

The Impact of Gentrification upon Culture, Tradition, Identity and Language: A Case Study of the Bo-Kaap Community

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Abstract

Language is central and important to the identity of every community. It defines who they are, their culture, social milieu, and traditions. It is through language that people communicate with one another and preserve their heritage and history. The history of colonisation in South Africa is an example of how culture, identity, language, and history have been subjected to colonisation. In this paper, I will discuss the impact of gentrification upon the Bo-Kaap community in Cape Town. Today, gentrification is not only displacing people, but slowly erasing the culture, identity, and language of this area. This paper is intended to continue the work of Achmat Davids, who first began documenting the history of Bo-Kaap. This paper analyses the potential of participatory action research (PAR) in communities to become more critically reflective and socially conscious about gentrification. First, this paper explores the rationale and process of engaging the Bo-Kaap community who, at the time this paper was written, were subjected to a gentrification. The research for this paper included the participation of students for them to develop greater awareness and become agents of social justice. This study also used oral testimonies in developing a strategy designed to help other communities in becoming more vigilant against gentrification and its resulting displacement, and to preserve local culture, traditions, and language.

Keywords: Bo-Kaap, culture, gentrification, tradition, identity

1. Introduction

Bo-Kaap is an area of Cape Town facing an onslaught of gentrification that threatens its culture, history, identity, and language. The codification of language used by early Muslim slaves in the Cape was in response to colonialism. Grenoble and Whaley have argued that:

All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and in particular in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity. (Grenoble A. Lenore & Whaley J, Lindsay, 2006, P2).

Davids contends that the first arrival of the first Muslims at the Cape may have been at the same time Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape (Davids, 1980). According to Mayson, oral history accounts assert that there were a group of “eastern slaves” who accompanied Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, when he took up command of the initial Dutch settlement in what is now South Africa (Mayson, 1865). Davids opines that the first official recording of Muslims at the Cape was in 1658 with the arrival of the Mardyckers:

They were brought to the Cape to protect the newly established [Dutch] settlement against the indigenous people and to provide a labour force in the same was as they had been employed first by the Portuguese. (Davids, 1980:35).

The Muslim identity in Bo-Kaap is unique, compared to other areas in South Africa. This uniqueness can be attributed to the forefathers of Islam who arrived in Cape Town; Shaykh Yusuf from Macassar in Indonesia, Tuan Guru from the Tedor Islands, and Shaykh Abu Bakr Effendi from the Ottoman Empire. They are considered the pioneers of Islam in South Africa.



(Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, South Africa, 2017)

The language of many people in the Bo-Kaap community is a combination of English, Afrikaans, Malayu, and Arabic. The written form of this language was intended by slaves to respond to the colonial onslaught. The preservation of this community was largely successful, with the acceptance of Islam by many slaves who left the Church.

Today Bo-Kaap's culture, traditions, identity, and language are threatened by gentrification. Gentrification can be best described as:

As a neighbourhood gentrifies, the economic opportunity that it presents increases. More people move into the area to take advantage of those opportunities, and then the desirability of that area increase even more. Developers begin to tear down old housing to build new. Old shops, restaurants, and other neighbourhood features may be driven out by storefronts that cater to new residents. Perhaps worst of all, the old residents themselves may be forced to leave. Rising costs of living and a changing landscape for jobs mean that the benefits gentrification brings to an area are often distributed unequally (Zuber-Skerriitt, 2012, para.4).

It can be argued that gentrification brings investment opportunities and creates employment. Thus, it is a complex issue that involves the people, social justice organizations, and policy makers in the City of Cape Town, as in any context experiencing gentrification.

In the context of this study, gentrification can be more specifically understood as a structured socio-economic system that erases the identity, culture, tradition, and language of a community.

Today gentrification contributes to a rise in municipal rates and affects the living standards of Bo-Kaap residents. They are increasingly forced to sell their homes just to survive and to give their families a better future. As a result, the spoken and written language of Bo-Kaap is being lost.

