

Original Research

Epistemic Voices at the Margins: A Reflexive Qualitative Inquiry into Indigenous Knowledge and Cognitive Justice in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This paper presents a critical examination of how indigenous epistemologies are marginalized yet persist within qualitative research practices in Pakistan, positioning cognitive justice as both an institutional challenge and a normative priority. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 university professors, researchers, and policy actors, the study employs a thematic analysis that combines deductive and inductive coding approaches, informed by a decolonial reflexive methodology. The findings suggest that indigenous knowledge in Pakistan is neither merely historical nor simply an alternative to Western paradigms; rather, it represents a dynamic and adaptable system of knowing that actively negotiates institutional exclusion through creative resistance strategies. While colonial legacies and the dominance of the English language continue to marginalize local epistemologies, participants demonstrate creative agency through negotiation, hybridization, and the reclamation of spiritual and relational ethics (tazkiyah al-nafs) in research practice. The study introduces a custody-introducing—the epistemic exclusion—tactical agency cycle to illustrate the dynamic relationship between institutional marginalization and scholars' strategic responses. This paper argues that structural transformation in the form of bilingual scholarship, oral scholarship, revising research ethics, and decolonizing academic hierarchies is required for the realization of cognitive justice in Pakistan. By centering the voices and lived experiences of Pakistani scholars, this research proposes an empirically grounded way forward for epistemic inclusion and methodological pluralism in the Global South. The study provides valuable insights for universities, policymakers, and researchers aiming to decolonize knowledge production.*

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, cognitive justice, qualitative inquiry, epistemic exclusion, decolonial research, Pakistan, hybridity, language policy, ethical reflexivity.

Introduction: The need to address the question of whose knowledge counts and whose voices are heard in the research process is one of the most pressing concerns for postcolonial societies (Chilisa, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014; Fricker, 2017). Before delving into this challenge in the Pakistani context, it is crucial to define key concepts that set the stage for this inquiry. Cognitive justice is: The acknowledgement and affirmation of plural epistemologies,

contesting the dominance of Western epistemologies (Santos, 2018). Indigenous knowledges refer to localised knowledges that are relational, communal, and spiritual (Chilisa, 2012). Epistemic violence is the institution of non-Western knowing through its systematic devaluation and erasure (Fricker, 2017).

The struggle to indigenize and localize qualitative research is not only an issue of epistemic culture, but of cognitive justice, and carries the consequences it does for knowledge-making, policy-making, and even daily practice, in the given social and epistemic conditions in Pakistan, and much of the Global South more broadly (Chilisa, 2012; Santos, 2018).

Publication Date: 30th June, 2026



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Even after decades of critical scholarship that have sought to deconstruct Eurocentric epistemologies, Pakistani academic institutions continue to systematically marginalize local epistemologies due to a single-minded adherence to Western epistemologies (Ndhlovu, 2021). It is practiced in many institutional forms, including language policies, referencing stipulations, and curriculum design, which prioritize Western knowledge and reject oral traditions and native theorizing (Karim, 2020; Park, 2023).

These mechanisms both shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and shape who counts as a legitimate knower (Fricker, 2017). As a result, Pakistani epistemologies find themselves on the fringes of formal research settings, reproducing practices of cognitive injustice and dispossession (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Despite an increasing interest in epistemic justice in international academia, Pakistani indigenous knowledge remains marginalized in academic institutions and is often reduced to a cultural artifact rather than being treated as valid knowledge (Bano, 2022; Chilisa, 2012). Linguistic colonialism has positioned English at the center of academic discourse, limiting the authentic representation of local knowledge systems to non-English languages (van den Bersselaar, 2006; Park, 2023).

The coloniality of knowledge persists in the ways Pakistani institution's structure epistemic authority, resulting in systematic Eurocentric biases in epistemic constructions (Santos, 2018; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). These legacies manifest as epistemic violence—the imposition of foreign paradigms at the expense of local realities (Fricker, 2017; Chilisa, 2017). Furthermore, Pakistan's pursuit of global academic prestige, as measured by Western standards, further marginalizes indigenous knowledges

and renders indigenous epistemologies as sources of data, rather than acknowledging their unique epistemic traditions (Park, 2023; Ndhlovu, 2021).

