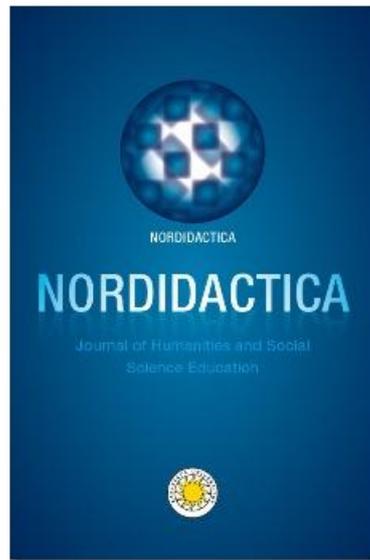


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## Navigating the methodological risks of ‘othering’ in research on inclusion and exclusion of religion and worldviews in teacher education

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*Abstract: This methodological article explores how the risks of othering can be addressed in educational research on religion and worldviews. Informed by feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous research traditions, the article expands an existing care ethics framework by integrating the principles of reflexivity and respect. A Swedish preschool teacher education project is used as an illustrative example to examine how six dimensions—international, societal, community, situational, event, and act—can guide socially sustainable research design. Rather than offering a fixed model, the framework is presented as a generative tool for reflection and adaptation. The article aims to contribute to ongoing methodological discussions by offering a possible approach to ethically grounded and inclusive research in superdiverse educational contexts.*

KEYWORDS: METHODOLOGY, CARE ETHICS, OTHERING, WORLDVIEW, RELIGION, SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE RESEARCH

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## Introduction

This article addresses the methodological risks of ‘othering’ in educational research. Using our ongoing research project as a case study, we explore a central question relevant to research conducted in contexts where dynamics between cultural and religious majority and minority groups are at play, namely: What methodological considerations are necessary to mitigate the risk of ‘othering’, and what principles can support participants’ sense of safety and belonging in the research process?

A key assumption underpinning this article is that creating a socially sustainable research environment involves the construction of caring communities (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022, 2023). Such communities require awareness that researcher–participant interactions are shaped by norms, routines, laws, and regulations that manifest across multiple dimensions—international, societal, and community-based. This awareness is operationalized through a tool previously developed for early childhood education (ECE) (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022), which we now adapt as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding and planning socially sustainable research. The tool comprises six dimensions of care: (1) international, (2) societal, (3) community, (4) situational, (5) event, and (6) act of care. In the context of our case study, the tool is used for examining how norms and values operate within and across these dimensions, shaping everyday research practices and influencing both researchers and participants. Within this framework, equality and the inclusion of diverse religions and worldviews are expressed through ethical interactions and a commitment to fostering caring relationships.

The concept of care is grounded in feminist and postcolonial care ethics (Langford & White 2019; Noddings 2013; Pettersen 2012; Tronto & Fisher 1990) and further informed by the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). This interpretation of care will be elaborated and operationalized in later sections. In brief, we use the term *caring research* to describe a research environment and process that are socially sustainable and sensitively attentive to the presence and significance of religions and worldviews. This includes ensuring that care is embedded throughout all stages of the research process—from planning, framing and operationalization to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

To deepen our understanding of how to address the risk of othering in research, we engage with a range of methodological and theoretical contributions that critically examine knowledge production and its ethical implications. The main body of the article is structured as a dialogue with scholars working within new materialist feminism (Haraway 1988), poststructuralism (Hemmings 2011), decolonial theory (e.g. Borup 2022; Gearon et al. 2021, 2022; Zembylas 2023), and Indigenous research methodologies (e.g. Kovach 2018; Lindgren & Sehlin MacNeil 2022; Smith 2005; Snow et al. 2016). Drawing on these perspectives, we conclude the article by reflecting on possibilities for cultivating a socially sustainable, caring, reflexive, and respectful research environment.

## **Studying inclusion and exclusion of religions and worldviews in Swedish preschool teacher education**

The ongoing project presented here serves as a case study to explore the methodological risks of othering in educational research. It serves as a concrete example for applying and further developing the analytical tool used for researching, understanding, and planning socially sustainable communities of care. The objective of the project is to generate up-to-date knowledge on the place of religion and other worldviews in Swedish Preschool Teacher Education (PTE) programmes offered at universities across the country. More precisely, we aim to generate knowledge about Swedish PTE’s discourses, and their educational content related to religion and worldviews. In accordance with Swedish research ethics, the study has undergone ethical review (Swedish Ethical Review Authority 2023). However, due to the sensitive nature of the study, ethical approval alone is not sufficient; a consciously maintained ethical approach is required throughout the study—an approach that aligns with the central purpose of this article.