To better understand the impact of gentrification, more qualitative research is required (Slater, 2009). Scholars such as Lees et al (2013), Larsen and Hansen (2008) and Ah Goo (2018) have written about gentrification from the perspective of displacement and replacement, while others through the lens of personal accounts. Shaw and Hagemans (2015) opine that a dearth in research exists about the financial impact of gentrification which is experienced by residents who remain in communities where gentrification is taking place. A study into the impact of gentrification on the language, culture, and traditions of the oldest urban Muslim community in South Africa, in Bo-Kaap, will be made through the framework of Action Research (AR).

Bachelor of Arts students at the International Peace College South Africa (IPSA) study Islam in South Africa as a module in their degree programme. Students study the colonisation period in South Africa and its impact on Islam in the Cape. PAR Students are assigned assignment-based research projects as part of the module on Islam in South Africa, with the intention to understand the ongoing challenges that the people of Bo-Kaap face due to gentrification. Often, when students begin the programme, they have little to no knowledge of gentrification and the impact that it has upon culture, tradition, and language. An important aim of the PAR project is to understand the personal stories of residents facing gentrification and the consequences of it upon their culture, tradition, and language as the oldest urban Muslim community in South Africa.

It was another primary aim of the PAR project to produce students who are not only knowledgeable about the history of Bo-Kaap, but also able to bring awareness to the challenges that residents face

today. The structured curriculum of the module is theoretical, and information based. One of the outcomes of the module, is to produce social justice activists through the course. Thus, a major requirement of this PAR project is to monitor the students' involvement and to develop a structured curriculum that produces students who are agents of social change. To achieve this, students must move beyond textbook knowledge. This is particularly important in this PAR project, because there is limited knowledge and information on gentrification in a South African context. To achieve the object of the project and contribute to the production of new knowledge, the students were required to engage community members directly and actively participate in the processes of collecting data and thereafter analyse it.

Changing or influencing government policies demand the production of new knowledge, creativity and developing critical ways of thinking about the implementation of these changes. Education that fails to prepare students to adequately seek transformative knowledge through continuous self-reflection and research, will result in subverting South Africa's national aspirations of becoming a socially just society in which the constitutional rights of all are upheld. This point is argued by Renfrew Christie (1995) when he asserts that when there is no research, there can be no development and history will be lost.

Another aim of this paper is to reflect on how to include critical inquiry and reflection and the integration of theory in the abovementioned PAR project. It is the contention of this paper that this can be achieved by exposing students to emancipatory action-based research methods, while at the same time influencing curriculum design. Boog (2003) argues that action research was intended from the beginning to be emancipatory, and he believes that it is still so. By exposing IPISA students for the first time to action research through applying its techniques, this project aims to create students who are more critical, imaginative, argumentative, and who are agents of social justice who provide a voice to the voiceless.

1.1. Educational Significance and Implication for the Field

A limitation of this research project is that students were at different levels of understanding action research and PAR in particular. Some of them had limited knowledge, while others had no understanding of what action research entails.

For everyone involved, the PAR project was significant because it provided everyone with evidence that action research, if done collaboratively and in a participatory way, can empower students with skills in becoming effective researchers and social justice advocates. The project not only enhanced students' action research experience, but also bridged the theory-practice divide by integrating a theoretical approach to the study of Islam in South Africa. Simultaneously, by modelling collaborative action research, the students and their instructors grew professionally and felt more empowered and informed.

Regarding the significance and outcomes of the course, analysing the final reports indicated that students were able to select and carry out projects beneficial to local communities. Furthermore, students indicated their enjoyment in choosing an issue that was significant and important to the history of Muslims in South Africa, as well as the satisfaction derived from the implementation and analysis of the project. They also indicated that they intend to actively research their practise and outcomes as students. Some students also indicated that they would apply the skills they gained in their own community to better understand the challenges that youth face. A particularly satisfying outcome of the project was that most students understood the difference between desktop research, technical action research, emancipatory action research, and PAR. Most importantly, students felt empowered as agents of social awareness and change.

2. Methodology and Data Collection

The research methodology applied for collecting data in this study was qualitative and interpretive. As for the qualitative dimension of the research project, it incorporates a form of the PAR process. The main objective of this research is to place social issues and advocacy high on teaching agendas and to develop a model that will bring awareness to

the threats of gentrification in the oldest urban Muslim community in Cape Town, South Africa.

