Decolonization Projects: Achieving Inclusion with Cultural Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

Decolonization is complex, vast, and the subject of an ongoing academic debate. While the many efforts to decolonize or dismantle the vestiges of colonialism that remain are laudable, they can also reinforce what they seek to end. For decolonization to be impactful, it must be done with epistemic and cultural humility, requiring decolonial scholars, project leaders, and well-meaning people to be more sensitive to those impacted by colonization and not regularly included in the discourse.

Keywords: Cultural Sensitivity, Decolonization, Global Health, Inclusion, Humility, Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Decolonization is complex. To successfully achieve decolonization, projects should incorporate the voices of those subjugated or silenced. Including such voices requires sincerely exploring who has been affected by colonialism or neocolonialism and how, as well as cultural sensitivity. In its basic use, decolonization refers to countries under colonial rule gaining independence or freedom from forms of subjugation. Additionally, scholars use the term to refer to efforts to dismantle neocolonialism and vestiges of colonialism. The process includes de-silencing subjugated voices.[1] I use decolonization in the latter way to refer to countries with technical independence.

While arguably colonization ended formally with independence from colonizing powers, neocolonialism is the indirect, informal, and sometimes subtle control of the people, their economy, and political life despite formal independence from colonizing authorities. I conceptualize neocolonialism as a system that involves direct and involuntary control of another's political, economic, or social life, impacting their worldview and ways of encountering the world.

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Decolonization may target actions, places, or systems like health care or AI to overcome the ills of colonialism and neocolonialism. It also may target knowledge and require rethinking how people develop their knowledge base. For example, if people grew up seeing an outside colonizer as superior, they would need to change their knowledge of superiority. Decolonization may target power, for example, changing who owns and distributes COVID-19 vaccines and who distributors exclude in the distribution of vaccines. Decolonization could require looking at those disempowered in the distribution process. Additionally, decolonization may target autonomy of persons by freeing people, ensuring human and individual rights, and respecting cultural traditions.

Decolonization projects that try to de-silence by including the voices of those affected by colonialism and neocolonialism must examine inclusiveness in the context of the culture of the subrogated individuals. Examples of decolonization projects include making datasets inclusive of diverse peoples and places, returning to traditional food and eating practices, making sure hospitals in developing countries are led by locals and respectful of cultural traditions, returning unethically obtained artefacts or objects. Another project would be laying the groundwork for equality in formerly colonized countries to ensure that business ownership, education, and financial success will flow fairly to those previously victimized by colonization. Summarily, there are many strategies for decolonizing. However, it is worth asking whether the strategies have risks that undermine the goal of decolonization.

I. Understanding Decolonization Discourses

Many fields, from AI to politics, economics, health care, aviation, and academia, discuss decolonization. The content of the discourse on decolonization depends on the region and field discussing it. Rather than just reporting on decolonization, the discussions may be calls to action. For example, decolonization discourses reflect activism for cognitive justice, such as equal consideration of Indian or African knowledge systems in global health discourses.[2]

In politics and political science, some scholars frame decolonization as an anti-western, anti-colonial movement by Africans to emancipate Africa/ns from subjugation or shift the continent to postcolonialism and post-neo-colonialism. This framing walls off non-African participants and may undermine their capacity to benefit the conversation.[3] There are other political scientists who actively support decolonization and see it as a field of activism in support of anyone and countries where colonization harmed people and development.[4] The point is that two ways of conceptualizing decolonization in politics and political science are discernible. One conceptualization is less inclusive since it alienates scholars and professionals from Western, high-income, or developed countries. The other is more inclusive.

In humanitarian studies, including philosophy, some decolonization articles and conversations are efforts to end the destructive force of colonization. They focus on either the form, such as ecocide, genocide, and many others, or the geographic location, such as Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.[5]

Finally, the feelings one brings into this conversation can adversely impact how one engages in them and who they listen to or are willing to hear from. For example, anger, rage, bitterness, and hatred are emotions that are not uncommon in spaces of decolonization conversations. Decolonization conversations that originate from a place of negativity risk deepening the psychological state of victimhood and prevent people from disrupting constructively or critically engaging in the conversation.[6]

II. Understanding Decolonization Strategies

Decolonization strategies mainly aim to de-silence victims of domination or subjugation. People have proposed many strategies for decolonizing. These strategies may be informed by what the target is for decolonization. Decolonization can target power relations in global health. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public health organizations noted the power imbalance in vaccine distribution. Decolonization could involve de-silencing those affected by neocolonialism to bring about a more balanced distribution of power and a more fair distribution of the vaccine. By analyzing who was adversely impacted by the distribution and who ought to wield power, those engaged in decolonizing advocated for positive change and equitable power relations.

