

## Becoming a Scholar Under Unequal Conditions: An Analytic Autoethnography of Authorship, Mentorship, and Publishing in Nigerian Higher Education

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**Abstract:** In this autoethnography, I examine my lived experience as a young Nigerian scholar navigating academic publishing within a higher education system characterized by economic constraint, institutional pressure, and unequal global knowledge hierarchies. Drawing on reflective journals, correspondence, institutional documents, and publication records from 2012 to 2025, I analyze how mentorship, promotion expectations, authorship practices, and ethical tensions influenced my scholarly development and publishing decisions. Guided by a constructivist-interpretivist orientation and using thematic and narrative analyses, I explore formative supervision, informal mentoring, vulnerability to predatory publishing, authorship injustice, ethical awakening, toward scholarly leadership. Reflecting on these experiences, I came to recognize that principled mentorship was important in strengthening competence, ethical awareness, confidence and resilience, whereas weak supervision, ambiguous authorship norms, and performance pressures increased exposure to predatory outlets and inequitable research practices. Ethical guidance and meaningful engagement with credible publication processes encouraged persistence and more responsible journal selection. I interpret these experiences as reflections of the structural conditions that influence academic growth in resource-limited systems. With my study, I advanced my understanding of scholarly identity formation and ethical publishing cultures in Global South higher education, and call for strengthened ethical mentorship, transparent authorship policies, institutional support for publishing literacy, and deliberate journal evaluation practices.

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## **1. Introduction**

Academic publishing has changed through the growing use of digital media, the accelerated global exchange of knowledge, and the expanding commercialization of research. These developments have widened access to scholarly communication while also intensifying inequalities between well-resourced and under-resourced academic communities. In Nigeria, publication output now occupies a central position in academic credibility, research performance, evaluation, and promotion, with a strong preference for journals indexed in Scopus and the Web of Science (MILLS et al., 2023; OWAN & ASUQUO, 2022). Yet many academics operate within conditions marked by limited funding, weak infrastructure, and inadequate mentoring, making such expectations difficult to fulfill (TELLA & ONYANCHIA, 2021). When evaluation systems reward publication quantity over quality, they may push scholars toward low-quality or deceptive outlets and distort scholarly priorities (OWAN, AGAMA, ODEY & IDIKA, 2024a). [1]

These pressures connect to wider debates on global knowledge inequality and the marginal positioning of Global South scholarship. Journals based in the Global North, citation indexes, and ranking systems frequently influence which forms of knowledge gain legitimacy, contributing to credibility deficits and interpretive marginalization for African scholars (LAZARUS, 2025; MILLS et al., 2023). Within universities, promotion regulations, mentorship structures, and authorship politics further affect visibility, recognition, and intellectual credit. Such processes often reinforce cumulative advantage, where already established academics continue to gain recognition while early-career scholars face constrained progression (MERTON, 1968; OKON, OWAN & OWAN, 2022). Metric-driven evaluation regimes intensify these dynamics by prioritizing citation counts, h-indices, and database indexing. While these measures may improve discoverability, they also redefine scholarly value, promote competition, and affect people's perceptions of academic success (OWAN, 2023a). [2]

Against this background, I examine how structural and interpersonal forces influence my publishing journey as a Nigerian early-career scholar operating within global systems of research evaluation. Professional records, reflective accounts, and correspondence serve as analytical material for understanding how promotion systems, mentorship relations, and authorship practices influence publishing decisions, ethical judgment, and scholarly identity (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010). The analysis is guided by two sensitizing concepts: Epistemic injustice and the Matthew effect. Epistemic injustice refers to uneven access to credibility, authority, and recognition within global knowledge systems, whereas the Matthew effect, whose development MERTON (1988) later acknowledged was substantially informed by ZUCKERMAN (1977), can be used to explain how institutional and relational structures favor already well-established scholars over emerging ones (see also LAZARUS, 2025; MERTON, 1968, 1988). These inequalities are often reinforced by uneven research funding, restricted access to indexed journals, language dominance, limited mentorship opportunities, and global publication systems that favor already established institutions and scholars. I address three questions in this study. First, how do promotion systems, mentorship relations, and authorship practices influence publishing decisions and ethical judgment for a Nigerian early-career academic? Second, how do these experiences reflect epistemic injustice and unequal recognition within global scholarship? Third, what practical lessons are derivable for early-career researchers and research governance in Nigeria? Although these questions are grounded in the Nigerian higher education system, the issues examined may also resonate across other Global South contexts and among marginalized scholars navigating unequal academic systems more broadly. [3]

Authors writing on African and Global South have relied largely on bibliometric analyses, surveys, and institutional reports in addressing similar questions. While these approaches are good in identifying structural disparities, they offer limited insight into the everyday ethical negotiations, identity tensions, and decision-making processes that shape scholarly development (MILLS et al., 2023; TELLA & ONYANCHA, 2021). Autoethnographic and narrative scholarship has begun to illuminate how marginalized academics navigate citation politics, epistemic exclusion, and performance pressures, yet systematic engagement with academic experience in Nigeria remains limited (CAMARGO, RAMOS, BENNETT, TALLEY & SILVA JR, 2025; LAZARUS, 2025). In this article, therefore, my contribution is a grounded Southern account of how recognition, credibility, and ethical responsibility are negotiated within demanding and unequal academic environments, with implications for academic development, mentoring practice, and research governance in Nigeria and comparable contexts. [4]

Experiences involving difficult supervision, authorship exclusion, predatory publishing, informal mentorship, and ethical uncertainty are the basis of the reflections, expressed in this article. I organize the discussion into five main sections. Following this introduction, in Section 2, I review the literature on global inequalities in academic publishing, metric-driven evaluation, predatory publishing, mentorship, authorship practices, and identity development in academia. In Section 3, I describe the methodological approach, including the

autoethnographic research design, philosophical orientation, and data generation through reflective journals, correspondence, institutional documents, and publication records, as well as the analytical procedures, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. In Section 4, I present and discuss the findings through a thematic narrative of my academic journey, structured across key developmental phases. Finally, in Section 5, I offer a reflective synthesis of the analysis and draw implications for mentorship, authorship ethics, and scholarly development within unequal academic systems. [5]

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Global inequalities, epistemic injustice and the publish-or-perish regime**

The global academic publishing system has undergone a major transformation, characterized by rising competition, dependence on performance indicators, expanded open-access models, and intensified pressure associated with the growing *publish-or-perish* culture. While open access has improved visibility and knowledge circulation, it has also increased exposure to unethical publishing practices, particularly for scholars in developing countries (BELLO & JAMES, 2025). This is partly due to the rapid growth of some author-funded open access publishing models which has created opportunities for predatory publishers to exploit researchers facing publication pressure and limited institutional support. These practices include predatory publishing, salami slicing, hijacked and cloned journals, manipulation of research metrics, selective publishing, editorial gaming, citation manipulation, and weak or deceptive peer review processes. In many African systems, including Nigeria, efforts to attain international recognition are often constrained by weak institutional support, limited funding, and restricted access to reputable outlets (OWAN, 2023a). Academics must therefore balance global publication expectations with national and community-oriented research priorities (TELLA & ONYANCHA, 2021). This tension extends beyond African scholarship and affects many scholars working in non-English-speaking academic environments in the Global North. In many cases, research addressing local realities, regional concerns, or indigenous knowledge systems receives limited recognition within dominant international citation systems, while publication in international English-language journals is increasingly treated as the primary route to academic legitimacy, visibility, promotion, and institutional recognition. As global metrics and ranking systems gain stronger influence, scholars may feel pressured to align their research topics, writing styles, and publication choices with Western academic expectations and internationally indexed outlets (OWAN & ASUQUO, 2022). These conditions may gradually weaken the perceived value of local journals and shift scholarly attention away from community-relevant concerns toward publication practices rewarded within global academic systems. [6]

Global publishing structures remain strongly influenced by Western institutions that control dominant citation indexes. African journals are frequently underrepresented in databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, thereby limiting their visibility, citation potential, and perceived legitimacy (IFIJEH, 2017).

