

Norma R. A. Romm

# Responsible Research Practice

Revisiting Transformative Paradigm  
in Social Research

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# Endorsement

Norma Romm provides excellent guidance through theory and practical examples for researchers who accept the challenge of working towards social, economic, and environmental justice for members of marginalized communities. She brings together the work of transformative and indigenous scholars to further understandings of the complex dynamics of contributing to positive social change through the use of innovative research strategies. The examples illustrate an emphasis on addressing social and ecological justice, along with the challenges that researchers encounter in this type of research. This book is an excellent contribution to understanding better how researchers can be responsive to the wicked problems facing the world.

—Donna M. Mertens, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus  
*Gallaudet University*

# Foreword

The book *Responsible Research Practice: Revisiting Transformative Paradigm in Social Research* articulates a new and diversified direction to research which uniquely shifts from the dominant ways of doing research, while drawing on and inflecting Mertens' exposition (e.g., 1999, 2009, 2014, 2016) of the transformative paradigm. It embraces the incorporation of an Indigenous lens to research in which care, relationality, and accountability are seen as cardinal. In working with and extending existing debates about some of the epistemic considerations relating to Indigenous world views as articulated by certain Indigenous scholars (e.g., Chilisa 2009, 2012; Kovach 2009; Murove 2005; Smith 1999), Romm recasts these and challenges researchers to further ruminate the principles of Relationship, Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (4 Rs) in research design. In this way, the book not only advances transformative-directed research but extends the meaning and practice of it by forwarding suggestions for ways of actively exercising responsibility in research.

The African *Ubuntu* principle enunciated by Romm and research participants as set out in Chap. 2 offers suitable parameters for reshaping/rearticulating the discourse of race and class relationships with a consciousness that emerges from people affected by social marginalization. This creates the ambience to debate socio-colonially constructed forms of dehumanization arising from the intersection of racism, classism, and use of cheap labor (capitalist exploitation). The book showcases via various examples, which are examined in depth across the book, how research can contribute to nurturing alternative principles for humans relating to each other and to all that exists in the web of life, where research can contribute to transforming social rifts and deep emotional/psychological wounds, as well as facilitating natural resource management and ecological sustainability.

The book advocates for transformative researchers, academics, community-engaged practitioners, and social/environmental activists to step outside their comfort space and reexamine their practices insofar as knowledge production, validation, and distribution/dissemination pertain. It recognizes that researchers and

professional research communities have particular orientations which, if not carefully reflected upon, can mean that the impact that research might have on the social and ecological world becomes neglected. To safeguard against this, Romm, referring to the work of Gergen (1978, 2015), examines possibilities for generative research and theorizing in which the metaphor of research as *shaping* replaces the metaphor of research as *watching*. In so doing, the main theme of the book challenges all those involved in research to take more responsibility for the shaping effects of research. This is underscored by Romm's detailed rendition of examples of research in various geographical contexts across the globe in which active ways of doing research are said (at least according to the Romm's account/extrapolation) to have been used to shape in cooperation with participants (as coresearchers) possibilities for empowerment. Also, Romm's reexamination of the autobiographical life story of an environmental feminist in Chap. 6 brings to bear the parameter for remedial action by those who would otherwise feel less empowered to become leading agents of change in their society on ecologically related issues.

I found particularly insightful Romm's discussion on ethics in Chap. 8, where she takes on and reconfigures the principles of the Belmont report of 1979. She explores with sensitivity issues such as giving incentives and rewards to research participants, where this is not seen as compromising the research agenda. She also maintains that the Belmont report does not sufficiently cater for an appreciation of the contention around professional researchers seeking knowledge production with reference to the label of "doing science", which she argues can become problematic (when the *watching* metaphor is invoked). She suggests that the Belmont report, which has become the benchmark of most Institutional Research Ethic Boards (IRBs) across the world, needs careful reconsideration in the light of alternative ethical positions where ethics and epistemology are seen as inextricably connected. She supplies practical examples of ways of navigating these alternative positions.

