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On Principles for Decolonial research

Reflections on 'love' by the 'colonized colonizer'

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The Sociological Research Foundation's Early Career Workshop with Prof. Linda Tuhiwai Smith [<https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/decolonizing-methodologies/>] made me think about aspects of work that we, as researchers, rarely touch upon, for example love. 'Not the toxic territorial' love – as Prof Tuhiwai Smith pointed out – but the one of compassion to those we engage in research with in our profession. As I thought more about this 'love' Linda spoke of, it made me think of both the violence I have faced, but also the violence I have caused, during the course of my profession.

Importantly, one thing we did *not* discuss in the room that day, that for me remained something of an elephant in the room, was 'whiteness'; not as a bio-centric notion, but as James Baldwin [<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/7753/the-fire-next-time-by-james-baldwin/>] understood it to be, that is as a 'metaphor for power' or hierarchies of coloniality even within people of colour, which can be seen through casteism, patriarchy, anti-blackness and/or Islamophobia. In much of the critical work I have carried out I see 'whiteness' as a structurally and institutionally oppressive structure subsuming any radical/decolonial work. This subsumed nature of 'critical' work can be seen when scholars of colour from the sub-continent not acknowledging their own complicity in caste hierarchy and anti-blackness, or in white peers not reflecting on the structural advantages of whiteness, or even black scholars whole-heartedly endorsing 'neo-liberal' logics for their own benefit. So for me, the question I came back to was: what does 'love' look like for me? For a 'non-dalit, brown migrant Muslim man', who has himself been implicated in anti-blackness, racism and casteism? I wondered what the 'love' of a 'colonized coloniser' looks like in doing research work while aware of the irony that even thinking of this is in fact a 'privilege'.

To 'love' for me also means to be uncomfortable, uneasy, hesitant with how I do research. This counter-intuitive, non-planned approach is far off from what we are often trained to do as researchers. This uncomfortable self-critique is to challenge one's own position in creating knowledge in an extractive way from a community without reflecting on our own complicities. These complicities, as Shaista Patel [<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633278>] reminds us, are and can be converging regardless of where we are placed in the world, whether they be structural or the everyday such as through words/omissions. The uncomfortable question is directly related to the ethical imperative of 'how' research is done. It would place the responsibility on the researcher to consider seriously the power dynamic between their own subjective experience, location, position and the community they are supposed to be working with but also how the researcher, as an individual, is complicit in various colonial hierarchies.

These are concerns and set of questions that are placed at the centre of the work I have done in organizing a research collective at the University of Kent with colleagues. In the collective, our initial conversations were specifically about these material issues around first of all the 'privilege' of being a researcher. Our understanding of establishing principles was to create a space which would keep reflective practices in mind when talking about decolonising research collectively. Our collective was not just about sharing experiences and learning from each other and the ethical challenges we have faced in our own research. We also aimed to be a strategic group who would advocate, influence research training modules in the Law School and broadly consult with the Graduate school training programs. 'Decolonising research' then was not just about discussing abstract knowledge forms, but cognizant of how knowledge forms are situated in a sociologically and politically located culture of knowledge production. Thus the principles of research as a manifesto was important for the group to organize and produce knowledge together.

The idea of 'love' for me was to be 'principled' in my approach. This required aspects of ourselves, our human-ness, to be measured and held back in a conventional research environment. Within the colonial research frame of 'whiteness' ideas are just abstract thoughts to pluck and use. However, ideas are actual, material 'experiences' and thus need to be engaged through questions surrounding ethics. This is also the crux of two brilliant Indian scholars Gopal Guru's and Sundar Surrakai's book on caste experiences of untouchability [<https://india.oup.com/product/the-cracked-mirror-9780199474592?>]. This process of understanding ideas not just as intellectual musings shifts the frame to engaging with experiences rooted in history, continuing structural and systemic injustices. To pay attention to the ethics of these experiences, is for me, the root of doing research with 'love'. Decolonial knowledge thus is personal, emotional and may effect those that are marginalized differently. The absence of this 'love' is 'theory without feeling'.

Reflecting on Linda's provocation about the importance of 'love' in research, as a colonized colonizer, it only made sense for me to engage even more reflectively, uncomfortably with principled, ethical frames of knowledge production. What I took most from the workshop was to continue to understand the process

of this 'love', which requires an unmaking of oneself as not just a researcher, but an individual. In my case, and the case of so many others like me – it requires first to see ourselves in the messy nature of a 'colonized colonizer'.

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