The dominance of English as the primary language of international scholarship further reinforces these inequalities, particularly for scholars working within non-English-speaking academic traditions, including parts of Africa historically influenced by French or Portuguese colonial systems. As a result, valuable locally grounded scholarship may receive limited international visibility despite its relevance within regional academic and community settings. Consequently, Nigerian scholars often face tensions between pursuing internationally recognized outlets and maintaining locally relevant scholarship. Similar tensions are experienced across many parts of the Global South, including South American academic settings where national scholarly discourse often operates largely in Spanish or Portuguese, while international recognition is strongly tied to publication in English-language journals and globally indexed outlets (CÉSPEDÉS, 2021). These pressures may influence research priorities, publication choices, and perceptions of scholarly value within local academic communities. This imbalance sustains inequalities in knowledge dissemination and reinforces the association between Global North publication and academic credibility (OWAN, 2023b). [7]

## **2.2 Metrics, promotion systems and the rise of predatory publishing**

Metric-driven evaluation systems have intensified performance pressure, particularly for early-career academics facing increasing publication requirements (OWAN et al., 2024a). In many Nigerian universities, promotion decisions rely heavily on publications in indexed journals, especially those indexed by Scopus and Web of Science (IFIJEH, 2017; OWAN & ASUQUO, 2022). Although designed to improve research quality and visibility, such systems often privilege quantity over substantive contribution, encouraging strategic rather than scholarly publication behaviors (BELLO & JAMES, 2025). For many researchers, however, meeting these expectations is difficult because publishing in reputable indexed journals is highly competitive. The resulting pressure may lead some academics to seek quicker publication routes, including journals that misrepresent their quality or legitimacy. [8]

These conditions have contributed to the growth of predatory publishing. Predatory journals charge publication fees while neglecting peer review and editorial integrity (BEALL, 2016). Their expansion is reinforced by institutional publish-or-perish pressures that reward rapid publication output and incentivize scholars to seek fast, easily accessible publication opportunities (KURT, 2018; MILLS & INOUE, 2021). Many questionable journals market themselves as internationally visible, open-access outlets with rapid review timelines while concealing weak editorial standards and strong profit motives (COBEY et al., 2019). In practice, distinguishing exploitative journals from legitimate open-access outlets is not always straightforward because many predatory journals imitate the appearance and language of reputable scholarly publications (KURT, 2018). Early career researchers may therefore become particularly vulnerable under conditions of promotion pressure, financial constraint, limited publishing literacy, and mentorship systems that sometimes encourage rapid publication strategies in response to institutional expectations (NIELSEN & DAVISON, 2020;

TELLA & ONYANCHI, 2021). Initiatives such as *Think, Check, Submit* seek to promote awareness of ethical journal selection and publishing (BUSSE & AUGUST, 2020). However, promotion policies that continue to emphasize publication counts reinforce pressure for rapid output, sustaining incentives that favor questionable outlets (BELLO & JAMES, 2025). [9]

### **2.3 Mentorship, authorship politics and academic identity**

Mentorship plays a central role in academic development, influencing productivity, ethical judgment, confidence, and resilience (KINGIRI, ANDERSEN & HANLIN, 2024). Structured mentoring initiatives in African universities, including the *BRAINS model*, have demonstrated improvements in research capacity and ethical publishing literacy (OGUNSOLA et al., 2023). Yet many Nigerian institutions lack formalized mentoring systems, leaving early-career academics dependent on informal and peer-based guidance (THE NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE, 2022). Even where mentorship exists, differences in mentors' publishing experience, ethical orientation, and familiarity with rapidly changing academic publishing systems may influence the quality and relevance of guidance available to younger scholars. These conditions are compounded by heavy workloads, limited incentives, and unequal power relations (IDUBOR & ADEKUNLE, 2021). [10]

Authorship practices frequently reflect these power asymmetries. Power asymmetries within academic and research relationships shape recognition, contribution, and access to scholarly capital (ZALEWSKI, 2022). Although authorship signals intellectual credit and scholarly recognition, junior academics often experience exclusion, coercive co-authorship, or rank-based authorship ordering (ADEKUNJO & ADEOLA, 2022). Such practices affect morale, trust, and researcher identity formation. Clear authorship norms and ethically grounded mentorship remain essential for fostering fair and responsible publishing cultures (OWAN, AMEH & ANAM, 2024b). [11]

### **2.4 Rejection, resilience and identity work in neoliberal academia**

Scholarly publishing requires sustained emotional labor, persistence, and adaptive learning. Academics must navigate rejection, reviewers' critiques, and peer evaluations while maintaining motivation. Rejection resilience supports long-term scholarly development by encouraging constructive engagement with feedback and repeated revision (LIM & BOWMAN, 2023; VAN DER MERWE & JOUBERT, 2025). Researchers using autoethnography have examined emotional vulnerability as an important aspect of understanding academic and personal experience (JUNG, 2025). Reflective practices following rejection can strengthen confidence and persistence (KINGIRI et al., 2024). Institutional interventions, including research grants and funding schemes such as [TETFund](#), may support access to legitimate publication pathways, although their effects remain uneven (IFIJEH, 2017). TETFund is a Nigerian government-supported intervention agency that assists higher education institutions through research funding, academic staff development, conference sponsorship, and publication support. [12]

## **2.5 Gaps and rationale for an autoethnographic Nigerian perspective**

Existing literature has documented structural inequalities, metric-driven pressures, predatory publishing, mentorship challenges, and authorship tensions across African and Global South contexts. However, much of this work relies on surveys, bibliometric analyses, and document reviews. Autoethnography can be used to examine how scholars experience and negotiate identity, vulnerability, and positionality within academic work. Researchers have explored emotional labor and reflexive practice among early-career researchers (LaMARRE, 2022), the negotiation of insider positionality and relational dynamics (HALILOVICH, 2022; PITARD, 2022), and the role of power asymmetries in shaping research relationships and recognition (ZALEWSKI, 2022). Other researchers have foregrounded emotional experience as analytically significant rather than incidental to scholarly life (JUNG, 2025). Despite these developments, limited attention has been given to how Nigerian academics navigate publishing systems, mentorship structures, and authorship ethics within unequal global knowledge environments. Experiences such as pressure to publish for promotion, uncertainty about journal legitimacy, unequal authorship arrangements, dependence on informal mentorship, financial barriers to publication, and tension between local relevance and international visibility often influence how early-career scholars make publishing decisions. There remains limited qualitative scholarship offering personal and reflective accounts of how Nigerian academics experience and negotiate these pressures in everyday scholarly life. Insufficient attention has been given to how mentorship relationships, ethical dilemmas, authorship conflicts, and rejection experiences shape identity, decision-making, and resilience. In this article, I address these gaps through analytic autoethnography, linking lived academic experience to the institutional and structural forces that shape publishing practices in Nigeria. [13]

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Research design, philosophical positioning, and reflexivity**

For this study, I utilized an analytic autoethnographic design, a qualitative approach that treats lived experience as meaningful data while requiring systematic engagement with theory, documentation, and institutional structures (ELLIS et al., 2010). The study aligns with ANDERSON's (2006) criteria for analytic autoethnographic research, including complete insider membership (the researcher is a full participant in the setting), sustained reflexivity (continuous critical self-examination), dialogue with others (engagement with participants and relevant audiences), and explicit theoretical commitment (linking personal experience to broader theoretical perspectives). Sustained reflexivity was achieved through continuous critical examination of my publishing experiences and decisions across different career stages, while a theoretical commitment guided my interpretation of these experiences using the concepts of epistemic injustice and unequal scholarly recognition. These principles position lived experience within debates on epistemic injustice, metric-driven publishing, authorship politics, and institutional power rather than as private life-writing

(ROWLANDS, 2022). The academic self-functioned as both participant and analyst. Insider autoethnography enables access to tacit knowledge that may remain inaccessible in externally driven research designs (PITARD, 2022). Narrative accounts were examined alongside documentary records, theory, reflexive practice, and peer dialogue with academic colleagues, mentors, and research collaborators to minimize self-centered interpretation. This design is particularly suited to postcolonial research environments because many forms of academic inequality, exclusion, and credibility negotiation are embedded within everyday institutional experiences that are often difficult to capture through conventional quantitative or externally positioned research approaches. Analytic autoethnography allows close examination of how colonial academic legacies, unequal publishing structures, language hierarchies, and institutional power relations are experienced, negotiated, and internalized by scholars within these systems. [14]

The study is grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm that understands knowledge as socially produced through meaning-making and lived experience (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018). It is further informed by a critical postcolonial stance that acknowledges the enduring influence of colonial legacies on academic hierarchies and epistemic authority (NDLOVU-GATSHENI, 2018). This orientation supports reflexivity, narrative interpretation, and analytical engagement with power. [15]