Lastly, by reiterating the use of multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to inform and empower researchers and coresearchers, some of the discourses in the multiple and mixed methods research (MMMR) literature are discussed along with paradigmatic extrapolation that responsibly feeds into both conventional and nonconventional (Indigenous) research methods (see, e.g., Chaps. 1 and 9). And by foregrounding spirituality in the discussion, which she crafts with reference to interdisciplinary fields of study (such as philosophy of science, sociology, Indigenous orality, and education), Romm engages in the politics of disrupting the conventional approach to research and knowledge construction that traditionally excluded the spiritual dimension. In articulating the spiritual, Romm extends the debates on connectedness in terms of fostering diverse relationships such as human to human, human to animal, and human/animal to the environment—living and nonliving things (cf. Smith 1999; Wane et al. 2014) as operationalized by many Indigenous societies globally.

In my view, Romm has managed to meticulously infer from different examples of research conducted in diverse contexts, ways of doing transformative, empowering and responsible research for a world-shaping agenda. The book is an

empowering and transformative tool that will reverberate with academics, researchers, social and environmental activists, and civil society bodies in their continuous endeavor to make the world a better place.

Pretoria, South Africa  
February 2017

Francis Adyanga Akena, Ph.D.

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## About the Author



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# Abbreviations

ABCD	Asset-Based Community Development
ADEA	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
BACUA	Bay Area Coalition for Urban Agriculture
CBPR	Community-Based Participatory Research
CIHR	Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement created by the Canadian Institute of Health Research
CT	Creativity Thinking
DBE	Department of Basic Education (South Africa)
DBST	District-Based Support Team
DHET	Department of Higher Education (South Africa)
EI	Emotional Intelligence
ENEP	United Nations Environmental Protection Program
EQ Test	Emotional Intelligence Test
ERC	Ethics Review Committee
ESR	Institute of Environmental Science and Research, New Zealand
FG	Focus Group
FS	Food Security
GBM	Green Belt Movement
GSS	Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale
GT	Gill Tract (at University of California)
ICAS	Ibadan Creativity Assessment Scale
ILO	International Labor Organization
ILST	Institutional Level Support Team (South Africa)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MMMR	Multiple and Mixed Methods Research
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
NARCH	Native American Research Centers for Health
NCWK	National Council of Women of Kenya
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization

OTF	Occupy The Farm
OWS	Occupy Wall Street
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PR	Participatory Research
REC	Research Ethics Committee
SACIE	Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education (Scale)
SALGA	South Australian Local Government Association
SBST	School-Based Support Team
SD	Sematic Differential
SESS	State Self-Esteem Scale
SGB	School Governing Body
SM	Social Mobilization
SMT	School Management Team
TEIP	Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (Scale)
TVED	Technical Vocational and Enterprises Development Office
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WWWCYA	Wadla Woreda Women, Children and Youth Affairs Office

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction to the Book: Activating Transformative Intent in Consideration of the Immersion of Research in Social and Ecological Existence



**Abstract** Mertens regards the transformative paradigm as an extension of critical and emancipatory traditions in social research. Researchers classed as working within the transformative paradigm, she notes, consciously tie the research enterprise to the furthering of social justice concerns. This chapter revisits her account of this paradigm and its relationship to “other” paradigms. After introducing myself and my concerns as a researcher, I discuss her understanding of the axiological commitments which guide research work within the transformative paradigm, commitments which she believes inform epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations. While looking at her arguments (and some variations in them in different writings of hers), I add what I see as additional angles, primarily with reference to a number of authors advocating critical systemic thinking-and-practice and advocating Indigenous systemic approaches. I focus on considering how research as an endeavor carries specific responsibilities, arising from our recognition of the involvement of social research in shaping the social and ecological worlds of which it is a part.

