their political and social biases towards hegemonic classes.⁷ This resistance to hegemony manifest as a foregrounding of the knowledge, experiences and histories of ‘ordinary’ people. This said, oral history is not a supplement to ‘real’ research, rather it “has the research capacity to deliver new knowledge and to provide challenging insights into academic or ‘mainstream’ forms of knowledge.”⁸

Core Elements Of Oral History:

Oral history is vital to ORA’s methodology, as a direct way to zone in on the positions and contributions of Africans, specifically because of oral history’s roots in resisting dominant narratives.

In addition to holding space for non-dominant narratives, oral histories inherently offer a multiplicity of positions and understandings – each oral history is told differently from an individual perspective. Oral histories reject the assumption of truth and a singular authority. This is important because so much of restitution’s history has been defined by the domination of European determinations in a battle over authority of the restitution narrative.⁹

⁵ Bangura, A. K. (2011). *African-Centred Research Methodologies: From Ancient Times to the Present*. San Diego, CA: Cognella.

⁶ Kimambo, I.N. (1993). *Three Decades of Production of Historical Knowledge at Dar-es-Salaam*. Dar-es-Salaam: Dar-es-Salaam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853796556902>

⁷ Sean Field, ‘Oral History Methodology: A Lecture Presented by Dr Sean Field, Centre for Popular Memory, Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town’ (Lecture, Lecture tour in Vietnam and the Philippines, Philippines, January 2007),

⁸ Portelli, A. (2009). ‘What Makes Oral History Different’. In: Giudice, L.D. (eds) *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans. Italian and Italian American Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230101395_2

⁹ Savoy, B. (2022). *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art; History of a Postcolonial Defeat*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv20hcs1p>



Instead, oral histories bring together events as they are understood, but also what they mean to the people telling them. Oral histories encourage a recognition not only of 'facts' but also of imagination, impact, and symbolism – in effect, their meaning to the various people connected to them. For restitution, this means understanding and taking seriously the events as they have taken place over time, and the impact they have come to have for the people affected by them.

How This Applies To ORA's Methods:

Due to a limit of existing data on restitution cases, ORA has identified the need for primary data collection, which is largely gathered through oral histories. As such a framework for oral history collection, capturing and analysis has been developed. In addition, ORA approaches the inclusion of oral histories as a way of enabling partial and incomplete information to stand as a valuable contribution to the broader knowledge base on restitution from multiple perspectives.

Methods:

- Empathetic and close listening to what the interviewee wishes to share.
- Careful and sensitive responsiveness to the reality that restitution is a matter of strong emotion and sociocultural and political urgency for many, including both knowledge holders and also researchers. Oral sources are human sources.
- Recognising the role played by the inevitable interaction between the researcher and the knowledge holder, and not attempting to ignore/erase this by making the researcher's presence in the knowledge sharing process visible e.g. always including the questions asked by researchers in the research transcripts.



- Enabling partial and incomplete information to stand as a valuable contribution to the broader knowledge base on restitution from multiple perspectives. Oral sources have their own ‘credibility’ despite being ‘incomplete’, historical work that excludes oral sources is “incomplete by definition”.¹⁰

Social Constructionism Grounded Theory:

Definition:

Social constructionism grounded theory is a qualitative research method that seeks to move away from the assumption of objectivity, neutrality and generalisation in research¹¹. It does so by offering researchers a framework within which to develop a distinctive and reflexive set of methods and strategies for data collection and data analysis.¹² These methods and strategies are selected to respond to ‘the ways in which particular societies categorise, code, process, and assign meaning to their experiences’.¹³

Grounded theory is an inductive and iterative process that involves “coding” data according to the features of a phenomenon that they present, ‘densifying the codes that endure across sources into categories’ and reading across these categories to develop an analysis of the phenomenon being studied.¹⁴ This creates a space for one’s research to merge findings that present ‘an interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon that accounts for context’.¹⁵

¹⁰ Portelli, A (Note 8).

¹¹ Charmaz, K. (2008). Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method. In J.-A. Holstein, & J.-F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Hand- book of Constructionist Research* (pp. 397-412). New York: Guilford.

¹² Ibid, 402.