I occupy an insider status as a Nigerian early-career academic working in education and operating across teaching, research, and academic publishing environments shaped by strong publication expectations and uneven institutional support. My experiences were influenced by my disciplinary location, institutional setting, access to mentorship networks, and career stage, and may differ from those of scholars working in other disciplines, institutional contexts, or socioeconomic conditions within Nigeria. This position provides experiential depth while introducing potential bias, vulnerability, and the risk of over-identification. I continuously negotiated positionality and relational dynamics within research settings (HALILOVICH, 2022). I therefore treated reflexivity as an ongoing practice involving the interrogation of my assumptions, the examination of power relations, and the critical reflection on my interpretations. I maintained a reflexive diary to document periodic reflections and responses to key academic events. [16]

### **3.2 Data sources and generation**

Data were drawn from reflective journals, e-mail correspondence with mentors and collaborators, publication analytics, and institutional documents, consistent with analytic autoethnography. In reflective journals (2018-2025), manuscript development, submission experiences, reviewer interactions, rejection, revision cycles, emotional responses, and ethical reflections were documented. E-mails with editors, reviewers, collaborators, supervisors, and administrators were included where they addressed authorship, journal selection, decision-making, and promotion expectations. Scopus and Google Scholar analytics were used to examine publication patterns, citation trajectories, and co-authorship networks

(KINGIRI et al., 2024). Institutional materials included promotion guidelines and research policies. [17]

To reduce reconstruction bias, memory-based accounts were cross-checked against dated documents. Data generation followed a cyclical process of recollection, documentation, interpretation, and reflexive reconsideration, guided by crystallization to acknowledge multiple angles of understanding (TRAN & TRAN, 2025). In a research logbook, I recorded methodological and ethical decisions. [18]

### **3.3 Data analysis**

For data analysis, I combined reflexive thematic analysis and narrative analysis. I used BRAUN and CLARKE's (2019) reflexive framework to guide coding and theme development, emphasizing interpretive engagement rather than inter-coder reliability metrics. For example, themes were developed through repeated reflection on how experiences of authorship exclusion, publication pressure, mentorship, and ethical uncertainty were connected across different stages of my academic journey, rather than through fixed coding agreement procedures. Themes addressed mentorship, journal selection, peer review, ethical dilemmas, authorship relations, rejection, resilience, and institutional pressure. Narrative analysis was used to reconstruct the publishing journey chronologically. The two approaches were applied iteratively, allowing movement between thematic interpretation and narrative coherence. Analytical sufficiency rather than numerical saturation guided interpretive decisions. Reflexive memos and peer dialogue supported ongoing examination of assumptions, including those related to institutional norms and dominant publication cultures (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018). [19]

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

I ensured ethical care throughout all stages of the study. I followed principles of respect, confidentiality, relational responsibility, and harm minimization. Institutional policy did not require formal ethics approval for reflective research involving personal materials and public records; I confirmed this with the ethics office. I gave careful attention to relational ethics and avoided direct member checking with supervisors or institutional actors to minimize risks associated with unequal power relations. I maintained ethical responsibility by anonymizing identifiable information, exercising caution in disclosure, representing others respectfully, and engaging in ongoing reflexive accountability. I also prioritized self-care, recognizing the emotional and reputational risks inherent in autoethnographic work. Because this study is an analytic autoethnography based primarily on the author's own experiences, reflective journals, correspondence, and publicly available documents, formal informed consent from research participants was not required. Where other individuals are discussed, identifying details have been anonymized or pseudonymized to protect confidentiality and minimize potential harm. [20]

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Theme 1: Formative supervision and emerging researcher identity

My research journey began in 2012 while I was enrolled in the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) program in Mathematics/Economics at a College of Education<sup>1</sup>, a tertiary teacher education institution in Nigeria, under the supervision of a mathematics lecturer widely regarded as the strictest in the department, whom I refer to here as Mentor 1. Of the 35 students initially assigned to him during my Nigeria Certificate in Education program, only six remained, while others transferred to supervisors they considered less demanding. When he asked why I had not changed, I insisted on working with the person allocated to me. That decision placed me within a supervisory regime where progress depended less on speed and more on repeated demonstration of competence. My project moved through cycles of rejection, rewriting, and resubmission. He required clear structure, a strong conceptual framework, and coherent argumentation before approving each section. Progress was slow. While many of my fellow NCE students completed their NCE research projects during the holidays and graduated, I was still working on the early chapters of my own research project. Over time, I came to recognize that the repeated corrections had strengthened my attention to detail, discipline, and scholarly judgment. My understanding of research design, argumentation, and academic writing deepened in ways that brief or distant supervision rarely achieves (ABEID et al., 2025; WU, OUBIBI & BAO, 2024). [21]

A turning point emerged during the literature review. Mentor 1 suspected that I had falsified the date of a cited work, arguing that the author had died long before the claimed publication year. What appeared as disagreement over a single reference became a lesson about credibility and academic trust. He required that all online materials be printed, checked, and verified. Every citation was examined, weak sources questioned, and inconsistencies challenged. At the time, I experienced the repeated scrutiny as intimidating and emotionally draining, particularly because I feared public embarrassment and academic inadequacy. When he later confirmed the accuracy of my references, including the contested one, I initially felt relief more than intellectual satisfaction. Only years later did I begin to understand the episode as ethical instruction rather than personal vindication. It reinforced accurate referencing, the use of verifiable sources, and transparency as obligations that protect scholarship and junior researchers alike (PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023a). In retrospect, these practices also stood in sharp contrast to later academic environments that often rewarded publication speed and output volume over careful scholarly verification and methodological patience. Research integrity literature similarly emphasizes supervisors' responsibility to model careful verification and frame scrutiny as an ethical duty rather than hostility (CUTRI et al., 2021). Although the process was demanding and sometimes slowed my progress compared with colleagues supervised by other lecturers, I did not interpret these experiences as hostility or unfair

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1 In the Nigerian education system, Colleges of Education are tertiary teacher education institutions that award the NCE. The NCE is a post-secondary teacher education qualification.

treatment at the time. I remained committed to completing the work under his supervision because I believed the strict corrections would strengthen my academic development. However, the fuller significance of these experiences as ethical and scholarly training became clearer through later reflection and subsequent encounters within academic publishing environments. Trust, in this sense, was not assumed but negotiated through defensible evidence. [22]

The structural barriers I encountered further reinforced this training. My study was designed to collect data from secondary school students through their schools. However, by the time I began data collection, the schools in my sample had already closed for the holidays, threatening my timeline. Mentor 1 insisted that I locate respondents through house-to-house visits. Instead of accessing students centrally through selected schools, I was required to locate many participants individually within their homes and communities. It made the process substantially more expensive, physically demanding, and time-consuming. This demand extended beyond procedural completion. It framed research as a practical obligation and constraints as conditions requiring adaptation rather than withdrawal. The expectation was that I should complete the study rigorously despite financial difficulties, logistical disruptions, and the additional burden of individually tracing participants outside school settings. Such persistence, accountability, and problem-solving align with descriptions of high-expectation supervision (WU et al., 2024). I adjusted my strategy, completed data collection, and eventually submitted ahead of the remaining students. By this stage, I had learned to search for literature, evaluate sources, organize materials, and use digital tools effectively despite limited institutional support. Developing these skills was not a smooth process. I often experienced frustration, exhaustion, uncertainty, and isolation while trying to access materials, understand unfamiliar systems, and meet academic expectations with limited guidance and financial resources. Over time, however, these repeated struggles gradually strengthened my confidence, independence, and ability to navigate difficult academic environments. In resource-constrained environments, these capabilities operate as survival competencies (ABEID et al., 2025). [23]

After completing my project, some of the remaining students under the same supervisor began approaching me for guidance on sections they had been struggling to complete. Since only six of the original thirty-five students assigned to the supervisor had remained, completing the project carried a certain credibility among those still navigating the process. I gradually began sharing strategies, explaining supervisory corrections, and assisting colleagues in responding to feedback. What started as informal support among struggling peers later expanded beyond our supervisory group as news of my assistance spread across other students and departments. This movement from struggling supervisee to supportive peer marked a shift in identity. I began to see myself less as a hesitant student and more as a developing scholar. Mentorship literature indicates that demanding supervision, combined with opportunities to assist others, supports the formation of researcher identity (WU et al., 2024). My experience reflects this transition. Supervision, once experienced as a hardship, later grounded a sense of responsibility, perseverance, and service. [24]