### 1.1 Introduction

#### 1.1.1 *Introducing Myself (An “Academic” Introduction)*

For readers to place my discussions on research in this book, I begin by presenting a construction of the research trajectory that has led me to the writing of this book. I use the word *construction* deliberately, to indicate that I concur with Pushor and Clandinin that narrative accounts are necessarily incomplete, fluid, multiple and changing—but they serve to show what people (narrators) value and what they find important to highlight (at some point in time) as part of their storying about their lives (2009, p. 296). Kenny elucidates too that stories told offer openings for describing and inviting co-reflection with others on values and critical themes (2002, p. 28). It is in this light that I would like my story of my academic trajectory to be understood.



In this chapter I start by presenting myself in terms of my “professional” life, beginning with my University education. In Chap. 2, I offer a more personal story, beginning with my childhood and my socialization into Whiteness (being defined as White), and my experience of deconstructing this (which also informed the “active” research outlined in my first example in Chap. 2).

At University, during my undergraduate studies I majored in Sociology and Philosophy, and went on to an Honors degree in Sociology (1981). I then chose as the topic for my Master’s degree (1982) Habermas’s and Marcuse’s (Marxist-oriented) critiques of positivist Sociology and the positivist striving for objectivity as the basis for a scientific approach (where researchers are urged to try to divest their own values from the knowing enterprise). For my doctoral degree, obtained in 1986, while I was employed at the University of South Africa (Unisa, 1982–1991), I critically discussed Althusser’s conception of Marxist methodology as intent on developing “scientific” discourses, albeit less empirically based ones than urged by positivism. In 1991, my book—*The methodologies of positivism and Marxism*—was published. In other publications (e.g., Flood & Romm, 1996; Hölscher & Romm, 1989; Romm, 1990, 1996a, 1996b, 2001a, 2001b), I considered options for reworking the Marxist argument that social inquiry should be linked to social transformation, by considering the mediating role of researchers in organizing dialogically interventionist research.

During a period of working in Swaziland (as Dean) in the Faculty of Social Sciences (1991–1993), I became involved in a project called Women and the Law in Southern Africa, where the team conducting the research consisted of seven women who were exploring inheritance issues in Swaziland as part of a larger research program in Southern Africa. My involvement in the study was as a (so-named) consultant to the researchers in Swaziland at a certain stage of the research process (as requested by the Swaziland co-ordinator). The team consisted of some lawyers and sociologists, and some non-professionals. (All of the researchers were women, although in other national teams—in other countries in Southern Africa—the research teams included men.) The idea, as detailed in Aphane et al., was to create a research project which could be considered as activist in that it “aimed not only at bringing change at a personal level [in aiding people to envisage options for action in relation to inheritance issues], but at the formal level as well, e.g., on policy, law and administration” (1993, p. 7). In Swaziland, we considered how the research remit could incorporate such an activist agenda.

While working as a researcher in the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull (1993–2003), as part of my reflections on research activity, and as part of my involvement in a variety of projects (including aiding master’s and doctoral students from around the globe who came to study at Hull), I concentrated—with colleagues and with students—on examining how researchers’ knowing efforts have social repercussions, which I argued need to be accounted for. In 2001, I produced a book called *Accountability in social research* (2001a). I identified seven different positions that researchers might take to render themselves accountable, and I finally argued for what I named a trusting constructivist

position. “Trusting constructivism” calls on researchers to defend their positions discursively as part of a process of earning trust.

From 2003 to 2004 as Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Cyprus College (now European University of Cyprus), I met colleagues concerned with using research—which I now call active research—to bridge gaps generated by the historical divide between Greek and Turkish Cypriots; and I also learned from certain colleagues how experimental research in studies of racism on “implicit bias” could become the basis for people/research participants rethinking their ways of orienting to others.

From 2005 onwards, besides continuing to contribute to edited books (e.g., 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2010) I collaborated with researchers from various countries (e.g., South Africa, Kenya, and Australia) in doing research for organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). In all of these projects I contributed primarily to the formulation of the methodological and ethical foundations for the projects—in the proposals and in conducting the research itself. We also were “active” in working with and capacitating local researchers (new graduates from the universities), exploring with them ways of relating to research participants so as to make them feel, and be, part of the research endeavor.