In this project, religion is understood as a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon that includes both formal religious traditions and everyday practices as well as personal and collective worldviews. The concepts of religion and worldviews are seen as partly overlapping and shaped through social interaction, cultural context, and individual meaning-making (Poulter 2013; Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022; Raivio & Skaremyr 2022). A worldview is defined as a person’s ontological, ethical, and epistemological orientation to the world, guiding how individuals interpret their surroundings and make decisions (Kuusisto 2017; 2022; Poulter 2013). As Pals (2022) notes, beliefs and behaviours categorized as religious can have a profound impact on both individual lives and broader social dynamics. Understanding how religions and worldviews function in people’s lives is therefore essential for analysing inclusion and exclusion in educational settings and for fostering a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). To frame what socially sustainable and caring education might entail in this context, we draw on the concept of *religion and worldview literacy* (Shaw 2020). While Shaw has more recently emphasized worldview literacy (2023), we retain the earlier formulation to highlight the importance of engaging with both religious and non-religious worldviews. In line with Shaw (2020, 2023), rather than viewing literacy as a static set of knowledge and skills, we understand it here as a reflexive and transformative capacity to engage with diversity that enables future educators to engage meaningfully with religion and worldview diversity.

Theoretically, the project draws on feminist care ethics (Langford & White 2019; Noddings 2013; Tronto & Fisher 1990) and critical perspectives such as critical pedagogy (Kumashiro 2000) and Black feminist and postcolonial theory (hooks 2003; powell 2024; Spivak [1987] 2006; Yuval-Davis 2011). Methodologically, the study is grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), inspired by Fairclough (2010) as well as Wodak and Mayer (2021), focusing on the semiotic dimensions of inclusion and exclusion of religions and worldviews in Swedish PTE, understood as embedded in broader social contexts.

Swedish policy documents, such as the Higher Education Ordinance (SCS 1993) and Agenda 2030 (UN 2015), emphasize the development of socially sustainable professionalism. A socially sustainable PTE environment should enable students to experience safety (Nasir & Al-Amin 2006; Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto 2016) and a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). Conversely, the absence of such recognition may lead to alienation among students and, by extension, among the children they will later teach.

Building on previous research (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2023), the project highlights the importance of fostering religion and worldview literacy in caring educational environments. The aim is to support future preschool teachers in developing the capacity to engage with diverse worldviews in early childhood education (ECE), thereby promoting openness and responsiveness in collaboration with children, families, and colleagues (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022; Skaremyr, Raivio & Kuusisto 2025).

The project employs a mixed-methods design, integrating three data sources: (A) policy and curriculum artefacts from all 18 Swedish PTE programmes, analysed for explicit and implicit references to religion and worldviews; (B) semi-structured interviews with teacher educators, focusing on their perceptions of preparing students for religious and worldview diversity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018); and (C) survey responses from students and recent graduates, reflecting on their experiences of the PTE's teaching content related to religion and worldviews.

The data are analysed using a combination of thematic content analysis and subject-oriented narratological and semiotic approaches (Raivio 2014). The findings from the three sub-studies are synthesized using CDA and an analytical tool for socially sustainable communities of care (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022), which is further developed in the present article to include the principles of reflexivity and respect alongside care.

### **Situating the research project**

Haraway (1988) uses the term 'situating' as a play on the dual meanings of siting (place) and sighting (vision) (cf. Lykke 2010). Haraway (1988) thus urges researchers to reflect on their 'siting', the context from which they conduct research, and their 'sighting', the perspective from which they view and present their findings. In this article we draw on Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges' to frame how our research is shaped by the perspectives, contexts, and identities of both researchers and participants. This framing is organized into three interrelated dimensions: perspectives, places, and bodies.

### ***Perspectives***

The project is grounded in postcolonial and feminist intersectional critiques of power (e.g. Crenshaw 1991; hooks 2003; powell 2024; Spivak 1988), which inform both its objectives and design. These perspectives challenge dominant narratives and illuminate how systems of oppression intersect across categories such as ethnicity, religion,

worldview, gender, and occupation. We understand these identity categories as fluid, overlapping, and historically situated, shaped by and contributing to societal power relations.

In line with Powell (2024), we view identities as temporal, context-dependent, and continually in flux. This aligns with Vertovec’s (2021) concept of superdiversity, which emphasizes the increasing complexity of social contexts through the diversification of diversities, across ethnicity, migration histories, languages, and worldviews. Together, these perspectives help us understand identities not as fixed traits but as dynamic and relational, shaped by intersecting conditions and shifting societal norms.

This framing allows us to approach participants as individuals with evolving identities, while also recognizing our own positionality within similarly fluid and superdiverse contexts, a perspective that becomes especially salient in the specific institutional and cultural settings of Swedish PTE.

### ***Places***

The study is situated in Swedish PTE, a context marked by both superdiversity and dominant societal norms. Superdiversity is evident in the presence of students and educators with varied linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. (Kuusisto & Garvis 2020.) At the same time, the legacy of a secular-Lutheran hegemony continues to influence perceptions of ‘Swedishness’ and shapes who is seen as belonging. While Sweden upholds religious freedom (SFS 1995:1212), this norm can marginalize not only religious minorities but also devout Christians who do not conform to secular expectations (Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2016). These dynamics are embedded in the institutional and cultural frameworks of PTE, where liberal, secular, and humanist values often define the ideal student and educator (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2023).

