

How can a decolonised research culture improve research integrity and what are the ethical implications?

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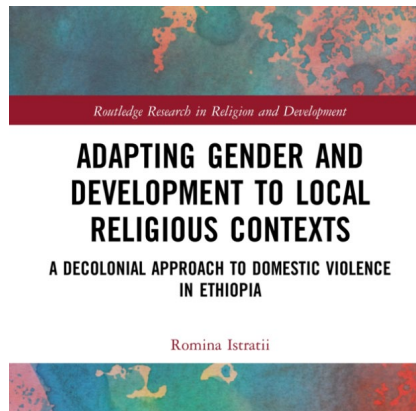
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Applying a Decolonial Lens
to Research Structures,
Norms and Practices in Higher
Education Institutions

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Decolonial
Subversions





Understanding research integrity

“While sometimes assumed to relate largely to cases of misconduct, research integrity encompasses the behaviours, actions, norms and culture that support good research practice, as well as the trustworthiness of the research record. Integrity also lies at the heart of reproducibility and replicability of research. Rigour in research methodology, as well as honesty and transparency in how the research is carried out, is what allows people to either reproduce research, or to understand how the researchers came to their findings.”

*Research Integrity in the UK Annual Statement
2023, p. 7*

Understanding decolonisation/decoloniality

Decolonisation can be understood differently depending on how one relates to histories of colonialism, as well as one's geography, history, wealth group, and socio-cultural locus ('positionality').



Decolonisation may refer to the territorial and political decolonisation that occurred in former colonies (e.g. Haitian revolution in 1789, independence movements post-1945) but it may also refer to epistemological, cultural or cognitive emancipation/liberation after territorial decolonisation has occurred.

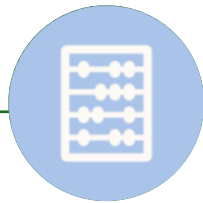


Decoloniality emerged in Latin America as a critique of on-going colonialisation (the coloniality of power) through knowledge, imperialism and globalisation. Decolonial thinkers speak of the coloniality/modernity matrix that extends beyond colonialism.

Epistemological inequalities

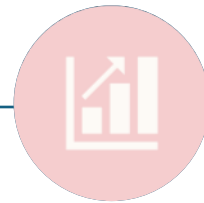
- Black educator Gloria Ladson-Billings has noted, “[e]pistemology is ultimately linked to worldview. (2005, 258). Individuals are always “epistemologically situated” (Istratii, 2017), which means that our personal worldviews and cultural socialisation influence our conceptual, theoretical and analytical frameworks.
- Historically, the Western European colonialists (and other colonial/imperial forces around the world) projected their worldviews, interests and understandings of humanity onto the “other” (Fanon, 1961; Said, 1978). Colonialism continued through the mind and culture (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986) and the paraphernalia of western modernity (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).
- Many of these assumptions have continued through power asymmetries in research practices (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999).
- Knowledge transfer continues to be still mostly one-way with high-income countries considered to have a surplus and low- and middle-income countries a deficit in knowledge (Mormina and Istratii, 2021).

An unequal world system



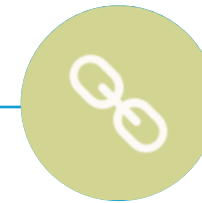
EPISTEMOLOGY

- Western epistemology has dominated, and this has been embedded in colonial legacies and culturally specific (Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment) concepts and standards of knowledge validity.



IDEOLOGY

- This epistemological dominance is supported by the ideological, normative/cultural and political prevalence of HICs and affiliated institutions and organisations.



STRUCTURE

- Material inequalities maintain epistemological inequalities, with most funding being based in HICs (or elite institutions/groups within LMICs), dictating their own standards of excellence.

A decolonial approach to research integrity

- An approach that looks at the system as a whole and understands how epistemological and power asymmetries, related to colonialism (western and regional colonialisms) and the dominance of western modernity/coloniality in the world have influenced and continue to influence research practices and standards, including definitions and criteria of research integrity and ethics.

Applying a decolonial lens to research practices and norms



Research methodologies,
practices and ethics
(researchers)



Research funding priorities,
eligibility criteria and due
diligence structures (funders)



Research development
practices, partnerships-building
approaches (research offices)

Read about the Decolonising Research Initiative at SOAS: [Decolonising research initiative | SOAS](#)

Applying a decolonial lens to research

- Research practice, ethics and impact defined within a western European/North American regulatory framework.
- Standards of knowledge validation favoured in the western world (positivist methods, quantitative metrics/data, etc.) promoted as normative, with lived experience, embodied or non-discursive knowledge often being marginalised or ignored.
- Modes and forms of knowledge production defined within a modernity/coloniality paradigm that favours culture-specific 'academic standards' (citation politics, peer review norms and biases, including prevalence of single-author publications, 'locked' knowledge).

