Decolonizing interpretive research: subaltern sensibilities and the politics of voice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the notion of decolonizing interpretive research in ways that respect and integrate the qualitative sensibilities of subaltern voices in the knowledge production of anti-colonial possibilities.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws from the decolonizing and post-colonial theoretical tradition, with a specific reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s contribution to this analysis.

Findings – Through a critical discussion of decolonizing concerns tied to qualitative interpretive interrogations, the paper points to the key assumptions that support and reinforce the sensibilities of subaltern voices in efforts to move western research approaches toward anti-colonial possibilities. In the process, this discussion supports the emergence of an itinerant epistemological lens that opens the field to decolonizing inquiry.

Practical implications – Its practical implications are tied to discursive transformations, which can impact social and material transformations within the context of research and society.

Originality/value – Moreover, the paper provides an innovative rethinking of interpretive research, in an effort to extend the analysis of decolonizing methodology to the construction of subaltern inspired intellectual labor.

Keywords Interpretive research, Post-colonial, Decolonizing, Knowledge production, Subaltern voice

Paper type Conceptual paper

Sensitive to the way in which colonialism produced powerful stereotypes of the people it colonised, the [subaltern scholar] is continually attentive to the way anyone is characterized, aware that fixed definitions can produce distorting blind spots, which carry a cost in the real world.

For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing – none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit (Freire, 1989).

Decolonizing interpretive research is uncompromisingly committed to creating counterhegemonic intellectual spaces in which new readings of the world can unfold, in ways that lead us toward possibilities of social and material change. True to this underlying revolutionary aim, many subaltern researchers have drawn heavily from the transgressive traditions of post-colonial theorists to forge inroads into the contentious terrain of our intellectual borderlands. The voices of subaltern scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in “Can the subaltern speak?” have challenged the epistemic violence of western academics. In particular, Spivak takes to task even the stalwart western leftist theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, confronting the underlying economic interests that surround academic research as commodity – generally constructed in the absence of subaltern sensibilities.

Spivak, moreover, shatters neutral claims in western representations of the subaltern, suggesting that need for decolonizing engagements that defy the hegemonic traditions of the western interpretive lens. At the core of Spivak’s acerbic critique is the incapacity of westerners to listen or hear the other, beyond enforcing and projecting their own Eurocentric sensibilities upon them – rendering the subaltern unseen and unheard. Hence, despite a variety of strident critiques issued over the years regarding Spivak’s abstracting language, “pretentiously opaque” disconnection from her readers, “bewildering eclecticism,” exceeding...
focus on epistemology, and her retreat from political activism and the universal socialist project (Eagleton, 1999; Wallace, 1999), Spivak’s willingness to risk stepping into “ways of thinking outside the European context that were discredited when capitalism became the most powerful imperialist force” (Spivak cited in Wallace, 1999) offered subaltern scholars inspiration to explore and voice the particularities of our lived experiences; and, by so doing, unveil colonizing and erroneous western pronouncements of subaltern conditions.

**Beyond western epistemologies**

Sensitivity to the history of colonialism could be an important corrective to the presentism and Eurocentrism of most analyses […] with their propensity to overstate the singularity of the present and to posit a radical discontinuity between contemporary social life and the recent past (Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2007).

The political sensibilities from which decolonizing interpretive research emerges must then be understood as both highly diverse and resistant to an absolute universalizing epistemological language – a language of empirical inquiry that has been predominantly anchored in fixed western epistemologies of patriarchal dominance, class divisions, heterosexism, abled bodies, and racializing reproduction. Accordingly, these have resulted in the subordination of subaltern voices often deemed suspect and, at times, dangerous to the veracity of so-called objective claims. It is important then to recognize that this discussion, true to its decolonizing intent, seeks to advance an evolving and itinerant – that is an epistemologically fluid and flexible means of knowing the world that deterritorializes and destabilizes the fixity of knowledge (Paraskeva, 2011) – redefinition of western notions of qualitative research that typically have led to abstract formulations devoid of both the internal and social negotiations that shape subaltern existence, particularly with respect to the most impoverished.