For instance, discussions about religion in the classroom may be framed primarily in terms of individual choice and private belief, which can be challenging for students from more collectivist or tradition-oriented backgrounds. Similarly, expressions of strong religious conviction, whether Christian, Muslim, or otherwise, may be viewed with suspicion or as incompatible with the perceived neutrality of the Swedish educational system. Our research critically engages with these hegemonies to better understand how inclusion and exclusion are constructed in educational settings, dynamics that are experienced and negotiated by both students and educators.

### ***Bodies***

The researchers involved in this project reflect the superdiversity present in Nordic academic contexts, bringing with them varied backgrounds, experiences, and epistemological standpoints. Although all three researchers identify as cisgender women and are Nordic scholars with light skin tones, there are notable differences among us. Two are senior lecturers and one is a professor. Two were born in Sweden, speak Swedish as their mother tongue, teach in Swedish PTE, and have professional experience as preschool teachers in Sweden—one of whom has a Finnish immigrant

father. The third researcher was born in Finland, speaks Finnish as her mother tongue, and teaches in Finnish PTE, but has also previously worked in Swedish PTE for several years. Our worldviews likewise vary as one identifies as Christian, one as pagan, and one as secular. Despite these differences, we all share the common experience of having been students and teachers in various teacher education programmes, which may enhance our ability to relate to the participants.

Similarly, the participants—teacher educators and students—represent a wide range of identities. While many educators are likely to be middle-aged, light-skinned, Swedish-speaking cisgender women, the student population is more diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic background, and worldview. Some are second-generation immigrants navigating multiple cultural expectations, while others come from rural or urban Swedish contexts with differing views on religion and worldviews. In both groups, interactions with individuals who identify with a range of cultural identities, religions, and worldviews are likely; however, the diversity within the student population tends to be greater. For example, a single cohort may include students who speak Swedish, Arabic, Somali, or Sami, and who identify as Muslim, Christian, or non-religious. Although the research questions do not directly concern participants’ personal religious or worldview identifications, such perspectives may emerge through shared experiences of inclusion or marginalization in interviews or surveys.

These aspects are important framing factors when examining societal and contextual norms, expectations, and the potential experiences of ‘othering’ that may arise from not fitting these norms. As researchers, we are aware of the asymmetrical power relations embedded in our roles. At the same time, our diverse backgrounds offer valuable insights into the lived realities of those we study. By situating ourselves and our research within these intersecting contexts, we aim to make visible who and what risks being constructed as ‘other’—both in research and in education, in line with Haraway’s (1988) call for reflexive, situated knowledges.

### **Creating a caring research environment**

In all forms of scientific study, it is important to have good research ethics, which includes care for both the subjects and objects of study. Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto (2022) offer a model (see Figure 1.) that serves as a tool for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable communities of care.



FIGURE 1

*A model for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable communities of care (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022)*

The model encompasses six dimensions of care: (1) international, (2) societal, (3) community, (4) situational, (5) event, and (6) act of care. It can be used to understand how norms and values within different dimensions function, manifest themselves, and influence researchers in their daily work. In addition, the model can be used to create sustainable research communities of care, where equality and inclusion of diverse religions and worldviews are manifested through ethical interactions, enabling well-being and safety for participants (for a more detailed description of the model and its function, see Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022).

The model's theoretical framework is informed by feminist and postcolonial perspectives, emphasizing the caring relationship between researchers and participants. The view of care through the lens of intersectional feminist care ethics is informed by Langford and White (2019), Noddings (2013), and Tronto and Fisher (1990), in which care is understood as ethical interactions between the caregiver (the caring-one) and the receiver of care (the cared-for). The presence or absence of care in ethical decision-making is seen as impacting individuals' well-being and ability to flourish. If applied to research, every interaction with a participant embeds ethics. Pettersen (2012) and Langford and White (2019) stress a dialogical approach in caregiving, characterized by attentiveness, responsiveness, and reciprocity. Care, as defined by Langford and White (2019), includes a broader social and political understanding. Establishing a caring relationship in which researchers acknowledge and are open to participants' narratives, which in our case includes the presence of religion and worldview in PTE, can enable tolerance and openness.

Postcolonial and black feminist thought further enrich this theoretical framing by illuminating power relations where gender, ethnicity, skin tone, religion, and culture intersect (e.g. hooks 2003; powell 2024; Spivak [1987] 2006, 1988). Spivak's (1988) deconstruction of universal ideas and hooks' (2003) critique of racist and sexist norms

inspire our understanding of discursive challenges related to religions and worldviews in enhancing social sustainability in higher education. Our concepts of ‘caring communities’ and ‘sustainable communities of care’ (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022, 2023; Skaremyr, Raivio & Kuusisto 2025) are inspired by hooks (2003), who emphasizes the importance of creating ‘beloved communities’ and adds a critical, power-conscious dimension to the teacher’s role—and, as applied in this article, to the researcher’s role. Ethical care interactions are inherently asymmetrical, involving needs and power dynamics. This perspective is crucial for researchers, especially white Western researchers.