My supervisory experience combined firmness, detailed feedback, close monitoring, and accessibility. Unlike supervisory patterns characterized by infrequent communication, limited engagement with the manuscript, delayed feedback, and minimal methodological guidance, my supervisor maintained active involvement throughout the research process. Drafts were reviewed repeatedly, references were scrutinized carefully, methodological decisions were questioned directly, and progress was monitored continuously despite the demanding nature of the process. This contrasts with common reports of weak supervision in resource-limited settings characterized by prolonged delays and fragmented engagement (ABEID et al., 2025). Simultaneously, it aligns with evidence that regular meetings, clear expectations, and attention to research integrity strengthen students' competence and ethical awareness (PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023a). My experience, therefore, illustrates how committed supervision, even within constrained institutions, can function as formative intellectual training. Through repeated revision, critical questioning, and emphasis on accuracy over speed, this relationship shaped my later understanding of authorship, publishing, and institutional expectations (CUTRI et al., 2021). [25]

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Becoming an informal research mentor in an unequal system**

After finishing my NCE research project, I did not plan to become a mentor. The role emerged quietly when a close colleague, also under the same supervisor, approached me, frustrated by repeated rejections. Sitting together, I showed her how I organized chapters, sourced literature, and wrote in the tone our supervisor preferred. When she later completed her work as the second student to finish, I experienced a growing sense of confidence and usefulness that stood in sharp contrast to the uncertainty I had struggled with earlier in the process. As word spread, more colleagues began approaching me for similar support. Although I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the increasing demands on my time and aware that these forms of guidance should ideally have been more readily available institutionally, I also felt valued by the trust colleagues placed in me. What began as peer assistance gradually evolved into an informal mentoring role situated within a system marked by uneven supervision and student reliance on survival strategies. This pattern mirrors peer mentoring dynamics in higher education, where students compensate for limited institutional guidance through near-peer expertise (GEHREKE, SCHILLING & KAUFFELD, 2024; SEERY, ANDRES, MOORE-CHERRY & O'SULLIVAN, 2021). [26]

In practice, my role extended beyond casual help. I was interpreting supervisory expectations, clarifying academic writing demands, and modeling project organization rather than teaching original research design. I functioned as a mediator between formal supervision and student understanding. This process strengthened my own skills through repeated explanation and structured guidance. Research indicates that near-peer mentoring often enhances mentors' academic confidence and sense of belonging (McPHAIL-BELL & REDMAN-MacLAREN, 2019). Yet beneath these gains were tensions I did not fully recognize. My influence lacked formal definition, institutional recognition, or ethical framing. It arose from necessity rather than policy. Many students lacked

the confidence, interpretive skill, or sustained supervisory access needed to navigate repeated corrections independently. Within this environment, students who developed familiarity with supervisory expectations gradually became informal translators of academic procedures for others. I did not initially recognize this role as mentorship or academic labor. It felt more like collective survival within a demanding system where students relied heavily on peer networks to reduce confusion, emotional frustration, and procedural delay. At the same time, the absence of formal boundaries created ethical ambiguities concerning intellectual contribution, authorship support, and the extent to which peer assistance should shape another student's academic work. [27]

A visible tension occurred when our supervisor noticed similarities in tone and writing style across several projects. He initially questioned some of the students, many of whom denied receiving assistance. When he later asked me directly, I admitted that I had been guiding colleagues by explaining supervisory expectations, structuring sections, and helping them understand how to respond to corrections. He accepted my explanation that the projects addressed different topics and that direct copying had not occurred. While reassuring on the surface, the episode unsettled me because it forced me to confront the unclear boundary between legitimate peer guidance and excessive influence over another student's academic voice. For the first time, I became aware that the informal support system developing around me also carried ethical tensions concerning authorship, originality, and intellectual responsibility. Where was the boundary between appropriate academic support and invisible labor performed for others? Such ambiguity is common in informal mentoring arrangements, where contributions remain undefined and responsibilities blur (GANDER, 2024; IHEDURU-ANDERSON et al., 2025). Students valued my assistance, yet I was largely invisible within institutional structures. I experienced this both as a source of pride and as a quiet form of invisibility. While colleagues increasingly relied on my guidance and affirmed my growing academic confidence, the labor itself remained unofficial, unrecognized, and situated outside formal systems of mentorship or institutional support. [28]

At the same time, I recognized that my writing during this period relied heavily on compilation rather than independent analytical contribution. Much of the skill I had developed involved locating materials from different sources, reorganizing ideas, and presenting them in a coherent academic form that satisfied supervisory expectations. Although sources were cited, my ability to generate original analytical arguments or to sustain an independent scholarly voice remained limited. In retrospect, this reflected a broader research culture in which students often learned academic writing primarily through imitation, reproduction, and structural organization rather than through deeper critical engagement and scholarly originality. My mentoring authority, therefore, coexisted with my own incomplete scholarly formation (IHEDURU-ANDERSON et al., 2025; MGAIWA & KAPINGA, 2021). [29]

As demand increased, the workload intensified. My time, energy, and emotions were stretched, transforming collegial help into sustained mentoring labor without

institutional support or recognition. Eventually, I began charging small fees. This decision seemed reasonable given the invisibility of my labor and my family's financial needs, yet it also unsettled me. I was aware that the same unequal conditions that had pushed students toward informal support systems were now influencing who could access more sustained assistance. At times, I justified the fees as compensation for time, emotional labor, and growing academic responsibility. At other moments, I worried that I was gradually reproducing the same inequalities and exclusions that had initially drawn students toward me for help. Those able to pay received more assistance than those who could not, risking reproduction of the inequalities that had made informal mentoring necessary. Researchers have noted that where structured academic development is absent, informal systems may support learning while also deepening inequality through semi-commercial practices (GEHREKE et al., 2024; SEERY et al., 2021). My fees did not create inequality but operated within a larger unequal structure defined by uneven supervision and financial constraint. [30]

#### **4.3 Theme 3: Reflection, structural constraints, and academic reorientation**

While these mentoring experiences were unfolding, my own educational journey was also taking an unexpected direction. Supervisory delays had extended my completion timeline. After completing my NCE program in early 2013, I enrolled in a six-month Diploma in Computer Repairs and Maintenance in Calabar. Developing hardware and computing skills functioned simultaneously as a survival strategy and a long-term investment. Where institutional systems could not reliably provide mentorship or technological support, I sought to build personal capacity. Similar adaptive pathways have been documented among emerging academics navigating resource-constrained environments (GANDER, 2024; GOLDSBOROUGH, CHAMPAGNE & BIETSCH, 2025). [31]

When I completed the diploma program in December 2013, I planned to proceed directly to a bachelor's degree in computer science or information technology. This intention was shaped not only by personal interest but also by the social climate around me. Education was often dismissed as an "all comers affair," being perceived as less prestigious than computing and technology. I gradually internalized these views, associating disciplinary choice with personal worth. Similar hierarchies have been documented in African contexts where certain fields acquire greater symbolic value and modern appeal (KENNY et al., 2024; MGAIWA & KAPINGA, 2021). My aspirations therefore reflected both an academic preference and an attempt to negotiate recognition within a system in which disciplines carried unequal status. [32]

Upon returning to my home community in 2014, where my parents lived, the practical challenges surrounding my academic and professional development remained unresolved. Faced with limited opportunities, I thought about extending the informal mentoring I had been providing by compiling PDF materials on common project topics, organizing them into digital folders, and distributing them at subsidized rates. The idea reflected an attempt to scale peer-based support into a more accessible format (IHEDURU-ANDERSON et al., 2025). However,

material realities intervened. Without a functioning computer, the plan proved impossible. My mentor identity thus confronted ethical, technological, and financial limits, reinforcing how infrastructure shapes the viability of supportive practices (ZANG, LEE & DE COSTA, 2024). [33]

In 2014, I sat for the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) entrance examination, Nigeria's national university entrance examination, with the determination to continue my education. My plans were interrupted by limited family finances. At the same time, my father sought admission for a master's degree. I chose not to intensify my own pursuit, believing his advancement was equally important. His admission did not materialize. This shared disappointment reinforced a sobering reality: Academic aspiration alone is fragile without financial capacity and institutional opportunity. African scholars frequently describe such disrupted trajectories shaped by ambition, economic constraint, and structural barriers (KENNY et al., 2024; MGAIWA & KAPINGA, 2021; NYGREN, SJÖBERG & KLINTENBERG, 2025). [34]

