Towards self-emancipation in ICT4D research: narratives about respect, traditional leadership and building networks of friendships in rural South Africa

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Abstract

In this paper, the author contends that if the outsider-researcher involved in ICT for development (ICT4D) research and practice really wants to make a difference and honestly address the emancipatory interests of the developing community according to local understanding, assumptions, needs and view of reality, emancipation will have to occur on both sides of the “development divide”. Using critical social theory as a position of enquiry and learning from the enculturation phases of critical ethnographic fieldwork, the paper reflects on ways in which the outsider researcher and practitioner may acquire self-emancipation for ensuring more sustainable ICT4D. The rationale for the paper’s objective is based on the general assumption evident in ICT4D literature that emancipation, empowerment and innovation occur primarily within the developing group, making them the primary focus in development efforts and research, while the outsider is depicted as the “expert” who approaches the developing group in an “appropriate” way in order to do ICT4D and facilitate the development of the “insider”. By presenting three narratives from an ongoing community engagement project in deep rural South African, the author reflects on particular instances where self-emancipation occurred. This paper, therefore, contributes by firstly, putting forward a position for self-reflexivity and self-emancipation in ICT4D work and secondly, by reflecting on confessional stories of self-emancipation. Themes include lessons learnt on building networks of friendships, traditional leadership and respect and the typical people-orientatedness of deep rural South African communities.

Keywords: ethnography, critical social theory, self-emancipation, self-reflexivity, rural communities
1 Introduction

In most Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) endeavours the assumption is that, there are generally two groups of people involved: those in need of development (the developing) and the outsider “doing” or researching the development (the developed). It is often a subconscious assumption that emancipation, empowerment and innovation occur primarily within the developing group and that generally the outsider has to approach the local community in an “appropriate” way in order to do ICT4D and facilitate the emancipation of the “insider”. This observation can easily be detected in papers that present a meta-analysis of ICT4D literature (e.g. Avgou, 2009, Weber, 2009 & Zheng, 2009). Typically the developing group is assumed to be the primary focus of development and emancipatory efforts. Although ICT4D literature may be seen to exists for the purpose of helping the researcher to do and understand ICT4D research, it is seldom that the “outsider” or researcher is depicted as the “one in need”, the “deprived one” or the one in need of emancipation. It is for these reasons and based on a critical position of enquiry, that the author puts it to the reader that if the outsider researcher-practitioner really wants to make a difference in ICT4D, i.e. honestly address the emancipatory interests of the developing community according to local understanding, assumptions, agenda, needs and view of reality, emancipation will have to occur on both sides of the “development divide”. For the developing community in deep rural South Africa (SA) this mostly implies the difficult cultural transition community members have to make to understand new and “foreign” ICT in order to innovate and interpret its use for their communities and context. For the outsider researcher-practitioner it means realising the emancipatory interests of the community, understanding meaning from within the lifeworld and realities of the local people (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997) and building partnerships so as to introduce and question ICT. Outsiders need to be empowered to treat the local people in such a way that their social fibre stays in tact and that their agendas, values and dignity are acknowledged and respected (Lewis, 1994; Zheng, 2009).

Based on a critical position of enquiry and being ethnographically immersed in an ongoing ICT4D project in deep rural SA, it is the author’s contention that finding appropriate ways of community engagement and the process of self-emancipation should be more of a “reality check” for the outsider-researcher than for the local community member challenged by foreign ICT. To state this in another way, the outsider researcher-practitioner is often well
aware of what ICT can do in industrialised contexts, but unaware of the issues and realities facing developing communities, how ICT should be viewed in such a context and how to relate to the local people. On the other hand, the local community member is generally aware of the local issues, tensions and context, but relatively unaware of what ICT can do or how to achieve development or emancipation with ICTs.

It is important to note that this paper forms part of a greater study where the author reflects on two specific aspects of an ongoing community engagement and ICT training initiative undertaken by the Department of Informatics, University of Pretoria in Happy Valley\(^1\) in deep rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), SA. The first aspect of the greater study deals with community entry and specifically how one should approach ICT4D research and practice in deep rural communities. The second aspect deals with the difficulties and realities of introducing and aligning ICT for deep rural communities. Underpinning these two aspects of the study, is the issue of deciphering meaning from the local people to be able to address the above.