Herein lies the rationale for a decolonizing interpretive research methodology, in that, subaltern intellectuals working to critique, redefine, and reinvent dominant readings of oppressive social phenomenon have struggled to infuse transgressive epistemological sensibilities, which defy the embedded conquering drive of the Eurocentric imagination. Accordingly, the subaltern interpretive voice has emerged through a courageous and yet risky, itinerant inquiry process that brushes western traditional notions of culture, knowing, and society against non-western epistemological sensibilities – transgressive sensibilities that unfold beyond the colonizing abyssal divide (Santos, 2005) and are anchored to subaltern lived histories of struggle and survival.

Hence, it is not incidental that theorists, such as Spivak who have issued fundamental challenges to western epistemologies, have emerged from historically colonized populations. In that, we have arrived to our scholarly inquiries anchored to a decolonizing sensibility of subaltern existence – that is, we have been forced to navigate across the dialectical terrain of what Paulo Freire termed the oppressor/oppressed contradiction, as part of our process of social and academic survival as subaltern cultural citizens and borderland intellectuals (Darder, 1991/2012). Furthermore, navigating the ravaging tensions and struggles of our subaltern positionality has also shaped us as the makers of meaning who have elected, painstakingly so, to ground our interpretive research efforts within anti-colonial traditions. As such, the underlying ethos of our intellectual labor has brought about, in deliberate and meaningful ways, fundamental epistemological shifts in the production of knowledge and, in doing so, has sought to offer a more just and emancipatory political vision of scholarship within both the academic borderlands and practical everyday struggles for liberation.

Toward a decolonizing end, subaltern researchers have chosen to engage colonizing theories of subalternity in ways that treat these ideas as desacralized texts, ripe for deconstruction, to be systematically and qualitatively analyzed, based upon our own lived subalternity, as both self-determined historical subjects and subordinated intellectuals.
capable of voicing and living our commitment to an anti-colonial vision of the world. Therefore, to perceive decolonizing interpretive research, which emerges within these instances, as solely an abstract theoretical endeavor is to ignore and undermine the powerful decolonizing voice that we, as subaltern researchers, employ in our production of counterhegemonic inquiry, claims, and subsequent conclusions and the political intent that fuels our endeavors. As such, decolonizing interpretive approaches must be understood as itinerant subaltern forms of qualitative research that seek to formidabley challenge and disrupt the one-dimensionality of Eurocentric epistemicides prevalent in traditional theories of research and society (Paraskeva, 2011).

A decolonizing ethical stance

Context matters when we look at ethics. The long view of colonialism has taught us to be cautious when making universal claims given the brutal consequences for those who don’t fit within the universal who could be subsequently de-humanized (Samek and Shultz, 2017).

Beyond decolonizing epistemological concerns is also the humanizing endeavor to reinvent a decolonizing ethical stance for our participation in the larger political project for social transformation. There is, then, a significant qualitative dimension at work here, in that it is precisely from what hooks (1994) calls an “authority of lived experience” and our subaltern sensibilities – generally rendered marginal and irrelevant to mainstream thought – that our decolonizing voices find the veracity to speak, to question, to transgress, and to reinvent the distorting discourses of the powerful, along with conditions of material and social inequality that have perpetuated the political and economic demise of subaltern populations.

Central to the qualitative labor of decolonizing interpretive research are found radical processes of social inquiry, critique, and cultural reformulations (or reinventions, as Freire would say) that strike at the very heart of dominant ideologies linked to persistent asymmetrical practices – practices that, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduce classed, racialized, gendered, heterosexual, abled, religious, and other formations that sustain recalcitrant inequalities, intractable social exclusions, and the persisting political disaffiliation of the subaltern. This interpretive process entails then a multitude of careful (re)readings of the world and of subaltern histories, in ways that critically and openly challenge what Freire referred to as the “tragic dilemma of the oppressed” (Darder, 2018). More importantly, subaltern relationships in the world, as they emerge between the subject and object or signifier and signified, must be understood as dialectically mediated within the social and material contexts of capitalist production. As such, mainstream theories of subalternity, as Spivak argued, are rooted in assimilative official transcripts of society, generally governed by the interests of the wealthy and powerful. More specifically, decolonizing interpretive researchers labor under a set of significant philosophical and political assumptions of difference:

... that are fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society and particular societies are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005).
With all this in mind, decolonizing interpretive research, as discussed here, must be understood as not only about a process of empowerment of individuals but, more importantly, as an ethical and political effort to shift in both theory and practice the ways in which we comprehend issues of difference, as well as our place in the world with respect to others. Or as Spivak asserts, “Politics is other people, not just me, me, me” (cited in Wallace, 1999). Hence “she invites one to look at one’s own context, positioning and complicities, to unlearn one’s privilege, to establish an ethical relationship to difference and to learn from below” (Andreotti, 2007). This entails a decolonizing ethical sensibility of difference that centers the subaltern voice as communal, demythologizes commonsensical notions of knowledge production, exposes the coloniality of power, disrupts Eurocentric epistemicides, and provides itinerant rereadings of subalternity.

Furthermore, the intentionality of interpretive research is also fundamentally grounded in what Enrique Dussel (2013) called an ethics of liberation, with “a rethinking of the totality of moral problems from the point of view and the demand of ‘responsibility’ for the poor” (p. 142). This multidimensional interpretive ethos of research seeks to redefine and rearticulate historical and contemporary claims made of subalternity and provide decolonizing strategies of engagement for altering the current hegemonic discourses and practices in the world that perpetuate colonizing aberrations.

Subaltern researchers who embark upon such a process are not only uncompromisingly committed to reinterpreting the world, but to the struggle for the reinvention of social and material conditions of everyday life. Inherent here is a dynamic and evolutionary promise of knowledge production informed by the radicalization of consciousness – a revolutionary social process, anchored both within histories of survival and the contingencies of everyday life (Darder, 2015). Moreover, there is no illusive ethical claim of neutrality from a decolonizing interpretive lens, in that its fundamental purpose and aim is to serve as an emancipatory epistemological tool in the expression and participation of subaltern voices in the larger on-going political project of decolonizing society.

**Politics of the subaltern voice**

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it.

You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said (Minh-Ha, 2009).

The politics of the subaltern voice engages forthrightly with the phenomenon of human oppression and its debilitating historical impact upon the identities, social location, representations, and material conditions of oppressed populations. Accordingly, subaltern voices emerge from tenacious and tireless navigation through the dehumanizing forces of silence, as Minh-Ha (2009) suggests, in a quest to unsay the distorted Eurocentric representations placed upon us. This notion recalls the epistemicidal assertions of Boaventura de Santos Souza (2005) and Paraskeva (2011), which point to a phenomenon in which voices that emerge from the knowledge outside the western purview are not only rendered silent and invisible, but are often absorbed or destroyed, as is precisely the case with the culture of forgetting (Darder, 2014) prompted by colonializing epistemologies. This further points to that repressive epistemological region that Santos (2007) calls the abyssal divide, where the voices of the Other are rendered irrelevant or nonexistent. Of this, Santos writes:

What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence (p. 1).
It is also worth noting that racializing class formations and implicit beliefs, attitudes, and values shaped by the impact of this abyssal divide persist in adherence to a global coloniality of power (Grosfoguel, 2011; Quijano, 2000) that further subjugates subaltern voice even within the geographic, academic, and political contexts of its formation. As such, colonizing expectations of knowledge production continue to be defined by the ruling interests of the economically and politically powerful. In response, subaltern voices call for a reading of history and the economy that profoundly critique and challenge official scripts of colonization around the world and their post-colonial celebrations, exposing that the colonial matrix of power (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009) – which encompasses economic control, control of authority, control of the public sphere, and ideological control and legitimation of knowledge – persists long after colonial political rule ceases (Wanderley and Faria, 2013). From this vantage point, our subaltern voices fueled by decolonizing interpretive sensibilities shed light on the whitewashed partiality and limitations of recorded accounts of knowledge, revealing the absence of subaltern voices that remain exiled and suppressed by the power of epistemicides.