Cognitive justice (Santos, 2018) is a theoretical approach that provides a conceptual framework for contesting epistemic hierarchies by making space for non-Western ways of knowing and denouncing epistemic erasure. More than tokenistic inclusion is also required by this paradigm; the reorganisation of legitimate evidence, logic, and experience is central (Ndhlovu, 2021). The liberal rhetoric of indigenous knowledge in many Pakistani universities often lacks the implementation of research practices and the incorporation of changes into their curricula (Bano, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

One important reason for epistemic exclusion is the phenomenon of linguistic hegemony of English, which essentially serves as a gatekeeping system that favors Western-educated researchers and excludes scholars who work in regional or indigenous languages (Park, 2023; Karim, 2020). In Pakistan, English continues to dominate not only publications but also the processes of research design, data analysis, and ethical approvals, which provide structural constraints for Urdu-based or orally transmitted knowledge systems (Ndhlovu, 2021; Chilisa, 2012). This language filter often misrepresents indigenous concepts and perpetuates colonial epistemic control (Bano, 2022).

Indigenous epistemologies are characterized by relationality, community engagement, spirituality, and contextual embeddedness, which contrasts with the Western emphasis on abstraction and generalizability (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). This knowledge system prioritizes lived experience, reciprocal relationships, and ethical duties to both human and non-

human communities (Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). However, in Pakistani academic contexts, indigenous epistemologies face significant barriers in translation to research design, data interpretation, and publication practices (Bano, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

Power can be exercised through research relationships, methodological decisions, and ethics (Fricker, 2017; Chilisa, 2017). With the increasing adoption of Western ethics review mechanisms in Pakistani universities, a conflict often arises between locally relevant ethical commitments to reciprocity, communal benefit, and spiritual responsibility, and the dominance of Western perspectives (Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

Methodological pluralism acknowledges that no single research paradigm encompasses the full spectrum of human experience (Stein et al., 2020). While there is a growing interest in hybrid approaches focusing on indigenous priorities, institutional lethargy and academic hierarchies also deter such pluralistic ventures in Pakistan (Bano, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2021).

Reflexivity appears to be both a methodological and an ethical imperative for decolonial scholarship, and it is framed in terms of collective responsibility and co-productive knowledge production (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2012). However, there are significant empirical gaps regarding how reflexive and decolonial methodologies are actually practiced in Pakistani higher education (Bano, 2022).

This research work addresses a critical gap by centering the epistemic voices that have been marginalized in Pakistani academic spaces. Through reflexive qualitative research, it explores how indigenous knowledge is represented,

negotiated, and reclaimed in contemporary research contexts. Drawing on in-depth interviews with relevant academic and policy stakeholders, the study examines how cognitive injustices are reproduced through institutional, linguistic, and ethical barriers. By focusing on scholars navigating between indigenous and academic knowledge systems, this research contributes to discussions of decolonized research practice, cognitive justice advancement, and pluralistic knowledge production in Pakistan and beyond.

This study aims to: (1) examine the current state of indigenous epistemologies in Pakistani qualitative research; (2) investigate institutional barriers to their recognition; (3) analyze how power, reflexivity, and positionality shape cognitive justice struggles; and (4) formulate pathways toward effective epistemic inclusion and pluralism. Moving beyond critique, this paper presents empirically grounded approaches to revitalizing indigenous knowledge as a living, credible, and vital source of social inquiry (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

The research questions guiding this study are: How are indigenous epistemologies represented and negotiated within Pakistani academic and policy research contexts? What institutional, linguistic, and ethical barriers impede the legitimization and integration of indigenous knowledge in mainstream qualitative research?

