

## Can collaborative knowledge production decolonize epistemology?

Sarah Nimführ<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*A critical engagement with representation, positionality, and power inequalities has become increasingly common in research and publication projects in the field of forced migration studies. Indeed, the field has drawn on decolonial frameworks to move towards more inclusive perspectives. Nevertheless, the challenge in decolonizing knowledge production is to consider the rich spectrum of knowledges and knowledge production, while remaining aware of complexities and tensions, to avoid further marginalizing already-marginalized actors. This article stimulates a discussion that critically reflects on the structures and power relations in which collaboration processes form. I draw on forms of collaboration applied in my research, primarily co-authorships with refugee research partners, to reflect on methodological challenges and questions of legitimacy, from positions of hegemonic academic knowledge production. An epistemic decolonization through collaborative knowledge production can only occur if researchers practise emancipatory and ethical scholarship that revalues marginalized actors' perspectives and agendas, while also actively decentring the western hegemonic academy.*

**Keywords:** Decoloniality; representation; collaboration; knowledge production; forced migration

### Introduction

In recent times, the call to ‘decolonize’ knowledge production has become a buzzword in global academia, which has led to its merely metaphorical use also within forced migration studies (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Topics that were previously analysed in diversity studies or inequality studies have now been labelled ‘decolonial’, and this alone gives them an aura of innovation. Often this labelling ignores those who were ‘decolonizing’ long before the concept gained so much traction. In the 1960s, feminist researchers and critical race theorists criticized how the lack of inclusion of ‘researched’ individuals leads to misrepresentations of those persons, and these persons have no control over what, where, and how knowledge circulates about them (for detailed insights into this debate see Abu-Lughod, 2008; Spivak, 1988). Critical researchers called for dialogic writing and polyvocal texts, while also pushing for epistemic disobedience to contest dominant academic traditions. According to the political scientist David Mwambari, the silencing of these former strands shows that the ‘majority-world’ (Kurtiş and Adams, 2017) is still colonized in terms of the recognition or relevance of certain knowledge orders and content (Mwambari, 2019). And quite often, if not silenced, marginalized knowledge and research practices are described as ‘Southern’ or ‘from below’ in contrast to a universalized western<sup>2</sup> knowledge system (see Bendix et al, 2021; Daswani, 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2014; Smith, 2012). In forced migration studies, this is particularly evident in the knowledge production process when both non-marginalized researchers and marginalized actors are involved.

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Nimführ, University of Arts Linz, Austria. E-mail: [sarah.nimfuhr@kunstuni-linz.at](mailto:sarah.nimfuhr@kunstuni-linz.at)

<sup>2</sup> Following Caroline Lenette, ‘I intentionally use a lower case “w” in “western” to decenter colonialist linguistic dominance and discourses’ (Lenette, 2022: 10).



A critical engagement with representation, positionality, and power inequalities is increasingly common in research and publication projects in the field of forced migration studies. The use of decolonial frameworks (Rogers and Swadener, 1999) has moved the field towards more inclusive perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to consider the limitations of decolonial practices: first, these practices are largely carried out in metropolises by Euro-American and diasporic scholars who benefit from these places of knowledge production and the direct material effects of this privilege. If they label research as ‘decolonial’ in this setting, this can aid them in the academic ‘career advancement machine’ (Bahri, 1995: 71, *op. cit.* do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan, 2015: 289; my translation). Thus, the educational scientist Beth Blue Swadener calls for scholars to reflect on their own position and strengthen their participation in ‘unlearning oppression’, when ‘benefiting from an array of unearned privileges’ (Mutua and Swadener, 2004: 6). Second, even if studies explicitly aim to reduce power differentials, challenges remain, as successfully decolonizing research perspectives always implies denaturalizing the global orders and power relations to which such research links. In this vein, the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith stated that even ‘the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, “research”, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary’ (Smith, 2012: 1). In highlighting these limitations, I do not want to claim that decolonizing knowledge production (within forced migration studies) is impossible; however, undoing the effects of colonialism has never been easy. So, how can migration researchers respond to this and design their research projects in ways that work towards decolonial practices?

