Decolonizing methods: African studies and qualitative research

Glenn Adams
University of Kansas, USA

Abstract

Interdisciplinary scholarship has highlighted the *coloniality of knowledge*: The idea that mainstream research is an integral component of racialized modernity that reflects perspectives of the powerful and reproduces domination. To counteract the coloniality of knowledge, decolonial theorists advocate research strategies of *accompaniment* that draw upon local understandings as an epistemological basis for rethinking mainstream research. To illustrate these strategies, I briefly describe observations from a program of research that compares experience of relationship across diverse West African and North American settings. Qualitative methods of accompaniment help illuminate forms of marginalized knowledge that not only make visible the political economy of relationship research but also suggest directions for sustainable ways of relating that reflect and promote the interests of broad humanity.

Prevailing ideologies of knowledge production portray scientific research as an identity-neutral tool that, especially in the hands of dispassionate or positionless observers, can yield relatively unbiased readings of objective reality. In contrast, perspectives on the *coloniality of knowledge* (e.g., Mignolo, 2009) emphasize that mainstream research is an integral component of racialized modernity. Regardless of researcher awareness or

Corresponding author:
Glenn Adams, Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.
Email: adamsg@ku.edu

sincere intentions otherwise, mainstream research practices typically reflect the perspective of the powerful and serve to reproduce forms of domination.

Coloniality of knowledge in relationship research

How is this concept relevant to relationship research? One example of the coloniality of knowledge is relative silence regarding perspectives from the Global South. For example, a random sample of 10% (n = 140) of articles from the 30-year history of *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (*JSPR*) yielded only three that considered settings in the Global South (two examples from Singapore, the other from Indian settings).[1] As critics have noted, the basis of research in a few WEIRD—that is, Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010)—settings renders silent or invisible the experience of the majority of humanity and takes the experience of a privileged few as the basis for a science of all.

Beyond absolute silence or outright exclusion, the coloniality of knowledge is also evident when investigators conduct research in the Global South. Most research in the Global South follows a resource extraction model. In the infrequent cases where investigators travel to research settings themselves (rather than rely on a local collaborator), they generally arrive with their own ready-made tools to mine data on behalf of external interests (both academic and material), manage only superficial interactions with local inhabitants, and emerge with conclusions that are loaded with their own preconceptions. Rarely do investigations of relationality among people in the Global South proceed in an organic fashion rooted in the common ground of lived experience in everyday local ecologies.[2]

Besides silence regarding perspectives from marginalized settings, the coloniality of knowledge in relationship research is evident in ideologies of *scientism* (Maxwell, 2004) that are increasingly influential in the neoliberal production model of academic work (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013). These ideologies include the prescription for research practitioners to cultivate an attitude of color-blind neutrality so that their particular identity positions and identity-relevant interests do not impact their observations and interpretations. Ironically, the practical effect of this prescription is not to make observation free from bias or to eliminate the positioned character of knowledge; instead, the call for researchers to ignore identity positions often results in the unwitting adoption of standards of normativity—the neoliberal individualist "reasonable person"—that are no less positioned. Alternatively stated, the abstraction from position and context is not toward a view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986) or a sanitized space akin to the physicists' vacuum (Shweder, 1990), but instead toward a hegemonic position associated with dominant (e.g., Euro-American) sensibilities.

In this way, the prescription for color-blind neutrality and other ideologies of scientism promotes two pernicious consequences associated with the coloniality of knowledge. One pernicious consequence is to denigrate identity-conscious forms of knowledge from marginalized spaces by treating such knowledge as a biased particular or special case rather than a valid source of general truths (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). An even more pernicious consequence is to obscure the operation of power, privilege, and identity positioning within allegedly neutral, mainstream work (Madison, 2005). The abstraction

from position and context elevates a particular set of identity-positioned knowledge to the status of context-transcendent or natural laws, allowing it to masquerade as dispassionate, positionless observation of objective truth, while actively obscuring the ways that it reflects and reproduces perspectives and interests of dominant identities.