Methodology: Research Design

The research employs a reflexive qualitative methodology grounded in interpretivist and decolonial paradigms (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). The underlying objective was to critically examine how indigenous epistemologies are either positioned, relegated, or asserted in Pakistani qualitative research, and to gain insight into the lived

experiences and perspectives of individuals who must navigate such a complex interplay of positions. Reflexivity was employed throughout, meaning that the researcher's positioning, assumptions, and moral responsibilities were continually questioned through weekly written reflections in a reflexive journal, integrated across all research phases (Wilson, 2008; Pillow, 2003).

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select information-rich participants who had firsthand experience with epistemic contestations in Pakistani academia. The sample consisted of seventeen participants (Ten men and seven women), who included university faculty members, qualitative researchers, and policy experts at the border of indigenous knowledge and higher learning. Sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, achieved when no new themes emerged from the final three interviews, consistent with recommendations for interpretive qualitative research. There was an attempt to make the background of disciplines and linguistic knowledge, as well as exposure to both mainstream and indigenous forms of research, diverse (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

The primary technique involved in data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews; these interviews combined structure and flexibility, allowing for probing of opinions regarding the affirmation or marginalization of indigenous knowledge among the participants. The semi-structured interview guide was developed through consultation with indigenous knowledge holders and piloted with two academics before finalization. Epistemic inclusivity and participant comfort were achieved by conducting the interviews in their preferred language (Urdu or English) (Smith, 2012;

Chilisa, 2012). Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded upon the consent of the respondents, and further transcribed and, where required, translated to maintain the original meaning and tone.

Interview prompts included:

- How are indigenous epistemologies recognized or excluded in academic research in Pakistan?
- What barriers exist for integrating indigenous knowledge into qualitative inquiry?
- How do language, institutional policy, and disciplinary norms shape epistemic justice or injustice?
- What ethical and reflexive strategies can address these exclusions?

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in a reflexive and ethically responsible manner. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal, where she recorded her positionality, biases, and ethical dilemmas that arose as the study progressed (Pillow, 2003; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). These were referred to as informed consent, confidentiality, and right to withdraw, with specific considerations of epistemic extraction and epistemic misrepresentation risks, which are critical aspects to indigenous and decolonial research ethics (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012).

In addition, member-checking was used to support data validation by asking participants to review, clarify, or elaborate on their interview transcripts and any important interpretations, thereby creating an atmosphere of accountability in the research relationship (Wilson, 2008) and upholding the values of the participants as co-constructors of knowledge.

Data Analysis: Coding Process and Codebook Development

All coding was undertaken by the primary researcher with regular consultation with the research supervisor. Thematic analysis was conducted using a method known as abductive thematic analysis, which is well-suited to both studying existing theoretical constructs (e.g., cognitive justice) and inductive knowledge emerging from the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The coding procedure began with a thorough examination of all transcripts and continued with the repeated formulation of themes that articulated the negotiation, affirmation, or erasure of indigenous epistemologies in the research practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 2015).

The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes

6. Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

Reflexive constant engagement increased the likelihood that the themes could not reproduce established scholarly logics but that participants would emphasize their construction of knowledge, power, and justice (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

Development of the Codebook: An Iterative and Reflexive Process

A codebook was created by a rigorous, iterative process in order to apply the thematic analysis and to make the development of themes as transparent as possible. The high-level actions are presented in tabular form below; they involved coding, code refinement, and categorizing codes into themes and subthemes. This involved the development of deductive codes (based on theory and the interview guide) and inductive codes (generated from the narratives themselves) simultaneously, and the use of reflexive work at all stages.

