

# Decolonizing Psychology

## About Dehumanization in Science and How It Makes Colonialism Look Scientific

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The topic I'll be describing in the essay begins with a relatively minor grievance of mine (compared to the others). The grievance in question is the passive voice in academic text, or rather that some academics, especially lecturers, see active voice as non-academic and ban its use. I've had plenty of experiences with them, most notably during my diploma thesis (alongside many other grievances). I have never received any other explanation for the tendency to dislike the "we"s and "I"s in a text other than that it is non-academic. I think that the implicit reasoning is that it makes the text more objective, by forcing the writer to write the text from an impersonal perspective, supposedly mitigating at least some form of personal bias. However, there is no evidence to support this reasoning. On the contrary, I see this removal of the human element as an obfuscation and a superficial fix to a deeper issue with Psychology and wider science.

In the essay, I'll make a connection between quantitative psychological methodology and colonialist practices. Because I'm a researcher, I'll narrow the scope of the essay to a specific point: the objectification of the researcher and studied populations in relation to the broader scientific Psychology, including the incentives. Then, compare them to the relationships between colonizers, native groups, and capitalism. It is personally important to understand the framework around me. I initially had a dislike for the banning of the "I", but throughout taking this course, alongside Culture and Psychology, I began to connect it to other issues, such as the neglect of sample representativeness and replicability. I'll expand on these topics as well.

## Colonization

Dehumanization is, has been, and will be used as a tool to allow the colonizers to exploit the native populations that have been colonized. It requires a transformation of the exploited into a subhuman in the eyes of the exploiter, as well as in the eyes of the exploited, through poverty and ignorance imposed by force (from Sartre's essay in Memmi, 2013). It is necessary to disconnect the exploited from their identities, for example, by removing their histories (Nkrumah, 1970). This supposed elevation by the European colonizers allowed them to treat the Indigenous peoples without dignity, moral consequences, or other consequences. As Césaire (2022, in Boucher, 2022) points out, contrary to the claim that the frontiers of colonization were driven by the missionaries, educators, and philanthropists, it was the slavers, gold miners, bankers, and traders who drove the exploitation, fueled by self-serving greed. Decolonization in the last century only led to another form of colonialism -- neocolonialism.

Another angle of the issue is that the indigenous communities were forced to adapt to the Western, colonial values, using the juridical system, economic incentives, or forced urbanization. They are forcefully transformed into a Western idea of what a human is (Viniestra-Velázquez, 2020). Consequently, their behavior in WASP is only analyzed through its reductionist lens.

## Psychological Reductionism and Dehumanization

Psychology and colonialism have long interacted (Viniestra-Velázquez, 2020). It is essential to note that psychological findings have been used to justify certain colonial and, in particular, neocolonial attitudes. Reductionism has led to neglect of certain aspects, a consequence of inverse incentives.

In my opinion and experience, empirical psychology's aim (a) is to be objective, but also encompass as much of the human experience as possible. Psychological hypotheses reflect these desires. From its inception, certain areas of Psychology have assumed that there are shared principles among all humans, a sentiment likely derived from the field of medicine, particularly human anatomy, which can be studied. This is especially apparent in the behavioristic approaches, which used simple ideas about human behavior and tested them empirically, to build theories of human behavior. The other side of any empirical theory is that it needs to be (b) feasible. I view the incorrect prioritization of objectivity over feasibility as the primary issue with many psychological hypotheses.

Feasibility can be seen in terms of the experiment cost, which is how it has been presented to me, but now I've come to believe, rather, I know, that it is the research funding and career itself. The guidance that I've received from my supervisors and other researchers has been to focus on the long-term impacts of each paper and research that I spend my time on. Each hypothesis should be enticing enough for researchers to cite it and research committee to fund it. However, it should be specific enough to pass the reviewer. From my perspective, when I first come up with a hypothesis or something I want to study, it needs to be refined. This refinement is where the compromise of feasibility and objectivity happens for me. It is an issue, because of sample representativeness.