¹³ Khupe, Constance, & Keane, Moyra. (2017). Towards an African education research methodology: decolonising new knowledge. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 6(1), 25-37. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2017/v6i1a3j>, p27.

¹⁴ Gurney, K. (2022). *Panya Routes: Independent art spaces in Africa*. Berlin: Motto Books, p185.

¹⁵ Charmaz, K (Note 10). (p402).



Core Elements of Grounded Theory:

Grounded theorists have a pluralistic understanding of knowledge, which means that they acknowledge that the world we live in is 'complex and heterogeneous'¹⁶, and that the conditions we use to frame what reality is to us are multiplicitous and diverse.¹⁷ This firstly draws attention to the fact that social phenomena, and the research processes we use to study them, are an ever changing 'sociocultural and historical construction'; constantly shaped and unshaped by the context within which they occur, and the subjective worlds of the people who live in that reality.¹⁸ Secondly, it disrupts the idea of the researcher as a passive and neutral observer in the research process, and locates them as a social actor within this construct, whose positionalities and decisions impact on what the research process reveals.¹⁹

Engaging with the dynamism of constructs means that the frame of a research process that one begins with evolves in tandem with the discovery of research content.²⁰ The researcher is encouraged to continuously 'respond to emergent questions, new insights and further information', to 'scrutinise the research decision and directions' that these new developments prompt, and to 'improvise methodological and analytical strategies' that allow further data to be yielded about the phenomenon as it exists within that context.²¹ This approach embeds the complexity of context and participant subjectivity, as well as the challenges that a researcher experiences in constructing their research process - such as silences, blockages, gatekeeping etc. - in one's data. This sets the stage for researchers to generate 'dense analyses, with explanatory power, and conceptual understanding'.²²

The limitation and beauty of grounded theory lies in its capacity to shift the

¹⁶ Gurney, K. (Note 13). p185.

¹⁷ Khupe, C and Keane, M. (Note 12). p27.

¹⁸ Charmaz, K. (Note 10).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. p403.

²² Ibid. p408.



'centre of conceptual gravity' to the context within which the social phenomenon is occurring.²³ This entangles one's data deeply with place, people and positionality to produce knowledge that could, and often does, change when new variables and contingencies are introduced.²⁴ Although one's context-driven research may only 'operate globally for the few', the 'insights that emerge on their own home-grown terms' also potentially 'operate locally for the many'.²⁵

How This Applies To ORA's Methods:

Open Restitution Africa seeks to engage with Africa-centred perspective and experiences of restitution. Our research objectives necessitate a positioned, context-specific and subjectivity-infused analysis of this social phenomenon. The lack of information and scant conceptual framing of restitution on these terms lends itself to a research process that can encompass the flux in findings that inevitably arises when one is re-covering and discovering multifarious data across diverse regions and actors in restitution journeys. Social constructionism grounded theory empowers us with tools to reflexively respond to this contentious, under-articulated and divergent knowledge landscape. It affords us the opportunity to transparently navigate and acknowledge our intentions, trepidations and nuanced understandings in a manner that invites others to further make visible what we may not be able to see.

Methods:

- Using the data generated from restitution case studies to iteratively emerge and frame the restitution process areas.
- Thorough self-documentation of our research process, and continuous engagement with fellow researchers, to keep track of shifts in the

²³ Gurney, K. (Note 13). p186.

²⁴ Charmaz, K. (Note 10).

²⁵ Gurney, K. (Note 13). p186.



methods and strategies that are being used to explore cases.

- Recording the researcher's interpretations and acts of extraction through the "story storing" component of the data platform.
- Developing an editable data entry platform that allows the researcher to revisit their framing of events, as they discover new information.
- Being transparent about the areas of knowledge or experience that are generally inaccessible, or that we have not been able to access, by noting absences and silences in our data entry process.
- Being transparent about the number and nature of the sources we have used to construct our data about a restitution case.
- Inviting constructive criticism around "blindspots" in our own datasets, to actively enable and encourage further knowledge production.

Note:

This is a methodology in motion. It will continue to evolve as we, at ORA, continue to learn about how to access, gather and share restitution process data, and how to further disrupt power in knowledge production.