Table 1: Development of the Codebook as an Iterative and Reflexive Process

Step	Description of Process	Sources/Inputs	Example Output
1. Code Generation	Initial codes were created during the first readings of transcripts. Both deductive (from interview guide/literature) and inductive (from participants' language).	Interview guide, literature, raw transcripts	"Language barrier", "Community validation", "Code-switching", "Ethical reflexivity"
2. Code Collation	Similar/overlapping codes grouped; redundant codes merged; ambiguous codes clarified with team/review.	Annotated transcripts, analytic memos	"Epistemic exclusion" merges "language barrier" and "publication bias."
3. Defining Codes	Codes are defined clearly, specifying scope and inclusion/exclusion criteria for each—definitions revised after re-examining data.	Team discussions, codebook drafts	"Code-switching: Shifting between languages (Urdu/English) to meet academic requirements"
4. Organizing Codes	Codes clustered under higher-order themes and subthemes reflecting research aims—table of codes/themes created as a working codebook.	Analytical frameworks, literature, and participant input	Theme: "Institutional Exclusion" with codes: "language policy", "funding practices"
5. Testing Codebook	Codebook tested by re-coding sample transcripts; inconsistencies or ambiguities identified and resolved. Code definitions refined for reliability.	Sampled transcripts, peer/member checking	Clarified the difference between "tokenistic inclusion" and "genuine affirmation."
6. Finalization	Final codebook compiled, listing all themes, subthemes, codes, definitions, and representative examples/quotes from data (Urdu-English preserved where relevant).	Final transcripts, research notes	See below for a sample excerpt

This systematic approach to codebook development ensured analytical rigor, credibility, and a faithful representation of the complex, context-specific experiences articulated by participants.

Sample Excerpt from the Final Codebook

In the further example of the analytical rigor and transparency of coding in

the process, Table 2 demonstrates a sample excerpt of the developed codebook. This excerpt illustrates how the most important themes were transformed into distinct codes, each of which was defined with precision and linked to corresponding data in the form of interview excerpts. The codebook retained both Urdu expressions and English translations, allowing for the fulfillment of cultural and contextual requirements.

Table 2: Reflexive Codebook Excerpt: Thematic Codes, Definitions, and Culturally Embedded Urdu-English Interview Quotations

Theme	Code	Definition	Illustrative Quote
Affirmation of Indigenous	Community validation	Acknowledgement of knowledge through collective/local recognition	"It is not valued in universities, but it is respected within the community."
Epistemic Exclusion	Language barrier	Exclusion due to the dominance of English in research, policy, and publication	"If you do not write in English, it does not get published."
Ethical Reflexivity	Tazkiyah al-nafs	Concept of self-purification/spiritual intent in research ethics	"True responsibility lies in the heart and in action."
Hybridization & Agency	Code-switching	Switching languages or frameworks to navigate institutional and community demands	"We have to compromise with both systems..."

The extended codebook contains all kinds of themes, subthemes, codes, specific definitions, and a more extensive scope of exemplary quotations. The following sample passage is given in order to illustrate how much analytical scrutiny was applied to the study and how uniform it was. The entire coding book is included in the Appendix or is available upon request.

Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed multiple strategies:

- Triangulation: Drawing on diverse participant backgrounds and both Urdu/English interviews.
- Member checking: Inviting participants' validation of findings.
- Thick description: Providing rich, contextualized accounts of interview narratives.

- Audit trail: Documenting analytic decisions and reflexive notes.

These strategies ensured credibility, transferability, and transparency, aligning with best practices in qualitative and decolonial research (Chilisa, 2012; Patton, 2015).

Results: This analysis is based on 17 in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who both practice and study indigenous knowledge and qualitative research in Pakistan, including researchers and policymakers. All participants operate at the periphery of these domains. Five key themes emerged from abductive analysis of participant narratives, presented below with supporting evidence.

Theme 1: Affirmation of Indigenous Knowledge

This review demonstrates a strong and rebellious assertion of indigenous knowledge by those involved, particularly senior professors and researchers who draw on local traditions. The respondents frequently quoted indigenous knowledge as being rooted in both material experience and spiritual principles, as well as language passed on through an oral form of communication, which are commonly dismissed by the academy, resting on formal educational principles.

“Knowledge does not only belong in books, but it is closely connected with our cultural traditions and the lives of our elders. This may not be so important in universities, but in our community, this is still upheld knowledge.” --A Professor

Participants consistently emphasized storytelling, proverbs, and spiritual ethics as legitimate forms of knowledge exchange. Multiple respondents described how this knowledge forms persist within community settings despite formal institutional dismissal.