Politically speaking, subaltern voices must often undertake oppositional interrogations of official claims that emerge from those sanctioned mainstream intellectuals who purport expertise in the production and navigation of explanatory knowledge about the lives and survival of those deemed as other – knowledge about which they themselves are tragically ungrounded and inexperienced. A central concern here, of course, is the extent to which a colonizing or what Edward Said (1978) called “orientalist” gaze is implicated in the western production of research expertise about the other. Thus, an accompanying question is to what extent do western political and economic interests distort the perceptions of the other, where an underlying hidden curriculum is the assimilation of the other, in order to preserve the classed, racialized, gendered, abled, sexual, and religious hierarchies or supremacies of Western cultural domination around the globe.

Hence, it is not surprising, for example, to uncover that “the deep underlying assumption that emerges in [traditional] studies is the physical and mental laziness of ‘non-Westerners’ as an immanent quality that makes them unproductive” (Frenkel and Shenhav, 2003). Such studies derived from an all too common deficit perspective – despite well-meaning intentions – ultimately work to undermine the social and material well-being of the oppressed, often leaving us further marginalized, exploited, disempowered, and excluded from participation in decision-making about our own lives and access to the benefits enjoyed freely by the wealthy and privileged. In response, subaltern voices brush fiercely across dominant interpretations in an effort to halt the assault, struggle to decolonize knowledge, and work to (re)produce knowledge forms that are in sync with the histories, cultures, languages, and cosmologies of the oppressed.

Fraser’s (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics is useful here in that she speaks to the concept of “arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 56). Herein is found the counterhegemonic dimension essential to decolonizing interpretive research; for without the “formulation of oppositional interpretation” or itinerant quality of subaltern voices, born of the deep dialectical tension between hegemonic and subaltern knowledge that must be courageously navigated, a genuinely decolonizing interpretive would be impossible. It is for this reason that decolonizing interpretive analyses draw heavily on subaltern historical and cultural sensibilities. This is in line with Frantz Fanon’s insistence that as colonized subjects liberate themselves from the colonizing frameworks that have constricted their voices and consciousness, they “are all the time adding to their knowledge in the light of experience, [and] will come to show themselves capable” (p. 141) of speaking the unspeakable.
It is, therefore, important to note that despite conventional qualitative research efforts to expand the positivist norms of scientific interrogation, the qualitative research arena still constitutes a space of knowledge construction dominated by an elite few and, thus, generally exists as a more benevolent colonizing expertise that, wittingly or unwittingly, still represses and marginalizes the deeper sensibilities inherent in the subaltern voice. This is carried out "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short, [Western research has functioned as a hegemonic apparatus] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over" (Said, 1978, p. 3) subaltern knowledge production.

Interpretive studies conducted by subaltern theorists such as Spivak and others, whether stated to be so or not, illustrate attempts to decolonize the interpretive, in that subaltern voices bring their histories as colonized subjects to bear on the manner in which the theories of decolonizing researchers engage philosophically, historically, and qualitatively the lives of oppressed populations. I also want to emphasize that a decolonizing interpretive dynamic is at work in many of the writings of subaltern researchers throughout the last century, although this phenomenon has seldom been noted in the manner offered in this discussion. Hence, there are now subaltern sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and literary writers from racialized and oppressed communities that have employed a decolonizing interpretive lens, in their efforts to extend and redefine our understanding of oppression and its impact on our lives and the lives of our peoples. Again, as members of oppressed communities and intimately grounded in the histories of oppression of which we write, the sensibilities of subaltern voices can offer epistemological breakthroughs necessary to forging transformative political praxis linked to bringing together decolonizing theories and practices within our fields of study and out in the world.

It is also telling that subaltern scholars have not always been aware of one another, since they have emerged within differing intellectual traditions and from a variety of historical contexts and geographical locations. Yet, there seems, nonetheless, to be an underlying similarity in the oppressor-oppressed dialectic often expressed in their works, which gives credence to both Santos and Paraskeva’s claims related to epistemological differences inherent to subaltern sensibilities. This, of course, in no way implies that the subaltern voice exists as an essentialized phenomenon – or as Spivak (as cited in Wallace, 1999) asserts, “I do not think that just being in India is a union ticket to authenticity” – but rather to suggest that despite the many differences at work in its expression, there is indeed an epistemological thread of subalternity at work that offers sufficient continuity to speak across conditions of oppression. This is indeed a juncture where the edges of my analysis brush countercurrent to Spivak’s defensive retorts against the existence of any stability across subaltern voices beyond strategic essentialism. In contrast, the argument here contends, without essentializing, that there exist decolonizing epistemological resonances that arise directly from one’s social location within the colonial matrix of power. And that it is, in fact, these decolonizing resonances mitigated by political commitments that create possible fields for dialogue across subaltern differences, as well as guide our decolonizing responses amid interactions with western intellectuals that profess to be allied to the struggle for human liberation.