Based on an ethnographic study (2015–2018) in Malta that dealt with the conditions in which non-deportable refugees lived, I first address the challenges of collaborative research practices. Second, I reflect on how I came to work with collaborative methodologies. Third, I provide focused insights into collaborative writing with refugee research partners. Finally, I offer some conclusions and share both my lessons learned and my hopes to work towards decolonial(izing) epistemology.

### **Collaborative research practices in forced migration studies**

EUrope’s problematic border and migration policies necessitate an engaged and intervening scholarship that deconstructs unequal power relations and moves knowledge out of a disenfranchised space.<sup>4</sup> Researchers working within a decolonial paradigm in this context think from marginalized edges and commit to the process of deconstructing hegemonic knowledges established by colonial power relations. When non-marginalized researchers study marginalized communities, they must be very critical of their own standpoints and their position within the ‘colonial matrix of power’ (Quijano, 2007).<sup>5</sup> I follow the suggestion made by the community-engaged researcher Caroline Lenette, namely, that [d]ecolonial research must start by addressing power differences to avoid reproducing colonial relations where the interests of western institutions and researchers are prioritized above the interests of multiply

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<sup>3</sup> When referring to processes in which researchers ‘actively decenter the Western academy as the exclusive locus of authorizing power that defines research agenda’ (Mutua & Swadener 2004: 4), many scholars speak of ‘decolonial frameworks’, ‘decolonial frames’, or the ‘decolonial option’ (see Rogers and Swadener, 1999, Itchuaqiyay and Matheson, 2021, Lenette, 2022, or Mignolo, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Following Maurice Stierl, I use this notation to counteract the equation of Europe and the EU and not to reduce the EU-European project to EU institutions.

<sup>5</sup> A concept developed by Anibal Quijano that depicts the geographic, political, and onto-epistemological expansion of western domination through the interrelated spheres of economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge.



marginalized co-researchers' (Lenette, 2022: 25). Particularly in politicized (im)mobility contexts such as forced migration, thorough ethical and methodological reflections are important, and expert knowledge should be related to the needs of the partners with whom one interacts. In other words, 'Decolonial practices should frame and drive research rather than being made to fit western-based knowledge systems' (ibid.). This also means weighing up the risks and benefits, as forced migration studies can also produce 'dangerous' knowledge. The migration scholar Christina Clark-Kazak highlighted this point: 'Researchers should think carefully about the messaging that will be disseminated through interactions with media and policy makers. Researchers must also consider how their mere presence in a specific location might heighten risks for workers and those in situation of forced migration' (Clark-Kazak, 2019: 14–15). During my fieldwork I experienced such a situation when I met with a refugee in front of an open centre, a shelter where asylum seekers are housed. He told me that the social workers would note down exactly who meets with whom and when. The authorities viewed encounters between the housed refugees and journalists or researchers critically, or they heavily regulated them. Since I took a critical stance on Malta's asylum system publicly, we decided to meet somewhere else in the future to avoid him getting into trouble. Further, we should always keep in mind how the media and authorities may use our research findings. Many of the refugees I met in Malta had already spoken to numerous other people about their situation before meeting me. These were NGO workers, authorities, but, of course, also other researchers. Now, what happens when the stories of the refugees we collect differ from those available to the authorities? If we establish a relationship of trust, the interviewees' stories may be more detailed. In the worst case scenario, this can lead to a person losing their claim to their protection status or having worse chances in ongoing proceedings.

In this vein, Nof Nasser-Eddin and Nour Abu-Assab suggest interrogating systems of oppression rather than individualized experiences. A decolonial intersectional approach can reveal what is not seen if we just focus on one aspect (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab, 2020). Because of these reflections, collaborations with refugees are increasing in critical knowledge production. An increasing number of engaged researchers strive to make their research participatory and to involve the people and institutions 'to be researched', so as to bring the interests of researchers and the researched closer together, at least temporarily and partially. However, as the social scientist Martha Montero-Sieburth notes, many scholars tend to underestimate that co-production is time-consuming and emotionally demanding, so the actual voice of the participants themselves is rarely highlighted or exposed (Montero-Sieburth, 2020). If researchers continue to silence majority-world experiences, there is a risk that intersectional, co-produced processes will be 'whitened' (Kurtiş and Adams, 2017). So, to what extent can breaking down the dichotomy between researchers and interaction partners succeed?