Theme 2: Institutional Exclusion

Participants unanimously emphasized how policies, curricula, and funding mechanisms in universities systematically marginalize indigenous knowledge. This is not just the issue of nonrecognition, but instead of exclusion; exclusion in the form of language policy, citation standards, and performance measures that favour Western-based research outputs (Karim, 2020).

“Policy makers always look towards Western models. It is challenging to secure funding or publication for indigenous or Urdu-based research. Unless we change this system, local knowledge will remain marginalized.” A Policy Maker

Multiple participants described institutional gatekeeping through promotion requirements that favor English-language publications, grant processes that discount domestic research, and dissertation guidelines that overlook local methodologies. The participants complained of being pressured into code-switching to English, as well as being pressured to apply theories introduced to them by Global North intellectuals, even when these theories were inappropriate to the local situation.

Theme 3: Language Hegemony and Barriers

The hegemony of English in the Pakistani scholarly world became one of the core coordinates of the epistemic dominance. Throughout, respondents gave an account of the gatekeeping role of language: English is regarded as the language of science and objectivity, therefore keeping Urdu and regional languages at the periphery.

“If you do not write journal articles in English, they do not get published. If you work in local languages, it is considered inferior.” — A Researcher.

This is not a specifically Pakistani phenomenon, but due to both its linguistic richness and the richness of local oral tradition, this phenomenon has a particularly severe impact in this region (van den Bersselaar, 2006; Ndhlovu, 2021). Respondents narrated experiences of good research on the sidelines due to its use of the Urdu or Sindhi language. Several noted that translating indigenous concepts into English results in significant conceptual loss.

Theme 4: Ethical Reflexivity and Indigenous Values

One theme that emerged, quite unexpectedly but powerfully, was the

contrast between Western form-based research ethics and the reflexivity inherent in the ethics of indigenous traditions. Multiple participants emphasized tazkiyah al-nafs, or (spiritual self-purification), which is key to ethical research that deals with intention and responsibility within relationships.

"What is required here is proper research ethics, including a clear intention and benefit to the community. Signatures on forms are less important -- the real responsibility is in the heart and in action." -- A Professor.

This can be linked to the insights provided by Smith (2012) and Thambinathan & Kinsella (2021), who suggest that ethical protocols based on indigenous paradigms focus on relational accountability and reciprocity over time, rather than strict adherence to a process. The study participants' critique of institutional review boards is predicated on the notion that they have the structural mindset of complete indifference to context, culture, values, and community consent.

Participants at various career stages discussed negotiation strategies, balancing the need for institutional publication in the English language with the requirement to preserve the transmission of indigenous knowledge through local languages and community engagement.

"We have to compromise with both systems -- to work in English for professional advancement, to maintain our identity and our community ties by maintaining local language and local knowledge." -- A Professor.

Participants viewed these strategies as a form of tactical agency, rather than compromise, in terms of creative power negotiation, which enabled them to advance

their careers while maintaining their indigenous knowledge spaces. It was important to participants not to occur in a vacuum, as they are continuously being renegotiated in response to both institutional demands and the changing needs of the community.

Discussion: A unique contribution to this nascent literature, which focuses on cognitive justice and indigenous epistemologies in the Global South, is the valuable empirical detail it provides on how Pakistani academics position themselves and, at a more micro-level, negotiate within, between, and across epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on a variety of decolonial scholarships, these findings are then situated within the context of regional and global debates and discussed in relation to their methodological and practical significance.

Finding 1: Indigenous Knowledge as a Living System

The significant findings of the work are that indigenous epistemologies of Pakistan are adaptive, resilient, and vibrant, and sometimes flourish in community practice. This is in contrast to the portrayals throughout the literature of indigenous knowledge of binary representations as either lost to colonial violence or as a mere historical artifact (Santos, 2018; Chilisa, 2012). The Pakistani context has revealed the survival and persistence of Indigenous epistemologies through adaptation, resistance, and selective negotiation with academic authority (Wilson, 2008; Ndhlovu, 2021).