Equally, when being is the target of decolonization, the language of unlearning or relearning and mental decolonization take centre stage in the decolonization discourse. For example, the quest to decolonize colonized minds aims to demythologize African inferiority and Western superiority. Demythologizing African inferiority enables those engaged in the decolonization discourse to cultivate and foster African agency.[7]

Finally, when knowledge production is the target of decolonization, scholars use inclusion and cognitive justice. For example, they try to alter the knowledge that underlies global health ethics.[8] "[D]decolonizing researchers aim to respectfully *understand and integrate* theory from Other(ed) perspectives, while also critically examining the underlying assumptions that inform their Western research framework."[9]

One common strategy that scholars use in decolonization is inclusion. It is worth asking, does including people who have been subrogated foster decolonization? Whether that is effective depends on whether included people are more heard or whether the strategies to include them create new forms of silencing.

III. Inclusion and the Quest to Decolonize

Evaluating how effective inclusion is in the quest to de-silence subjugated voices is important. First, inclusive strategies are not neutral. They are epistemically situated. This situatedness constrains meaning-making in different ways: how and what questions are asked, how social roles are constructed, organized or assigned, and who is admitted to the room where these conversations occur.[10] Inclusion strategies may reinforce (unchallenged) assumptions. For example, to address prejudices and stereotypes in global health images, Arsenii Alenichev and his colleagues[11] successfully inverted "one stereotypical global health image" by prompting a generative AI to produce "an image of *a traditional Indian or African healer* healing a White Child." Although there were some problems with the image of the White child, this innovation is a significant, useful effort to de-embed or strip global health images of problematic pictures that mythologize White superiority and Black inferiority. Yet it is possible that using categories like *traditional Indian or African* reinforces unchallenged assumptions, raising key questions regarding how language and words create new stereotypes. It is common to define traditional as non-conventional, unorthodox, and informal. Yet studies continue to reveal that non-scientifically appraised healing approaches in India or Africa are not only effective but also real, meaningful, fundamental, and primary care-seeking behaviours in many communities in these regions.[12]

Suppose inclusive strategies are not un-situated. These conversations may be had within the structures, language, and spaces built by or connected to colonialism. The spaces, language, places, and structures in which these conversations occur can limit who can participate and how they participate. Importantly, some

conditions are not conducive to participation as equals. The allocated time for the discussion could also constrain how individuals express themselves. It is unclear who is ultimately heard.

Furthermore, epistemic situatedness of inclusion can impact decolonization conversations when participants are beneficiaries of, products of, and trained by structures and systems they seek to dismantle. To enhance the decolonization project and its goals, a pressing task is to unveil and question how the circumstances may inhibit activism. If the vestiges of colonialism continue to structure the decolonization discourse invisibly, the vestiges may undermine decolonization. For example, a public health discussion that includes white Western doctors and Western pharmaceutical executives in Africa may have many local Africans at the table but could still effectively devalue their input based on built-in assumptions and biases that are vestiges of colonialism.

Second, exclusion and inclusion are also not binary. Individuals may experience exclusion, even while included (the phenomenon called internal exclusion). In other words, inclusion can fail to be substantial or become a means of enhancing optics, "a way of (un)consciously weakening the radical claims being pursued."[13] For example, in South Africa, many institutions have made significant efforts to diversify their faculties due to the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act 55.[14] The act requires South African institutions to implement employment equity that redresses the history of harmful discrimination in the country. The act further requires transforming departments and institutional administrations. Although many recognize and support the need to transform departments in South Africa, the rhetoric of transformation departs sharply from the lived experiences.[15] This misalignment between the plan and practice is evident in the underrepresentation of black people and females in senior management teams, professorships in many universities and health departments, and positions of power in some South African institutions. Those selected in the transformation of the departments have also complained of being overworked. The burden of extra work undermines their ability to develop agency and voice in the space they now occupy or fulfil key requirements that have implications for their career trajectory.[16] This is called the *minority tax*. Notably, "the minority tax… is the burden of extra responsibilities [placed] on faculty of colour to achieve diversity and inclusion and contributes to attrition and impedes academic promotion."[17] One challenge for decolonializing projects will be for decolonial scholars and those selected for decolonization objectives to have the humility to decline invitations, requests, roles, and platforms for which they are either unqualified or lack the capacity to fulfil. At its heart, decolonization strategies must empower those included rather than weaken them.

