**INTRODUCTION TO DECOLONISING THEORY**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

When conducting research with Indigenous peoples in Australia, as well as in many other nations, individuals need to be cognisant of the history and perceptions of research in these communities. They need to be aware that Indigenous peoples often equate Western research with subjugation and colonisation. They need to be informed about how to conduct research that does not prime these memories or perceptions but instead benefits the community. Decolonising theory is a perspective that researchers should espouse to preclude the detrimental effects of Western research in Indigenous communities.

|  |
| --- |
| **History of colonisation and research in Indigenous communities** |

To appreciate decolonising theory, researchers need to appreciate how Western science combined with European imperialism and colonisation to culminate in a series of events that decimated the lives of many Indigenous peoples (Humprey, 2001). During the 1700s to 1900s in particular, this Western scientific paradigm, sometimes referred to as positivism, evolved and prevailed in Europe. The central purpose of this movement was to unearth the objective truths or universal laws of nature—principles or assumptions that characterize or explain the world. To unearth these truths or laws of nature, scientists developed techniques that were designed to eradicate misconceptions and biases. This pursuit thus reinforced two assumptions

* first, Western scientists assumed the world can be reduced to universal, objective truths (Hughes, 2001)
* second, to arrive at these truths, scientists needed to minimize the effects of biases; they needed to remain as neutral as possible, unfettered by preferences or preconceptions

These fundamental tenets—the notion of universal truths and eradication of biases—have often served communities well and may not seem especially harmful. Nevertheless, when combined with the imperialism that epitomized Europe during these centuries, these assumptions sometimes culminated in practices that were dreadfully unjust and detrimental towards Indigenous communities throughout Australia and around the globe (Cochran et al., 2008; Smith, 1999). The following table outlines how Western positivism culminated in detrimental behaviours towards Indigenous peoples in colonized nations (Smith, 1999)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tenet of Western science | Consequence to the treatment of Indigenous peoples |
| The assumption of universal truths | * Indigenous perspectives that deviated from Western scientific principles were derided and thus Indigenous knowledges were dismissed
 |
| The belief that researchers must demonstrate neutrality to preclude biases  | * Rather than develop rapport and empathy, indigenous communities were perceived as objects of study—almost like a separate species—and not as people with whom to collaborate (Rigney, 2001)
* Because they were perceived as objects of study, they were dehumanized; their human qualities, emotions, and needs were dismissed, compromising their sense of agency and power (see also Attwood, 1992)
 |

As a consequence of this dehumanization, the European colonisers seldom treated Indigenous communities with dignity. Over time, these Western scientists gradually developed theories that both justify and magnify this mistreatment (Rigney, 2001). The following table outlines theories that culminated in many inhumane practices.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Theory  | Description of theory  | Consequence of theory |
| Polygenesis  | * The assumption that diverse races, such as Europeans and Indigenous communities in Australia, evolved from distinct genetic origins.
 | * According to Moore (1994), this theory was touted as evidence that Indigenous communities are inherently distinct, like another species
* This premise was ultimately invoked to justify segregation and ultimately even murder.
 |
| Social Darwinism | * Broadly, the assumption that natural selection can be extended to explain the evolution of societies—ultimately priming the belief that some communities that have thrived are fitter or superior to other communities
 | * This theory was to justify both the supremacy of some communities—such as European societies—and the inherent competition between communities, culminating in assimilation policies, epitomized by the stolen generation.
 |
| Phrenology | * A theory that assumes that specific patterns of bumps on the skull can be used to predict mental capacities
 | * This theory was invoked to suggest that Indigenous peoples are cognitively impaired
 |
| Great chain of being | * A Christian notion that all matter and life can be arranged hierarchically, starting with God, and progressing down to angels, nobles, commoners, wild animals, and so forth, ending in precious metals and finally other minerals
 | * Because this theory underscored the notion of a hierarchy, individuals become more inclined to perceive Indigenous peoples as lower on this hierarchy, diminishing their status in society
 |
| Racial hygiene | * This theory assumed that miscegenation—the mixing of distinct races—is analogous to mixed breeds in animals and should be shunned; proponents of this theory assumed that lower races might contaminate or compromise the purity and supremacy of higher races (Gray, 2011)
 | * This theory inspired laws and practices that prevented miscegenation and even attempts to eradicate individuals whose parents or grandparents were both Indigenous and European.
 |

