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Article

Decolonising research methodologies: opportunity and caution

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Abstract

Decolonising methodologies attempt to bring together a number of critical, indigenous, liberation, and feminist methodologies to strengthen decolonisation research. Decolonising methodologies have potential, but it is important to be aware of possible limitations. I argue that the manner in which decolonising methodologies is located in the paradigm debate is limiting and prescriptive, lacks clarity of the concepts that it draws on, reproduces problematic representations of the marginalised, overemphasises how much choice researchers have in choosing decolonising methodologies, and does not address the systemic barriers to decolonisation scholarship. Recommendations for how to strengthen decolonising methodologies are presented.

Keywords

Decolonising methodologies, knowledge production, paradigms, representation

Introduction

Decolonising methodologies bring together, among others, indigenous, transformative, liberation, feminist, and critical methodologies to strengthen decolonising research. Spurred on by Linda Smith's (1999) seminal book by the same title, a number of innovative and creative research methods have gained traction, including photovoice, autoethnography, visual methods, storytelling, and participatory approaches to strengthen decolonisation scholarship. The literature is vast with a plethora of articles (e.g., Brannelly, 2016), books (e.g., Chilisa, 2011; Smith, 1999), special issues (e.g., Adams, Dobles, Gómez, Kurtiş, & Molina, 2015; Fredericks & Adams, 2011), a handbook (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008), and symposia that have attempted to collate knowledge on decolonising methodologies and/or reflect on the relationship between research methodology and decolonisation.

In this article I pose five critiques of 'decolonising methodologies'. I argue that while decolonising research methodologies are useful and necessary in the current political moment, there is a

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danger that the movement simplifies the relationship between 'research methodologies' and 'decolonisation'. Importantly, if not properly interrogated, the decolonising methodologies movement may inadvertently reinforce the systems that it critiques. Some of the critiques that I present are old but important, given the current attention on research methodologies in decolonisation writings. I write in the spirit that if decolonising methodologies are to meaningfully contribute to decolonising knowledge production, the movement has to be aware of potential blind spots.

Decolonising methodologies brings together a number of theoretical and paradigmatic strands, some of which would be uncomfortable being lumped together (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). The disparate strands also make it difficult to pin down a definition of decolonising methodologies. However, questions about the novelty of decolonising methodologies or a definition is less important to me, than how those methodologies function in the current decolonisation turn. I take the view that methodologies mobilising under a 'paradigm' (e.g., qualitative methodologies under constructivism in the early 1990s), in this case decolonisation, serve an important *political* function to legitimise their presence and strengthen scholarship. Paradigmatic partnerships are complex, prone to simplification, and sometimes fleeting, but are important as political movements to strengthen a cause.

Central to decolonising methodologies is a discontent with knowledge production rooted in the global North (Zavala, 2013). The movement attempts to disrupt the universal ideas about the human condition and gives voice to those who have been historically overlooked or deliberately marginalised. It also provides a space and language for researchers from marginalised groups who have often been positioned as 'outsiders-within' the academy (Zavala, 2013). It raises questions about who we focus our research on, the types of questions that are asked, the relationship between researchers and participants, the values underpinning research, what can be inferred from the study, and the contributions to equality and justice. Decolonising methodologies also focus on the research enterprise itself, its pedagogies, systems, exclusions and power that privilege certain knowledges over others.

Drawing on decolonisation methodologies can be useful to decolonisation research in South African psychology, as we see in this special issue and elsewhere (see, for example, Carolissen et al., 2017; Segalo, Manoff, & Fine, 2015; Sonn, Stevens, & Duncan, 2013). However, we should not assume that certain methodologies are *de facto* more likely to contribute to decolonisation than others. For example, it is often suggested that participatory action research can contribute more to decolonisation research than quantitative cross-sectional surveys, or that quantitative methodologies are conservative and that qualitative methodologies are politically woke. There are, of course, instances when this may be true. However, quantitative research can be useful in social justice research (Cokely & Awad, 2013). Similarly, the majority of qualitative and/or mixed methods studies do not contribute to decolonisation scholarship. In cannot be true, therefore, that a methodology separated from its overarching paradigm is necessary or sufficient for decolonisation research.

Thus, decolonising methodologies, like other methodologies, are not as straightforward as is sometimes represented in the literature. It is important, therefore, to interrogate the assumptions of decolonising methodologies, if anything, to make the movement more impactful. If we do not do this, we run the risk of perpetuating a system of knowledge production that is at best powerless, and at worst continues to produce limited knowledge under a new guise. What follows are five critiques of decolonising methodologies.