The year 2014 became a period of survival, improvisation, and quiet frustration. I moved between roles as a Parent Teacher Association secondary school teacher, a volunteer assistant in a primary school, and an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) trainer in a small village computer center. These roles functioned as adaptive strategies, sustaining my engagement with learning while formal academic progression stalled. Observing former colleagues advance academically while I remained at home generated feelings of stagnation, disappointment, and emotional fatigue, intensified by the sacrifice linked to my father's unrealized admission. Research associates stalled academic movement with identity tension and emotional distress (BORGER et al., 2025). Delay was experienced not merely as lost time but as uncertainty about direction and self-worth. [35]

With time, this difficult phase became reflective rather than defeatist. In early 2015, I made a pragmatic decision to re-enter higher education through Direct Entry using the Nigeria Certificate in Education. I gained admission to the University of Calabar for the 2015/2016 academic session. Although I had developed an interest in Measurement and Evaluation, I eventually enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program in Educational Administration and Planning with Economics because Measurement and Evaluation was available only at the postgraduate level. This redirection illustrates how academic identity is frequently negotiated within institutional structures, defining accessible pathways (KENNY et al., 2024). My return, therefore, embodied both agency and constraint. [36]

A new phase of academic re-engagement began in 2016 through participation in the Federal Government N-Power scheme. The program was a Nigerian government employment initiative designed to engage young graduates in temporary teaching and community service roles. Placement at a public primary school in Calabar revived my mentoring role. I worked closely with a permanent classroom teacher, Mrs. J, who struggled with her undergraduate research

project. Supporting her through revisions and supervisory feedback once again positioned me as an informal mentor. Soon, other teaching practice students sought assistance. Such reliance on informal mentoring reflects patterns observed where formal mentoring structures remain limited (CUSCHIERI & CUSCHIERI, 2025). [37]

This period, however, was marked by considerable hardship, and activities were hectic. Mentoring responsibilities coexisted with demanding duties, modest pay, and emotional strain. Literature cautions that informal mentoring often becomes invisible labor, intellectually demanding yet institutionally unrecognized (KENNY et al., 2024; NYGREN et al., 2025). Even so, the experience reinforced an important understanding: Mentorship is not merely kindness but intellectual and emotional work that shapes ethical awareness and academic maturity. At the same time, these mentoring relationships increased my visibility, credibility, and recognition among students and emerging academic networks, gradually contributing to social and scholarly capital that later influenced my academic opportunities. Institutional recognition of such labor is widely recommended for fairness and sustainability (SCHOENBERG et al., 2024). [38]

Looking back, this phase reveals how financial limitation, institutional constraint, disciplinary hierarchies, reflection, and mentoring experiences interacted to shape my developing academic identity. Through survival work and informal guidance, I cultivated resilience, ethical sensitivity, and heightened awareness of the structural conditions that influence emerging scholars in Nigeria (KENNY et al., 2024; MGAIWA & KAPINGA, 2021; NYGREN et al., 2025). Viewed analytically, my mentoring practices formed part of a broader effort to navigate academic life within systems marked by uneven mentoring, fragile infrastructure, and economic uncertainty. Questions of responsibility, legitimacy, and ethics (how much help is appropriate, who gains access, and under what conditions) became central to my evolving scholarly consciousness (GANDER, 2024; IHEDURU-ANDERSON et al., 2025). [39]

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Informal mentorship and first manuscripts**

Between 2013 and early 2017, I functioned mainly as a research resource person, supporting others' projects while possessing limited knowledge of formal academic publishing. My more professional research journey began in 2017, during my second year of the three-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program in Educational Administration and Planning with Economics at a Nigerian public university. Having gained admission through Direct Entry with my NCE qualification, I entered the program at Year Two. This transition began through an unexpected interaction. After missing a Friday lecture while assisting my uncle, I attended the following Monday's class, which was unusually quiet. Normally active and engaged, I drew the attention of the lecturer, referred to here as Mentor 2, with my silence. Interpreting the change as possible illness or emotional distress, he invited me to his office. I explained that my quietness stemmed from guilt over the missed lecture. [40]

That visit became a decisive turning point. While seated in his office, another student arrived with a statistical problem. As I glanced at the issue, I suggested an appropriate analysis and explained how to apply it. Both men were visibly surprised. The colleague assumed I was a lecturer or doctoral student. Until then, Mentor 2 had known me only as an enthusiastic undergraduate. Although I had previously exercised similar forms of expertise within informal peer mentoring spaces, those capacities largely remained socially invisible outside student networks. The interaction became significant because the recognition came from established academics whose acknowledgment carried institutional legitimacy. Demonstrated competence, therefore, did not merely reveal ability; it altered how my academic identity was perceived within a hierarchical university environment, shifting from *active student* toward *emerging scholar*. This episode illustrates how scholarly recognition often depends not only on competence itself but also on validation by actors positioned within institutional authority structures. [41]

Following this encounter, our relationship deepened. Mentor 2 gradually introduced me to more complex dimensions of academic work and later shared his doctoral thesis, inviting my reflections on supervisory feedback. Reading a dissertation for the first time exposed me to how arguments are constructed, methods defended, and revision practiced as disciplined scholarly labor. The literature on mentorship has associated early exposure to authentic scholarly materials with accelerated competence and research identity development (ALM & BAILEY, 2022; FOLÁYAN, GASCÓN-CATALÁN & MARTÍNEZ-PÉREZ, 2025). The interaction resembled an apprenticeship model in which learning occurred through guided participation and growing trust (OKON et al., 2022). Importantly, this learning unfolded through relational access rather than formal curriculum. [42]

As our collaboration evolved, I observed more about his working conditions. He frequently prepared manuscripts at commercial computer centers, incurring high costs. Given my ICT competence, I offered assistance. I soon began typing manuscripts, drafting correspondence, and managing submission processes. What initially appeared as administrative support became situated learning in scholarly publishing. Through participation, I gained familiarity with submission systems, editorial communication, and the relationship between publication output and academic career progression. [43]

Mentor 2 emphasized that publications were essential for promotion and described how his early publications had strengthened his academic mobility, challenging the widespread societal belief within Nigeria that access to prestigious academic and government positions depended primarily on political connections, patronage networks, or influential personal relationships rather than scholarly productivity. In many African institutions, publication expectations coexist with uneven training in publishing processes (EJILAH et al., 2025). His account functioned as both guidance and counter-narrative. Within that conversation, I asked a question that had been forming quietly in my mind: "Can an undergraduate student like me also publish?" When he answered confidently that it was possible, I experienced a sudden mixture of surprise, excitement, and curiosity. Until that moment, academic publication had appeared distant and

reserved for senior scholars. His response altered how I began to imagine my future within academia. Looking back now, that brief exchange became one of the earliest moments when I began to see scholarly work not simply as something produced by others but as a path I, too, could meaningfully pursue. [44]

Quietly, I decided to attempt authorship. Drawing on earlier research experience, I designed a study on effective communication and employee performance, developed an instrument, collected data, and drafted what would become Paper 1 (AROP, OWAN & EKPANG, 2018). To structure my writing, I downloaded a published article. I used it as a mirror, following its organizational logic and rhetorical flow while ensuring that data and analyses were entirely my own. Modelling functioned as a developmental scaffold common among novice researchers. While effective for skill acquisition, it also presents ethical tension when originality and citation boundaries are not explicitly discussed (FOLÁYAN et al., 2025; OKON et al., 2022). [45]

After approximately three months, I submitted Paper 1 to Mentor 2. He initially doubted my independent authorship, reflecting the perceived improbability of undergraduate publication at that level. To establish credibility, I presented raw data and supporting materials. Only then did he accept my claim. The episode illustrates how epistemic trust within academic hierarchies is negotiated through evidence, particularly when junior scholars exceed normative expectations. [46]

In retrospect, this experience raises methodological and ethical questions. Learning through modeling strengthened my confidence and analytical organization, yet it also exposed the fragility of ethical boundaries when mentors do not explicitly clarify distinctions between plagiarism, imitation, synthesis, originality, and responsible adaptation in academic writing. Research integrity literature stresses mentors' responsibility in clarifying these distinctions (DIGGS-ANDREWS, MAYER & RIGGS, 2021; PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023b). In my case, scrutiny reinforced accountability, although authorship norms and long-term publication strategy remained less clearly articulated. [47]