Collaborations, as a research practice critical of hegemony, are one answer to dismantling this dichotomy. In most collaborative research projects, however, only certain components are participatory (see Malone, 2020). Often, this is due to budget limitations or structural framework conditions. This may include, for example, establishing contact with potential (refugee) research partners before entering the field in order to jointly outline the research problem. However, according to the Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics, 'this is the only way to start off in a way that erodes the privilege of the researcher to define what is relevant from what is irrelevant of research foci' (Decoloniality Europe, 2013: n.p.). Further, a truly collaborative approach faces not only methodological challenges, but also questions of

legitimacy from positions of hegemonic academic knowledge production. I experienced such questions during the collaborations that formed part of my own project, which I will later discuss.

## Reflections on a collaborative project

My research project involved participatory and non-participatory elements. I tried to reduce power asymmetries in the research process by actively involving (refugee) research partners in knowledge production. Between 2015 and 2018, I accompanied rejected asylum seekers ethnographically on their journeys through the EUropean border regime (Nimführ, 2020). My study was based on a partnership between me (the researcher) and those who were willing to interact with me through various forms of collaboration. Some people wanted to be more involved, others less so. At first this triggered a feeling of discomfort in me – a feeling that Aaron Malone (2020) also described – as I had hoped for universal equitable participation, which was ultimately not possible. I remained convinced by the idea that it is important for a decolonial approach to dissolve the dichotomy between researcher and research partners, and so I detached myself from the idealizing notion that collaboration means ‘everybody does everything’. Moreover, it is important to remember that the interests of researchers and research partners are not always the same, and that the individual degree of participation or non-participation should always be a free decision made by the research partners.<sup>6</sup> They appreciated my idea of writing and analysing together. However, most of them could not find the necessary time and technical resources for such as project. Refugee research partners especially found themselves in precarious living situations, and so co-writing an article or even a book was understandably viewed as less of a priority than working on vital issues, such as preparing for a new asylum hearing or gathering necessary documents for the asylum process. And, of course, there were the challenges of managing difficult childcare arrangements and having several jobs at once.

For these reasons, we jointly negotiated different degrees of participation. Within this approach, research partners’ agency is foregrounded: they can decide independently whether to participate or not, rather than being stigmatized as exclusively vulnerable individuals whom the researchers must protect. Lenette argues in this context that ‘[i]n refugee studies (...) the focus on cross-cultural differences and the ‘vulnerable’ label associated with people who have experienced forced migration assumes a unidirectional, top-down model of power relations’ (Lenette, 2022: 81). Thus, through vulnerabilization, collaborative approaches can undermine their very intention and maintain power imbalances that are inherent to research, instead of disrupting these imbalances.

Since I did not plan this approach from the outset, I conducted the first research stage, in which I defined the research problem on my own without consulting the refugees involved. My project’s collaborative approach emerged by chance and on the initiative of the persons with whom I spoke. During a participatory observation phase, an interlocutor grabbed my pen and asked if he could restructure the diagram that I had drawn in my research diary. I was apprehensive at first, but I gave him the pen. Later, I felt encouraged by other similar

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<sup>6</sup> A problem arises in this context when contact is made with potential research partners through gatekeepers or organizations or authorities on which the research partners depend in some way. Here, it is often difficult to differentiate whether information is provided because the persons actually want to provide it, or because they feel obligated to provide information to the respective institution or person.



encounters and initiatives of co-writing and commenting, and so I asked interested people I interacted with to read and comment on my notes to stimulate an ongoing debate of the analysis. However, the decision regarding which of my research partners' notes and comments I would use for the analysis, and how I would interpret them, was mine alone. Therefore, at a later stage of my research, I discussed the publication material with my research partners before publishing it. In one case, the partners were unhappy with my wording and asked for changes to a paragraph. This gave me the idea of writing together. Later, I co-authored texts with my research partners (both those with and without a refugee background). I promoted this form of collaboration because it facilitated productive dialogue among research partners. By sharing authorship with fieldwork collaborators, it recognized and made visible the contributions of those who were integral to formulating the ideas captured in writing.