### **Addressing othering in research**

This section temporarily sets aside the previously introduced theoretical and methodological tool to explore broader methodological challenges related to the risk of othering in research on religion and worldviews. Drawing on postcolonial, feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous perspectives, it examines how representation, positionality, and epistemic authority shape research practices. Rather than offering a fixed framework, the aim is to reflect critically on these risks and identify principles that support more inclusive and context-sensitive research. These reflections will later be brought into dialogue with the care ethical approach. In this way, the section addresses the first part of the guiding question: What methodological aspects need to be accounted for to handle the risk of ‘othering’?

‘Othering’ is a central concept in postcolonial theory (e.g. powell & Menendian 2016; powell 2024; Spivak [1987] 2006, 1988), decolonial thought (Gearon et al. 2021; Zembylas 2023), and Indigenous research (e.g. Kovach 2018; Lindgren & Sehlin MacNeil 2022; Smith 2025; Snow et al. 2016). It encompasses dimensions such as religion, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, skin tone, and disability. powell and Menendian (2016, p. 17) define ‘othering’ as “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities”. These axes of difference, as powell and Menendian (2016) and Vertovec (2021) argue, are deeply contextual and variable, yet share underlying dynamics. Postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous critiques of colonial ‘othering’ regarding race, skin tone, and ethnicity are relevant to our enquiry, since these often intersect with religion and worldviews. With the specific focus of religion, critical analyses have been offered by scholars such as Gearon et al. (2021, 2022) and Zembylas (2023), examining how religion has historically played a role in processes of colonization and how these legacies continue to influence contemporary educational contexts. Their work highlights the need to consider decolonial perspectives when addressing the presence and function of religion in educational settings, urging educators to critically reflect on how religious narratives are included, excluded, or framed within curricula.

### **Religion and the reproduction of othering**

The reproduction of othering in research is closely tied to how religion is framed within dominant knowledge systems. Postcolonial and Indigenous scholars have long critiqued the ways in which Western academic traditions construct and maintain hierarchies of knowledge, often positioning non-Western or minority worldviews as inferior or exotic. Said's (1979) concept of Orientalism offers a foundational critique of how Western scholarship has historically depicted Eastern societies as static, primitive, and fundamentally different from the West, an approach that continues to shape how religious and cultural difference is represented. These critiques are echoed in Indigenous scholarship (e.g. Kovach 2018, 2021), which challenges the ontological assumptions of Western science and calls for greater respect for diverse epistemologies. Together, these perspectives highlight how religion can become a site for reproducing colonial logics of othering, particularly when framed through dominant secular or Christian lenses.

Postcolonial and decolonial critiques of representation in research underscore how religions situated outside dominant traditions, often labelled as 'other' or associated with minority populations, are frequently framed through reductive or biased lenses, particularly within Christian-majority or secularized contexts (Gearon et al. 2021, 2022). These critiques illuminate how such portrayals can reproduce existing hierarchies of power and reinforce normative cultural assumptions. This dynamic is evident in contexts such as Sweden, where the legacy of a secular-Lutheran majority continues to shape the frameworks through which religious diversity is interpreted and institutionalized (Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2016), especially within educational and public discourse.

### **Representation and reflexive positional awareness**

The representation, or absence, of minority religions in Christian-majority or secular contexts, such as Sweden, raises important questions about epistemic authority: who has the right or legitimacy to represent religious or cultural groups in research and (how) can this be done in an epistemically just way? Questions like this are particularly pressing in educational settings shaped by what Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto (2016) and Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto (2010) describe as the Nordic secular Lutheran gaze, a perspective that may lack the cultural and religious sensitivity needed to engage meaningfully with diverse worldviews. This highlights the challenge of how scholars can become aware of their own positional blind spots and strive to see through other's eyes (Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2016), thereby enhancing their interpretive sensitivity and ethical responsibility.

As shown by Borup (2022), identity-political discourse influences research by encouraging studies conducted by individuals who share the identity or lived experiences of the communities being studied, to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating epistemic injustice. Borup (2022) critiques this approach in a way that aligns with Vertovec's (2007, 2021) concept of super-diversity, challenging static or essentialist understandings of identity. While Borup cautions against reducing scholarship to subjectivist or advocacy-driven positions, Vertovec's concept of super-

diversity offers a constructive alternative by emphasizing the complex, intersecting, and context-dependent nature of identity. Both perspectives call for a more reflexive and analytically pluralistic approach, one that acknowledges the significance of identity without allowing it to dominate or constrain scholarly enquiry.