Applying a decolonial lens to research

- Research practices and norms defined within a reward system and culture that has often perpetuated ethnocentrism, inequitable partnerships and the instrumentalisation of research participants, research assistants or communities.
- Quality of research outputs dictated by dominant epistemological standards and culture (high-impact journal publications versus non-English outputs) and value of outputs not historically determined by their impact or benefit for real communities.

A pair of black-rimmed glasses is placed on an open book. A red bookmark is visible on the left page. The background is a soft-focus wooden surface.

Decolonising research
cultures and improving
research integrity

Step 1: Recognising and diversifying

Recognise that Anglo-American/European standards are not universal or normative but have been inevitably culturally-influenced.

Understand how research practice and research standards are defined and conceptualised in other contexts to make research integrity language more accessible and diverse.



Knowledge 'ownership' and plagiarism

- The concept of plagiarism is essentially premised on an understanding that knowledge can be 'owned' and attributed.
- In many contexts of the world knowledge is seen as collective and open.
- This points to the need to understand diverse approaches to engaging ancestral knowledge and to ensure that Anglo-American/European definitions are not assumed as universal and self-explanatory but are properly presented and justified to non-western collaborators.

Step 2: Making visible positionality-related power and biases



how our positionality (the cumulative effect of our identity, affiliations, socialisation and geographical locus) informs our research and the epistemological/theoretical assumptions that we take for granted vis-à-vis the research context)



how our positionality informs our engagements with research participants, research assistants and research collaborators and project partners



how we credit the contributions of research communities, research assistants and project collaborators

Decolonial ethics

- Moves beyond following ethical standards as enforced by UK HEIs, funders and regulatory bodies.
- Centres on researcher positionality and embodying an ethos of humility, reflexivity and self-awareness with respect and care for research communities and collaborators.

Ethical questions to reflect on



Do we implement epistemological and methodological reflexivity and humility in our cross-cultural work?



Are we open to genuinely learning from our research participants and collaborators (as opposed to assuming ourselves as the 'experts')?



Are we prepared to reflect on and recognise our epistemological, theoretical, disciplinary and personal biases and to challenge them throughout the research?



Do we consider, acknowledge and integrate the contributions of collaborators, even if they may hold positions of lesser power?

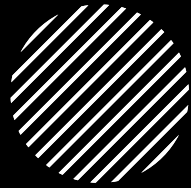


Do we seriously consider the impact that our research may have on the research participants and their communities and are we prepared to step back when negative impact is anticipated?



Are we prepared to acknowledge negative or null results and outcomes, and even admit honest mistakes?

Individual responsibilities and initiatives



- Heightened reflexivity about epistemological and theoretical legacies, and a closer engagement with context-specific worldviews and knowledge systems can subvert the dominance of a single lens via which to see the world.
- More inclusive, transparent and humbler engagements with communities, research assistants and research collaborators can foster productive collaborations and joint research outputs that can improve research rigour and knowledge-exchange across societies.

Institutional and regulatory initiatives and responsibilities



Regulatory bodies and funders could revisit and open their definitions, criteria and language of research integrity to encompass decolonial ethics.



Universities could reward and encourage research where decolonial ethics are visibly and demonstrably embodied, and conversely cease to tolerate extractivist research cultures (e.g. idea appropriation where power imbalances exist among researchers, exploitation of research participant experience and knowledge, etc.)



HE environment should normalise zero or limited ‘success’ in research (e.g. finding null results, or admitting that research is not generalisable due to methodological decisions that were not sufficiently reflected on at early stages) and decisions to avoid research or withdraw from research contexts where impact is anticipated to be negative.



Everyone's responsibility

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Additional resources

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- 'Decolonising Knowledge by Empowering the Margins.' The Know Show Podcast. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuxNPI-58Bw>
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- Istratii, Romina (2020) *Bridging the Epistemological, Structural and Normative in Knowledge Production: How Euro-centrism is Systemically Preserved and Can Be Subverted*. In: LSE Africa Talks: Decolonising African Knowledge Systems, 16 January 2020, LSE. Access podcast and slides here: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2020/01/20200116t1830vWT/Africa-Talks-Decolonising-Knowledge-Systems>