### Writing together

I will now offer insight into the co-writing process of an article co-authored with Buba Sesay (see Nimführ and Sesay, 2019).<sup>7</sup> After our participation at an international migration conference was accepted, Buba and I started writing our paper. Because of our different starting points, the writing process faced several challenges. First, we had different educational biographies. An academic and a non-academic background were joining forces, which meant that Buba had no experience of structuring an academic paper, and he was not used to the numerous revision stages during the publication process. Furthermore, Buba had taught himself to read and write, which is why he preferred that I write the main text. We thus developed a writing system in which Buba told me what he would like to have written down, and I then translated that into text form. Before submitting the article, we went through all the paragraphs together, and Buba would intervene when I did not put his thoughts on paper in the way he envisioned. Additionally, the writing process was shaped by our respective life contexts and associated priorities. Buba's legal situation was still uncertain, and he was trying to regularize his status, while I was employed at university and was living in relatively stable circumstances.

We often had long conversations regarding the use of terms in our paper, such as 'refugee' or 'smuggler'. This included conversations on how we may conceptualize leaving Malta undetected. Further, our writing process also entailed different textual demands. While I had the analytical component and the structure of an academic paper in mind, it was important to Buba to report in as much detail as possible on the oppressions and deprivations he had experienced, which he sometimes also portrayed very emotionally. Our already long-standing relationship of trust had a positive effect on the joint writing process, yet the distribution of roles was rather fixed from the beginning: I primarily steered the writing process and the article structure, whereas the content-related focal points were shaped mostly by Buba. Because of the demands of academic language and tiring academic work routines, this distribution of roles was reinforced.

Sharing the privileges of research, and thus of making knowledge accessible beyond the ivory tower, however, does not only lead to recognition. During the peer review stage, the academic benefits of this collaborative approach were questioned and alleged pitfalls were pointed out. This experience is consistent with those of Gustafson et al., who reported that scholars and co-researchers who want to share their transformative research risk not being taken seriously

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<sup>7</sup>To avoid jeopardizing their status, all co-authors opted to choose a pseudonym.

(Gustafson et al., 2019). Moreover, this demonstrates that academia and peer review processes often function rigidly according to very specific logics and ideas about knowledge orders and forms of representation.

Similar hurdles can occur when presenting research results collaboratively. After our abstract had been accepted, Buba and I prepared our trip to the conference venue. We had been in contact with the conference organizing team for several weeks to waive the conference fee for Buba and to apply for a travel grant. Unfortunately, all requests were rejected. Only refugee authors with a university affiliation were eligible for a travel grant from the solidarity fund, and so Buba was excluded. Since we were unable to raise enough funds to attend the conference, I went to the conference alone. I started our presentation with a slide stating ‘Where is Buba?’ and explained the circumstances that led to my having to present our co-authored paper alone. In this context, Lenette reasonably questions academic conferences, which are still designed for privileged western participants, as an appropriate site for dialogue because they may not be ‘culturally safe places for co-researchers’ (Lenette, 2022: 64).

This denial of access does not only make conference collaborations difficult; it also creates barriers to co-researchers presenting together in public settings. Together with Laura Otto and Gabriel Samateh, I wrote a chapter as part of an anthology on disintegration policies (see Nimführ, Otto and Samateh, 2020), which was to be presented at a book launch. However, the co-author Gabriel Samateh chose not to put in a public appearance. He feared that the Maltese asylum department would find out about his participation and that his critical attitude towards Maltese integration policy would have consequences for his pending family proceedings. This fear was not unfounded, as became apparent shortly after the publication of our chapter, when I received an email from the Maltese minister for integration, who had become aware of our article through Maltese media sources. He was dissatisfied with our presentation of Malta’s integration policy and offered us another interview for clarification after he had broken off the interview that Laura and I had completed with him in 2015. The fact that not everyone has a free choice to appear in public without fear of reprisals is also demonstrated by the unequal balance of power among actors in the border regime.

## **Concluding comments**

Through my reflections and experiences described here, I view collaborative knowledge production in forced migration contexts as offering an opportunity to transgress western epistemology. The decolonization of knowledge production can be seen as a journey and a common learning process built on mutual respect for various ways of knowing and knowledge making. This project cannot be understood as ‘all or nothing’ – it may and should also have the courage to be incomplete. As Kagendo Mutua and Beth Blue Swadener put it, ‘decolonizing research is a messy, complex, and perhaps impossible endeavor’. Despite this, the act of ‘decoloniz[ing] one’s work is a project worth pursuing in solidarity with local colleagues and movements’ (Mutua and Swadener, 2004: 7). Despite the challenges and ongoing institutional resistance, I want to encourage other researchers to share the academic privilege of interpretation, representation, and dissemination with (refugee) research partners, as this can support the ‘liberation of knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2008: 146) and recognize the equality of different forms and the production of knowledge (Aluli Meyer, 2003; Mbembe,