## Sample (mis)representativeness

A statistical test needs a hypothesis that can be evaluated using empirical data from, e.g., experiments. This approach needs to reduce the humans that participated in the experiment to only a couple of measurable variables -- age, gender, test scores, ... -- and then compare a score (e.g. average in a t-test) of the populations (different ages). What the statistical test sees, and consequently what the results reflect, is only the variable that the person was reduced to. Treating the rest of the person as a random effect, or something that has no impact on the resulting score (on the average test score of a gender). This is not an inherent problem if the human participants who created the empirically gathered data (the sample) are representative of the population mentioned, even implicitly, in the hypothesis.

For example, if you have a hypothesis saying that drivers above the age 50 drive worse than drivers under 50, the variables that the humans are reduced to are age, who is considered a driver, and also the operationalization of the driving, e.g. reaction time to a situation. In a mathematical sense, the hypothesis can be applied to the drivers, if the sample represents all of their types. If we go to the extreme, then any person is their own type of driver, maybe even depending on their mood, age, etc., thus we end up with a potentially infinite number of combinations, which are not feasible to gather empirically. Thus, researchers need to take a subset of those combinations, and reason its choice. This issue is called sample representativeness.

## Practical Consequences

If the sample isn't representative, then the statistical test results don't extend to the hypothesis (Lu et al., 2025). In practice, this means that the statistical test results (e.g., the  $t$  and  $p$  in a t-test) are just another descriptive number about the sample, and the null hypothesis cannot be rejected nor confirmed, giving the researcher no information about their research hypothesis.

Sample mis-representativeness is one of the causes for the replicability crisis. A problem that psychology has been dealing with for many decades, where the results of many studies, even those that are integral to the field, have not been replicated in later research. If the experimental setting is nearly the same, but the results differ, then the cause is likely the recruitment process, which has led to running experiments in larger teams across multiple sites (Korbmacher, 2023). Another striking thing is how similar the participants usually are, same genders, ages, and education, but still the results are not replicable. It raises serious doubts about the transferability of those findings and choices enacted upon them.

## Colonization of the Researcher and the Participant

Lastly, I'd like to point out the similarity between the relationship of the researcher and participant to the exploiter and the exploited. Not necessarily to suggest that researchers are exploiting participants (though that case can be made), but to show how these similarities can be used to legitimize the system that perpetrates the exploitation.

A key aspect of the interaction between the colonizers and indigenous populations is the dehumanization of both individuals in each interaction. The exploited get dehumanized to allow them to accept their sub-human positions and for the exploiters to perpetrate the violence. The exploiter gets dehumanized as a tool of the system, perpetrating a liberation of sorts. An insight I've been aiming towards is that scientists are dehumanized, mostly by removing them

as conscious actors (in the ways described above), into tools of science, in the pursuit of objectivity. Participants, on the other hand, get dehumanized into variables that describe only a few of their surface-level characteristics.

To emphasize, I'm not suggesting that science involves the colonization of participants by researchers, but rather that the detached relationship that colonizers have with the exploited populations shares a key similarity with the scientific one. It is unclear whether the detached scientific approach was modeled after the way first colonizers interacted with the populations, vice versa, or if they developed alongside one another. However, there are also striking similarities between colonization and how the last century's psychologists experimented. I'm reminded of the Harlow experiments on monkeys, and ones on humans, like the Little Albert experiment.

## Decolonization

I believe the first step is to properly listen to and include the actual experts on the indigenous experience, namely the indigenous researchers and writers. There is a clear sign of frustration and a tendency to diverge from WASP Psychology into localized Indigenous Psychologies. These can better address localized issues, reflect the community's history, values, and directly benefit the community (González et al., 2022). However, there is also a sense of justice, and these problems must be addressed from within Psychology itself.

I've met many researchers in Psychology who are elitist, give no credibility to any other way of reasoning than the scientific method, and boast that their findings are backed up by rigorous research and statistics. I was closer to that mindset than I am now; I especially disregarded religious sources of knowledge. Nonetheless, when the math behind the statistics doesn't work, then what scientists are doing is essentially a lot of reading, and what we'd normally consider pseudo-science — sciency-looking wordplay with some numbers. The scientific method works only if we allow some humility into our research results and methods, but especially when we start to look reasonably at the interpretations we're deriving.

