

Post-Colonial Theory and Action Research

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Abstract

This essay explores connections between post-colonial theory and action research. Post-colonial theory is committed to addressing the plague of colonialism. Action research, at its core, promises to problematize uncontested 'colonial' hegemonies of any form. Both post-colonial theory and action research engage dialogic, critically reflective and collaborative values to offer a fuller range of human wisdom. The authors contend that post-colonialism theory calls for justice and seeks to speak to social and psychological suffering, exploitation, violence and enslavement done to the powerless victims of colonization around the world by challenging the superiority of dominant perspectives and seeking to re-position and empower the marginalized and subordinated. In similar ways, action research works to eradicate oppression, powerlessness and worthlessness by affirming solidarity with the oppressed, helping humans move from passive to active and by fundamentally reshaping power. Because both post-colonial theory and action research position the insider or oppressed in an ethic of efficacy, it values community, relationships, communication and equality, and is committed to reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection. Thus, both hold the potential to help reconstruct conditions for a more democratic and just society.

Keywords: *Post-colonial theory; action research; colonialism; powerlessness; worthlessness*

Introduction

"The collapse of the great European empires; their replacement by the world economic hegemony of the United States; the steady erosion of the nation state and of traditional geopolitical frontiers, along with mass global migrations and the creation of so-called multicultural societies; the intensified exploitation of ethnic groups within the West and 'peripheral' societies elsewhere; the formidable power of the new transnational corporations: all of this has developed spaces since the 1600's, and with it a veritable revolution in our notions of space, power, language, identity " (Eagleton, 1996, 204).

19th century British Prime Minister William Gladstone stated that "justice delayed is justice denied"¹: "His adage contains an unconsidered irony, given Gladstone's various leadership positions and appointments within the government of the largest colonizer and dealer of injustice to non-European nations and indigenous peoples world-wide. If his declaration has merit, those who are committed to the re-dress of wrongs done to citizens under the auspices of colonialism have a difficult undertaking ahead.

For centuries, indigenous populations have been 'denied' justice. The task of addressing wrongs done during the height of colonization, and its still noxious after-effects, is complex. Hundreds of years have passed since powerful European nations like Britain, Holland, Spain and France first recognized the vast wealth of raw materials – people and their knowledge included – untouched and unrecognized for

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice_delayed_is_justice_denied

their economic potential beginning in the 16th century; from their own perspective of Western, enlightened privilege, those European governments asserted authority, subjugating the "backward and immature" subordinates (Kant, in Dussel, 2000, p. 473), replacing their culture, language, traditions and right to self-determination with the hegemony of the 'west' (Dussel, 2000; Eppert, 2000; Kelbassa, 2008; Smith, 2007).

Post-colonialism theory asks for justice: it seeks to speak to the vast and horrific social and psychological suffering, exploitation, violence and enslavement done to the powerless victims of colonization around the world. It challenges the superiority of the dominant Western perspective and seeks to re-position and empower the marginalized and subordinated "Other" (Smith, p. 12). It pushes back to resist paternalistic and patriarchal foreign practices that dismiss local thought, culture and practice as uniformed, "barbarian" and irrational (Dussel, p. 472). It identifies the complicated process of establishing an identity that is both different from, yet influenced by, the colonist who has left.

Similar in its goal to eradicate oppression, "powerlessness and worthlessness" (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 31) created by the inequities prevalent during colonization, Action Research, particularly 'Southern' Participatory Action Research (PAR), is committed "to affirm solidarity with the oppressed", to assist moving the "stakeholders from passive to active" (p. 30) and the "fundamental alteration in the distribution of power and money" (p. 154). Action research positions the insider or oppressed in an ethic of efficacy; it values community, relationships, communication and equality, and through its commitment to "reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection" action research has the potential to help construct the conditions for a more democratic and just society (Roberson, 2000, p. 309).

The areas of the world most impacted by colonization, Africa, Latin America, Asia, are "miserably poor"(Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 154), and, though they are no longer controlled politically by foreign powers, the influence of 'Western' ideas of 'how things should be done, for example, Reagan's marriage of capitalism, materialism and democracy in the 1980s called "Free Market Democracy," were still the 'official' guiding ideological ethos of the United States - at least through the Bush years (Banks, 2008, p. 57). Greenwood and Levin (2007) note that, "existing public institutions are distrusted and generally viewed as protectors of an unjust order. The suspect institutions include schools and universities, churches, governments and governmental agencies, most intergovernmental development programs, and businesses" (p. 154). Given the role these institutions played implementing the policies of the colonizer, the distrust is not without merit. Where then does this leave a nation or nations within nations of people trying to move forward? How impossible and contested even is the concept "forward" within such hegemony?

Action research, at its core, holds the promise of problematizing uncontested 'colonial' hegemonies of any form. Action research, implemented through the lens of post-colonial theory, offers an answer: as noted by Susan Noffke, "the local and communitarian processes often embodied in action research may be enhanced through the use of a wider body of social theory, one that has embraced a social justice agenda that takes into account both local and global manifestations of oppression" (2009, p. 241).