Critiques of decolonising methodologies

Paradigms

A persistent feature of South African psychological research is the reliance on the epistemological stances view of paradigms. The epistemological stances link research methodologies (how we do

research), ontology (our views about the nature of the social world), epistemology (researchers' role in relation to participants), axiology (values and ethics), and so forth with paradigms (broader philosophical views about the social world). The epistemological stances view of paradigms was important because it legitimised qualitative methods alongside quantitative methods in a philosophical taxonomy of knowledge. The table was half a page long (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) with just four paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism, but has grown to over 20 pages (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) with more columns and rows added with each new paradigm that has sought credibility in a taxonomy of methodologies.

Even methodologies aligned to decolonising methodologies have not escaped the epistemological stances table. Chilisa (2011), for example, locates indigenous postcolonial research methodologies in the epistemological stances tables in her seminal book on the topic. She compares the indigenous research paradigm with positivism, interpretivism, and transformative paradigms and details how the indigenous paradigm differs from other paradigms in terms of the purpose of research, ontology, epistemology, and so forth. In doing so, she establishes what indigenous research methodologies *are* based, in part, on how they differ from other more established paradigms.

The epistemological stances is useful to introduce researchers to how research methodologies are embedded in philosophical assumptions about the social world. It is also useful to show the range of available methods and paradigms. The problem is that table has become unwieldy and less useful as each methodological movement has attempted to find a column (paradigm) of its own.

Importantly, the table tends to simplify paradigms and their relationship with methods. For example, many mixed method advocates identify pragmatism as its paradigmatic partner (Feilzer, 2010). To do this, pragmatism, a broad and complex meta-philosophy, is grossly simplified to accommodate the legitimacy of the mixed methods movement. Indeed, many pragmatists would refute the idea that it is a paradigm at all and would hate to be aligned to one methodology (Menand, 1997). A similar problem exists with decolonisation methodologies. For example, African feminisms would resist being uncritically lumped with Western feminisms or other critical paradigms that have overlooked or entrenched patriarchy under a paradigm called decolonisation.

In addition, the alignment between paradigm and methods implicit in the epistemological stances table has become limiting and prescriptive. Regardless of whether the research contributes to the social good or to justice, if it meets the 'within column' technical standards of the methods-paradigm alignment, ethics, style, and quality, then it is deemed adequate. It is indeed possible to review an article or a proposal based only on the criteria implied in the table, regardless of the content.

Most importantly, if we are to rely exclusively on the epistemological stances view to locate decolonising methodologies, it may become just another paradigm alongside established paradigms in a table, which may not only simplify and prescribe what it is, but forecloses a meta-critique of the *systems* that produced the epistemological stances table in the first place (a point I will return to later).

If we are to take seriously calls to decolonise methodologies, then psychological research needs to loosen its reliance on the epistemological stances as its *only* source of thinking about paradigms. By this, I do not mean that we should dismiss it altogether, but that it should be placed in perspective. There are other ways of thinking about paradigms, including the 'community of scholars' view and the 'model example' view (Denscombe, 2008; Morgan, 2007). For example, there is a growing body of literature that focuses on deepening what is currently being called African-centred psychology. There is also a lively and rich development of psychological theory in relation to relevant issues such as disability, sexualities, racism, class, incarceration, migration, environment, and violence. Indeed, there are pockets of scholarship that resemble community of scholars

drawing on overlapping but sometimes unique methodologies. Do we need the epistemological stances to augment the theoretical development? Do we still need to justify their methodologies by locating them alongside other paradigms?

Concepts

The concepts used in decolonising research methodologies such as decolonisation, social justice, inclusion, empowerment, and so forth are sometimes used simplistically. For example, take the familiar trope that 'decolonisation' is the 'paradigm' in which decolonising methodologies are located. But what exactly do we mean by decolonisation? The decolonisation literature is complex, rich, and is linked to concepts such as decoloniality (Maldonado–Torres, 2011), postcolonial (Mbembe, 1992), and metacolonial (Bulhan, 2015). For some, decolonisation is a call to purge a discipline of Western thought and replace it with 'indigenous' knowledge systems; for others, to include local and indigenous knowledge alongside Western knowledge; and for others, it is to give voice to the marginalised. For others, it is a passing fad, a recycled set of ideas that have very little critical bearing on the critical work that needs to be done. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in varied and complicated ways in which decolonisation has been written into psychological research.