Interpretivism aims to move beyond the scope of gathering information and knowledge. It includes the understanding that people are the product of their actions. In studying the challenges faced by the Bo-Kaap community, it was important to understand its history, social, and cultural practices. Social reality is a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation of behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Bo-Kaap, as the oldest urban Muslim community in Cape Town, illustrates that the formation of social constructs and cultural practices undergo years of development, and therefore it was important to conduct interviews with senior citizens in the community. The data was collected in 2019 and the collection techniques used in this PAR included field notes, student assistance, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.

In this research process, the focus group techniques produced many insights. Students held regular meetings and discussions while preparing and developing the project. The focus group technique is an effective qualitative method for studying ideas in group formations. This method particularly exposes critical and passive interaction, attitudes, and cognition, and allows researchers to arrive at a collaboration of ideas, because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Zuber-Sheritt, 2012).

The instructor and the student assistant provided focus groups with valuable feedback regarding their research. In addition to noting that a project of this nature is important and interesting, its limitations and constraints were also mentioned. As their instructor, I oversaw three focus group sessions with four students in each group. Three discussions were held lasting of 50 minutes each. The first focus group meeting was at the beginning of the module, explaining the course content and assignment. The second meeting focused on conceptualising the PAR, which included gathering the required resources and finalising the timelines. The last session was at the end of the module to evaluate and analyse the data, and to determine which aspects of the project could be improved.

The methodology adopted was driven by emancipatory research:

Emancipatory action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concerns to people, and more generally, the flourishing of persons and their communities. (Bradbury, 2001:1).

For this project, students were requested to formulate their ideas, develop a methodology, and present why this action research was important. In their preliminary research, which included engaging with their own families about the issue of gentrification in Bo-Kaap, it became clear to them that gentrification is affecting the community. This clarified their purpose, of recording the impact of gentrification on Bo-Kaap's culture, traditions, and language.

This study incorporates and includes Sagor's (2000) perspective, that researchers initiate their own action research projects, with the objective of improving their practice and knowledge. An integral part of this PAR project was that students participated in the conception and design of the project, data collections and analysis.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Community-based participatory research and service-learning intersect at the crossroads of academic interest and community development (Brulin, 1998; Ennals, 2004; Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Pine, 2009). Research into action research in the field of education indicates that the development from a student into a teacher involves engaging in the process of inquiry and reflection that action research demands (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005). Brown and Tandon assert that participatory action research can be seen as an integrated activity that combines social investigation, knowledge, and action. The goal of participatory action research is to work collaboratively to generate new knowledge to influence change (O'Leary, 2004;98). Using action research, students working on this project commenced with a

preliminary study, divided themselves into focus groups, formulated a theoretical and conceptual framework, finalised the rollout of the PAR, and concluded with an analysis and write-up of their field work.

PAR is not new. It originated with studies by Kurt Lewin (1948) and the Tavistock Institute in the 1940s. The main objective is that it must be done with, not on or for people (Brock & Petti, 2007; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Swantz, 2008).

The first discussion in South Africa on an emancipatory form of action research as an educational construct appeared in the book *Action research: justified optimism or wishful thinking?* edited by Flanagan, Breen, and Walker (1984). Not long after the book's publication, in 1987 this idea began to take root as a research methodology for addressing social issues, and increasingly formed part of the requirements for masters' programmes in the Education Faculty at the University of the Western Cape. This was first implemented in the supervision of Owen van den Berg, and then later under Dirk Meerkotter (1996). According to them, all action research should be liberating. It is also a powerful academic exercise in the production of knowledge.

The current PAR project is inspired by the methods of Fals Borda, who first applied PAR in promoting new knowledge in research about literacy development (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Quigley, 2000). Borda's work challenged hegemonic approaches to education as well as contributed new insights about youth development and its related issues in many societies (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fine & Torre, 2008; Noffke & Somekh, 2009). Further interest in PAR projects is evident in the approaches of Freire (1972), who attempted to use critical pedagogy and dialogical reflective methods in the classroom.