Hence, decolonizing intentions have opened the way for counterhegemonic considerations that critically privilege the cultural histories and experiences of oppressed peoples and further contribute to reinventing false and debilitating notions of subalternity. The autoethnographic episteme from whence subaltern voices partly emanate, therefore, sits subtlety but powerfully beneath – suggesting a decolonizing episteme at work in the research finding, claims, and conclusions of subaltern scholars from different parts of the world. Further, had Scholars such as Fanon, Memmi, Nyerere, Cabral, Bhabha, Spivak, and others not found the courage and intellectual wherewithal to follow the inner stirrings of their subaltern sensibilities,
the decolonizing interpretive perspectives they have produced – centered on the lives of formerly colonized, enslaved, and genocided populations – would have remained ever silenced within the hegemonic abyssal divide of western epistemological traditions.

**Decolonizing methodologies**

Decolonizing Methodologies […] provoke revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation (Smith, 1999).

Decolonizing methodologies begin with the view that all human beings participate actively in producing meaning, irrespective of their social location. Subaltern researchers involved in conducting decolonizing interpretive study do not simply see their work as an academic exercise in knowledge construction, but as part of a larger imperative for liberating subaltern meaning and provoking revolutionary thought. In this sense, decolonizing researchers recognize themselves as cultural workers and, thus, their intellectual efforts are understood as deeply political projects of contestation. Therefore, they do not enter the arena as impartial and neutral observers or solely objective thinkers but, rather, as transformative intellectuals, grounded in a humanizing emancipatory political vision of inquiry. Hence, decolonizing researchers who seek to (re)create knowledge must labor consistently to be cognizant of the histories, lived experiences, cultural realities, and economic plights of the communities that inspire their research not solely as academic initiative, but as an intimately experienced and lived political commitment.

Decolonizing methodologies then encompass a rigorous process of study that helps to expand the limits of rationality and, by so doing, supports the development of counterhegemonic forms of thinking and reflecting upon the world, so to better grasp the impact of current social and material relations of power at work in the lives of subaltern populations. In turn, decolonizing interpretive research designs aim to demystify the artificial limits of racialized formations and economic hierarchies of domination, viewing all cultures and linguistic systems as significant to our planetary survival. In the process, subaltern sensibilities serve to support the epistemological creativity, imagination, questioning, doubting, and risk-taking so necessary to this approach. And, as inferred earlier, this decolonizing process of study signals a research design that incorporates the subaltern researcher as an unapologetic political participant, whose knowledge is understood a priori as partial, unfinished, and deeply informed by the particular historical, economic, and cultural configurations of the times.

I would be remiss to not mention that there are those who openly discredit decolonizing interpretive research as highly subjective abstraction that fails to produce practical or useful knowledge they bemoan the absence of voices (as legitimated by the mainstream). About the first line of critique, decolonizing interpretive studies are absolutely by no means a lesser alternative in research design or less rigorous than other forms of research designs, in that it requires rigorous engagement and rereadings of official discourses on histories, politics, economics, geographies (i.e. land-based), psychologies, spirituality, and so on. This in itself points to a profound intellectual challenge as well as an enormous possibility for producing counterhegemonic readings of the world that lead to the construction of decolonizing theories – theories anchored in subaltern sensibilities.