Postcolonial and feminist scholars often aim not only to generate knowledge but also to effect social change. However, as Hemmings (2011) argues, narratives driven by compassion can inadvertently construct dichotomies between sympathetic and unsympathetic subjects. This dynamic can reinforce hierarchies and 'othering', even when the intention is to challenge them. Hemmings highlights a key problem with compassion-based narratives: the subject—the 'someone' or 'someones' with whom the researching and narrating subject ('I/we') sympathize—is always constructed in relation to an 'other' with whom sympathy is withheld. This becomes apparent when the narrative works either seductively or disturbingly on the reader, where the reader experiences resistance if he or she tries to read the text unconditionally and does not want to hierarchize or value the subjects constructed in the narrative. Which subjects should preferably be read as sympathetic and which ones should preferably be read as 'the others' is then, so to speak, already predetermined by the narrator's way of telling the story. Other than bringing forth an important critical awareness to bear in mind when reporting research results, Hemmings' (2011) analytical strategy, focusing on subject-object relations, can also offer a valuable tool for examining how 'othering' and hierarchization may manifest in narratives. Borup (2022) and Hemmings (2011) both caution against essentializing identity categories in socially engaged research. They both argue that relying on compassion-driven narratives (like identity politics), though seemingly empathetic, can unintentionally reinforce binary oppositions and fixed notions of identity. Instead, researchers are encouraged to adopt more nuanced and ethically grounded storytelling strategies.

This call for complexity resonates with Said's (1979) critique of reductive representations and with Gearon et al.'s (2021) analysis of how religious minorities are framed within dominant educational discourses. Both emphasize the importance of resisting oversimplification and acknowledging the power dynamics embedded in representation. Feminist scholars such as Letherby (2003) have similarly advocated for amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant epistemologies, while Sporre (2011) offers a model for inclusive and reflective methodologies that foreground positional awareness and ethical engagement. Furthermore, even when research does not directly involve minority communities, the imperative of responsible representation remains. This includes critically examining whose perspectives are included, how they are framed, and what assumptions underpin these portrayals. Researchers are thus called to reflect on their own positionality and to engage with methods that promote inclusivity, complexity, and respect in the production of knowledge.

powell (2024) challenges the notion of false universalism, the assumption that the experiences, values, and conditions of dominant or privileged groups can be generalized to all. His critique underscores how such universalist claims often erase difference and silence marginalized perspectives, reinforcing structures of epistemic dominance. These are not new thoughts. Almost 40 years ago, Spivak (1988) advocated against epistemic

violence, critiquing the assumptions of neutrality and universality embedded in dominant Euro-American research traditions, especially those of Marxism and post-structuralism, arguing that they often silence or misrepresent the voices of the marginalized, particularly women in the Global South—a term she uses to highlight geopolitical marginalization, while acknowledging its limitations. One of her philosophical strategies to counteract this was to deconstruct the ‘universal subject’ in dominant Western philosophical traditions.

In the same year, Haraway (1988) introduced the concept of ‘situated knowledges’ as a critique of the universal subject in science. She frames knowledge as inherently local, historical, and cultural—mediated through embodied visualization devices and technologies, including human bodies, research tools, and conceptual frameworks. This perspective challenges the epistemological assumptions of neutrality and universality that underpin dominant, Eurocentric research traditions. Through her related concept of ‘embodied objectivity’, Haraway calls for methodological transparency and reflexivity, emphasizing that acknowledging the partiality of knowledge does not diminish its value. On the contrary, she argues that research grounded in situated perspectives can contribute meaningfully to broader understandings, especially when placed in dialogue with other situated knowledges. Such an approach aligns with the broader aim of epistemic justice, by recognizing and valuing diverse ways of knowing.

To sum up, this section has explored how representation, positionality, and reflexivity shape research practices and knowledge production. The contributions discussed highlight the importance of being attentive to how researchers’ own positions and assumptions influence interpretation and framing.

### **Reflexive and respectful research ethics**

Building on previous discussions of reflexivity in relation to representation and identity, this section focuses more explicitly on how it is conceptualized as an ethical principle within Indigenous research and relational methodologies, to offer further insight into how researchers can engage ethically and responsively with diverse communities and knowledge systems.

Indigenous researchers such as Snow et al. (2016) stress the importance of practicing reflexivity through critical reflection on researchers’ knowledge privilege, methodological choices, and the potential consequences of their work. Equally central to Indigenous research ethics is the principle of respect, which Snow et al. (2016) identify as foundational. Kovach (2018, 2021) elaborates on this by outlining three dimensions of respect: (a) respect for the core values and cultural norms of the community in which the research is conducted, (b) respect for diverse epistemologies, and (c) respect for those who will be affected by the research outcomes.

Respect also entails practices such as sharing knowledge and reporting findings back to the communities involved, thereby fostering stronger, reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants (Snow et al. 2016). This aligns with broader calls to build respectful and sustainable connections between research, practice, and policy (Lindgren & Sehlin MacNeil 2022). Kovach further emphasizes the significance of

researchers’ relational capital—their social positioning and the quality of their relationships—which shapes the dynamics between researchers and participants. From this perspective, participatory or action-oriented research designs are not only methodologically sound but also ethically preferable.

Extending these insights, and in conversation with Haraway (1988) and Powell (2024), research ethics require sustained reflexivity and attentiveness to the situatedness of both researchers and participants. This includes acknowledging one’s own positionality (e.g. Letherby 2003) and relational capital (Kovach 2018, 2021) and actively working to mitigate harmful power dynamics throughout the research process. Such an approach moves beyond abstract ethical principles, embedding respect and accountability into the fabric of research practice.