What I *am* suggesting is that if we are to use decolonising methodologies to decolonise psychological knowledge, then we should be aware of the complexity of the term 'decolonisation', including its rich, contested, and complicated history. The interrogation of decolonisation should also include negative aspects. For example, the term 'decolonisation' was actively used by the apartheid state to develop the former Bantustan homelands, such as the Transkei, into independent countries. The perverse motivation was that, in keeping with decolonisation (independence in a number of African countries) that was occurring in the rest of the continent in the 1960s and 1970s, Bantustans could achieve 'decolonisation' from the colonial oppression of White South Africa by forming independent 'countries' (van Rensburg, 1976). All this meant was that the apartheid state entrenched its vision of segregation and separate development in the name of decolonisation and self-determination. I wonder if White researchers doing participatory research in the then homelands in the 1970s and 1980s, would have considered themselves to be using decolonising methodologies? I am not at all suggesting that all references to decolonisation are, or have the potential to be negative, but it is important to understand the rich and complex history of the term and its socio-political assemblages in a given moment.

Similarly, the literature on decolonising methodologies often claims to contribute to 'social justice'. But what exactly do we mean by 'social justice'? It is often assumed that we agree what social justice is and how we can achieve it. We imagine that our decolonised methodologies contribute more to 'social justice' than other methodologies. Yet, the term 'social justice' is complex and contested in terms of its definitions, theories, rights, liberties and obligations implied within those theories; and the institutions, laws, and structures that are meant to uphold social justice (Barnes, in press; Pratt, Zion, & Loff, 2012). There are also different foci of social justice, including how resources should be distributed (distributive justice); the types of justice in contexts of transition (transitional justice); the laws, organisations, and governance structures (procedural justice); and how people are treated with dignity and respect (interactional justice) (Jost & Kay, 2010). More importantly, many atrocities and injustices have occurred precisely because of moral claims to 'social justice'. For example, social justice that referenced the 'lawfulness', 'peace', and 'freedom' was drawn by perpetrators to justify xenophobic attacks on foreign-owned business in South Africa (Palmary, 2017).

Another familiar trope is that decolonising methodologies are more 'empowering' than other methodologies. The decolonising methodologies literature imagines that researchers work 'with' not 'on' marginalised communities, educating them on their rights, offering them a 'voice' in, and through member checking the final research product and, in the process, empowering them to reduce social injustices. The focus on empowerment is particularly noticeable in psychology, where the emphasis of much research is often on identifying the causes of social injustices and attempting to reduce injustices through improving participants' knowledge, agency, volition, participation in governance processes, and social capital (Winter & Hanley, 2015). Researchers are positioned as 'change agents' who not only give voice to the marginalised through their research but also in the process educate them on their rights, liberties, and appropriate channels to remedy the situation. Methodologists are sometimes represented as transformative 'healers' who use research to improve the lives of the marginalised (Mertens, 2003).

However, some authors have been critical of 'empowerment', in particular, the assumption that improving the manner in which marginalised communities 'think' about their circumstances will stimulate them and/or others to act if they are motivated enough and if their environments are conducive to change (Barnes, 2015). What this ignores, of course, are the upstream causes of social injustices like capitalism, globalisation, patriarchy, and inequality that are the more important drivers of social injustices.

Representation

The literature on decolonising methodologies makes reference to the poor, marginalised, and disenfranchised. Decolonising methodologies, particularly indigenous methodologies, give voice to issues of 'indigenous' populations. I agree with these propositions for the most part. Psychological research has had a long and problematic history of reproducing universalistic notions of the human condition, have contributed directly to injustices (e.g., its complicity with apartheid or more recently with torture), or by the very least turning a blind eye to injustices in the name of scientific neutrality.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of conceptualising of what constitutes 'indigenous' (e.g., in our context, what is 'African' in African psychology? [Palmary & Barnes, 2015]), a danger is that in calling attention to the plight of indigenous people, decolonising methodologies may simplify highly complex groups. They reproduce racist, sexist, and classed representations of those groups. In the global South, participants, particularly poor women, are all too often infantilised and represented as in need of assistance (Burman, 2008). The 'marginalised' are sometimes reduced to simplistic language, cultural, spiritual, and ethnic representations. Although decolonising methodologies may take a more respectful and relational approach to research with marginalised communities, they sometimes simplify 'indigeneity' to make the point about that marginalisation. Perhaps simplification is a necessary evil to show just how untransformed psychological research is, but it may be something that inadvertently reproduces racist and sexist representations of the beneficiaries of research.

A further aspect of representation is *who* is writing about decolonising methodologies. There is a need for more representation from the global South in the decolonising methodologies literature. I do not wish to suggest only people from marginalised groups can write about the marginalised. However, we do need more diverse contributions but to also balance the all-too-common scenario of Western voices in speaking about and on behalf of local people. Importantly, there is a case to be made for addressing the systems of exclusion that prevent writers from marginalised communities from entering as well as their experiences of marginalisation within the academy.