In 2010, another book of mine was published, namely *New racism* (2010). This work considers how one can investigate arenas of racism which are often not visible or concretizable, and are less overt than traditional forms of racism. I drew out different ways of seeing the value of critical race theorizing, and offered suggestions for proceeding from a “dialogical standpoint epistemology” (linked to a constructivist approach).<sup>1</sup> In the book, I also illustrated how questions around epistemology relate directly to issues of racism. For example, (new) racism manifests itself, inter alia, when Indigenous epistemologies are afforded less status than Western-oriented—supposedly more rational—styles of knowing. Via the book I was hoping to (re)credentialize what Ladson-Billings (2003) calls “ethnic epistemologies”, by offering detailed discussions around their principles and how they can be activated in accountable social research. (Like the word “ethnic”, the term *Indigenous* can be used here to denote “Indigenous peoples and culture” in different contexts, as Kovach, 2009, p. 20, explains. Notably, however, authors such as Ladson-Billings and Kovach do not consider “culture” as harboring monolithic meanings, but rather as harboring symbolic expressions which can form a basis for continuing conversation around the symbols.) In any case, the book addresses the oft-unrecognized privileging of Western-oriented knowing, while calling for explicit reflection on this privileged position, as part of the discussion around racism.

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<sup>1</sup>A standpoint epistemology as posited by certain Marxist and feminist-oriented authors suggests that research always begins from a standpoint, which needs to be acknowledged. A dialogical standpoint epistemology focuses on continued dialogue around initial standpoints/positions/perspectives. (See Romm, 1997, paras 6.1–6.5.)

In recent articles, written from my base again at Unisa (since 2012), I explore anew current issues in the terrain of research (and theorizing): for example, how one can link “retroductive” reasoning to a dialogical standpoint and at the same time undercut social dominance theory (Romm, 2013a, 2017a); how one can design and use questionnaires within a qualitative constructivist approach (Romm, 2013b); how one can facilitate focus groups in an active manner (Romm, Nel, & Tlale 2013); how storytelling can be interpreted as an expression of “agency” (McKay & Romm, 2015); how one can organize focus groups to take into account Indigenous ways of knowing (Romm, 2015a, 2017b); how an Indigenous (relational) ethic can be brought to bear on the practice of community operational research (Romm, 2017c); how one can theorize literacy initiatives as an adult educator in view of the principles of Ubuntu (Quan-Baffour & Romm, 2015); how one can use evaluative research on literacy to strengthen development initiatives (Romm & Dichaba, 2015); and how one can foreground Indigenous ways of knowing to open up options for redirecting the Anthropocene, that is, our human involvement in the ecological environment (Romm, 2014a, 2017d). These articles all encapsulate my continued efforts to explore new ways of effecting researcher accountability. (See also Romm, 2014b, where I explain how, in my inaugural lecture at Unisa in November 2013, I spoke about my suggestions concerning active and accountable social inquiry.)

This book now takes further my “interest” in thinking through how we (the research community and all those concerned) can justify a kind of inquiry where inquirers do not shy from seeking opportunities to stimulate constructive change via the research endeavor. In order to forward these considerations, I engage with, and try to expand upon, the meaning and practice of what Mertens in her extensive (and eminent) writings came to call a transformative paradigm for guiding social inquiry.

### ***1.1.2 Some Considerations Around the Transformative Paradigm***

This book concentrates on what it might mean to speak about the active role of “transformative” researchers. I focus on offering in-depth discussions, with reference to examples, of how indeed transformative activity can be forwarded in a variety of ways via the research process. I shall indicate why in transformative research, the very term *research* has become reviewed, to highlight more collaborative relationships in the research enterprise. As Midgley et al. state (2007, p. 242), the redefinition of research is especially important in the light of a (long) history of experts treating as objects of study the research participants, under the gaze of would-be scientists. Cram and Mertens (citing Cram, Chilisa, & Mertens, 2013) refer specifically to research involving Indigenous communities, where “the ‘bad name’ that research has within Indigenous communities is not about the notion

of research itself; rather it is about how that research has been practiced, by whom, and for what purpose that has created ill-feeling” (2015, p. 94).