Finding 2: The Mechanisms of Exclusion

Findings reveal that colonialism also presents itself in more subtle ways, outside of explicit policy, for example, through language hierarchies, funding priorities, and citation politics. (Bano, 2022). English

hegemony is epistemic, which means it is the power to define whose scholarship gets to be seen and legitimized (Park, 2023).

This marginalization results in a double burden for the scholar, who must struggle to function according to the institution's expectations to remain employed and sustain indigenous research methodologies (Stein, Dalphinnet et al., 2020). This means strong epistemic hierarchies that push knowledge from indigenous peoples to the periphery, as cultural heritage or as an inactive area of investigation (Chilisa, 2017). Marginalization of language can go beyond exclusion from having a voice in determining what is valid evidence and proper methodology (Park, 2023). The Englishing of education is to blame for what Santos (2018) calls a "cognitive empire", the re-inscription of colonial epistemologies in postcolonial contexts.

Finding 3: Dual Consciousness

This study extends Fricker's (2017) notion of an epistemic injustice framework and demonstrates how Pakistani scholars envision negotiating the dual consciousness of survival as an institutional actor and epistemic authenticity. Participants create strategic responses, such as hybrid forms of publication, code-switching, and non-academic forms of knowledge transmission.

Finding 4: Ethical Reflexivity

One particular interpretation is the particular concern for ethical reflexivity (which includes indigenous values such as tazkiyah al-nafs) as a central concern of research quality and cognitive equity. Reflections taken from indigenous critics of Western IRB processes help us remember the important point (Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021) that ethical research in an indigenous context is relational, process-based, and grounded in intention, reciprocity, and benefits to the community. (Chilisa 2012;

Smith 2012; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021).

This perspective also challenges the dominant narratives in the qualitative methods literature, which equate procedural ethics to actual ethics practice. This is consistent with calls for contextualized and dialogical ethics, in which research participants are not simply to be protected, but are also co-designers of the research process and its value (Glass et al., 2018). Suppose cognitive justice is to make any sense. In that case, it is essential that Pakistani research institutions move away from ethics review systems that fail to recognize the relevance of local knowledge systems and instead validate accountability to society.

The ethical reflexivity demonstrated in the process of tazkiyah al-nafs calls for the scholar to depart from extractive research relations to humility, learning together, and mutual growth (Chilisa, 2012). This means that the key to advancing cognitive justice lies in shifting research relationships, as well as the research subjects themselves.

Finding 5: Hybridization Strategies

Participants' negotiation and hybridization strategies in relation to adaptation not only indicate adaptation, but also new modalities of agency and epistemic innovation. These findings challenge the prevailing narrative in the literature on decolonial research, which often portrays hybridity as a necessarily co-opted or diluted act (Stein et al., 2020). Hybrid strategies have offered the comforts of publishing in English for the advancement of one's career, but teaching and practicing in one's mother tongue has not lost its allure yet, nor is it totally impervious for many Pakistani academics. Instead, they are tactical and contingent ways of generating fractures in intellectual formations (Ndhlovu, 2021).

The tactical agency of Pakistani scholars is consistent with Fricker's (2017) argument that epistemic agency is neither independent nor unconditional, and Bano's (2022) observation that dual consciousness both burdens and strengthens academics on the margins in parallel. The struggle for cognitive justice arises as a long-term process of institutional-level changes as well as daily acts of negotiation and resistance.

Development of Conceptual Model

All of the above collectively indicate a new model of cognitive justice in Pakistan, one that is pluralistic, reflexive, and grounded in an understanding of the negotiated realities and the fact of agency. There is epistemic marginalization, which is continuously generated by structural and institutional obstacles, and in response, both scholars and communities' manifest different negotiation, hybridization, and ethical reflexivity strategies. Such continuous resistance generates biased acceptance and the survivability of indigenous knowledge, although the quest for complete cognitive justice is yet to be achieved and remains an ongoing process. These dynamics are graphically summarized in the following conceptual model (Figure 1), which describes the routes and cycles in the interconnected visions identified in this study.