Although many lessons were learned and continue to be learned from this project, this paper only reflects on some of the themes that emanated from the enculturation phases (De Vos, et al., 2007; Myers, 2009) of ethnographic fieldwork done up to now. The research is also a continuation of work reported in a prior paper by the same author and a colleague, where the same methodological approach was used to reflect on some of the other self-emancipatory themes discovered from the fieldwork (see Krauss & Turpin, 2010).

## 2 Research objectives

In a critical discussion of MIS research, Lee (1999:25) poses the question: “In what ways do MIS researchers themselves require emancipation?” Similarly, one may ask; *In what ways do ICT4D researchers and practitioners require emancipation, in order to ensure more sustainable ICT4D?*

In scrutinising this research question, the author relates to three confessional narratives on self-emancipation. The narratives are about 1) building networks of friendships, 2) traditional leadership and respect, and 3) the typical people-orientated social system of deep rural South African communities. In addition to demonstrating the process of self-emancipation in

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\(^1\) Due to the extremely sensitive nature of the research and the tension caused by HIV and AIDS, TB and poverty in the Happy Valley community, actual names of places and people are withheld from this paper.
ethnographic work, this paper also presents a critical theoretical underpinning, that reflects the departing values of the researcher and in essence also the epistemological approach required for understanding and building knowledge about the research topic.

In the following section, the value of critical social theory for self-emancipation and as a position of enquiry is explained. Following that, the project context and research methodology are put forward and specifically how the narratives on self-emancipation emerged from ethnographic fieldwork. The three narratives are then presented. The paper concludes by revisiting the research objectives.

3 Critical Social Theory in ICT4D

Authors writing on Critical Social Theory (CST) in Information Systems often also work in the ICT4D context. Examples include Avgerou (2005), Adam (2001), Čečez-Kecmanović (2001) and the International Federation for Information Processing Working Group on Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries (IFIP WG 9.4), who are doing pioneering work in CST (Avison, Fitzgerald & Powell, 2005). Avgerou (2005) suggests that the unequal power evident in the discourse between industrialized and developing parts of the world is one of the most critical issues of contemporary society. In confirmation, Lewis (1994) states that in developing contexts there is a need to question the preconceived ideas of both the impoverished and the rich, thus making a critical approach to community engagement essential.

Applying a critical epistemology when conducting fieldwork requires that the researcher must, in addition to eliciting participants’ subjective view of phenomena as is typical to the interpretive paradigm, also encourage reflexive accounts in both the researcher and research subjects (Kvasny & Richardson, 2006). Avgerou (2005) advocates the explicit critical examination of the researcher’s own tacit knowledge, emotionally charged preconceptions, political convictions and moral values, and empathy with research subjects in building understanding and knowledge.

A critical position of enquiry, therefore, enables the researcher to be self-critical and self-reflective in pursuing understanding of the lifeworld of local people from the position of local people and to understand their emancipatory interests according to local culture, view of reality and sense of dignity and self-respect (Lewis, 1994; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997). Being critical implies an appropriate position for learning about the needs, agendas, values and
difficulties of the rural community. It also implies the need to be subjectively and personally involved and pursuing self-emancipation as a form of self-delivery from unwarranted beliefs, misconceptions, perceptions and ethnocentrism that may distort the recognition and understanding of the emancipatory interests of the local people (Avgerou, 2005; Lewis, 1994; McGrath, 2005). This research, therefore, presents the concept of self-emancipation in ICT4D work as a position where outsiders can be emancipated from a lack of a sense and understanding of appropriate community engagement practices and an inability to intuitively do ICT4D that honestly addresses the emancipatory interests of the rural South African community.

4 Project context

The research reported here emerges from the researcher position of being ethnographically immersed in an ongoing community engagement and ICT training project, entitled The Happy Valley Initiative, at the Happy Valley community in deep rural KZN. The researcher’s role has been and still is the primary driver and “outsider” champion of the Happy Valley Initiative. Since 2008 the researcher, in partnership with several key community members, has been involved in basically all aspects of the community engagement and ICT training that has evolved since the inception of the project. This involvement includes how the Happy Valley Initiative started and gained momentum, how relationships with teachers and key community members developed and matured, how key community members were empowered through ICT and “train-the-trainer” initiatives, how the ICT training is slowly becoming sustainable and ultimately how the researcher himself was empowered, emancipated and personally enriched through relationships with the community and lessons learned from the richness of living among the people for periods of time.