So far, this section has discussed the methodological risks of ‘othering’ in the study of religion and worldviews, alongside strategies for mitigating these risks through reflexivity, positional and ethical awareness, respect, and relational responsibility. In the last section of this part of the article, we return to our original framework—based on intersectional care ethics and show how this might be expanded by including reflexivity and respect.

### **Expanding the framework: Care, reflexivity, and respect**

While care, as presented earlier in this article, forms the ethical foundation of our research framework (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto 2022, 2023; Skaremyr, Raivio & Kuusisto 2025), it cannot, based on the insights from postcolonial, decolonial, Indigenous research discussed above, stand alone. To fully address the complexities of power, representation, and inclusion in educational research, particularly in studies involving religion and worldviews, the principle of *care* must be expanded through the complementary principles of *reflexivity* and *respect*. These principles are not merely additions but integral to the enactment of care in socially sustainable research.

Reflexivity is understood here as a form of care directed both outward, toward participants, and inward, toward the researcher’s own assumptions, positionality, and influence on the research process. Drawing on Haraway’s (1988) concept of ‘situated knowledges’, reflexivity involves acknowledging that all knowledge is produced from specific social, cultural, and historical positions. It requires researchers to critically examine how their own identities, institutional affiliations, and epistemological frameworks shape the research questions they ask, the methods they use, and the interpretations they make—including the language choices used when reporting findings. In this way, reflexivity becomes a practice of ethical attentiveness: an ongoing effort to remain accountable to the people and contexts we study.

Respect, in turn, is foundational to ethical care. Informed by Indigenous research ethics (Kovach 2018; Lindgren & Sehlin MacNeil 2022; Smith 2025; Snow et al. 2016), respect involves recognizing the legitimacy of multiple knowledge systems, honouring participants’ lived experiences and ensuring that research practices do not reproduce harm or marginalization. Respect is enacted through inclusive language, transparent communication, and a commitment to co-creating knowledge in ways that are

meaningful and accessible to participants. It also entails recognizing the asymmetries of power inherent in research relationships and working to mitigate them through relational accountability.

Together, care, reflexivity, and respect form a triadic ethical framework—three guiding principles for conducting socially sustainable research that minimizes methodological risks of ‘othering’ and fosters conditions in which both participants and audiences of the research can experience a sense of belonging. Reflexivity deepens care by ensuring that it is not naïve or uncritical, while respect grounds care in mutual recognition and relational ethics. This expanded framework enables, if implemented throughout the entire research process, researchers to navigate the ethical complexities of studying religion and worldviews in education, fostering research environments where participants can feel seen, heard, and valued.

In the following section, we demonstrate, using our own research as an example, how these principles of care, reflexivity, and respect can be applied across the six dimensions of our theoretical and methodological tool.

## **Implementing care, reflexivity, and respect in research**

Research on religion and worldviews in teacher education, such as ours, must actively resist reproducing othering. As previously argued, this requires a research approach grounded in care, reflexivity, and respect—principles that should inform every phase of the process, from initial design and theoretical framing to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

We now turn to the six interrelated dimensions of socially sustainable research—(1) international, (2) societal, (3) community, (4) situational, (5) event, and (6) act—and explore how they intersect with our guiding principles. These dimensions are not discrete; rather, they are entangled and co-constitutive, revealing how ethical values and norms are enacted in research, from global frameworks to everyday encounters.

### **1. International dimension of care: Navigating global discourses and policy frameworks**

This dimension addresses how research is situated within global academic, political, and economic structures (e.g. Eurocentrism, Orientalism), as well as within international policy frameworks such as Agenda 2030 (UN 2015). It invites researchers to consider how their work contributes to or challenges global inequalities and epistemic hierarchies. Furthermore, highlights that researchers make active choices—regarding which topics they deem significant, which scholarly traditions and debates they engage with, and which concepts they operationalize.

Also, decolonizing epistemologies, particularly those related to religion, education, and underrepresented participant groups such as children or individuals in marginalized societal positions (Gearon et al. 2021, 2022), is essential in the broader context of existing research. Our study contributes to this effort by aiming to enhance teacher sensitivity to children’s religions and worldviews in both preschool and higher

education. In doing so, it offers valuable insights for researchers and policymakers internationally. For instance, findings on the vulnerabilities experienced by minority-background children in ECEC or students in PTE can help amplify their voices and inform global knowledge and practice.

Within the international dimension, care involves acknowledging the global implications of our research, particularly in relation to colonial legacies and Eurocentric knowledge systems (Kovach 2021; Said 1979). By adopting a decolonizing perspective (Gearon et al. 2021) and amplifying voices from minority backgrounds in preschool and teacher education, we aim to challenge entrenched epistemic hierarchies. Reflexivity in this dimension requires us to critically examine our own position within global academic networks, including the influence of language choices, funding sources, and institutional affiliations. Respect, in turn, entails a commitment to engaging with and citing scholars from diverse geopolitical contexts and recognizing the legitimacy of multiple knowledge systems. This also includes using inclusive language in our surveys and ensuring that our research findings are communicated in accessible and meaningful ways (Snow et al. 2016).