As these shocking illustrations demonstrate, at least from the perspective of Indigenous peoples, European colonists appeared to exploit Western science to justify inequality and aggression. Because of these European practices, such as assimilation, manifesting as the stolen generation for example, communities thus perceived research as tantamount to exploitation and became “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary (Smith, 1999, p.1).”

This perception of research was not merely an illusion. This research agenda devastated the lives of many Indigenous peoples. Because of the assimilation policies, Indigenous peoples became disconnected from their histories, land, languages, relationships, lifestyles and culture. And because of the dehumanisation that underpinned many Western theories, inequality became rampant.

|  |
| --- |
| **The decolonising perspective** |

 Decolonising theory is an approach that is designed to address these concerns about Western research in Indigenous settings (Smith, 1999). In particular, proponents of this theory

* understand and acknowledge the historical and detrimental effects of previous research perspectives on Indigenous communities
* question the ethics and conduct of research around Indigenous peoples
* instead, advocate research that offers Indigenous peoples more opportunities to voice their perspectives, knowledges, and epistemologies as well as contemplate and modify their roles as researchers and educators

Proponents of this theory, apply research practices that are sensitive and appropriate in Indigenous cultures to benefit these communities (Smith, 1999). Specifically, this research is designed to

* privilege and honour Indigenous knowledges
* strengthen Indigenous capacity redress social injustice—and thus recognize Indigenous land, honour Indigenous sovereignty, and promote wellbeing

**Decolonising research methods**

Decolonising theory does not imply that all Western research methods are unsuitable to Indigenous culture. Instead, Western researchers should adapt their methods to resonate with Indigenous perspectives—in particular, to the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of Indigenous beliefs. Thus, Western researchers need to receive significant training on how to adapt their research methods appropriately (Kovach, 2010; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Wilson, 2008). The following table outlines traditional Western practices that should be modified to suit the Indigenous milieu (see Datta, 2017)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Traditional Western practices or perspectives | Suitable adaptations |
| To prevent bias, Western researchers often dissociate the scientific endeavour from practical implications | * The research goals should be intimately connected to the practices and needs of the community
 |
| To prevent bias, Western researchers strive to be neutral and thus attempt to dissociate from their participants. They would not, for example, shift the questions they ask in response to the requests of participants | * The research methods should be developed in mutual collaboration with the community and utilize Indigenous knowledges and methods (Cochran et al., 2008)
 |
| To prevent bias, Western researchers often develop their research protocols and plans in advance and then adhere strictly to these protocols and plans.  | * Researchers need to adapt their protocols to respect the cultural practices in Indigenous communities—and listen to the stories and perspectives of Indigenous individuals and families (e.g., Datta, 2017).
 |
| In Western science, the researcher conceptualizes themselves as the source of discovery. They might use phrases like “I discovered that…” | * Researchers need to be aware that Indigenous peoples will not perceive the researcher as the source of discovery. Indigenous peoples will often conceptualize the knowledges as residing in the land and community; knowledges thus can be learned but not discovered.
* Western researchers who propose they have discovered this knowledge have actually appropriated this knowledge
* Indeed, Smith (1999) uses the expression re-search, with a hyphen, perhaps to highlight the nature of research
 |