The Happy Valley community is one of the poorest in SA and its members face numerous difficulties such as extreme poverty and a high occurrence of HIV and tuberculosis (TB) infections. According to caregivers from the community, Happy Valley is in tension mainly because of sickness, death, malnutrition and extreme poverty. Most people are either infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. Because of these conditions, there are a growing number of orphans while a general feeling of hopelessness impacts negatively on development initiatives.
In contrast with these dire circumstances, several very successful community-owned projects have been started. These include an orphan care unit, a hospice doing groundbreaking research on HIV and TB and Happy Valley School. Happy Valley School is considered one of the best schools in the region despite the various difficulties they face. Happy Valley School and the hospice are also the primary focus areas for the Happy Valley Initiative.

At Happy Valley School a number of IT training initiatives have been started. So far, 24 teachers were trained in basic office applications in a UNESCO funded training project, four teachers were empowered through a train-the-trainer initiative to further ICT training in the region and as a result, 10 more teachers and 10 nurses from the hospice are now being trained in basic ICT. Further training courses are being planned for the future of which some will be supported by funding from the community. Coinciding with the ICT training, a number of community engagement activities have been started, for example, an annual campus trip to the university for grade 11 learners while lessons learnt are also being implemented in another rural school closer to the university.

5 Methodological approach

A combination of critical ethnographic and participant observational strategies was used to do fieldwork. Participant observation in fieldwork allows the researcher to be both an emotionally engaged participant and a coolly dispassionate observer of social phenomena (De Vos et al., 2007). Critical ethnography on the other hand, allows the researcher to “step outside his own narrow cultural background and to set aside his own ethnocentrism to view the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems” which is the essence of what the critical social theorist believes in (Myers, 2009). Critical ethnography views the research as an emergent process in which there is dialogue between the researcher and the people in the research setting (Myers, 2009), thus allowing the researcher to view social life as constructed in contexts of power and open up to scrutiny, hidden agendas, power centres and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain (Thomas, 1993, cited in Myers, 2009). For the critical theorist, this approach is emancipatory and an opportunity to be self-reflective, as the researcher is empowered to investigate beyond explicit observations, values and assumptions to taken-for-granted-assumptions and unwritten rules and protocol.
Since community entry is an ongoing process and community gatekeepers and cultural interpreters are integral partners in the research process (De Vos et al., 2007), fieldwork implies that the researcher continuously reflects on and discusses observed behaviour and engagement with cultural interpreters and community research partners. This can be observed from the narratives that follow. In addition, cultural interpreters play an integral role in deciphering meaning and interpreting social phenomena.

Being ethnographically immersed in the Happy Valley Initiative, the researcher aspired to embrace a number of key characteristics and tactics. 1) He allowed for a time of enculturation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Myers, 2009) to get a sense of the cultural context; 2) he maintained a critical self-reflective position of enquiry as it is as important as rigorous treatment of data (De Vos et al., 2007; Myers, 2009); 3) he developed and maintained good honest and open relationships with cultural interpreters; and 4) both procedural aspects and analytical aspects of fieldwork were documented since they may reflect important characteristics, principles and values (Myers, 2009) that may only prove relevant later in the research.

To align with the epistemology of CST and to assist in understanding meaning from within the lifeworld of the local people (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997), the researcher explicitly avoided the use theories or conceptual lenses for guiding fieldwork as they might potentially distort what is observed from the community. De Vos et al. (2007) confirms this by stating that the main problem is how to approach the field with an open mind, that is, with no preconceived ideas that might interfere with the emancipatory needs of the research stakeholders or distort what is observed about social phenomena. A critical position of enquiry, therefore, enables the researcher to question his own assumptions and ontology in order to address the emancipatory interests of research subjects and change (Adam, 2001).

Throughout many ongoing engagement opportunities, the researcher gathered and documented many stories, observations and quotes from community members and cultural interpreters. The researcher engaged in numerous informal, impromptu, opportunistic and spontaneous conversations with people, gaining access to the “unofficial” story and deeper meaning. As a result, the researcher is in possession of several sources of data. These include recordings of meetings, text messages, emails, narratives, feedback reports on work done, press releases and detailed field notes as a form of commentary taken during community engagement (Myers, 2009). Data was collected and analysed almost simultaneously. From the data, the various materials were collated into narratives that reflect stories of meaning.
making (Myers, 2009). From the narratives specific values, themes, and principles are put forward that could assist in answering the research question.