Producing a manuscript as an undergraduate reshaped my academic identity. Early engagement in mentored research is associated with increased confidence, scholarly belonging, and sustained research commitment (ALM & BAILEY, 2022; DICKSON et al., 2021). At the same time, this phase reflects a broader structural pattern: Emerging researchers often depend on individual mentors and informal learning channels where institutional mentorship systems remain limited. Informal mentorship enabled my transition from resource person to emerging author, yet development remained contingent on individual goodwill. Strengthening formal mentorship frameworks and publishing literacy pathways may reduce this precarity and promote more equitable scholarly growth (DIGGS-ANDREWS et al., 2021; PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023b). [48]

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Ghost authorship, hierarchy, and predatory journals in early mentorship**

Later in 2017, I wrote two additional manuscripts. One was a conceptual article developed from a course assignment on education for sustainable economic growth, referred to as Paper 2 (OFFEM, ANIAH, AGUNWA & OWAN, 2017). The second emerged from an emotional response to a one-month academic strike that disrupted university activities (Paper 3). Still inexperienced in journal selection and editorial processes, I submitted these manuscripts, along with Paper 1, to Mentor 2 for guidance and possible publication. [49]

What followed became one of the most painful moments in my early academic life. One night, I received an e-mail announcing a newly released issue of a journal. Out of excitement, I opened it and scanned the table of contents. I suddenly recognized the exact title of Paper 3. At first, I laughed in disbelief. Then I saw Mentor 2's name alongside those of two academic colleagues of similar institutional rank and status listed as coauthors. My name was absent. Assuming a summary error, I opened the full article. The same three names appeared. In that instant, excitement gave way to sadness, anger, and confusion. I cried, struggling to understand how a manuscript I had written alone could appear in print without my name. [50]

When I contacted Mentor 2, he explained that the editor had imposed a strict three-author limit, leaving no space to include me. He claimed he had protested and apologized for the omission. Nothing changed. Much later, after gaining familiarity with publishing practices, I revisited the journal and examined issues from the same period. Several articles were credited to more than three authors. Even if a limit had existed, a troubling question persisted. If names had to be reduced, should mine not have remained, given that I had conceived and written the manuscript? As the only student among the eventual coauthors, brought into the paper by Mentor 2, my position was the easiest to erase. The article later became one of Mentor 2's most cited works to date, deepening my sense of betrayal. The omission of authorship became even more difficult to reconcile because the added coauthors were not senior mentors overseeing the work but rather colleagues of comparable academic standing to Mentor 2. [51]

Analytically, this episode represents ghost authorship, where a substantial contributor is excluded from authorship recognition. Scholarship identifies ghost authorship as a serious ethical breach because it distorts intellectual credit and undermines trust (DEMETER et al., 2025; PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023b; RAJAKUMAR, GAMAN, PUYANA & BONILLA-ESCOBAR, 2024). Hierarchical power relations, ambiguous authorship norms, and weak accountability systems often enable such practices. Within these environments, authorship becomes a site of power rather than a transparent record of contribution. Junior intellectual labor may be appropriated through control of naming and visibility. [52]

Despite this experience, I continued collaborating with Mentor 2 because I was still inexperienced in academic publishing and depended heavily on him for

access to journals, editorial processes, and publication opportunities. Paper 2 was later published in an institutional journal. Upon collecting hard copies, I again observed my name positioned last after two additional co-authors had been added. Mentor 2 explained that "a student is not supposed to lead lecturers." At the time, I accepted this as academic logic. Despite the earlier authorship omission, I continued collaborating with him partly because I lacked the confidence and institutional knowledge to navigate publication independently. Although trust had been damaged, I also initially accepted his explanations regarding journal restrictions and authorship decisions because I had little basis to question them. I also hoped the relationship would still support my academic growth. In retrospect, the collaboration no longer carried the same sense of openness and confidence that had characterized the earlier mentorship period. Only later did I recognize this as rank-based authorship ordering which conflicts with widely accepted ethical principles linking authorship order to contribution (DEMETER et al., 2025; RAJAKUMAR et al., 2024). Rank-driven authorship systems often disadvantage emerging scholars, shaping confidence and perceived agency. [53]

By this stage, my trust in Mentor 2 had weakened. When the reviewer feedback for Paper 1 arrived, I implemented the corrections but chose not to return the revised manuscript. Fear guided that decision. In 2018, during the final year of my Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program, I approached Mentor 3, partly because familiarity created a sense of safety. He had previously taught at the College of Education, where I began my research journey, before later transferring to the same department at the same university where I was studying as an undergraduate. Although he had not known me well during my early years at the college, reconnecting through our shared institutional history and mutual familiarity made it easier to pursue mentorship. Under his mentorship, I developed clearer argumentation in my writing, and our collaboration increased my research productivity. Together, we produced approximately eighteen publications, including my first international article. However, a different tension emerged. Our collaboration prioritized publication speed over journal credibility. We favored outlets promising rapid acceptance and rarely questioned editorial standards or indexing claims. I frequently functioned as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) lead and corresponding author, navigating journal selection through trial and error. Many senior academics around me also lacked strong publishing literacy, which normalized the use of questionable outlets. Only later did I recognize that several journals we used were predatory. This recognition emerged gradually as I became more familiar with publication ethics, journal indexing systems, peer review standards and resources such as [BEALL's list](#), an online compilation of potential predatory publishers and journals. Over time, I also began noticing that many of these journals lacked the editorial rigor, review transparency, and scholarly standards characteristic of the more established international journals I later encountered. Researchers have shown that vulnerability to predatory publishing among early-career researchers is shaped by systemic pressures, uneven training, and institutional incentives (PRUSCHAK & HOPP, 2022). My own experience strongly reflected these conditions. At the time, publication itself appeared synonymous with scholarly

legitimacy and academic progress. I lacked the knowledge needed to distinguish credible journals from exploitative outlets and largely navigated journal selection through trial and error. Importantly, many of the mentors around me were themselves operating with limited exposure to international publishing and uneven digital literacy, relying heavily on local publication cultures and being unfamiliar with evolving predatory practices in online publishing spaces. Journal vetting, education, and ethical mentorship are therefore critical safeguards (PERKINS & ROE, 2024). [54]

As my publications increased, other lecturers invited me to collaborate. Yet authorship arrangements continued reflecting hierarchy more than contribution. Even when I led analyses and managed submissions, senior colleagues typically retained first authorship. I had internalized the belief that it was improper for an undergraduate student to precede lecturers. Literature on research integrity describes how such norms are reproduced within unequal academic cultures (PIZZOLATO & DIERICKX, 2023b). Authorship thus functioned not only as credit but as symbolic capital embedded in institutional power. At that time, I did not interpret these practices as ethical problems. They appeared normal within the academic culture I sought to join. Only later did I begin to recognize how these experiences had shaped my understanding of fairness, recognition, and scholarly belonging. Repeated placement in subordinate authorship positions gradually normalized the idea that junior scholars should minimize their claims to visibility, leadership, and intellectual ownership within collaborative work. Over time, I came to see how these experiences influenced my confidence in negotiating authorship, my expectations concerning academic hierarchy, and my earlier acceptance of unequal recognition as professionally appropriate. [55]

#### **4.6 Theme 6: Advanced mentorship, authorship equity, and ethical awakening**

Towards the end of 2018, I recognized a growing tension between productivity and disciplinary identity. Although my publication output was increasing, most of my papers remained within educational management, my undergraduate training field. My long-term ambition, however, was to specialize in measurement and evaluation. This misalignment prompted a deliberate redirection of my research energy. Remaining with my earlier mentor would no longer support this trajectory. I sought guidance grounded in the methodological traditions of educational measurement and approached a lecturer who had earlier taught me research methodology, tests, and measurement. He became Mentor 4. [56]

At that time, my technical practice still reflected earlier structural constraints. I had conducted most analyses manually. Despite understanding Excel and SPSS, I lacked a personal computer and had to rely on borrowed devices. This condition produced persistent methodological anxiety. I questioned whether manual calculations and computer-generated analyses would consistently produce identical results. The concern extended beyond technique toward issues of statistical trust and procedural validity. My search for empirical clarification yielded little reassurance. When I presented this concern to Mentor 4, he treated

it as a legitimate research question. In his office, we generated datasets and analyzed them manually and electronically, comparing the outputs using correlation, independent t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. The results aligned. This exercise provided technical verification and epistemic reassurance while modeling careful analytical reasoning. He responded warmly, suggesting the possibility of publication. I later drafted what became a simulation-based paper. Beyond resolving doubt, the interaction affirmed that my questions possessed scholarly value. Mentorship here functioned as validation of epistemic agency (RESNIK, 2023). [57]