Most relevant for this special issue on qualitative methods, ideologies of scientism include a valorization of quantitative methods. Quantitative methods are an exemplary tool of abstraction. They afford the researcher the ability to take a cacophonous diversity of incommensurable, particular responses and translate them into a common metric. This is a powerful affordance that often enables important insights. However, this feature of quantitative methods also enables both the neocolonial resource extraction model of research and the illusion of positionless observation via abstraction of information from context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). The coloniality of knowledge is evident in mainstream practices of quantitative research both as a process of abstraction that translates content-rich, context-particular meaning into content-free, context-general information and in reinterpretation of the resulting, translated information in ways that reflect mainstream scientific imagination rather than the experience of the original source (Kidder & Fine, 1997).

Decolonial methodology

How can one illuminate and potentially counteract the coloniality of knowledge? One set of resources for decolonizing knowledge comes from epistemological perspectives of African (and other geographic area) studies.[3] Although not immune to processes associated with the coloniality of knowledge (Mudimbe, 1988), the epistemological standpoint of African studies has its foundation in experience of (rather than observations about) people in African spaces. An important feature of this epistemological standpoint is a prominent consciousness of neocolonial oppression as an enduring force in the modern global order. From this epistemological standpoint, the story of the modern global order is not one of unprecedented abundance, boundless growth, inevitable progress, and the triumph of individual liberty. Instead, these features of modernity as viewed from WEIRD settings are but one side of the same oppressive coin that in the Global South has promoted crushing poverty, destruction of communities, loss of livelihoods, and other forms of violence (both spectacular and slow; Nixon, 2011; cf. Rodney, 1974). In contrast to prevailing epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 2007) that promote inattention to such processes of domination or consider them irrelevant to relationship research, the epistemological standpoint of African studies directs identity-conscious attention to the ongoing coloniality of everyday life as it applies to the experience of relationality.

Another resource for decolonizing knowledge comes from the methodological practices of *accompaniment*: ways of knowing in which researchers immerse themselves in the flow of community life and experience events alongside people in the context of everyday activity.[4] Rather than ethnocentric conclusions common in research from geographical or personal distance, practices of accompaniment provide greater opportunity for researchers to understand reality from local perspectives. The point of these practices is not necessarily (or even primarily) to document patterns of relationality

in "other" contexts. Instead, the point is to stand with people in "other" settings to come to a better understanding of relationality in general.

An empirical example

As an illustration of these ideas, consider empirical observations from a multi-method program of research that I conducted during more than 5 years of work and study in the West Africa region. As a White American psychologist in West African communities, I did not set out to provide a definitive account of characteristic relationship patterns in some reified and essentialized West African "culture" (a problematic endeavor in any case). Instead, I attempted to draw upon local understandings through research practices of accompaniment to better appreciate the cultural–ecological foundations of relationship in general.

The phenomenon that I found most illuminating in this regard is what I called *enemyship*: A personal relationship of hatred and malice in which one person wishes for another person's downfall or attempts to sabotage that person's progress (Adams, 2005). Although typically absent from social discourse in the WEIRD settings that inform relationship research, the idea of enemyship—particularly concern about the potential for malice in close interpersonal spaces—is prominent in material culture and social discourse across a variety of West African spaces. In a series of studies using both ethnographic interviews and brief written surveys, I observed that people across a variety of diverse, West African settings are more likely to report being the target of enemies, report fewer friends, and express greater caution about intimacy than do people across a variety of diverse, North American settings (Adams, 2005; Adams & Plaut, 2003).

How is one to understand these differences? Audiences in North American settings tend to regard the prominence of enemyship in West African worlds as the strange phenomenon that requires explanation. To these audiences, concern about enemies or caution about intimate disclosure sounds "paranoid" (Adams, 2005) or is reminiscent of "avoidant attachment" (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). In contrast to this pathologizing lens, research practices of accompaniment and the epistemological standpoint of African studies provide an alternative framework from which to understand different patterns of relationality. One can discuss this framework in terms of two strategies (see Adams, Kurtiş, Salter, & Anderson, 2012).