In each narrative, the author uses confessional or vulnerable writing (Schultze, 2000) to reflect on the process of self-emancipation as well as implications for ongoing ICT4D in deep rural SA. It is hoped that by presenting these narratives, the author will not only explain and demonstrate the process of self-emancipation but also present key issues for successful community engagement and sustainable ICT4D.

Although, the narratives refer to some interviews that were done, the results from those interviews do not form part of data analysed for this paper. The interviews will be used for the purpose of data integrity and confirmation in follow-up research, as the researcher attempts to formally record and reflect on lessons learned from the enculturation phases and participatory ICT work done in the community.

For more on the methodologies of critical ethnographic work and participant observation in communities, the reader may refer to sources such as De Vos et al. (2005), Leedy and Ormrod (2005), Myers (2009), Neuman (1997) and Schultze (2000).

6 Building networks of friendships

The following narrative tells a story of how friendships with key community members developed, how these friendships evolved into researcher partnerships and how the researcher was empowered to gain access to the unofficial story and deeper meaning.

Early in January 2010, I received a phone call from one of my 2009 “students” from the community. “We are on our way to Pretoria and would like to visit you”. I had invited Lebo to visit me before, but never thought that he would actually take me up on that. So one Friday evening he, his wife and son stopped at my place. For me it was a weekend where a lifelong friendship was cemented.

Although we socialised and spoke about many things during the three days, two themes stood out for me: the first is how important respect is in the local Zulu culture and how one should honestly learn how to show respect. Lebo and his wife told me many stories; stories about the symbolism of Lobola, about friendships and family, about traditional leadership, Zulu royalty and how important it is for them to respect each other. They also told me about the many difficulties of living in their context and how this tension has actually...
become part of their culture! Lebo said that if I’m interested, I should watch the movie “Yesterday” because it reflects what he has experienced growing up. Lebo said that if there is one thing that he would keep from his Zulu culture, it is the way people still respect each other.

The second theme was friendships. Lebo told me that when he was in Germany, he was amazed at how the people live in isolation and behind walls. “I will not be able to live like that, because friends are very important to me”. I came to realise that building networks of friendships might be key in community engagement. I also remembered that late in 2009, M’ni, another student from the 2009 training sessions and a teacher, sent me a text message that I didn’t respond to immediately. I didn’t value it at that stage. I now realised that this was probably his way of reaching out to me as was natural to his custom. It struck me that friendships and hospitality might be the way forward in the Happy Valley Initiative.

So when Lebo left on Monday morning, I texted to M’ni. I wanted to respond to his reaching out last year. This was my message: “Hi, M’ni. Thinking of you lately. Lebo visited us last month. Hows the training going?”. He responded almost immediately: “Hi bro. I b liv u r grt im doing so fine. Wow thnx 4yo concern. hey did I tell the studnts invited us at their chrmas party thanking God for the chance they had. [M’ni was part of a group of teachers doing IT training for nurses at the local hospice] They even gave us some gifts. We enjoyed it so mch! Does UP offer burs 4 people who want to do teaching. Plz find it for me. B blsd mybro. Luv u.” How is that for creating an opportunity? I responded: “it is nice if the students ar so grateful. Me and u must go on UNISA website when I get there in apr. c u then.”

I learnt a valuable lesson. I also realised that in order to pursue the research that I am doing, I had to be personally and intrinsically involved with people from the community. It wasn’t long before M’ni phoned me to arrange for a second campus visit for the school’s grade 11’s.

The friendships that developed with M’ni and Lebo also opened up several interview opportunities for my colleague and me. When we visited in April, M’ni and Sarah, another student, literally took us by the hand and set up interviews with a number of key community members and visionaries at Happy Valley. These key community members include the local king, one of only four Induna’s in the region (these men are like traditional community gatekeepers and guardians), a church leader, businessman and a member of the local municipality who is working in at the finance department (the results from these interviews fall outside of the scope of this paper, but is mentioned to illustrate
how M’ni became a research partner). We could record all of these interviews and engaged
with the local people at an intimate level. In fact, M’ni and Sarah, having learnt about my
research and the things about ICT I am interested in, even guided some of the interviews
and did the interpreting for me. In a sense, these relationships allowed me to almost sit
back, observe and record. I learnt a further lesson: friendships may well evolve into
research partnerships! M’ni and Sarah especially helped me interpret and decipher
meaning, set up contacts and explained many of the intricacies that I wouldn’t be able to
grasp outside of the openness created through friendships and respect. I managed to gain
access to the unofficial story!

