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Who Is Afraid of Postcolonial Theory? Practical Considerations on Epistemic Freedom for Development-Oriented Research

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Abstract

Postcolonial theories are often regarded as “high theory” and therefore not relevant to practice-oriented research. We owe attention for epistemological questions in development research primarily to postcolonial, decolonial and feminist studies. However, Global South voices are still struggling for epistemic freedom, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni pointed out for the African case in a book published in 2018, in which he argues that “[...] global coloniality operates as an invisible power matrix that is shaping and sustaining asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South”. Although practical development research in particular has a direct influence on many people in the Global South through recommendations in policy documents and their implementation, power relations in knowledge production are rarely questioned. This research addresses the practical implications of feminist postcolonial approaches to knowledge production and practice-oriented development research by drawing on feminist contributions to postcolonial epistemology, in particular Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1987) and C.T. Mohanty’s contributions (1984, 2003). An ongoing study on socio-cultural effects of rural transformation in Northern Ethiopia that combines feminist theory with practice-oriented approaches to gender-transformative change is taken to reflect processes of knowledge production. In specific, the study uses autoethnographic field notes to analyse how the research has shaped and reproduced power relations in the process of knowledge production. The study shows eg. how identity influences research. Gender, age and race have given the researcher a certain access to the field and transported a corresponding body of knowledge, while other segments were denied her. This contribution exemplifies that awareness of unequal power relations in academic North-South cooperation can lead to a more reflective use of data and thus to profound and holistic knowledge generation. Through the engagement with postcolonial theory, existing power relations can be uncovered and questioned and thus contribute to strengthening epistemic freedom of the Global South and the decolonization of knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemic freedom, epistemology, Ethiopia, gender-transformative change, North-South cooperation, postcolonial theory, rural transformations