This model requires institutional reform to accommodate space for bilingual publication, oral knowledge transmission, and non-Western methodologies (Santos, 2018; Ndhlovu, 2021); funding and evaluation structures to allow legitimacy and value of research in Urdu and regional languages (Karim, 2020); ethics processes which are dialogical, relational and context-responsive (Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021); and support for researchers as they navigate and create hybrid forms of scholarly practice (Stein et al., 2020);

Above all, this work proposes that we cannot study cognitive justice as a final state, but rather as a praxis that is ongoing and evolving. This task must be undertaken with humility, solidarity, and critical vigilance, and it is something that scholars, institutions, and policymakers should undertake in unison.

Toward Cognitive Justice in Pakistani Academia identifies several interconnected policy priorities spanning four broad areas. First, institutional recognition must expand scholarly merit criteria to include indigenous languages, oral traditions, and community engagement as legitimate criteria for

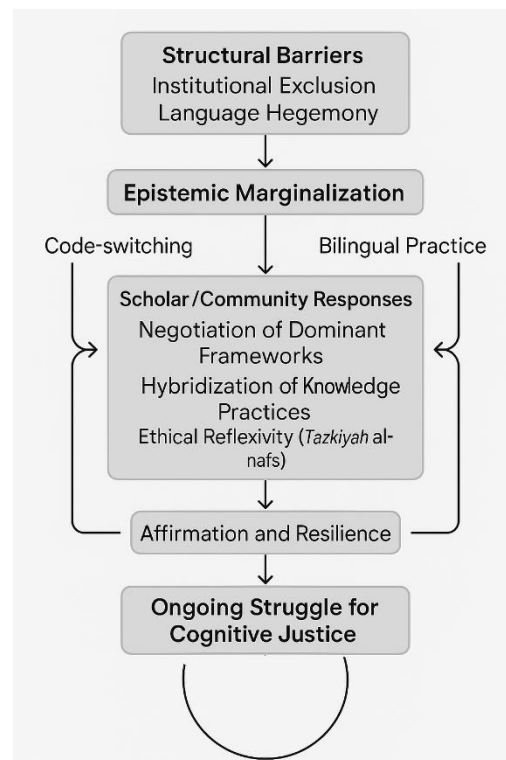


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Epistemic Marginalization and Pathways Toward Cognitive Justice in Pakistani Qualitative Research.

recognition and evaluation in recruitment, funding, and promotion decisions, in addition to traditional academic products. Second, the publishing infrastructure should create bilingual and multimodal platforms for

academic publications, conferences, and research engagements that value and share both English and vernacular scholarship. Third, ethics reform must include the transformation of research oversight, reconfiguring ethics systems to incorporate local principles of relational accountability, community consultation, and reflexive, continual practice, rather than simply procedural conformance. Fourth, capacity building and partnerships should support the training of researchers in indigenous and participatory methodologies and provide a career pathway for rural and underrepresented scholars. This enables shared futures for long-term collaborative partnerships among universities, policymakers, and community knowledge holders in co-constructing solutions to epistemic justice.

Implementing these recommendations will foster a more equitable, pluralistic, and contextually meaningful research environment, enabling Pakistan to realize the full potential of its rich intellectual heritage while contributing as an innovator to the global movement for cognitive justice.

While this analysis presents a detailed account of the experiences and strategies of professors, researchers, and policy actors at universities, the analysis is limited in several respects. The research primarily focused on urban-based academic and policy environments. The voices of rural scholars, grassroots activists, and traditional knowledge holders continue to be poorly represented and must be heard. The data reflects the condition and attitude of a given moment and may not reflect the institutional reforms underway or the new grassroots movements. The study is context-specific, as it is a Qualitative study, so the results cannot be used as a direct reference across Pakistan's territories or even in the field of study.

However, they shed important areas for contemplation in the context of the broader events of South Asia and the Global South.