My advice to anyone wanting to do community entry, community engagement or any real,
sustainable ICT for development project, is to allow people into your personal space and
allow them to be your friends. For them it is important to show hospitality and it is their
way of showing respect. You should respond. Learn from them, listen to them, do things
with them and allow your boundaries to be expanded! You will be enriched as a person.

7 A narrative about traditional leadership and respect

Since my first visit to Happy Valley I was told that the ultimate traditional authority in the
community is the local Zulu chief and his leadership. The following narrative reflects on how
I met him and some of the things I learnt during this special engagement. To align with and
identify with the people, I will refer to him as the king or his majesty as this is how the locals
would address him.

Since we first visited Happy Valley I was hoping for a chance to meet the king, but never
had a good opportunity up to now. I realised that I had to be introduced by a guide or
spokesperson since I would not know how to approach the king on my own. I also realised
that I had to build a relationship with someone who might be able to guide me and
introduce me appropriately and correctly. Building such a relationship took time and I had
to allow for a time of enculturation.

One of the values that I learnt from the cultural interpreters during previous fieldtrips is that
the community must experience ownership in any development project and that as an
outsider, I should not storm in and implement what I think is right without their consent and
support or without waiting for their timing and sense of readiness. Because I wanted the
project to be sustainable, I had to ensure that local visionaries identify with the project in
order to guide me as an outsider in implementing the project.
In addition to learning about these values, I was lucky to have the king’s daughter as one of my students during the June/July 2009 training. She produced very good results, was quiet and seemed to understand the community well. I especially noted her as having a broader sense of the community and their needs (I later learned from another princes that royalty in South African context naturally have a sense of looking out for their community). Sipho didn’t speak much, but when she spoke, one could listen and take note of it. For example, at one stage during a meeting, she mentioned that the ICT training should be taken to the rest of the community so that they do not see the mission and the school as isolated from the rest of the people. ICT4D literature shows that ICT implementation has the potential to create or reinforce social divides in a community (Lewis, 1994; Zheng, 2009). Being royalty, she seemed to be naturally aware of this.

Therefore, having this understanding and attempting to implement the training according to these values and principles for about eight months (Feb 09 to Nov 09), I felt that the time for meeting the king was close. However, I still didn’t know when, how and who would introduce me. During my November visit, M’ni took Adam, another partner in the project and an indigenous man from Zambia, and me on a sightseeing trip through Happy Valley (Adam, coming from a similar traditional community, was especially instrumental in guiding me in ways of showing respect right from the start of the project). M’ni showed us many places while he explained many of the issues related to local traditions. One of the issues we spoke about was the scope of traditional leadership. M’ni pointed out to us the importance of the ultimate authority of Zulu kingship. He told us that a king from another area specifically told his people that they should not cut down trees, because according to M’ni, they should protect nature. M’ni showed us the boundary of where the one king’s area stopped and the other started. In the figure below, one can see the boundary between the two kingdoms and how many more trees there are on the one side. The local people respected the king so much that they would not cut down trees for wood, even if they might desperately need it for fuel.
Boundaries between two kingdoms, showing the values of respect for Zulu leadership

So on our way sightseeing, I noted to M’ni that I would like to meet the king. He immediately told me that he was related (I didn’t know M’ni was royalty until then) and that he could organise a meeting for us. He told me that the king was approachable and would be open to meeting us unlike some other local kings who really demand respect in particular ways. I immediately started enquiring about conduct of respect and protocol. From that moment, I had a two-hour lesson on Zulu royalty.

Back from our trip, M’ni made a phone call and off we went to meet the king. As we approached the king’s palace or traditional headquarters, I noticed both Adam and M’ni tense up. M’ni told me that even though he personally knows the king, he is still nervous every time he meets him. He said that the community has great respect for this man. I was determined to follow their customs and behaviour in showing respect and therefore align with their way of doing things – almost in a sense imitating what they did.

