Reclaiming the Decolonial Project: The Politics of Method

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This talk reflects on the ways in which the decolonization movement has been received and influenced the academia. The talk challenges the appropriation of the decolonial project and anti-racism by rooting in a much longer tradition of activism, community knowledge and resistance. Ultimately, the talk argues that these initiatives cannot just be a matter of methodology but must be linked to our everyday ethics, relationships, and academic praxis.

The questions we ask, the voices we use: is a move towards more diverse message carriers and a rethinking of methodological approaches a means to decolonising research methods

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In the UK, Eurocentrically evolved research methodologies and the methods applied to elicit insight into research questions, dominate published academic literature. Implications of approaching research questions from a standpoint that may not culturally fit the world views of the populations under study, is a topic of concern. As the discourse surrounding decolonisation becomes increasingly evident in academia and beyond, inclusion of diverse world views must be considered as a priority.

The importance of including diverse perspectives and experiences in research, especially underrepresented and other marginalised populations, is recognised by increasing numbers of researchers. Moves towards including diverse stakeholders in research have gathered momentum over the past three decades. Researchers across many disciplines now involve stakeholders in various points of the research process from design through to dissemination. Inclusive methodologies, such as Public and Patient Involvement, Participatory Action Research, co-production and other approaches, have been developed to actively include those directly affected by the research. However, is a lack of diverse representation in academia impacting on the research questions being asked, the methods employed, and the way that findings are understood and disseminated?

Decolonisation of research has been defined as "a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels" and has "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (Smith, 2012, p.606). In short, the undoing of colonial ideologies and the inclusion of more diverse races and ethnicities in the academic arena. Decolonisation is a continual process that, with concerted effort and willingness, should moderate existing power imbalances and inherent biases that are deeply embedded within academic thinking and research practices. Yet it is difficult to envisage that decolonisation of research methods can be achieved in the UK academic system. A system where, from teaching of theory to publication of findings, the methods employed are still so heavily entrenched in post-colonial Eurocentric thought. Furthermore, the numbers of senior and/or published academics from global majority backgrounds, particularly those of African heritage, are so small.

This keynote focuses on potential ways to reimagine research methods to ensure cultural sensitivity throughout the research process by the active inclusion of diverse perspectives throughout the academic process. It calls for a move to broaden critical thinking, expand theoretical positions and embrace new methodological approaches. A cultural shift in power is needed to allow space for diverse academic minds to rethink and develop more culturally sensitive methods and contribute. This requires a change in the research methods landscape. In conclusion, there are no easy or quick wins to mitigate the imposition of Western ideologies within research. Rather a need exists for a continued push to include the voices of those who have been oppressed by colonisation. Decolonisation will not prevail if no action is taken to include, not only the narratives and perspectives of oppressed populations, but their active input in all aspects of academic practice from classroom to publication.

(Im)possibility of doing 'decolonial' work in neo-liberal Universities

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As outlined by Held (2019) "…academia has almost exclusively been focusing on Western paradigms and approaches to research…This manifestation of ontological oppression is a result of Western science being exported around the globe from Europe alongside imperialistic and colonial attitudes". It is therefore surprising that Universities in the Western world especially in the UK are increasingly calling for 'decolonisation'- of curriculum, of education and of research. Scholars have called this phenomenon 'intellectual decolonization' (Moosavi 2020), 'decolonization hype' (Behari-Leak, 2019, p. 58) and as 'in vogue in the academy' (Izharuddin, 2019, p. 137). Notably, this push for decolonisation is coming at a time when Universities across the board have increasingly come under criticism for high fees, neoliberal managerialism, precarity of staff, rampant racism, and sexism. While acknowledging that there is range of important 'decolonial' interventions starting from programmes of reparations (viz University of Glasgow) to decolonization of curriculum across the sector (to varying degrees), this keynote draws attention to the (im)possibility of decolonial work in Universities by calling attention to three issues. First the question of university as the gatekeeper/owner of resources such as space, of knowledge paradigms, research, etc. We also address the challenges of the University's complicity in simultaneous dehumanisation and selective "rehumanisation" of staff and students. The keynote calls for a pragmatic facilitation of conditions for diverse kinds of encounters: between students and staff, among students, among staff but also between the neoliberal university and its staff and students. Through a dialogical presentation the speakers would like to imagine what these new encounters may look like?