This study makes several novel contributions that advance the fields of cognitive justice and decolonial research. This is the first comprehensive empirical research work on indigenous knowledge systems and cognitive justice, particularly in the context of Pakistani academia, that addresses the gap in South Asian academic decolonial knowledge. The introduction of the "epistemic exclusion-tactical agency cycle" represents an innovative conceptual model for understanding how marginalized scholars navigate and resist the hierarchies of the epistemic system, making it a new theoretical contribution to the literature. The endeavor to empirically underpin tazkiyah al-nafs (spiritual self-purification) as a research ethics system represents an innovative alternative to Western procedural ethics, broadening the scope of decolonial methodological practice. The reframing of academic hybridization strategies as tactical agency rather than compromise offers a new way of seeing how academics in postcolonial contexts navigate institutional constraints in creative ways. The translation of decolonial theory to concrete and actionable policy recommendations for Pakistani institutions provides a novel bridge between critical scholarship and institutional practice.

Based on the findings and analysis, several important recommendations flow for future research and practice. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies to understand the dynamics of change in indigenous epistemologies in Pakistani academic institutions and also to interrogate the efficacy of policy interventions aimed at fostering epistemic inclusion. Second, a participatory action research process that includes rural scholars, traditional knowledge holders, and grassroots activists would

provide a more comprehensive understanding of cognitive justice problems across a range of geographic and social contexts. Third, comparative studies across different countries in the Global South would help identify common patterns and context-specific variations in epistemic marginalization and forms of resistance. Fourth, research that considers disciplinary contexts would shed light on the differences in the integration of indigenous knowledge across various fields, such as the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. Fifth, an inquiry into the role played by technology and digital platforms in preserving and disseminating indigenous knowledge could provide new avenues for epistemic inclusion. Ultimately, research partnerships between universities and community knowledge holders should be established to co-create methodologies that genuinely embody the principles of cognitive justice and reciprocal knowledge exchange. These recommendations all indicate direction for research that moves beyond documenting epistemic injustices to actively co-construct more equitable knowledge systems.

Conclusion: While conducting qualitative research in Pakistan, this article offers a critical reflection on indigenous epistemologies and the concept of cognitive justice. It demonstrates the complex relationship between institutional exclusion and academic agency. A significant contribution of this study is to show that it is not an immovable tradition or an alternative to Western paradigms, but rather an expression of dynamic knowledge systems grounded in specific contexts.

The conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrates that the process of cognitive justice is not a straightforward or readily attained outcome, but rather one that requires deliberate effort and sustained commitment. Instead, it

References:

mandates an institutional change in research funding, publication criteria, and ethical guidelines to positively appreciate oral, community, and bilingual knowledge practices. Institutional hierarchies need to be disrupted at their core, and indigenous postulates, such as tazkiyah al-nafs and accountability relationships, are internalized within the ethics and practice of research.

A key theoretical contribution demonstrates that they are not passive victims of epistemic injustice but strategic agents who actively navigate, negotiate, and hybridize knowledge systems to preserve indigenous epistemologies while advancing their careers. This tactical agency—our conceptual framework of the "epistemic exclusion-tactical agency cycle"—reveals how scholars create innovative spaces for indigenous knowledge within constraining institutional structures, representing both creative resistance and the persistent limitations of current academic systems.

Moving forward, achieving cognitive justice requires specific institutional mechanisms: universities must revise promotion criteria to value vernacular scholarship, funding bodies must support bilingual research initiatives, and ethics committees must adopt dialogical processes that engage community knowledge holders as co-designers rather than subjects. Rather than peripheral voices, Pakistani indigenous knowledge holders represent essential contributors to global epistemic pluralism, offering methodological innovations and ethical frameworks that challenge extractive research paradigms. Only in such continuous commitment and critical vigilance can the project of cognitive justice and the decolonization of knowledge become an institutional reality rather than an aspirational rhetoric.

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Declaration Section

Acknowledgement: N/A

Funding Statement: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Consideration: The present study has been conducted following the ethical considerations. The present study does not have any unethical practices.

Consent to Participate: Verbal consent was taken from all the respondents

Availability of Data: The data is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author