In her paper "Understanding Development Education Through Action Research," Sierra Leone born, Western-educated researcher Yatta Kanu² describes the research in which she worked to help "bring about improved teaching practices among teachers from six developing countries" – former colonized nations – struggling to address "prevalent appalling conditions of teaching and teacher education" (1997, p. 167-8). As was the policy under colony rule, only those deemed capable of "[supporting] the colonial administration" received an education (p. 168): the language, values, morals, ethics and desires of the colonizer were extended to a 'worthy' minority, leaving the rest of the population ignorant, and thus more easily managed (Smith, 2007).

² Professor, University of Manitoba. BA., Dip.Ed., M. Ed. (Sierra Leone), Cert. in Curr. Dev.Soc. St. (Leeds, UK), B. Litt. (Birmingham, UK), Ph.D. (Alberta, Canada)

Understandably then, following their liberation, many nations “embarked upon educational expansion policies” in the hopes that a more educated, literate majority would be better positioned to expedite their development (Kanu, 1997, p. 168); however, producing a well-trained and effective educator work-force has been slow to keep up to the demands of an ever-expanding population and an ever-growing awareness of “a complex and changing society” (p. 168). Thus, Kanu and her team, through the Institute for Educational Development (IED) developed, ran and assessed a teacher education program. The eighteen-month in-service project sought to work with teachers already considered qualified and fluent in English. After their teaching practice had been improved, it was expected they would act as mentors to disseminate the skills, values and knowledge they gained during the project to their colleagues back home.

Kanu provides three reasons for choosing action research to enable the project, and shares the team’s post-colonialist aversion to emulating the superior or elite over-lord by mandating or directing the research process:

“First, the project team members were all educated in the Western tradition and were conscious of the prevailing disillusionment with development education delivered by outside educators (usually from the West or educated in the West). The IED itself, resourced by Western-educated reformers, located amidst the educational context described above and established to institute reform through educational development, seemed to epitomize the position of expert. Being conscious about this position of the IED, the team members were cautious with regard to providing prescriptions for educational problems or posing questions to which they had predetermined answers. It was thought that through action research the project team could pose initial questions about development education and then reinterpret and reconstruct these questions where necessary in order to arrive at the understandings which they were seeking. Second, the team wanted the project to be run on the basis of collaboration with the teachers and the local community and third, the team wanted to make the project a learning opportunity for themselves and for the teachers involved, so that each party could emerge from the action-research process with a deeper self-understanding and transformation” (p. 169-70).

Greenwood and Levin (2007) identify a core value of Southern PAR – its “value and [reliance] on the knowledge, analysis and efforts of local people” (p. 155). The respect shown to the local population’s knowledge and capabilities may hold the key to creating an empowered identity: as the authors reveal, a “co-generative dialogue begins that can transform the views of” the researcher and the local people (p. 155). Already leery of the “unquestionable truths and realities” (p. 170) imposed by the West, and aware of the “neocolonial³ tradition” (p. 175), Kanu hoped for the project to create a “fusion of horizons” where teachers and researchers in the group could co-create new understandings about effective, quality teaching and student learning (Gadamer, in Kanu, p. 171). Through the project, she became more aware of her own Western biases – even though she acknowledges herself as “both a female and African whose country had been subjugated to colonial rule for over a century” (p. 180) – she struggled with frustration and anger at the participants’ struggles with English proficiency, ‘rational’ problem solving or producing a critical eye when offered action plans, and their entrenched socio-cultural way of doing things (1997).

Kanu’s experience exposed her own as-of-yet-unknown cultural conflicts and “ambiguities” (p. 182). She describes how her doctoral studies introduced her to a vast array of ideas and theories through which to interpret her liberation and freedom - which she then attempted to use in the IED program. As she explains, “these [resulting] tensions made me realize that these discourses were ‘working through’ me in repressive ways to reproduce the same repressive colonial conditions I was trying to address through development education” (p. 181). Her realization highlights the complicated nature of individuals and nations attempting to create a new identity once the colonizer has left. What was original, authentic and ‘true’; and, what is adopted, constructed and ‘false’? And, once the co-opting

³ Neocolonialism: a term used by post-colonial critics of developed countries’ involvement in the developing world. Writings within the theoretical framework of neocolonialism argue that existing or past international economic arrangements created by former colonial powers were or are used to maintain control of their former colonies and dependencies. The term *neocolonialism* can combine a critique of current *actual* colonialism (where some states continue administrating foreign territories and their populations in violation of United Nations resolutions) and a critique of the involvement of modern capitalist businesses in nations which were former colonies.

of the foreign identity has occurred, how does one un-learn and reclaim the real self? These are essential questions Canadian educators confront when working to engage First Nation, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples; the atrocities⁴ done to indigenous populations – including forced attendance at Residential Schools in order to “kill the Indian in the child”⁵ – has created a third world legacy within Canada’s First Nation population:

“The incidence of tuberculosis and diabetes among First Nations is three times that of the broader population. First Nations housing conditions are below acceptable standards for 65% of on-reserve households and 49% of off-reserve households. The figure for the non-First Nations population is 30%. Incarceration rates in federal and provincial jails in 1995-96 were at least five times greater for First Nation versus non-First Nations individuals. Suicide rates are 2.5 times higher among First Nations than the broader population. Homicide rates are six times higher than in the broader population”(The Cost of Doing Nothing: A Call to Action, 1997).