Freire's approach to action research is helpful for the objective and purpose of the current project, in that it not only empowers students with new knowledge but also researchers and policy makers. This, as Walker asserts (1990:61), allows educators' voices and those of their students as active partners in the research to be heard as producers of knowledge.

Researchers involved in this study were not only concerned with changing and improving their educational methodology and approach in classrooms, but also highlighting and influencing positive change in society. Knowledge must have a purpose and objective, and be able to move beyond theory and information towards empowerment and transformation, where students become agents of social change.

3.1. Contextual Relevance

During the 2019 academic year at IPSA, second-year students participated in an action research project for an assignment about the history of Islam in the Cape, part of a history module in IPSA's undergraduate programme. Each student was required to plan a research project with the aim of developing active involvement in social justice, and creating awareness of the impact of gentrification upon the oldest urban Muslim community in South Africa. Another aim of this PAR project was to start a critical discussion on the dangers and effects of gentrification at the provincial level, in the hope of influencing zoning policies in the City of Cape Town.

4. Ethical Considerations

Before this project commenced, it was important to discuss ethical issues and its dimensions, such as involvement with and work in the Bo-Kaap community. Students were informed that I have been serving as a religious leader in the Bo-Kaap community since 2002. As part of this role, I participated in many forums, discussing the perils of gentrification in Bo-Kaap. It was important for students to understand my role and position as a community leader; this type of information is central to any PAR project. This sort of disclosure is part of an ethical approach, as argued by Ely (1999: 218) who said, "qualitative research is an ethical endeavour". I engaged the willingness of students to participate in such important research and made them aware of any challenges that may be associated with it.

Although all students who were invited agreed to participate in the PAR project, it was equally important to understand why they were willing to engage in such research. Some of the remarks were:

- To engage in a project at this level will be interesting.
- It will be informative to interview the seniors in the Bo-Kaap community on the challenges they face.
- To recording the impact of gentrification upon the oldest urban Muslim community in South Africa, the Bo-Kaap community, will be exciting.
- To create awareness of the challenges the Bo-Kaap community faces.
- To influence government policies and to preserve the identity of a community.

Discussing the objective of this project with students and hearing their responses, conveyed much more than just a single response of a “yes” answer. It was explained to students that being co-researchers in the PAR project at this level requires planning. They understood the requirement of being actively involved in conceptualising and designing the project, collecting data, and analysing it. They were made aware that they may be asked to be interviewed by those who may be interested in the project. Students were required to keep a detailed diary, and to take any necessary photos or video recordings for future reference. Students also had to understand that at any time during the project, they might be requested to hand in their data to be scrutinised and analysed. It was important for them to understand that the interests of all co-researchers and interviewees should be protected, and that the highest ethical practice must be observed at all times. Fundamental aspects of ethics include how one treats individuals, the information shared, and maintaining confidentiality. (Mathison, Ross & Cornett, 1993). Throughout this process, I was reminded to exercise caution regarding social norms and ethical conduct; implications related to these may vary and change (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). Ethical considerations can be revisited as a project unfolds. PAR should not limit discussions about ethics to the design and the proposal phase.

4.1 Participatory Action Research Project Guidelines and Procedures

First, the students identified the challenges that the Bo-Kaap community face. Thereafter, they each wrote an outline of no more than two pages indicating:

- (1) How gentrification is understood?
- (1) What are the similarities between apartheid and living in a democratic South Africa?
- (1) How does the research benefit them and society?
- (1) What are the social, economic, and linguistic impacts of gentrification?
- (1) What evidence can be collected to raise awareness and influence policy in Bo-Kaap?

Next, students planned research approaches that would address these challenges and ideally bring about positive changes. In the next phase, they were required to put their plan into action, adhering to strict timelines to be completed in the designated period. It was emphasised that not only would their PAR require careful preparation, but gathering and collecting evidence must be done professionally. Keeping careful records were a vital components of the research. They were required to reflect and plan while incorporating analytical thinking. Students were also required to record their actions, evidence, and reflections as they proceeded, whether in a written form or audio recording. Finally, the project had to be collated into one product which included different sub-headings.