## **2. Societal dimension: Critically engaging with national norms and hegemonies**

Within the societal dimension, care involves recognizing how national policy documents such as Higher Education Ordinance (SCS 1993) and dominant cultural narratives shape educational norms and practices. In the Swedish context, this includes acknowledging and critically addressing the influence of secular-Lutheran hegemony, which can marginalize religious and existential perspectives that fall outside the dominant framework (e.g. Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2016). Our research seeks to challenge these norms by highlighting how they affect inclusion and exclusion in teacher education. Reflexivity requires us to examine how our own national and cultural backgrounds influence our interpretations and interactions. Drawing on Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges', as presented above in the introduction of the article, we seek to make visible how our embodied perspectives and institutional contexts shape the knowledge we produce.

We reflect on our own position within academic networks, including language choices, funding sources, and institutional affiliations, and remain aware that our values and assumptions may differ from those of our participants. We also strive to approach these differences with openness and humility. Respect here means valuing the diverse ways in which participants understand and engage with religion and worldviews. In our study, this means that we strive to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and instead support a more inclusive and pluralistic educational discourse.

## **3. Community dimension: Constructions of (non-)belonging in local educational contexts**

At the community dimension, care is expressed through the creation of ethical and inclusive research relationships within the local context of preschool teacher education

(PTE) programmes. This includes fostering trust, ensuring transparency, and respecting participants’ confidentiality and autonomy. At the same time, it requires a critical awareness of structures that may contribute to exclusion—particularly for individuals with minority religious worldviews or lifestyles who may feel unsafe disclosing their beliefs within the predominantly secular university environment. As Nasir and Al-Amin (2006, p. 22) note, such negotiations of identity in higher education can be “at once intensely private and painfully public.” Recognizing this, we strive to create conditions that support a sense of belonging and identity safety for all participants.

Reflexivity involves being open about our roles and intentions as researchers and critically examining the power dynamics that shape our interactions with participants. We draw on the concept of religion and worldview literacy (Shaw 2020) to guide our engagement with participants’ diverse perspectives. Respect in this context means honouring participants’ lived experiences and narratives, and co-creating knowledge in ways that affirm their identities. We are particularly attentive to how norms of inclusion and exclusion operate within educational communities, and we work to ensure that our research practices support rather than undermine participants’ safety and sense of belonging.

#### **4. Situational dimension: Designing ethical and inclusive research encounters**

Within the situational dimension, care is enacted through the design and facilitation of research encounters such as interviews and surveys. These moments require attentiveness to participants’ emotional and cultural sensitivities, especially when discussing topics related to religion and identity. We have strived to plan for creating dialogical spaces that are characterized by mutual respect and openness (Langford & White 2019). Hence, interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants to ensure a neutral setting, which in all cases turned out to be via a secure video conferencing platform. We aimed to build trust and foster an empathetic, respectful, and caring atmosphere. This process began before the actual meeting—through clear, thoughtful communication about data confidentiality and participants’ right to withdraw at any time. We applied this approach to all interactions, especially in one-on-one interviews with teachers. Reflexivity in these situations means being prepared to act in response to the dynamics of the research setting and willing to adapt our methods as needed. Respect for participants’ diverse worldviews, including their religious beliefs and interpretations of PTE content, was essential.

Guided by Vertovec’s (2021) concept of super-diversity, we approached participant identities as complex and intersecting rather than fixed. This perspective informed our use of open-ended survey questions and our inclusive approach to collecting background information. For example, in the question concerning gender, we provided the options female, male, transgender, non-binary/non-conforming, and prefer not to answer. In addition to the questions focused on what teaching content they had or what they had encountered during parts of the education located in preschools related to interculturality, religion, or worldviews, we asked if they wanted to tell about any

further experiences or thoughts about teaching and educational content or other situations that concerned issues related to religion and worldviews within their education. The interviews with PTA teachers were planned as semi-structured with open-ended questions, allowing us to reflect critically on how our methodological choices shape whose voices are heard and how they are represented.

We also continuously assessed how our presence, questions, and assumptions may influence participants’ comfort and willingness to share. Respect here involves recognizing and valuing local knowledge systems and avoiding the imposition of external frameworks that may not align with participants’ lived realities. Our goal was to ensure that each research encounter was ethically grounded and supportive of participants’ dignity and agency. The principles of respect were thus, as exemplified above, applied to the survey, even though we did not engage with respondents one-on-one. At the outset, we informed participants that their anonymity and unrecognizability would be preserved in all reporting. However, our ethical considerations extend beyond anonymity to include questions of representation in communicating the results—namely, who speaks for whom, how findings are presented, and whose voices are heard.

## **5. Event dimension: Responding ethically in real-time interactions**

Within every situation planned for (like an interview), several events may occur related to the issues raised in the conversation. An event is framed not only by the content of interaction, but also by the ethical decisions made in real-time and the relational impact of what is said or done. One such event occurred during an interview when the participant hesitated after being asked about expressions of lived religion in the university context. The researcher responded by gently reframing the question and offering examples such as “the quiet room” or visible symbols like a cross or hijab. This moment illustrates how ethical decisions made as the interaction unfolds—such as adjusting language and tone—can shape the participant’s experience of safety and inclusion. It highlights the performative nature of research interaction, where even small gestures carry relational and ethical significance.