During manuscript preparation, a profound ethical awakening occurred. Still influenced by assumptions internalized under earlier mentorships, I listed Mentor 4 as first author and placed myself second, believing a student should not lead a co-authored paper. Upon reviewing the draft, he repositioned my name as first author. When I questioned this, he asked who had taught me such a rule and firmly rejected the notion. He explained that authorship leadership should follow contribution rather than academic rank. The individual who conceived the study, led the analysis, and drafted the manuscript should lead the paper. In this work, he noted, fairness required that I be listed first. This moment disrupted a deeply internalized hierarchy. Authorship was reframed from a status privilege to an ethical record of intellectual labor. Contribution-based authorship, widely emphasized in research integrity scholarship, became newly intelligible to me (RESNIK, 2023). Mentor 4's intervention represented ethical reorientation, replacing deference with principled reasoning. [58]

The experience not only enlightened me; it gave me courage. I reassessed earlier collaborations, particularly with Mentor 3, where authorship leadership had consistently followed hierarchy. One manuscript remained under review. Strengthened by my revised understanding, I requested first authorship. He agreed without resistance. This shift occurred not through policy change but through ethical awareness. Authorship agency emerged relationally. Collaboration with Mentor 4 also consolidated my disciplinary identity. Publishing within the field of educational measurement and evaluation aligned scholarly activity with long-term aspirations. Over time, our partnership produced more than thirty publications, including several Scopus-indexed papers. These outcomes reflected not only increased output but a transition toward recognized scholarly participation. [59]

The mentorship was not without early misjudgments. In the initial stages, some manuscripts were submitted to questionable journals, influenced by institutional pressure for rapid publication and limited structural guidance. Such patterns are widely documented in resource-constrained systems with uneven publishing literacy (BELLO & JAMES, 2025). These experiences later prompted recalibration. I developed more critical approaches to evaluating indexing claims, peer-review processes, and editorial standards and, working with Mentor 4, therefore extended beyond technical instruction. Unlike in some earlier experiences, disagreements were discussed openly, journal choices were carefully vetted, and authorship decisions were explained transparently rather

than imposed by hierarchy. Errors were acknowledged without humiliation, and my contributions were treated as intellectually valuable rather than subordinate by default. These interactions gradually changed how I understood mentorship, not simply as academic supervision but as a relational practice grounded in fairness, respect, accountability, and shared scholarly responsibility. Through dialogue, collaborative verification, acknowledgment of errors, and fairness in authorship practices, I developed greater independence, clearer ethical judgment, and stronger resilience. Ethically grounded mentorship, as literature suggests, plays a central role in protecting and strengthening emerging scholars (KINGIRI et al., 2024; OGUNSOLA et al., 2023; VAN DER MERWE & JOUBERT, 2025). [60]

#### **4.7 Theme 7: Maturation, scholarly leadership, and giving back**

In October 2019, I encountered a pivotal influence in my publishing journey through a young Nigerian scholar referred to here as Mr. C. What began as a book purchase evolved into a conversation about research and publishing realities in Nigeria. By this time, I had gained fair mastery of research methodology and could conceptualize studies, design instruments, analyze data, and draft manuscripts, although I still relied on senior guidance. Mr. C's productivity and calm confidence immediately prompted comparison and self-reflection. [61]

When he asked about my 2018 publications, I mentioned eighteen or nineteen papers. He responded that he had published fifteen that same year. I initially felt reassured that I was ahead. Later curiosity led me to his ResearchGate profile. Instead of familiar fast-publication outlets, I found his papers published in well-regarded international journals under major publishers such as Springer and Elsevier. The discovery produced shock and embarrassment. Until then, I had quietly assumed that my higher publication count reflected stronger academic progress. Seeing a comparatively young scholar with publications concentrated in journals I had previously considered inaccessible within my academic environment forced me to question both the quality of my own publication trajectory and the assumptions I had internalized about what was possible from my institutional setting. That moment became one of the earliest points at which I began paying serious attention not only to publication quantity but also to journal credibility, indexing, and publisher reputation. Previously, a senior lecturer had described journals under major international publishers as almost inaccessible to young African scholars, presenting acceptance as something exceptional and extremely rare. The impression created was that publishing even a single paper in outlets associated with publishers such as Elsevier, Springer, or Taylor and Francis represented a lifetime academic achievement worthy of pride. Over time, these narratives quietly lowered my aspirations and produced a sense of fear toward such journals. I avoided them not because I had experienced rejection, but because I had already internalized the belief that successful publication there was nearly impossible for someone from my academic background and institutional environment. Mr. C's publication record destabilized these internalized beliefs, revealing how informal academic narratives can quietly regulate ambition and perceived scholarly boundaries. [62]

Reading his book further reinforced this shift by encouraging me to approach reputable international journals with greater confidence rather than fear. Its force lay in the credibility of someone who had achieved what others described as unattainable. Possibility moved from abstraction to observable reality. The psychological barrier created by inherited academic myths began to dissolve. Starting in late 2019, I redirected submissions to stronger journals. The transition was demanding. Rejections were frequent, accompanied by critiques of framing, referencing, methodological clarity, and writing habits shaped by earlier rapid-publication practices. Gradually, I began to interpret peer review as a learning mechanism rather than exclusion. This experience differed sharply from the rapid publication environments I had encountered earlier, where acceptance often occurred with limited critical engagement or developmental feedback. In contrast, rigorous peer review exposed weaknesses that predatory and low-quality publication systems had allowed to persist unnoticed. What initially felt discouraging gradually became intellectually formative. Rejection, revision, and resubmission became processes of scholarly refinement, consistent with literature on rejection resilience (KINGIRI et al., 2024; VAN DER MERWE & JOUBERT, 2025). [63]

After completing my Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program and while serving in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), progress unfolded incrementally. In 2020, I secured my first deliberate Scopus-indexed publication. Another research collaboration undertaken during my NYSC in 2020 later led to the production of five articles published in Scopus-indexed journals in 2021, by which time I had begun my first year in the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program. Productivity peaked in 2022, with 24 articles published in Scopus-indexed journals, many of which appeared in major international publications. These outcomes reflected the cumulative effects of the methodological grounding I had acquired, disciplined writing, increased confidence, and sustained collaboration. Part of this shift emerged from access to stronger scholarly networks, including collaborators based both within and outside Nigeria, as well as mentorship that encouraged more rigorous publication practices and higher journal aspirations. My own motivation also intensified as publications gradually appeared in journals I had once considered inaccessible. Each successful publication reinforced my confidence and strengthened my determination to pursue subsequent work with greater ambition. At the time, these numbers held strong symbolic significance because publication metrics were closely tied to visibility, legitimacy, and perceptions of academic progress in my environment. However, the experience also forced me to confront ongoing tensions between publication quantity, intellectual depth, time demands, and sustainable scholarly quality. While increased productivity reflected strengthened methodological grounding, disciplined writing, collaborative networks, and growing confidence, I gradually became more cautious about equating academic growth solely with publication counts. Access to mentorship and scholarly networks played important roles through collaborative writing opportunities, exposure to stronger publication standards, guidance on journal selection, interpretation of reviewer feedback, methodological improvement, and the gradual development of confidence to

engage with more competitive international publishing spaces (OGUNSOLA et al., 2023). [64]

Institutional developments further shaped this phase. In 2021, my university introduced promotion guidelines requiring Scopus-indexed publications. The policy generated anxiety among lecturers facing renewed evaluation pressure. Within this environment, I transitioned into an informal mentoring role, supporting lecturers by assisting with journal selection, manuscript improvement, and responses to reviewer feedback. Analytically, this role reversal illustrates how scholarly authority within academic environments may sometimes emerge through demonstrated competence, practical publishing experience, and problem-solving ability rather than through formal institutional rank alone. Although many of the lecturers held higher academic positions than I did, they increasingly relied on my expertise in journal selection, manuscript preparation, and reviewer engagement during a period of heightened publication pressure. Mentorship emerged from competence and lived experience rather than rank. Similar adaptive and peer-supported learning patterns are documented in African academic settings where formal mentorship structures remain limited (THE NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE, 2022). [65]