The first strategy is to *normalize* accounts of "other" patterns that mainstream approaches portray as "abnormal." Rather than treat cautious restraint and concern about enemyship with contempt, practices of accompaniment can sensitize the investigator to the cultural ecologies—in this case, everyday realities of embeddedness and material interdependence in many West African worlds—in which these patterns are adaptive. Healthy adjustment to these realities requires careful management of obligations for material support (Coe, 2011) and allocation of effort to maintaining existing connections (cf. Salter & Adams, 2012). Instead of unhealthy deviation from a universal standard, caution about enemyship reflects larger patterns of maintenance-oriented relationality that are both well adapted to situations of embedded interdependence and worthy of respect or emulation (see Keller, 2012; Oishi & Kesibir, 2012).

The second strategy is to *denaturalize* the patterns that mainstream research portrays as standard. Rather than elevate the sense of freedom from enemyship or emotionally expressive intimacy to the status of natural standards, practices of accompaniment and epistemological perspectives of African studies provide conceptual tools to rethink these patterns. In particular, these tools afford appreciation for the extent to which apparently standard forms reflect particular cultural ecologies—in this case, the material independence and abstraction from context associated with WEIRD realities—that make possible the freedom to avoid onerous obligations and to pursue the self-expansion, exploration, and personal growth that mainstream perspectives of relationship research valorize (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Feeney, 2004). It is precisely within the context of these WEIRD cultural ecologies, rather than some context-general law, that prescriptively normative practices of mainstream relationship research are adaptive (see Keller, 2012; Oishi & Kesibir, 2012).

The decolonial turn: From growth to sustainability

The brief example illustrates the potential significance that practices of accompaniment have for relationship research. The significance is not simply (or even primarily) to afford better understanding of relationship patterns in marginalized spaces; rather, it is to draw upon experience in marginalized spaces as a privileged epistemological base from which to rethink hegemonic forms of knowledge in mainstream research. The view from this epistemological base not only locates prescriptive forms of growth-oriented relationality within particular cultural ecologies but also situates these cultural ecologies in broader historical context. That is, it helps to illuminate how the cultural ecologies of unprecedented material abundance and security that people in globally dominant spaces enjoy—and the expansion-oriented relationship habits that these cultural ecologies afford—are products of the same colonial domination that produces poverty and insecurity in many communities of the Global South (e.g., Fanon, 1963).

Viewed from this perspective, one can extend decolonial critiques of the neoliberal growth paradigm from studies of international development (e.g., Escobar, 1995) to studies of human development. To the extent that expansion-oriented ways of relating require abundant resources to fuel growth and exploration, they raise concerns about long-term sustainability. To the extent that expansion-oriented ways of relating depend on ongoing domination, they raise concerns about social justice. I anticipate that many readers of *JSPR* will regard these concerns about injustice as far-fetched. I agree with this characterization, if we define *far-fetched* as *recovered from [knowledge] locations that are distant* from mainstream relationship research. I propose that such recovery of obscured knowledge is a primary purpose of qualitative research, and practices of accompaniment are particularly well suited to this purpose. These practices not only help to make visible issues of coloniality in relationship research but also suggest directions for more sustainable ways of relating that reflect and promote the interests of broader humanity.

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Notes

1. This is an ongoing investigation by Nur Soylu from the Cultural Psychology Research Group at the University of Kansas with assistance from Rebecca Zhang and Will Pellett.
2. For noteworthy exceptions, see work by Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) and Keller, Demuth, and Yovsi (2008).
3. Similar resources for decolonizing knowledge come from such marginalized knowledge formations as critical race theory (e.g., Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995), disability studies (Meekosha, 2011), transnational feminist scholarship (Mohanty, 2003), and various Indigenous Studies (Smith, 1999).
4. Space constraints prevent an extended discussion of this concept; instead, see Lynd (2012), Martín-Baró (1994), and Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2013).

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