**Features of decolonising methods**

Some Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, in various nations, have utilized these principles to characterize some of the key features and methods of decolonising research (e.g., Datta, 2017; Zavala, 2013). Nevertheless, proponents of decolonising theory do not prescribe a particular suite of research methods that researchers must blindly apply. Indeed, they perceive such prescriptions as impediments that limit our attempts to develop knowledge differently. The following table outlines some of these features and methods

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Feature or method of decolonising research | Clarification |
| Close collaboration with the community should also entail collective ownership, collective data analysis, and collective presentation of results | * The community elders and other individuals should shape and contribute significantly to the research title, questions, and objectives
* All Western researchers and the Indigenous researchers in the community should work as an equal team—but the elders should guide this research
* The Western researchers should recognize they are learners rather than discoverers
* Elders should be the main owners of research findings—and, for example, receive copies of all transcripts, recordings, and field notes.
* Researchers should include elders in papers or presentations—and seek approval to publish or present
* Themes should be extracted with elders or other relevant individuals. If the community do not use computer software to analyze data, the Western researchers should refrain from this software as well to enable joint analysis
* The Western scientists and Indigenous co-researchers should present to the community and, with approval from elders, to other bodies together
 |
| Indigenous knowledges are scientific and thus should be granted equal weight to Western scientific insights about communities  | * Western researchers often prioritize their scientific insights over Indigenous knowledges.
* But, Indigenous knowledges have also evolved over centuries to help communities live sustainably.
* This iterative development of knowledge to improve lives can certainly be defined as scientific too.
* This recognition might challenge the assumption of some researchers that Western science is more valid than Indigenous knowledges
 |
| Research should revolve around establishing trusting, ongoing relationships between Western institutions and Indigenous communities (Datta, 2017) | * Existing institutions, such as schools, tend to establish strong relationships with Indigenous children and adolescents but eschew the community including elders
 |
| Honour Indigenous protocols rather than only institutional protocols (e.g., Lavallée, 2009) | * Western researchers tend to prioritize institutional protocols, such as the regulations enforced by ethics committees and university policies.
* These protocols might attempt to respect Indigenous communities. But, as researchers interact with Indigenous peoples, they will learn about other protocols they should follow, often imparted orally.
* Therefore, these researchers should recognize that, often, the protocols of their institution might not be adequate.
 |
| Non-Indigenous researchers should attempt to decolonize themselves—that is, diminish the degree to which they inadvertently perpetuate colonizing forces | Non-Indigenous researchers often inadvertently perpetuate colonization even if aware of these sensitivities. For example, they may* unwittingly initiate acts that epitomize colonization; even subtle remarks such as “Let’s spend a few minutes discussing…” contradicts some of the features of natural conversation in Indigenous communities; similarly recording a conversation may also represent a colonizing force
* impose a Western epistemology—in which they learn many isolated theories, such as critical race theory or participatory action research, and then embrace these theories rigidly as well as evaluate these theories methodically; this approach contrasts with Indigenous ways of knowing that may be more organic in which ideas do not need to cohere as neatly; likewise, Indigenous communities do not always embrace binary thinking, such as Western versus non-Western, and can often reconcile conflicting ideologies
* inadvertently appropriate or exploit Indigenous knowledges

