

Who is afraid of Postcolonial Theory?¹

Practical Considerations on Epistemic Freedom for Development-Oriented Research

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1. Introduction

- ❖ Postcolonial theory scholars have produced a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches that address the historical and contemporary power relations related to colonialism and their continuations as well as the marginalization and exclusion of knowledge based on racial and cultural differences.
- ❖ Knowledge in development research is often produced by 'Global North' institutions, dominated by Western researchers and deeply rooted in a Eurocentric school of thought.
- ❖ 'Global South' voices are still struggling for Epistemic Freedom.
- ❖ Although practical development research in particular has a direct impact on many people in the Global South, e.g. through policy recommendations and their implementation, power relations in knowledge production are rarely questioned.

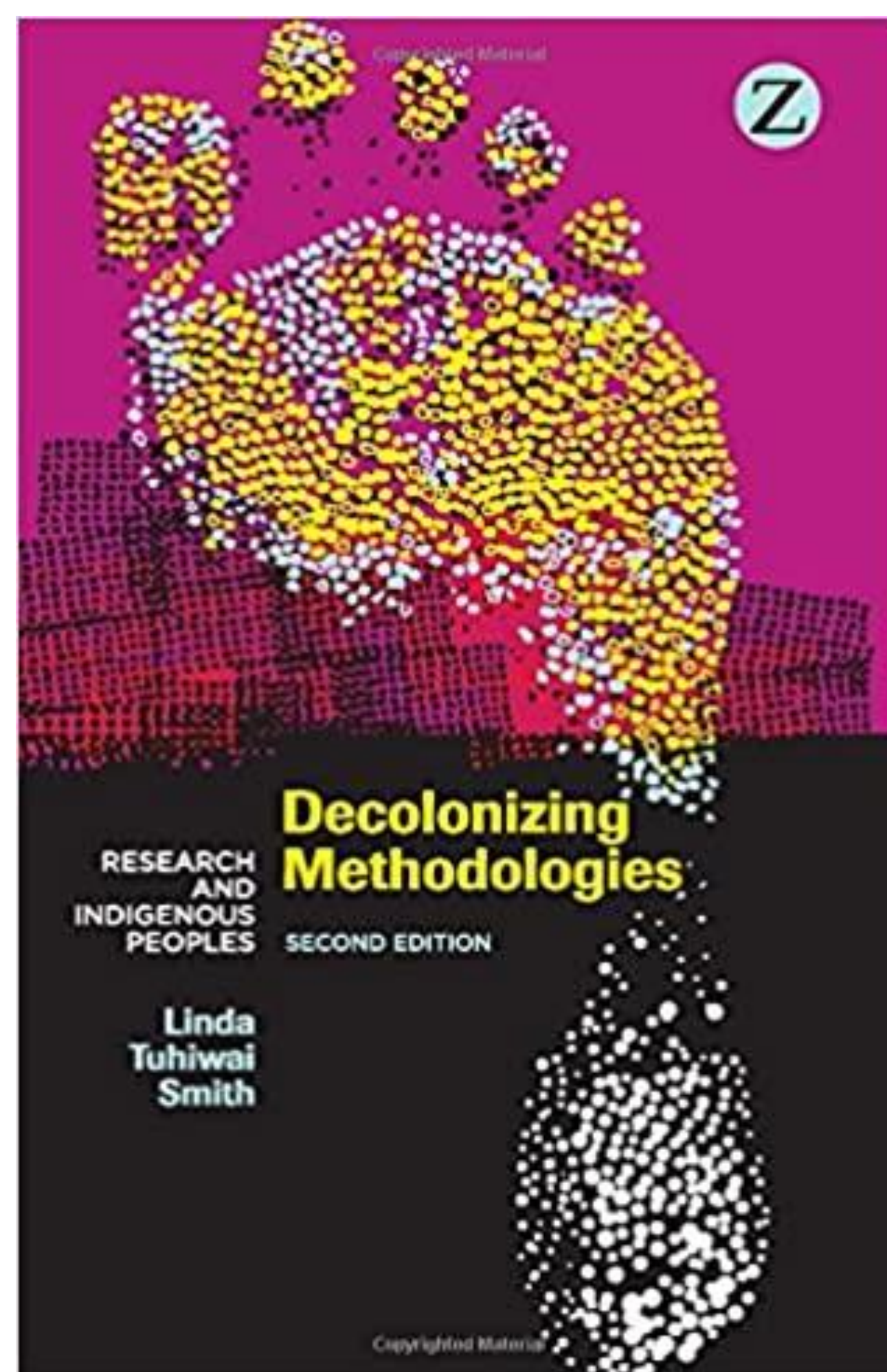


Figure 1: Book covers of „Can the Subaltern Speak?“ (2010) by Rosalind C. Morris and „Decolonizing Methodologies“ (2012) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith – just two examples of the vast literature engaging with postcolonial theories and decolonization strategies.

3. Theoretical Considerations

- ❖ Postcolonial theory approaches are rarely addressed in development research/practice since they cannot be easily translated “on the ground” (Power 2003), are complex and diverse.
- ❖ In this research, especially Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) and Mohanty’s essay „Under Western Eyes” (1984).
- ❖ In her much-recited essay, Spivak uses an example from the British colonial occupation of India to illustrate how women are systematically oppressed by both colonial and national powers.
- ❖ This epistemic violence, Spivak concludes, is to be confronted by postcolonial feminists by carefully and self-reflectively becoming advocates of the subaltern woman and creating spaces where the subaltern woman can “speak”.
- ❖ Mohanty explores how „Western feminist scholarship” has reduced Third World women into a single category and made them a homogenous and powerless group.
- ❖ She describes this as act of colonization.

6. Conclusions/Suggestions for further debates

- ❖ Awareness of postcolonial approaches to knowledge production and applying strategies of critical reflection can reveal unequal power structures and help not to reproduce them.
- ❖ “Giving voice” to people, esp. to subaltern groups, should be considered with caution.
- ❖ Instead of “speaking” for subaltern groups, other ways of creating spaces in which they can speak may be explored.

2. Objectives and Research Questions

