

Why Decolonise Research Methods? Some Initial Thoughts

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Over the past few years debates on decolonisation have dominated scholarly deliberations. Coloniality and decoloniality are concepts that are being used by a wide range of scholars, artists, and social activists in the Americas and increasingly in Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. This quest for decolonisation has been called the ‘docolonial turn’- which is rooted in struggles against racism, imperialism, apartheid, etc (see Maldonado-Torres 2006 for an elaboration of this concept). The epistemic decolonial turn is thus a project that aims to “epistemologically transcend, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology.” (Grosfoguel (2007:211). However, as Walter Dignolo (2011) reminds us, the decolonial turn is not a new phenomenon, not least in Africa. It can be traced to thinkers of liberation like Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Franz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Thomas Sankara, Steve Biko, to name but a few. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also put a case for decoloniality in his famous 1979 book *“Decolonising the Mind”*. Thus the political and epistemic foundations of decoloniality have been in place for over five decades. The resurgence of debates on decolonisation in South Africa, especially recent calls by university students to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum and University structures and cultures, provide an opportunity for us in the HSRC to critique and rethink the way we conduct our research. Our mantle at the HSRC – ***Social Sciences that makes a difference OR “Solving social problems through research”*** – is an important reminder of why our research should be relevant and life-changing. This forces us to continually ask what strategies, we at the HSRC, might use to conduct research that makes a difference and speaks to the needs of the communities we are researching. We need to critique the discourses and practices that have underpinned our research practices in the HSRC over the years and explore the implications of “decolonial turn” for our work.

The question of decolonising research methods is not new. Anti-colonial, activist and grassroots research methods emerged in Latin America in the 1970s. Great work in this area has also been conducted in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, especially on research with indigenous communities. In South Africa, scholars such as Archie Mafeje (e.g. 2000), Achille Mbembe (e.g 2001, 2015); (e.g Sabelo Ndlovu- Gatsheni (e.g 2013), Relebohile Molestane (e.g 2015) have engaged with this issue from varied disciplinary perspectives.

My talk is organised around 3 categories:

- Coloniality of knowledge
- The geo-body and politics of knowledge

- Decolonizing research and practice.

Coloniality of Knowledge

The term 'coloniality' in simple terms refers to the 'continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administration' (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007). Coloniality exists in the realms of power, knowledge and being. Although the three – power, knowledge and being are interrelated, our focus today is on 'knowledge'. Coloniality of knowledge refers to the manner in which Eurocentric knowledge systems are privileged over other knowledges and epistemes (Mignolo 2007). Knowledges outside the bounds of Western modernity are often ignored, marginalised or repressed. Therefore our very own understanding of the social world remains largely colonised without us even being aware of it. Western knowledge remains common sense and hegemonic. Our framework as researchers and our ways of being, speaking, listening, knowing, relating and seeing is rooted in Euro-American ideals informed by Western knowledge systems. The very structure and fabric of our disciplines is mired in a history of whiteness and coloniality. Decolonial perspectives thus point to these colonial continuities embedded not just in the epistemic foundations, but also in the actual practices, i.e. the craft of research as canonised in research methods and methodologies. The Euro-American methodological canon, namely, qualitative, quantitative and triangulation is basically what we are comfortable with.

Since our Western education has constructed our ideas of what is good, ideal and normal, it is important to acknowledge our constitutive blindness to other forms of seeing, knowing and being in the world that do not fit what we can recognize through the frames of references we have become used to. Lewis Gordon (2011) reminds us that our epistemic blindness prevents us from listening to possibilities that, for example, are not framed by **Cartesian** – rationality), **teleological** (focusing on a foreseeable end goal) and **universal reasoning** (the idea of only one possible rationality) - these are essential categories we have learned through our Western-style schooling and education.

The basic tenets of Western knowledge should not be seen as all good or all bad, but we should recognise that they are **historically situated**, and **potentially restrictive** if universalised through our projects, as they prevent the imagination of other possibilities.