To override these tendencies, non-Indigenous researchers should first decolonize themselves; that is, they should* monitor their behavior and beliefs—but without positioning themselves as the center of their activities
* they should acknowledge and recognize their power and privilege
* they should recognize, question, and even abandon the assumptions that can reinforce disrespect towards Indigenous communities—epitomizing humility
* as part of this humility, they should listen more than talk—but still maintain authenticity somehow
* they should enable Indigenous communities to judge which practices are suitable
 |
| Non-Indigenous researchers should reflect with other non-Indigenous researchers | * To decolonize themselves, many non-Indigenous researchers consult widely with members of Indigenous communities
* But rather than always burden Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous researchers should also converse honestly with non-Indigenous colleagues about their experiences, reflections, and concerns
 |
| Non-Indigenous researchers should embrace the discomfort that humility can elicit  | * When non-Indigenous researchers contemplate how their practices might reinforce colonial practices—and embrace humility—they also may feel strong levels of discomfort and uncertainty; they may feel self-conscious as well
* These researchers need to embrace, rather than shun, these feelings; if they attempt to resolve these feelings too rapidly, they might inadvertently develop beliefs or opinions that could be harmful, such as the assumption they are superior
* They need to experience this discomfort while they also feel privileged and honored to be conversing with Indigenous communities.
* Yet even while maintaining humility and thus selecting their words carefully, they must show authenticity and humanness
 |
| Research entails action to assist a community rather than merely a written report. | * Western researchers often conceptualize research output as reports and grants.
* In contrast, research should be conceptualized as an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to voice their perspectives and to seek justice against oppressions
 |
|  | * Researchers might need to learn about other compatible perspectives such as the work of Dr. Marcia McKenzie in critical ethnographic narrative
* They might need to participate in social justice activities
 |

In short, decolonising theory is partly designed to shift the conceptualisation of Indigenous communities from objects of study to peoples who question, critique, theorize, and communicate knowledge.

|  |
| --- |
| **References** |

Attwood, B. (1992). Introduction. In B. Attwood & J. Arnold (Eds.), Power, knowledge and Aborigines. Bundoora: La Trobe University Press.

Cochran, P. A. L., Marshall, C. A., & Garcia-Downing, C. (2008). Indigenous ways of knowing: Implications for participatory research and community. American Journal of Public Health, 98(1). 22-27.

Datta, R. (2017). Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research. Research Ethics doi: 10.1177/1747016117733296

Datta, R., Khyang, U. N., Khyang, H. K. P., Kheyang, H. A. P., Khyang, M. C., & Chapola, J. (2015). Participatory action research and researcher’s responsibilities: An experience with Indigenous community. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 18(6), 581-599.

Gray, S. (2011). Brass discs, dog tags and finger scanners: The apology and Aboriginal protection in the Northern Territory 1863–1973. Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press.

Hughes, P. (2001). Paradigms, methods and knowledge. In G. M. Naughton, S. A. Rolfe, & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), Doing early childhood research: International perspectives on theory and practice (pp. 31–35). Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

Humprey, K. (2001). Dirty questions: Indigenous health and Western research. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 25(3), 197–202.

Kovach, M. (2010). Indigenous methodologies. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Krusz, E., Davey, T., Wigginton, B., & Hall, N. (2020). What contributions, if any, can non-indigenous researchers offer toward decolonizing health research? Qualitative health research, 30(2), 205-216.

Lavallée, L. (2009). Practical application of an Indigenous research framework and Indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8(1), 21-40.

Rigney, L. I. (1997). Internationalism of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander anti- colonial cultural critique of research methodologies: A guide to Indigenist research methodology and its principles. In Research and Development in Higher Education: Advancing International Perspectives (pp. 632–639). Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australian Annual International Conference

Rigney, L. I. (2001). A first perspective of Indigenous Australian participation in science: Framing Indigenous research towards Indigenous Australian intellectual sovereignty. Karama Higher Education Journal, August(7), 1-13.

Simonds, V. W., & Christopher, S. (2013). Adapting western methods to Indigenous contexts. American Journal of Public Health, 103(12), 2185-2192.

Simpson, L. (2001). Aboriginal peoples and knowledge: Decolonizing our processes. Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 21(1), 137-148.

Smith, L. T. (1999). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. London: Zed Books.

Wildcat, M., McDonald, M., Irlbacher-Fox, S., & Coulthard, G. (2014). Learning from the land: Indigenous land based pedagogy and decolonization. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 3(3), I–XV.

Wilson, S. (2008) Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1(1). 1-40.

Zavala, M. (2013). What do we mean by decolonizing research strategies? Lessons from decolonizing Indigenous research projects in New Zealand and Latin America. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 2(1), 55-71.