About specious concerns that decolonizing interpretive methodologies are less scientifically rigorous due to intentional integration of subaltern sensibilities, there are a few things that must be noted. Rigor is the outcome of developing an intellectual capacity to engage critically and move with depth into different aspects and dimensions of an issue or problem that one is studying and to do this both systematically and creatively. Within the context of a decolonizing interpretive analysis, subaltern researchers must enact these
itinerant analytical skills in a manner that consistently contends with the link between theory and practice within their own labor as educators and researchers out in the world. Academic rigor within the context of a decolonizing interpretive research must be understood then as not only a cognitive or abstract process of analysis. Rather, it also entails a deeply physical, emotional, and spiritual activity of communal solidarity; which, when practiced consistently, allows subaltern researchers to become more integral human beings, through a creative and itinerant epistemological process of problematization and radicalization (Darder, 2015) – an empowering process of knowledge construction that although deeply rooted within the researchers’ worldview, also crosses frontiers to evoke the common humanity of all.

On the criticism relative to practicality or usefulness, a decolonizing interpretive design is meant to both recover and generate new insights and theories from the richness of detailed comparisons of the existing literature related to subaltern theories and practices – comparisons deeply grounded within the decolonizing sensibilities of the researcher’s political intent. This is essential, if subaltern voices are to disrupt and deliberately shift and shatter the hegemonic reasoning ascribed to social phenomena and move us beyond the traditional views of knowledge and society. This inherently implies that a very different practice must ensue, given shifts in epistemological frameworks that both define the problem and posit alternatives for future liberatory possibilities. For example, this signals decolonizing approaches that move us beyond the deceptive quantophobia of positivism countering the unrelenting tendency to seek quantification of all human phenomena and rely on the tyrannous discourses of so-called evidence-based, even among qualitative researchers. The privileging of this western hallmark of knowledge production anchored in a longstanding quest for mastery over nature, wittingly or unwittingly, interrupts our ability to delve deeper into contestations of human meaning and deep asymmetries of power responsible for disastrous consequences among subaltern populations.

In contrast, decolonizing methodologies are counterpunctal to the Eurocentric aesthetics of traditional research. It is for this reason that Fanon (1967) insisted, “But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work […] must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. [They] must go on until [they have] found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge” (p. 223). This learning of the future that Fanon refers to is precisely that decolonizing knowledge that can support a shift in dominant social relationships and material structures, in the interest of economic and cultural democracy.

And lastly, there is the often-voiced and well-meaning concern about the “absence of voices.” Decolonizing interpretive research signals an analysis that requires inherently a formidable process of simultaneous itinerancy and deductive analysis. This entails an inferential analysis that is deeply grounded in the a priori subaltern sensibilities of the researcher – sensibilities culturally groomed and sharpened within the subaltern context in which they labor (Darder, 2012). That is, to “know an area of inquiry inside out and [be] intimately familiar with the issues and controversies” that exists within the communal cultural context.” Accordingly, research conclusions, traditionally assumed to be derived form purely individual production or a unilateral voice – true to the individualistic assumptions of a western episteme – can, in fact, only be derived from subaltern researchers’ consistent and on-going engagements with the communal voices of fellow subaltern subjects. Hence, decolonizing interpretive research is inextricably tied to communal subaltern voices (or the “I am because we are” voice) and sensibilities, which sit and remain ever at the center of this intimate form of qualitative analysis. In many ways, this dialectical understanding of the subaltern voice echoes Freire’s (1970/2012) notion that the emancipatory knowledge of the researcher must emerge from an intimate understanding of “the empirical knowledge of the people” (p. 181).
All this, of course, entails a grueling and precarious process in the reformulation of existing hegemonic conceptualizations based on epistemologies of the subaltern. As such, colonizing knowledge must be systematically deconstructed by way of the wisdom of decolonizing epistemologies brought to light by an itinerant practice of analysis, critique, and reformulation. It is from whence that decolonizing interpretive methodologies can advance renewed emancipatory insights and new decolonizing perspectives. These perspectives, anchored to a priori knowledge of lived histories and an immense field of non-western epistemologies, are exercised in the contestation and reinvention of hegemonic practices, within both the research arena and the larger field of political struggle. This points to a significant dialectical understanding within radical subaltern sensibilities – our individual voice exists dialectically to the larger communal expressions of voice. It is, again, important not to essentialize the meaning of what has just been stated, in that decolonizing theorists are subaltern researchers who recognize they are deeply accountable for the exercise of their individual voices, but who are keenly aware that the subaltern voice also emerges inherently from the devastation of communities – communities historically subordinated by genocide, slavery, colonization, and impoverishment to conserve economic apartheid, domestically and internationally.