2016).<sup>8</sup> Knowledge is then understood as pluriversal rather than universal. It is not about ‘giving voice’, which is closely connected to white saviourism, but rather about ‘voicing the experiences’ of the silenced to be ‘acknowledged as a valid source of knowledge’ (Nasser-Edin and Abu-Assab, 2020: 196). Like the social scientist Robtel Neajai Pailey (2019), I agree that ‘epistemic decolonization’ cannot occur without producing emancipatory and ethical scholarship that revalues marginalized actors’ perspectives and agendas, which brings us to this article’s lessons and hopes.

### **Lessons and hopes in working towards decolonizing knowledge production**

When one wants to engage in research collaborations, we should first become aware of power asymmetries in knowledge production itself, manifest in hegemonic forms of knowledge and in the dichotomy between scientists as powerful knowledge authorities versus refugees as bearers of ‘other’ expertise or experiential knowledge. We should carefully consider the role that research partners play in our studies. We should think about how we recognize their agency in our work, and how we can promote their knowledges. While we as researchers often only witness and document a slice of the lives of refugees or the work of NGO staff, they have been confronted with these issues for years and are therefore experts in this field.

This brings us to the recognition and relevance of local, Indigenous, non-academic, and non-Eurocentric knowledge forms and content, which should be enforced (see also Bejarano et al, 2019; Mora and Diaz, 2004). We can work toward decolonizing knowledge production by questioning dominant knowledge orders, uncovering and addressing gaps in reflection, drawing on marginalized theories, and entering collaborations with other researchers from the respective research locations, while also visualizing transcultural modes of knowledge production.

In order ‘to put research in favour of decolonial processes of change’ (Decoloniality Europe, 2013: n.p.), an awareness of the privileges of research is necessary and guidance in the form of an ethical checklist for both researchers and collaborating individuals needs to be provided. The inclusion of all involved actors is very important in the implementation and development of such guidelines. This is because it is usually privileged researchers who decide on these principles. Prescribed ethical principles may not consider the intersectionality of problems faced by people in complex situations (Obijiofor et al., 2016). For research that advocates decolonial processes of change, the people concerned must be involved and the community perspectives as well as ideas must be prioritized (see Decoloniality Europe, 2013; Lenette, 2022; Nyemba and Mayer, 2017).

This goes hand in hand with the claim that the research project should be recentred on committed social praxis, which means that the benefits for the interaction partners should always be considered. This also counteracts ‘knowledge grabbing’, and it requires a researcher commitment that goes beyond ‘do no harm’ and is more than just ‘giving back’: we should invest time and resources that not only serve our academic interests but that also benefit the people we collaborate with. The application of decolonial approaches should not be detached from the day-to-day dilemmas of our research partners. However, it is important to remember that the interests and resources of researchers and research partners may not be the same.

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<sup>8</sup> By this, Walter D. Mignolo means to detach oneself from the overall structure of knowledge in order to engage in an epistemic reconstitution of ways of thinking, languages, ways of living, and being in the world, which denies the rhetoric of modernity and implements the logic of coloniality.

This said, it is important that we should always evaluate the appropriateness of a decolonial frame for our work (see Itchuaqiyaq and Matheson, 2021), and if it does not have any significant benefits to marginalized stakeholders and communities (in the case discussed here, to refugees), then maybe we should place it inside another ideological frame that links to feminism, social justice, anticolonialism, critical race theory, de-canonization, or de-Eurocentrization.

I hope to engage scholars and other readers with my thoughts and insights so that we may continue to discuss and explore potential ways of decolonizing research and work, while moving towards the creation of ‘spaces of liberatory praxis’ (Mutua and Swadener, 2004: 20). In this sense, improvements in the academic apparatus, such as the accessibility of conferences and the shift to more open formats, as well as the reform of peer review processes to include, among other things, a greater tolerance of linguistic difference, e.g. in the use of English by scholars with diverse language backgrounds, could challenge systematic injustices in favour of dialogic knowledge production.

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