This research aims to highlight the epistemological dimension of (practice-oriented) research by drawing on some of the central writings in (feminist) postcolonial theory and exploring their practical implications.

In particular, the following research questions are addressed:

- ❖ What are some of the practical implications of (feminist) postcolonial theory approaches for practice-oriented development research?
- ❖ What are strategies for and limitations of “epistemologically sensitive” (practice-oriented) research?
- ❖ How can “epistemologically sensitive” research contribute to Epistemic Freedom?

Quick guide: *Definitions*

Epistemic Violence

Drawing on Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term to describe the silencing of marginalized (‘subaltern’) groups by privileging Western knowledge. Due to (post)colonial power structures, indigenous/local voices and their knowledge disappear (‘epistemicides’), or are oppressed.

Epistemic Freedom

Recently coined by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, epistemic freedom is “about democratizing ‘knowledge’ [...] into ‘knowledges’” and “ranged against overrepresentation of Eurocentric thought in knowledge, social theory and education.” (2018, p. 4).

4. Methodological Approaches

- ❖ Methodological approaches can draw on feminist perspectives on the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988) and derived epistemological key concepts (Hiemstra and Billo, 2017):
 - ❖ **Reflexivity:** Process of self-reflection and thinking through the ways identity influences the research process.
 - ❖ **Positionality:** “Being situated” in an epistemological milieu.
 - ❖ **Subjectivity:** How we negotiate our sense of self (e.g. perceptions, decisions) in relation to our surroundings.
 - ❖ **Betweenness:** Negotiating various degrees of differences in relationships with research participants.
 - ❖ **Insider-vs.-outsider:** our position in the communities in which we conduct research.

5. Empirical Insights

- ❖ Using epistemological key concepts, autoethnographic field notes taken during (and beyond) a field research stay, were analyzed to monitor the process of knowledge production in an ongoing study on changing gender norms in agricultural transformation processes in Ethiopia.
- ❖ Identity of the researcher (gender [female], age [29], ‘race’ [white]) has significantly shaped the knowledge production process.
- ❖ While access to “female perspectives” through my own female identity was not difficult, power relations generated by other identify features (e.g. culture) could hardly be overcome.
- ❖ ‘Subaltern groups’ in particular could hardly be reached because of local power structures.

Literature

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