Hence, the overarching purpose of a decolonizing methodology is to provide an emancipatory reformulation of the conceptual or ideological interrelationships that exist between theoretical explanations and practical applications within specific fields or areas of study and struggle. In light of this underlying purpose, the development of decolonizing theories must be understood as deeply integrative. This to say, it will either produce a new or reformulated decolonizing framework for consideration within some aspect of human phenomenon or demonstrate ways in which existing hegemonic proclamations of counterhegemonic theoretical perspectives (i.e. critical, feminist, queer, etc.) can be practiced in the world. Important to this rearticulation is a sound decolonizing analysis and interpretation that seek to demonstrate clearly the theoretical, structural, and practical transformations necessary to effectively integrating, in practice, conclusions that arise from decolonizing interpretive studies. As such, decolonizing forms of understanding that emerge here aim to further knowledge practices, pedagogical interventions, and political strategies that can move us toward more humanizing ways of being, feeling, thinking, speaking, and knowing the world.

Decolonizing inquiry as humanizing praxis

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 1970).

For Freire (1970), the construction of knowledge – particularly by and with oppressed populations – must unfold organically through a humanizing praxis that is grounded in the voices and sensibilities of subaltern researchers, both within the academy and out in the larger society. This calls for a decolonizing research process that situates subaltern sensibilities at the epicenter, driving and producing research that speaks to the specificities of their subalternty. Significant decolonizing human inquiry is an understanding of the interpretive research process as also tied to the expression of what Freire (1970) called our true vocation: to be human. As such, when communal and individual processes of inquiry are stifled or squelched – as these have been for so long among the subaltern – results are often conditions of dehumanization that deactivate the social agency, voice, and political self-determination of racialized and economically impoverished communities. For Freire (1970), "coming to voice and democratic participation then are inextricably linked to an evolving praxis of naming the world and cultivating the power to denounce injustice and announce justice. This is central to the discussion here, in that “oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge […] consciousness” (p. 51), by way of everyday practices that blunt subaltern
sensibilities and silence our unruly voices seeking to bear witness to conditions of subjugation that persists in the world today:

In direct contrast, decolonizing interpretive research is intent on creating counterhegemonic spaces for human inquiry that openly unveil human subjugation and its consequences, motivated by radical compassion and the transformative power of communal solidarity. About this, the subaltern Maori scholar, Linda Tuhikai Smith (1999) asserts, The intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place (p. xii).

Furthermore, Freire asserts, “While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind’s central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern” (p. 43). Inescapable concern, indeed, given the current disastrous conditions produced by globalized neoliberal interests that have hardened exclusions based on economic greed, wrongheaded notions of privilege, deviant ideologies of race, patriarchal dominance, and other forms of social exclusion, with an unrelenting push to further the disaffiliation subaltern populations.

Counter to political exploitation, domination, disempowerment, false generosities, and violence against the oppressed, decolonizing interpretive knowledge challenges forthrightly the persisting coloniality of power, to put in place liberatory ways of knowing and being that can potentiate our revolutionary dreams. Moreover, as revolutionary praxis, the restoration of our humanity is paramount to decolonizing research approaches, where the subaltern scholar engages systematically in sustained practices of transformative problem-posing inquiry (Freire, 1970), so as to articulate new truths in line with emancipatory possibilities. It is precisely though this rigorous and sustained progression of problematization that subaltern researchers arrive to decolonizing conclusions – conclusions embraced as legitimate and vital dimensions of our evolving sensibilities as empowered subjects of history, despite our legacies of social and material subordination.

Posited throughout this discussion has been a way of knowing that considers transformation and empowerment only possible through a sustained decolonizing process that faithfully and consistently acknowledges, draws on, and gives expression to subaltern sensibilities and itinerant epistemologies of the south (Santos, 2007) that invoke a larger emancipatory project – one that derails the social and material exclusions of subalternity. As such, this heralds a humanizing practice of research and politics linked to an underlying radical and transformative ethos of interpretive research, fueled by our political commitment to construct together the knowledge, structures, institutions, and relationships necessary to forging culturally democratic and economically just futures.

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Further reading

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