The geo- and body politics of knowledge

The second issue we need to come to terms with is that of location/or the locus of enunciation. From where does knowledge come? From where do we as researchers think?. Why is Western knowledge considered neutral, universal and removed from location (e.g. Mignolo 2002, Maldonado-Torres 2004), while other knowledges are considered provincial and situated? Why has Eurocentered epistemology carefully hidden its own geo-historical and bio-graphical locations? Therefore canon of methodology as we know hides its locus of enunciation by claiming to be objective, totalising and universal. The task for us therefore is

to disrupt this universalism by recognising that Western knowledge and methods of doing research are actually situated in certain historical and social realities. This knowledge is actually provincial to Europe or America. We have to recognise that there is no single epistemic tradition from which to arrive at truth or universality. Decolonisation of knowledge is needed whereby the epistemic perspectives and insights of critical thinking from the “Global South” are also taken seriously. Already there is a growing literature on positionality and the way it shapes our research process and writing. Again in feminist theories, the concepts of standpoint and location are important. Decoloniality invites Africans to think from where they are as the first step towards decolonisation of the mind. Chinweizu (1987) using the concept of Africanity as a theoretical lens, emphasises the importance of working from the standpoint of Africa and not from some abstract universalism. The philosophy of Africanity privileges Africa as a starting point of subjectivity. Archie Mafeje (2000) has called this *endogeneity* — which is a scholarship grounded in and driven by the affirmation of African experiences and an intellectual standpoint derived from a rootedness in the African conditions. We need to privilege perspectives, insights and knowledges flowing from African societies within the continent and in the diaspora, of course without necessarily throwing away progressive aspects of Euro-American epistemologies. Mbembe (2015) points out, decolonisation “is not about closing the door to European or other traditions. It is about defining clearly what the centre is”. So it’s not ignoring Western knowledge, but it is about re-centring Africa and its experiences.

Decolonizing research and practice

A decolonising approach to research is twofold:

- a) the deconstruction of existing methodologies and methods that (re)produce the coloniality of knowledge; and
- b) a reconstruction/or reinvention of research practice

Decolonising research (DR) methods requires a purposeful and deliberate approach to “transforming the institution of research, the deep underlying structures and taken-for-granted ways of organizing, conducting, and disseminating research knowledge” (Tuhivai Smith 1999). DR urges us to account for the positionality of the researcher in relation to the field, the people investigated, and the “geopolitics of knowledge” (Mignolo) more broadly. At the same it enables local/marginalised communities to theorize their own lives and forces us researchers to acknowledge their as valid as academic knowledge (Zavala 2013). Participatory Action Research methods and feminist methodologies have achieved some of the research practice advocated by DR, but not all PAR projects are decolonising projects – it is the collective spaces rather than individuals that make decolonising research possible.

Some questions we need to ask in the HSRC:

- What are the implications of decentering or decolonizing methodology? What does this imply in terms of research agendas, funding, research cooperation, evaluations, case studies, and dissemination?
- How do requirements of decolonial research clash with ethical applications, academic regulations and guidelines?
- How can new forms of doing research be mobilised (e.g. story-telling, oral history, auto-ethnography, action-research, testimonies)?
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Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to emphasise that decolonising research and knowledge requires that we have the courage, strength, confidence and humility to rise to the challenges and difficulties of current times; it commands that we educate ourselves to become comfortable with the discomfort of disrupting the known and common sense. It calls us to become inspired and excited by the new possibilities opened by uncharted spaces, processes and encounters that do not offer any pre-determined scripts or guarantees.

We should not be afraid of **epistemic disobedience**, as Mignolo (2009) states. We need to design methods that speak to our realities – methods that are participative, interactive and emancipatory, and of course ethical. Our very own Archie Mafeje advocated for **combative methodology**, which by its very nature is disobedient.

Thank you.

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