Midgley et al. make the point that in the case of a research project in which they were involved with a Māori community (where the research was linked to exploring options for safe drinking water) a display of “professional identity” on the part of researchers from the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) in New Zealand, would have created distrust (2007, p. 244). If they had emphasized their professional qualifications, track record in research and research experience, this would have been viewed as problematic by community participants, as if these researchers were imposing their expertise on the community (in colonizing style) (p. 244). Researcher “identity” thus had to be reconsidered. In this case, the team of researchers consisted of mainly non-Māori researchers, and the issue of “identity” as researchers needed to be negotiated so that consultation with the community was seen as paramount. Put differently, as explained to me in personal communication by email with Midgley, 28 July 2016, the ESR researchers “needed to be acutely aware of the implications of their [professional] identity from other perspectives and act accordingly”. Ultimately, Midgley et al. (2007) report that their association with a trusted group of people with “strong community networks” enabled what they call a “blurring of the boundary of the ESR team’s ‘outsider’ identity in favor of a partnership identity” (p. 242).

As it happened in this research project, Midgley et al. (2007, p. 244) remark that at some stage, certain “weight” (importance) did come to be assigned to aspects of the ESR researchers’ professional identity, namely at the point at which the Community Health Trust, in conjunction with a local Māori committee, wished the research results to be presented to a “whole of government” seminar hosted by the Office for the national community and voluntary sector—part of the Ministry of Social Development. However, this was in order to assign credence to the research (for the government audience): it did not imply that the research process as it had been conducted was a process of “experts” framing the questions to be explored and defining ways to go about exploring them (without involving participants in these processes). On the contrary, the way in which the ESR researchers liaised with members of the community at all points could be said to have been a mutual encounter.

The intent to develop a collaborative type of involvement with participants in communities which is at the same time meaningful to them (see also Midgley, Johnson, & Chichirau, 2017) is accompanied by definitions of validity that reflect this intention. Gonzalez et al. suggest that the definition of “valid” research becomes broadened so as to accommodate an “expectation that the research question itself is ‘valid’, in the sense of coming from, or being meaningful to, the involved community” (2011, p. S166). This tallies with Mertens’ suggestion that when following a transformative research agenda, researchers should, *inter alia*, make data collection decisions with community members and involve them in interpreting and considering the use of “information” collected, so that the research is likely to forward “the goals of social change and social justice” (2009, p. 313). Mertens refers, by way of example, to research work organized by Chilisa and

Tsheko (2014) aimed at developing an enriched “understanding of the meaning of HIV/Aids in the context of Botswana” (2016, p. 9). She explains this as follows:

In Botswana, sex is regarded as a taboo topic, thus by using proverbs and other indirect ways to discuss the topic, the researchers were providing a safer way for the youth to discuss their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. (Mertens, 2016, p. 9)

What became identified as significant in this process was that “youth wanted relationships and they wanted a future” (Mertens, 2016, p. 10). Mertens cites Chilisa and Tsheko’s elucidation of how interventions aimed at envisaging new futures henceforward became facilitated via the research exploration, seen as a collaborative encounter of the initiating researchers with “the researched” (as co-explorers):

The researched reflect on their qualities and move toward self-discovery, as they dream and envision the best that they could be, dialogue on strategies to implement their dreams, and draw a plan to take them to their destiny. (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014, p. 229, as cited in Mertens, 2016, p. 10)

Mertens also elaborates that as the project progressed, the initiating researchers continued to focus on relationship building in the community, so as to develop “coalitions, networks and connectedness with the community and parents of the youth who were involved as research participants” (2016, p. 10).