My decolonization, like that of many others, began with the realization of the issue through a historical lesson. It originates in my high-school History curriculum, after realizing that many colonization stories are false and Europeans just used, usually unknowingly, bad political situations in other cultures, total war, and unfair, inhuman tactics to dominate, subjugate, and exploit most of the world. All hidden behind the cultural veil of what is told about colonization and urbanization today.

I knew beforehand that the lack of sample representativeness means that our results are murky at best and wrong on average. What the Psychological courses made me realize, through debate and writing, is that this same elitism, among other things, is what is slowing down the proper inclusion of culture into all of Psychology. Acknowledging culture is a necessary step to better focus hypotheses and ensure that the system we're building is reasonable.

## Restrictions and Papers with Background

Sample representativeness issues can be addressed retrospectively by constraining the population to match the sample demographics. The age, gender, nationality, should become the target population to make sure that the results are as reproducible as possible. This is a conservative approach to minimize the risk of grounding future research on invalid conclusions based on data that are not representative. This does require additional work on our side as researchers, but it does improve, among other things, the meaningfulness of our work.

Inclusion of an author's background is common in non-scientific literature. It is usually in the form of a short bibliography on the cover of the book, describing the author's demographics and other works. Whilst they mostly exist for popularization, they can give us a slight insight into where the author is coming from. As a basic, surface-level example, I expect a different detective story from a Norwegian, than an American, but they are almost never written by the author themselves, but rather the publishing company. However, extended discussions about the book, in connection with the author can often be found. I believe this is transferable to Psychology.

Scientific authors include their own bibliographies in blogs, cvs, etc., from which personal connection to the work is often impossible to infer. I know many peers that are motivated by personal experiences and talk about themselves with respect to their work.

Further, there are often many other factors that influenced the research, such as sample availability, that could be extremely helpful to explain some of the author's choices. Some publishers already require inclusion of a section called *\*Limitations\**, for example ACL, but this section doesn't allow for a nuanced discussion, as it is only for the shortcomings of the article. *\*Discussion\** also serves a similar purpose, but it is usually mainly related to the research results and not its circumstance.

Thus, I advocate for a non-peer-reviewed section, called *\*Research Background\**. That would be focused on the research circumstance:

### **Inception**

- how did the research question/hypothesis first manifest?
  - o including personal experience (mustn't breach authors privacy);
- How did the authors background influence the work? Cultural considerations, personal biases against other topics;
- What were the practical considerations? Research gaps, career advancement...;
- What is the relation to the author's previous research?

### **Design** (if applicable; example on an experiment)

- How does the design process relate to broader perspectives? Previous experience, Cultural considerations (is this a common procedure in my culture?, could other cultures interpret the design differently?);
- What were some specific design choices? Previous unsuccessful or discontinued attempts, issues with design; issues with carrying out the design
- Did it work according to the author's expectation?

### **Interpretation** (somewhat covered by discussion and limitations, focused on cultural aspects)

- How did the author's culture influence the interpretation?

This could also humanize research, moving away from the objectification of the researcher. But I wonder If I have enough perspective to write it properly.

## Conclusion

I've shown my personal connection, forcing passive voice in writing, to what I see as the objectification of the researcher. Then I discussed what I see with sample representativeness, that is the dehumanization of the participant, their reduction to simple variables, without other discussion about their background. Both dehumanizations are similar to what colonialism used on the exploited, but also the exploiters. This scientific link can be used to legitimize neo-colonialistic approaches but also hides problems with theory and sample misrepresentativeness. These problems need to be acknowledged and indigenous perspectives need to be respected. I proposed two ad-hoc solutions that could improve the state of Psychological results: adding the author's background for acknowledgement of cultural influences, and retrospectively constraining the populations to which the results apply, by only using the demographics of the gathered sample. Neither of these solutions fundamentally solve the problem, but opens the issue for researchers, with emphasis on the applicability of our results. They must be applied in parallel with humility about the results, actual acknowledgement of indigenous perspectives, especially on local/indigenous issues.

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