Topics chosen by the students included:

- (a) A comparative study of the Bo-Kaap during colonialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid, including reflections on today's ongoing changes.
- (b) Understanding the socio-cultural challenges of Bo-Kaap.
- (c) The social, economic, and linguistic impact of gentrification.

- (d) Marginalisation and discrimination against the people of Bo-Kaap.
- (e) The restoration of justice in post-apartheid South Africa.

5. Finding and Discussions

The findings of this study provide a broad perspective on the ongoing development and changes happening in Bo-Kaap.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data collection:

Firstly, the students were able to articulate the steps in the action research process and were able to describe how to use them in other modules and in independent research beyond the classroom. At the end of the semester students wrote final papers depicting their journey of learning to become participatory action researchers. Students found the process to be helpful and planned to do participatory action research in the future. Most students reflected on how they were able to understand their teaching practices more fully by engaging in this PAR project. The diversity and the scope of the research questions the students formulated was particularly impressive.

Secondly, students understood the complexities of gentrification. They were well informed and collected data from several first-hand sources. The project help inform students' understanding of society, tradition, and language. Previously, they found these challenging to address. Students deepened their understanding of lived realities in Bo-Kaap. They realised that gentrification is not only about the influx of foreigners and wealthy people into a community, but also the adverse effects it has upon the oldest urban Muslim community in South Africa.

Through the processes of data collection, students documented the economic, social, traditional, and linguistic impact of gentrification on the Bo-Kaap community. Each student recognised the potential of action research as a means of exploring how to improve understandings of the lived realities of gentrification.

This PAR project created new ways of highlighting the impact of gentrification on the Bo-Kaap community. According to some students, collaborative participatory action research not only changed their perceptions, but also their outlook as researchers and social

activists. They reported that the most rewarding aspect of the research was the realisation that effective curriculum design and the transfer of knowledge in the classroom has a greater impact if it is developed via ethically motivated social justice leadership as part of a PAR. It is a contention of this paper that this type of assignment-based research should be explored in other Islamic studies modules.

This research project also revealed that many students previously had little knowledge of gentrification. Additionally, the students were generally unaware that it exists in other countries and different cultural contexts.

Gentrification is a global phenomenon. It is currently underway in many American contexts, such as the Bushwick neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. “This process can disrupt the traditional makeup of a neighbourhood with the influx of wealthier people moving into downtrodden, largely minority urban neighbourhoods” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Small businesses are often adversely affected economically by gentrification when large enterprise businesses move into the area. Development, high municipal rates, traffic congestion, and overcrowding makes adjustment difficult for long-time residents.

Many residents in Bo-Kaap have had to make the difficult decision to sell their homes and it remains an ongoing issue. The restoration of social and economic justice more than 28 years into democracy has been meagre, and in some cases non-existent. The national and provincial governments in South Africa have neglected their duties and responsibilities to the Bo-Kaap community. High municipal rates and a rising costs of living, coupled with high employment rates are contributing factors that force many people to sell their homes in Bo-Kaap, which are common circumstances often reported in interviews with residents of the area. In a sad tone, short of shedding tears, a resident explains that all she wants is to provide comfortably for her children and give them an opportunity in life; “I can no longer afford to live in Bo-Kaap and I am thinking of selling my home that has been in our family for generations”. This sentiment, expressed in an interview with a student researcher, was certainly revealing; similarly emotional feelings were shared by others. An interesting observation of one the students that stood out was that among the actors in the process of gentrification were both the national and provincial government. During interviews, students captured the sentiments of residents who have had

to make difficult financial decisions, sometimes having to decide between paying high municipal rates, giving their children a good education, and putting food on their tables. Other comments that emerged during interviews reflected despair; many said very little has changed for them following apartheid. One resident believed that there is very little political will to address the issue of gentrification in Bo-Kaap. He opined that if the city of Cape Town wanted to truly redress the pains of apartheid, previously disadvantaged communities should be able to benefit from new legislation of laws and by-laws. It is obvious that many residents in Bo-Kaap are suffering the economic impact of gentrification. Considering what was reported in interviews with community members, there is little doubt that there is an increase in people requiring financial support to meet their basic living requirements.