The idea of research being a collaborative, relationship-building enterprise is of course not new in the field of social research. Many researchers in the participative research tradition—which includes certain versions of qualitative research and versions of research underpinned by “critical theoretical” traditions—have focused on what Kovach (2009, p. 26) summarizes as “the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied”. Such researchers have questioned the notion of research as setting out to seek “a singular static truth from an objective distance” (p. 26). This search for univocal “truth” is associated with what is called the positivist or postpositivist paradigm. The positivist/postpositivist philosophy of science is often regarded as suspect within postcolonial thought, because of its historical links to colonial practices of imposing ways of seeing “realities”, which fail to do justice to alternative ways of engaging with “reality”, and alternative possibilities for acting (Bishop, 1994; Bristol, 2012; Collins, 2000; Harris & Wasilewski, 2004; Lavia & Mahlomaholo, 2012; Ndimande, 2012).

I have used as my first example in this section the deliberations provided by Midgley et al. (2007) (who self-name their work as critically systemic), not only because of their redefinition of researcher identities but also because the example is set within a discussion of environmental concerns regarding water use in the community. The importance of incorporating ecological concerns into discussions of social justice is one of the themes that will be looked into in the book (with detailed examples provided in Chap. 6). The focus on social *and environmental* justice is regarded as particularly important by certain (if not all) Indigenous authors and others who regard our human connectedness with the non-human world, our spiritual being in relation with all living and non-living things, and our

(non-anthropocentric) stewardship role as crucial to bear in mind (cf. Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Goduka, 2012; McIntyre-Mills, 2014a, 2014b; McIntyre-Mills & Binchai, 2014; Molefe, 2015; Murove, 2005, 2007; Quan-Baffour, 2017; Ross, 2010; Smith, 1999; Wane, Akena & Ilmi, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Smith suggests that a common thread that Indigenous authors stress, is the “importance of making connections and *affirming connectedness* .... Connectedness positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment” (1999, p. 148, my italics). Lowan-Trudeau sums up that “inherent in most Indigenous worldviews is recognition of the inherent value, spirit, and interconnectedness of all people, living creatures, and bioregions” (2014, p. 356). McIntyre-Mills calls this a “systemic ethics” approach, where the systemic concept of co-determination implies that “the environment is a living entity which co-determines our very existence, not as a commodity from which to extract endless profit” (2014a, p. 133).

How then do these considerations tie in with what Mertens has called the “transformative paradigm”? Mertens suggests that paradigms “serve as ... frameworks that guide researchers in the identification and clarification of their beliefs with regard to ethics, reality, knowledge, and methodology” (2010, p. 469). But she recognizes that paradigms can of course also be used to classify (place) *others’* research as falling more or less within the scope of a paradigmatic way of conceiving and conducting research (as defined by the paradigms that she distinguishes).

Kovach points to Mertens’ account of “positivism/postpositivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatic [research] as each being a distinctive paradigm” (2009, p. 26). She argues that Indigenous methodologies can “find an ally”, especially in qualitative/constructivist and transformative approaches (2009, p. 27). She also notes (2009, p. 27) that “the field of qualitative research is an inclusive space”, which can include various understandings of what commitment to qualitative and transformative research might mean in practice. However, Kovach has also expressed some reservations with aligning (current views of) transformative and Indigenous paradigms too closely (pp. 176–177). As the book proceeds, I show in what respects Indigenous paradigms offer specific understandings of “being-in-relation” (see also Romm, 2015a, 2015b, 2017e; Romm & Tlale, 2016; Tlale & Romm, 2017), and specific understandings of what this implies for responsible research practice. In Table 1.2 (in Sect. 1.3.5), following Chilisa (2012, p. 40), I include a heading on Indigenous paradigmatic research to point to certain distinct

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<sup>2</sup>Molefe (2015) explains that because African metaphysical systems generally construe reality in terms of all-inclusive relationships, he does not agree with certain (dominant) interpretations of African humanism (including that of Gyekye, 1995, 2010) where implicit dichotomies between “humans” and “nature” are posited. He sets out, as he puts it, “to challenge and repudiate humanism as the best interpretation of African ethics” (2015, p. 59). He considers that “a truly African ethics ... demands that we accord moral status to some aspects of the environment, like animals, for their own sakes” (pp. 59–60). He favorably cites Murove’s article (2007), where the concept of *Ukama* is seen as linked with that of *Ubuntu*.