Care, in relation to this dimension, entails being prepared to respond with compassion and attentiveness to unexpected reactions or dilemmas, while remaining mindful of how different topics are introduced. We recognize that even subtle actions can have significant ethical implications and strive to ensure that our conduct consistently reflects our values. Such gestures may influence how participants experience being seen, understood, and included. For example, as in the example above, we were mindful of how our tone of voice, body language, and phrasing of questions could affect participants’ responses (e.g. Stevanovic & Kuusisto 2022) and their sense of safety and belonging.

Reflexivity in the event dimension involves documenting and reflecting on these spontaneous decisions, considering how they align with our broader ethical commitments. Using research journals and peer debriefing within the research team might support this reflective process. A moment that exemplifies reflexivity occurred during an interview when the participant shared a personal experience related to

experiencing student discussions regarding religion. The researcher briefly considered responding with a similar personal story, hoping to foster connection, but hesitated, reflecting on whether such a disclosure might shift the focus away from the participant or unintentionally reinforce power asymmetries. Reflexivity is accordingly not only an internal process but a relational act: the decision not to speak was performative, shaping the tone of the interaction and reinforcing the participant's position as the primary voice. Hence, even silence, when ethically grounded, can contribute to a sense of being respected, heard, and centred in the research encounter.

Respect, in the moments exemplified above, was demonstrated through our efforts to uphold participants' dignity and autonomy, particularly during vulnerable or emotionally charged interactions. In the ongoing analysis of data, we aim to approach responses with sensitivity, openness, and respect. The researchers' own values play a key role in maintaining this sensitivity, especially when responses or document statements conflicted with their personal views. At the same time, respect here includes communicating results in ways that do justice to what was written or said by respondents.

## **6. Act dimension: Embodying ethics in everyday research practice**

In the dimension of everyday acts as a researcher, the act of care is embedded in the micro-level actions that shape the overall tone and integrity of the research project. This includes how we listen, respond, follow up, and maintain ongoing consent throughout the research process. Similarly to the event dimension, focusing on caring acts means being mindful of our verbal and non-verbal cues, phrasing of questions, and what message these together signal to the recipient. The same interview moment described earlier also exemplifies how care is enacted through concrete researcher practices. This example illustrates how our ethical stance is reflected and how care becomes visible through what the researcher does, not just what is said. When the participant hesitated, the researcher responded by listening attentively, offering gentle prompts, and adjusting the phrasing to support reflection. These micro-level actions were intentional and reflected a commitment to creating a safe and respectful space.

Reflexivity is sustained through continuous self-examination and dialogue with colleagues, allowing us to remain aware of our assumptions, emotions, and ethical responsibilities. The same moment described earlier—when the researcher paused before sharing a personal experience—also illustrates reflexivity as an enacted practice. The decision to hold back was grounded in ethical awareness and attentiveness to power dynamics and became part of the team's ongoing reflective process.

The act of respect needs to be expressed through a commitment to acknowledging all contributions, giving credit where it is due, and ensuring that research outputs are accessible and meaningful to those involved. In texts communicating the results from our study, we strive to retell participants' stories respectfully, avoiding essentialism and narratives that reinforce othering (Borup 2022). Since we use Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough 2010), we recognize the risk of presenting findings in overly technical or inaccessible language. To address this, we follow principles of accessibility

and authenticity (Snow et al. 2016), aiming to communicate results in ways that are meaningful to both participants and those affected by the research.

Inspired by Sporre (2013) and other scholars, and mindful of Hemmings’ (2011) critique of sympathetic storytelling that may still reinforce othering, we aim to create dialogic narratives. These reflect a mosaic of voices and address authenticity and responsibility, giving space to minority perspectives and capturing the complexity and richness of participants’ experiences. In doing so, we seek to challenge dominant epistemologies, amplify marginalized voices (Letherby 2003), and, where possible, counter the Western gaze (Kovach 2012).

## **Toward socially sustainable research practice**

Ethical research is not a checklist, but a continuous, relational practice shaped by context, power, and responsibility. In this article, we have explored how the methodological risks of othering—particularly in research involving cultural and religious majority–minority dynamics—can be addressed through a framework grounded in care, reflexivity, and respect. Drawing on an ongoing study of religion and worldviews in Swedish preschool teacher education, we have demonstrated how these principles can be operationalized across six interrelated dimensions of socially sustainable research.

Whether conducted in early childhood education, teacher training, or related fields, integrating care, reflexivity, and respect can help mitigate the risks of othering and foster a more just and meaningful knowledge production. Rather than a fixed model, this framework serves as a generative tool for critical reflection and contextual adaptation. We invite other researchers to engage with, expand upon, and apply these dimensions in their own work. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a broader methodological conversation about how ethically responsible and inclusive research can be carried out in pluralistic educational settings.

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