Post-colonial theory and action research ethics demand we work to excavate all that was lost - ancestral traditions, languages, history, culture and religion - and restore honor and status to that which was stolen in order to address what must be regained and re-learned, and how that will occur. Education holds a key to lifting FNMI peoples out of poverty (& thus improving prosperity for all Canadians) by providing access to further education⁶ and training – as well as creating a future society that recognizes and esteems the diversity created by inclusion; however, this means inclusive education, relevant and meaningful to FNMI learners, which acknowledges the different kinds of knowledge, knowing traditions and ways of being that are part of indigenous cultures.

In the past two decades, leading post-colonial theorists Edward Said⁷, Homi K. Bhabha⁸ and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁹ have sought to detangle these complicated questions in the hopes of ‘de-colonizing’ the future. Their various contributions to this discourse compel educators to listen and critically reflect on the ongoing, often innocuous acts of inequity, stereotypes, oppression and exclusion we still carry out in classrooms. How, through our selection of texts, through our recollections of history, through our viewing of other cultures, through the ways we esteem, privilege and construct certain kinds of knowledge are we continuing the myth of inferior worlds, inferior races and inferior ways of being? How do we honor the wisdom and knowledge of oppressed peoples without further exploitation?

Following his study of the Oromo oral traditions in Ethiopia, researcher Workineh Kelbessa (2008) concludes, “the critical appropriation and implementation of indigenous values and practices is a necessary condition for solving [all] environmental, social, economic, and political problems” (p. 304).

⁴There were over 2.5 million First Nations people prior to colonization. Now there are about 800,000 according to 2009 census figures.

⁵ Residential and Industrial Schools were established in locations across Canada, predominantly in Western Canada for the purpose of “killing the Indian in the child.” Over 150,000 children attended these residential schools up to 1973. <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=2586>

⁶ The cost of incarcerating and individual for one year: \$100,000.00 VS post-secondary education, roughly \$13,200.00 per student (funded through the Federal Post Secondary Education program for First Nation students). <http://www.afn.ca/cmslib/general/mfnps.pd>

⁷ Palestinian born, Said is most famous for describing and critiquing “Orientalism”, which he perceived as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. Said concluded that Western writings about the Orient depict it as an irrational, weak, feminized “Other”, contrasted with the rational, strong, masculine West, a contrast he suggests derives from the need to create “difference” between West and East that can be attributed to immutable “essences” in the Oriental make-up.

⁸ Bhabha is an Indian critical theorist. One of Bhabha’s central ideas is that of “hybridization,” which, taking up from Edward Said’s work, describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations. His work transformed the study of colonialism by applying post-structuralist methodologies to colonial texts.

⁹ Self-described “practical Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist,” she is best known for the article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, considered a founding text of post-colonialism, and for her translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. Spivak is perhaps best known for political use of contemporary cultural and critical theories to challenge the legacy of colonialism on the way readers engage with literature and culture. She often focuses on the cultural texts of those who are marginalized by dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the “postcolonial subject.”

There is an Italian proverb: Once the game is over, the king and the pawn go back in the same box. For too long, subjugated peoples have been used as pawns in ambitions of the powerful and elite. As our global fates become more entwined, we will be challenged to address increasingly complex global issues.

Educational institutions, teachers, and educational researchers play pivotal roles in addressing those issues. The dominance of the Western perspective has deeply entrenched hierarchical structures and power positions. But these have little relevance in schools whose goals are to create collaborative, equalitarian, and thoughtful world citizens able to embrace diversity, challenge injustice, think globally, and value a variety of way of being and knowing. Kurt Lewin, considered the father of 'action research,' emigrated with his wife and children to the U.S. in 1933, in response to growing Anti-Semitism in Germany. Sadly, his mother and other family members remained behind, and were murdered by the Nazis. Shaped by his own experiences with a powerful nation's goals of empire, Lewin offers this insight from the past that may provide a perspective for the future:

"[I]t is not similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but rather interdependence of fate. Any normal group, and certainly any development and organized one contains and should contain individuals of very different character...What is more, a person who has learned to see how much his own fate depends upon the fate of his entire group will be ready and even eager to take over a fair share of responsibility for its welfare." (1948, p. 165-6).

Post-colonial theory – committed to addressing the plague of colonialism - coupled with the dialogic, critically reflective, and collaborative values of action research offers a portal to "the full range of human wisdom [essential for] the health of our planet and its inhabitants" (Kelbessa, p. 305). For too long, the voices of those whose lives were, and continue to be, impacted by colonialism have not been attended to well enough in schools. Educators, more than any other professional, must be positioned to address, reflect, and create spaces where action research processes, focused through a post-colonial lens, can illuminate lingering biases and stereotypes, and where racism and ignorance can be analyzed challenged, and ultimately eliminated.

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