As we sat and waited, both Adam and M’ni were quiet. When the king arrived, I noticed that he was driven by his son in a very simple but neat Toyota bakkie. I later learned that he had no formal education, few literacy skills and had no driver’s license. Yet he exhibited a tremendous authority and wisdom. I sensed that the people actually loved him very much. I was told by M’ni that I should allow the king to start the conversation and that I should wait for him to allow me to respond.
The king started by telling us about how important the development of his community is to him. He also said that what we were doing in terms of ICT training as well as the way we approached it was according to him right and appropriate. In fact, he thanked us for what we are doing with the words “siyabonga khakhulu” meaning “I am very grateful”. After saying a few things about his view of what we are doing and his community he asked us three questions. I will reflect on two of those questions.

First he asked how the training came about and how we got involved. I responded by thanking him for being able to be in his community and also told him what an honour it was for us to meet him. Learning from previous lessons, I knew that I had to acknowledge his leadership and position in the community. I told him about my earlier connections with Martha and some friends at the orphanage, UNESCO’s involvement in the project and how we met up with Mrs Ndlovu from Happy Valley School.

Another question from him was: What is our vision for the training? Having learnt about the importance of ownership and transfer of vision, I noted that the vision is actually Mrs Ndlovu’s vision to empower her teachers and schoolchildren and also maybe other schools in the vicinity and that we at the university aim to support them with knowledge and skills. As a result, he turned to the M’ni who was also a teacher at the school and said that he hopes that the teachers will be faithful. For me this was a moment of symbolic transfer of ownership. I knew that the project is now viewed as a community initiative and not ours only.

I asked him if there were anything that he would suggest with regards to the way we do the IT training – I sincerely wanted his advice as he knows his people very well. He reiterated that he had no problem with what we are doing and continued by telling us how important the certification of the course is to him.

One of the things M’ni and Adam told me is to not stare at him or look him in the eyes directly. During our meeting, I noted Adam actually looking at the floor when he addressed the king. I tried to copy his behaviour but found it quite awkward. I also noted that when I look at the king during the conversation, he would look away. Adam told me later that it could be seen as me challenging him in a way.

Leaving his palace, we felt honoured to meet the king and grateful for his open reception. On the way, back M’ni continued to tell me about the authority of the king and how he in two or three questions actually profiled me and the ICT training project. I didn’t realise it at that stage. M’ni noticed it and mentioned it to me.
One of the key lessons I learned during this engagement was how well respected and loved the king was in his community – I could see it from M’ni’s reactions. I also realised that for continued openness and emancipation of the local people and myself, I had to align with what the local people valued which in this case was absolute loyalty and respect for their leadership structures. I felt emancipated and empowered to continue with the ICT4D project under the protection and support of the king himself up the point where I could say that I have encountered riches beyond what many outsiders can identify with. I believe that getting the approval and blessing of traditional leadership may be instrumental in successful ICT4D research and practice in rural South African communities.

8 A narrative about people orientatedness

The following narrative reflects on observations and interviews the researcher had with local community members and cultural interpreters that illustrates the typical people orientatedness of South African rural communities. It also reflects on how one should adapt a people orientated value system when engaging in ICT training initiatives or research in deep rural communities. It all started with Lebo’s story of how valuable friendships and family are to him.

After Lebo’s inspiring and empowering visit to my home in Pretoria, I was especially sensitised to the friendship and people orientatedness of the local Zulu culture. I started asking about it and deliberately collecting stories about it. One of the stories occurred when I approached Peter to “set up and interview for collecting data”.

One morning I asked Peter whether I could possibly come and talk to him later that day about my research. My intention and understanding was that I will address certain themes in an informal interview or discussion and that I was going to sit with him for about an hour, hopefully to ask questions and record the conversation. Later that day I confirmed my visit with him. He asked me where my wife and children are (during that specific field visit my family joined my research endeavours). I told him that they are visiting some friends down the road and that it will only be me visiting him. What happened during the next few hours was a valuable lesson to me. He immediately appeared very dissatisfied about the fact that my family was not going to come along even up to the point of disappointment. Luckily, we had an open relationship and he could verbalise how he felt about it. He was not offended, but he vividly explained how hospitality works in his culture. He said that if someone invites you it means that your family or anybody else that you invite may come along and that for him it is important that my whole family should join them for the visit. I
realised that this man was excited and that he valued my visit to him. I had to respect that and abide to the value system that now emerged to me. However, being as task orientated as I am and having to do research, I also realised that the intention of recording an interview or any vague interview structure was flying out the window. I therefore took the flow of things and submitted to what was happening to me.