Systems

Universities promote universal methodological and bio-medicalised ethics criteria that in many instances discourage decolonising methodologies. In my presentations and discussions about decolonising methodologies, the most frequently asked questions relate to the disjuncture between decolonising methodologies and university research review processes. Someone once asked me how she should obtain ethics clearance to interview the non-living? Similarly, a colleague recounted she had witnessed someone do an interview with a non-living ancestor. My first thought (sadly) was how such a study would get ethics clearance. Other questions included, where do I publish my research using decolonising methodologies? How do methodological and ethics reviews limit the possibilities of the kinds of questions that can be asked? How is it that publications that lay claim to decolonisation, liberation, and social justice cost so much? Who stands to gain from indigenous research in the current system (Keane, Khupe, & Seehawer, 2017)?

Decolonising methodologies compel us to focus on the systems that reproduce and reinforce certain types of research/ers. However, postgraduate degree and research committees, ethics committees, and research quality reviews incentivise methodologies and types of research over others. Creative research is suppressed because it would not pass the muster of research review committees. Research review committees stifle methodologies that do not fit neatly with their assessment criteria and they encourage such studies to fit in with politically insipid frameworks such as indigenous knowledge systems that are constructed as separate from the mainstream.

Again, I am not suggesting that we do not have regulations and guidelines for research, but it is important that those committees get up to speed with regard to range and complexity of the methodologies that are currently being deployed. Importantly, it is important to draw attention to elements of the research enterprise itself that serve as barriers to decolonisation scholarship.

Choice

Decolonising methodologies represent researchers in the global South as having a choice in methodological decisions. The representation of a researcher working with a community using decolonised methodologies because they ‘choose’ to do so is, in fact, a privileged position. Researchers in the global South are often located in large research teams where the research is funded and designed by donors and researchers in the global North, which, of course, is a reflection of the global inequalities in research. Researchers in the global South are sometimes positioned as skilled fieldwork managers with little or no conceptual role in the design, data collection, and interpretation. The situation is exacerbated by the ‘consultant’ culture in many parts of the global South where researchers are compelled to do consulting work for a living at the mercy of donor agencies whose focal areas and methodological preferences may be mainstream (Landau, 2012).

Concluding remarks

Decolonising methodologies mobilise a number of research methodologies to strength decolonisation research in psychology. I welcome decolonising methodologies as a political collective that draws attention to the potential role of research methodology in decolonisation research and psychological knowledge production.

However, I have attempted to show how these efforts are positioned in an understanding of paradigms that is limiting and prescriptive, sometimes lacks clarity of the concepts that it seeks to promote, tends to simplify representation of the beneficiaries of research, overemphasises how much choice researchers have in choosing to used decolonising methodologies, and sometimes

overlooks the systems that serve as barriers to decolonisation scholarship. Given these limitations, and if we are not careful, decolonised methodologies may become just another methodological movement (with its own set of guidelines, systems, language, and quality criteria) that fits into the current system of doing research rather than contribute, critique, or even dismantle it. One can imagine then that we continue with the way we think, teach, practice, and assess research and that we locate decolonising methodology as another 'way of doing' research with its own column in the epistemological stances table alongside other established methodologies. Put differently, how much decolonising can decolonising methodologies achieve if set up in this way?

Going forward, it would be useful to strengthen decolonising methodologies. It is important to synthesise existing work on decolonising methodologies. There continues to be a lot written about decolonising methodologies across disciplines and across locations. There is also a wider variety of methodologies that are being employed in psychological research that lay claim to decolonisation. It would be particularly useful to collate methodologies in efforts to distil lessons learnt. It is also important to collate projects that use innovative methodologies in decolonising research.

It is also important to think through the place of decolonising methodologies in relation to paradigms. The loosening of the language, pedagogy, and practice of research methodologies, together with a re-injection of old philosophical ideas of and an increasing emphasis on learning from indigenous voices, means that it is an opportune time to rethink how we locate decolonising methodologies within the paradigms debate. It is equally important to be clearer about the concepts that decolonising methodologies draw upon and the need to be aware about the politics of representation. In addition, it is important to think about the systems that regulate and govern how research is conducted. It would be naïve at this point to think that research systems would be overly enthusiastic to accommodate some of the issues faced in decolonisation research. There is a need for advocacy around decolonising methodologies in research review processes.

Much of what I have discussed assumes that research has a role to play in decolonisation. It assumes that knowledge produced by those in the know will be heard by decision-makers who, in turn, will affect social change. However, one of the most important early career realisations for me was that research (in the way in which we see it) plays a limited role in social change. A more radical idea for decolonising methodologies is to impart the idea that research is just one small part of decolonisation. It may be useful to document social change, it may be useful to document key barriers to social change, but research in and of itself is neither sufficient nor necessary for decolonisation. It would be more advantageous to understand the socio-political drivers of de/colonisation and social asymmetries together *with* decolonising methodologies than on methodologies alone. It is hoped that this article will stimulate further thinking about decolonising methodologies.

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