Finally, inclusion can lead to a phenomenon known as elite capture.[18] Elite capture occurs when socially advantaged individuals in a group monopolize or exploit activism to their own benefit at the expense of the larger, struggling group. Elite capture weakens decolonization efforts from within, revealing that those likely to benefit from global inclusive efforts are those who fulfil globally constructed standards, those "already present in the room."

There is no better strategy to weaken decolonial movements than weakening the project from within by strategically positioning individuals who share physical properties with the victims of exclusion and silencing but intellectually, behaviourally, psychologically, and emotionally share more common ground with the colonizer. Such insiders may be unaware they are furthering neocolonial conditions rather than decolonizing. In relation to decolonization, particularly in global health, elite capture reveals that those whose voices are loudest in the room are not necessarily those more impacted by colonialism. They may benefit more from reinforcing colonialism. Opportunism weakens meaningful activism from within,

preventing good initiatives and strategies from having their intended impact or taking substantive root.[19] This paper cannot do justice to elite capture, but it is worth noting its negative impacts.

IV. Improving the Impact of Decolonization

To end neo-colonialism, it is important to understand how it manifests and what to do at each level. Beyond the academic discourse, many tangible efforts exist to decolonize through de-silencing. Examples of these efforts include the ME2 movement that seeks to centre the concerns and experiences of sexually abused or harassed victims in the public discourse. At the funding level, many grant-awarding agencies like Wellcome Trust have dedicated huge budgets to studies that help them understand how they may have perpetrated colonialism or neocolonialism and what they can do differently going forward.[20] In South Africa, promulgating the Employment Equity Act 55 was a tangible attempt to entrench decolonization concerns in a country's regulatory framework. Yet, these decolonization efforts could fail to be substantive if they do not reflect cultural sensitivity.

Two key components of cultural sensitivity are worth highlighting here: epistemic and cultural humility. Epistemic humility is an intellectual virtue described as knowing one's limitations and the limitations of the learning methods employed. At its simplest, it is the ability to admit when one is wrong. Cultural humility includes genuine attempts to learn about and embrace other cultures. Epistemic and cultural humility are signs of academic excellence and strength. Epistemic and cultural humility seriously acknowledge how the state of our knowledge, cognitive limitations, experiences, and backgrounds, while constraining us, also invite us to listen, learn, grow, and change. The limitations-owing account of epistemic and cultural humility suggests that "a person who is aware of her cognitive limitations and owns them is much better positioned to achieve such epistemic goods as true beliefs and understanding than someone who… simply has insight into the epistemic status of her beliefs."[21]

Epistemic and cultural humility may help prevent decolonization projects that unintentionally reinforce what they seek to dismantle. Epistemic humility calls on decolonizers to defer tasks for which they are not qualified to suitably qualified persons. Beyond this, humility supports brave scholarship that imagines and reimagines how featuring the same voices, faces, and perspectives possibly introduces new forms of domination or silencing. Cultural knowledge can lead to a more intentional way of seeking out the right people or a more diverse group than those frequently featured in decolonization conversations. This would give others more opportunities to navigate these spaces and should do so in ways that are familiar to them. One ought to be more sensitive to those who would ordinarily not be included in these conversations. Unless we radically and boldly reimagine these discussions, we risk alienating those most negatively impacted by neocolonialism.

CONCLUSION

Decolonization conversations are complex and the subject of academic debate. The strategies employed to decolonize can harm or help the victims of neo-colonialism. Inclusion of previously silenced individuals may not be enough to overcome the vestiges of colonialism, leading to a false inclusion, where those included feel excluded or contribute in ways reflecting their own biases and circumstances. Inclusion of an elite or people who do not truly represent the subjugated can lead to elite capture. For decolonization strategies to be impactful, for example, in the context of global health, project leaders and participants must engage in conversations employing epistemic and cultural humility. In many ways, epistemic and cultural humility can help us demythologize our assumptions of any cultural superiority or cognitive authority, allowing for diverse voices, cultures, and perspectives to emerge without domination.

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