One resident reported that she did not qualify for indigent relief and a rates rebate from the government based on her income level. She reported that her salary goes towards paying her municipal rates, traveling expenses, education and food. She cannot afford to send her children to a private school, or to pay for the sort of life that she was deprived of under apartheid. “We were in poverty, kept in poverty and gentrification is causing poverty” she claimed.

Residents who have been forced to sell their homes reminisced about what life was like in Bo-Kaap, the street games they played as children, the social lives they lived, and the security they felt. Being forced out of Bo-Kaap for financial reasons is one of the most painful experiences that residents have had to endure. One interviewee who opted to remain anonymous stated that he does not wish upon any father to be forced to decide to sell his home because of being unable to pay high municipal rates, and being unable to send their children to the best schools for an education that he had no access to:

Moving from Bo-Kaap was the most difficult decision I had to make and living where I am currently is not the same. The social and cultural atmosphere and inclusive brotherly neighbourhood feeling is not the same. Many times, I come to Bo-Kaap just to participate in the social and culturing [sic] practises of the Bo-Kaap community (Anonymous interviewee, 2019).

Another interesting comment made by a resident is that the restoration of justice is vital to addressing the pain that apartheid caused.

This PAR project has revealed that many of the senior citizens living in Bo-Kaap view gentrification as an extension of the racist apartheid-era Group Areas Act, which was part of broader forced removal policies under the apartheid government of South Africa. Gentrification can be seen as a modern form of eviction, as stated by some residents. Other residents have claimed that when some foreigners move into the area, they have little or no respect for the local cultural and religious practises of the Bo-Kaap community. These new residents have attempted to silence the call of the five daily Muslim prayers, delivered over several loudspeakers in the area, a practice spanning more than 60 years as stated by some interviewees. This tradition, of delivering the call to prayer over loudspeakers, is being challenged more regularly all the time.

Ms Fawzia Ahmad, a resident of Bo-Kaap, asserts that:

Gentrification is our pain. We have been fighting gentrification for years. Years ago Bo-Kaap was known as a “slum”, it was our people who built up the area and slowly started to renovate their homes. It must be noted that our people suffered under apartheid and did not earn huge salaries. The little that they had left after paying all their expenses were invested in upgrading their homes. These renovations increase their municipal rates. (F. Ahmed, 2019)

This PAR project revealed that more research is needed and awareness must be raised about gentrification. The experiences of those places in Britain, North America, and France that have been gentrified may provide useful examples to help deepen our understanding of this phenomenon in South Africa in general, and Bo-Kaap in particular. The residents of Bo-Kaap, in collaboration with academics and social activists, must address gentrification before the spatial impact thereof completely erases the local culture, traditions, and language of the area. The area is becoming more densely populated with new developments, which are signed off by the city of Cape Town. Other areas of Cape Town, including Woodstock and Salt River, are also

facing gentrification. Residents are increasingly forced to sell their homes because the levy and rental prices of units have doubled, or more, in recent years.

Finally, it is evident that the action research project had its own constraints and challenges. This was also evident from the comments made by students in their feedback about the project:

- (1) This action research project required more time.
- (2) There were always going to be ethical challenges – especially from some interviewees who were traumatised by apartheid.
- (3) Fear of not capturing the true spirit of the interviewees.
- (4) Whether the objective of raising awareness about the plight of Bo-Kaap facing gentrification will be achieved.

The last theme was extensively discussed in the focus group discussions. It underlined the idea that the PAR project should be concise, manageable, and meet its objective. This was the students' first experience with action research. Thus, challenges were inevitable. However, identifying and cataloguing these may serve as a valuable resource for future PAR projects.

5.1. Pedagogical implications

PAR, with an undertone of an emancipatory objective, can become a powerful tool in supporting the transformation of societies in the wake of the fourth industrial revolution. This project has made a significant contribution to raising awareness of the plight of the Bo-Kaap community. It has also contributed significantly to IPSA's academic programme in developing a more socially conscious, justice-oriented student. Awareness must be created, and this research must be shared.

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