By 2022, I was ranked among the top 500 Nigerian researchers according to [Scopus](#) and [SciVal](#) rankings, a position I maintained through 2025. Within my institutional environment, such rankings held important symbolic and professional value because publication metrics increasingly influenced visibility, promotion, opportunities for collaboration, and perceptions of academic credibility. They also contributed to my eventual transition into formal academic employment as an assistant lecturer while I was a doctoral student with a master's degree. At the same time, I gradually became aware that metric-based recognition systems operate differently across national and institutional research cultures and cannot fully represent scholarly contribution, teaching impact, or community engagement. With more than sixty Scopus-indexed publications, my earlier reliance on fast and questionable outlets appeared increasingly as a formative phase rather than a defining identity. At the same time, this progression underscored the influence of structural forces. Rankings, institutional policies, and global publishing hierarchies simultaneously create opportunity and constraint (OWAN, 2023b). On the one hand, they may increase visibility, collaboration opportunities, promotion prospects, institutional recognition, and access to wider scholarly networks. On the other hand, they also intensify pressure for rapid publication, strengthen dependence on metric-based evaluation, and reinforce unequal access to high-visibility journals, mentorship networks, research funding, and international academic platforms, particularly for scholars working within resource-constrained environments. My present orientation, therefore, involves guiding others through these pressures, discouraging predatory publishing, and prioritizing ethical judgment. [66]

Another milestone followed. In October 2025 when I secured a faculty position as an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Calabar. My publication profile contributed significantly to this outcome, echoing earlier assurances that scholarly

productivity could open academic pathways. The momentum continued into 2026. By July, I had successfully completed my Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) program in Research, Measurement and Evaluation while continuing to publish in reputable international journals. As of July 2026, I had published nine Scopus-indexed articles during the year, with five additional papers accepted for publication. My sustained research contributions also earned me the Distinguished Fellowship Award of the Association of Educational Management and Policy Practitioners (FAEMAPP). These milestones reinforced my conviction that ethical scholarship, sustained learning, and collaboration create opportunities for meaningful academic growth rather than merely increasing publication counts. Beyond metrics, years of mentoring, collaboration, and research support strengthened relational trust within my academic community. Looking back, this period represents more than increased output. It marks movement from fear toward confidence, from constrained aspiration toward deliberate participation, and from individual struggle toward collective contribution. Scholarly maturation here involved challenging limiting narratives, recalibrating publishing strategies, and embracing peer review as intellectual apprenticeship. Giving back now includes guiding younger scholars, clarifying authorship ethics, discouraging unethical shortcuts, and strengthening confidence in African researchers' capacity to thrive within global scholarship. [67]

## 5. Final Reflection

Looking back from the present, I now publish confidently in journals once described as inaccessible and "not meant for people like us." Publishing in such outlets gradually changed how I viewed my own academic possibilities and professional legitimacy. What once appeared distant and reserved for scholars in better-resourced environments increasingly became part of the academic space I could participate in directly. My journey remains shaped by my positionality as a Nigerian scholar working within a resource-constrained academic system and negotiating unequal publishing structures. Rather than internalizing narratives that diminish African scholarship, I now approach publishing with greater deliberation, paying close attention to journal credibility, authorship ethics, and institutional incentives. Although I have developed strategies to avoid predatory outlets, I remain cautious. Predatory publishing continues to evolve, and my earlier misjudgments remind me that problematic publication choices are not solely individual failures but outcomes shaped by scarcity, performance pressure, and metric-driven evaluation. [68]

One of the most meaningful outcomes of this journey has been the opportunity to support others. As a university lecturer and research mentor, I continue to integrate these lessons into my teaching, supervision, and scholarly collaborations, recognizing that responsible research practice is cultivated through daily academic relationships rather than occasional instruction. I now work intentionally to reduce isolation, misinformation, and preventable harm among emerging scholars. Experience alone is insufficient preparation; therefore, I encourage early conversations not only about journal quality, authorship expectations, research integrity, and the emotional demands of publishing, but

also about methodological rigor, analytical depth, academic writing quality, originality, and the importance of producing work capable of contributing meaningfully to scholarly discussions. The emotional labor associated with rejection, betrayal, self-doubt, and sustained vigilance remains underacknowledged in academic discourse, yet it has been central to my development. A key element of my present commitment is the affirmation that authorship leadership should follow intellectual contribution rather than rank, and that junior researchers possess genuine scholarly agency. Ethical publishing cultures, as this journey illustrates, do not emerge by accident. They require principled mentorship, institutional responsibility, and shared accountability. [69]

I now lead a research group of more than thirty members whose collaboration extends beyond technical productivity. Our interactions involve not only manuscript development and publication support but also shared discussions about research ethics, reviewer feedback, authorship practices, publication pressure, and responsible scholarship. We question doubtful publication practices, encourage careful academic work, and try to create the supportive scholarly environment many of us lacked earlier in our careers. Observing younger scholars gradually develop confidence, an independent academic voice, and greater ethical awareness has become one of the most meaningful aspects of my academic life. Their progress continually reminds me that scholarly development is deeply relational and collective rather than purely individual. [70]

This reflection also required accepting that academic growth is rarely linear. My development involved repeated cycles of learning, unlearning, reassessment, and correction. Earlier missteps, including submission to questionable journals, acceptance of unequal authorship arrangements, and internalization of limiting academic beliefs, now appear as part of the broader intellectual and ethical apprenticeship through which I gradually learned to navigate academic life. Rather than disowning these experiences, I now regard them as enduring reminders of humility, responsibility, and the continuing process of scholarly development. [71]

Viewed through the lens of epistemic injustice and the Matthew effect, this journey extends beyond individual experience. My early struggles with limited mentorship, restricted access to credible publication opportunities, unequal authorship practices, and uncertainty about research quality illustrate how structural inequalities influence whose knowledge is recognized, whose voices are trusted, and whose careers progress within global academic systems. At the same time, my later experiences show that principled mentorship, ethical publishing practices, and sustained institutional support can interrupt these patterns by widening opportunities for emerging scholars to participate more equitably in scholarly communication. These concepts therefore help explain both the barriers encountered and the conditions under which more inclusive academic futures can be cultivated. [72]

I therefore understand this story not as a movement from hardship to certainty but as an ongoing process of becoming: Becoming more ethically grounded,

more critically aware, more careful in judgment, and more accountable to those who trust my guidance. Growth required moving beyond fear, beyond unexamined deference to hierarchy, and beyond viewing metrics as ends in themselves. It now involves contributing to a research culture in which excellence remains inseparable from integrity and where the success of one generation is measured by how effectively it prepares the next. Through ethical mentorship, strengthened confidence among emerging scholars, and sustained insistence on fairness, more humane academic futures may gradually take shape within African higher education. Finally, I carry deep appreciation for every mentor mentioned in this narrative. None was entirely perfect, and none was entirely harmful. Each contributed meaningfully to my intellectual and ethical formation. Their guidance, challenges, limitations, and strengths collectively shaped my ethical consciousness, scholarly identity, and enduring commitment to support others navigating similar academic pathways. If this account contributes, even modestly, to reducing the forms of epistemic injustice that continue to affect scholars working within resource-constrained academic systems, then this journey will have served a purpose beyond my own experience. [73]

### **Ethics Statement**

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study, with attention to respect, confidentiality, relational responsibility, reflexivity, and the minimization of potential harm. Institutional policy did not require formal ethics approval for reflective research based on personal materials and publicly available records, and this position was confirmed with the relevant ethics office. Identifying information relating to individuals discussed in the narrative was anonymized or pseudonymized, and care was taken to limit unnecessary disclosure. Particular attention was given to power relations, positionality, and the emotional and reputational risks associated with autoethnographic representation. These measures guided the responsible interpretation and presentation of experiences involving other individuals.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

I declare that there are no competing interests associated with this study. No financial, professional, institutional, or personal interests influenced the conduct, interpretation, or presentation of the research reported in this article.

### **AI Statement**

I confirm that the conceptualization, research design, data generation, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this article are my own work. However, I used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, particularly ChatGPT and Grammarly, during the revision stage to assist with grammar, readability, and language refinement. AI tools were not used to generate, analyze, interpret, or modify the substantive data, findings, arguments, or conclusions. All AI-assisted revisions were reviewed and verified by the author, who accepts responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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