So as a result of Peter’s insistence, Sarah and I had to walk down the road to go and fetch my wife and children where they were. I realised that, although my intended interview would not go as planned, that I now have an opportunity to observe culture and values much deeper and in a more relaxed manner than what an interview would have revealed to me. I therefore, allowed this newly acquired friend of mine to show me hospitality while I made deliberate effort of enjoying it. On the way back, I noted to Sarah, Peter’s hospitality and insistence on bringing my family along. She responded by telling me a further story about the importance of hospitality, family and friendship in their culture.

She told me about a certain German lady who visited Happy Valley and who told her that in Germany people appear sometimes “very rushed”, while she observed people in Happy Valley much more relaxed. Sarah responded that it is their custom to always put people before work, even if they are under pressure to complete something. She said that personally she finds it difficult to complete her work when there are people around, because she has to put her work aside to entertain people (Sarah is the general manager of the mission). She noted that sometimes white people seem “very work orientated and therefore always in a hurry”.

Back at Peter’s place we were welcomed by a whole array of cakes and snacks for tea. Peter continued his prior discussion about hospitality. Among other things he said that it is customary to always finish all the food presented to them as a way of accepting hospitality. Luckily, he understood that my wife and I were not able or going to finish everything they prepared for us. During the visit to Peter, he asked me if I was willing to help him install a new printer that he acquired. So as a result, I found myself assisting him with the installation process. An intended one-hour interview ended up in a three-hour very relaxed tea drinking and socialising event.

I learned a number of valuable lessons about these people that assisted me in understanding their view of reality better. Firstly, their culture is extremely people centered. For someone from the outside wanting to establish rapport, do research, introduce ICT or ICT training, one will have to align with and respect their people orientated value system. A further lesson was that of allowing an interview or a discussion to develop naturally, even if it
means deviating from the original intention or themes you wanted to address. Stories and memories of interactions might later on provide valuable access to the unofficial story and deeper meaning that one might not envisage at the beginning of fieldwork. As researcher-practitioner I was emancipated through the lessons I learned and through allowing fieldwork to evolve as it did. I could, therefore, align myself with what these people considered important as a community and subsequently utilise a people orientatedness in future and ongoing IC4D endeavours. In fact, I was enriched as an individual because a people orientated approach is potentially less destructive to relationships than the task orientatedness I was so acquainted to.

9 Conclusions

The aims of this paper are to present CST as position for self-emancipation in ICT4D research and practice and to present confessional narratives about the self-emancipatory experiences of the researcher in his involvement in ICT4D in a deep rural community in SA. The paper provides practical examples of instances where the researcher had no option but to change and adapt some of his preconceptions and views. A self-critical and self-reflective position of enquiry allowed the researcher to be open to the guidance from cultural interpreters and to question his own implicit assumptions, values, protocol, and beliefs and their relevance to practical ICT4D work and research. CST and ethnographic approaches to fieldwork also allowed the researcher to formalise and communicate his learning through the use of confessional writing and narratives (Myers, 2009; Schultze, 2000).

Results from this paper show that self-emancipation should be central to ongoing and sustainable community engagement in deep rural SA. Being reflective and self-critical also allow the ICT4D researcher and practitioner to be more culturally sensitive and open to address the real emancipatory interests of deep rural communities according to their needs, understanding and view of reality.

In order to align with the epistemology of CST and to approach the fieldwork with an open mind, the author endeavoured to avoid using theory as a conceptual lens for doing fieldwork. It will, however, be useful to retrospectively relate the findings of this study to ICT4D literature and theories in follow-up research.

The author and his colleague are busy with ongoing PhD studies in Happy Valley. Together, they are using different approaches and frameworks to help them make sense and be more
effective in the very different social context to which they are exposed to in the Happy Valley Initiative. There is still much to be done in terms of ICT interventions in the community, and the emancipation of the researcher is ongoing.

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11 References


